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A FORGOTTEN SIN

A NOVEL

BY

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(MADAME LONGARD DE LONGGARDE)

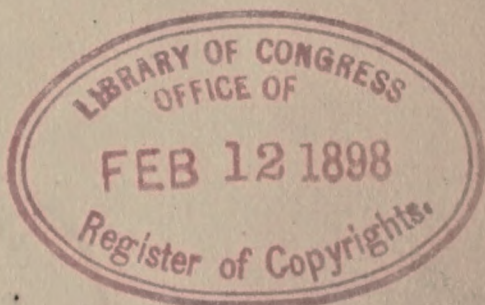
AUTHOR OF

A SPOTLESS REPUTATION, AN ARRANGED MARRIAGE,
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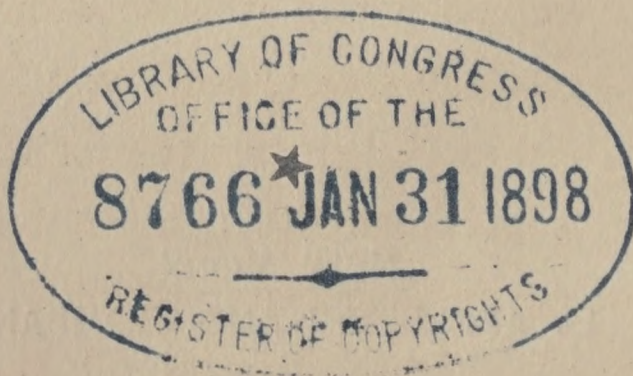
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A FORGOTTEN SIN.

CHAPTER I.

HAD any one coming to the neighbourhood of Skeffington for the first time asked, "What are the people at the Hall like?" it is probable that he would have got some such answer as this: "Oh, they are just very like everybody else. *He* a pleasant old gentleman, very busy with the estate, and still a little vain of his looks, which, I believe, used to be quite stunning, once upon a time: *she* hopelessly commonplace, but quite harmless; the sort of person whom it is so difficult to find anything to say about, don't you know? or to say to, either, for the matter of that—an excellent housekeeper, I believe, but certainly *she* can never have been stunning to look at; anyway, it's *he* who bears off the palm for

interest between the two. As for the girl—well, she's just a pretty English girl,—very pretty, I admit, and also very English,—a little in the old-fashioned style, perhaps, and not with very much to say for herself either, or anyway not yet. And they all get on so excellently together, and everything always runs so smoothly at the Hall, that one never has the chance of making a remark."

Such, looked at from a neighbourly point of view, was the impression given by the Skeffington family circle; and even a much closer look did not dispel it. Any one, for instance, who, after the departure of the last guests to-day, could have managed to return invisibly to the drawing-room where father, mother, and daughter were lingering before the final good-night, would certainly have remained of opinion that these people were "just like everybody else,"—that is to say, an eminently respectable family, affectionate and prosperous, and uninteresting because of these very attributes.

Mr. Morell, his elbow on the mantelpiece and his finely-shaped hand caressing his finely-shaped forehead with a gesture which was habitual in him,—though perhaps a little too elegant in figure and too regular in feature to be called a typical British squire, might nevertheless be taken as a distinctly fine specimen of an English country gentleman, though, of course, an elderly one. There had been a time when that well-moulded hand had passed thus lovingly over brilliant, golden locks,—that was the time at which the characteristic gesture had been acquired; and though in place of the golden locks there was now a bald forehead, thinly fringed with silver, the fingers had not unlearned the trick, and continued to caress the naked skin almost as complacently as they had once caressed the much-admired, sunny locks. The more interesting of the two: yes, there could scarcely be a doubt of that. Looking at the shortish, stout woman with the ordinary face, just now lighting her bedroom candle, it was impos-

sible not to agree with the imaginary informant above quoted.

And Esmè? Here also the informant was right, for she distinctly deserved the italicised *very* before the "pretty" bestowed upon her, though it was not an obtrusive sort of prettiness. No sensational contrast of hair and eyes, no dazzling brilliancy of complexion, nothing that was likely to strike at a distance; only a graceful though still over-youthful figure, a childishly clear skin, a quantity of that peculiar shade of fair hair which the French call *cendré*, and a pair of thickly-fringed, grey-blue eyes which were neither shy nor bold, neither sad nor gay, but which might yet become any of these things, according to what Fate held in store for this child's soul which still looked out through them upon the unexplored world.

Likewise, it seemed true that she had little to say for herself; but that was scarcely to be wondered at, considering that to-day was her seventeenth birthday, and that the big

dinner-party which had been given in honour of the event was the first occasion in which she had figured in public in a frock of the regulation "grown-up" length.

"Did it feel very uncomfortable?" asked Mr. Morell, gazing fondly at his daughter across the room, and still playing with the imaginary hair on his forehead.

"Not quite so bad as I expected, except for the train; I hope nobody saw me kicking it about. I can't imagine how people manage in a ballroom."

Mr. Morell laughed indulgently.

"By the time you have been through half a season you will be able to manage it quite easily; won't she, Mary?"

"I suppose she will," replied Mrs. Morell, placidly, and then added after a moment: "But there is no hurry about that. We are not going to London this year, surely?"

"No, no, not this year," he said, with just a touch of haste. "I shall be very busy this summer; and besides, there is the expense to

consider. Time enough to be presented at eighteen. By next year everything will be easier."

He shifted his elbow on the mantelpiece, and stood for a few minutes gazing silently into the dying fire.

"I am sure Esmè is in no hurry about it," observed Mrs. Morell in her tranquil, even voice.

"None at all," agreed Esmè, stifling a yawn, for she was not yet used to late hours. "If there exists a passion for dancing within me it has not yet been aroused. Just now it is only my bed that I am in any hurry about."

The eyes of both father and mother followed her from the room.

"But when we *do* bring her out," exclaimed Mr. Morell, as the door closed behind the slender, white-robed apparition, "I feel pretty sure that her path will be clear. I don't know what other people think of her, and possibly I am a partial judge, but I confess that I find her beautiful, or on the high-

road to becoming beautiful. Tell me, Mary, does it not strike you that she has got exactly my eyes? Excuse the vanity of the remark," he laughed, lightly.

"The colour, certainly, is the same," agreed Mrs. Morell, a little stolidly.

"And her hair, too, reminds me,—though, to be sure, I fancy my hair had more colour in it," and he gazed somewhat wistfully at the reflection of his denuded forehead in the glass.

"Your hair was the colour of gold," said Mrs. Morell, busying herself again with her candle.

"So it was, so it was," and he nodded slowly to himself in the glass. "Anyway, the resemblance is unmistakable. I confess I am very curious as to the effect she will produce, and as to the offers she will have. I feel pretty certain that she will soon be married."

"Oh, but I can't lose her yet," said the mother, a trifle more quickly.

"Why not, if it is to secure her own hap-

piness? Tell me, Mary," and he raised his head as though under the influence of some new thought, "do you not think it very likely that she will make a big marriage?"

This time the wife appeared to hesitate before answering.

"Why need she make a big marriage? Has she not enough of her own?"

"I never said there was any need," answered the husband, with the faintest touch of irritation; "but, except in the eyes of monks or maniacs, big marriages are surely preferable to small ones; and the greater her fortune, the greater, humanly speaking, will be her chances of enjoyment, or of doing good either, if it comes to that. Surely you agree with me?"

"Oh yes, I agree. But, Robert, is it not time for us to be thinking of bed? You told me, did you not, that you have to take the early train to town again to-morrow?"

"To be sure; it won't do to gossip any longer. Let us sleep upon the consciousness

that Esmè's first step in society has been a success. We may be proud of our daughter, Mary. Why do you say so little? Are you not as proud as I am?"

"I am as proud as you are," and the homely grey eyes kindled for a moment, as the exultant father stooped to kiss the passive mother's cheek. "But you know that I can't talk so well as you do, Robert."

"That's right. Leave the talking to me," he laughed, good-naturedly, "and meanwhile don't forget that I shall require my coffee at seven to-morrow morning. Good night, Mary."

"Good night, Robert," and, with the exchange of another smile, they took their several ways.

CHAPTER II.

LET us follow the members of this humdrum, well-to-do English family to their respective apartments, and see whether, in the depths of privacy, they look so exactly "like everybody else" as was generally asserted.

The first thing that Mr. Morell did on reaching his room was not to make ready for bed, but, having divested himself only of his evening-coat, to begin pacing the floor with an expression of troubled, rather than joyous excitement on his still handsome face. Occasionally, when passing the glass on the toilet-table, he would throw a glance at his own reflection; but it was not of his own looks that he was then thinking.

"If she has anything like the success that I had,"—he mused dreamily and hopefully.

And certainly, if Esmè could attain the position in society once occupied by her father, there could be little doubt that her fortune was made.

Some thirty years ago Robert Morell had come as near to being a male professional beauty as the usages of British society, as well as a substratum of common-sense in his own nature, would allow. Despite the common-sense, however, society had succeeded in spoiling him for any other profession; for this universal favourite was not only marvellously handsome, he was also a good conversationalist, obviously good-natured, and of that undying gaiety of temperament which enlivens the dullest drawing-room. With just enough fortune to live decently in chosen circles, he had early begun to let himself drift. Without having ever been deliberately vicious, he had never found the strength to resist the exercise of his power over women; and had thus, by his twenty-fifth year, acquired the reputation of having broken more hearts than any

other man then *en vogue* in London, and had yet never been in love with anybody but himself. Needless to say that the pet of society was all the more courted and caressed by the beauties of each season for this faculty of remaining fancy-free.

Strangely enough, the one pair of eyes which for a time had taken to haunting his dreams did not belong to any of these fashionable beauties, but to a low-born girl, the daughter of a cottager under whose modest roof he had spent some days during a fishing-tour in the south of England. He had meant to stop in the cottage for only one night, but the eyes had been so curiously fascinating that they had compelled him to change his programme.

A slender, graceful, untamed thing she was—half-shy, half-bold, half-unapproachable, half-seductive, with a quivering mouth and flashes of fierce desire in her brown eyes that were so strangely shot through with gleams of yellow. He had never seen this exact light

in any human eyes before, though he had noticed it often in the eyes of a young dog, or in those of panthers or wild cats. It was a new variety in women's eyes, and so out of the common that it interested even this connoisseur of women. It was in order to study those curiously animal eyes more closely that he decided to stop on for a few days longer—for that, and to amuse himself by seeing whether this shy creature of the woods, who shrank from him so fearfully and yet vibrated so visibly in response to his every touch, was not to be tamed by the same magic that had brought so many of her highly educated sisters to his feet. There were no trout caught in those sunny June days, but there were many secret strolls by the murmuring river, where creel and rod lay at rest among the boulders, and many talks in the long summer twilights. It was a change from London drawing-rooms and wasp-waisted belles. Sometimes indeed, in later days, it had passed through his mind that if fate had thrown him more frequently

into the path of that vibrating creature he might actually have lost a good part of his usually so sublime serenity. But fate had not brought them together again. For a time that so startling yellow light would follow him in his dreams, and when, a year later, he was passing near the same place on another fishing-tour, he had actually gone out of his way in order to make inquiries after Eva Birke. The old cottager was dead, he learnt, and the girl and her brother had emigrated to America some months before. On the whole he was relieved to hear it, though he would have enjoyed seeing the yellow eyes again. Soon they faded even from his dreams, and it was many years now since he had thought of them.

Meanwhile, though his hair was beginning to grow thin, he continued to be a much-admired and much-sought-after bachelor; but already he watched himself a little anxiously in the glass. "When the skin begins to show through that place at the side," he said to

himself, "it will be time to think of settling down."

But, before the skin had quite begun to show through, there came another warning, for one day, as he was taking a bite out of a real Scotch oatcake, he felt a curious sensation in his mouth, and assured himself by means of his tongue that one of his front teeth was loose. Things were beginning to get serious; decidedly the moment was come. It was now that the substratum of common-sense came to the surface, right through the thick layer of vanity.

"Better go before I am dismissed," he reflected philosophically, and began deliberately to look about him. Among the many candidates for his favour there was a rather considerable heiress of the name of Mary Garrett, in whose quiet grey eyes his practised glance had long since read a devotion deeper, if less ostentatious, than that of many more demonstrative women. Why not make her happy, in consideration of her rent-roll?

Her plainness of feature struck him as an advantage, rather than otherwise. No doubt this pet of society had his own reasons for distrusting a beautiful wife—that is to say, if she were one's own wife instead of somebody else's. Be this as it may, the elderly Adonis bestowed his much-admired person upon Mary Garrett, and, abjuring his youth and its traditions, forthwith settled down into the regulation respectable country squire. The splendid estate of Skeffington, which his bride had brought to him as her portion, was the very place to awaken ambitions of a certain order; and even the easy-going Robert Morell, finding himself suddenly transformed from an almost poor man into a very considerable landowner, seemed to undergo a radical change of nature. He required a new interest in life to replace that furnished by his fast-fading looks, and finding so fine an opportunity ready to hand, he threw himself into his new *rôle* with a zest and power of enjoyment of which he had scarcely suspected himself capable. The

estate, though in fair order, had, in the hands of old-fashioned trustees, lagged behind the times; there were none of the modern improvements, nothing cultivated which had not been cultivated last century, and many opportunities lying waste. To all these things Mr. Morell now began to turn his attention with a new-born energy which deserved better results. For, having no experience that had been gathered outside a drawing-room, and having, moreover, lost his head a little bit over his new elevation, he had early begun to entangle the affairs of the estate. A word of advice might have put everything right a dozen times during the last dozen years, but advice was a thing which Mr. Morell never asked, for, since becoming a landlord, he was almost as vain of his management as he had once been of his looks.

His social successes, besides, had fed large the sanguine element in his nature, which now led him on from one experiment to another, always hoping confidently for the success

which yet evaded him. But although even larger fortunes than his have melted in exactly this fashion, all might still have been well if he had not, in an unlucky moment, conceived the hope of retrenching his losses at one blow. A few words dropped by two unknown travelling companions in a railway carriage, while he was on his way to London, where an uncomfortable interview with his solicitor awaited him, had first put the fatal idea into Mr. Morell's head. Since George Grey—whoever he might be—had become rich overnight merely through a parcel of Australian copper shares, why should not Robert Morell at least retrieve what he had lost by some such means? The thought pursued him during the rest of the journey, and on reaching London it was not to his solicitor that he went first, but to an acquaintance who dated from his society days, and about whom he remembered having heard that he lived entirely by speculating on the Stock Exchange.

The first step taken, the others followed

almost unavoidably. Why pursue the familiar development of that recognised form of mental disease called gambling, to which a certain fixed percentage of the happiness and health of mankind is yearly sacrificed? The timid beginnings, the rapture of the first gain, the sting of the first loss, the growing boldness, mingled of terror and of mock confidence, the dogged desire to vanquish fate just because fate seems to be resisting, the ever-recurring feverish hope, alternating with the darkness of impending disaster, and finally the desperation which, losing all control, grows almost light-headed in the insane haste with which it throws good money after bad,—everybody has heard the symptoms described so often that they have become a mere commonplace.

Mr. Morell had not yet quite reached this final stage, but he was at a measurable distance from it. As he paced his bedroom floor with nervously furrowed brow, he was asking himself what the morrow would bring. Upon

the news waiting for him in town the future of Skeffington hung wellnigh upon a thread. And to think that to the eyes of outsiders the edifice of his prosperity, hollow to the core and ready to crumble at a touch, still bore so fair an aspect! What a dust the fall would raise!

It was the thought of exposure which stung far sharper than even the thought of poverty. To have to acknowledge his failure was bitterer than to have to bear the consequences. And to Mary, too, the good, devoted creature who had so confidently intrusted her all to him! It was a humiliation which he felt unable to face. Did she really suspect nothing? Once or twice lately he had caught her eyes watching him with a certain anxious inquiry. Doubtless these frequent journeys to town had aroused her attention, and, doubtless, too, his manner betrayed at times the nervous strain that was upon him. He was conscious even of having lost flesh. But she had asked nothing—she

never did; and if the blow *did* fall, she would say nothing either, and, no doubt, would find in her devotion to him strength to bear it. "The dear creature is so deeply attached to me," mused Mr. Morell, still pacing the floor, "but how about Esmè?"

A look of real pain passed through his pale-blue eyes. His daughter was the one person in the world capable of rousing in him true emotion, and though possibly the admiring affection with which he regarded her may have been coloured by the fact of her real or imagined resemblance to himself, yet it was of its kind a real affection.

After a moment of painful thought he put up his head with a nervously defiant gesture.

"Bah! Why torture myself with visions of what may never be? To-morrow at this time I may know that the Brazilian Star shares have gone up, and all danger will be past. Broadly speaking, my luck has been true to me all my life, and I don't believe it's going to desert me now."

And five minutes later he was as soundly asleep as though there were no such things as Brazilian Star shares in the world.

Meanwhile in the adjoining room the insignificant little person who was this man's wife was still sitting over the fire, wide awake, and—was it possible?—yes, actually crying. Seen thus, divested of both lace coiffure and jewels, she was even plainer than she appeared in public, but, strangely enough, not quite so insignificant. The usually so placid mouth was working, and the calm grey eyes were shining through the tears with a surprisingly vivid light. The truth was, that this ordinary-looking woman, about whom people were accustomed to remark, "Oh, Mrs. Morrell!" as though to say that *she* didn't count, was in reality a far rarer and finer nature than her much-admired husband, who, despite his straight nose and well-turned figure, showed himself, when closely looked at, to be a perfectly commonplace person.

The history of her life was not very strik-

ing, but it had its own unostentatious pathos. She had loved deeply and had got what she wanted, and yet was a disappointed woman. At the time of her marriage she had, indeed, been quite clear in her mind that Robert had chosen her for her money's sake and not for her own, but in her secret heart she had counted on gaining his love in time; she had put it to herself as a task, and she had failed. And even the failure might have been borne if her own love could have survived it. But, unfortunately for herself, hers was not a nature to worship blindly for long. Despite her homely exterior she had always been an idealist at heart, and as one by one her illusions faded and fell to the ground, she passed through those fine phases of suffering that are known only to peculiarly sensitive natures. With a sort of youthful simplicity which was quite distinct from stupidity, she had fancied that a noble exterior must portend a noble soul, and she had found that the idol at whose feet she had worshipped was not of gold but

of clay. Dreams had pursued her of devoting herself to this man's happiness, of sacrificing every taste of her own to the lightest of his wishes, of loving him as no man had ever before been loved, and, behold! he did not require her love, nor want it, and his wishes were quite other from those she had pictured to herself. It was not her vanity which suffered so much as her pride, for she had quickly understood that if she had failed to gain his love, it was principally because he had no love to give, or none of the only sort which could have satisfied her, whereas the discovery that she had attempted to merge her whole being in a nature so far below her own stung her proudly reserved spirit with a sense of keenest humiliation. Her fault always had been to take herself too seriously, and the difficulty of expressing herself, under which she laboured, sprang from this cause as well as from a keen consciousness of her lack of beauty, the instinctive feeling which pursues certain natures that plain women have less right than

beautiful women, not only to be seen, but also to be heard.

