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HOPE DEFERRED.

VOL. III.



HOPE DEFERRED.

BY

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AUTHOR OF "AVICE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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CHAPTER XIV.

THUS the Count and Countess de Lutz began their new life. No sooner was their arrival known in Amonville than an influx of visitors poured in upon them. The Count had expected that such would be the case, and made no attempt at seclusion. He hoped that Marietta's imperfect knowledge of French would prevent her acquiring a too decided taste for society. Nothing he feared so much for their common peace as idle gossip.

Among the first, and soon the most assiduous of Marietta's visitors, was the Marquise de la Croix. She met the Count with the open, easy frankness of an old friend; her cheek never flushed, her voice never trembled when she greeted him. To the young Countess she was beyond measure courteous, intreating her, in the absence of the Dowager Countess de Lutz, to make use of her, if she needed female advice and help.

“Not but what I know my friend, the Count, to be a man of infinite resources, equal to any emergency. Still occasions may arise, to a foreigner especially, so I pray you remember I am always at your service.”

Her thorough knowledge of the Italian language rendered her more especially wel-

come to the young Countess, who was charmed, perfectly enamoured of the Marquise, and told her husband she was the pleasantest woman of their acquaintance. The Count did not choose positively to dissent from this opinion, but he warned his wife that in some respects he considered the Marquise a dangerous companion—not a woman he should wish her to grow intimate with.

“Why not?” she asked. “If we suit each other, what can it signify to a man who his wife’s female friends are?”

“It signifies much,” answered the Count. “It is to such friendships that many households trace their misery and disunion. Be advised, Marietta. I beg of you to beware of the Marquise.”

She tossed her head haughtily, as if in defiance. A woman seldom obeys a man unless she loves him. And though it could not be said that Marietta had entirely ceased to love Charles de Lutz, she had virtually done so from the hour passion had died within her. She clung to him now, proud of her new position, her wealth and title ; she knew that he was necessary to their maintenance. She would not have endured a rival, anyone to come between them, more now than in their early wedded life, but for tender love and gratitude towards the man who had done so much for her, she had none. Pride and jealousy were her masters. It was wonderful how speedily she emancipated herself from all control. Her beauty, her elegance, her husband's

name, were a ready passport ; and if a few voices arose, venturing to express the opinion that the Count's sudden re-appearance with a wife of two years' standing, whom nobody knew, was, to say the least of it, strange, they were instantly silenced by the Marquise de la Croix and her clique. The Countess was perfect, young, and beautiful, an ornament to society, what did they require more ? After the manner Jeanne had trifled with him, it was fortunate for Amonville that the Count had chosen so well, and settled down at Lutz.

Thus week by week the Count saw the intimacy grow closer and closer between his wife and Madame de la Croix. He might have stopped it with a high hand, had he chosen—many men would have done so—

but he knew well the storm of angry passions it would arouse, and he shrank sensitively from it. Nothing he dreaded like a scene—a woman's scene; his whole nature recoiled before it, it jarred upon every nerve in his body; and so, wrongly—for he yielded to a weakness—he let things take their course.

As long as they remained at the Château, the distance acted as a sort of check; but, instigated by the Marquise, as the Autumn days drew in, Marietta asked her husband to remove into town for the Winter months. He gave her no decisive answer, not wishing, as usual, to arouse opposition, yet unwilling, for many reasons, to accede to her request. But when day after day Marietta renewed the attack, fretting and fuming by

the hour together, complaining that the Château was cold, that, notwithstanding furs and hot water, she was nearly frozen to death each time she ventured into town, he began to yield, and did so quite when one day she attempted to draw the Marquise into the discussion, saying shortly,

“It is sufficient, Marietta; you desire to remove into town. I had hoped you would have loved and been content with the Château. As this cannot be, we will try the pleasures of Amonville.”

So he took and furnished for her a handsome hotel, and about the first week in November they removed thither. From henceforth the barrier between husband and wife rose rapidly higher and higher. Marietta became a complete woman of the

world. Her beauty, the novelty of her presence among them, and the mystery of her marriage, attracted the good people of Amonville. It was their pleasure to make a favourite of her, to fête her in every possible manner ; and soon her days and nights were spent in giving and receiving visits, between the ball-room and the public assembly. The sudden change in her existence entirely metamorphosed Marietta, fascinating and exciting her. She threw herself into it with passion ; everything else was forgotten, saving always the formal fulfilment of her religious duties ; to them she clung with Italian superstition, and thereby greatly edified the devout members of her society. After all, the Count had done well ; his wife was not a heretic, but a de-

vout member of the Church. Her husband was generous; Marietta's purse was well-filled, and her priestly guests had but to ask to receive. No marvel if they also pronounced it a very happy and fortunate union!

And Charles de Lutz, what were his feelings? Seeing her happy and contented, he tried to be so likewise. What had he to complain of? Surely he was rather to be envied, with his beautiful wife, the admired, the courted; with wealth and youth and honour; what more could he desire? He would not ask himself that question; he knew full well he had no joy in life; he knew full well the void of emptiness which haunted him. He had no companion, no second self to commune with; his was a

never-ceasing hunger of the heart and soul, which none might know or guess at, which he would not even acknowledge to himself. He threw himself into his wife's amusements; kept open house; hunted, drove; lived in the midst of action, never pausing to think, fearful lest he might recognise the shallow hollowness of his whole life. Amonville, at least, was satisfied; the Count was doing his duty at last, filling his place in society, no longer shackled by the prudery and English ideas of Madame de Lutz.

CHAPTER XV.

OCTOBER was drawing to a close. The days were still bright, but the wind blowing over the downs was bleak and cutting. Jeanne seemed to feel it, as she stood beneath the Vicarage porch awaiting her horse, and ready equipped for her daily ride.

She shivered visibly, notwithstanding the warm seal-skin jacket she wore over her riding-habit; so much so that Gordon, as he helped her to mount, noticed it, and said,

“Jeanne, I am sure you find it too cold

to-day ; had you not better stay at home ? ”

“ No, no,” answered Jeanne ; “ I am not really cold, it is only just at first—I shall be all right presently.”

“ Are you quite sure ? ” he repeated, anxiously.

“ Yes, quite,” she answered, smiling ; “ and we must go to Stonehenge to-day—it has been planned so long. My uncle would be vexed if we deferred the expedition ; it is his hobby.”

Apparently but half-satisfied, Gordon assisted his cousin to mount ; and soon the two were cantering gently along the undulated high road. The country through which they passed offered comparatively few charms. Large tracts of freshly-ploughed land stretched far and wide, with little

hamlets nestling beneath the hills. Here and there ancient red-brick farm-houses, substantial homesteads, with their mighty hay-stacks, and great flocks of poultry, giving assurance of certain wealth and easy independence; not rivalling, but contrasting, happily for both, with the noble mansion rising close beside it.

A mansion such as one scarcely sees out of Old England—no pretentious castle, giving one a vague idea of grandeur and discomfort, but simply a great home, beneath the branches of whose ancient trees lovers have strolled, and generations of children of the same race have succeeded each other in their play—and the smoke rising from those many chimneys speak eloquently to the wanderer of warmth and hospitality.

So Jeanne saw and appreciated her mother's land, though it could never be so dear to her as Sunny France, the home of her childhood, where she had grown to womanhood, and where her best affections lay enshrined. Gradually the country through which they rode bore a less cultivated aspect. The ploughed fields gave place to pasture lands; not rich green fields, as one sees in the fair county of Kent, but great unenclosed tracts of short, brownish heather, over which flocks of sheep were browsing in every direction.

“Now look, Jeanne,” said Gordon, reining up his horse, as, leaving a straggling village behind them, they emerged upon an open space—“behold the far-famed Salisbury Plain; and that dark pile you can just

^M
^Mdistinguish in the distance, is none other than Stonehenge.”

“How dreary!—how desolate!” exclaimed Jeanne.

“Yes. Those old Druids were at least consistent, and chose their place of sacrifice well,” answered Gordon. “You will ride across the plain and examine the ruin, will you not, Jeanne?”

“Certainly,” she answered; and they rode forward.

Truly, as Jeanne said, it was a dreary, desolate plain, stretching as far as the eye could see, with nothing to break its intense monotony save that ungainly pile of huge stones towards the centre; and far away in the distance, just above the horizon, rose the spire of Salisbury Cathedral, as if to

show how Christianity had overcome the barbarous rites of heathendom.

“Here, Jeanne, is the beginning of the ruin,” said Gordon, pointing to hillocks of earth, placed at equal distances, forming a vast circle, within which was another circle, of lesser circumference. The mounds of earth were all covered alike with the short greenish-brown grass of the plain. In the centre of these two outer circles rose the actual ruins of the ancient temple. Huge stones, of from twenty to thirty feet in height, placed perpendicularly, and telling a wondrous tale of ancient power and science—for the most ignorant could not fail to recognise the fact that brute force alone would never have sufficed to transport those huge masses from the distant

quarries across that arid plain. "Let us dismount, Jeanne, and 'do' the ruins properly," said Gordon, laughing.

He therewith sprang to the ground, helped Jeanne to do the same, and, after picketing their horses, proceeded to examine more minutely the scene of so many horrors. Drearly the wind blew across the plain, moaning around that ruined temple. As Jeanne, gathering up her riding-skirt, silently followed Gordon, a strange sense of awe and fear crept over her. At last they stood together beside what is supposed to have been the sacrificial altar, which consists of two perpendicular stones, supporting a third, placed horizontally, across them. The cousins were silent for a few minutes, until Gordon said,

“Strange, is it not, Jeanne, to feel one’s-self standing on the very spot where, centuries ago, heathendom exercised its greatest cruelties; and priesthood, strong from superior knowledge, wielded almost unlimited power.”

“Rather through fear,” answered Jeanne.

“Nay, I think not,” replied Gordon. “Fear was an auxiliary, made use of to awe the people into obedience. The real power of the Druids, and, indeed, of the priests of all ages and all denominations, was, and is, due to their superior knowledge. In ancient times what must have been their dominion over a people buried in the depths of ignorance! From the warrior chief, nominally their king, to the vilest serf tilling the land, they governed by

fear, the fruit of ignorance—ignorance so palpable that the merest child in these days would laugh at their chimeras, and a school-boy would explain their chemical trickeries. Christianity brought a ray of light divine, which, though sometimes veiled, has never been wholly extinguished.”

“Not even in the dark ages,” said Jeanne thoughtfully.

“No, not even then,” answered Gordon, “though there again priesthood and ignorance did battle together.”

Silently Jeanne gazed into vacancy.

“What are you thinking of, Jeanne?” asked her cousin.

“Of that poem of Tennyson’s, ‘Love me best,’ I think it is entitled. Do you remember?—where famine is raging in the land,

and, to save the people, the oracle bids the priest sacrifice to the gods that which the king holds dearest ; and so they take his child—his fair-haired boy—while he is out hunting in the fields. And the mother disputes the claim ; she is the king's wife ; she is his best beloved, and the warrior, coming suddenly into their midst, cannot, dare not deny his love ; and so, to save her child, she thrusts the cruel knife into her own bosom, and dies before those two. I almost seem to see the scene, Gordon, here on this dreary plain—the crowd of priests thirsting for blood, the bowed head of the warrior chief in his silent agony, with the child clinging to him in wild terror, and the dead woman yonder, a smile of triumph on her lips even in her death-struggle. Oh ! how could she ?”

“You could not, Jeanne?” asked Gordon.

“I cannot tell,” she answered. “I am no mother; but now it seems to me as if my husband must be first—that, knowing myself the best beloved, nearest his heart, I could not have left him standing alone in his misery, from henceforth ever alone. I think she must have doubted the very love she claimed; the child must have been dearer to both than they were to each other.”

“I wonder whether you will speak thus ten years hence, Jeanne, when you have children of your own climbing on your lap?” said Gordon.

“That will never be,” she answered softly.

“You cannot tell,” said Gordon.

“We none can tell what the future has in store for us,” replied Jeanne; “but it seems to me now that, however dear a child may and must be, the husband and the father must be dearer still.”

“It were well if it were always so,” said Gordon; “but as far as my knowledge extends, the reverse is too often the rule—especially in France, Jeanne.”

“I know; but that comes from the marriages. How would you have it otherwise? There has been no love before, and the heart must speak some day.”

“You think so?” said Gordon.

“I believe so,” she answered, flushing deeply.

“Oh! Jeanne, will yours never speak for

me, dear?" exclaimed Gordon, suddenly moving closer to her, and taking her passive hand in his.

Like a frightened child, Jeanne started away—in a second she was carried home beneath the linden-trees.

"Oh, Gordon!—oh, my cousin! you know that cannot be! Let me go home."

"Not just yet—wait a minute longer, Jeanne. I have waited so long to speak with you, hoping for one ray of light, and now I can keep silence no longer. I know that your first dream of love is over. Why must you go back to that land where it lies broken? Stay here, Jeanne—here, in England; make for yourself a home; let the past be the past—time heals the deepest wounds—and if the fullest, the tenderest

devotion can count for aught, rest assured it will not be wanting to your life. How I love you, Jeanne, words cannot tell! I will not hurry you—I will bide your time—only give me the faintest hope that one day I may call you mine, and I will be content.”

“Gordon! Gordon! why will you speak thus?” exclaimed Jeanne, lifting up her face, flushed and pained. “I cannot—do not you see I cannot? Touched for the moment—as how can I fail to be?—I might promise to be your wife in *name*—in *heart* I never could be. Gordon, do not make me say more.”

The voice was so gentle, so pleadingly sad, Gordon bent before it.

“Very well, Jeanne,” he said, “we will

not talk of it now ;—in time, dear, in time, perhaps.”

“In time,” repeated Jeanne, slowly, with a slight shiver ; “ it seems to me eternity itself were too short to forget one’s love.”

“ But, Jeanne, when that love is hopeless—when you cannot, ought not, to encourage it, what then ?”

“ What then ?” repeated Jeanne, slowly ; “ I do not know. A woman without a soul is worthless, and I have given mine away long ago.”

“ But, Jeanne, *he* cannot accept it—cannot you call it back again ?”

She shook her head, answering in the same dreamy tone,

“ Did I say I had given it away ?—I was wrong ; like a bird it left its cage, flew

away, and has never come home again. What can I do, Gordon, but live quietly beside my mother, doing my duty as it comes to me, but not accepting responsibilities for which I am not equal?"

"Jeanne, you will break my heart," pleaded Gordon.

"Nay, nay, my friend," said she, slowly, "hearts may break for joy, but not for sorrow. But look yonder—the clouds are gathering; I am cold standing here, let us go home."

She was right. The sky had grown of a leaden, heavy hue, and the wind blew in gusts across the plain, moaning amidst the huge moss-grown stones. No wonder Jeanne shivered. With a heavy sigh Gordon unpicketed the horses, and helping her to

mount, they turned homewards. But they had not advanced far on their way when the clouds broke, and the rain began to fall in torrents. They were between two villages, and saw no chance of shelter, so rode rapidly on. When they came within sight of habitations, they were already so thoroughly wet, that the wisest course was to ride on as rapidly as possible, trusting to the exercise to prevent evil effects.

Madame de Lutz was beyond measure anxious when she saw Jeanne's condition, and sent her straight to bed. But the harm had already commenced. Towards evening violent fever and shivering fits set in; still, with care, the worst might have been prevented, but for the unfortunate chain of events which followed. Mr. Elliot had been un-

usually excited and nervous about Jeanne throughout the whole afternoon—blaming himself, blaming Gordon. The utmost care had been taken to quiet him, but in vain ; and now, in the dead of the night, his old enemy returned, and struck him with his hand of iron, depriving him of the power of speech, almost of movement. Terrified, the night-watcher roused the household. Gordon and his aunt were instantly beside him, but they saw at once that he was past human help ; still his eyes wandered restlessly around, as if seeking some one—they knew it was Jeanne. They had hoped he would not have missed her, but now they could not deny the pleading request of those dying eyes, so they called her, and were repaid by the look of contented happiness

which settled on his face. She knelt beside him, holding his hand till early morning, when he fell asleep, that deep, deep sleep from which there is no waking. Jeanne left his bed to lie down in her own, from which she did not rise for many weeks. The cold of that bleak plain, her ride through the pouring rain, grief for her uncle's death, had been all too much for her delicate frame. Violent fever, and inflammation of the lungs were the result ; but youth gained the mastery, and Jeanne arose from her sick-bed—a mere shadow, truly ; but still she did arise to finish the battle. The doctors ordered her immediately out of England ; they recommended Nice, Mentone ; but she, with a sick longing for home and old familiar scenes, said,

“Mamma, take me to the dear Cottage first, and afterwards we will see.”

December was fast drawing to a close when they started on their homeward journey.

CHAPTER XVI.

“**B**ON jour, ma chère,” said the Marquise de la Croix, rising from her *causeuse* in front of the fire, and holding out her hand to greet the young Countess de Lutz, as she entered her boudoir rather late one Winter’s afternoon.

“You were not expecting me?” said Marietta.

“No,” answered Louise; “but you know I am always glad to see you.” And she rolled an arm-chair towards the fire for her

guest. Marietta seated herself silently, and stretched out her hands towards the warmth. "Come," said Louise, looking at her, "I see you have something particular to say. What is it?"

"You are right," said Marietta, lifting her head. "I have come to consult you. My husband!"

"Ah! if we are going to discuss Monsieur le Comte," said Louise, laughing, "we will first of all make ourselves comfortable, and secure privacy. He is by far too important a person not to be treated with due respect. Take off your furs. I will ring for the fire to be made up, and the lamp brought. Then we will take counsel together."

Gloomily Marietta obeyed, while the man-

servant piled on fresh wood, brought the lamp, and drew close the heavy damask curtains.

“Jean, I am not at home,” said the Marquise. “And desire Madame de Lutz’s carriage to return and fetch her at six o’clock.”

When the door had closed upon him, Louise drew her chair close to Marietta’s, and looking at her steadily, said,

“Maintenant, ma chère.”

“We leave for Italy early next month, immediately after the New Year,” said Marietta, quickly.

“Ah! indeed,” said the Marquise, with a slight start. “And the reason for this sudden decision?”

“I cannot tell—a whim!” answered Marietta, impatiently.

“When did he announce it to you?” asked Louise.

“This morning, at breakfast.”

“And what did you say?”

“What could I say, except that I thought it absurd—that I could see no reason for moving, just as we had settled ourselves in town—and that all my plans for the Winter season were made? He answered that I had made them entirely without consulting him; that he objected to the continuous round of society into which I had been drawn; that he had never intended it should be so; that he did not choose me to go out alone; that to accompany me continually, he must sacrifice his art, his duties, to my caprices; and that, at the present rate, his picture would never be finished for

the May exhibition. You know, Marquise, he began it late; I think he was nearly two years without touching a brush, and, now he has begun again, he is wrapped up in it."

"Of course everything must be sacrificed to his eternal painting! To hear him talk, one would think he was a common artist, working for his daily bread."

And the Marquise laughed. But Marietta was an artist's daughter, and an inborn love of art surged up within her when she heard it slighted; so she answered somewhat sharply,

"I do not complain of that. He is an artist, and a good one, too! Only I cannot see why he should not remain here. What can suddenly have occurred to drive him hence? I like Amonville—the life here

suits me. Above all things, I am near you, my chosen friend. I will not, if I can help it, go to Italy."

"Tell him so," said the Marquise, shortly.

"It were useless," answered Marietta. "You do not know my husband. In general he yields, rather than dispute, or enter upon a discussion; but let him determine, in his own mind, that a certain course of action is right, and the only right one to be pursued, and he is immovable. He listens to all one may have to say, but he never swerves from his own determination."

"How do you account, then, for this sudden idea?—a week ago there was no question of your going," said the Marquise.

"I cannot account for it at all," answered Marietta, thoughtfully; "and what is

stranger, he received only yesterday a letter from his aunt, asking him to see that the Cottage was properly warmed and prepared for her reception ; that she hoped to be at Lutz before the new year."

At this item of news Madame de la Croix tossed her head scornfully, looked inquiringly at her companion, and said, significantly—

"And you still do not know why he is anxious to leave Amonville?"

"No," said Marietta, curiously; "do you?"

"I think I can guess pretty correctly," answered the Marquise, smiling; and drawing her chair close to Marietta's, she continued, speaking in that confidential tone of voice which women assume when they are

about to talk scandal, or to enlighten a friend on a subject which would be much better untold. "My friend," said the Marquise, "there are certain things which, for our domestic happiness, it is much better, indeed necessary, we should be aware of, however painful the knowledge may be. Otherwise, it is impossible for us to rule our households or our husbands; our eyes are blinded—living in the dark we do not know what is going on around. Now, it seems to me, you are very ignorant of your husband's past life, and incapable, therefore, of justly appreciating his present course of action. From the first moment I saw you, forgive me if I say I pitied you and felt drawn towards you. I think I have proved my sympathy?"

The Marquise paused, smiling; and Marietta held out her hand, saying, in Italian— for they mostly spoke Italian together—

“Truly, truly!”

“Nevertheless, my position has been a difficult one, drawn as I was instinctively towards yourself, yet an old friend of your husband. I have been, as it were, divided between the two. But now my conscience tells me it is cruel to leave you longer groping in the dark. If you are willing, I will enlighten you somewhat as to the past connection between your husband and Mademoiselle de Lutz.”

Only then did Madame de la Croix become fully aware of the dangerous character of the woman she had to deal with.

“Do you mean to say there is any con-

nection except that which arises from their relationship?" said Marietta, springing up, her eyes flashing and her lips quivering.

"Come, come," said the Marquise, "be composed, Countess. I assert nothing of the sort; I will leave you to judge, but if you are going to be jealous of your husband, I had better be silent; I was only about to warn you, for the convenience of all parties."