Under the blight of disappointment she had shrunk yet further into herself, presenting an even duller surface to inquiring eyes than she had done before. No one should guess the failure of her life, if she could by any depths of silence prevent it; no other woman should know that she had sold herself for a price which had not been paid: though she should require to cut out her tongue for the purpose, the secret must die with her. Even in the early days of her marriage she had never attempted to show her whole feeling, nervously afraid of incommoding Robert with her affection, and in time the affection had come to die, and there remained only the empty, tired heart of the disillusioned woman, without the man who had been the cause of the disillusion having ever suspected the capabilities of self-sacrifice, the treasures of tenderness, which it had once contained, nor the disappointment which had rusted

them. He had been far too busy with his private aims to have time for observing his wife, to whom he considered that he had behaved very well by marrying her at all, and better still by remaining faithful to her after he had done so. "The dear creature is so absurdly devoted to me," he would still say to himself, with half-compassionate complacency, years after he had become to her only the shell of a dead ideal.

It was of course impossible that Mrs. Morell should not in the course of years have caught various glimpses of the downfall of their fortunes, but she had been too diffident to claim the confidence withheld, and—exactly because the money was hers—too proud to ask for explanations. Even at this period, though her husband's manner within the last months had made her suspect much, she was very far from guessing the whole truth.

Robert's words to-night concerning the desirability of Esmè's making a "big" mar-

riage had to her ears sounded more alarming than anything she had lately observed.

“And must my sweet child be sacrificed as I sacrificed myself?” she queried, still brooding over the fire. “I was chosen because of my money; must her husband again be chosen for her, and again because of money? It is too much to hope that in such a case there will be love on both sides; and yet she deserves a better fate than I, if only because she is beautiful.”

And the poor little person rocked her body and choked back her sobs for fear of being heard in the next room, with symptoms of such deeply-working emotion as no living soul had ever yet seen on the mistress of Skeffington's everyday countenance. This was the real Mrs. Morell, in contradiction to the one generally seen in society.

And about Esmè, at this moment slumbering peacefully with her pink cheek on her white arm, and with the soft cloud of hair shading her delicate neck, are there likewise

revelations to be made? Was there a real Esmè as well as a sham Esmè to be considered? No, or at least not yet; for, having had no experiences, she had no reason to dissimulate. The need for a mask would come in time, no doubt; but it had not come yet. So far, both in public and in private, Esmè presented the same countenance, and yet even now, without being aware of it, she was more or less of a fraud, considering that the world took her for an heiress, whereas she was not very far from becoming a beggar.

What else she was it would have been hard to say at this point; not even her mother could feel certain yet whether the child would prove to have a woman's soul, and she shrank from the idea of the proof, knowing well that the word was almost synonymous with suffering. Esmè's own attitude towards life was one of hopeful, but not in the least impatient, expectation. It seemed so natural to suppose that the future would be as smooth and pleasant as the past had been, and the past had

been so pleasant that she felt in no hurry whatever to say good-bye to it.

These, then, are the true portraits of the three people who were "exactly like everybody else," and, no doubt, the description is as correct as descriptions which people make of each other are wont to be; for few of us have any real notion what our closest acquaintances are like with their masks off, and there is a mask taken off every night behind nine out of ten bedroom doors in the United Kingdom—of that be assured.

CHAPTER III.

AT an early hour on the following forenoon Mr. Morell was being ushered into the private parlour at the back of a certain house in the City—well known for its extensive operations on all European money-markets—where he had lately been a constant visitor. He entered the apartment with his usual elastic tread; for want of spirit had never been his failing, and, in face of the crisis so near at hand, he had felt the need of pulling himself together. Besides, he had slept well and breakfasted well, and he could not yet believe that fate would dare to brave him to the end. Yet, despite his obstinate confidence, it was a relief when, after five long minutes, a step came down the passage. It shuffled a little behind the door—somehow he did not quite like that shuffle,—and then a

jovial, blowsy man, who looked far more like a better sort of farmer than a stockbroker, entered rather noisily, clearing his throat, blowing his nose, and scraping his feet on the mat, all at the same time.

“Ah, Mr. Morell, I was expecting you,” he boisterously exclaimed. “You told me not to wire; so I didn’t.”

“The Brazilian Star shares all right, are they not?” asked Mr. Morell, startled by the quaver in his own voice.

“Sorry to say they’re not; but you’ll have better luck next time, no doubt,” he added hurriedly, partly from force of habit and partly because he hadn’t the proper feelings for a stockbroker, which means having no feelings at all, and that he was honestly sorry for his client, though very far from aware of the death-blow he had dealt in those few words.

“You mean that they have failed to rise?”

“Failed to rise would have been a joke, my dear sir; down again, flat down on their

bellies they are, and not likely to find their feet again in a hurry. It's a bad loss, I fear; but, as I say, next time——”

“Then you consider them absolutely done for?” asked Mr. Morell, in a strangely thin voice, caused by a sudden feeling of physical faintness.

“Dished! I was only waiting for your instructions before selling out, for they are sinking hour by hour, and it's as well to save what can be saved. Wait a bit, I've got the last telegrams here.”

It was probably some rudimentary feeling of delicacy which caused the bucolic-looking individual to begin fumbling among his papers, with his back turned to Mr. Morell.

During these minutes Mr. Morell was on the verge of doing half-a-dozen different things, all of them unreasonable,—of crying out, of flying into a rage, of bursting into tears like a woman, of doing he knew not what; and if at this juncture Mr. Barker had happened to turn round, it is certain that he

would have rushed for the brandy—there was always brandy kept ready on the premises for people who came to that back-parlour, and it was wanted at least once a-day—but on the very verge of the breakdown something came to Mr. Morell's aid which was either pride or vanity, or a mixture of both, and which just saved him from the ignominy of exposure. The problem was how to get out of the room without any loss of dignity; every further analysis of the situation must be postponed until this end was accomplished. He waited for a few moments longer, aware that it would be too risky to speak just yet, and during those moments the rustling of Mr. Barker's papers, and the rumbling of the carriages in the street, echoing but faintly here, seemed to blend themselves in his ears to a chorus of mocking devils. In the small yard at the back of the old-fashioned house there stood a sickly laburnum, sparsely clothed with leaves, as sere and yellow as though it had been autumn instead of spring; he looked at

it so long and so hard that he took a hatred to laburnum, which clung to him to the day of his death. Nevertheless he succeeded in giving his instructions almost coherently, even though his voice didn't seem quite to belong to himself. It was at the last moment that Mr. Barker, taking courage to look into his visitor's face, felt suddenly moved to suggest the brandy. He had observed various changes of colour before in this very back-parlour, but never anything exactly like this greenish-grey tint. But the brandy was declined almost haughtily, and two minutes later Mr. Morell was standing on the pavement, staring up and down the street with curiously vacant eyes, as though he had forgotten what he was there for, and heedless of the jostlings of the passers-by.

“The next time!” he was saying to himself under cover of the street noises and with a ghastly-looking smile pulling his white lips from side to side. “That fool doesn't know that there is no next time for me.”

The sight of an empty hansom seemed suddenly to arouse him from his trance, and though, in making a step forward to hail it, he gave a strange lurch in his gait, as though he were the worse for drink, he yet reached its side in safety and gave the address of his solicitor.

It was a long drive to Mr. Ridge's office, and the din of the street stunned him to-day, as though this were his first visit to town. But he was glad to be stunned; he did not want to think just yet. It was only when he reached the office that the sight of the familiar walls and of the familiar countenance above the desk broke down with one blow the false insensibility behind which he was attempting to ensconce himself.

"I'm done for, Ridge!" he cried out, sinking into his accustomed arm-chair and letting his face do what it liked. "This time I'm done for!"

The countenance above the desk was elderly and neutral, both in tint and expression.

It looked on unmoved, though respectfully, at Mr. Morell's display of emotion.

"You have come to tell me, sir, that the chance you spoke of has failed?" he asked, in a voice that was as colourless as his washed-out grey eyes, and having waited till he considered the right moment come.

"Utterly failed! It was my last card, and I've played it."

"You will remember that I always considered the investment a risky one."

"Never mind that—never mind that now, in God's name, but tell me whether there is anything else to be done?"

"I doubt it," said Mr. Ridge calmly.

"But something, surely, something!" insisted Mr. Morell, with the feverish warmth which was beginning to succeed to the first chill of despair. "Don't sit there so quiet, man! Think again! If a loan could be raised——"

"And the security?"

Mr. Morell sank back again in his chair.

After a long pause he asked, in a small, uncertain voice—

“And Skeffington will have to go?”

“I see no alternative.”

“In other words, I am bankrupt?”

“I am afraid there is no other word for it;” and for a moment or two the distracted eyes of the client and the neutral eyes of the solicitor met in complete silence.

“Will it have to be soon?” asked Mr. Morell in that same small voice.

“I do not think I can manage to postpone the—the end more than a few weeks,—three, or perhaps four. I have strained all possible threads already, almost to breaking-point; but the creditors have been kept out of their money too long, they are become as unmanageable as hungry dogs.”

“And may something not happen before the end of these few weeks?” asked Mr. Morell, with a characteristic catching at even this ghostly ray of hope.

“Nothing but a miraculous chance, such

as a big loan, for instance. But no sane person lends fifty thousand pounds without security, and nothing short of that will pull us out of the hole, even for a time."

"I know, I know," agreed the despondent man.

"Three weeks, you said, or four? Make it four, Ridge, I beg of you. So four weeks is all that remains to me."

He was still rather dazed when, at the end of the interview, he made his way down the stairs, and the stupefaction lingered with him as he mechanically ate his luncheon at the usual table in his club, but already he was beginning slowly to realise. The train which bore him homewards sped through fields where ploughmen could be seen at work, and where he could almost smell the new-turned earth in passing whiffs, for the month was April, and all hands were busy out of doors. On the other days it had amused him to catch these passing glimpses of agricultural life, and to try and guess at the patent of the imple-

ments the labourers were using, even as he flew past; but to-day each plough was a mote in his eye, and each grazing cow a nuisance, since each served to remind him that the things of the soil were no longer any business of his.

As he caught a prophetic glimpse of himself in a London lodging, with perhaps two hundred a-year and a wife and daughter to support, he shuddered and shut his eyes. Of course there was always one resource, for who can force a man possessing a revolver and the necessary charge to be a pauper against his will? Mr. Morell possessed a very excellent and finely engraved revolver, on whose chased steel surface the light played with wonderful effect, and lately he had more than once caught himself thinking of this revolver with a quite new interest. Hitherto it had been only a plaything; was it possible that *there* lay the solution of his difficulties? The thought just swept across his mind, to be laughed away by common-sense. In reality he

was less afraid of dying than of being declared bankrupt, but nevertheless he had no mind whatever to die.

Luckily the moment of coming to a decision was still four weeks off, and although he supposed it to be inevitable, he yet found an unreasonable relief in the thought of this respite, for he was one of those men who cannot help but procrastinate.

The dogcart was waiting for him at the station as usual. Everything was exactly as usual—the groom's respectful salutation, the glossy horse, the well-kept avenue down which the dogcart bowled so smoothly—but everything bore a new signification for him to-day. For how much longer would this dogcart be his? What remarks would the groom make to the coachman when he learnt that the master was "smashed up"? Who would be bowling down this avenue this time next year?

It was with a species of groan that he alighted at the door, and, still deep in thought,

walked across the hall and straight into the drawing-room, not distinctly knowing where he was going, and unconscious of the hum of voices which might have warned him of the presence of visitors. When he awoke to the situation it was too late to retreat. There was nothing for it but to come forward and profess himself delighted with this meeting with the fussy little woman and her three beaming, red-cheeked daughters who had driven over to tea.

“But not to tea only,” explained Mrs. Stanger shrilly, when with a supreme effort he had succeeded in making the requisite number of bows, “though nobody does make tea like Mary for miles round; but I was just telling her about the little dance we are arranging for next week—a mere carpet-dance, you know—just to console dear Fanny and Maggie and Addie for not being able to get to town this season. I *must* do something to keep them quiet, you know, or else they’d simply bolt; and they are *so* anxious to have Esmè too,

the sweet children! You know what hearts they have! But here is Mary making difficulties; and yet after the dinner yesterday you can't say she isn't 'out,' and dear Fanny and Maggie and Addie will be *so* disappointed if she does not come. What do *you* say, Mr. Morell? Please help me to reason with Mary; only a carpet-dance, remember; and it is to be called the Dance of the Exiles, because it's meant to cheer up all the unfortunates out of London."

She paused, breathless, twisting her head about among her laces after the manner of a hen pruning her feathers. Her loose, brownish-grey hair somehow also suggested feathers, and the shrill cackle in which she spoke completed the idea of the British domestic fowl, which undeniably hung about her plump, restless person.

"Just so; only a carpet-dance," repeated Mr. Morell, rather blankly. He had some difficulty in concentrating his mind on this new subject.

“ You consent, do you not? Never mind what Mary says! ”

Mary was saying nothing at the moment, but, from behind the shelter of the tea-urn, had, ever since her husband's entrance, been furtively watching his face.

“ What does she say? ” asked Mr. Morell, sinking wearily on to a seat.

“ That Esmè is too young, ” &c.

Mrs. Stanger talked on for three more minutes on end, during which time Mr. Morell, instead of listening to her, looked wistfully across the room to where the three Miss Stangers had got Esmè well in their midst, and were evidently doing their best to inflame her imagination with visions of the carpet-dance.

“ It's very unselfish of me to invite her, ” he at last heard Mrs. Stanger saying, “ for I'm half afraid she'll pocket a few of my own girls' partners. ”

This, happening to tally with his own thought, succeeded in rousing Mr. Morell.

All at once he began to understand what was being talked about.

“By all means, yes; why shouldn't she go?” he exclaimed, with sudden alertness. “Let the child have her fun while she may!”

“But, Robert, we had meant to wait until Esmè was eighteen,” timidly objected Mrs. Morell.

“Eighteen? Pooh! That's a whole year off. Who knows whether any of us will be alive this time next year! Nothing like seizing the moment by the hair of the head—ha, ha! Yes; we shall certainly join the exiles, Mrs. Stanger, and mind you have plenty of partners for Esmè!”

He laughed rather excitedly, and gulped down half a cup of tea.

“Leave that to me—leave that to me!” cackled the delighted Mrs. Stanger. “We have some *charming* young men on our list. And now that I've conquered, I must be off to beat up more exiles. Fanny, Maggie,

‘Addie, where are you, my dears? It’s time to say good-bye.’”

While she bustled out of the room with her brood of chickens around her, and while the ceremony of departure was going on in the hall, Mrs. Morell sat alone in the drawing-room, with her eyes fixed expectantly on the door. Would Robert come back or not? That was what she was asking herself.

He did come back, just as the carriage passed the window; but he had not returned to make disclosures, as she saw at a glance. The flush of false gaiety was still on his cheek, and the somewhat convulsive smile still on his lips, a thin mask which the wife’s eyes easily pierced.

“What a rate that woman talks at!” he remarked, with would-be alertness, and she could see how his lips twitched as he spoke.

“Robert,” she said, upon some sudden impulse, not of curiosity, but of overpowering pity, “what has disturbed you? You look un-

happy about something. Have you had bad news?"

She was quite astonished at herself when she had spoken. It was so long since she had permitted herself any such indiscretion as this, and she could not understand what had pushed her to speak to-day. Robert himself was obviously equally astonished, but he did not look pleased.

"What on earth makes you think that I am distressed?" he asked, hurriedly.

"Your looks, Robert," faltered the poor woman, growing as red as a girl, "and your manner lately. I thought there might be difficulties, but I did not like to trouble you with questions; but to-day it seems so evident, and if there was anything I could do——"

She broke off in alarm, painfully aware that her sentences were getting entangled. The habit of repressing rather than expressing her feelings was so deep-rooted by this time that she had positively forgotten how to do the latter thing.

And yet even those few broken words had sufficed to cause Mr. Morell a moment of hesitation. There would be a certain relief, no doubt, in disburdening himself of the truth to anybody, even to Mary; but almost simultaneously came the thought of the humiliation, and the relaxing lines about his mouth hardened again. No, not until the force of circumstances compelled him to it, would he confess his failure. Up to the very last day of these four weeks of grace would he still remain in her eyes the same successful man he had been all his life.

“Nonsense, Mary!” he said, almost roughly, as he turned away. “There is certainly nothing you can do, nor any need to do anything. You have never taken any interest in business matters, you know, and you wouldn’t understand. Quite right, you were not to torment me with questions. I recommend the same policy for the future. By the way, what day did Mrs. Stanger say for the carpet-dance?”

“Tuesday,” she replied, instantly withdrawing into her shell. Her heart was big with unspoken words, as she wistfully watched the man she had once loved slowly moving about the room. Never since the early days of her marriage had her heart so yearned over him as it did at this moment, and although the emotion was compassion and not love, it almost made her believe for a moment that she could love him again, if only he were unhappy enough, and were in enough need of her; but as to putting the thought into words after the rebuff just received, that was as impossible to her as to commit a murder. She therefore said nothing except “Tuesday,” and a moment later added, probably by way of reassuring Robert that there were no more questions coming—

“I should have liked to keep Esmè in longer, but since you wish it——”

“Pooh! you can’t call a dance at Mrs. Stanger’s coming out.”

“A dance may be the beginning of so many

things," she sighed, scarcely aware of what she was afraid.

"So much the better, if it is a beginning," said Mr. Morell, with a womanishly hysterical laugh. "Let her pick up a husband if she can, by all means;" and he went out, still laughing joylessly to himself.

"Any sort of husband," he meanwhile completed his reflections. "Supposing one of Mrs. Stanger's charming young men were to engage to provide for her future, what a burden off my mind! Let her make hay while the sun shines. Who'll invite her to a carpet-dance, I wonder, when I'm declared bankrupt?"

CHAPTER IV.

WHEN Esmè came down ready dressed for the dance, her father and mother began by exchanging a quick glance (a thing which fathers and mothers are apt to do on these occasions), but their reflections were nevertheless radically opposed.

“She may make her fortune yet,” was what Mr. Morell said to himself, while the question which the mother’s heart instinctively asked, and asked in fear and trembling, was, “Who will be the man to love her?” For it was quite evident that she was not a woman destined to remain unloved.

The soft white stuff of her childishly simple gown—an adapted dinner-gown, since there had been no time to order an elaborate ball toilette—seemed the silken sheath from which the opening bud has scarcely slipped,

while the half-parted glistening lips and the almost too slender neck completed the delicately flowerlike impression which was the chief characteristic of her beauty. She was beautiful, indeed, as she stood thus looking from father to mother with the flush of expectation on her cheek, and a look half-laughing, half-alarmed in her exquisitely moist blue eyes; and young—oh, so young!—not older than the April day itself.

In reality the moment of appearing before her parents was the most triumphant moment of the evening, for once in the ballroom, and surrounded by more brilliant or more striking apparitions, Esmè ceased to be conspicuous. Not that there was anything insignificant in her appearance, but that the many exquisite details which went to make up this face, “all composed of flowers,” were too finely shaded and too delicately worked out to tell at a distance.