"Jealous!" said Marietta, scoffingly; "I was merely startled. Go on, Marquise," and she reseated herself.

"That is well," said Madame de la Croix. "Jealousy is vulgar; it is very well for the *petite bourgeoisie*, but in the world we carefully eschew it. *Mon Dieu!* we should have enough to do if we amused ourselves

with being jealous of our husbands. So you will hear my story. Well, then, listen attentively." And, partly in Italian, partly in French, the Marquise proceeded graphically to relate the tale, as far as she knew it, of Jeanne's childhood, her betrothal to the Count, and, as she termed it, the long course of coquetry which, English fashion, mother and daughter had carried on. "I cannot tell you what their object was," she continued; "I fancy—indeed, I am sure—the Count, though determined to do his duty, viewed the marriage simply in the light of a duty, and showed more indifference on the subject than pleased Madame de Lutz, who, feeling secure of her game, thought she might trifle with it. I cannot fathom all her motives—suffice it to say, she regretted bitterly

her conduct when the Count absented himself for three years. I was myself on one occasion witness of her anxiety. To satisfy her, I made innumerable inquiries at Rome, without success. When he did return, you may imagine they determined he should not escape them again. Under pretext that he was ill, they kept him entirely isolated, refusing his most intimate friends access to his presence. Jeanne never left him—reading, walking, riding, she was always beside him. It was her last chance, you know. I believe—indeed, am sure—she knew of his marriage at least a month or two before the rest of the world; and it was by her persuasion he kept it secret, even from her mother, who, when she learnt it, fell down in a fit, was ill for several days,

and then left for England with her daughter. But you may imagine that Jeanne's conduct during the Count's residence at the Château had compromised her in the eyes of all clear-sighted people ; she openly went and came, ordered and counter-ordered, as if she had been mistress. Once even I was shocked ; and though I fully believed her to be betrothed to the Count, ventured, for old friendship's sake, to hint that her freedom and *laisser-aller* might be English, but was decidedly not French ; and that her conduct, to say the least of it, was open to discussion. My dear Countess, you will never believe the insolent way in which she received my kindly observations. I was so shocked at the indelicacy of her remarks, and the insinuations she permitted herself,

that I left her standing alone, still speaking. I did not wait to hear the end of what she had to say. I have never seen her again from that day to this. Shortly afterwards she left for England, and the Count immediately began to make his preparations for your reception; therefore, you see, it is pretty evident she, and she alone, prevented his doing so earlier. It was then that I felt what a lonely, difficult position yours was likely to be, and determined, if you proved in the least congenial, to cultivate your society—help and support you, as, under the circumstances, only women can help each other. Madame de Lutz's long absence has, up to the present time, been propitious to your happiness, for I do not believe the Count can withstand Jeanne's

influence. From habit she holds him, as it were, in subjection. He is, to a certain extent, aware of this, and, therefore, wishes to hurry you off to Italy, to avoid a rencontre."

"And I will not go," said Marietta, passionately. "I will stop, and face this Mademoiselle Jeanne. He has deceived me!—from the very first he has deceived me! The day of my arrival, when he showed me how near each other the two estates lay, it struck me at once as strange that a marriage between the two cousins had not been arranged. I remember saying as much to him, and his answering carelessly that his aunt was an English woman, and that those things were managed differently in her country. The matter

dropped there, and I thought no more about it. I had so much to occupy my attention ; everything was so new."

"Of course," said the Marquise. "The case is just this: According to English notions, a woman must love the man she is about to marry, and *vice versâ*. An absurd and in many cases a dangerous rule, as it has proved in the present case. Had Madame de Lutz been content to marry her daughter before the Count went for the first time to Italy, Jeanne would have settled down as we all do, and taken her place in society. But when I tell you she did not even know he had proposed for her, and been refused ! I was not married at the time, and meeting Jeanne at a reunion of young girls, I told her what all the world

knew except herself. I remember her boldly declaring she would not marry the Count, even if she had been given the choice; but I am very certain from that day to this she has never ceased to hanker after him. Only finding, after she has gone so far, that it is too late, seeing he was married, her English propriety took fright, and she disappeared from the scene."

"Why, then, does she not stay away?—why does she return thus suddenly?" asked Marietta, impatiently.

"Ah! that is a question I cannot answer," replied the Marquise; "time alone can solve that mystery. It will scarcely advantage her to enter into an intrigue with the Count; she would gain nothing, and would probably lose much by it. She is not liked in Amon-

ville as it is; such very exclusive young ladies do not make many friends. It will go hard with Jeanne if she tries any tricks. Unmarried, she has no lawful protector; your husband would scarcely venture to interfere in her favour—it would only compromise her more; therefore, taking all things into consideration, I see no reason why you should not remain in Amonville. Whatever happens, the women are sure to side with you, and you have but to will it to secure the men also. Jeanne is not even pretty—a pale, washed-out English Miss, with reddish hair, no figure, and people say consumptive. Hold your own, my dear Countess, and you need fear nothing.”

“Hold my own, when I am in Italy!—

what good will that do me?" murmured Marietta.

The Marquise threw herself back in her chair, laughing heartily.

"I see nothing to laugh at," said Marietta, flashing an angry look at her from beneath her long black lashes.

"Forgive me, my dear friend," said the Marquise, checking her merriment; "but you are a very child! You do not, perhaps, know a little French proverb, '*Ce que femme veut, Dieu veut.*' In consequence, far more, '*Ce que femme veut homme veut,*' if only one is properly patient and persistent. You do not wish to go to Italy; the case is very simple—you will not go."

"And, pray, how do you arrange that?" asked the Countess.

“By simply not openly contradicting him,” said the Marquise. “It is sad, but certainly a most prominent part of a woman’s education to learn to dissimulate; it is the only way to guide a man—unless, of course, he is in love with you. Open opposition only ends in a scene. Hysterics and violent nervous attacks have the desired effect on some men, but I doubt it with a man of your husband’s temperament; he would simply leave you, not discussing the point, but carrying out his own will notwithstanding. No, my opinion is that to gain your object you must outwardly submit. He desires to go to Italy; therefore, as a good wife, to Italy you are bound to go, though Amonville were becoming pleasant and home-like to you. Openly to all the world you may express your regret—

openly we, your friends, may pity you, and mourn your departure—nay, we may be permitted to marvel at the unforeseen necessity, at the very time when Madame de Lutz and Jeanne are expected. You also, in his hearing, may dwell upon this circumstance, and how you had hoped to create a family link with his aunt and his cousin. Do not attempt persuasion ; bend obediently to his lordship's will, and never fear but what I will second you, I think efficaciously. I know the Count's tender point—trust me for probing it. Together, it were strange indeed if we were beaten.”

Marietta did not answer ; she sat looking into the fire. At last she asked,

“Do you suppose the Count ever loved this Jeanne?”

“Of course. All the world said so, at least, last Winter, when, as you were already his wife, he had no business to think of her. Before that, I believe, he viewed his marriage merely in the light of a duty, as I told you. Did you know him on the occasion of his first visit to Rome?”

“Yes,” replied Marietta, shortly.

“But doubtless there was nothing between you; you were but ordinary acquaintances?” interrogated the Marquise.

“Nothing between us!” answered Marietta, rising from her seat, and, with wild action and passionate excitement, tossing her arms upwards. “He had sworn he loved me; he knew I worshipped the very ground he trod on! Ah, Marquise, Italian women love well, but they hate well too!”

Calmly, calculatingly, the Marquise's cold eye followed Marietta's excited movements. Something like scorn was expressed in the slight curl of her short upper lip ; but whatever her feelings were, she, at least, was too cunning and too well-bred to give free vent to them. Going up to the Countess she took her gently by the hand, and, leading her back to her seat beside the fire, said, almost caressingly,

“Calm yourself, my dear friend. I have long foreseen this time, but if you will place entire confidence in me, I think we are mistresses of the situation, and may openly defy Mademoiselle Jeanne. Only I cannot advise you, without being fully *au courant* as to the past. Will you trust me with the particulars of your marriage?”

Marietta hesitated, and looked half-suspiciously at the Marquise.

“Nay, nay, I would not have you tell me for the world, if it involves a mystery,” she exclaimed.

“It is simple enough,” answered Marietta, speaking quickly and passionately. “I was only an artist’s daughter, and he came to live with my father. We fell in love with each other, and he, perceiving the danger, left me, and returned to France; but I was *his*, body and soul. I knew, too, he would return, for I had made him drink of the waters of the Fontana di Trevi. He stayed away many months, and I fell sick. During the fever I must have said something to arouse my uncle’s suspicions, for I was scarcely recovered when he questioned me

closely. I was weak and weary, and hardly knew what I said; he warned me to be careful for the future, or he would force me to take the veil. About this time the Count returned to Rome. My uncle must have known it, but I did not. I was watched night and day, but Charles de Lutz never came near me; until suddenly, one evening, he made his appearance. I forgot everything in my delight at seeing him once more; but my uncle had tracked him, and, in the midst of our rapturous meeting, suddenly stood before us. He would have immured me that same hour in the convent, using bitter words, taunting me with loving one who would never dream of making me his wife. He was wrong. Within an hour I stood before the altar in the church

Della Trinita, and came forth Charles de Lutz's wife. Only I never knew he was noble until he fetched me home last Summer. I was happy at first, as long as he devoted himself to my service; but gradually his art, his friends, and at last his child came and robbed me of what I considered my own property. He neither would nor could understand my feelings, and so we cooled towards each other. After the child's death, and my illness, I pined for my dear Rome and my father's house. I was of no good to him—he owed me some compensation for my sufferings, therefore my father came and took me for a time to his home, until the Count, unable any longer to lead a two-fold life, brought me to Lutz."

“I never heard before that you had a child,” said the Marquise.

“Yes, a little girl, whom he chose to call Jeanne. I understand why now. The fuss he made over her no one can imagine. She was a De Lutz, and I was only an artist’s and a peasant woman’s daughter. Judge if it were pleasing to see—the child thought more of than oneself? He even went so far as to have a second marriage celebrated before the French Consul. I never rightly understood why. If the first one sufficed to establish my honour, I saw no reason why it should not suffice for the child. I never forgot that. He was generous to me while I stayed with my father, and is so still—he denies me nothing. But though I will endure no rival, the love I once felt for

him has long since ceased to exist. Now, Marquise, you know the whole story. Can you help me to my revenge?"

"Nay, nay," said Madame de la Croix, "you take things too deeply to heart. A married woman is not expected to adore her husband—it is vulgar, ridiculous. He has done well in hiding from you his connection with Jeanne; only he has no right to force you to leave your home. We must prevent that."

"How?" said Marietta, sullenly.

"Go home, and behave as if nothing had happened," answered the Marquise. "Tonight we shall meet at Madame Girard's ball. You can easily find an opportunity, in the Count's presence, of announcing your departure to me—in his very presence, mind."

“Good. Go on,” said Marietta.

“I shall express my surprise, my regret, etc.,” said the Marquise. “You can then casually inform me of Jeanne’s expected return. You understand. Leave the result to me.”

“Very well,” said Marietta.

At that moment the man-servant announced Madame de Lutz’s carriage, so the two ladies, having taken an affectionate leave of each other, parted with a significant “*Au revoir.*”

As the door closed on her friend, Madame de la Croix returned to her place in front of the hearth, and stood gazing thoughtfully into the embers.

There was a triumphant, satisfied look upon her face, and her fingers drummed an

imaginary tune as they rested on the marble mantelpiece.

“It will be strange if I do not play my own game now,” she murmured. “I hold trump cards. He was evidently drawn into this marriage by his exaggerated sense of honour ; but it would have been worthless in France had no child been born, and there had been no civil marriage.”

She continued to ruminate on all she had heard until dinner was announced, and she joined her mother and husband in the drawing-room.

That evening her maid found the Marquise even more difficult to please than usual. No dress was handsome enough, no coiffure sufficiently becoming. But when, at last, her toilette was completed, and she

stood looking at herself in the large mirror, which reflected her entire person, a smile of satisfaction played about her mouth. She certainly was a strikingly-handsome woman.

In the meantime Marietta was following out, as best she could, the plan traced out for her by her friend. It was not one suited to her character, and therefore the more difficult to accomplish with tact. She would have preferred openly, justly or unjustly, to have accused her husband of deceit and infidelity; to have loudly proclaimed her wrongs, and, by the force of her will and passion, to have maintained her position as Countess de Lutz. There was no delicacy, no reserve in her character. She was the Countess de Lutz, and gloried in the privi-

leges, the luxuries that title gave her. She would yield her prerogatives to no one; but never had the thought occurred to her that with the honours she incurred the responsibilities of her new rank. Such a feeling could only come to a true-hearted woman, one whose mind and body were alike educated, who knew what it meant to think of and for others.

But with Marietta self had ever predominated. Her very love had been egoistic, and therefore had died the death. In her, the chief beauty of a woman's life, her pure unselfishness, was marred, if not wholly destroyed. She might charm, she might fascinate for a moment, her physical beauty rendered that probable; but a true, lasting affection, real love, apart from passion, that

would never be hers; she could not have appreciated it, she was not equal to the almost hourly sacrifice of self which it demands.

For why does love die out so often and so soon? Because men and women do not recognize its delicacy, its fragility. They use it roughly, pouring out its wealth with a lavish hand; and then suddenly they marvel to find the goblet, which seemed brimming over, which promised so many a delicious draught, empty! If we would only remember that the essentially beautiful is seldom otherwise than fragile, and that love is no exception to this rule, it needs infinite care not to break or bruise it. Nature teaches us the lesson which we will not learn. The fairest flowers need the greatest care, the

greenest grass is that which most we water. Oh! if we were but wise, and would but cherish that little plant of love with half the care we give to other things of less importance! Life would be more worth having, there would be fewer sad faces, fewer disappointed hearts. We blame circumstances, we blame others, for the fading of that little plant out of our homes, where once it was so green; and the fault lies too often with ourselves, in that we have neglected instead of nourishing what really constitutes the happiness or misery of our lives.

CHAPTER XVII.

“**T**HANK you, Count. I will rest awhile.

See, there is an empty chair beside your wife. I have scarcely spoken to her this evening ; if you will lend me your arm, I should be glad to do so now.”

And, leaving the dance, the Marquise de la Croix and the Count de Lutz crossed the room, to where Madame de Lutz sat also resting. She held out her hand languidly to greet her friend, who, as she took her place beside her, said, smiling,

“ Our beautiful Countess seems sad and

out of spirits this evening. All Amonville will quarrel with you, Count, if clouds darken so lovely a brow."

"I know no reason why Marietta should be sad," answered the Count. "It is hardly reasonable to make a man responsible for his wife's whims."

"Count, Count, you are incorrigible," said the Marquise, playfully tapping him on the arm with her fan. "Come, be amenable for once. Draw that chair closer, we are in a quiet corner; I will confess your wife, and between us we may perhaps drive the clouds away."

"There is no necessity for me to assist at the ceremony, Marquise," answered the Count coldly. "Only two are needed in the confessional."

“My dear Marquise,” interrupted Marietta somewhat bitterly, “my husband knows full well why I am *triste*. Do not trouble yourself about me, it is not worth your while. I shall soon drop out of the circle of your acquaintances, even as I dropped into it.”

“What do you mean?” asked Madame de la Croix, with well-feigned surprise.

“My wife means,” said Charles de Lutz, quietly, but with a shade of annoyance in his voice, “that she is vexed because I have determined to finish the Winter in Italy; she wishes to remain in France.”

“Ah!” said the Marquise, “I am surprised. I should have thought you would have been glad to return for a while to your own Italy.”

“No; I am contented here,” answered Marietta. “I dislike travelling.”

“Then I presume, as a good husband, you will remain, Count,” said the Marquise.

“I do not know what your interpretation of a good husband may be, Marquise,” answered the Count; “but if you mean by that title a man who, against his own judgment, yields to his wife, I am afraid I can lay no claim to it. My plans are made, and I think, though it may cost her something at first, she will not ultimately regret my decision. We shall leave for Italy early in January.”

“So soon!” exclaimed the Marquise, “and all the balls and fêtes of which the Countess was to have been the Queen!”

“I never wished it,” answered the Count; “she has been drawn into society far more

than I desired, so I am not sorry to put a stop to it."

"Why, Count, you are a perfect tyrant. Did you expect your wife, with all her youth and beauty, to lead a nun's life?"

"Madame," replied the Count seriously, "I expected nothing from my wife save the duty she might freely give."

"But if she does not give it freely, as in this case?" asked the Marquise.

"Of course, if the Count continues to desire it, I have nothing more to say," interrupted Marietta; "only he knows what a secluded, weary life I led in Italy; here I have made friends, and my existence is better worth having. Besides, I have been looking forward to Madame de Lutz's and Mademoiselle Jeanne's return, when we

should have formed a family party ; but it seems I am destined to be disappointed."

"Is there any talk of the return of the family to the Cottage?" asked the Marquise.

"Yes," answered the Count. "Jeanne has been dangerously ill ; the English climate is too severe for her. My aunt hopes shortly to return to Lutz."

"Ah," said the Marquise, tapping the wax floor with the point of her satin slipper, at the same time casting a significant look at the Count, which, notwithstanding all his *sangfroid*, caused his brow to darken ; then, turning to the young Countess, she said, gaily : "Console yourself, *ma chère* ; what is deferred is not lost. Mademoiselle Jeanne will keep—indeed I think we, the poor inhabitants of Amonville, are the chief

sufferers. I can hardly find it in my heart to pity you for having to pass the Winter at Rome."

"Doubtless I am unreasonable," answered Marietta, haughtily; "but I had, at least, hoped for sympathy from you."

"And I shall be the first to give it when occasion offers; but I am too old a wife to encourage needless rebellion. You are a spoilt child, *chère Comtesse*."

At the same moment the music broke forth afresh, and the Count, bowing, said,

"I believe we are engaged for this valse, Marquise."

She rose, smiling, placed her arm within his, and, as she moved away, turned and looked significantly at Marietta.

"You must pardon me, Count," said the

Marquise, as they stood together in the interval of the dance.

“Pardon you?” said the Count, “and, pray, wherefore, Marquise?”

“Why, for encouraging your wife’s wish to remain at Amonville, of course. I understand now it is both wise and right that you should go.”

“Madame, *I* do not understand *you*; will you speak plainly?” said the Count, sternly.

“Ah, now, of course, you are going to be angry,” murmured the Marquise. “Is it my fault if I see and understand things more clearly than ordinary people?”

“Or have a more vivid imagination, and fancy you do so, Madame?”

“Indeed,” answered the Marquise, “is it

imagination that you are going to Italy, to prevent your wife meeting Jeanne de Lutz?"

"I may truly answer yes," replied the Count, in the same tone. "I am taking my wife away, Madame, to prevent her mind being poisoned by idle gossip."

"You do not accuse me, Count?"

"I accuse no one, Madame."

"Ah, I fear, nevertheless, that you misjudge me," continued the Marquise. "Strange that a man cannot recognise a true friend."

"Is it friendly to interpret my actions at your pleasure?" asked the Count.

"If you had trusted me, I should have had nothing to interpret," answered the Marquise; "and could not, therefore, have erred."

“Trusted you!” said the Count, “with what?”

“With your secret marriage—with your love for Jeanne—in fact, with all your life. You do not know how useful a woman-friend may be, Count.”

“Marquise, pardon me, you are labouring under some strange mistake. I scarcely think you can know what you are saying; above all things, this is no place for such language.”

“I know well what I am saying, Count. I would have been your friend, had you willed it; I am so still, even against your pleasure. One word more, and I have finished. As surely as you take your wife to Italy, the world will say you do so because you dare not let her come face to face with your cousin Jeanne.”

“The world is welcome to say what it chooses, Marquise.”

“Good ; I have finished. Shall we take one more turn ?” And quietly, as if nothing unusual had passed between them, they joined the dancers.

In nothing was Charles de Lutz moved to change his plans. He knew that Amonville must talk—whatever happened, it was sure to do that. He had to combat two evils—gossip and slander, which, however unpleasant, must in time die out, and which could do no great mischief as long as they did not reach his wife’s ears, rousing her jealous nature, and destroying all chance of peace and quiet either for himself or Jeanne. Anything in the world rather than the latter alternative. So the preparations for

their departure continued; slowly, of course, as Marietta carefully threw every possible obstacle into the way of their advancement.

One evening, towards the end of December, the Count and Countess de Lutz were seated at their late dinner, when a carriage suddenly drove up and stopped in front of the house.

“Who can it be, at this hour?” said Marietta, listening. The Count also lent an attentive ear, and presently voices were heard in the hall.

“It is my aunt and Jeanne,” he exclaimed, rising hastily, and going out to meet them. A minute, and he re-entered, with Jeanne leaning on his arm, and going up to Marietta, said, in a low, somewhat agitated

voice, "Marietta, my cousin—Jeanne, my wife."

Jeanne threw back the thick veil which covered her face, and holding out her hand, said simply,

"Yes, we are cousins. Will you kiss me?"

"*Si, si,*" said Marietta, taken by surprise; and the two faces met, in strange contrast to each other. One in the full glow of health and beauty, with richly-braided hair and bright-coloured ribbons; the other white as death itself, draped in deep mourning, only relieved by the soft golden hair, shading her face, and her large blue eyes.

"I must leave her with you, Marietta, while I go and see after my aunt and the luggage. You will make acquaintance in my

absence." And so saying, he left the room.

"What do you think of her, Charles?" asked his aunt, advancing from amidst a chaos of luggage which surrounded her to meet her nephew.