Mr. Morell, despite his fatherly vanity, was just a trifle disappointed when he saw Esmè

among the other girls, and was able to compare the faintly-tinted face with the more brilliant roses on the cheeks of Fanny, Maggie, and Addie Stanger, and the childishly slender figure of his daughter with their well-developed busts. Certainly she looked almost too ridiculously young to be figuring in a low dress. He would have liked her to make a decided effect to-night, even though it were for the first and the last time. Everything should have concurred to-day to make what would probably be his last appearance in society as brilliant as might be, for the man was so constituted that he could taste the pleasure of the moment, even though knowing that bitterness must follow. It actually tickled his fancy to see his neighbours smiling at him in such complete unconsciousness of the impending catastrophe. Did really not one of them see the shadow of the axe which was suspended above his head, held only by a thread ready to snap at any moment? He himself saw the axe wherever he moved, but he had come here mean-

ing to enjoy himself once more in his life, to taste his social importance for the last time; and, despite the axe, he almost succeeded.

The carpet-dance was wonderfully well attended for the season. People who either could not or did not want to go to London, and people who had not yet gone, had all answered to Mrs. Stanger's call. Some starts had even been postponed, for the fussy little woman was an excellent hostess, and the suppers at Rumbleton were known to be as good as any in town. Mr. Morell, wandering from room to room, seemed to take a bitter satisfaction in acknowledging the excellence of the arrangements. When again would he see such judiciously tempered lights, such well-served refreshments, such inviting-looking whist-tables? It was at one of these latter that he sank down at last, in answer to a call for a fourth hand. He had gazed his fill at the dancing-room, and Esmè was provided for, since Mrs. Stanger had kept her promise about the partners. He had just seen her standing

up for the first quadrille with an unknown black-haired man, whom he supposed must be a stranger in the neighbourhood, and who, despite his severely correct evening-dress, somehow struck him as being too picturesque for an Englishman.

More than an hour passed before the rubber was over and he again thought of strolling back to the dancing-room. It was the moment of a pause between two dances. Where was Esmè? Over there, on a low seat, and a man was talking to her,—why, it was again the black-haired fellow of the first quadrille; but what of that? Ten to one he had not been near her in the interval. Mr. Morell turned away and gave no further thought to the subject for the moment.

Half an hour later, in the supper-room, he came upon his daughter just in the act of receiving an ice from the hands of a man who had his back to the room. The man had to make way for a passing couple, and in doing so half turned his head. Mr. Morell once more

recognised the dark face, which was almost the only strange one in the room to him, and at last his paternal attention began to be seriously aroused.

“Who is that dark fellow over there?” he inquired of the man nearest him. “The clean-shaved one with the eyeglass. I don’t seem to have seen him before.”

“I daresay not,” was the reply, “since he’s only come home lately. It’s Dennison of Stedhurst, don’t you know?”

“Tom Dennison’s nephew, you mean, who has come in for the property?”

“Just so; but he doesn’t seem much inclined to sit down upon it—too slow for him, I expect.”

“Wasn’t there something wrong about his mother?” asked Mr. Morell, after a pause.

“There was this much wrong about her, that she was Spanish, to begin with, and that, furthermore, they quarrelled like cat and dog; but, on the other hand, there must have been a good deal right about her, considering that

she brought a million and a half to Dennison on her marriage. He met her when he was attached to the Embassy at Madrid, you know."

"So this young man gets——"

"No, has got—considering that he was left an orphan at fifteen, and unhampered with brothers and sisters. I call it a disgusting instance of the partiality of fortune. What need had this young Cræsus of his uncle's estate into the bargain, on the top of his own money-bags? No wonder he is *blasé* at twenty-five!"

"Is he only twenty-five?" repeated Mr. Morell, looking curiously across the room at his daughter's companion. At sight of the way in which he bent towards her a sudden thrill of excitement ran through his veins. All that he had just been learning placed the attentions which Mr. Dennison of Stedhurst was obviously paying Esmè in a quite new light. Possibilities that were almost too dazzling to be contemplated were already beginning to trouble his incorrigibly sanguine spirit. The

possessor of a million and a half in love with Esmè—or, let us say, only struck with her—what might it not lead to? He resolved to be more observant for the rest of the evening. The man himself had not prepossessed him at first sight; but since hearing that he was Dennison of Stedhurst he had forgotten what it was that he had not liked about him. Watching him more attentively now, he had begun to understand why he had struck him as picturesque. It was not his face, which, despite the intensely black eyes, was too thin of feature to be called good-looking; rather it was a certain indolent grace about his singularly well-proportioned frame, a peculiar ease of attitude which yet was not slovenliness, very rarely found in a representative of the Anglo-Saxon race. Beside this man with the lithe elastic-looking limbs, the arms and legs of the sturdy young squires who pushed past him looked almost as though fashioned out of wood, and worked with wires, and they themselves painfully conscious of the fact, while

Mr. Dennison scarcely seemed aware that he possessed any such appendages, which probably was the secret of his managing them so well. It is only in certain Southern countries that this type of figure and of movement is to be found, the countries that painters, and more especially sculptors, go to when they are in search of classical attitudes, and know that they may find what they want, even in the man who herds the donkeys or cleans the boots. Costume, doubtless, bears a chief part here, and no man can hope to look classical in an English evening-coat; it is enough if he escape being ungraceful: and this, at least, might be asserted of Mr. Dennison. Despite the disadvantages of the unlovely garment, there was no mistaking that the figure beneath it need not have shamed a young Greek god.

But as for the face, it showed nothing of godlike serenity; human, on the contrary, essentially human, and too old for its age, the lines about the thin lips too nervously mobile,

the dark eyes too restless in their search for something which they did not find. The features, clean-shaved, might have belonged to an actor or a priest; it was a face which attracted some people and repelled others, but one at which every one looked twice, whether in approval or disapproval.

Just at the first moment Esmè had been a little alarmed when the tall dark stranger, who looked so much older than his age, had asked her for a dance. Even her inexperienced eye had immediately detected the man of the world, and she asked herself aghast what she could possibly talk about to such a one. With Willy Stanger or Bobby Dutton, with whom she had played at funerals and weddings in days gone by, she would have felt much more at her ease. But the first few minutes reassured her.

“Should you rather begin, or do you leave the choice of the subject to me?” Mr. Denison said, as he took his place beside her, for the music had not yet struck up. He spoke

with perfect fluency, and only a very slight foreign accent. "I can talk politics in moderation, and I can describe five European capitals from personal observation. I also know a little about music. On the whole, I think I am strongest on the capitals—what do you vote for?"

Esmè glanced at him doubtfully, to see if he was laughing at her. It is true that his lips were so thin that they could scarcely help looking ironical, but, right through the restlessness of his black eyes, there nevertheless shone a kindly light, which unaccountably gave her courage.

"I think I should like best to hear about the music," she ventured.

"Ah!" and he gave her a sharper, more attentive glance; "is that the way your tastes lie? We shall talk about music some day, if you like, but not within hearing of that dreadful piano. I wonder how much they pay the fellow for an hour's jingling? You don't call *that* music, do you?"

“I—I rather liked it,” stammered Esmè, truthful but confused.

“Aren’t you making a mistake? Was it not the dancing you liked, and not the jingling? That’s pardonable, at a first ball.”

“How do you know it’s my first ball? Did mamma tell you?”

“You told me yourself.”

“When?”

“When you accepted me so politely as a partner. Nobody is polite to the other sex except at a first ball. Manners are quite *démodé*, you know. But don’t lose heart,” he added, still in the half-bantering tone of a grown-up person addressing a child, “you’ll learn in time.”

Esmè began to laugh without quite knowing why. She had most exquisite small teeth, and when she laughed you got delicious glimpses of them.

Mr. Dennison began to wish that he had made her laugh sooner.

“Do you know all the people in the room?” he asked abruptly. “I don’t. Who is that elderly young lady who is trying so hard to look unconcerned as to the chances of a partner? What a time she must have spent in her dressing-room to-night! Judging from her method and materials, I should say it must take her quite thirty minutes to get rid of ten years, and she has had to get rid of twenty!”

“You surely don’t think she paints?” asked Esmè aghast.

“I can even give you the address of the shop where that particular shade of rose is to be had.”

“Oh, how dreadful!”

“Not in the least. That’s another thing you’ll learn in time. Just listen to the clucking of our excellent hostess! Have you ever seen anything more like a hen who has found a fat worm on a dung-hill? It must be something special in the partner line that she is anxious to divide among her precious chicks.

See how Fanny and Maggie and Addie flock about her!"

This time he looked confidently at Esmè, hoping to see the tiny white teeth again, but instead he encountered a slight frown and a shade of rising colour.

She was enjoying herself so well in Mrs. Stanger's house that to compare her to a clucking old hen struck Esmè as disloyal, even traitorous.

"Why do you make such unkind remarks?" she found courage to object. "Addie and Fanny and Maggie are my friends."

Mr. Dennison looked at her in slight surprise, but he did not seem displeased. Evidently this was not the right way to make her laugh.

"Another thing to learn!" he said beneath his breath.

"I beg your pardon," he remarked aloud, "I am always forgetting that this is your first ball."

He bent a little nearer to her as he spoke;

he had only just perceived how long and thick were the silken lashes which veiled her eyes. They were too fair in colour to make much effect at a distance, but they added an exquisite detail to her beauty.

“It is funny, is it not, that you should be an exile at your first ball?” he presently remarked. “I’m told that everybody here is an exile, and that this is their special feast. What is it we’re supposed to be exiled from, by the way?”

“From London, I believe. The season is just beginning, you know.”

“Ah, and are you not yearning to be there?”

As he spoke his restless eyes were exploring her face with a curiously eager scrutiny.

“No, I don’t think I am. I have so many friends here, and I should feel so strange there,—more like an exile than here, I think.”

“And yet London is not so bad of its kind,” mused Mr. Dennison, with a sudden shadow upon his features. “I thought noth-

ing could be more delightfully wicked than Paris, but I changed my mind when I saw your London drawing-rooms."

"Are you not an Englishman?" asked Esmè, a little bewildered.

"I? I am whatever you like to call me. What can a man be who had an English father and a Spanish mother, who was born in St. Petersburg and educated at half-a-dozen places? I think you might call me an exile with great truth,—not a sham exile, mind you, like these revellers here to-night, but a real exile, if an exile means fitting in nowhere in particular."

He was speaking gravely for the first time, gravely and somewhat bitterly; but even while Esmè looked at him in wonder, he was laughing again, more lightly than before, and she thought she must have been mistaken in thinking him so serious.

At the moment of cloaking, Mr. Morell saw the opportunity he had been looking for.

"I have only just discovered that we are neighbours," he said, as unconcernedly as he

could, to the young man who was busying himself with Esmè's wraps. "We have a few people coming to dinner on Friday; I hope you'll be of the number. Your uncle was such an old chum of mine that I should like to make better acquaintance with his nephew."

Mr. Dennison bowed silently in response, and the invitation was understood to be accepted.

"Can't help if it looks barefaced," muttered Mr. Morell to himself. Under ordinary circumstances he had far too good taste to be so precipitate, but time pressed too fearfully to allow of any stickling at a shade of delicacy.

At the sound of her husband's words Mrs. Morell's heart had sunk, for she also had made inquiries concerning this man. She had heard the same story about his wealth, and she had also heard other things; for "I should advise you to be careful" had been whispered to her by her informant. "I'm told he ought to be marked 'Dangerous!'" What can you expect, after all, of a young man with so many op-

portunities!" and the lady in question, who possibly would have preferred to see the dangerous man busying himself with her own daughters, looked expressively at the ceiling.

The fact of his wealth alone would have been enough to prejudice Mrs. Morell against him—marking him out, as it seemed, as the rich man of her imagination, to whom her daughter's happiness would have to be sacrificed; and now this whispered warning on the top of it! That Robert should favour him was only to be expected from his words of the other evening. The mother's heart was full of anxious thoughts, while in the father's, meanwhile, a new-born, still half-incredulous hope was springing up. What the evening had brought seemed almost too good to be true. He had scarcely been able to command his voice as he gave the invitation, and, seeing it accepted, he could have embraced the man for very joy.

Thus during the whole long drive father and mother sat side by side thinking of the

same thing, but thinking of it very differently; while on the seat opposite, Esmè, between the pleasant excitement produced by music and movement and a pleasant weariness of limb, sat with her fair head thrown back against the cushions, not forming any coherent thought, and only vaguely aware that after to-night everyday life might possibly seem a little flat, and that what had satisfied her yesterday might fail to satisfy her to-morrow.

CHAPTER V.

MR. DENNISON had described himself best when he said that he fitted in nowhere.

Perhaps it was the mixture of races in him, or more likely the jumble of impressions and the contradictory influences brought to bear upon his childhood, which was answerable for the state of chronic unrest in which he lived. His beautiful, hot-blooded mother had not long been satisfied with the sincere, yet, in her opinion, far too well-governed affection which her Northern spouse had bestowed on her, and had, after a series of domestic scenes provoked by her overwhelming jealousy, at length succeeded in goading the long-suffering Englishman into suing for a judicial separation. This was in Charles's eighth year; and from thenceforward his childhood, which, like the true son of a diplomat, he had spent a

little everywhere, lost even that semblance of a permanent home which is so essential to the comfort of early years, and so influential in the formation of character. Handed backwards and forwards from one parent to the other, keenly aware of the unnaturalness of this mode of life, and not yet able to grasp the necessity of it, generally rejoining his father at some fresh post or finding his mother at some new watering-place, whither she had gone to restore her excitable nerves, his instinctive pleasure in life poisoned by the all-pervading bitterness of two beings whose hot love had turned to hotter hate, and all this in that enervating atmosphere of luxury which in itself tends to suffocate natural impulses—how could his spirit reach its proper growth?

He learnt to read the truth in his father's disdainful silence as much as in his mother's unguarded outbursts, and, by dint of seeing how mercilessly North and South condemned one another, he came to the conclusion in his

poor bewildered child's brain that goodness and virtue, and at any rate charity, could have no real existence among any nation of the world. Very early he had understood that, instead of forming a bond between these two dissimilar characters, he was only an object to quarrel over—a mirror in which to reflect mutual dislikes; and he suffered from this consciousness as only a precocious and sensitive child can suffer, for the boy, brought up under this high pressure of unhappiness, could hardly escape being precocious.

As yet he had not attempted to judge between his parents, but the moment would have to come soon. When he grew a little older he must of necessity take his stand either on one side or on the other: this he vaguely felt, yet shrank from looking the question in the face. But the moment never really came, for fate spared him the supreme decision by carrying off father and mother in one year, and leaving him at fourteen alone in the world.

“Alone in the world” is in this case only a figure of speech; for heirs to a million and a half pounds sterling are never let alone, whether they wish it or not.

There now began the third and final period of Charles's boyhood. Until now it had been his parents who had snatched him from one another; now it was the relatives of those dead parents who took up the game. Spanish aunts and English uncles vied with each other as to who should have the custody of the precious minor, and again it ended in his being divided between them. The same animosity, the same bitterness, the same outbursts of national antipathy, called out this time by mistrust of each other, and underlaid by an infinitely baser motive, since hatred always remains more respectable than the greed of money. Long before he had crossed the line which separates boyhood from youth, Charles's unnaturally sharpened eyes had seen through it all, and his reason had therefrom formed its estimate of human nature. He was not yet

eighteen when a pretty little brown-eyed Spanish cousin, three years his junior and still in short petticoats, had given him a rendezvous under a pomegranate-tree, and had then and there made open love to him; and when in a movement of honest disgust he had flown out at her, she had got frightened and confessed that it was her mother who had given her the idea—a thing which, knowing his aunt Blanca, he readily believed. A year later, when staying with some cousins in England, and being almost touched by the affection shown him, he had successfully stumbled into a trap laid for his generosity, and whose contrivance betrayed the true British business instinct.

At twenty he was already a disenchanted man, whose youthful mouth was even now falling into the habitual folds of the cynic's smile. In the highly-strung character of his nervous organisation he might have stood as a type of his time, for it is by unnatural pressure that is developed this almost sickly sensibility, which in his case was heightened by the receptiveness of

an artistic temperament, for—more Southern than Northern in this—music had, even in his early boyhood, been his one unmixed pleasure. Natures that are both nervous and artistic are generally the most susceptible to the influence of the other sex, and with Charles Dennison this was the case in a supreme degree. He was not only subject to woman's power, but dependent on it to a point which often frightened himself. Speaking in this sense, there are two sorts of men: men to whom women are a luxury, and those to whom women are a necessity; men who can do without women, and men who cannot,—and Charles was an extreme example of the second category.

Such men require their mothers and their sisters as imperiously as they will later on depend upon their mistresses, and will not die happy unless acquaintance with a daughter's love completes their experience of all the available forms of female affection. Now Charles had only known maternal love distorted by hate, he had never had a sister, and already

he trembled at the thought of the disappointments which his first mistress might bring him, even while knowing that they would have to be risked.

Put into possession of his fortune, there was a moment when youth and health and strongly-coursing blood, triumphing over his early world-weariness, threw him headlong into the whirlpool of mere vulgar enjoyment. But this, too, was only a phase: in proportion as he gorged himself with pleasure, early repletion set in, and with it the uneasy awakening of his better instincts; for all through his unnatural childhood, all through the dissipations of his early manhood, something had remained healthy within him. And the point to which his instinct once more led him back was Woman,—not Woman in the vulgar sense in which he had got used to viewing her since his plunge into the whirlpool, but Woman in a high and noble sense. Women were at once his danger and his hope, and everything would depend upon the special woman into whose

hands he would ultimately fall. So instinctively aware of this was he himself that, despite the experiences already gained from fortune-hunting mothers and daughters, despite the many recoils of disgust and disillusionment, he felt himself obliged ever and again to return to them, to examine each single specimen he met, with a certain morbid curiosity which left him no peace. He lived in the attitude of constant looking out for the right woman, for the woman who could save him from himself, from the cankering disbelief in humanity, and from the undisciplined movements of the voluptuous blood inherited from his Southern mother. An obstinate belief that this right woman existed somewhere—the woman who would love him for himself and not for his money—survived his most humiliating experiences. Hence those many experiments on the other sex which had earned for him the epithet of “dangerous,” but which were in reality the unquiet, half-despairing endeavours of a soul to find its mate, and with it

its salvation. But even these endeavours were intermittent, for there could not fail to come moments when the absurdity of being "in earnest" on fifty thousand a-year struck him with irresistible force, and caused him to lapse into doing as the others do.

It follows, from all this, that his cynicism, both of speech and expression, was not nearly so real as he himself supposed,—it could not be, so long as that obstinate hope still lived. It was the people who saw through him that were attracted by this rather perplexing young man, and it was those who did not see through him that were repelled.

So used had he become to the attitude of expectation, that he could scarcely meet a woman under thirty without looking at her expectantly, with the half-formed thought in his mind, "Perhaps this is she?"—provided, of course, that she was at least fairly good-looking, for he was beset with the true artistic fastidiousness of the senses.