"I can scarcely tell," he answered, evasively. "I only caught a glimpse of her face. I fear she is much changed."

"Her one cry has been, 'Take me home, mamma, take me home. I shall only get well at the Cottage.' Have I done wrong to bring her, Charles?"

The two were standing quite apart and speaking low, and Madame de Lutz laid her hand upon her nephew's arm. He raised it to his lips, saying,

"I think not, aunt. I love Jeanne too well to harm her by word or deed."

“But you might do so unwittingly,” said Madame anxiously.

“Nay, fear not,” answered the Count. “In a fortnight, at latest, I shall be in Italy with my wife. Now come and let me introduce you, or they will begin to wonder at our non-appearance.”

But he was mistaken; Jeanne and Marietta were too much engrossed with themselves to think of others. As the door closed upon the Count, Jeanne had moved a little backwards, and stood looking at Marietta from a distance. At last her face broke into a soft sweet smile of admiration, and she exclaimed, “I knew you were beautiful, but I had no idea how beautiful.”

“He did not tell you?” asked Marietta proudly.

“Who—Charles? Oh! yes, he told me,” she answered, “but one must see to believe.”

Flattered and pleased, Marietta for the moment forgot Madame de la Croix’s insinuations, forgot the jealousy surging at her heart, and going up to Jeanne, said,

“Let me take your hat and cloak; you are so covered up I cannot see you; besides, you must be very tired.”

“There is not much left of me to see,” said Jeanne, throwing off her wraps and standing before Marietta in her plain black dress, looking as slight and fragile as if a breath of wind would have sufficed to blow her down.

“You have been very ill,” said Marietta, looking at her.

“Yes,” said Jeanne; “but I am getting well now. Do I frighten you?”

“No,” said Marietta; “but how white and thin you are! I was ill last year, but I never looked like that.”

“Ah! well, I shall soon be strong, now I am home again; there is no place like home.”

Marietta did not answer her directly; at last she said,

“My little daughter that died was just like you; she had the same blue eyes, and the same golden hair.”

“We should have been cousins,” said Jeanne, almost apologetically.

“I know,” answered Marietta irritably. “Have you heard that we leave in about a week for Italy?”

“No, indeed,” said Jeanne; “but how glad you must be!—almost as glad as I am to come home to the Cottage.”

“You are quite mistaken,” answered Marietta. “I like Amonville much better than Italy. I never went out there as I do here. I did not even know I was a Countess—which was wrong, very wrong of my husband. Besides, here I have made many friends, especially the Marquise de la Croix. It is very hard to leave everything, just as one is getting accustomed to the place and people.”

“Why do you not tell my cousin so?” said Jeanne; “he would not force you to go to Italy against your will.”

“You think so,” answered Marietta. “Wait and see. I have said all I can, and

still he is unmoved. I wish you would try your influence."

Jeanne started, colouring deeply. At that moment the door opened, to admit the Count and Madame. The former looked anxiously at Jeanne, and the troubled, almost frightened expression of her face did not escape him. A great pain shot through his heart; it had begun already—already; but taking his aunt up to Marietta, he introduced her, as he had done Jeanne, with the simple formula, "Aunt, my wife," and leaving the elder and younger lady to make acquaintance, he quietly drew a large arm-chair close to the hearth, saying,

"Jeanne, come and sit down here and warm yourself; you are both cold and tired. Louis, place the little round table

by Mademoiselle, and serve her here."

"Nay, nay, Charles, indeed," said Jeanne. "I am not cold. I can sit quite well at table."

"Have you grown wilful since you have been in England, Jeannette?"

The gentle tone of voice, the old familiar name, fell caressingly on Jeanne's ear. She could but obey, and take the offered seat, while the others gathered round the freshly-served dinner-table. A certain restraint hung over them all while the first course was passing round; each seemed to feel uncertain what to do or say.

At last Madame, turning to Marietta, said kindly,

"My nephew tells me you are returning to Italy for the remainder of the Winter.

You must be very pleased at the prospect?"

Marietta looked furtively across at her husband, who hastened to answer,

"Marietta has been so fêted in Amonville that it has spoiled her, aunt; she fancies the novelty of balls and parties will last for ever. I am willing she should retain that illusion, so I am carrying her off in the midst of all the gaieties. We shall return next season, and take another sip at the intoxicating cup of Amonville delights."

Marietta's silence, but her angry looks, told Madame that she had made a mistake, and trodden on dangerous ground; she hastened, therefore, to change the conversation; and Jeanne, also, began eagerly to ask after old acquaintances. Her pale face

had gradually flushed with nervous excitement, and her blue eyes were strangely, almost unnaturally, bright.

Dish after dish passed her untouched, but the Count heard her ask several times for fresh water, until he was fain to inquire of her whether her residence in England had engendered a partiality for the watery element. He spoke jestingly, though he scarcely felt so.

“I am always thirsty, since my illness,” answered Jeanne. “Mamma says it is a habit,” and she pushed the glass away with a certain impatience.

A few minutes later, and they adjourned to the drawing-room.

“What a comfortable, well-arranged house you seem to have, Charles!” said his

aunt, as they stood together on the hearth-rug.

“Just what I tell him,” answered Marietta, with a gentle sigh; and Madame de Lutz once more regretted her observation, especially when Charles de Lutz replied, sharply—

“I tried to make it comfortable, home-like, though I never really liked coming into town; but Marietta found the Château dull, and the drive in and out too cold; this decided me, but the house has become a perfect ‘Vanity Fair.’ I cannot stand it; that is why I have decided to start for Italy. Next year we shall see.”

Marietta had listened silently and haughtily to her husband; and now, without attempting to answer him, she threw herself

languidly on the sofa beside Jeanne, saying, wearily,

“You do well not to marry, Mademoiselle ; at least, you are free to come and go at your pleasure, whereas we poor married women are carried hither and thither at our husband’s will, parted, at almost a moment’s notice, from our best and dearest friends. Ah, me !”

Even as she uttered the last exclamation, the drawing-room door was thrown open, and the man-servant announced Madame la Marquise de la Croix. Eagerly Marietta rose to meet her, exclaiming, in Italian,

“Ah, *cara mia*, my heart and my thoughts were with you. We were just speaking of this cruel separation. See, my aunt and my cousin Jeanne, of whom you

have told me so much, arrived this evening.”

The information was unnecessary; Louise's eager eye had taken in the whole group. Going up to Madame de Lutz, she made her a deep reverence, saying, as she held out her hand,

“This is indeed an unexpected pleasure, dear Madame.” Then, turning to Jeanne, with one of those hard, stereotype smiles, and taking the young girl's passive hand in hers, “Ah, dear Jeanne,” she said, “how things have changed since we last parted, the night of Madame Beauvais' ball! I have heard, with much regret, of your long illness. You are indeed greatly changed, but let us hope your native air and genial society will restore you to your former

self. *Chère Comtesse*," she continued, turning to Marietta, "I am sure you must have been at a loss to recognise my portrait of Jeanne!"

"Nay," answered Jeanne, attempting to smile, but feeling very much as if a serpent were coiling itself round her, "I hope I am not quite past recognition."

"Marquise, will you not throw off your cloak, and take a cup of tea with us?" asked Charles de Lutz, assuming, however unwillingly, his duty as host.

"I regret the impossibility," answered Madame de la Croix; "but you seem all to have forgotten that the Philharmonic Concert takes place to-night. I felt sure you would be going, so, as at dinner my husband gave out that he should be otherwise en-

gaged, I came round, thinking we could go together; but, of course, I understand you will remain at home to-night?" And she bowed, smiling, towards Jeanne.

"Indeed," said Madame de Lutz, addressing herself to Marietta, "I hope you will not suffer our presence to interfere with any of your plans. Jeanne is tired from her journey, and will soon retire to her room; I shall not be long before I follow her example, so, if you have any plan of amusement for this evening, you must not allow yourself to be deterred by us."

"You are most kind," answered Marietta, carefully avoiding her husband's eye; "and if indeed you intend retiring so soon, I think I may as well accompany my dear friend to the concert. Count, you will come, also,

will you not?" she continued, addressing herself to her husband.

"No, I thank you," was the cold answer.

"Ah, well!" said Marietta, with a gentle sigh, "I daresay you will all three be happier without me; I am but a stranger; you have doubtless much to say to each other. Count, will you ring the bell, and desire Maurice to bring me my fur cloak."

Silently her husband obeyed.

"Indeed, I am ashamed of myself," exclaimed the Marquise, "thus to break up such an interesting family-party. But, as the dear Countess says so delicately, she is as yet but a stranger amongst you." And, turning with a peculiar smile to Jeanne, she continued, in broken English, "It is, perhaps, as well; you may have certain

things to say to each other, which the Countess will not be any the better for hearing."

"I do not understand you, Louise," said Jeanne, quietly, though her pale face flushed crimson. "We have nothing to say which my cousin Marietta may not hear."

"Good, good," said the Marquise, with the same double smile; and holding out her hand to Jeanne, she rose to leave. "*Au revoir*, and better health to you, Jeanne."

And Marietta being carefully wrapped up by her maid, the two ladies, after wishing Madame de Lutz good night, and making a thousand excuses for leaving her, were escorted by the Count to Madame de la Croix's carriage, and drove off. The Count,

beyond an "amusez-vous, Mesdames," never unclosed his lips.

In the few minutes he was absent, Madame remarked to her daughter—

"I am, beyond measure, surprised and grieved that Charles should have allowed that woman to obtain such a footing in his household; she is playing a double game, I feel sure of it."

"Mamma, what makes you think so?" said Jeanne, soothingly. "Why must you begin at once to vex yourself? What harm do you suppose she can do either Marietta or myself? Louise always loved novelty and patronage; believe me, that alone has drawn her towards the young Countess. I acknowledge it is a pity; she is no very desirable friend."

“I cannot help it. I am more than sorry, I am deeply grieved at the sight of her in this house,” said Madame. “Knowing her as he does, Charles should have been wiser, and have chosen a better friend for his wife.”

“Easier said than done, aunt,” said the Count, who had entered, and was now leaning over the back of Madame’s chair.

“You ought to have prevented the Marquise growing intimate with your wife, Charles, at any risk,” said Madame seriously.

“I know it,” he answered; “but there are so many things which I ought to have done, and have not accomplished. It is but one more added to the number.”

He was evidently trying to avoid a posi-

tive reply ; but Madame was pertinacious.

“ You should have insisted. A stranger, she could scarcely choose her friends. You should have done so for her.”

The Count laughed a painful laugh, and almost for the first time in her life Jeanne saw his eyes flash angrily, while his voice told a tale of suppressed passion, as he said,

“ Strange how little women know women.” Then he continued more calmly, “ I quite agree with you that the Marquise is no companion for my wife ; and from the first I told Marietta that I objected to the intimacy. The result was the contrary to what I desired. Blame me—doubtless I deserve it ; but what will you have ? I hate scenes—I hate laying down the law ; if

I cannot be willingly, lovingly obeyed, I would rather let things take their course. Call it weakness, call it what you will, such is my nature—I cannot change now. Marietta and I have not one thought, one feeling in common; her will and mine clash every hour of the day. I am no tyrant, to force a woman to bend to me. I neither will nor can dispute; therefore she goes her way, and I go mine, and there is at least peace between us. I never wished to bring her to Lutz, knowing her character. Justice has now been done; the world knows I have a wife. In a fortnight we shall return to Italy, and the Marquise will be left alone to her devices. Marietta is beyond measure angry; since I have announced my determination it is a daily, hourly battle; but I will not have

your peace of mind imperilled, and we shall go."

"Nay, but, Charles, I can understand the life here must be very fascinating to one who is so beautiful, and has never been into the world. You judge her hardly," said Jeanne.

"Do you think so?" said the Count.

"Yes," answered his cousin, rising and standing beside him. "Your manner is so distant and cold to her; you drive her away, instead of drawing her towards you. Naturally she turns to the Marquise for sympathy. I should not like to think that you went to Italy, and thereby vexed your wife, on my account. I am not afraid of either her or the Marquise."

An involuntary smile broke over the

Count's whole face, and laying his hand on Jeanne's head, he smoothed the soft fair hair back from her brow, as had been his wont when she was a child, and his voice was very gentle as he answered her.

“Little Jeanne is speaking out of her own heart, but not from knowledge. Child, you do not understand, and it is as well that you should not. You look very tired; go to bed, dear. I am sorry you should have been annoyed the first evening of your return.”

He kissed her on the forehead as he finished, and Jeanne bent her head to hide the emotion which his words and action gave rise to. At a glance she had seen how changed he was—the furrowed lines upon his brow, the sad, weary look in mouth and

eyes ; it hurt her ; she would fain have cried out for mercy, not for herself, but for him. Absent, she had tried to imagine him living a quiet, indifferent life, fairly happy, like most men. She saw that she had misjudged him ; she saw that the mistake which had been made was greater than even she had conceived, and her heart sank within her. Nevertheless, as she obeyed her cousin and prepared to retire, she was sufficiently mistress of herself to say playfully,

“ I think you take me still for a child, Charles.”

“ I wish you were, Jeannette,” answered her cousin seriously.

Then Jeanne, wishing them both good night, left the room.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AUNT and nephew were silent for a few minutes, while the Count kept up a restless walk. At last he stopped in front of Madame, saying,

“Aunt, will you understand me when I tell you that my life has lost all charm—that I am weary to death of it? Listen—do not stop me; you are not to blame. I mistook passion for love. The wife that I have taken to myself never loved me, nor I her; she is beautiful, and fascinated me. As for her, any man who would have broken the

monotony of her life would have been to her as much as I have been. I do not deceive myself—I do not care to do so ; and it is as well you should not do so either. Marietta is a woman of violent passions, utterly uncontrolled and uncontrollable. I do not choose, therefore, that either you or Jeanne should be subject to her whims, especially when her chosen guide is such a woman as the Marquise de la Croix. Therefore, notwithstanding her opposition, I am taking her back to Italy, before Amonville has time to poison her mind.”

“You will do as you judge right, Charles,” answered Madame ; “but I certainly think no second motives should actuate your conduct towards your wife. I have brought Jeanne home, because it was a ne-

cessity ; and we must begin our life as we mean to continue it. Neither you nor she can be exiles from your natural homes. Her place is at the Cottage ; yours at the Château. You have both of you duties to perform, which you neither may nor can ignore. Is it not cowardly to turn your back and fly ? Because a mistake has been made at the outset of your lives, are you from henceforth to sacrifice everything to that ? Jeanne does not think so, no more do I. You talk of love and passion. You have no right to do so as regards my daughter. Granted that *too late* you discover that you love each other. Of what stuff must that love be if you must needs put mountains and valleys between it and you ? Believe me, *such love* is not worth so much trouble ;

it will die out of itself. You need not break up your home and vex your wife for what is, after all, only a matter of time."

Charles de Lutz moved impatiently, as if he would have interrupted her ; but she, raising her hand, continued to speak rapidly :

"Let me finish ; it is necessary we should understand each other, once for all. I have trusted you all your life as an honest man, and do so still. Whatever errors you have committed, I attribute them far more to circumstances, and the force of events, than to premeditated wrong on your part. I erred, perhaps, in doing battle, as I have done, for years against the accepted rules of society, and of the country of my adoption. It has brought sorrow to you both, and my child's first fresh love lies broken. These are the

evils we see, and, therefore, mourn, but what we do not see is that which *might* and *would* have been, had I allowed events to run their course. Who can tell now where the wrong really lay? With my dear husband, who, dying, would have mapped out his child's life, forgetting that we have each and all our own individuality; or with me, ambitious of one thing only, that my child should taste to the full that best gift of God to man, a pure and holy love? We have sinned in thus arrogating to ourselves the right of forcing the frail bark of life whither we would, instead of leaving it to Him who alone can guide it safely into port. But He can and will save it yet; only from henceforth you must be content to go your way, and leave Jeanne to go hers, acting both independently of

each other. You must put Jeanne out of your thoughts—not consulting her tastes and pleasures, but your wife’s. Otherwise misery will ensue; the one will be sacrificed to the other. Marietta will unjustly suffer from your tenderness for Jeanne, and I, her mother, tell you I will not suffer it should be so. Never fear, I will take care of my child; she is too pure, too true to herself, to wish you to act otherwise; it would but grieve and break her heart.”

“And so, to please my wife, you would have me remain at Amonville, and see Jeanne daily as a stranger might?” asked the Count.

“I neither ask you to remain at Amonville, nor to go away on account of us,” answered Madame. “Do what suits your

own and your wife's convenience. I will not have Jeanne a pretext for any of your actions. You said, just now, you would not subject her to your wife's whims. I will take care such is not the case ; but neither must your wife be subjected to Jeanne's comings and goings."

"You are hard," answered the Count.

"I am just," replied Madame de Lutz. "I know it is in a man's nature to see but one thing—the woman he loves ; woe be-tide that woman if, by her influence, she lowers by one degree the standard of that man's life ! Now, Charles, I have said my say. You know what I think, and what Jeanne thinks ; you will act as you deem right." So saying, she rose, and, in her old motherly fashion, laying aside all her stern-

ness, for she saw in the man before her only the boy she had loved and cared for so long, she laid her hands on both his shoulders, and kissed him, as a mother would an erring son, saying, "Be wise and just, Charles, and all things may yet be well."

He laughed a bitter laugh, as he replied, "You do not know my wife, aunt."

"Possibly not," replied Madame; "but still she *is* your wife—do what is *right* by her."

"I understand and appreciate your feelings, only I repeat you do not know my wife. I cannot trust her; she lives by passion, and acts from instinct, not from judgment; she hates as she loves, without reason; she is carried away herself, and drags others in her wake, as I know to my

cost. It is hard to suffer a whole lifetime for a moment's folly; and Jeanne, who has done no wrong!"

"The sins of the fathers," said Madame, sadly. "Did you ever hear of a reformation without martyrs, Charles? I fear France will need many martyrs before she is regenerate."

"I doubt whether the present result of your system will make many converts, aunt," replied the Count.

"Nevertheless, I would not act differently," she answered. "I have faith in the *right*, and I can better bear to see Jeanne suffer now than I could have done had she been your wife, without a wife's highest privilege—your love."

"But that would not have been," answer-

ed the Count, "seeing how I love her now."

"Hush!" said Madame, sternly. "You did not love her when you would have made her your wife; and I do not believe in love born after marriage, especially here in France. But why go over the old tale, it can serve no purpose now? Good night, Charles."

"Good night, aunt."

And so they parted; she to her room, and Charles de Lutz to walk up and down the streets in the cold night air, until he turned into his club, which he only quitted long past midnight.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE following morning, the Count, going into his wife's dressing-room, found her sitting over the fire, leisurely sipping her chocolate. She looked up as he entered, more graciously than usual, and, pointing to an easy-chair, asked him if he would not also take some chocolate."

"No, thank you," he said; "you know I never take anything before eleven; besides, I cannot stay, I have business in town."

"Ah, but I want to talk to you," said Marietta; "you must put off your business for a little while."

“What is it you want, Marietta?” he asked, seriously, guessing at once what was coming.

“Nay, but,” she answered, “you must sit down and hear me quietly. Is it such a great thing for a wife to desire her husband’s company for a quarter of an hour?”

Charles de Lutz smiled. He was not so easily deceived. However, he seated himself, and looking up at Marietta, said,

“Well, now tell me what you want; some new jewel?”

“Ah, no!” answered Marietta, impatiently; “you give me jewels and dresses enough; you are not in fault there.”

“Then what do you complain of?” asked the Count.

“That you are not frank, and do not

trust me," answered Marietta; "and yet it were better for us both to be straightforward."

"I think so too," replied her husband.

"Well, then," continued Marietta, "why not tell me your reason for wishing to leave Amonville before the arrival of your aunt and cousin?"

"Because I know you better than you know yourself," answered the Count, calmly.

"Indeed!" said Marietta. "Well, I am enlightened now. I know that your cousin, Jeanne de Lutz, was your first love—that, but for the accident which made me your wife, she would to-day have been Countess de Lutz."

"As to Jeanne being my first love," an-

swered the Count, bitterly, "whoever told you that ventured on a great deal. I imagine no one but myself could assert that much. However, let it pass. Now, for the second statement—Jeanne was to have been my wife. Certainly, that is perfectly true; we were betrothed when she was quite a child; when, however, she reached the years of discretion, she refused to ratify the treaty."

"But you loved her," said Marietta.

"Loved my cousin Jeanne, most certainly I did!" he answered.

"Then why did you marry me?"

Charles de Lutz hesitated. He marvelled how she had the face to ask that question. He was tempted to throw the answer back at her in all its naked truth; but the natural

chivalry, the gentleness of his nature, gained the mastery, and he merely said,

“Doubtless because I never loved her as I loved you, Marietta.”

And he knew he was speaking the truth, though she might not attach their real meaning to his words. Truly he had never loved Jeanne with the same love wherewith he had loved Marietta.

Thoughtfully the Countess looked into the fire, while her husband continued speaking.

“I see the very thing I have tried most earnestly to avoid has already happened. I would willingly have kept you and Jeanne apart, at least for the present, because I know your suspicious character, Marietta; and I know also the evil, slandering tongues of Amonville. Jeanne has never been popu-

lar here, because she has never mixed freely in society, and for other reasons. I felt sure that idle gossip would soon bring tales to your ears, exaggerated by the manner of telling, and by your nature; have I not reasons for judging you thus, Marietta? All I desired, in acting as I have done, was to avoid giving you pain, or placing Jeanne in a false position. If we had been truer husband and wife to each other, all this would not have happened; I should not have come home alone to die, and no one would have ignored the existence of my wife." And he turned away. But Marietta stopped him.

"You thought I should be jealous of Jeanne, did you not?" she asked.

"Yes, I did," replied the Count. "You have often been so for less."

“Scarcely, I think,” answered Marietta, rising, and looking at herself with a smile of satisfaction in the mirror.

The Count smiled bitterly too. That haughty beauty had lost all charms for him, beyond the mere artistic appreciation.

“Well, Count,” continued Marietta, as she arranged the lace lappets of her morning head-dress, “for once I assure you you are mistaken. I have seen Mademoiselle Jeanne, and, notwithstanding what others say, can never believe you have such bad taste as to admire her. That she should have made love to you is, of course, natural, under the circumstances.”

The Count bit his lip with angry impatience, but answered nevertheless quietly,

“I suppose that last speech is learnt from

your friend, Madame de la Croix. It is scarcely worth my while to inform you that my cousin Jeanne never made love to me."

"I do not care if she did," replied Marietta hastily; then, changing her tone and speaking gently, she continued, "I know people will talk evil, and it is quite natural you should have been fond of your cousin. I never was less inclined to be jealous of any one in my life—it would be perfectly ridiculous. Why, I do not think she has six months to live. I have seen many English girls brought to Rome for their health, and they all looked just as Jeanne does; they did not remain long to sadden us with their death-like faces. No, indeed, jealousy would be misplaced in this case."

The cold hard tones, the cruelty of the

words, struck sharp and cutting upon the Count's nerves, and made him turn almost with repugnance from the woman who gave utterance to them.

“I sincerely hope you exaggerate the evil, Marietta,” he replied. “Jeanne is still so young ; with care the disease may be kept in abeyance.”

“Possibly,” said Marietta carelessly. “I am no physician. What I said just now was only to prove to you how far all thought of jealousy is from me. And now, Count, I am going to ask you, as a favour, to relinquish this journey to Italy. I am not afraid of the neighbourhood of your cousin, and I am anxious to show the town of Amonville that such is the case, which at present it is inclined to doubt.”

“Marietta,” said the Count, holding up his hand to stay her, “enough. The mischief I had hoped to avoid is already done, and, whether you go to Italy or stay here, I cannot now undo it. In all you say, I recognise the pupil of Madame la Marquise de la Croix. If mischief comes of it, she, and she alone, will be responsible. I warned you against that woman, yet you have made her your most intimate friend, and you allow yourself to be entirely guided by her. Now, I tell you, you may choose between her and me. Nay, do not interrupt me—I have not much to say. You do not wish to go to Italy; you cannot bend sufficiently to my pleasure to yield your tastes to mine. Good! I am no tyrant; we will remain in France, but one week

from this day I go to Paris; you follow me or not, as you think proper. I desire that the Marquise should cease her daily, almost hourly visits to our house. I must and will break through this circle of unmeaning, uninteresting society which, with the help of your friend, to serve her purposes, you have managed to draw round us. Now, Countess, you understand—the preparations for our journey to Italy will be countermanded, and you will yourself decide whether it suits you to follow me to Paris or not." And without adding another word, Charles de Lutz left the room.

Scarcely had he done so when, from a door opposite, opening out of Marietta's bedroom, Madame de la Croix entered the dressing-room. Her face was white with

suppressed anger, her lips tight closed.

“You heard?” said Marietta, turning towards her.

“Yes,” answered the Marquise, shortly.

“What have you done so to anger my husband against you?” asked Marietta.

“What can a woman do worse than spoil a man’s game?” replied the Marquise, scoffingly. “The Count is aware I know *too much*, therefore he fears me. Under the circumstances, I prefer his hatred to his love, so it does not signify. But we must hurry; I ought to be home. What are your plans? What shall you do?”

“Why, go to Paris, of course,” answered Marietta; “that is far less objectionable than Italy. At least, we shall meet, for, of course, you will come?”

“Yes, after the carnival. It would not do for me to follow you at once; and, indeed, I think it will be advisable for us to appear less together. Your husband evidently dislikes me; my presence irritates him. I would not, for the world, be the occasion of disagreement between you. You know he told you to choose between him and me.”

“Ah, but,” said Marietta, passionately, “I love you, my friend, and will go through fire and water rather than lose you. Of course, as he is my husband, I must live where it pleases him, but that neither can nor shall necessitate my separation from you.”

“My dear Marietta, you are a perfect child,” said the Marquise, smiling. “Of course, I know you cannot do without me;

your ignorance of the many rules and etiquettes of society, notwithstanding your beauty and station, would soon place you in a difficult position. I have undertaken to chaperon you, and, up to the present time, I do not think you can complain of me. Your success in Amonville has been complete, and, if you are careful, I will ensure you as great a one in Paris; only what is the use of irritating your husband? He suspects me. We will just show him he does so wrongly. In public, we will keep apart; in private, we can continue to see each other *ad libitum*. Who knows, in Paris, what his neighbour does? It is not likely the Count will follow you in your walks and drives. We can arrange to meet sometimes at my house, sometimes at church, or, if necessary,

to secure greater quiet, we can hire a room, —nothing will be easier. And now, my dear, as I am your monitor, before parting let me give you a word of advice. In future, do not kill Mademoiselle Jeanne so rapidly ; nothing touches a man's heart so much ; it is bad policy on your part. 'Pity is akin to love,' you know."

"After all, I do not believe he cares much for her," replied Marietta. "You heard how coolly he took what I said?"

"Very good," replied the Marquise ; "time will prove. I tell you, Countess, he loves that pale-faced girl far more than you dream of."

"Then why, when he could remain here close to her, does he use every effort to remove to a distance?"

“ Because Jeanne is a De Lutz, and he fears a scandal. Now, farewell. I must really be gone. Be prudent. To see properly, one must appear not to see at all. You are a novice in the ways of the world, *cara mia*, but time will teach you. *Addio.*”

“ *Addio!*” repeated Marietta thoughtfully, as, holding the Marquise’s hand, she conducted her to the door. There they parted. Silently, with knitted brow, Marietta returned to her seat. Suddenly she pulled her bell twice violently ; it was answered by Teresa.

“ Brush my hair,” said Marietta shortly.

Without answering, Teresa let down the coils of rich black hair which formed no inconsiderable part of Marietta’s beauty, and began slowly and methodically to brush the

glossy masses. She knew her young mistress's humour, and was aware the order given denoted a perturbed state of mind. She quietly brushed on, without speaking, and Marietta pondered. By degrees the brow softened, a look of satisfaction settled on the richly-curved lips, and she turned almost smilingly to Teresa, saying,

“ Make Greek plaits to-day, Teresa. Do you remember how the Count used to admire them ? Ah ! if husbands were only as easily pleased as lovers ! Give me my black velvet walking-costume ; I shall go out after breakfast. Tell Pierre to have the carriage ready for one o'clock ; and, by-the-by, we are not going to Italy, but to Paris, for the remainder of the Winter, so you need not hurry your preparations.”

Thus talking gaily to Teresa, she finished dressing, and was ready just in time, as the servant announced "*Madame est servie,*" to descend to the breakfast-room, and welcome smilingly her guests of the previous evening. A more lovely hostess, both Madame and Jeanne inwardly agreed, had never sat at the head of any table.

"Mademoiselle Jeanne, will you take a drive with me after breakfast? It is a fine day, and I have ordered the carriage at one," said Marietta, as they left the table.

"Gladly," answered Jeanne, "more especially as mamma is going to the Cottage, and will not allow me to accompany her, for fear it should be damp."

"That is well," answered Marietta, smil-

ing. "I suppose, Count, you will accompany your aunt?"

"Yes," he replied; "I have business at the Château."

"Very well, then, I will take care of Mademoiselle Jeanne."

And from that day forth Marietta arrogated to herself the whole charge of Jeanne. She surrounded her with every attention, laid herself out to please and fête her, and refused several invitations because she would not leave her guests during their short stay in her house. She spoke of Jeanne's health in touching terms. Altogether, the good people of Amonville were highly edified.

The Count was for a moment surprised at this unexpected turn of events, and, to

tell the truth, only half pleased ; he suspected Marietta, and the suspicion grew to be a certainty when on two or three occasions she called on Jeanne, half laughingly, half seriously, to use her influence with her cousin. Again by degrees, as if by pure accident, she got into the habit of suddenly leaving them alone. Altogether, the Count did not like the aspect of affairs. He knew his wife's character too well, so he remained faithful to his original plan, and, once the Cottage ready to receive its inmates, he announced his determination to leave immediately for Paris. His wife attempted no opposition ; so once more the Château was forsaken, and the little house in the Champs Elysées became the place of residence of the young Count and Countess de Lutz.

CHAPTER XX.

“**H**OW are you, Jeanne?” asked Charles de Lutz, entering the boudoir at the Cottage, early one June morning, about three years after the events related in the last chapter.

“I am better, thank you; the Summer is doing me good,” answered Jeanne, holding out her hand by way of welcome. “What has brought you back to Lutz so soon again, Charles? It is hardly a month since you were here?”

“I expected as much from you, Jeanne,”

answered the Count, half playfully, half bitterly. "I am not wanted here, any more than in my own house. In fact, considering how perfectly unnecessary my existence is to anyone's comfort, and how perfectly joyless it is to myself, I am beginning to think I may as well dispense with it altogether."

"Charles, how can you speak so?" said Jeanne, in a grieved tone.

"Well, then, my cousin, you might have had more consideration than to remind me I had been here within the month. Of course, I have no right to be anxious about you, though I left you ill, and have since had but short and unsatisfactory accounts of you. I am weary to death. I have worked hard to finish my picture for

the exhibition ; and now it is hung—and well hung—and has obtained no insignificant success, I do not seem to care one whit. I am tired and worn out ; I want rest and quiet, both alike unattainable in the whirl of Paris life. So I have come home for a week or two, before going to the Baths with my wife.”

“ And why did not Marietta accompany you ?” asked Jeanne.

“ Because she preferred remaining behind,” answered the Count. “ Jeanne, you know, as well as I do, that our lives are distinctly twofold ; we have little or nothing in common. She is a mere tool in the hands of Madame de la Croix. What could I do ? The more I fought against that influence, the more it took root and flourished. I

could not keep them apart ; if I attempted to do so, they deceived me, and the result was a wordy warfare between us, which did not mend matters ; so I finished by feigning blindness, and have since been more peaceful, but I am sick of life. In pity, child, let me forget, let me rest quiet for a time, as in the old days !”

And he threw himself into an armchair, and closed his eyes, as if weary of the very light of day. Jeanne turned away, fearful lest he should see the sorrow and the pity on her face. She knew so well that his life was a daily martyrdom ; that his wife’s caprices knew no bounds ; that to-day it pleased her to go here, to-morrow there ; that she was to be seen at Paris, at the Baths, the very centre of the most dissipated

society ; that of home life he knew nothing but the name, and the few glimpses he still caught of it, from time to time, at the Cottage. He spent the whole year in Paris, save in the very height of Summer, when he went to some fashionable bathing-place ; and in the Autumn, during the shooting-season, when he came to Lutz ; but Jeanne and her mother were mostly absent at such times—it was better so.

Marietta had not long been able to dissemble her real character to them. In the beginning she had tried to patronize Jeanne ; once even she had persuaded her to come and stay with her in Paris ; and, unsuspecting of evil, grateful for the kindness, Jeanne had gone ; but she soon perceived the aim and purpose of the young Countess, and so

gently but decisively retired. Nothing more was needed to rouse the slumbering hatred in Marietta's heart, and the Marquise de la Croix did not fail to fan the embers into a flame, until the Countess hated Jeanne with an almost deadly hatred, and let her feel it, too, on every occasion, wounding her by word and deed, as only a woman can. And Jeanne, half-scared, drew back. She had done no wrong, but she was conscious of one fact, that she loved the Count, and that he loved her, and though she was utterly powerless to pluck out that love, her conscience pained her.

Her great fear was lest her mother or Charles should perceive the slight put upon her. She tried in every possible way to screen Marietta, and succeeded. She

had always remained delicate since her visit to England, and, at times, occasioned her mother great anxiety; there was such a lack of vitality about her, such an evident fading away. The physicians who saw her said little and did little—the evil was beyond their ken.

In person she had not changed much during the last few years; she was white and fragile-looking; there was, perhaps, less brightness, less hopefulness, in her manner than formerly, but there was a deeper tenderness, a sort of earnest patience lighting up each feature. Not even Madame de Lutz knew the depth and power of Jeanne's nature; the struggle that went on within her from day to day. She lived so simply, so earnestly, always full of energy and careful

thought for those around her. Even her mother almost forgot the love-passage in her life, it was so completely thrown into the shade—never alluded to; they simply tacitly avoided as much as possible the society of the young Count and Countess.

It was so self-evident that Charles de Lutz was a disappointed man, that he and his wife had scarcely two thoughts in common, that, for the sake of peace, and to avoid continual discussion, he had, by degrees, let Marietta have entirely her own way, retreating to his studio whenever matters became actually too distasteful. A look of settled *ennui* was habitual to him now, except at rare intervals, when his art charmed him; or escaping from his own *entourage*, he would pass a few hours in familiar inter-

course at the Cottage. But these occasions were few and far between, neither Jeanne nor her mother encouraging any renewal of old days. Yet it was pain and grief enough to them to close their doors against him, he seemed so weary, so longing for kind sympathy.

Matters stood thus when Charles de Lutz came alone from Paris, to recruit himself at Lutz. Jeanne had passed a bad Winter; the weather had been more than usually severe, and she had been confined a great deal to her own rooms, and entirely to the house for several months. With the Spring she had gained a little strength; but those around her saw an evident change for the worse; she did not rally as quickly nor as completely as usual. And so, on this

June morning, when he spoke so wearily and bitterly, Jeanne felt as if all moral strength had left her. The warm tears welled up in her eyes, her heart throbbed painfully, it was all she could do not to show her sympathy by voice and touch.

She remembered how, as a child, when anything vexed him, she had been wont to climb upon his knee, caressingly entice him out into the garden, and do anything to make him glad again!—how, in later times, with word and smile, with gentle reasoning or kindly converse, she had dispelled the clouds. She knew she had not lost the power, she knew the knack so well, and seeing him thus weary, her love forced her to speak.

“You know that is not true, Charles ;

you know that we are glad enough to see you at the Cottage, only one has duties which it is not well to forget, even for a time ; it only makes them more difficult to resume."

"Ah, but, my little preacher," answered the Count, smiling, "have you forgotten an old English adage, 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy?' Now, I think that is my case. I have been labouring at the fulfilment of my duties so incessantly that I feel desperately dull, and I doubt whether I shall not commit some insane act, if no relaxation be granted me. Come, Jeanne, let us throw dull care to the wind, for a few days, and see if we cannot make life less painfully severe ; it is becoming a perfect nightmare." And he rubbed his

eyes, and shook himself, as if just rousing himself from sleep. Jeanne could not help it, she laughed outright. "That is well," he said. "Now, put something on, and come and take a turn in the garden before breakfast. I know my aunt is not ready to receive me yet. You look like a hot-house flower needing both sun and air."

He wrapped a shawl round her, as he spoke, placed her arm in his, and led her out into the garden, where the June roses in all their glory gladdened the eye. And the two wandered among the flower-beds, breathing in the fresh pure air, while the Count exerted himself, as he rarely did, to amuse her.

He was never a great talker; his was rather a nature for quiet thought. Anything

likely to engender dispute, and consequently noise, was objectionable to him. He rarely mixed himself up in men's discussions; he was too lazily indifferent to public opinion. "I shall not convert them, nor they me," he was wont to say, and so let the subject drop.

But, in truth, there were few more eloquent speakers than Charles de Lutz when he did exert himself. The charm of his private conversation was very great; and now, looking down at Jeanne's pale face and languid manner, he suddenly ignored his own weariness, and, because his soul loved and clung to her above all else, he strove to cheer her, talking brightly, earnestly, until Jeanne forgot herself, and the merry laugh of former days parted her lips. The un-

accustomed sound brought Madame de Lutz to her window, and seeing her nephew, she called to him. In a minute the two were standing looking up at her.

“You have played truant again, Charles!” she said, half seriously, half sadly.

“Aunt,” answered the Count, “if you were a good Catholic, you would know that at certain seasons it is well to retire from the world, and at a distance, in some calm retreat, to contemplate its wickedness, and one’s own. I think one generally dwells with most satisfaction on the first. Such is at present my case. I am tired of the world and its wickedness, and so have come down here for a week or ten days, to recruit my strength and sweeten my temper, which has not, I can assure you, improved of late.

Aunt, you are bound to receive me kindly, forgetful of all past grievances, leaving the future to take care of itself, and living for the next ten days, from hour to hour, a pleasant home-life, such as was ours before my hair turned grey." And half seriously, half smilingly, he uncovered his head, thus showing how his hair was thickly sprinkled with white. At the same time, he raised his eyes to his aunt, so pleadingly she could but interpret their meaning, "I am tired out. Grant me a reprieve, however short." And something of the same expression was visible in Jeanne's face.

In romance, we read of heroes and heroines, with Stoic resolution, capable of withstanding the most trying temptations, always steadfast, always firm in the hour of trial,

imbued with a power of discernment which enables them almost to regulate their own future as well as that of others. But in real life such is by no means the case. We do not arm ourselves against imperceptible dangers; we do not resist the pleadings of those we love, because of a possible future inconvenience. We *are* moved by tenderness; we *do* act from impulse, yielding to momentary weaknesses.

And Madame de Lutz saw no danger in allowing the Count and Jeanne to associate. She had no real fear for either of them. It was so long ago, she believed passion to be dead in the Count, and she had never been sure of its existence in Jeanne. She saw that they both needed change, rest, and companionship, such as they could best find

together ; so, looking down on them as they stood beneath her window, she said simply,

“ You are like a schoolboy, Charles, asking for a holiday !”

“ And I feel like one, aunt. Will you not grant it me ?”

“ I suppose I must,” she answered. “ Do they know of your arrival at the Château ?”

“ No. I came straight to the Cottage. Aunt, I am your guest ; our servants are all in Paris. Marietta will doubtless join me shortly. There was a bazaar or something which detained her ; and I really was not well enough to stay longer. I seemed to smell the woods of Lutz, the perfume of the wild-flowers reached me in my shut-up studio, the song of the birds bade

me begone. In fact, I was home-sick."

"Very poetical," said Jeanne, smiling; "but instead of talking at the window, suppose we go in. Ah! there is the breakfast-bell." And she ran lightly up the steps leading to the drawing-room.

The ray of sunlight glancing across her path made her for a moment forget her physical weakness; but arrived at the top, she was fain to lean, white and trembling, against the balustrades.

"Jeanne, what is the matter?" asked the Count.

"Nothing," she answered; "it is only weakness. I am always so if I hurry. I shall be all right in a few minutes."

He stood and watched her, with painful anxiety, until the heaving breast was some-

what calmer ; then, without speaking, he once more placed her arm in his, and they entered the drawing-room, at the same moment as Madame de Lutz came from her room.

Ten days, a fortnight slipped by, and Charles de Lutz was still at the Cottage, the inmates of which seemed to have forgotten the flight of time. A sort of irresistible feeling of contentment, of completeness, had gradually settled down upon them, a shadow of old days charming and lulling them to forgetfulness. As if by one accord, both Jeanne and Charles de Lutz avoided all mention of aught that might trouble them ; they utterly ignored the past, and thought not of the future. They were like two weary travellers sitting down beside a gentle

running stream, laving themselves in its clear rippling waters, and then falling asleep in the green grass on its banks, forgetful of the blazing mid-day sun which would soon pour down upon their unprotected heads, and the long journey which still lay before them.

CHAPTER XXI.

AT the exhibition of French artists at Paris, two Englishmen, with catalogues in hand, were carefully examining the pictures. The elder of the two, to judge by the continual bows he exchanged with everybody, was evidently an *habitué* of Paris.

“My dear Gordon,” he observed to his companion, “it seems to me you are examining your catalogue far more carefully than the pictures themselves.”

“You are about right,” answered Gordon

Elliot, laughing; "but the truth is, I am looking out for the picture of an artist, a connection of my own—the Count Charles de Lutz."

"Charles de Lutz a connection of yours! Why did you not tell me so, my dear fellow? Why, he is a rising artist—a man that we are beginning to be proud of. He has done well this year. His picture is in the north room; I will take you to it. In the meantime, tell me how you are related to him."

"By marriage," answered Gordon. "My father's sister married the present Count's uncle."

"Your father's sister married Charles de Lutz's uncle," repeated Alick Campbell slowly. "Yes, I see. Your aunt is his

aunt by marriage, and Mademoiselle Jeanne de Lutz is cousin to you both, in the same degree."

"Just so," answered Gordon, colouring.

"Do you know my cousin?"

"Eighteen months ago, she came on a short visit to the young Countess, and I was introduced to her. She was one of the sweetest girls I ever met. No beauty, but so bright, so simple—very different from our Parisian type of young lady. But she did not stay long, and has never since returned. I doubt whether she found the society of the Countess, and her *entourage*, quite congenial; besides her health was very delicate."

"What sort of woman is the young Countess?" asked Gordon.

“Have you never seen her?” replied Alick Campbell.

“No, I have not been in France for the last three years,” answered Gordon.

“Well, then, my dear fellow, you had better make her acquaintance; you are not likely to see such another splendid woman in a hurry. Nevertheless, I would not care to have her for my wife. She and her friend, the Marquise de la Croix, have been the rage in Paris for the last two Winters.”

“Do you mean to say that Charles de Lutz allows his wife to associate intimately with the Marquise de la Croix?” exclaimed Gordon. “I thought she was sueing for a separation from her husband?”