When at the Dance of the Exiles his eyes

had fallen on Esmè Morell, this same question had risen in his mind, and, almost more from force of habit than from anything else, he had begun his usual closer examination of the object. The course of the evening had brought him none of those shocks which were by this time so familiar; but what of that? How often had he been duped by just such dewy *débutante* eyes, whose owner, while pretending to find some difficulty in the process of adding two to two, had yet been subsequently convicted of having not only known the sum of his income to a penny, but even of having carefully planned its expenditure, after his hoped-for capture! Should he pursue his experiments further? Perhaps it was a strain of English doggedness in his half-Spanish blood, or perhaps it was a vision of silken lashes lying on a childishly pure cheek, which caused him to decide in the affirmative. Mr. Morell's invitation had almost succeeded in warning him off. At sight of the thinly-veiled eagerness, the much-hunted *parti* had had some

difficulty in not grinning in the other man's face; but he had remembered in time that the father's worldly wisdom did not necessarily prove anything against the daughter.

CHAPTER VI.

CHARLES DENNISON arrived at Skeffington on Friday in a state of uneasy curiosity. The evening would probably bring him revelations as to the character of his latest discovery, calculated to shatter the dream that was beginning to trouble him—so he told himself with his artificial cynicism. He was her neighbour at table, as he had expected; but, although he put her through a skilfully-veiled course of cross-examination regarding her tastes, habits, likings and dislikings, “exploring” her, as he was wont to term the process, the dinner ended, somewhat to his astonishment, without his having made any specially alarming discovery. She was more of a listener than a talker, indeed; but her answers came so readily, and sometimes so awkwardly, as to be evidently unprepared, and were so many glimpses af-

forded him into the most entirely untouched child's soul which he was aware of having yet come near.

She was not flirting with him either, a discovery which at first reassured him, but later filled him with a vague unreasoning fear. Supposing the impression he was every moment more vividly aware of was one-sided? And this thought put another tone into his voice and lit a keener spark in his eye, as, regardless of the notice he might be attracting, he busied himself exclusively with his neighbour, attempting to discover that which he was not yet sure of desiring. But, strive as cunningly as he might, the child's eyes remained untroubled, her bearing serenely unconscious. It was not until the latter part of the evening that he saw another look on her face.

On their entry into the drawing-room the gentlemen found a sleepy matron in possession of the piano, half-nodding over the keys.

What she was playing was called a sonata, but, judging from the effect both upon her-

self and upon her audience, it deserved to be ranked as a lullaby. Mrs. Morell and her only other lady-guest, for the small party had been hastily organised as a screen to Mr. Morell's true motive, having nothing particular to say to one another, had long ago abandoned the effort of coining remarks, and leant back in their respective chairs wearily wishing for the end of the evening. Esmè was indeed wide awake, but there was nobody to talk to until the gentlemen came, when she hoped that Mr. Dennison would go on telling her about Spain and Italy. It was a hope quite unconscious of an after-thought. He talked well, and he had a way of making her talk with a freedom which she had never before found in herself,—that was all she thought of as, right through the drowsy music, she listened for the opening of the dining-room door.

When the door opened at last the matron at the piano broke off suddenly, clean in the middle of a passage, and looked round her in an astonished manner, which suggested that

for the last few minutes, at least, she had been playing in her sleep. Mr. Dennison gave one apprehensive glance in her direction, and took up his position as far from the piano as possible.

“Come, Mrs. Bennett,” said Mr. Morell, in his favourite playful tone, rendered wonderfully light by the observations he had made during dinner, “you’re not going to deprive us of the end of that sonata, are you? Is our appearance so alarming as all that? It’s cruel of her, isn’t it, Dennison?”

“Heartless,” replied Mr. Dennison, with a curious contraction of the lips.

Mrs. Bennett murmured something indistinct and rose heavily from the piano.

“Ask *him* to play,” whispered Mr. Bennett, who in thirty years of married life had probably had as much of his wife’s sonatas as an average man could be expected to stand.

Mr. Morell turned radiantly towards his young guest, too glad of the chance of saying something pleasant.

“What! you’re a musician, Dennison, and I didn’t know it? You really must excuse my ignorance. You see your uncle was not at all in that line, and I’m always forgetting that you’re not his son. Is it true that you play?”

“Yes, it is true that I play.”

“And will you play to us now?”

Mr. Dennison made a movement which looked like a refusal, but before he had spoken his eyes fell upon Esmè gazing at him in pleased expectation, and an idea seemed to come to him.

“Very well; I will play if you like,” he said quietly, and without another word he walked over to the piano.

The moment his hands were on the keys a great change came over his face, indeed over his whole person. Something lit up in his eyes, the folds about his mouth relaxed, the premature agedness was wiped from his features, in one moment the face had become young and hopeful, the splendid frame seemed

to awake to a new life, the young muscles to string themselves more firmly.

With the very first chords a feeling of astonishment fell upon the room, for even the unmusical can scarcely fail to distinguish the master-hand from that of the blunderer. No one knew the name of the piece he was playing, but every one felt compelled to listen. The discreet yet penetrating pathos speaking out of those minor chords, and broken through, as it were, at intervals by bursts of fiery hope, were not things which appealed directly to every listener, but even the most indifferent was able to appreciate the perfection of the execution.

At the very first moment his eyes had sought Esmè, right across the big room, and during the first few minutes his glance returned to her again and again, with a questioning, observing light in it. But even before the first melody had melted into a second—a wild war-song that sent the blood into his dark cheek—his eyes had ceased to seek her

out, and the look of rapt contentment on his face showed that he had forgotten everything and every one, even Esmè included. He was at that stage when for the true musician there exist only two things—himself and his instrument.

Something within Esmè had vibrated in response to the very first note, and now she sat gazing and listening in a state of wonder which bordered on stupefaction. Was this the same instrument on which Mrs. Bennett had been strumming only ten minutes ago? And was this the same man who had taken her in to dinner? Both seemed equally transformed. Had any one asked her before to-night whether she was fond of music or not, she would certainly not have answered No, because she knew that there were certain airs which moved her in a way that nothing else did; but never until this moment had she suspected her own intense receptiveness to true music, never taken account of it as of a power in the world. What talent she may possibly have possessed

had never been properly roused, and therefore she did not play well herself and probably never would, for there are other qualities besides mere sensitiveness to music wanted to form a real musician, and Esmè's nature was more passive than active, better calculated to mirror another's soul than to project its own reflection; yet as she sat there with half-closed eyes, rapt in strains of melodies which flowed into one another, sweet, despairing, passionate, voluptuous, tender, but always true, always fraught with conviction, she felt troubled to the depths of her being, in a way she had never before been troubled. New emotions, to which she could not even give a name, awoke and stirred; desires which she did not understand made her heart beat: now a sudden hunger of the soul, never guessed at till that moment, stabbed her like a knife; and again a pity as sharp as physical pain, pity for she knew not whom, drove the tears to her eyes.

And mingled with it all was wonder at

the player. Was it within belief that this was the same Mr. Dennison who had made such shallow and frivolous, though undoubtedly amusing, remarks about people, and who looked so bored and almost morose? How steadily his restless eyes now burned, how high he held his head, what a reflection of joy and of power on his thin, dissatisfied face! She had not thought him handsome before; but now all at once, with his music in her ears, his countenance appeared to her more eloquent of beauty than any living face she had ever seen—more like a face in a picture, she told herself confusedly. He had made unkind remarks about people—yes; but “He can’t be really unkind if he plays like that,” she told herself with an instinct more infallible than logic.

Long after the rest of the small audience, recovering from their first impressions, had fallen to talking again under their breaths, Esmè sat quite still, sunk in a deep chair, breathlessly listening and looking. As he fell

into a new air his eyes once more strayed towards her, and she understood that now he was playing for her alone. It was a serenade now, one of those low, yet thrilling songs of love which he had learnt in his mother's country, in whose notes you can hear the sob of the mandoline under the moonlit palace-wall, all the more passionately pleading for having to be hushed. Esmè listened with dilated eyes, which could not even sink before the long questioning gaze that came from over there. As the last whispered note died away Mr. Dennison rose.

A chorus of compliments greeted him. He suffered them with the patience of long usage, and waited until general talk had resumed its sway. Then he made his way to Esmè's side.

"And you?" he inquired, with a faint smile. "Are you going to say nothing to me? I am used to compliments, I assure you."

The light was still in his eyes and the reflection of joy on his face as he looked at her.

Esmè sat up in her chair, almost with an effort. It was a deep arm-chair, in which she half disappeared,—a seat more suited to a portly old gentleman than to her slender figure.

“Did you not like my playing?” he asked, observing her.

“I don’t know if I *liked* it,” she slowly said, looking at him with dazed eyes. “I think it hurt me too much—at places, I mean; and also it frightened me. I didn’t know music could be like that.”

“And did it not do you good at places too? Were there not moments when it made your heart light?”

“Yes, oh yes; but the pain always came back again.”

He looked at her, and saw a single tear still hanging upon her long lashes.

“I am glad of that,” he said, abruptly.

“Glad that you gave me pain?”

“Yes. It means that you felt what I wanted you to feel; it means that you can

feel music, even if you don't understand it: that is all I wanted to know. For, don't you see, that if I can pain you with my music, that means that I can also delight you?"

She leant back in the big chair with a little sigh of exhaustion. The question as to why he had wanted to know this, and why he should wish to delight her, was too puzzling to be thought out.

"Do you understand now why I could not talk about music the other day in the ball-room?" he asked, after a moment.

"Yes, I understand. One doesn't want to talk in a ballroom of things that are holy to one."

He gave her an almost grateful look.

"You have understood me again. 'Holy' is a strong word for you English to use, but not too strong for the case. Music has been to me both father and mother, both native land and religion, and it may yet end by having to be both wife and child," he finished with one of his broken laughs and that sudden darkening

ing of the face so characteristic of his mobile countenance.

“When I am at my piano I sometimes forget that I am too much of an Englishman to get on in Spain, too much of a Spaniard to feel at home in England, too serious for society, too frivolous for the cloister, and too petted and spoiled for real work—a round peg in a square hole, in fact, as you say here.”

Esmè answered nothing this time. It was strange, she thought, that these confidences from a man whom she was speaking to for the second time in her life should seem so completely natural. Watching the pain on the dark face, she began to understand what his music had meant and why it had hurt her so cruelly.

That evening Mr. Dennison went home in a state of mingled wonder and elation. This was the second evening he had passed in Esmè's society, and, instead of having discovered her to be a fraud, he had found a point of intense sympathy between herself and him.

True to his instinctive mistrust, he still kept himself prepared for subsequent disappointment, but in the meantime his experiments must certainly be pushed further.

CHAPTER VII.

BUT the elation was not entirely on Mr. Dennison's side. Mr. Morell, too, went to bed that night in a state of sanguine expectation.

It really seemed as though the "miraculous chance" of which the solicitor had so slightingly spoken, was going to step in at the eleventh hour and save the situation. All depended now on hurrying on events—by artificial means, if necessary—for time was getting terribly short. Less than three weeks now remained of the interval of grace promised by Mr. Ridge. If it had not been for the thing having to be done in such a hurry, there would really have been no necessity for all the ingenuity which Mr. Morell now applied, by the orthodox help of picnics, tennis-parties, and "chance" meetings, to bringing Esmè and Charles Dennison into closer contact; for, dat-

ing from that first dinner at Skeffington, the young man seemed as anxious for these meetings as the old one could be. But the difference was, that the young man had time before him, while the old one had none. This obvious willingness of the subject to be operated upon filled Mr. Morell with an ever-growing delight, very hard to mask even decently. At moments he was compelled to give vent to it in Mary's presence, even though knowing that she was not in a position fully to appreciate the grounds of his exultation.

“The mere fact of his not being in London at this moment is proof enough of his infatuation,” he said to her triumphantly on one of these occasions. “Every other man with a sixpence in his pocket has gone. Why should Dennison be rustivating at Stedhurst if it were not for Esmè? He'll propose before the end of the month, I tell you. Just see if he doesn't!”

“Surely not so soon as that,” Mrs. Morell answered quietly, yet with troubled eyes. “It

is barely a fortnight since we first met him.”

“Time has nothing to do with it. Any one can see that he is as hard hit as a man can be.”

“And she?” said the mother, still with that troubled look.

“Esmè? Bah! There can't be any difficulty there. If a girl of that age doesn't fall in love with the first decently good-looking young man who pays her marked attentions, then either there's something wrong with her constitution, or else the affair is mismanaged. Besides, it wouldn't be hard to persuade her that she cares for him, even if she doesn't,” he added, thinking aloud this time, and forgetting that Mary was there.

“Persuade her that she cares for him?” she repeated, putting up her head with an almost defiant movement. “Surely you would not have her marry him against her will?”

“Of course not—of course not; how you do take up one's words, to be sure! All I

mean is, that she is certain to fall in love with him if she is let alone. The music will do it, if nothing else will."

"Yes, the music!" sighed Mrs. Morell to herself.

Like all unmusical natures, she somewhat distrusted the emotions awakened by music. They were much more likely, it seemed to her, to be a false and flimsy travesty of love than love itself. "Music has done much mischief in the world," she now reflected. "It may very well be that Esmè is taken with him; but she is so young, she has seen so few men, she is flattered by his attentions, how should the child know her own mind? If only I could feel sure of the man himself!"

On this point she was still very far from clear. Not only was Mr. Dennison peculiarly calculated to produce very contrary impressions, but in this case Mrs. Morell's usually correct judgment was clouded by the keen maternal anxiety of a woman determined at all costs to save her daughter from her own

fate, and by a certain tenacity of idea which existed in her self-repressed nature.

The suspicion that a financial catastrophe of some sort was impending had now grown to a conviction, and had brought with it the full understanding of the situation. From the first she had taken a dislike to the man with whose money it appeared that Esmè was to be bought; indeed it would not be too much to say that she had taken a dislike to him before she had even seen him, while he was still a quite apocryphal personage. Since she had seen him he had been described to her as "dangerous," which generally means that the person so described is a heartless libertine. Could such a one be worthy of the treasure of Esmè's innocence? Undoubtedly there were moments in which a certain tenderness, almost reverence, in the eyes resting on her daughter reassured and vaguely comforted the mother's heart, but unfortunately the glance was often followed by a remark or a smile which reawakened her chronic fears.

A question put to Esmè would at least have cleared up the point as to her own state of feeling, but the idea of putting that question never even occurred to Mrs. Morell. The habit of reserve is one which gains so irresistibly upon the human soul that, when practised for a length of years, there comes a moment when, even with the will strained to the utmost, it becomes almost impossible to throw it off. Though ready at any moment to be, if necessary, tortured to death for her sake, Mrs. Morell had never been really intimate with her own child. Even to the baby on her knee her caresses had been given more furtively than openly; and now that the baby had become a woman, she felt as shy of speaking to her about love as though she had a stranger before her and the subject had been a forbidden one.

Meanwhile Mr. Dennison, troubling himself little about the signs around him, feverishly pursued his experiments. The deeper he penetrated into the child's mind, the more re-

freshed and hopeful did he feel, thankful with the thankfulness of one who, after traversing miles of arid desert, has found a cool fountain at which to slake his thirst.

Search as he would, he could find no mark of evil upon her: her mind was a white and unwritten page, and the elements of which it was composed were as natural, and therefore as healthy, as was her fair young body. Yet long after he was sure of this, he continued to keep up the harmless farce of telling himself at each visit that he was prepared for a disappointment. His mental attitude at this time was not unlike that of a child building a brick house and watching each brick fearfully, expecting the crash to come from moment to moment, and scarcely able to believe that the ever-increasing edifice still holds.

Since the evening of the first dinner-party music had naturally played a dominant part in their intercourse. He had quickly understood that music was the means by which he

could most easily force her to betray her soul to him. While still vibrating from one of his wild, dreamy *fantasias*, it would have been hard indeed for her to hide her true thoughts, or to feign before him what she did not feel. At such moments he felt that she was as helpless in his hands as a chloroformed patient in those of a surgeon. He knew the feeling only too well himself, for the same tone of mind which gave him the power of working on others made him liable to be worked upon, and by the same means.

“ I will tell you exactly what you are feeling,” he said to Esmè one day, when he had just done playing a sonata of Mozart’s. “ You would like to take your hat at once and go out of the house, anywhere where there is sky overhead and grass underfoot, for that last passage has made you suddenly thirsty for green fields and buds and skipping lambs, and all the rest of it. I’ve been through all that. Why, I give you my word of honour that I spent two hours on my back in a very damp

meadow after I had heard that sonata for the first time, and had a stiff shoulder in consequence for a week after. But wait a little; I'll keep you from doing anything so foolish. You haven't heard this *Dumka* yet; that will put out the light of the green fields in a moment."

He played the Russian melody, simple as the plaint of a child, heavy as a dirge, and then he said, after a pause—

"I learnt it from a Russian woman: she had a shade on her lip and a jaw like a bulldog; but if she had asked me to marry her, I am not sure that I should have been able to refuse, for her notes simply went through and through me like arrows, far more thoroughly than her eyes could have done." He paused again, and then added reflectively, "Sometimes it strikes me as rather terrible to be so entirely at the mercy of a fellow-creature, merely because of a musical sympathy."

Though the soul he was studying appeared to himself so convincingly transparent, there

yet came moments when an evil genius still sought to obscure his vision.

He had been talking to her one day about his desolate childhood, and inwardly revelling in the signs of pity and distress which chased one another across her tell-tale countenance, like lights and shadows across a summer landscape, when all at once the old mistrust seized him.

“You look as if you were sorry for me,” he remarked, interrupting his narrative.

“I am dreadfully sorry,” said Esmè, below her breath.

He looked at her with a mixture of contradictory emotions in his eyes; then he asked abruptly and almost harshly—

“You know, do you not, that I am very rich?”

Esmè's eyes grew wider.

“Yes; of course I know that you are rich,” she answered readily. “If Stedhurst belongs to you, you must be rich; but why do you tell me that now?”

“Only that I have remarked that it is generally easier to pity rich people for their sentimental sorrows than poor people for their real ones.”

“You mean that one makes up to rich people more than to poor ones. I suppose that is true, but I hope it isn't *too* true. I shouldn't like to think that people are so kind to me only because of papa's money; for papa is rich too, you know,” she added in the most matter-of-fact little tone in the world.

Mr. Dennison laughed and pursued the subject no further. Evidently there was nothing to be discovered in this direction. It almost seemed as though the article were genuine after all.

A few days later he had a further proof, or something that seemed to him a proof.

He had found her in an out-of-the-way corner of the garden, busily weeding a large oblong plot of ground in the shadow of the wall. Mr. Morell, occupied with business, as

he explained, had been only too delighted to direct him where to find his daughter. Esmè flushed with pleasure, but went on wielding her hoe, talking to him the while of the new rose-tree which the gardener had promised her, and of the pansies which would be in flower next week.

“ You see, this plot has been under my care for so long,” she explained as she worked, “ that I can’t bear to give it up to a servant. Ever since I was five years old it has been my private garden, and it was here I used to bury my dolls and my dead canary-birds. It’s almost got something of the sacredness of a cemetery in my eyes, and the idea of Jem’s big unfeeling spade going down into the earth seems to me like a desecration. That’s why I never allow anybody to touch it. But I’m afraid I’ve been rather neglecting it lately,” she added, remorsefully. “ Just look what a state it is in! ”

She stooped to remove something that obstructed her path, and Mr. Dennison came to

her assistance. It was a small fir-tree that lay at full length on the plot, rootless and half strangled in the newly-grown weeds. As Mr. Dennison pulled it aside, he saw that bits of ribbon and paper that had once been coloured still clung to the rusty branches.