“Well, ‘allow’ is not the word,” answered Campbell; “he endures it. One cannot

be too particular in Paris, you know; one is obliged to wink at many things. I believe the Pope has been applied to for a divorce—upon what grounds I cannot tell you, for you know divorces are not recognised in France. People say she was in love with the Count formerly, but that he did not reciprocate, and that, in the hope of winning him, she cultivated the wife. If such were really her plan of action, she has signally failed; Charles de Lutz pays little enough attention to any woman, and least of all to the Marquise. To my certain knowledge, he did his utmost to keep his wife away from her, and failed. The Countess is a woman who knows no will but her own; so, for the sake of peace, he closed his eyes, and would not see. And now the Marquise

and the Countess are known in Paris by the name of 'The Inseparables.' Only this I will say, the Countess de Lutz has been more careful of her reputation than her friend the Marquise. There is nothing serious against her, still one cannot touch pitch and remain undefiled."

"Ah, well," said Gordon, "I bless my stars that, under the circumstances, I am not a Frenchman."

"My dear fellow, they don't complain," said Alick, laughing. "They know what to expect from the hour they begin to entertain matrimonial projects. What Frenchman ever thought of choosing a wife for himself? They leave that to their mammas, who turn over the convents, pick out the prettiest—nay, I meant to say, the richest—

maiden, fresh and nun-like, whom their sons take upon trust, and introduce into the wicked world, 'where Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do.' And, of necessity, they are very idle, convent-bred, and, at the outset of their career, at least, very empty-headed. The result is patent. Frenchwomen, as a rule, would make good wives, if only they had a chance given them. It is the system which is in fault. First, a man can't speak to a girl until she is married; afterwards he is free to come and go as he thinks proper—as if the fact of a wedding-ring on the third finger of the left hand were talisman sufficient to secure a woman's love and fidelity. Then if a Frenchwoman is not worldly she is priest-ridden; and I really should be at a loss to

say which of the two is preferable. When I hear people talk of the immorality and fickleness of the French, I say, 'Good, they haven't a chance given them to be otherwise, as long as the present system continues; under the same circumstances, Englishmen would be ten times worse. There are, to my knowledge, no tenderer mothers in the world than French mothers, foolishly so; they make molly-coddles of their sons, and *petites maîtresses* of their daughters. But the fact remains; French children are not left to servants and governesses, as in England. If they are ill or well brought up, it is their parents' doing, and one thing is certain, if a Frenchman respects nothing else on earth, he has, as a rule, a profound veneration for his mother.

Her acts differ in his eyes essentially from those of other women. Child-love is an instinct in a woman, but wife-love is a plant of more subtle growth, needing greater care and a richer soil. But look, Gordon, there, to the left, on the bench yonder, are the very ladies in question."

And he pointed to where the Marquise de la Croix and the Countess de Lutz sat, not looking at the pictures, but conversing eagerly in Italian.

Gordon's eye followed Alick's, and without speaking for several minutes, he carefully examined the Countess. At last he said, "I should like to be introduced to Madame de Lutz; my connection authorises it. The Marquise is an old acquaintance."

"Nothing easier, my dear fellow," an-

swered his friend. "I must pay my respects to both ladies, and will therefore perform the ceremony of introduction."

And the two young men advanced to the bench where the ladies were seated.

"Ah, Monsieur Campbell, one is sure to meet you everywhere," said the Marquise.

"I trust my presence does not displease you, Madame?" said Alick.

"No, assuredly," said the Marquise, smiling graciously. "You are always gay, which is saying a great deal, and ensures a man's welcome."

Alick Campbell bowed, and, turning to Marietta, said,

"Madame la Comtesse, my friend here desires to be introduced to you. He claims to be a connection; I wish I

could do as much. Mr. Gordon Elliot.”

“Ah, Mr. Gordon,” said the Marquise, exchanging a flash of intelligence with Marietta, “I thought your face was not unfamiliar to me. *Ma chère*,” she continued, addressing herself to the Countess, “Monsieur Gordon is a cousin of the family.”

“I am most happy to make your acquaintance, Monsieur,” said Marietta, bowing. “I have often heard my husband, and your cousin, Mademoiselle de Lutz, mention your name. You have timed your visit to Paris unfortunately. My husband is absent, and I join him shortly. Shall you make any lengthened stay?”

“I think not, Madame,” answered Gordon. “My leave of absence expires a week from to-day.”

“You are in the army?” asked the Marquise, blandly.

“Yes, Madame,” replied Gordon. “I was educated for the law, but the life did not suit me, so after the death of my poor father I entered Her Majesty’s service.”

“But, surely, you will not return to England without paying a visit to Lutz?” said Marietta. “It would be an unpardonable neglect. What would Mademoiselle Jeanne think?”

“I do not think my cousin troubles herself much about my comings or my goings,” said Gordon. “We have not met for several years.”

“That may possibly be your fault,” said the Marquise, significantly.

Gordon coloured, and, turning the conversation, said to Marietta,

“May I be permitted to pay my respects to-morrow, in the Champ Elysées?”

“I shall be most happy,” answered Marietta, smiling. “As I was saying, my stay in Paris is most uncertain. I shall probably join my husband at Lutz in a couple of days. My engagements are so numerous, that perhaps it will be as well for me to fix the hour when you will find me at home. Let me see, to-morrow afternoon and evening I have appointments *en masse*; what do you say to eleven o’clock to-morrow morning?”

“That I am highly honoured. I will therefore say *au revoir*, and not *adieu*,” said Gordon, bowing low to the two ladies.

And Alick Campbell following his friend's example, the two young men retired arm-in-arm.

"Well, what do you think of her?" asked Alick.

"I think," answered Gordon, "that, as you say, she is one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen; but how Charles de Lutz came to marry her is what I shall never guess. I cannot imagine such a woman having any hold upon a man of his tastes. With all her beauty, there is to me something repelling in her face."

"And yet," said Alick, "that was 'a *mariage d'inclination*,' as the French say."

"Or, rather of madness," replied Gordon.

"Possibly. Let us go and look at his picture," answered Alick Campbell.

“Well, what do you think of him?” asked the Marquise, turning to Marietta, as the young men disappeared.

“I think him a very handsome man,” answered the Countess. “Mademoiselle Jeanne is *difficile*.”

“She flew at higher game, *ma chère*,” said the Marquise, sneeringly.

“But now, at least, she might content herself with him,” said Marietta.

“Ah, but *now*, perhaps, she has learned to think courting preferable to matrimony,” answered the Marquise.

Marietta’s brow darkened, and, rising, she said, “These rooms are very hot; shall we take a drive? I have much to say to you, and we shall be more at our ease in the carriage.”

“As you will,” said the Marquise, rising, and following her.

The carriage was waiting at the grand entrance. Having seated themselves, and given the *valet de pied* the order to drive to the Bois, Marietta said, shortly,

“You know he is still at the Cottage?”

“And has sent for you to join him, has he not?” answered the Marquise.

“Listen,” said Marietta. “We must talk seriously, for I have much to say. I need scarcely tell you that, personally, I do not care what the Count does, nor where he goes.”

“*Il me semble qu'il n'est que trop sage,*” said the Marquise, laughing. “He does not give you much reason for jealousy.”

“I tell you,” repeated the Countess, im-

patiently, "I should not care whom he paid court to, where he went, or what he did, if only I could part him from Jeanne de Lutz!"

"Bah!" said the Marquise; "and then you tell me you are not jealous!"

"You simply do not understand me," answered Marietta. "I do not care for my husband; I do not seek his love; I do not desire it! Had I been jealously inclined, should I have retained you for my friend? Do you suppose people have not tried to blacken you in my eyes—to assert that your friendship was but a pretext for other things? My husband is necessary to me, for the maintenance of my position—nothing more."

The Marquise shrugged her shoulders.

“People would find it somewhat difficult, I should say, to discover a too great intimacy between myself and the Count. Why, I do not think we exchange half a dozen civil words in the course of a month.”

“I know,” said Marietta; “but some people hold that to be no criterion—a mere blind. Let that be as it may; I should be perfectly indifferent if all they said were true. What I do not choose is that Jeanne de Lutz should reign paramount; not because I love him, but because I hate the girl. I would gladly see her dead to-morrow. Why can’t she die—she is always ailing?”

“All in good time,” said the Marquise, laughing. “To hear you, *ma chère*, one would think you were meditating murder.”

“Bah!” said Marietta, impatiently; “the

girl fascinates the Count; his utter indifference to all other women is proof positive. Marquise, why cannot you try your charms upon him, you who hold so many in sway? I would thank you beyond measure. You see what my jealousy amounts to. I have no wish to win him back for myself. My love for him was a girlish passion, and is dead long ago. I prefer by far the freedom of my present life to any idle romance. I do not object to a rival, but I do object to that rival being Jeanne de Lutz."

"I perfectly understand you," answered the Marquise. "The young lady is almost as hateful to me as she is to you. My belief is, if the Count had remained at Lutz seeing her daily, he would have wearied of her long ere this; as it is, meet-

ing so rarely, she has retained her power."

"Well, he has been a fortnight at the Cottage now," answered Marietta, "and in his letter of this morning, he intimates that he shall not return to Paris, but remain at Lutz till we go to the baths; at the same time, he invites me to join him there."

"Go, by all means," said the Marquise.

"But I hate the Château; I hate Lutz," said Marietta.

"But you hate Jeanne de Lutz most, do you not?" asked the Marquise.

"Yes, truly," said Marietta, passionately.

"Then go to Lutz, and take Gordon Elliot with you."

"How can I do that, when you heard him say just now that he must be in Eng-

land next week ; and to what purpose ?” asked Marietta.

“Gordon Elliot both was and is in love with Jeanne. I read that in his face when her name was mentioned. It will not need much persuasion to-morrow, when he calls upon you, to make him change his plans and go to Lutz. Charles de Lutz’s love for Jeanne is of an exclusive rare nature ; he knows she never can or will belong to him, and though he covets her, were a favoured rival to present himself, I am persuaded he would withdraw himself without a word or sign ; and it will be easy to persuade him that Gordon Elliot is a favoured lover. Do you understand now ? A letter dropped by accident, a word here and there, a man’s jealousy is easily roused ; and half Jeanne’s

power lies in the Count's belief that she has always and does still love him ; destroy that idea, and we shall soon see if Mademoiselle de Lutz will hold her own much longer."

"I think your plan is good," said Marietta thoughtfully ; "at least it is worthy of trial. I shall leave Paris the day after to-morrow, then ; and Mr. Elliot, I will try and persuade him either to accompany or to follow me immediately."

"Just so," said the Marquise. "Now I must drive to the Petit St. Thomas—there were some lovely new muslins in the window yesterday ;" and pulling the string, she bade the coachman drive to the Petit St. Thomas.

Gordon Elliot was punctual to his appointment with the Countess. As the clock struck eleven he stood at the *porte-cochère*

of the little house in the Champs Elysées. It had undergone considerable changes since Charles de Lutz first occupied it in his bachelor days. Marietta had done her best to make him take a larger and more important establishment ; but for once he had stood firm, and decisively refused to do so. He liked his atelier, his own quarters suited him—he would retain them unaltered ; as for the rest, he gave his wife *carte-blanche* to enlarge, improve—in fact, do what she would. So, magnificent reception-rooms had been added to the original building, and a private suite for the Countess's own use ; the whole furnished with all that modern art and Parisian luxury could devise.

Into the Countess's boudoir Gordon Elliot was shown. The room had been darkened to

keep out the heat, and a strong perfume of flowers rendered the atmosphere oppressive. On entering, he did not at once perceive Marietta, who was at the further end of the room, buried in a large arm-chair, her hands idly resting on her lap, her eyes staring into vacancy. The loose morning robe, the coils of black hair wound somewhat carelessly round her small, well-shaped head, showed to perfection the still unmarred beauty of the woman, and no born Countess could have advanced to meet her guest with more stately grace and courtesy of manner than did Marietta when Gordon Elliot was announced.

“Indeed, Mr. Elliot, you are punctual,” she said; “am I to take the compliment entirely to myself?”

“I should be at a loss to say for whom else it can be meant, even supposing it to be a compliment, which is more than I am willing to allow,” answered Gordon, seating himself on the sofa opposite Marietta.

“Allow, at all events, that there is something of curiosity in your visit to-day,” continued the Countess.

“That I will do most readily,” replied Gordon. “I have heard so much of you, and, excuse me, of your great beauty, that it would have been strange indeed if I had not sought to improve the opportunity vouchsafed me yesterday of making your acquaintance.”

“And of hearing news of——!” said the Countess, archly; “well, I will spare you till after breakfast—for of course

you will stay and breakfast with me?"

"You are most kind," answered Gordon, "but I by no means intended to inflict myself thus indefinitely upon you."

"Nay, it is no infliction, but a charity, to break the monotony of my solitude;" adding, with a martyr-like shake of the head, "I am so much alone!"

The announcement, "Madame est servie," saved Gordon the awkwardness of a reply. Offering the Countess his arm, they adjourned to the dining-room. The presence of the servants during the meal was a safe barrier against all private conversation. Marietta had profited by her Parisian life, and the society of the Marquise, who was an adept at small talk, and kept up a pleasant flow of conversation. The theatres, the operas, the

last public scandal, she was *au fait* in one and all. At last the conversation turned upon the war so lately begun, and which was occupying all heads and hearts.

“Do you think you will be really ordered out?” asked the Countess.

“I hope so, Madame,” answered the young soldier.

“You hope so, and why? is it such a pleasure to have a bullet through one’s body!”

“I cannot speak as to the bullet, for as yet I have never experienced the sensation,” answered Gordon smiling; “but I think there is no soldier in England or France to-day who is not doubly anxious to take his part in the mighty fray, and to reap on his own account some little glory.”

“Of course,” answered the Countess, “men are never satisfied with what they have, they must be for ever straining for what they have not. If you followed my advice, Mr. Elliot, you would let the nations fight their battles without your assistance, and you would quietly settle down and take a wife to yourself. I know of one you might have for the asking. Shall we take our coffee in the boudoir?” she continued quickly; and without giving Gordon time to answer her, she rose from table and moved towards the door. He sprang forward to open it for her, and as he did so, she looked up at him with a strange meaning look that sent the blood coursing through Gordon’s veins angrily, and caused him to mutter between his teeth, “The devil’s in that woman, what does she mean?”

Pointing Gordon to an easy-chair, the Countess seated herself beside a little table, upon which stood two fragrant cups of coffee. If her companion had watched her closely, he would have seen that, from under the black lashes, she was examining his face, though apparently she was occupied in slowly dropping lump after lump of sugar into her cup. At last she looked up, saying quickly,

“Mr. Elliot, you will accompany me to Lutz to-morrow?”

“I think not, Madame,” he answered quietly.

“Nay, but I tell you you will, when you have heard me to the end, or else you are a very wilful man.”

“Madame, I am all attention.”

“Very good, then. Let me tell you, Mr. Elliot, that I know all your feelings for Jeanne de Lutz—nay, do not stop me, I know further that she refused you because, when it was too late, she chose to fall in love with my husband. But all that is years ago, and I have reasons to believe that Jeanne has once more changed her mind. I believe that she would gladly listen to you now. Her health has been very bad of late, which I attribute simply to *ennui*, caused by the monotonous life she leads at the Cottage. She does not think it, Mr. Elliot; but, believe me, I am her best friend. I tried to draw her to Paris, but in vain. That was natural, perhaps; it was doubtless painful to her to see me occupying a position which might have been hers. But now, you must

know, she is no longer in her first youth—is heartily sick of her life at the Cottage—would gladly marry, only no suitors present themselves. I am sorry to say it, but her connection with my husband has injured her reputation considerably. I know the Count de Lutz was much to blame in keeping our marriage so long a secret, but from all I can gather, Jeanne was highly imprudent.”

“Madame la Comtesse,” said Gordon, rising hastily with flushed cheek and trembling voice; “pardon me, but I believe in God and in my cousin Jeanne!”

“And who asked you not to believe in her, Mr. Elliot?” said the Countess, seriously; “it is because I know you can appreciate her, and are above idle gossip, that I have determined to speak to you. I tell

you, if you still love Jeanne, you may win her now."

"To what purpose?" answered Gordon, sadly; "did you not say just now that in all probability I was going where death is rife?"

"When you have learnt to value life more than you do now, you will also learn to guard it better."

"Nay, Countess, do you not know that he who seeks death on the battle-field rarely finds it; the bullets mostly strike those to whom life is dear?"

"But I will take no refusal; you must come and try your fate once more. I will answer for your success."

The temptation was powerful; he yearned once more to see that gentle woman's face, to

hear the voice he loved so well. Not for one instant did the Countess's words or manner deceive him, he knew she was playing both Jeanne and him false; still, it might be as well to let her think she had carried the day, and a word of warning to his cousin might not be ill-timed.

“Well, Countess,” he said, smiling, “you are an eloquent pleader. I lay down my arms—you have conquered.”

“You will come to Lutz!” she exclaimed, in a tone of triumph.

“I will follow your advice, madame, and pay my humble respects before leaving France, to my aunt and cousin.”

“That is well,” answered Marietta. “You will accompany me to-morrow?”

“I regret not being able to do that,” re-

plied Gordon ; “ but I have already an engagement to dine with a party of friends at St. Cloud. The following day, however, you may depend upon me ;” and he rose to take his leave.

“ Then I will be your *avant-coureur*, and announce your arrival. Believe me, you will be welcome ; and mind you take Jeanne’s heart by storm,—we ladies like to feel a master’s hand.”

“ Thank you ; I will remember,” answered Gordon, laughing. *Au revoir*, Madame la Comtesse.”

“ *Au revoir*, Monsieur Elliot.” And so they parted.

Then Marietta rose, opened her secretary, and wrote on a slip of paper, in Italian, “ All is going well. I have won the first

step. I leave at once for Lutz." She sealed the envelope, and addressing it to Madame de la Croix, rang the bell, and ordered the man-servant to see it was delivered without delay.

CHAPTER XXII.

THERE was bustle and preparation at the Château. Servants and carriages had arrived from Paris, announcing the mistress's advent for the morrow. Slowly Jeanne and Charles de Lutz were riding home together, from visiting an out-lying farm. They were both silent—in truth, sad at heart, like two children who knew their holiday was over, yet did not dare to acknowledge, even to themselves, the cause of their sadness. So quietly and silently they rode on, through the Summer air, communing with their own hearts.

Arrived at the Cottage, the Count dismounted, and lifted Jeanne from her horse. As he did so, he said,

“ I think you are a little stronger within the last few days, Jeanne.”

“ Yes,” she answered ; “ I think so too.”

“ Are you too tired to take a turn in the garden, before going in ?” he asked.

Jeanne hesitated ; she knew it was scarcely safe ; they were both feeling the change that was creeping on ; one word might be just too much.

“ Are you afraid of me, Jeannette ?” said the Count, seeing she did not answer.

She looked up, smiling, in his face, all sign of hesitation gone, as she laid her hand upon his arm.

“ That is right,” he said, looking down

upon her. "You must never doubt me, Jeanne. You know I would not grieve you by word or deed, were it to save my life. Women work us much harm, but they help us, too, sometimes; at least, good women do. When I came to the Cottage the other day, Jeanne, I was so tired of life that I think, if you had turned away from me, I should have left France—left all my so-called duties, and have sought change, quiet, and solitude in a foreign land. You can never guess what a life I lead! How uncongenial it is; how worse than alone I find myself!"

"Do not let us speak of it," said Jeanne, hastily. "Things cannot be changed, but they may grow better in time—let us hope so, at least; and remember how many in-

terests still remain to you—your art, your people!”

“Poor people!” said the Count, shaking his head. “It is not much I see of them, and for all the good I do them they may thank you. Why, I scarcely spend three months at Lutz in the course of a whole year! I cannot; Marietta would never stand it. I do not like the tone of her last letter.”

“Then I wish you had gone sooner, Charles,” said Jeanne. “You have no right to rouse in her even the shadow of jealousy, however unfounded it may seem to you. What does she say?”

“Oh, nothing at all startling. She speaks softly enough, as she always does when trying to blind me. She hopes the country air

and my family's society have effectually improved my health, &c., &c."

"Charles, are you sure you are always gentle, always kindly?" said Jeanne, with anxious tremulousness.

"Why, Jeanne, I am a very model husband," answered her cousin with a laugh; "I do not suppose there is such another in all Paris. No woman has power to charm me. I think you know as much."

"I wish you could be happy,—I wish you could both be happy," said Jeanne, earnestly.

"Not more than I do, little one," answered the Count sadly; "but I have ceased to hope it, ceased to strive after it. Marietta and I are *two*, as completely as if we had never been man and wife. Marietta's love has died out long ago; she is personally as in-

different to me as the bird flying yonder. She is jealous of you ; not because she cares for me, but out of hatred for you—hatred fed and nursed by the Marquise de la Croix. Jeannette, how were you so unwise as to raise to yourself so bitter an enemy ?”

“ Louise never liked me from my earliest girlhood ; somehow I have crossed and annoyed her. But what matters it, loved or hated, I think I shall have soon done with both. Oh, Charles, you talk of being tired, it can be nothing to what I feel. I am so weary that, were it not for my mother, I do not think that I should have the strength to live ; and yet I might have been so happy, the world is so beautiful. I have loved it so, and do love it still ; its brightness, its pure beauty, such as God made it. My

heart still leaps with gladness at the sunshine, the song of the birds still awaken an echo in my heart, and yet I live just because I must, and because it is a sin to wish to die!"

She did not know it, but even as she spoke the tears were running down her cheeks. It was such a rare thing for her to give vent to any outward display of feeling; she seemed for a moment to have forgotten herself, to have forgotten that she was not alone. The two were standing on a slope of rising ground, with the avenue of linden trees behind them, and all the fair estate of Lutz lying stretched at their feet. Thus they stood sadly, those two childless heirs of all that wealth, both yearning silently towards each other, yet both recognising

the inexorable fate which parted them.