“Why, it looks like a Christmas-tree,” he exclaimed, laughing. “How did the thing come here?”

“It *is* a Christmas-tree.”

“A Christmas-tree for pigmies, to judge from its size.”

“No, a Christmas-tree for birds. I give them one every year, and you can't imagine how grateful they are. Think; just when the snow is deepest and all the worms sound asleep, to find a table ready spread with bread-crusts and biscuits—yes, and almonds and nuts too, for I don't see why they shouldn't enjoy their Christmas feast as much as we do. I don't know if they quite appreciate the ribbons and rosettes; but that belongs to the idea, and I think they are broken in to it by this time.

I sometimes hide behind that laurel bush and watch them perching on the branches and pecking away at the almonds, and sometimes I can almost think I hear them smacking their lips. You're not laughing at me, are you?" she asked with sudden confusion, as she found his meditative gaze upon her. "You see, that's another of the things I began when I was five years old; and those sort of things are so hard to leave off, though, of course, I know it is childish."

"No, I am not laughing at you," was all Mr. Dennison said, and then he relapsed into silence. During that silence he was mentally watching ten small white fingers busy with the decking out of the fir-branches; then, as in a vision, he saw the slight childish figure stealing down through the dusk of the winter evening, half-ashamed of her mission of mercy, and yet revelling in advance in the pleasure in store for her small feathered friends; then the blue eyes peeping from behind the laurel bush to watch them at their feast: and as the pic-

tures passed before his mind's eye he felt his heart grow unaccountably light. A bird's Christmas-tree is perhaps rather a peculiar proof to take of a woman's moral worth, but Mr. Dennison was peculiar in some ways. Of all the symptoms which had told him that Esmè was the woman he was looking for, this rusty fir-tree, with its rain-sodden ribbons, seemed to him the most convincing.

Altogether things were going fast, but not yet fast enough for Mr. Morell's taste. As the end of the month drew near, his terror came back upon him. True, it was evident by this time that Mr. Dennison was as good as captured; but so long as he had made no formal declaration, there remained the danger of his being frightened off by the crash. And even supposing he was not frightened off, there would be the crash to go through first, and the exposure he so passionately dreaded.

How different would things be if Dennison had spoken first, and he had been able to set-

tle the matter with him "under four eyes"! —that one humiliation he could, of course, not escape. The rest of the world, his own family included, might then never know that there had been a danger. How could he bring the man to speak before the dreaded date? This was the question which pressed upon him both in and out of his dreams.

On one of the last days of the month there came a letter from Mr. Ridge which made him look strangely grave. Half an hour later his harassed mind had matured a new plan of action.

During this fortnight of sudden intimacy between Skeffington and Stedhurst there had more than once been talk of an expedition to the latter place, which Mr. Morell had not visited since the death of his late neighbour, Tom Dennison, and which neither Mrs. Morell nor Esmè had ever seen except from a distance, since the late owner had been a confirmed and somewhat misanthropical bachelor, but which yet was known to be one of the

most picturesque sights in the neighbourhood.

Anxiety had made Mr. Morell as keen as a woman in the nice balancing of possible causes and effects, and with a clearness of vision which would not have shamed the most matchmaking of mothers, he foresaw the emotions likely to be awakened in Mr. Dennison by the sight of the girl who had evidently won his heart moving about under the roof which he had apparently chosen for his home, and by her mere presence conjuring up visions of happy domesticity—helping him, as it were, to put into tangible shape the dreams that no doubt were already pursuing him. Many proposals of marriage had been precipitated, if not called forth, by just such influences as these, assisted, of course, by a few judiciously arranged *tête-à-tête*; and in his delight with his new idea, Mr. Morell felt almost certain that the recipe could not fail here. Mr. Dennison was expected that very afternoon with some music which he had promised to bring over;

and before the close of his visit, thanks to a few judicious turns given to the conversation, the expedition had been arranged for the following day.

CHAPTER VIII.

QUITE apart from Mr. Morell's private aims, Stedhurst well deserved a visit. The battlemented ivy-grown keep, crowning a somewhat steep hill which was shaded by some of the oldest oaks in England, was a different thing altogether from the conventional modern country-houses in the flat, well-ordered parks, laid out more or less after one pattern, which studded Blankshire for miles around. Even Skeffington, though undoubtedly venerable as to date, was but a barrack compared to the medieval charm of this typical castle of romance. It was just at this point that the flat lowlands on which stood Esmè's home began to swell into hills and sink into valleys. Stedhurst stood on the first and lowest of these hills, and yet high enough to command

the plain, and even, on particularly clear days, to afford a glimpse of the far-off sea.

But the great charm of Stedhurst was in its waters, for the wooded hill on which it stood was, in point of fact, a peninsula, very nearly an island, round whose base a stately river swept with a rush so mighty as surely to have made the spot almost impregnable in the old days of sieges, and down whose sides several gurgling streams hurried between moss and boulders to throw themselves into the broad waters. Some people complained that it was impossible to take a comfortable walk in the Stedhurst park; and from the point of view of those who were either weak in the knees or short in the wind, this might be true, seeing that there was not a single entirely flat path within it, and considering also the number of bridges to be continually crossed. But then what compensation in the glorious glimpses of country that were for ever framing themselves between the hoary oak-stems, in the many surprises which the irregularity

of the ground brought with it, and above all in the continual murmuring of water, that peculiarly crisp tinkle whose very sound causes you to *see* the crystal clearness with your ears almost as distinctly as with your eyes themselves! In whichever direction you walked, you could not get far from the water. As the music of one faded in your ears, the song was straightway taken up by a second. By dint of winding and turning and coming back again upon their path in their efforts to find the best road downhill, and sometimes dividing their waters in deference to some accident of the soil, the little rills seemed to multiply indefinitely in a manner particularly confusing to a stranger.

“If I were a composer instead of only a player,” said Mr. Dennison to Esmè, “I should go nowhere else for inspiration. They sing dozens of songs and in dozens of keys.”

The two were alone in the park. The inspection of the house and garden, as well as the luxurious tea served on the terrace of

the castle, were over, and Mr. Morell had judged that the time for the *tête-à-tête* had arrived. It was easy to plead the steepness of the walks; and easier still to give Mary her orders with a glance. What more natural than that the host should wish to show the beauties of the park to his visitor, or that the "old people" should content themselves with the view of the sea from the terrace?

"There is one stream that always sings *Dumkas*," went on Mr. Dennison, as he walked beside Esmè down the winding path, "and another that never gets beyond a lullaby. Some of them sob, some of them laugh, and there is one terribly frivolous one which seems to know nothing but dance-music. Listen in that direction; I can hear its impertinent little tinkle quite clearly."

"And what sort of song does the river sing?" asked Esmè, with a happy half-laugh.

"The river seems to sing whatever song I call for; or rather I should say, it echoes whatever happens to be within me. It is

really a chorus, you know, since it gathers all the small voices into itself, and there's always one that predominates for me, according to the mood I happen to be in. When I am frivolous I hear only the dance-music, and when I am cross only the *Dumkas*."

"And what do you hear to-day?" asked Esmè unreflectingly, as they stepped from under the trees on to the grassy margin, where the young blades shook softly and continually with the unceasing sweep of the water that rushed past their very roots.

"To-day," said Mr. Dennison, with his eyes upon Esmè's face, "I hear a chorus of voices which I almost think are angels, and I am almost certain that they are singing a song of triumph."

She met his eyes and felt suddenly troubled. "It is much more beautiful here than at Skeffington," she murmured, confusedly.

It was indeed beautiful, doubly so on such a day as this. The month was April, and yet

this was an almost typical summer day, one of those solitary specimens that sometimes come in the middle of spring,—a June day, with only the June foliage wanting. The afternoon had been as still and hot as though the season were six weeks older; but instead of the richly tinted, broadly unfolded leaves that usually go along with this atmosphere, there was scarcely a breath of green on the tardy oaks, though flowers in plenty were heaped at the feet of the grimly naked trunks, their bright bloom sprinkled here and there with last year's brown leaves, which this year's swelling sap had only just pushed from the places they had held all winter in the teeth of the wildest storms. Every grass blade, every tiny leaf and bud, was too obviously brand-new to belong to summer. It was something like a child masquerading in the clothes of a grown-up person. The tepid motionless air, and the premature gnats floating over the ground, might deceive you for a moment, but you had only to raise your eyes to the branches

overhead to see that this was April and not June.

“It is a splendid place, certainly,” said Mr. Dennison; “but if it were not for the streams, I don’t know if I could live here. It isn’t as though it had memories for me, and it must absorb a good deal of one’s mental energy to keep from hanging one’s self during an English winter, more especially when there are so many oak-trees handy; and yet, for a man who has never had a home, there is a certain comfort in having one pointed out to him by Providence.”

Esmè said nothing. She was trying to imagine what life would feel like if Mr. Dennison decided not to settle in England—and not succeeding very well.

They wandered on in the evening light, in no hurry to cut short this delicious ramble, sometimes mounting, sometimes descending, often coming out again on the borders of the river, and often crossing the rustic bridges that spanned the omnipresent streams, while

Esmè's hands grew fuller and fuller of yellow primroses and blue periwinkles, and over their heads the birds, anxious no doubt to be heard above the gurgling of the water, sang their loudest. There were dozens of moments at which nothing could have been easier than to take Esmè's hands, flowers and all, and to say, "I love you," and nothing certainly more appropriate to the surroundings, but still Mr. Dennison did not speak. It was not the thought of the short acquaintance, nor the fear of being unconventional, that kept him back,—that, on the contrary, might have been an inducement; it was not diffidence either; it was nothing but the dislike of putting an end to a situation which he was conscious of intensely enjoying, even while knowing that that which must inevitably follow would be more enjoyable still. The tacit has often more charms than the explicit, and the phase before the declaration, a declaration whose result is not doubtful, has a peculiar fascination for an epicure in sensations. That is why Mr. Den-

nison spoke no binding word, but continued to do the honours of his park after his own fashion.

“Here we are, back again at the ‘perpetual mourner,’ as I have dubbed him,” he exclaimed as they crossed one bridge. “Surely anybody can hear that he’s pitched in a minor key. But I’m not quite sure that it isn’t more bad humour on his part than true grief—what the Americans call ‘pure cussedness’; and I rather fancy that it would only require a good clearing out of those dead branches between the stones, which must be very trying to his temper, to put him back into the major.”

Esmè laughed, and then stood still in dismay.

“Must I go over *that*?” she asked in a tone of genuine alarm.

They had come out on the very edge of another stream, which they had indeed crossed earlier, but at a lower point. The bridge up here, which the spring floods had recently torn away, had been temporarily replaced by

a mere plank thrown from bank to bank. Through the fast-falling dusk Esmè peered at it apprehensively, and then down into what appeared to be a veritable chasm at her feet, for a rapid falling away of the ground at this point had transformed the stream into a miniature waterfall. Even in broad daylight it would have been a giddy piece of work, and the shadows of evening increased the incertitude of the undertaking.

“I quite forgot this,” said Mr. Dennison, annoyed at his own negligence. “We can go back, if you prefer; but it is a long way round, and you are probably tired. Do you think you could manage if you took my hand?”

“Yes, yes!” said Esmè, ashamed of what she felt sure he must regard as a weakness,—“let me try;” and she put out her hand resolutely. As he took it he saw, despite the dusk, that her face was looking rather white, for in truth she suffered badly from giddiness, and knew it.

“Perhaps we had better go round, after all,” he suggested.

“No; let me try,” she obstinately repeated. He walked in advance, steadily and cautiously regulating his step by hers, and looking back from time to time, to make sure that she was keeping her balance. They were almost in the middle of the plank when he felt her sway, and turned just in time to support her against his arm. There was no margin for question or answer: if an accident was to be averted there was only one thing to be done, and Mr. Dennison did it without either hesitation or afterthought. So far all was natural, even unavoidable; but when he reached the end of the plank, with Esmè lying like a child in his arms, he seemed to forget why he had taken her up, and walked straight on, as though in a trance, without relieving himself of his burden, and oblivious of the fact that since he had *terra firma* beneath his feet the necessity of the situation had ceased to be. To him her weight was nothing, while the

fair head resting with closed eyes against his shoulder, and the little hands that clung fearfully to his coat, were very much indeed. How long he might have walked on with his delicious burden he did not know; but at the very first turn of the path there fell a shadow which did not belong to the trees, and, before he had time to form a thought, Mr. Denison found himself face to face with Esmè's father, whose approaching footsteps had been drowned in the splashing of the tiny waterfall.

The truth was, that the afternoon was becoming too long for Mr. Morell's painfully strained nerves. No doubt it was he who had sent the young people out walking in the park; but as half-hour after half-hour passed without bringing them back again, his patience was being slowly racked to death. A hopeful and yet agitated curiosity as to the result of his superior manœuvrings began to devour his spirit. This long delay must surely mean something, and there came at last a moment when he felt that he could not await

the natural time of explanation. At any price he must know what was going on on those winding walks, which even the leafless oak branches screened so provokingly well from the terrace above. Thus it came about that, leaving Mary to admire the view alone, he began cautiously descending the hill, looking about him guiltily, prepared even to play the spy if the opportunity offered. It was a risky step, considering the danger of frightening off the suitor; but Fate was going to be much kinder to Mr. Morell than his imprudence deserved.

At sight of Mr. Dennison and his burden Mr. Morell stood still. It required a closer look to assure himself through the dusk that it was indeed Esmè whom the young man was holding in his arms. His first conscious sensation was one of so real an indignation that it drove the blood up to his withered temples, making him for the moment lose sight even of his original intention. To see that delicate head pillowed on the shoulder of a man who

was not her brother, stirred something within him which had hitherto never had occasion to stir. His second sensation was of alarm, pure and simple; but before he had time to put a question, Mr. Dennison, recovering his wits, had gently put Esmè to the ground, and he could see that she was not hurt.

There was a moment of complete silence. Esmè, who, in apprehension of seeing again the empty space beneath her, had kept her eyes tightly shut until now, still vaguely believing herself to be on the plank above the water, now looked about her dazed, not immediately understanding where she was. A glance at her father's severely astonished face, as well as the recollection of how within this very minute Mr. Dennison had still had her in his arms, brought to her a sudden comprehension of the situation. A hot wave of confusion, utterly unlike anything she had ever experienced in her eventless life, overcame her irresistibly. Whatever happened, she felt that she could not stay for even one moment longer

between those two men, nor bear their eyes upon her. Murmuring something indistinct, she turned and disappeared along the nearest path. It was an open and undisguised flight, but to Esmè there seemed to be no alternative.

Mr. Morell had meanwhile recovered his presence of mind. Indignation and alarm had been swept aside by the thought which, as in a sudden flash of light, showed him his chance—a far better chance than he had dared to hope for. Some explanation was obviously due to him, seeing that the usages even of nineteenth-century society do not make it customary for young men to carry about young ladies in their arms in the dusk, *à la* Paul and Virginia. Would it ever have been possible to invent a more appropriate opportunity for asking this particular young man's intentions?

Esmè, as she fled upwards towards the terrace, could hear her father's voice, apparently putting some question to Mr. Dennison, and only ran all the faster for fear of being able to distinguish the words.

When she reached home at last, after the long and peculiarly silent drive, she went straight to her bedroom; but instead of beginning to dress for dinner, she stood at the window, with her hat still on, staring and staring out at the night sky, as though she could not yet make up her mind to exchange it for the ceiling of her room. Her heart was beating rather faster than usual,—not that she expected anything definite, but that a strange sort of excitement seemed to lie in the air. There was a wonderful moonlight night to match the wonderful day; again a June night, with only this difference, that at the open window you could bear a jacket very well. The transparent sky, with the last glow of sunset still making a blot of colour to the west, the white light upon the gravel, the gleams of silver on the pond,—they might have been summer sights; and the illusion was even more perfect by night than by day, for in this light you did not miss the leaves upon the trees.

Esmè was still standing at the window, when her mother, having knocked twice without response, entered at last and found the room lighted by the moonlight only. She walked straight up to where her daughter stood in the brightest of the flood and took both her hands in hers.

“Esmè,” she said, in a voice that shook so little as scarcely to betray her inward agitation, “your father has sent me to tell you that Mr. Dennison has proposed for you.”

Esmè gazed back at her mother without a word, growing slowly pale. In this white light there seemed something like consternation on her face, something almost like fright; and her mother, judging from her own secret fears, misread the signs she saw.

“Do not be afraid,” she said, quickly, “you shall not marry him unless you wish it. I promise you shall be left free to choose, whatever your father may say. God knows how I shall manage, but I promise you!”

She had come here straight from Mr.

Morell's triumphant announcement, and with the outspoken intention of forestalling any influence he might bring to bear on the girl. She must convince herself that Esmè was taking the man of her own free will and inclination, and not merely to oblige her father. As she now looked deep into the startled blue eyes, it seemed to her that her fears were realised.

“Speak to me, Esmè,” she urged, unconsciously pressing the passive hands within her own; “what answer am I to take your father? I should like to give you time for reflection, but he is urgent; the decision must be come to at once, so he says. Think well, my child, before you speak. Do you think you could be happy as Mr. Dennison's wife?”

Instead of speaking, Esmè suddenly wrenched her hands away from her mother, and clasping them before her face, burst into a passion of tears.

In a moment the fair head, hat and all, had

been pulled down on to Mrs. Morell's plump shoulder.

"I knew it, I knew it," she sighed, softly stroking Esmè's hot forehead. "You would like to please your father, but it costs too much. But never fear, my darling,"—even at this moment the word was uttered almost timidly,—"if you do not care for Mr. Dennison, you shall never see him again. I promise you that he shall be sent away to-morrow, for ever."

In the same moment Mrs. Morell came near to being choked by the arms that were clasped vehemently round her neck, far more vehemently than she had ever known Esmè do anything.

"Don't send him away, don't send him away!" she half-sobbed, half-laughed into her astonished mother's ear; "it doesn't cost too much, and I am only crying because I am too happy!"

CHAPTER IX.

“BEFORE allowing you to bind yourself irrevocably, I have considered it my duty to tell you how matters stand,” Mr. Morell was saying at about ten o’clock on the following morning, pale but composed, and with—considering the circumstances—a very fair show of dignity.

He was sitting in his private business-room, and Mr. Dennison was sitting opposite to him. The humiliating confession had been made; and although the loan had not been asked for in so many words, it had been made quite clear to Mr. Dennison that, unless he wanted to marry into a bankrupt family, he must be prepared to risk a sum which, though considerable in itself, was less than the sum of his yearly income. As to the magnanimous phrase of giving him yet a chance of escape,

both Mr. Morell and Mr. Dennison understood this to be only a polite form. Now that it had come to the actual moment, Mr. Morell, though he managed not to betray it, felt almost a little ashamed of himself; the matter looked more barefaced than he had expected it to look. But a man with a rope round his neck cannot stick at shades of delicacy.

“My dear Mr. Morell,” said the visitor, betraying no particular surprise, though he was inwardly chuckling over the disclosure which so completely explained many symptoms that had lately vaguely puzzled him, “I *am* irrevocably bound, not so much by what I said to you last night as by the chains which your daughter has managed to cast around me. It is not particularly good taste to talk of one’s own money; but, on the other hand, I am afraid it would look like affectation if I asked you to believe that your daughter’s fortune was not the object I was seeking, and that therefore its collapse cannot affect my resolution.”

He mused for a moment with his eyes on the ground, then looked up quickly.

“Does your daughter know of the position of affairs?” he asked, with a change of tone.

“Esmè? Good gracious, no! Not even my wife suspects the truth. Except my creditors and my man of business, you are the only man in the world who knows.”

Mr. Dennison looked into the other's eyes, and saw that he was speaking the truth. The treacherous doubt which had crossed his mind vanished again, leaving behind it a deep feeling of shame. “That is well,” he said, with a breath of relief. Mr. Morell's private aims were entirely indifferent to him, but it would have killed all the joy within him to have to suspect Esmè of being her father's accomplice.

Half an hour later, all having been settled to Mr. Morell's satisfaction, Charles Dennison went to seek Esmè in the park, where, with beating heart and cold fingers that were

too unsteady even to gather flowers, she awaited him; and the kiss which he gave her under the young green leaves, without words, since none were wanted yet, was the opening of the gate of a paradise which most of us have trodden for at least a little time, but also the end of her childhood.

That day was the first of a series of peacefully happy, miraculously smooth days which came to visit Skeffington. And not happy for Esmè alone. It is scarcely straining a point to say that Mr. Morell, in his way, was almost happier than his daughter, for he was enjoying the intoxicating sensation of escape from a danger which had remained unknown to her. The bitter pill of that first interview with his future son-in-law once swallowed, he was able to give way to his delight in the altered situation. Mr. Dennison had shown himself easier to deal with even than Mr. Morell, in his most sanguine dreams, had dared to hope, and the blessing which he had given the betrothed pair had been tinged

with a joy that was almost rapture. Before the engagement was a week old he was back again in all his old grooves. Merely to avert bankruptcy was no longer enough for him; with Mr. Dennison in reserve, there was no reason why he should not succeed in clearing the estate.

And Mrs. Morell was as happy as her husband, for she too was relieved of a heavy fear. At the moment when she had heard Esmè's panting whisper in her ear, it had been as though a veil had fallen from her eyes. No woman could mistake that tone, least of all one who has ever loved. The haunting idea of a sacrifice to be made could not stand in face of this accent. Already at the first meeting on the morrow she had discovered that Mr. Dennison was quite a different sort of man from what she had supposed. Since her child loved him, he must deserve to be loved; and before many more days had passed, she was astonished to find how much she liked him herself. The explanation was very simple; it

was only that she had learnt to look at him through Esmè's eyes. In the weeks that followed, Mrs. Morell was perfectly happy for the first time in her life, and for the first time since her marriage she lost sight of her chronic disappointment, at sight of her daughter's greater good-luck.

On Esmè herself the effect of happiness was to make her grow even more silent than usual. She spoke less than ever, even when Charles was beside her; but something was for ever brimming up through her eyes and out at the corners of her sensitive mouth, and some inward light, which never went out, made her face fairer than ever to look upon.

“It would turn the blackest sinner in the world into a saint to think that it is he who has lit that light,” said Mr. Dennison one day, as he sat at her feet in the big drawing-room, which had been deserted in their favour. It was impossible to take the usual stroll in the park, for the prematurely fine weather had shared the fate of most premature things by

collapsing ignominiously. The pertly precocious child had been forced to give up the finery purloined from its elders, and was now storming and howling over its disappointment with tears that, though the month was May, bore a suspicious resemblance to sleet. But it is probable that neither Mr. Dennison nor Esmè were depressed by the weather: there are moments in one's life when a sleety day can be even more exhilarating than one with a cloudless sky.

“But you are not a sinner,” said Esmè, with that new happy smile which came to her lips so readily nowadays, as she looked at him with her eyes full of innocent faith.

“I am not a saint,” he said, suddenly grave, for something in her eyes had given him a pang of regret for many things that were past and that had better never have been.

“You will learn in time that all men are sinners, only in different degrees; and I am like the rest of them, or at least I have been like the rest, but that was before I had ever

had a chance of doing like this," and taking up her two hands he began to press long, clinging kisses alternately upon the inside of each of the small, rosy palms.

"That is enough, Charles," she faltered laughingly, as he did not seem to grow tired.

"You must not call me Charles to-day. Carlos is more appropriate to the circumstances. Englishmen don't sprawl upon footstools at the feet of their lady-loves,—at least I cannot imagine an unmixed son of Albion doing so, without both feeling and looking a fool. I'm not an Englishman to-day, but I may be to-morrow. How can you expect any stability of character from a man who is called Carlos Dennison? That's what they called me over there; and I haven't yet made up my mind whether they were right or not."

This question of divided nationality was the only one on which they ever disputed.

"Why do you say '*You English*'?" Esmè had once asked, almost indignantly. "You're an Englishman yourself."

“That depends entirely on circumstances,” he replied. “When anything reminds me of Waterloo, or of the abolition of slavery, I always make a point of saying, ‘It is *we* English who did it;’ but you can’t expect a person who has seen oranges ripening in the sun to speak of *our* London fogs. These are the cases in which I prefer the second pronoun. It’s rather convenient to have a choice of nationalities for occasions of this kind.”

The spell of bad weather was conducive to such discussions, but the summer weather which followed—real and not sham summer weather this time—drew them out of doors once more, and called forth a greater variety of pursuits. To his astonishment Mr. Denison presently found himself with his coat off and a spade in his hand, working in Esmè’s garden, and enjoying it more than he had enjoyed anything since he was a boy. In point of fact, he was not so very far removed from a boy in age, although until lately he

had quite forgotten that he had been in the world for only twenty-five years.

“ You must promise me one thing,” he said to Esmè one day, when they were both at work in the oblong plot, looking at her very seriously as he rested on his spade. Then in answer to her questioning glance: “ It is that we shall have a birds’ Christmas-tree at Stedhurst every year—no, don’t laugh; it was exactly on this spot that I made up my mind to ask you to be my wife: it was a bit of coloured paper that did it, I do believe;” and then he began to laugh himself, and they both laughed together out of sheer light-heartedness, as do children to whom everything is excuse enough to set them off.

All that there was of good, of simple, of healthy in Charles Dennison came to light in these days, and all that there was of twisted and morbid seemed to fade away to nothing. Indeed much that at first sight appeared repellent in him sprang from qualities that were good in themselves. It was exactly because

he had expected much of human nature and had been disappointed in his expectations that he had learnt to avenge his disappointments in words that sounded like mockery, and it was exactly because he wanted to believe in good women that it cut him to the quick to find so many bad ones. It was this feeling of deceived hope which had made him fly out so savagely at the little cousin who had met him under the pomegranate-tree when he was seventeen, and it was this same feeling which made him so intensely grateful to Esmè for at length realising his ideal.

Has it ever happened to you to be basking in full sunshine upon a flowery bank, bathed in warm air, and telling yourself that it is impossible that this spotless sun should ever cease to shine, impossible even that evening should ever come, and even while this feeling of security is upon you, to notice with a little chill at your heart that the sunshine is getting paler, that the motionless leaves are stirred by a breeze that was not here a minute

ago, and that a white film, risen from God knows where, is creeping stealthily over the beautiful blue sky? It is scarcely a change, and yet it is so great a change that the world is no longer the same place it was a minute ago; and presently, while you are still asking yourself how this can be, you will notice that the golden landscape has turned grey.

Looking back upon these days, later on, Esmè had some difficulty in exactly retracing the moment at which the change began. It was something so indefinite, and at first so imperceptible, that she could not be sure when the uncertain dread within her had begun to take shape.

And yet, by dint of thinking, she fixed upon one day in particular which seemed to have been the point of departure of all that afterwards followed. Charles, or *Carlos*, as he insisted on her calling him, had been in town on some business connected with the loan to Mr. Morell. It was the first time he had visited London since the spring, though the

season was at its height, and although he had more than once announced his intention of inspecting the new Opera Company now in possession of Covent Garden. As yet he had found it too difficult to keep away from Skeffington; and had not business intervened, it is probable that the intention would have remained an intention. Once in town, however, his steps had turned naturally to Covent Garden. Business details were always hateful to him, and nothing but music could take the taste out of his mouth.

And it had taken it very effectually, it would seem, to judge from the shining eyes and somewhat excited elation of manner with which he described to Esmè the treat he had just enjoyed.

“That sort of thing is as necessary to one’s spirits, from time to time, as a bath is to one’s body,” he explained, as he plied his hoe beside Esmè. “I was beginning to get sick of my own performances. When I came out of the gaslight into the street, I believe I was

a little drunk—mentally of course. When I tell you that even *I* couldn't find a fault with their orchestra, you will understand that it must have been pretty good. As for the company, they are entirely picked voices, collected at unheard-of prices all over the Old and the New World."

"And what was the opera?"

"The most appropriate possible—'Carmen.' You mustn't expect me to say '*We English*' to-day. I'm feeling hopelessly Spanish. I do believe they did it in my honour. Ah, that song of the Torreador!"

"I should like to see 'Carmen' some day," remarked Esmè.

"No, not 'Carmen,' my darling. Some other opera, if you like, but not 'Carmen'; it is too horrible a story, and too horribly true. It would frighten you, and you wouldn't believe it. It is quite impossible that an Esmè should understand a Carmen; and yet the species exists," he added, after an imperceptible pause.

“Is Carmen such a shocking person as all that?” asked Esmè, laughing.

“She is; and the worst of it is, that exactly this particular sort of shocking person has a knack of making other people as bad as herself. Ah, my darling,” he said, with sudden anxiety and what looked like a change of subject, “do you know what you have undertaken? To tame a man—a man with a wild beast in his veins?”

Then as he met her startled eyes: “The catechism tells us, does it not, that our evil passions are worse than beasts of prey? And there is no one in the world without evil passions, I suppose. You have no easy task before you, Esmè.”

“You will teach me,” she said, confidently.

“No, I will not teach you,” he vehemently replied. “My teaching would spoil everything. It is only by being untaught, unguided, and as ignorant as God has made you—by being *yourself*, in other words—that you can

lead me: remember that, and for mercy's sake do not try to grow wise. Come," he added, with a quick change of tone, as he threw aside the hoe, "the work won't get on to-day; let's take a turn in the park instead," and he walked out of the garden by Esme's side, humming an air out of "Carmen."

When Esmè was alone again, she began thinking over the afternoon that was past. What was there that was different from usual? Nothing apparently, except that Carlos had talked rather excitedly; but she knew that music always excited him. But why, then, should she think it necessary at all to pass the last few hours in review? She could not say, and yet she found herself returning in thought more than once to the conversation in the garden, and unable to come to any quite satisfactory conclusion.

CHAPTER X.

A WEEK later she felt quite certain that it was not her imagination that was at fault: Carlos was no longer quite the same Carlos that he had been in the early days of their engagement. Not precisely that his affection seemed cooled, but that the new-born serenity of manner, which dated from the eventful day at Stedhurst, and which had sat upon him so well, was gone. The old restlessness was stealing back to his eyes, the old nervous smile again twitched his lips. Perhaps the serenity was a thing too contrary to his nature to last for any length of time, and only momentarily called forth by the reaction of his engagement. Esmè told herself this in these first days of doubt, for want of a better explanation; but still she did not feel satisfied.

The first real chill fell upon her one day

in the beginning of June, about a week after the conversation in the garden. She had expected Carlos to come as usual, and, pending his arrival, had not thought it worth while to settle to any work; but, for the first time, she had expected him in vain. There was nothing very strange about the circumstance, for before this there had been days on which he had not found it possible to ride over from Stedhurst; but hitherto there had always been a message, and generally a bunch of flowers along with it, while to-day there was nothing. Next morning at breakfast there was a note, however, which, to her astonishment, was dated from London.

“ I thought I could keep away from Covent Garden,” he wrote in hasty characters, “ but I find I cannot. When I saw ‘ Carmen ’ in the *répertoire* this morning, I simply had no choice but to take the next train. I hope you were not disappointed, my darling. I’ll be with you to-morrow afternoon, and I’ll bring something to make up.”

He was with her, as he said; but he came later than usual, having missed the earlier train from London, as he explained; and this time the alteration in his whole being, so subtle at first as almost to defy analysis, was unmistakable.

He was not elated this time; rather he appeared so strangely subdued that Esmè, in the innocence of her heart, asked him whether he had had any bad news, though she could not imagine from whom, for she knew that there was no love lost between him and any of his relations. Mr. Dennison laughed a little gloomily as he answered, "No; no bad news."

"You don't seem to have enjoyed 'Carmen' as much as last time," she remarked a little wistfully, vaguely aware that something was wrong, but not knowing where to look for it. "Did they not sing so well yesterday?"

"On the contrary, they sang better;" and then he turned towards her with a quick sigh.

"You should not have let me go to Lon-

don yesterday," he said on some impulse, groping suddenly for her hand. "It would have done me far more good to pass the afternoon with you."

"But how could I prevent you, since you never asked my advice?" she replied, with a rather uncertain laugh.

"You should have guessed," he said, almost fretfully, pressing the small hand he held over his two eyes in turn. "You should have told me that you required me for something special. That music has left a bad taste in my mouth. I wish I had never heard it."

"Then let us chase it away with some other music," said Esmè, making an effort to shake off the vague depression that was threatening to infect herself. "Do play me that waltz of Ziehrer's which you tried the other day."

He went obediently to the piano and played a few bars of the waltz, then broke off abruptly in the middle of a passage and rose.

“It’s no good,” he said. “I can’t keep my attention on Ziehrer to-day; in another two bars I’d have got into another melody.”

A game of tennis was tried after that; but it proved to be a rather silent one, in which many more balls were missed than hit.

It was only just before his departure that his subdued and apparently absent-minded mood gave way to another.

He had taken leave of Esmè, and was walking towards the stables in order to fetch his horse, while she stood on the tennis-ground looking after him, still with that inexplicable heaviness at her heart, when all at once he stopped short, having apparently remembered something. In a moment he had turned, and was back again at her side.

“These are my amends for my negligence of yesterday,” he said, taking a small leather case from his coat pocket. “I can’t imagine how I forgot about them.”

Esmè gazed with dazzled eyes at the three

diamond stars which the opening lid disclosed. She had a good many leather cases upstairs in her room: the drawer had grown marvelously full since the beginning of her engagement, but none of the contents outshone these glittering stars; and, despite the heaviness at her heart, she was too much of a woman for her eyes not to light up in response to their many-coloured fire.

“You like them?” asked Mr. Dennison. “And yet I should wish them ten times more beautiful for you.”

He bent a little nearer to her.

“You know that I love you, do you not?” he asked, speaking low but very emphatically. “You know that you are everything to me—everything, remember—and that I can never thank you enough for loving me.”

“I know,” faltered Esmè, taken aback by his curious intensity of accent, and by the unquiet glow in the eyes fixed on hers. “You have told it me often, and I believe you.”

“God bless you for that!” he said below

his breath, and was gone again before she had recovered from her surprise.

She returned to the house wondering, deeply moved, and yet not comforted.

For two or three days after this Carlos came assiduously, and held himself so completely at Esmè's orders that, but for the want of rest in his eyes, the early days of their betrothal seemed to have returned. Then, quite unexpectedly, there followed another blank day, and another note dated from London, but containing this time no mention of Covent Garden, and only speaking in vague terms of a business call. Even on his reappearance at Skeffington he gave no closer explanation, and the brevity of his answers made it clear to Esmè that he was not inclined to be questioned. And yet even this unusual touch of harshness in his manner could not conceal a certain want of ease in her presence which, as nearly as it was possible to his individuality, tended towards embarrassment.

Dating from that time the blank days be-

came more frequent, and were not always explained, even by a note. Soon Esmè got used, although not resigned, to not seeing Carlos for two or three days running—to not even knowing whether the interval had been spent at Stedhurst or in London. Fits of despondency and of unnaturally high spirits followed closely upon one another, but what most bewildered Esmè's inexperience was his attitude towards herself. Upon protestations of affection, uncalled for in their vehemence, and the reality of whose passion it was impossible to doubt, there would follow intervals in which he would treat her with an almost ceremonious respect, equally inexplicable. At times she would surprise his eyes, fixed on her with a look so strange and yearning that she felt moved to her inmost heart; it was a look which seemed to be asking for something, and yet what could she give him more than she had given him already? And on other days, this same man appeared to forget her very presence for half an hour at a time. It was an

old habit of his in moments of emotion to take up her two hands and to press them over his closed eyes; and once as he did so she could feel that they were wet, and yet she did not dare to ask him what he was weeping for. His very tastes and ideas had undergone a change. A year seemed to have passed since, with such boyish gladness, he had taken his part in Esmè's pursuits; the look of youth was gone from his face, leaving it older even than it had been at the Dance of the Exiles. There was no more work in the garden now—only hours at the piano, and other hours, sometimes silent and sometimes loquacious, spent under the shade of the summer trees.

It was a stray mention of that rusty old fir-tree, whose discovery in the garden had amused and touched him so greatly, which best showed Esmè the difference which a few weeks had made in the tenor of his mind.

“Are there any firs at Stedhurst?” she had asked. “There seem to be only oaks.

We shall have to import one from here for our birds at Christmas."

"We shan't be at Stedhurst at Christmas," he had replied.

"But, Carlos, why not? Where shall we be?"

"At some place where the sun shines," he said, with that new irritation of manner which seemed to be growing upon him. "I should never be able to face an English winter."

"Then what will the birds do for their tree?"

"They will have to do without it, I suppose." Evidently the subject had lost its interest for him.

By this time Esmè was beginning to acknowledge the truth to herself: Carlos was drifting away from her—against his own will, it would seem, but not the less irresistibly. For as long as possible she had fought against her fears, shutting her eyes to signs that would have enlightened a more experienced woman;

but now at last she understood, beyond mistake, that some power outside her knowledge was slowly but surely drawing away from her the man she loved. As yet her fears were all her own. Not even to her mother had she breathed a word of them; it was not in her nature to do so. As she had been silently happy, just so silently was she now unhappy—silently but not so resignedly as her mother had been under somewhat similar circumstances. Some of her mother's qualities she possessed,—for instance, those same capabilities of self-sacrifice; but, despite the flower-like face, not the same innate meekness of spirit. Perhaps the difference between mother and daughter was rooted only in the difference of their two faces, in the instinct of the beautiful woman who claims her rightful share of the inheritance of love, and who therefore cannot be contented with the fate to which the plain woman has been able to submit. It is by chafing against it that she suffers more. Nothing hitherto had awakened this slumber-

ing instinct in Esmè, and therefore to a casual observer she presented much the same moral appearance as did her mother; but in reality, hidden away in that untried heart, there existed a far greater capability of passion, and a pride, not more susceptible indeed, but of a haughtier colour than anything Mrs. Morell had ever felt. Thus, in those days of ever-growing doubts and fears, there came to her upheavings of rebellion against the desolation she felt impending, and which were not the less real for never finding utterance. But greater than the feeling of revolt was the suffering, pure and simple. Until now she had loved Carlos principally because she felt that he needed her: with women who possess the motherly instinct in perfection, this very often is the first point of departure. Now that she foresaw the possibility of losing him, she began to understand that she too needed him, and that to have to give him up would be to have done with the joy of living.