“Jeanne, pardon me,” said the Count.

“For what?” she asked.

“For the marring of your life,” he answered.

“It were not marred if I could see you happy, Charles.”

“That I fear will never be,” he answered.
“Jeanne, life is a strange enigma, shall we never solve it? In the Marietta of to-day I would defy any one to recognise the passionate girl I married. One would have thought she would have been docile, amenable to my slightest wish; instead of which it was I whom she sought to mould—and failing, ceased to love me. She will sooner take the advice of the most ordinary acquaintance than hearken to me to-day.

The Marquise has indoctrinated her with the idea that I never cared for her—that my first and only love was given elsewhere. It is true, I mistook passion for love, but the one might and would have succeeded to the other, had Marietta been a woman capable of appreciating it. Now I only recognise the fact that I have lost her future, yours and mine ; hers less than ours, seeing ambition has taken the place of all things else in her heart, and she is comparatively satisfied. If the Marquise would only leave her alone, and not always push her on to jealous hate !”

“ I cannot understand it,” said Jeanne. We have not given her occasion for jealousy ; why does she hate me so ?”

“ Because Marietta’s nature, wholly un-

disciplined, responds to three passions only, love, fear, and hate. She chooses to love the Marquise, and therefore will believe no ill of her ; though, God knows, she has heard and seen enough. She fears me because she deceives me, and yet knows herself to be dependent upon me, and she hates you because the Marquise wills she should, and it is Marietta's pleasure to obey her blindly. She would probably hate you less if you had kept yourself less aloof from us, and given her more occasion to complain."

"Yes, I understand," said Jeanne ; "and I think, sometimes, all this misery is killing me. Things would go better perhaps if I were dead," and she raised her hands wearily to her face, thus showing only too well how thin and white they were. Charles de

Lutz took one of them in his, and silently pressed it to his lips. "Don't, Charles, you hurt me!" said Jeanne feebly. He let it fall with a sigh, and then slowly they both turned towards the house. As they did so, a slight noise in the linden walk attracted their attention.

"Was any one listening to us, do you think?" said Jeanne, flushing painfully.

"And supposing they were, they heard no harm," answered the Count. "Never fear, Jeanne;" and leaving her side for a minute, he stepped into the walk, but he found no apparent sign of any one's presence; and he was returning to Jeanne, when a glove lying beside a tree attracted his attention; he stooped, picked it up, and recognised it as Marietta's.

“So her ladyship has arrived,” he muttered, as he put it into his pocket, “and has turned eavesdropper. What next? The pupil improves on the teacher.”

“I have seen no one, Jeanne,” he said, as he joined her; and they proceeded slowly towards the house. As they approached it, they saw Marietta leaning over the balcony of the salon, talking to a peasant woman who stood beneath the window, and was apparently the owner of some half-dozen asses. Jeanne looked inquiringly at the Count, saying,

“Did you expect her so soon?”

“Hardly,” he answered; “she announced her arrival only for to-morrow.”

While they were still speaking, the Countess, all smiles, advanced to meet them, say-

ing, "Jeanne, as I found no one at the Cottage to receive me, I revenged myself by drinking your milk."

"And I hope you liked it better than I do. I am glad to escape the infliction for one day."

"Ah, but Mademoiselle must have her bowl also," said the peasant woman. "Madame will never forgive me if I allow her to miss it."

"Thanks, good Madeleine; not to-day," said Jeanne. "You and my mother lay too great store on the effects your milk is to produce. I have no such faith myself. It may make the candle burn a little longer, that is all."

"I tell you, Jeanne," said the Countess, "all your illness proceeds from *ennui*. We

will have some gaiety at the Château, and you will see if it does not do you good. You lead a miserable life, buried here in the country. If I were to listen to the Count, I am persuaded I should be in your plight. It is a perfect death in life down here. Now, guess whom I saw in Paris, and whom I have persuaded to come and stay with us?"

"That is morally impossible, Marietta," said Jeanne; "I do not know the list of your acquaintances."

"Ah, but he is no acquaintance of mine, only a very dear friend of yours," answered Marietta.

Jeanne smiled incredulously, saying, carelessly,

"I am quite at a loss; I have so few very

dear friends, and none, to my knowledge, in Paris."

Marietta stooped, and whispered a name in Jeanne's ear.

"What, Gordon Elliot!" she exclaimed, colouring with surprise. "Where did you meet him, Marietta?"

"Ah, you see, I told you you would be pleased," was the answer. "I met him first at the Exhibition of Paintings. He was introduced to me by Monsieur Campbell, and, upon the following day, called upon me, and it was then that I persuaded him to pay the Château a visit. He hesitated at first, for some private reason, I suppose; for it was plain to see which way his inclinations tended. He did not need much pressing, and will be here to-morrow.

That is the reason I came down to-day to give you all fair warning."

"It is very kind of you, Marietta," said Jeanne. "I shall be glad to see Gordon; especially as, if this war continues, I expect he will be ordered off before the Autumn."

"He expects as much himself," answered Marietta; "he has only a week's leave remaining."

"Then I am delighted he should spend it with us," said the Count. "He was one of the nicest lads I ever came across."

"I can tell you he is a very handsome man now," said Marietta; "and asked—how shall I put it, Jeanne, not to shock your feelings?—most tenderly after you. Your present state of health seemed to distress him greatly."

“You have not seen my mother as yet, have you?” asked Jeanne.

“No,” answered the Countess, “she was out when I arrived—gone to the curé’s about some sick woman, I believe. The servants told me you had been out riding, and must be somewhere about the grounds, as you had not even changed your dress; so I determined to wait patiently, and old Madeleine coming, I gossiped with her, and drank your milk.”

“To which, as I have said before, you were most welcome,” answered Jeanne. “If you will excuse me, I will go and lie down for half an hour, and then dress for dinner. Mamma cannot be much longer. You will dine and sleep here to-night, will you not?”

“I will dine with pleasure,” answered

Marietta, "but I have ordered my own rooms to be prepared for to-night."

"See—there is mamma," said Jeanne, pointing to the path leading up to the Cottage, "so I will go ; it would vex her, and I should be good for nothing if I did not lie down before dinner. *Au revoir*;" and she left the room.

"Well," said Marietta, turning to her husband, "she is a perfect shadow ! How long do the doctors give her to live ?"

"I really do not know," answered the Count, impatiently ; "myself I do not believe there is any organic disease, simply a lack of vitality. She is stronger than she looks, or even feels. But Laurent told my aunt the other day, it seems, that any sudden excitement or over-fatigue might carry

her off in a few hours. I am glad you announced Gordon's visit."

"So am I now," answered his wife, "though at first I had intended it as a surprise. Do you know, Count, I think it a great pity those two have not made a match? Gordon Elliot is evidently in love with Jeanne."

"Did he tell you so?" asked the Count.

"As if I needed telling! Why, I had only to mention her name before him to make sure of the fact. There is more between those two than is generally believed."

The Count smiled as he answered—

"In your own imagination, Marietta. I do not think Jeanne dreams of marriage."

"It were better she did. Listen, Count: you who take such a tender interest in your

cousin should be the last to oppose a plan I have formed for her happiness. From certain words Mr. Elliot let drop, I feel persuaded she has given him such encouragement as authorizes his demanding a positive answer from her ; and I do not doubt it will be a favourable one, if she be properly advised."

"As far as I am concerned, I shall give no advice either way," answered the Count ; "the whole thing strikes me as perfectly absurd, in her present state of health ; and Gordon will, of course, be sent off to the Crimea within the next month or two."

"Then they can be betrothed, and the marriage can take place after Mr. Elliot's return. I suppose you have no personal objection to my plan?" she inquired, sharply.

“None whatever,” answered the Count, carelessly; “only I do not believe in it. however, if it amuses you, I know you must have some excitement; still, remember Jeanne is not to be tormented.”

Marietta was about to answer him, when Madame de Lutz entered the room, and so the conversation was arrested.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE following day Gordon arrived. The Count drove over to Amonville Station to meet him, and, notwithstanding the changed positions and chequered events of the last few years, the two men met cordially.

Charles de Lutz purposely avoided mentioning Jeanne's state of health; he would leave Gordon to judge for himself. If, really, there were any truth in Marietta's surmises, nothing he could say should raise an obstacle. That he should suffer, seeing

Jeanne the wife of another, he knew full well,—suffer more acutely, perhaps, than in an ordinary case, because he had never been able to lose the sense of possession of a certain right to have and hold her. And yet to see her happy, to see her bright again! But something in his own heart told him that Jeanne brightened under one sun only, the sunlight of his own love, which he was forced to hide behind the clouds of duty and respect. He did not fear Gordon Elliot's courtship; he had a sadly earnest faith in Jeanne's fidelity.

Madame de Lutz was greatly pleased at seeing her nephew once again. The evening of his arrival they all dined at the Cottage, for, as the invitation had come from the Countess, Gordon was her guest. A

certain feeling of content came over Madame as she saw the party gathered round her table. Marietta was looking beautiful, and, being in a particularly good temper, was unusually gracious. Jeanne was brighter and better than she had been for many a day; she wore a white dress, with bright red roses in her hair and bosom; there was a soft light in her eyes, and a smile upon her lips. She was basking in the presence of those she loved, and her hopeful nature rose to the surface. Who could tell, the evil days were past, perhaps, and peace was dawning upon them all! She verily expanded as a flower does, in the warmth of her home-circle. The change was not lost upon Marietta, and she took care it should not be lost upon the Count; but he knew Jeanne

so well—he knew that she was glad because she was surrounded by those dear to her, because there was a sort of completeness in her home. The purity of her nature made her content. Gordon was not deceived, either. Jeanne was glad to see him, welcomed him as a sister might a long-absent brother, but the colour never deepened in her cheek, her hand never trembled as it lay in his. No, she was not for him, and so he determined by no word of his to break through the quiet communion of the next few days, unless the Countess by some manœuvre forced him to speak, and then it need not be with Jeanne. He saw that Marietta was determined to bring about some explanation by which she might involve them both; her object was apparently to

rid herself of Jeanne. And yet, watch them as closely as he might, Gordon could not see that either the Count or his cousin gave her reason for jealousy ; there was nothing underhand between them, either in look or word or deed ; they had nothing to hide, save the love pure and fathomless which lay deep down in their hearts, and which, though no earthly power could eradicate it, they rarely allowed to rise to the surface.

It made no change in their daily lives, as far as others were concerned, over themselves only it threw its shadow ; yet it is questionable whether they would either of them have been willing to forego the pain.

It is a difficult position the one I am attempting to describe, and open to the criti-

cisms of moralists ; yet I think there are few who will deny that it is one which exists far oftener than the world is even aware of, or imagines. Can it be otherwise ? “ The heart knoweth its own bitterness, and a stranger intermeddleth not with its joy.” What secret meaning lies in those words for each and all ! He who created us, who made us what we are, alone can know and judge us. What is a dire temptation to one woman, is harmless to move another. They say that in nature there are no two leaves, no two flowers alike ; how, then, can we expect to find two human natures. The purest, the holiest who ever took human form and dwelt among us, was the most merciful, because he alone read men and women aright. “ Let him who is without sin amongst you cast the first stone.”

“Go and sin no more.” “Her sins are forgiven her because she loved much.” Words of authority, of mercy, and of hope, in strange contrast with the harsh judgments of the world.

As I said, Madame de Lutz was herself well pleased with the turn she thought affairs were taking. Why should not Jeanne marry Gordon and be happy? She had always carefully avoided alluding to the past, believing the simplest way was to ignore it altogether. She had fretted at one time, almost as much as Jeanne herself, over the Count's ill-assorted match; but of late she had seen comparatively so little of them, that it had been less evident to her. And now all united to mislead her. The general appearance of satisfaction, Marietta's almost

affectionate manner towards the Count and Jeanne. It was very pleasant ; but, alas ! like most pleasant things, destined to be very shallow and short-lived, as both she and Marietta found to their cost. All that the former could do to inveigle Gordon Elliot she did do. She went so far as to offer to mediate with Jeanne for him. At this Gordon laughed outright, and finished by saying,

“ My dear Madame, do you not see that Jeanne has no more idea of marrying me than she has of flying? Leave well alone; you know I could not carry a wife off to the Crimea.”

But Marietta was not a woman easily to throw over a plan she had conceived. Finding she could not make Gordon talk, she

changed her tactics, and began to talk herself, and of herself, of the Count's coldness, &c., and then sighing pathetically, she ventured one day to say,

“ Ah, Mr. Elliot, if you would you might make many people happy besides yourself and Jeanne. Fortunately I am not of a jealous nature, but still it is not pleasant daily and hourly to see one's rival.”

“ Madame la Comtesse,” said Gordon, seriously, “ let us speak of this for the last time. Mademoiselle de Lutz and myself are never likely to be man and wife. I do not think you have any right to call Jeanne your rival; I am sure she neither desires nor assumes that position. It is not her fault if a combination of circumstances caused at one time her betrothal to the Count your husband.

I think few women could have acted more nobly or more justly than Jeanne has done. From what I gather, I believe the Count and she rarely meet; that the present occasion is an exception. Will you allow me to advise you, Countess, both for your own and your husband's sake, to overcome these feelings?"

Darker and darker Marietta's brow had grown, and Gordon was startled at the evil expression in her face as, looking up into his, she muttered,

"You speak like a cold-hearted Englishman, which you are! You do not, cannot, understand how I hate Jeanne de Lutz, and how I have sworn, by all the saints in heaven, to be revenged on her!"

They had been walking up and down the

Château terrace ; as she finished speaking she left him abruptly, and disappeared into the house. Gordon's brow grew very anxious as he watched her retreating figure ; and, as he continued his walk up and down, he questioned himself as to the propriety of warning the Count or Jeanne. His visit came to an abrupt close, however ; he received orders to hasten home immediately, preparative to his departure for the Crimea. In the Spring of the same year the war-trumpet had resounded through Europe. A peace of forty years was broken, and two nations who, when last seen in arms, fought one against the other, now joined hands, like noble enemies, and buried all ancient animosities in the honourable task of succouring a weaker power.

The morning of Gordon's departure he and the Count were standing together on the terrace of the castle.

"I suppose it would be impossible for you to pass by Lutz on your way to Marseilles before embarking?" asked the latter.

"I am afraid quite impossible," answered Gordon; "as it is, I shall be greatly pressed; my regiment sails next week, and I must be in time to join it on landing. No, we shall say farewell to-day, Charles; and, in case we should not meet again, I must thank you for all your many kindnesses in the past."

"Nay, you owe me no thanks," answered the Count. "I feel tempted at this moment to go out with you myself. I might get some staff-appointment; it would, at least,

be a change, and some stray shot might rid me of a life grown burdensome."

"Count!" said Gordon, deprecatingly.

"My dear fellow, it has come to that. I am tired of my existence." But, hastily changing the conversation, he said, "Let us go to the stables, and see the new mare."

Warm was Gordon's admiration of the animal. A thoroughbred, perfect at every point. It was a new acquisition, and the owner might well be proud of it. Gordon stroked the glossy neck with real pleasure, admiring unstintingly each perfection.

"Gordon," said the Count at last, "if you would give me a real pleasure, you will accept the animal. She was bought for you; when I heard you were coming I sent and purchased her. I knew she was for sale.

Let her be your war-horse ; she is fleet and sure of foot, and will do you good service."

Gordon would have exclaimed at the magnificence of the gift, but Charles de Lutz stopped him, saying,

"It is a kindness you are doing me ; accept it, in remembrance of one we both love and reverence." He seemed about to add something more, but checked himself, and, turning to the groom, began making arrangements for the horse's journey. As they left the stables, Gordon knew this was his last opportunity, and he determined to seize it.

"De Lutz," he said, "we may never meet again. I accept your gift in the spirit in which it is offered, but in return I entreat you to pardon me if what I am

about to say should grieve or offend you."

"You may grieve, but I doubt your power of offending me," answered the Count. "Say what you have to say, Gordon. I guess pretty well the sum and substance, but the expression of it will relieve your mind, and satisfy you that you have done your duty."

"Just so, Charles," said Gordon. "It is hard to speak to a man of his own wife—few would endure it."

"I can from you," answered the Count, with a strange, cold sternness in his voice, at the same time throwing away the end of his cigar and deliberately lighting another. "Go on."

"The Countess de Lutz is an Italian woman; we know that her nation hate fiercely, and dearly love revenge. Do you think it

safe to let her associate with Jeanne in her present frame of mind?"

"No, I do not," answered the Count; "but how can I help it? It is impossible for me to leave the estate at this moment—there are the new buildings, and fifty other things which need a master's eye. I will not send her away by herself—her imagination would at once take fire. In three weeks we shall go together to the baths, then back to Paris, so that probably she and Jeanne will not meet till the Winter. I know what you would say, Gordon. I will be careful, for all our sakes."

"She spoke very violently yesterday," continued Gordon, slowly. "I am afraid she has some plot laid which will give you trouble."

“Very likely,” answered the Count.
“Thank you for the warning. I will be on the watch.”

And there the conversation dropped. Gordon felt as if he had spoken to very little effect; still he had put the Count on his guard.

Of all partings (and God knows they are many and frequent enough in every sphere of life), none can be compared, for the conflicting emotions which it arouses, with the departure of the soldier—be he son, brother, friend, or lover—for the scene of action. Pride wars with love, crushing back the agony. We dare not bid him stay, honour, dearer than life itself, is at stake; we must loosen our hold, drive back our tears, and, smiling, bid him “God speed.” Even

though visions of battle-fields, the cries of the dead and dying, shall haunt us for many a long day and night, while we are waiting, waiting, for those who never will return! There is something almost sacred in such farewells. Jeanne felt the influence, as she stood for the last time, her hand clasped in Gordon Elliot's.

“It may be for years, it may be for ever!” he said, trying to laugh off the sadness creeping over them. “Jeanne, I wish I left you stronger and happier.”

“I am both within the last few days,” she answered. “Your visit seems to have done us all good; let us hope the effects will continue.”

“An outsider often sees more clearly than those most deeply interested,” an-

swered Gordon. "May I venture to give you a little word of advice, Jeanne, as I have done the Count?"

"Most certainly," she answered, smiling.

Gordon hesitated, then spoke quickly—

"I would leave the Cottage, and break through all old associations for awhile, Jeanne; not for yourself, or for him—I know well nothing can alter that. There are feelings which neither absence nor time can kill, however much they may be kept under restraint. But for others, I fear much there are passions at work which may breed mischief. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, indeed," answered Jeanne, colouring, and speaking low; "yet, in truth, I have done my best to prevent even the shadow of evil."

“I know it,” said Gordon, “and therefore it is that I advise you to absent yourself for a time. You have tried every other means ; try that now.”

“I will,” said Jeanne, firmly. “Thank you, Gordon.”

“Good-bye, Jeanne.”

“Good-bye, Gordon.”

He stooped and kissed her, and so they parted.

Ten days later, Madame de Lutz received a letter of farewell, in which Gordon wrote :

“I am glad to have been once more at Lutz, and to have seen you all. The remembrance of those last few days will ever remain with me as a pleasant ray of sunlight.”

A very different letter reached Charles

de Lutz about the same time ; it ran thus :—

“ MONSIEUR LE COMTE,

“ It is not often I trouble you, for I know full well that all I say and do is reprehensible in your eyes ; nevertheless, I still retain sufficient interest in you and yours, to feel indignant when I see you being made a dupe of. The subject is scarcely suited to a letter, therefore if you will be at my house the day after to-morrow, at five o'clock, I shall be happy to prove to you that you are being grossly deceived by one in whom you place entire confidence. I have the honour to remain,

“ Your old friend and well-wisher,

“ LOUISE DE LA CROIX.”

Impatiently the Count tossed the letter

on one side, inwardly determined to pay no attention to it; but the same evening, after dinner, Madame de la Croix's carriage drove slowly up to the Château de Lutz, and the lady presented herself, smiling and graceful as ever.

In the course of the evening, in the presence of Marietta, she addressed herself to the Count, saying, carelessly,

“Shall you be in town the day after tomorrow, Count?”

“I believe so, Madame,” he answered.

“Then you will oblige me greatly if you will drop in and see me for a few minutes. I am anxious to have your opinion of a picture my husband bought some time back. I believe he has been grossly cheated. May I count upon you?”

He could scarcely do otherwise than acquiesce, and so the matter passed off. On the appointed day and hour, Charles de Lutz presented himself at the Marquise de la Croix's, and was ushered into that lady's private apartment, half bedroom, half sitting-room, such as one often sees in France—a perfect nest of elegance, the bed being little less than a pile of lace and silk. The Marquise received him courteously, but somewhat coldly; and after the first common-places, having seated herself, and the Count having done the same, she said seriously,

“I have undertaken a painful and ungrateful task, one for the disinterestedness of which I shall get little credit. Nevertheless it is not the first time I have sacrificed myself, my feelings, my interests

to you ; I am prepared to do so again."

The Count bowed ; he was at a loss what to say, it was rather a difficult position for any man to be told that a woman had sacrificed herself, and would do it again, unasked, in his behalf. The Marquise continued—

"I have hesitated, I have shrunk from the performance of the duty I have in hand, but sooner or later I knew the blow must fall upon you, and so I thought it kinder to inflict it myself."

Once more she paused, and the Count said quickly,

"Madame, I have no doubt as to your kindly intentions, but suspense is always painful ; will you inform me, without further delays of the misfortune which has befallen me ?"