As for suspecting the true cause of his

alienation, she had not yet got so far as that. Any girl more precocious in this direction, or having read only half-a-dozen modern novels, would long ere this have guessed at a woman behind the scenes; but such a thought lay too distant from all Esmè knew as yet of the world, and was too contrary to her ideas of loyalty and to her blind faith in the man to whom she had given her whole heart at the first asking.

It was not until towards the end of June that the possibility of there being another woman in the case unexpectedly entered her mind, forcibly conjured up by some more than usually inexplicable remarks of Charles's.

They had been sitting together on a bench under a spreading beech, side by side, and silent for some minutes, when Mr. Dennison began to speak slowly and with apparent calmness, like one who has well weighed his words.

“Esmè,” he said, looking straight in front of him, “I sometimes think that it would be better for you if you did not marry me. I

have told you that I am not a good man—though, God knows, I should wish to be so for your sake. It's the old story of the spirit being willing and the flesh weak." He smiled faintly and without joy. "You should marry some one worthier of you. I do not deserve the happiness of having you for my wife."

Esmè felt a sensation as of an ice-cold blade at her heart, but her head went up a little higher as she answered steadily.

"If you do not love me, Carlos, as you used to love me—and it has sometimes seemed so to me lately—then certainly it is better that we should not marry. It would be better that we should part now than that you should be unhappy all your life."

She looked straight at him as she spoke, and for the first time he noticed the traces of suffering on the childish face and round about those tender eyes which reminded him for ever of two blue flowers drenched in dew. The sight cut him suddenly to the quick, abruptly upsetting his equanimity. In a mo-

ment his arm was round her, and she felt herself pressed strongly to his side.

“Never, never, my darling!” he cried. “You do not know what you are saying, and I did not know what I was saying just now. Give up such a treasure as your love—that would be my ruin indeed. You know that you are my only hope—I have told you so often—my only refuge against myself. I need you, Esmè, I need you! Promise that you will never give me up!”

“And do you love me, Charles?” she whispered, trembling with the infection of his excitement.

“As a wanderer loves the star that guides him,” he answered, with a curious sort of solemnity; “as the shipwrecked mariner loves the port that receives him; and that is the true sort of love, believe me—the only sort that lives, in spite of anything she may say. The other sort is of the earth, earthy; this alone can save a man.”

Esmè sat quite still, with her head against

his shoulder, thinking over the words just spoken. She was woman enough to have marked that "she"—escaped, it would seem unawares, from his lips; and despite the ardour of his words, despite the arm which still held her so strongly, the chill had returned to her heart. Her mind was at work on a new idea. Was it possible, after all, that the key to the situation lay in that one little pronoun?

CHAPTER XI.

NEXT day at the same hour Mr. Dennison was sitting in a large and luxuriously furnished room, listening to the slumber-song out of Meyerbeer's 'Africaine.' He sat on a low seat, with his right elbow on his knee and his hand shading his eyes, as though by this concentration of attention not to lose one note of the wonderful woman's voice that filled the apartment, floating out through the open window into the square beyond.

The room was not only luxuriously but also somewhat eccentrically decorated. Thus the wall straight behind Mr. Dennison was almost covered with a collection of miscellaneous articles not generally to be found in drawing-rooms,—as, for instance, a fantastically ornamented tambourine, a gilded sceptre set with coloured glass, and a crown to

match, a decorative but rather frail-looking wooden oar, several daggers of various shapes with mock-jewel hilts, a whole variety of feminine head-gear, ranging from the embroidered handkerchief of the Russian peasant to the mantilla of the Spanish *donna* and the white linen head-cloth of the Mohammedan wife, while a fishing-net formed of golden cords was festooned into a species of irregular background. In one corner of the room stood a painted spinning-wheel, while in another lay a heap of wreaths, fading under one another's weight, and for the most part decorated with broad silk ribbons of every imaginable hue, and often with such inscriptions as these in gilt letters: "To the Queen of Song," "To the most triumphant of all Zuleikas," &c. Just such ribbons, only bleached with time, were to be seen all over the apartment at the most unexpected places, such as holding together the crimson silk curtains, or making a big bow above one of the large-sized photographs which decorated the walls. All the

photographs represented a woman in costume, evidently theatrical: the costume varied with each picture, but the face was the same in all. On every table, great and small, vases with bouquets stood crowded together, and the mingled scent of the fresh flowers on the table and the fast-fading flowers on the floor made the air on this warm summer day as sweet and as oppressive as the air in a hothouse. It was Mr. Dennison who had insisted on opening at least one of the windows, for fear, as he said, of suffocation.

But the most curious object in this curious apartment was a cage of oxidised silver, standing in the farthest and darkest corner, and with something soft and yellow, and evidently alive, although it was so immovable, bundled together in the background.

When the song at the piano ceased Mr. Dennison did not yet move, but sat on in silence, with his hand before his eyes.

The singer looked towards him and waited for a few moments. Then she said, "Well?"

in a tone which told him that she was smiling as she spoke.

He looked up, dropping his hand.

“You could lead me to the ends of the earth with that air,” he said, musingly.

“That is what I mean to do, with that air or with another. And I believe you will go willingly,” she added after a pause.

“Not while a portion of my senses remains to me.”

“They needn't remain for ever.”

She rose as she spoke, and coming forward into the light, revealed a more than commonly tall and magnificently moulded figure, that moved with a soft, supple motion, which yet somehow suggested an unusual strength of muscle. The tea-gown, whose train she dragged over the carpet behind her, was of some soft, golden-brown stuff, with a loosely draped front of flame-coloured silk. The wide hanging sleeves showed a similar lining, while the same burning tint peeped out at neck and hem, suggesting a hidden fire, ever ready

to break forth. The face was a somewhat full oval, framed in warm brown hair, rich in complexion, and lighted by a pair of brown eyes that, despite their melting tint, had yet in their depths a gleam of something that was neither soft nor caressing. It was the same face as on the photographs, only rendered infinitely more beautiful by the addition of colour. Seen in the half light at the back of the room, she might have been taken for twenty-two, but the light from the windows falling full upon her face revealed marks which rarely come before thirty.

On the first convenient couch she came to she let herself sink in a half-lying posture, and from under her lowered eyelids continued to watch her visitor. Mr. Dennison was staring straight in front of him, having made no answer.

“They needn’t remain for ever,” she repeated, in her soft, rich voice, that rolled as exquisitely in speech as in song. “I am quite ready to help you to get rid of what remains;”

and she laughed as softly as she had spoken, and gazed down caressingly at one of her silk-stockinged feet, from which the embroidered slipper had dropped to the floor.

Still there came no answer from the moody man opposite her.

“Why were you not in the house last night?” she asked, more sharply. “Did you not know that it was to be one of my nights of triumph? Zuleika always brings me more laurels than I know what to do with. Look at that heap over there, and not even a sprig among them from you!”

“I was not in London yesterday.”

“You should have been; you had promised. But I sing again to-night, and of course you will stay. It is Carmen.”

He made an impatient movement.

“Why Carmen again?” he asked, with something like repugnance in his voice. “You are always singing Carmen.”

“And am I not successful in Carmen?”

“You are too successful. No one who

was not half a Carmen at heart could bring out the character with such horrible reality. I saw you first in the part, and to me you always remain Carmen."

"And yet you love me!"

He looked at her across the breadth of the room which separated them.

"I have never said that I love you. I do not myself know whether I love or hate you; I know only that I am a plaything in your hands, that when I hear your voice—how is it that so earthly a creature should possess so divine a voice?—my will and my reason get weak, and that the thought of never hearing it again makes life appear blank to me."

"There is no reason why you should never hear it again," she gently remarked. "It is just because of this that I want you to follow me 'to the ends of the earth,' as you call it."

"Yes, there is a reason. I came here to-day to tell it you. I should have told

you long ago. I am engaged to be married; I have been engaged for two months, though I was coward enough to hold my tongue."

"I know that you are engaged to be married," she replied, unmoved, though a sudden gleam of yellow light passed through her eyes.

"You knew it? And yet no scruple held you back from playing this cat-and-mouse game with me? You had no thought——"

He broke off, striking his forehead with the flat of his hand.

"I forgot. I must be losing my senses indeed to talk of scruples to you; it is by such transactions as these that you live."

He threw towards her a dark glance, almost of abhorrence, which she met smiling.

"Speak on," she said lazily, settling herself more comfortably among her embroidered cushions; "give vent to your feelings. Such words do not hurt me. I have heard them before."

“How did you know of my engagement?” he asked, sullenly.

“There are Society papers, are there not? A man of your wealth doesn't get engaged without the world noting the fact; there are too many disappointed mothers lying in wait for that, you know. Really, it was rather simple of you to suppose me ignorant. Besides, I took an interest in the matter. That is quite natural, surely, since I take an interest in you.”

“My marriage is fixed for autumn.” He looked at her, as he spoke, with a glance that dared her to contradict him.

“That also I have heard, and I have heard, besides, that your *fiancée* has fair hair and blue eyes, and is very young.”

He winced at the sound of her words, without knowing why.

“If you know so much, you will not be surprised that I have come here to-day to say good-bye. This ‘musical friendship,’ as you are pleased to call it, must cease.”

She laid one hand behind her dark head, and again altered her position among the cushions, while the wide sleeve, falling back, revealed the rounded arm beneath.

“ Ah; so you have come to say good-bye, have you? ” she said, with the affectation of a drawl, which for the first time revealed in her accent the suspicion of an underbred element, looking him full and steadily in the eyes as she spoke.

He gazed back again into those wonderful brown eyes, behind whose apparent calmness he could yet detect a smouldering fire, telling himself every instant that he was going to look away, and yet not finding the strength to do so.

For more than a minute there was silence in the room.

“ Julia, will you let me go? ” he asked at last in another, almost an imploring tone.

The answer came low but very distinct—

“ No, I will not let you go. I have told you so before.”

With a movement that had in it something of the vehemence of despair, Mr. Denison rose from his seat, and in a few hurried steps reached her side.

“What do you want of me?” he asked hoarsely. “Why will you not give me my freedom? Do you want me to marry you?”

She shook her head slowly, looking up at him the while, as he stood over her.

“No, I do not want you to marry me. I could never make up my mind to tie myself down to that extent. I have been too long free to be able to breathe in a cage, but I don’t want you to marry that other woman either——”

“I cannot marry her so long as I go on visiting you,” he said with a sigh. “Though I am not so guilty as the world probably supposes, I am clear in my mind that that would be a vile thing to do.”

“And that is why I mean to take you with me across the seas,” she continued, as

though he had not spoken, "when my time here is ended."

"Why *me?*" he persisted. "Are there not plenty of other fools ready to run where you want them? Will none of the others do?"

Again she shook her head.

"No, none of the others will do. It must be you."

"But why? In God's name why? I have never been able to understand why you singled me out. I am not your lover; you say you do not want me for a husband; why, you do not even pretend to love me! What possible description can you give of our relationship?"

"I thought we had agreed to call it a 'musical friendship.'"

"You know that it is not that—not that alone. Did you not yourself a minute ago taunt me with loving you? You know that it is not your voice alone, but also your face, that has thrown this unhappy spell upon me, or rather that I am no longer able to distin-

guish between your voice and yourself, to understand where the power of the one ends and of the other begins. I have told you that I do not know whether I most love or hate you; but whatever I feel for you, it certainly is not friendship. And it will not stay what it is now, you know that also. Another stage must come. That is why I say that until I am free of *you* I cannot marry *her*."

She was not looking at him now, but examining the rings on her fingers, and when he paused there came no answer.

"Tell me," he said impatiently, "why must it be *me*, of all men? Is it because of my money? Others have got money too."

"It *was* because of your money; why should I deny it?—for after all, not many men have your money, though it may amuse you to play the modest millionaire: but it *is* no longer so. Call it a caprice if you like; what can it matter to you why my motive has changed, when I tell you my intention is irrevocable?"

With a shrug of his shoulders he turned away and began pacing the crowded room. As he wound in and out between *bric-a-brac* tables and luxurious easy-chairs, Julia's eyes followed him closely and approvingly, for a man who possesses beauty of figure rather than of feature is always seen to most advantage in motion.

“And are you really so much to be pitied,” she began presently in her former velvet-soft voice. “Do you not know that hundreds of men in London would give half their fortunes to have even your privileges? Believe me, that fair-haired little girl down in the country could never satisfy you for long.”

In an instant he was back again beside the sofa, standing above her with blazing eyes.

“Do not dare to speak of her,” he said fiercely. “These walls are not worthy to hear her name, nor your lips to speak it. She is the one thing on earth that is holy to me.”

“And is she also beautiful? As beautiful as I am? I have told you often that I do not

believe in passions that are aroused by mere virtues. Look at me well; is *she* more beautiful, or *I*?"

He looked down at her as she lay smiling up into his face. Seen thus closely, with the hot flush on her cheek and her dazzling teeth almost too broadly displayed, there was about her features, as well as about the somewhat too free attitude, an undeniable suggestion of coarseness; but the picture, nevertheless, was so brilliant, and melted so perfectly into the brilliant surroundings, that the delicately tinted portrait of Esmè, rising before his mind's eye, seemed to be killed by the contrast. With a groan he turned away.

"*You*," he said between his teeth. "You are a poison-flower whose scent is made to go to men's heads and craze them. I have known bad women, but never one who had the power you have of waking all my evil instincts, of stirring the mud at the bottom of my nature. When I see you before the foot-lights, decked with false jewels and lavishing

your glances right and left, so triumphant in vigour, so flushed with health, I tell myself that you are the very incarnation of seductive sin, such as in old times they used to paint it in the triangular allegory of the World, the Flesh, and the Devil, in order to warn devout Christians."

"And why not?" she said, in a much lower tone, "since but for a sin I should have no being at all."

"What did you say?" he asked, not having caught her words.

"Only a thought that passed through my head. So she is holy and I am vile; but she has a father and mother, and I have told you that I never had either. They love her very much, I suppose?" she asked, with a sudden shade of wistfulness in her tone.

"I will not speak of her here; I have said so before."

"Never mind; I can guess it. Of course, they love her, and her father cherishes her, and watches over her, and removes every stone

from her path. Do you think it is very hard to remain innocent under these circumstances? And has it ever occurred to you that even I, in her place, might have been a good woman? Do you know what it means to be thrown upon the world, and told that if you want a place there you must fight for it? Well, I have got my place," and she cast her eyes slowly round the gay and luxurious apartment that was literally stuffed with trophies; "but does it astonish you that I should have gathered some bruises, yes, and some stains, on the way?"

The shadow of a new emotion had swept the mockery from the beautiful face, blotting out even the lurking fierceness in the wonderful brown eyes.

It was the first time Mr. Dennison had seen her in this mood, and he looked at her apprehensively, as though seeing in this change some fresh danger to himself.

"If there is indeed a spot in your heart that is not spoilt," he said uncertainly, "then

be merciful to her and send me away, since I am too weak to go alone."

Instantly her face hardened again.

"To her? Never! For her I have no mercy. She has everything that I have not."

There was the sound of a low growl behind them, and something stirred in the oxidised silver cage. It was a young panther-cat, whom the last loudly-spoken words had aroused from its heavy after-dinner sleep, and who now peered out drowsily from between the twisted bars.

"Down, Asra!" said Julia, without turning her head. "He is getting a little unmanageable," she remarked. "I got this scratch this morning in giving him his breakfast, but I don't think he will try it again. I never knew how strong I really was until I had wrestled with him to-day. It shows a good deal, does it not? I think I shall have to paint it up for this evening."

Mr. Dennison stood staring down at the fresh red streak upon the white arm, and as

he looked, something in the sight of the fresh blood, scarcely yet congealed, stirred him almost as though he too had been a beast of prey like Asra. The desire came over him to seize that wounded arm and drag it towards him, whether to kiss it or to put his teeth where the panther's claws had been he scarcely knew in this moment of mental vertigo.

“Have you made up your mind to stay?” asked Julia, whose eyes were jealously following all the changes on his face.

He roused himself with a supreme effort. “It cannot be; I am going,” he said quickly.

“Wait until I have sung you one more song. I promise you that you shall go after that—unless you change your mind.”

“No, no; not that!” he cried, and laid his hand on her shoulder as though to force her back again. “I must not hear your voice again to-day.”

“But I choose that you shall hear it,” she laughed, as, eluding his hand with a dexterous movement, she rose to her feet.

“Come, Carlos; only one little song, and one that I know you like. Stay with me but half an hour longer. It is true that I do not pretend to love you—and yet——”

She did not finish her thought aloud, but in her own mind she added, as she moved towards the piano, “What a fool the man must be not to see that the game is in his hands!”

Mr. Dennison, without speaking, took his hat and went with set face towards the door. But the door was a long way off, and there were many turns and twists to make before it could be reached. He had not gone three steps when the first note sounded on the piano, and before he was in the middle of the room, his ears were full of the voice of the siren.

“Close by the ramparts of Seville
Dwells my good friend Lillas Pastia;
I’ll dance there the gay Seguidille,
And quaff the bright Manzanillā.
Yes, but I must have company;
True pleasure shared by two must be!
So to the merry dance to-night
My lover bold shall come with me!

My lover bold? Ah, what vexation!
I quarrelled with him yesterday.
My widowed heart needs consolation,
And craves for love without delay."

The liquid notes seemed to cling about him, holding him back as though with hands; and to a man whose eyes at the sound of a rightly struck chord were wont to dilate as do those of a sportsman at the noise of cracking twigs, or those of a *gourmand* at sight of an *entrée*, no hands could have been so strong to hold him as those notes. Surely too, today, and despite the impudent audacity of Carmen's song, there was something deeper, more humanly moved, in the voice, something quite distinct from the mere technique of the singer, and even from the perfect quality of the organ itself. With this recognition his heart began to beat more feverishly; a cloud seemed to descend before his eyes. He was not yet at the door, and already his steps began to drag, while ever more passionately the voice rang out:—

“ Full many for my love are dying,
But none of them for me will do ;
And yet, alas, for love I'm sighing !
Will you love *me* ? I will love *you* !
Who wants a heart ? Mine may be taken !
Now is the time, ready am I ;
Let the thrilling of love awaken,
Take my hand and away we'll fly ! ”

The door at last. He put out his hand and grasped blindly for the handle, but at the same moment it fell nerveless by his side, and, sitting down on the nearest seat, he bowed his head in his hands as though to allow the flood of voluptuous music to close over him and drown him in its sickeningly sweet waves.

CHAPTER XII.