The tones of his voice were cold, almost sarcastic ; the Marquise winced under them, and for a moment hesitated, but *coûte que coûte* the effort must be made, so taking up a small packet of letters lying in front of her on the mantelpiece, she asked,

“Do you recognise this handwriting, Count?”

Carelessly Charles de Lutz cast his eye upon the packet, saying,

“Really, I cannot say, Marquise ; it is certainly English caligraphy ; but then all English handwritings resemble one another. I should be sorry to take my oath upon any of them.”

“Look again, Count, this one ought to be familiar to you.”

“Possibly,” he answered; “but, as I said before, I should be sorry to swear to it.”

“Doubtless you would,” answered the Marquise slowly. “Count, these are letters from your cousin Jeanne de Lutz to Gordon Elliot; love-letters—do you understand?”

“And in your hands, Marquise?” said the Count, smiling incredulously.

“In my hands, by a mere chance,” she answered. “They were found in a secretary in Gordon Elliot’s room after his departure. They were given to my maid by one of your men-servants who is courting her, and she, judging rightly of their importance, brought them to me. Count, will you examine them for yourself?”

“Nay, Marquise, I do not consider myself authorized in perusing my cousin’s corre-

spondence. It seems to me that she herself, or the person they are addressed to, ought alone to receive your present communication; to me it can be of no importance. Mademoiselle de Lutz is perfectly free, and at liberty to write to whomsoever she pleases. I have neither the right nor the desire to interfere with her correspondence."

"And you mean to say, Count, that, while she professes an unalterable affection for you, you are content that she should write to and receive love-letters from another?"

"My cousin *professes* nothing for me, Madame, which could in any way prevent her receiving homage from another man."

Madame de la Croix stood abashed, the ground was slipping from under her; but

once more she rallied to the charge, and with a laugh of incredulity said :

“You imagine you can deceive me, Count ; indeed you are mistaken, I have watched you too long, and know your game. You fear, by showing either interest or anxiety about the letters, to compromise Mademoiselle de Lutz.”

“It is rude to contradict a lady,” answered the Count carelessly. “If that idea be agreeable to you, there is no reason why you should not give yourself the satisfaction of *privately* entertaining it. I say privately, because you know, Marquise, for public slander there is such a thing as indictment for libel.”

“Thank you, Count,” exclaimed the Marquise, rising from her seat with a gesture of

passionate anger and fiercely flashing eyes.

“Have you any further communications, Marquise?” asked the Count.

“No,” she answered shortly.

“Then I will bid you good evening, Madame,” he replied, rising; and bowing low before the lady, without addressing another word to her, left the room.

Not often did Louise de la Croix give full vent to her feelings, it was not *comme il faut*. From earliest childhood she had been taught self-command and personal restraint. But now, when her last card was played, and she saw that the game was lost, the bitterness, the accumulated annoyances of years gained the mastery. When she saw the man whom she had loved so vainly, so unreasoningly, leave her presence disbelieving and

despising her, the woman in her rose stronger than her pride; she laid her head down amidst the cushions of her sofa, and wept tears of unmitigated bitterness. What would she not have given at that moment to feel herself loved, believed in, revered as Jeanne was? A sharp ring at the house-bell roused her, and she fled into her dressing-room.

When, a quarter of an hour later, she re-entered her apartment perfectly composed, she found Marietta impatiently awaiting her, and who exclaimed eagerly as she advanced to meet her, "Well, have you done it? What did he say?"

"For once you are right, *amica mia*," answered the Marquise, coolly.

"How, what do you mean?" exclaimed

Marietta, not giving her time to finish her phrase.

“I mean that he will not so much as listen to an insinuation against Mademoiselle de Lutz.”

“What did he say?” asked Marietta. “Did he see the letters?”

“At a distance; he would not even touch them. He contented himself with assuring me that it was no business of his; that his cousin Jeanne was a free woman, and had a perfect right to correspond with whomsoever she chose.”

“That is all!” said Marietta.

“That is all,” repeated the Marquise. “Either he is perfect master of his feelings, or he simply disbelieves the tale, I cannot tell which.”

“Could he have detected a flaw in the handwriting,” asked Marietta, anxiously.

“He barely looked at them,” answered the Marquise; “merely remarked that all English handwritings resemble one another. No, it is not that.”

“Then he loves her so well that he will believe no evil of her,” said Marietta, sullenly.

“*You say it, not I,*” answered the Marquise.

“I should not care, I should not care one whit, if only I did not hate her so!” exclaimed Marietta, passionately.

“You had better curb your feelings,” said the Marquise, coolly; “it will serve no purpose giving vent to them.”

Marietta vouchsafed no answer; never, perhaps, had her brow been so dark—never

had her full, rich lips been so passionately hateful. She rose, and, holding out her hand to the Marquise,

“I must be going; it is late already. Farewell!”

“Adieu,” answered the Marquise. “If I were you I would from henceforth cease to trouble myself about Jeanne de Lutz; after all, she does you no real injury.”

“You think not,” said Marietta, mockingly. “I tell you I hate her—is not that enough?” And therewith she left the room.

The Marquise shrugged her shoulders, muttering,

“Let them manage their own affairs; from henceforth I am utterly indifferent to all things.”

She heard the Countess de Lutz’s carriage

drive away, but still she sat pondering listlessly, wearily, until her maid came in to dress her for some dinner-party. The woman was surprised at her mistress's unusual indifference, and quiet acquiescence in whatever she proposed; not often was Madame de la Croix so easy to serve.

Jeanne de Lutz was standing at the drawing-room table, turning over some newly-arrived magazines, while she was waiting for dinner to be announced, when her cousin entered. He had just arrived from Amonville, had left his horse at the Château, and, finding his wife had not returned, had hurried up on foot to the Cottage.

“Jeanne, are you alone?” he said, hastily taking her hand.

“Yes,” she answered; “mamma came in late, and has not quite finished dressing. Why do you ask—is anything the matter?”

“No,” he answered; “an absurdity, nothing more. I only wished to warn you. Have you any letters from Gordon, or do you suppose he has any of yours thrown about?”

“Most certainly not,” answered Jeanne. “I do not believe I have written to Gordon half a dozen times in my life, and all the world is welcome to read our correspondence. Why do you ask?”

“Because the Marquise de la Croix has a packet of love-letters, said to be from you and Gordon, and found in his secretary after he left.”

“They most certainly are not mine,” said Jeanne. “Did you look at them, Charles?”

“No, I would not; she was watching me, ready to construe every action according to her own imagination. I was pretty certain it was a ruse?”

“What for?” asked Jeanne, opening her eyes with astonishment.

“No matter, dear; it cannot hurt either you or me. Good-bye. I must hurry home. I do not care for Marietta to know I have been here this evening.”

“But, Charles, what are those letters?—it is not pleasant to think of such productions, supposing they bear my name, falling into everyone’s hands.”

“They are not yours, Jeanne. I think

their work was done and ended this afternoon. I do not believe we shall ever hear of their existence again."

"Ah me! Why cannot they leave me alone!" almost groaned Jeanne. Then she added, "Charles, I have persuaded mamma to spend the Winter at Florence. I am stronger, and I feel I need change. I think we shall leave the Cottage in the course of next month, travel quietly from place to place during the Summer months, and so give ourselves plenty of time to settle comfortably for the Winter."

A momentary struggle, a sort of agony, convulsed the Count's face, then he answered,

"I think you are right, Jeanne ; things

cannot go on as they are at present. Good-bye, and God bless you!" And he turned away.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ABOUT four o'clock one hot afternoon, a fortnight after the events related in our last chapter, the young Countess de Lutz might have been seen strolling leisurely up towards the Cottage. It was very warm, and a lace covering, half shawl, half veil, enveloped Marietta's entire figure ; her face looked strangely colourless beneath the dark folds, and her eyes seemed to stare fixedly before her.

Some little way in front of her, on the same road, a peasant woman was driving

three or four asses (the curves in the path prevented her seeing the Countess behind her). She moved lazily along, allowing the animals ever and anon to munch a blade of grass, or pull the green branches out of the neighbouring hedge. She held a long switch in her hand, and, more from habit than impatience, struck the animal nearest to her from time to time, with the exclamation, "Allons, marche!"

She was a common type of the peasantry of the country. Her face was brown and hard from exposure, her short, coloured petticoats coarse and ungraceful, and her feet shod in heavy wooden *sabots*. The only piece of coquetry visible in her toilette was the snowy cap, over which a many-coloured handkerchief was carefully tied.

Furtively, at a distance, the young Countess de Lutz followed this group, until she saw it pass the Cottage-gates, and halt beneath the windows of Jeanne's boudoir. Then, crouching behind a tree, she watched.

“Mam'selle Jeanne!” called out the peasant woman. No answer came. Madeleine seated herself composedly on a garden bench, and soon the gentle swaying backwards and forwards of her body testified to an evening *siesta*. Ten minutes might thus have elapsed, with nothing to break the silence, save the trampling of the asses' feet on the gravel-walk, and the distant cooing of the pigeons in the dove-cot.

With a start, the woman awoke, and rising, this time struck the closed windows with her switch, calling, louder than on the

previous occasion, "Mam'selle Jeanne, *êtes-vous là?*"

The window was slowly opened, and a servant's head appeared.

"Ah, it is you, Madeleine," she said. "Well, Mademoiselle Jeanne is out. Madame, seeing how fine the day was, ordered the carriage, and took her into Amonville; they won't be back for another hour. Give me your bowl of milk; it can be warmed for her."

Madeleine took the white china bowl from the maid's hands, filled it with the white, foaming milk, and gave it back. As she did so, she said, anxiously,

"Well, and how is the Mam'selle?"

"They say she is better," answered the maid; "myself, I cannot see much differ-

ence. I do not believe she will ever be better in this world ; she frets by half too much !”

“Frets!” said the woman ; “what can she have to fret about ?”

“Ah, that is just like you,” answered the maid. “You think as long as one can make the pot boil, there is an end of trouble. Much you know about it !”

“Yes, but Mam’selle Jeanne, so pretty and so good, what can trouble her ?”

“Why, you know, she ought to have married the Count, and he went and took that Italian woman instead ; and a nice life she leads him. You think it is a pleasant sight under our young lady’s very eyes.”

“Ah, yes, I understand,” said Madeleine, sagely. “They say, down there,” and she

pointed in the direction of the Château, "that the Countess has an awful temper; that she minds no one but that 'ere Marquise."

"And to think, with all the airs she gives herself, that she was just a nobody!" said the maid. "A peasant woman's daughter; no better than your Margot!"

"*Est-il possible?* Who told you that?" exclaimed Madeleine, placing her arms akimbo, and opening her eyes wide with astonishment.

"Who told me?" answered the maid, tossing her head. "Why, Madame de la Croix's head man, of course."

"Ah, I see," said Madeleine; "*il vous fait la cour, n'est-ce pas?*" And she grinned from ear to ear.

“That has nothing to do with the matter in hand,” answered the girl, by no means displeased at the insinuation. “He told me it, and he knows what he says, if any man does.”

“*En tout cas, elle est diablement belle la Comtesse,*” said Madeleine, preparing to drive her asses home.

“Yes, too beautiful,” said the maid; “she bewitched the Count, and I shall be greatly surprised if she is not up to mischief one day.”

With this philosophical remark she closed the window, and left Madeleine to retrace her steps to the village.

Once more silence and solitude fell upon the Cottage; then slowly Marietta emerged from her hiding-place, and looked cautious-

ly, furtively around. The sun was blazing full upon the Cottage, and all the windows were hermetically closed, to prevent the heat entering the apartments. With noiseless, rapid steps, the Countess crossed the lawn, ascended the *perron* leading to the drawing-room, slipped her hand into the slight space between the shutters, pulled them open, entered, and passed from them into the boudoir.

Anxiously she looked around. A death-like silence reigned everywhere. The whole apartment was empty ; the servants were all at their different occupations in the other wing of the house. On a little table beside Jeanne's sofa stood the bowl of milk. In a minute Marietta was stooping over it, staring fixedly into the opaque liquid. The expres-

sion of her face never varied, until she drew forth from her pocket a tiny phial, removed with steady hand the stopper, and held it over the bowl. Then, for the first time, she hesitated, her hand trembled, and she drew back.

“Bah,” she muttered, recovering herself and speaking in Italian, “she is more than half dead already; she cannot live long; it is a kindness!” and once again she held the phial suspended over the bowl. “One, two, three, four, five, six!” she counted the white drops as they fell, slowly, carefully. “That will do,” she muttered, staying her hand; “she does not need much;” and replacing the stopper, she once more hid the phial, and with hurried steps, never looking behind her, returned the way she had come;

through the stillness of that glorious summer day, with nothing to startle or alarm her, save now and then the twitter of a bird roused from its *siesta*. Nature lay resting in peace and perfect beauty, unconscious that sin was gliding through her midst.

Slowly, as if he were tired, with dusty boots and holding his wide awake in his hand, the Count de Lutz crossed the Cottage lawn. The gardener was just beginning to water the flower-beds; he touched his cap to the Count, who, nodding kindly, stopped beside him saying,

“Are the ladies in, Francis?”

“*Mais non!*” answered the man, “does not Monsieur know that they drove over to Amonville this morning?”

“Ah,” said the Count, “I had forgotten.”

And looking at his watch, he continued, "Half-past five they must be home to dinner. I may as well wait;" and so he entered by the drawing room window, and passed, as his wife had done scarcely an hour before, into Jeanne's boudoir. Nothing was changed, save that the windows had been thrown open, to let in the evening breeze, which was just rising, bearing with it the perfume of the freshly-watered flowers. The room looked cool and pleasant, and Charles de Lutz paused for a moment on the threshold. A sigh as of regret escaped his lips, which he did not even attempt to repress; then throwing himself into an arm-chair, he mechanically took up a monthly magazine and began reading. Suddenly he rose, laid the book on one side, and going to the bell-rope, was

about to ring, when his eye fell on Jeanne's untouched bowl of milk.

“That will do just as well,” he said; “it is too late for her to drink it now,” and he emptied it at a draught. Then he quietly resumed his reading.

Scarcely an hour later, Jeanne, accompanied by her mother, entered her room. She had scarcely advanced ten steps, when a cry of horror parted her lips, and she stood transfixed. Her mother pushed passed her, but the same cry of horror escaped her also. Charles de Lutz was lying back in the arm-chair more livid than death itself, with half distorted features, and the perspiration pearling down his face. In his death agony he had torn open his shirt, and the whole bust was bared to view. He was not perfectly sense-

less now ; he knew when his aunt and cousin called to him, threw up his arms, and held out his hands as if to ward them off. In a second Jeanne had recovered herself, and was beside him calm and collected, with a handkerchief wiping away the foam oozing from between his tightly-clenched teeth.

“ Ring the bell, mamma,” she said ; “ send down to the Château for Louis, and to the village for Monsieur Aubert.”

Madame de Lutz obeyed ; and then, aided by her own tremulous, astonished servants, she succeeded in laying the Count upon a bed in the adjoining room. There was no time for questioning, hardly for thought ; only one wild effort to alleviate the terrible suffering before them. No syllable passed the Count’s lips ; only once or twice, in the

midst of his agony, a look of inexpressible relief settled on his face as his eye rested on Jeanne.

M. Aubert, the village doctor, who had known both Charles and Jeanne de Lutz from their earliest childhood, was the first to arrive; and without ceremony, putting both Madame and Jeanne on one side, he stooped over the Count. Suddenly he raised himself; with a face almost as white as his patient's he turned sharply upon Madame and her daughter.

“What has he taken?—where has he been?” he exclaimed.

“I do not know. I cannot tell,” said Madame. On our return from Amonville, we found him lying thus, in Jeanne's boudoir.”

Once more Monsieur Aubert stooped over

the Count, and whispered a word in his ear.

“*Non, non,*” said the Count, summoning up his strength to speak. He struggled to say more, but failed.

“Then another has!” exclaimed the doctor; but either Charles de Lutz did not hear, or did not understand,—he fell back, stiffened in convulsions.

“Madame, you must go,” said the doctor, pointing to the door; “it is a matter of life and death! God help us! Send his man Louis at once!”

Madame was preparing silently to obey, when the door was thrown open, and a woman, uttering a terrible cry, threw herself on the bed beside the Count.

“Marietta!” said the Count, opening his half-closed eyelids. It seemed as if death

were already closing round him. The young Countess did not answer her husband's call, but turning her white, terrified face towards the doctor, said, imperiously,

“Save him—you must save him!”

“Madame la Comtesse, I am doing, and have done, all I can,” said old Monsieur Aubert, sternly.

“He will not, he cannot die! Tell me he will not!” she exclaimed.

“Madame, I dare not! I can but do my best.”

“Marietta!” said once more the Count's feeble voice. She turned and stooped over him, trembling like an aspen leaf from head to foot, her large eyes wide open, filled with terror. Steadily, as if he had gathered into a nucleus all that remained to him of life,

Charles de Lutz looked into his wife's face. She could not bear it. Tossing her arms on high, she uttered a terrible cry, and cowered down beside his bed, gnawing the sheets in her agony.

Those nearest sought to raise her, and carry her out of the room, but, like a spectre, Charles de Lutz rose in his bed.

"Leave her and me alone," he said ; and one by one the occupants of the room glided out—all save Monsieur Aubert, who, disregarding the order, leant sternly and silently against the wall, just behind the bed. As the door closed, the Count once more spoke.

"Now, Marietta!" was all he said.

"Spare me—spare me!" she exclaimed, crouching lower on the ground.

“Speak—I will have it so!” said the Count, sternly.

“I did it—yes, I did it!” she exclaimed, in Italian. “What would you have? I hated her so! We both hated her so, the Marquise and I! For ten days I have watched my opportunity from early morning until late at night. To-day I saw her drive over to Amonville. I followed the woman with the asses, for I knew Jeanne would drink her milk when she came home. No one was there, and I did the deed. How could I tell you would haunt the place, even in her absence; and I hated her so! People said that she was dying, and still she went on living a sickly, weary life! What good was she to any one? And to me she was an eyesore.”

The Count held up his hand feebly, deprecatingly,

“Never, willingly, has Jeanne injured you in word or deed, Marietta.”

“I know it; I would she had done so! Had she been your mistress—if I could have pointed at her with the finger of scorn—if I could have despised her, I think I should have been satisfied.”

“Marietta, Marietta, your undisciplined heart, your wild passions, have both won and lost me. No matter, we have both sinned, one against the other. It is well I shall pay the double debt. God pardon us both!” And he fell back gasping on the pillows.

“But you will not; you cannot die! The dose was so small. Only for her!—

only for her!" almost shrieked Marietta.

The Count shuddered, answering feebly,

"I shall die, Marietta, whether the dose were great or small, because I do not care to live. What can we two henceforth have in common with each other?" He paused; then hurriedly, as if he felt his moments were counted, he continued, "When I am dead, you will go back to Italy, and never again cross either my aunt's or Jeanne's path in life; such is my will. On those conditions you will be screened and provided for. My honour, and the honour of my house, demand it. Farewell, Marietta! Now go—go quickly, and send Monsieur Aubert to me. Alone, mind, alone."

Marietta rose from her knees, her features rigid, her eyes staring vacantly before her.

She gathered the folds of her veil around her, in such a fashion as to hide her face from view, and then slowly she turned to go. Having reached the door, she looked back at her husband, as he lay moaning in his death-agony.

“I did it—yes, I did it!” she muttered, between her teeth, and, opening the door, she would have rushed wildly forth, had not Monsieur Aubert barred her way.

“Countess, whither are you going?” he asked, sternly.

She looked steadily at him, laid her hand confidently upon his arm, saying, in a low voice :—

“He won’t—he can’t die, doctor, will he?” Then, before he could answer, her eye fell upon Jeanne, who was coming

hastily across the hall. "For her, only for her!" she shouted. "Why could she not drink it? Did he love her so that he must needs die for her?"

And, throwing off the doctor's restraining hand, she dashed passed him out of the house, across the lawn, in the direction of the Château.

"Follow her, do not leave her alone!" said M. Aubert, turning a dark anxious face to Jeanne; "she is mad. I must go back to the Count. Take care, Jeanne, or worse will happen yet. Send Louis to me as soon as you can."

And he re-entered the Count's room, closing the door behind him; and Jeanne stood alone, alone with a terrible fear, growing every second into a still more terrible

certainty. The doctor's and Marietta's last words both ringing in her ears, what was she to do—what could she do? For a second she buried her face in her hands, and if ever Jeanne prayed, she did so then. “My God, help and guide me!” Lifting her white agitated face, she saw Louis standing before her.

“Louis,” she said quickly, “M. Aubert asks for you; but the Countess has fled out of your master's room half mad with grief; she must be followed and brought back. I cannot go, and dare not trust others. Do you hurry after her, see her in safe hands, and come back as speedily as you can. In the meantime, I will keep watch at this door. Go, Louis—go, as you love your master.”

The man needed no second bidding, and

Jeanne took up her watch outside her cousin's door. Strange rumours were beginning to circulate amongst the servants, and Jeanne became conscious of half frightened looks, a continuous flitting to and fro, a hanging about the hall. She felt that this must not be ; so, going into the midst of them, she spoke firmly :

“My friends, a great trouble is overshadowing us ; I scarcely know what it is, but this I do know, that neglect on your part can only make it harder for us to bear. Go each of you about your daily work ; when your services are needed, we know that we can trust you each and all, and will not fail to call upon you for help.”

Loved and trusted as Jeanne was, her words had the desired effect, and the house-

hold rapidly dispersed, while Jeanne once more resumed her lonely post. A few minutes later, Madame appeared, and with her a physician who had just arrived from Amonville.

“ My daughter, go to your own room ; M. Laurent has come to consult with M. Aubert.”

“ Mamma,” said Jeanne calmly, “ M. Aubert bade me stay here, to see that no one disturbed him.”

“ But M. Laurent, my child !”

“ Mamma, I cannot help it,” exclaimed Jeanne, in a tone of agony.

At that moment Monsieur Aubert appeared.

“ Is not Louis here yet ?” he asked ; but his eye fell on his colleague ; he hesitated for

a moment, then holding out his hand said, "I am glad it is you, Laurent. Madame," he continued hastily, "I should have refused to act with any other man; but Monsieur Laurent is a friend of the family, I think we can trust him. Will you send this note down to my house at once, and let the bearer wait for the answer; and mind no one disturbs us; your nephew's life hangs on a thread. Now, doctor;" and he held the door open for his colleague to enter, closing it instantly; and Madame and Jeanne heard the bolts drawn.

M. Aubert's note was despatched immediately; and then Madame, taking Jeanne's hand, said, "Come away, my child; we can do no good—he is in God's hands." And she led her into the boudoir.

The girl shuddered from head to foot as she entered, and her eye seemed to search for the cause of so much misery; but all traces of disorder had been removed, even to the empty bowl. The subdued voice of the physicians, the patient's plaint, could be distinctly heard by those two anxious women.

“Mamma,” said Jeanne, suddenly, “if Louis does not return soon with news of Marietta, I shall myself go down to the Château.”

“Wait a little longer, Jeanne,” answered her mother, rising from her seat, and walking nervously up and down the room; while Jeanne stood at the window, gazing anxiously in the direction of the Château.

The Summer day had waned; the sun was

sinking, red and glowing, behind the woods of Lutz, promising a glorious morrow.

How long they had remained thus waiting, Jeanne and her mother never knew. The room was almost dark when they both became suddenly aware that Louis was standing before them.

“*Madame est servie,*” he announced.

The common words fell strangely upon their ears—they almost started.

“It is late,” continued the man, with the familiarity of an old servant; “mademoiselle must take something.”

“Louis is right. Come, Jeanne,” said Madame.

“And the Comtesse—where is she?” asked Jeanne, eagerly.

“Jacqueline is looking after Madame la

Comtesse," answered the man, respectfully.

As he opened the door for them to pass, Jeanne paused, and, looking at him, said,

"Why are you not with your master, Louis?"

"M. Aubert would not give me admittance when I returned," he answered. "He bade me tell you all was going well, and ordered me to remain at hand in case of an emergency."

As he finished speaking, they entered the dining-room. Jeanne involuntarily shaded her eyes with her hand; the full-lighted room, the table, laid as usual with snowy damask, and bright glass and silver, dazzled her painfully. The ordinary things of life seem so strangely out of place at moments such as these!

Louis alone served them, in perfect silence, placing the dishes before them, and, by his calm persistency, almost forcing them to eat and drink. The meal was half over, when M. Aubert's voice was heard calling "Louis." The two ladies rose instinctively, but the man placed himself before them saying, respectfully,

"Madame, allow me to go first." And he hastened away.

"It is your turn now, Louis," said the doctor, coming to meet him. "Laurent is in there, and will explain what you must do. Go!" And he held the Count's door open.

But Louis hesitated, and whispered something in the doctor's ear.

"You did not see her safe?" said the latter.

“I could not; I knew I was wanted here.”

“Very well, I will go directly. Do the ladies know?” asked Monsieur Aubert.

“No; I saw no use in telling them. I simply said she was in Jacqueline’s care.”

“Good. Now, Louis, mind,” and the doctor spoke impressively, “no one but yourself is to approach your master. Understand?”

The man bowed and disappeared.

“Now, Mademoiselle Jeanne,” said the doctor, advancing to meet her, and taking her hand kindly in both of his, “do not look so scared—a sunstroke is, after all, a nasty thing, but it might be worse. You have been dining—that is well; help me to do the same, for I must run down into the village,

as quickly as my old legs will carry me, and I must speak to your mother."

Going to the table, he poured out a glass of wine, and drank it; then carefully turning the keys in the two doors leading into the drawing-room, he re-seated himself, saying quietly, "Now we must all three understand each other. Monsieur Laurent and I are both agreed, Madame, that the Count is suffering from the effects of a severe sun-stroke. He imprudently went to and from the Gué Farm on foot, in the heat of the day; an act of madness. With care, I hope we may yet save him, but the case is a ticklish one."

The doctor paused, and helping himself from a dish which stood before him, he devoted himself assiduously for a few minutes

to the use of his knife and fork, until Madame de Lutz said,

“Doctor, that is the story for the world, but not for us.”

“Accept the same,” he answered shortly.

“I cannot,” she replied.

“Madame, at present I can give you no other. There are cases where silence and discretion are worth any price. Instead of trying to solve a mystery, be content to ignore it, until you cannot do otherwise.” So saying, he rose and left the room.

“Mamma,” said Jeanne, “I think there is a curse upon us.”

“Jeanne, you have no right to say so,” exclaimed her mother.

“Mamma,” said the girl, throwing herself down on the ground beside her mother, and

burying her face in her lap, "it is my secret sin finding me out. Have I not loved him all my life? Do I not love him still? Have I ever sought to check the feeling, though I knew he called another woman wife? Have I not sinned? How do we know where sin begins or ends? And now he is dying for me—for me who care so little to live! God pardon me!"

"God pardon *us!*" said Madame, bowing her head reverently. "We have all erred more or less. Pray, Jeanne, pray that God will deliver us from evil."

"I cannot, mother, I cannot; my heart is like ice. It is not over yet; I feel it is not. Something worse has yet to come."

Even as she spoke, there were sounds of men's voices outside.

“Jeanne, I insist on your going to your own room,” said Madame. Hastily rising, and forcing Jeanne to do the same, she hurried her along a back passage to her own apartment; and giving her in charge to her maid, left her, while she hastily retraced her steps, determined, if possible, to obtain access to her nephew. In the hall, she found herself face to face with M. Aubert, the steward of the Château, and some peasants in blue blouses. The latter, notwithstanding the doctor’s efforts to keep them out, pushed their way into the hall.

“What is it?—what is the matter?” said Madame faintly.

“Madame,” answered Monsieur Aubert, speaking in a thick voice, “I know you do not lack courage; summon up all you have

and come down with me to the Château. Your presence is needed ; the tragedy down yonder is more terrible than the one up here," and he whispered something in her ear.

"And you are here to tell it me, doctor!" exclaimed Madame. "I think Jeanne was right—the house is accursed. Come!" and catching up a shawl she hurried forth, the men making way for her to pass, and then following her. M. Aubert kept his place beside her. "Why were you not there, doctor?—why were you not there?" exclaimed Madame passionately.

"I dared not leave the Count one second sooner. Louis assured me that she was being searched for. I knew she could not go far. I was on my way thither when these men

met and told me. Hurry, Madame—who knows, we may be yet in time.”

Lights were being carried rapidly to and fro in the Château. Through the open windows servants might have been seen hurrying about, without apparently either aim or purpose. A woman's wild shrieking wail guided Madame to Marietta's room. Pushing open the door, she and the doctor entered. There on the bed, beneath the costly hangings of silk and muslin, lay the lifeless form of Marietta, Countess of Lutz. Jacqueline and one or two women were mechanically chafing her hands and feet, but feebly, without energy, for the sake of doing something; they knew to all intents and purposes that their best efforts would be useless. The colourless face, the half open

eyes staring so painfully, the black hair clinging wet and clammy to the marble brow—all told, alas! too plainly that life was extinct. On the ground lay Teresa pouring out her grief in wild passionate cries. No sound escaped Madame's lips, as, the women making way for her, she stood looking almost as white and motionless as the dead woman beside that bed.

“Take her away and clear the room!” said M. Aubert, pointing to Teresa. Seeing that the task was beyond the women's power, he took her up in his own arms, and placed her on a chair in the adjoining room. He signed to the others to follow her, all save Jacqueline. Then he hastily drew the bolt, and turning to Madame said,

“Dear lady, I would have spared you

this sight had it been possible, but there is work to do here which requires your presence. No time must be lost. The Mayor and his *adjoints* are already warned. They will be here shortly, to prove the cause of death. Two crimes have been committed. One is self-evident, the other may still be hid, and the honour of the house of Lutz screened. Only all proof of its existence must be destroyed; and, if I am not mistaken, it lies still hidden on the person of this dead woman, or else somewhere in this room. Jacqueline, has your mistress changed her dress since the afternoon?"

"No," said the housekeeper, trying to speak calmly. "She came in shortly before dinner, seemed tired, and sat down to wait for the master in the *petit salon*. When the

news of his illness came she burst out laughing, exclaiming, 'They mean Mademoiselle Jeanne. Of course she is ill. When is she ever anything else?' But presently, when we assured her it was the master, she turned deadly pale, and rushing out, I saw her take the road to the Cottage. An hour later, Louis came down and asked for the Countess. She had not returned, and search was immediately made for her. *Mère Martin* had seen her gliding across the meadows in the direction of the river. Alarmed, we hurried thither. A lace shawl had caught in the bushes on the bank. The current is not rapid, you know, doctor, and she was soon found, but dead—quite dead! May God and the blessed Virgin help us!" And tears rolled down the woman's furrowed face.

“Hush!” said the doctor, sternly. “This is no time for idle tears. She is, then, just as she was found?”

Jacqueline nodded. M. Aubert thereupon approached the dead, and with minute care, to avoid disturbing the position of the corpse, which many besides himself had already seen, he sought and found the pocket of her dress. A lace handkerchief, a pair of gloves, a bunch of keys, and a tiny bottle completed the contents. He held the bottle up to Madame, then hid it carefully about his own person, replaced the other articles, smoothed away all sign of disorder, withdrew the bolt, and then, like a man who had accomplished some difficult task, drew a long breath, saying solemnly,

“We three alone hold the clue to this

mystery. Let us forget what we have seen !”

“ Amen !” answered Jacqueline ; while Madame buried her face in her hands, murmuring, “ God pardon her and us !”

A knock at the door aroused them all.

“ Come in,” said Monsieur Aubert, purposely avoiding opening it himself. “ The authorities are here,” he said in a low voice to Madame. “ Be calm—it will soon be over. Your presence will prevent too many inquiries.”

And those whose business it was to ascertain, and place on the public records, the cause of death, entered even as he spoke.

That the young Countess was dead, dead beyond recall, it needed less practised eyes than theirs to ascertain. A few witnesses

were examined—those who had found her. Then the question was asked—“Where is the Count?”

“Lying at the Cottage dangerously ill,” answered Monsieur Aubert. “He fell down in a fit, caused by a sunstroke; we thought him dying; the Countess was informed too suddenly of the event, and, leaving the Count’s presence, committed the deed we now deplore.”

The explanations were perfectly satisfactory. The witnesses gave their evidence clearly; and with a few words and expressions of deep sympathy to Madame de Lutz, the gentlemen withdrew, to pronounce a verdict of “Drowned in a fit of temporary insanity.” And once more Madame de Lutz and Doctor Aubert stood alone with the dead.

“Thank God it is over!” exclaimed the latter, reverently. “Come away, dear lady; remember there are others who require our care. Here we have done all that lies in our power to screen alike the living and the dead.”

And, taking her hand, he led her forth.

The air was heavy, and the night was dark. A storm seemed pending. The wind whistled and moaned in the long avenue of trees, and Teresa’s voice, wailing for her lost mistress, rose above the storm.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE 5TH OF NOVEMBER, 1854.

“**T**O arms! to arms! they are upon us!”

From rank to file, that dark November morning, the order passed, and Englishmen, roused from their slumbers, silently flew to arms, straining their eyes in vain through the thick mist, to see from whence the unexpected foe had come. Thundering over the plain of Inkermann the cannon roared, and musket shots laid many a gallant heart low in the dust. Seven thousand

Britons against sixty thousand Russians! Surely, in centuries to come, the story will be as famous as that of Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans! Death or surrender?—the question was not even mooted! Tarnish British honour! Lay down the sword in the very face of enemies and allies? Leave to their children and their children's children the task of redeeming their lost prestige? Death—what was death in comparison with that?

And the youngest boy, seizing his musket, prepared to die, with a grim smile upon his face, and his mother's name upon his lips. Would she, though he were her youngest and best beloved, have had him do otherwise? Thinner and thinner grew their ranks.

“Killed—my brave men all killed!” exclaimed in despair their gallant chief. Hark! above the battle’s din the clarion sound—
They come! they come! our good friends!
Stand firm a little longer!—hold your own, brave hearts!

Never did sweeter music greet English ears than that clear, shrill, clarion sound, and that wild shout of those intrepid Zouaves, as, charging at full speed, they forced their way through the enemy’s ranks, and opened a road out for the few survivors of that gallant band.

“Forward, De Lutz, forward!” shouted a young English officer, waving his sword on high, as he caught sight of a tall form within a hundred yards of where he himself was fighting desperately.

The words had hardly died upon his lips when one of the thousand bullets whizzing round his head laid him low. The Count de Lutz heard the cry, and with a handful of brave men pushed onwards. He thought he recognised the voice, but in the heat of action, amidst the thick smoke enveloping that scene of carnage, he failed to distinguish the person of him who called. Only when the combat was over, and he sought for him in the English quarters, he found Gordon Elliot's name on the list of "missing."

Picking their way carefully amidst the dead and dying, a party of men might have been seen that same November night crossing the plain of Inkermann. Frequently they paused, holding their lanterns aloft,

thus casting a lurid light on the corpses piled in hideous confusion.

Sometimes when the bitter cry for help grew too agonizing, they would pause to speak a few words of comfort, or give such help as lay in their power ; then they would once more hurry forward. It was evident they were searching for some one in particular.

“ Higher up, more towards the centre,” said the leader, standing still as if to reconnoitre. “ Here, it must be about here,” he said, at last.

And then began that fearful search—the turning of dead faces up to the moonlight, the laying of hands on hearts which had ceased to beat for ever.

“ *Voilà, Monsieur,*” said Louis, coming suddenly up to his master.

“Dead or alive?” asked the Count, lifting himself up quickly from his own fruitless search.

“Just breathing, nothing more,” answered Louis.

In another moment Charles de Lutz was kneeling beside Gordon Elliot, who lay where he had fallen, surrounded by the remnant of his own brave regiment. The doctor had already examined him, and, rising at his approach, made way for Charles de Lutz.

“Is there no hope?” asked the latter. An ominous shake of the head was the only answer.

“At all events, he cannot lie here; he will be frozen to death,” said the Count, stripping off as he spoke his own grey mili-

tary cloak, and wrapping it round his friend.

The familiar voice pierced through the films of death, and awoke sweet memories.

“Is it you, Charles de Lutz?” asked the dying man, struggling to raise himself.

“Yes, it is I, Gordon, my boy,” answered the Count, sadly. Adding, “The bullet should have struck me, not you.”

Gordon shook his head, while a strange smile played about his colourless lips.

“Nay, it is best so,” he answered feebly. “Go home, De Lutz—she loves you—and tell her—tell her I was faithful unto death. For God and for her!” And, as if he had only waited to deliver his message, his head drooped forward, and he gently breathed his last.

A few minutes' silence; then Charles de

Lutz lifted the corpse reverently in his arms, and laid it on the litter which they had brought, and slowly the mournful *cor-tége* wended its way towards the camp. On the morrow Gordon Elliot, with many other noble hearts, was laid to rest with all due honours in that little plot of earth where so many French and English heroes sleep side by side, awaiting their reward. Peace be to their ashes! In his pocket-book Charles de Lutz found a faded tendril of ivy. Truly *he had been* faithful unto death!

The dying message and the ivy were both sent to Jeanne.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ONCE more it was Spring-time at the Cottage. The swallows had come home again, and swept in flocks through the soft air, with their shrill, joyous cry. The lambs were bleating in the meadows, the trees had blossomed green, and the hyacinth and the cowslip made sweet perfume. At the open window of the Cottage stood Jeanne de Lutz, reading a letter. Years have slipped silently by, and left their mark on her as on us all. Every trace of the girl has passed away. The

pensive face, the slightly sharpened outline of the delicate features, the deep, saddened look in the once laughing eye, the mouth, which seemed to have forgotten how to smile—all spoke of the woman who had passed through the fierce ordeal of life, who knew what sorrow meant, who had suffered and endured. And now Jeanne stood reading a letter which had just arrived. Her pale face was flushed, and her lips moved from time to time, as if by giving utterance to the written words she rendered them more comprehensible to herself. They were few, and ran thus :—

“Jeanne, I have bided my time. I have faced death, disease, cold, and hunger for your sake, yet have I been spared. Wilt

thou be less merciful than God? I await your mandate, let it be come or go. All other words between us two were superfluous.

“CHARLES DE LUTZ.”

For a few seconds Jeanne stood silently pondering; then turning to her secretary, she wrote on a strip of paper the word “Come;” enclosed it in an envelope, which she sealed and addressed, rang the bell, and desired the man-servant to carry it to the post. Then the pent-up feelings of many years gave way, and Jeanne de Lutz, the woman, kneeling beside her couch, wept and prayed, even as she had done when a girl, only not hopelessly. She knew the end was near. A step roused her; and rising, she faced her mother.

“Jeanne!”

“Mamma, it is nothing,” she answered, smiling through her tears. “I have bidden him come home.”

And, not waiting to explain, or to see the result her words might produce, she ran quickly out into the garden.

A traveller was walking rapidly along the high-road leading to Lutz. As he strode on, he cast from time to time an inquiring look around, as if he were recalling places and events. On the boundary of the estate he paused, and a thought, painful in its intensity, seemed to cross his brain.

“Ah! well,” he exclaimed aloud, “surely this time there is no mistake;” and he resumed his walk.

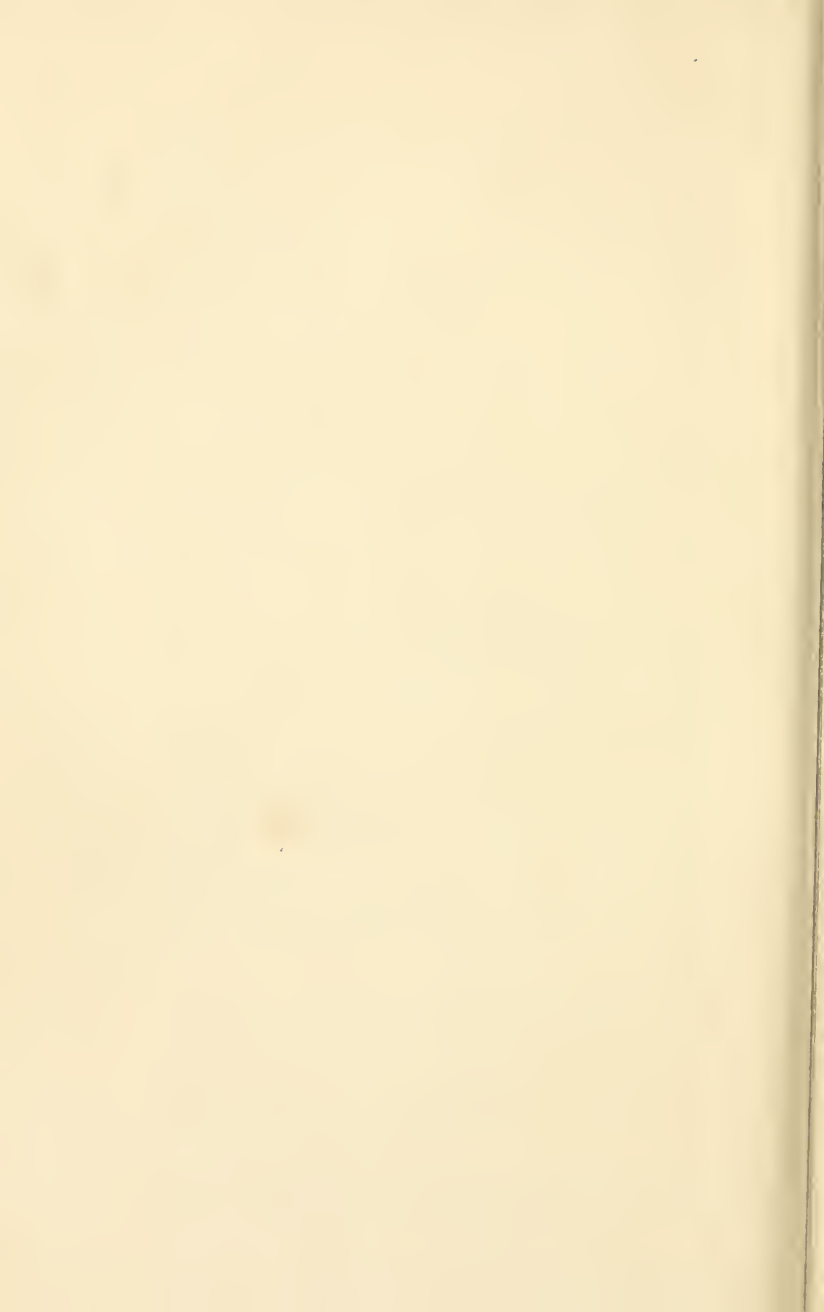
His road lay through a little wood, at the entrance of which a wooden cross had been erected by some former Count de Lutz. At its base, beneath its shadow, a woman leant waiting. At the sight of her Charles de Lutz stood still; then, holding out his arms, he cried,

“Jeanne, Jeanne!”

And she, gliding into them, hid her face upon his bosom. No word was spoken between those two; the only sound that broke the stillness was a sort of sob, until Charles de Lutz, lifting the drooping head, and gazing down upon that upturned face, murmured,

“At last, my darling!”

THE END.



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