ALTHOUGH Esmè had spoken no word of her fears, they were yet shared by some one besides herself. Not by Mr. Morell; he was far too blissfully wrapped in the happy conviction of success, far too pleasantly occupied in reaping the fruits of what he considered to be his own successful manœuvring, to have leisure for looking about him and studying details. Self-complacent natures have the advantage of not worrying over anything but obvious misfortunes; and for Mr. Morell a thing once accomplished, especially if accomplished by himself, was undoubtedly accomplished. No small doubts or fears assailed him; nor scruples either, for the matter of that. But with Mrs. Morell the case was different. She had done indeed with the misgivings which had preceded the engagement,

but the tenderness with which she had partaken of her daughter's joy was far too watchful for even the tiniest symptoms to escape her. It was she who had become aware, almost before Esmè herself, of some undefined change in Mr. Dennison—she who first felt the significance of his absences, and ruminated over the cause. The very first sign had aroused her motherly vigilance, and, once awake, nothing could put it to sleep again. She had noted the growing unrest in Charles's glance, the slow extinguishing of the radiance on Esmè's face, and she had put two and two together so successfully that, long before the conversation on the bench, she had gauged almost correctly the state of the case, which for so long had so sorely puzzled Esmè's own inexperience. Perhaps it would be true to say that, in these days of growing suspicion and gathering certitude, the mother suffered scarcely less than the daughter, for Mrs. Morell possessed that desirable, or rather most undesirable, quality of being able to suffer by

proxy. How put matters right? The first necessity was obviously to bring clearness into the situation, for fear of blundering in the dark, and destroying where she wanted to save.

Evidently somebody must be spoken to; not Esmè herself, Mrs. Morell at once decided—knowing instinctively that she would be met here with her own reserve in the person of her own child. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to speak to Robert. Once or twice already she had been on the point of speaking, and had shrunk back at the last moment. But at last there came a day when she felt that it was time to act.

This was on the morrow of Mr. Dennison's visit last referred to. It had been a long visit, but it had evidently brought no comfort to Esmè; on the contrary, she looked to-day even quieter and more thoughtful than she had done of late. At sight of her face that morning Mrs. Morell had felt that she could look on inactive no longer. Mr. Morell was

away most of the day, busy with some new undertaking, and on his return towards evening was rather astonished to find his wife sitting in his business-room, apparently waiting for him, a thing quite contrary to her habits.

“Ah, Mary,” he began in high good-humour, for the work had been particularly successful to-day, “that’s a good idea of yours! I was just going to look for you in order to tell you that we’ll actually be done with the draining of the Cottlefield meadows this week. I hadn’t dared to hope it would go at such a rate. It’ll be an immense benefit to the estate. Really it’s quite wonderful what can be done with a little energy and a little money!”

He was hanging up his hat and stick as he spoke, and now paused instinctively for the felicitations he naturally expected. But Mary said nothing, and as he turned inquiringly towards her he saw that, whatever she was thinking of, it was not of the drainage-

works, for her face was disturbed and slightly flushed, and her eyes were fixed on him in unmistakable distress.

“Anything the matter with you, my dear?” he asked good-naturedly, as he let himself down into the comfortably padded chair before his writing-table. “You don’t look well, somehow.”

“There is nothing the matter with *me*, Robert, but I fear very much that something is the matter with Esmè. I came here to speak to you about her.”

“Esmè?” he repeated, startled for a moment. “Is she ill?”

“No; it is not for her health I fear.”

“What then?”

“Has it not struck you as strange that Charles should not have been here for three days until yesterday?”

“Was he not here for three days? I don’t remember. A lovers’ quarrel, probably; but they’ll make it up, they’ll make it up, my dear, never fear!”

“They haven’t quarrelled, and therefore they cannot make it up. Lovers’ quarrels don’t last a fortnight, and Esmè has been losing colour for longer than that.”

“The heat, no doubt,” said Mr. Morell confidently. “It’s no wonder, at her age. I feel quite done up myself to-day after those four hours in the sun.”

“It is not the heat.” Mrs. Morell paused for a moment, then with an effort she went on, speaking quickly—

“Robert, I should not like to distress you, but I must tell you the truth to-day, or what I guess of the truth. You have been too busy lately to observe what is going on; but I am always there, and I can at least see that something is going on. Charles is no longer what he was at first. Listen to what I have to tell you.”

And in hurried but emphatic words she gave him the outline of her observations of the last weeks, touching on Mr. Dennison’s absences, his vague excuses, his curious

changes of mood and manner, and summing up the impressions she had gathered from these symptoms.

She spoke with an earnestness that drove the tears to her eyes, and, in spite of himself, fixed her husband's attention. He listened incredulously at first, but gradually with a rising uneasiness, and, as he listened, certain circumstances of which he had taken no special note at the moment, rose in his memory to corroborate the unwelcome tale. With a creeping chill in his blood he began to ask himself whether this thing were indeed possible? In a moment of sudden panic he even caught sight of the ruin of all his hopes, all the more cruel because of the security which had preceded it. He saw himself placed again upon the spot on which he had stood on the day of his return from London, that day on which the invitation to the Exiles' dance had been given, and without waiting for the rest of Mary's arguments he burst into angry speech, more in answer to his own

thoughts than to what she had just been saying.

“The scoundrel!” he exclaimed, so vehemently that Mrs. Morell fell into astonished silence. “Take back his word? Shuffle out of the affair? Is that what he is thinking of? But he forgets that he has *me* to deal with. He has bound himself, and I shall not let him go. Trust me for that!”

He had risen as he spoke, and had begun to pace the room with flushed face and long strides, but, having taken only one turn, his passion died out as quickly as it had risen. The dark-red colour faded from his cheeks as he sank down again on his chair.

“I don’t believe it,” he said decisively, and with a clearing countenance. “It is your mother’s heart that is running away with your head, my dear Mary. Because Charles comes here every second day instead of every day, you immediately conclude that he means to jilt Esmè. The thing cannot be, simply because it’s too preposterous.”

And so, at that moment, it really seemed to him. Merely to admit the possibility suggested by Mary was to think of consequences so momentous that it became far simpler not to admit that possibility, more especially as Mr. Morell's nature was particularly well adapted for this sort of mental blindness.

Mrs. Morell, as she looked at her husband, was pondering, not over his last words, but over some earlier ones.

"No doubt he has bound himself," she said after a moment, and in reply to those words, "but you cannot surely mean to say that if he wants to go you will not let him. You would not surely give Esmè to a man who takes her against his will, merely to redeem his word? Just think of the humiliation!"

Mr. Morell flushed again, as hotly as before. "You do not know what you are talking about," he said hastily. "I tell you that, either with or without his will, he shall marry Esmè. The alternative for us all is too dis-

trussing to be contemplated. There are other humiliations, far worse humiliations than that you speak of."

Until this moment Mrs. Morell had given no thought to the financial side of the question. Something in Robert's tone and face reminded her at this moment of its existence, and suggested a whole background of only half-revealed complications. With a deep, tremulous sigh she turned her face to the window beside which she sat, and immediately her eyes became fixed upon something below.

The window of Mr. Morell's business-room looked down on a part of the shrubbery which lay at the back of the house,—and here, between two rhododendron bushes, Mrs. Morell had caught the flutter of Esmè's light summer gown. With anxious attention she watched her advance, and as the light of the setting sun fell full upon the pale oval face, a sudden and quite new fear tightened the mother's heart. For weeks past she had been aware that Esmè was not looking like

herself, but never until this moment had she realised the change which so short a time had wrought, for the sorrow that is either too shy or too proud to speak, works far quicker than that which finds solace in words. In those we see daily, however dear, these shocks of recognition seem to depend principally on chance, on the fall of light, an attitude, a glance, or possibly also on the disposition of our own minds. To Mrs. Morell, despite all her watchfulness, full light had not come until this moment. It was with the completeness of a revelation that the recognition of extreme delicacy written upon the colourless face, round about the great blue eyes, and even in the lines of the over-slender figure, touched her now. Until to-day she had been so absorbed in sympathising with the mental suffering that she had almost overlooked the possibility of any physical danger.

“Robert,” she said, in so strange a voice that he raised his head in surprise, “if you still doubt what I have told you, come here

and look. Can you see her face and still believe that all is well between her and Charles?"

"What do you mean?"

"Come here and look," she repeated.

He obeyed in wonder, and, having reached the window and looked out, fell into a long silence.

The ghastly splendour of the setting sun was still upon Esmè's face, illuminating it with a crude, pitiless light which painfully showed up its pallor and a strange languor, quite new to the childish features. The same listlessness was to be read in the attitude of her whole figure as, wandering aimlessly over the grass, plucking a leaf here, a flower there, only to let it drop again, she passed slowly before the window. It was evident that, thinking herself unobserved, she had abandoned the effort which enabled her under the eyes of father and mother to keep up such a good show of composure. That those eyes were upon her now she did not guess, though one glance upward would have shown her the two heads

—the fine-shaped, white-haired head of the former man of fashion, and the homely head of the elderly matron—in closer proximity than they had been for years.

“She is expecting him again to-day,” said Mrs. Morell, as Esmè stood still for the third or fourth time and threw a long glance behind her, “but the hour is past and he will not come.” She spoke below her breath, as though afraid of being overheard.

Mr. Morell said nothing, but he watched the slight figure intently as it moved away among the lengthening shadows. Upon him too the panic had seized, like a contagion caught from the mother’s terror. That blue-eyed child was the only thing in the wide world that he had ever truly loved, besides himself. To sell her to a rich bidder had never struck him as a heartless act, but to see her pine—and having looked upon her face with his inner eyes opened, he could no longer doubt that she was pining—was another thing altogether. So sharp was the pain that as-

sailed him, that for the moment he even forgot the loss of his prosperity in face of that other loss, the possibility of which had been brought home to him by the sight of that wan face.

“Do you believe me now, Robert?” said Mrs. Morell when Esmè had been watched out of sight.

There were tears, genuine tears, not only in the old egotist’s eyes, but also in his voice as he answered—

“Yes, I believe you, Mary.”

“And to think that only four weeks have done this! I was wrong when I told you that there was no fear for her health. She has not often been ill, but she has no real power of resistance.”

Mr. Morell had sat down again beside the table, and was shading his eyes with one hand.

“Who can it be?” he mused aloud. “Of course there is a woman in the question.”

“I suppose so,” sighed Mrs. Morell. To

the wife, who had seen life in spite of herself, the conclusion appeared as clear as to the former man of the world. "He is only twenty-five, after all," she hesitatingly added, "and we must not forget that he has Southern blood in his veins."

"Blood or no blood, woman or no woman, he shall marry her!" said Mr. Morell, bringing down the flat of his fine white hand on the table. "The man must be secured. She is breaking her heart for him, and she shall have him!"

"Yes, Robert, yes, he must be secured!" eagerly agreed Mrs. Morell. What she had just seen out of the window had sufficed, for the moment, to throw prudence to the winds. She saw only that her child was suffering for want of a certain thing, and her foolish mother's heart—no heart is truly motherly if it cannot be foolish at times—thought only of bringing back the colour to the pale face, the light to the anxious eyes, by giving her the thing she wanted.

“Something must be done; but what?”

Mr. Morell sat plunged in thought for some moments longer.

“You say his notes during his absence are dated from London?”

“Yes.”

“Very well. I shall go to town for a few days. The draining must just stand over. Most of our neighbours are there now, and they are *his* neighbours as well. Possibly I may get some clue as to the manner in which he spends his time there. Yes; I shall find it out, even if I have to play the detective, and when I *have* found it out—well, we shall see what happens next.”

CHAPTER XIII.

IF Mr. Morell possessed any inquisitorial qualities they were not brought into very prominent requisition on this occasion. No need of playing the detective here. Mr. Denison was far too conspicuous a person, even in the labyrinth of London, for his smallest acts to pass unobserved. Though he was not in the regular "swim" this year, his engagement had nevertheless been one of the events of the season from which he was personally absent. Besides, he had been seen at the opera, where young ladies had pointed him out to one another with gently resigned glances as "that half-Spanish millionaire, you know, my dear, who is going to marry Miss Morell," and had as often as not mentally added, "If it hadn't been for that premature snapping-up, you and I might have been quar-

relling over him at this moment;” while the respective mothers examined him through their eye-glasses with an expression which said, as plainly as words could have done, “What a son-in-law lost!”

At the very first place of inquiry Mr. Morell felt the end of the clue between his fingers.

He had begun by trying his luck with a gay young couple, near neighbours of Mr. Dennison’s, and living at present in the very thick of the London season. People as completely “in it” as they were, were almost certain to know of anything that was going on in the set to which both they and the master of Stedhurst belonged. Mr. Morell contrived to drop in about luncheon-time, so as to have leisure to guide the conversation into the desired channel.

“It’s been a first-rate season, I hear,” he remarked at a convenient moment, “though, of course, only the echoes of it reach us down at Skeffington, through Dennison, who makes

an occasional run up for a favourite opera: the boy is music-mad, you know. He has been to see you, I suppose?" he added, with a very good imitation of carelessness.

"Never came near us," replied Mrs. Milner, bristling with most becoming indignation. "I was just telling Fred that he ought to collar him the next time he meets him in the street and bring him home to dinner, in order to teach him manners."

"He would hardly thank me for that," put in Fred, with a grin which seemed to Mr. Morell's watchful eye to have a double meaning.

"Ah, well, an engaged man isn't expected to have manners, you know. Neither visits, dinners, nor balls are in his line just at present, and if he hasn't dined with you he hasn't dined with any one else either, I'll be bound," and Mr. Morell paused with a half-expressed point of interrogation in his voice.

"We certainly haven't met him anywhere," said Mrs. Milner promptly. "Of

course, he has no business in a ballroom at present; but the wretch might look up his neighbours."

"No doubt he is much more pleasantly occupied," remarked Mr. Milner, with so boyishly mischievous a twinkle in his eye that it could not escape Mr. Morell.

"Well, I don't think we're *unpleasant* exactly," began the irate little woman, and then suddenly she seemed to remember something. "Oh, you mean what Lady Barnet was saying the other day," she burst out reflectively, but stopped short as her eye fell on Mr. Morell.

"But I never go by *her*," she added hurriedly, while Mr. Morell distinctly saw the two young people exchange an evident glance of alarm at their own imprudence.

From that moment he felt sure that something was known concerning Mr. Dennison's doings in London—something not considered suitable for his ears—and he became all the more determined to hear it.

Needless to say, his next visit was to Lady Barnet. He knew her as an elderly society gossip who, if she possessed any information—and she generally had all that was agoing—was physically and morally unable to resist the delight of imparting it, and whom such small considerations as good taste or discretion were not likely to hamper in the way in which they had apparently hampered the scatterbrained but kind-hearted young Milners.

Here there was no necessity for “leading up.” From the moment that he entered the room, filled with a bevy of callers, Mr. Morell caught Lady Barnet’s eye fixed upon him with a certain predictive sparkle, which he knew by experience to mean revelations to come; and, sure enough, scarcely were the visitors sufficiently thinned out to allow of the hostess indulging in private conversation than she began inquiring after “dear Esmè” and her “charming *fiancé*,” with so much interest that Mr. Morell could almost guess what was coming.

“How devoted to music that young man must be!” she remarked, with deep sympathy in voice and expression. “I hardly ever go to the opera without catching sight of that coal-black head of his—more especially on certain nights.”

“We all have our favourite operas,” said Mr. Morell, tentatively.

“And our favourite singers as well,” completed his informant suavely, though she was positively quivering with the pleasure of what she was doing.

“I scarcely know, to tell the truth, whom they have got this year. Been so busy down at Skeffington that I don’t believe I have looked at a *répertoire* since spring. But I’m told it’s a strong company.”

“*Very*,” said Lady Barnet, with a host of meanings in the one word. “And I should say myself that their strength lies as much in their looks as in their voices. It’s a regular collection of beauties that Mr. Beerman has managed to get together this year.”

“Really,” said Mr. Morell; and in another minute he would have known all he required to know, had not a fresh incursion of visitors broken up the *tête-à-tête*, quite as much to Lady Barnet’s regret as to his own.

Already he knew that Mary’s fears were well founded, and yet it was with a feeling of unmistakable relief that he regained the street. So it was only an opera-singer, after all! What he had really feared was a serious attachment to some girl in society who had contrived to lure this most desirable husband from his allegiance. That would have been a far graver question than a mere entanglement with a singer. It was a bother, of course, and might lead to complications; but people don’t generally marry singers, and Mr. Morell’s own experience of life tended to make him lenient towards such passing episodes as this.

The next few visits he paid, and the next few acquaintances he ran against, with small exception added their unit to the conviction that he had hit upon the right trail. The

mention of the opera in connection with Mr. Dennison seldom failed to evoke either a furtive smile or a pause of embarrassment—the smile being generally on the lips of women, while the embarrassment, strangely enough, was more visible in the stronger sex.

Already, by the evening of this first day in town, Mr. Morell began to see daylight pretty clearly. There remained only the final details to discover, and, above all, the name of his daughter's rival. Having reviewed the means at his disposal, Mr. Morell decided to look up an old chum—a former “beauty man” like himself, who had more than once been his rival in days long past, but who, unlike himself, never having been able to make up his mind to domesticity, had found it preferable to go on living on his reputation—haunting the ballrooms which had seen the triumphs of his youth, a superannuated butterfly, who continued to flutter spasmodically about the flowers that smiled ironically in his face and tittered behind his back. This man,

too, might be counted on to be *au courant* of interesting events.

Mr. Morell found him in full dress, on the point of starting for a dinner-party that was to be followed by a dance. As he gazed upon the perfumed and elaborately combed old dandy, whom a "treasure" of a valet had got up to a wonderfully fair imitation of what is called "ripe youth," memories of his own former self came over Mr. Morell. In presence of this perfectly appointed figure, the former London man, whose personal elegance was the pride of Blankshire drawing-rooms, was conscious of feeling countrified, not to say bucolic.

Mr. Clinton was very pleased to see his old friend, but not particularly so to be interrupted at the moment of a rather belated departure.

"A question to ask me," he repeated rather ruefully, glancing at his watch and uneasily flapping his lavender kid gloves. "Won't it keep till to-morrow?"

“No, it won't; and it won't detain you five minutes either, unless you're going to fence in your answer, which I count upon you not to do. It's simply this,” and Mr. Morell took a steady look at his host: “Can you, or can you not, give me the name of the woman whom Dennison visits when he comes to town?—my future son-in-law, you know. He visits some woman, I know, so don't lose time in soothing assurances, and I am almost certain it is an opera-singer; but her name is what I want, and I don't care to go to everybody for that.”

This time he meant to make straight for the point. No need for any preliminaries here: much more delicate subjects than this had been discussed over and over again between the two ancient chums in this very room.

Mr. Clinton's face changed a little, but it was evident that he too saw the superfluity of roundabout phrases, for he answered without hesitation.

“Yes, of course I can tell you; it is Signora Belveda, the new star of Beerman’s company, and he is there at least three times a-week.”

Despite the old intimacy, it is very probable that if he had not been in such a hurry to start for the Duchess of Mangerton’s party, Mr. Clinton would not have been quite so plain as this. But since it was evident that Mr. Morell meant to have the information he required, the quickest way to shake him off was to give it him neat.

“I thought so,” said Mr. Morell almost calmly.

It was not the first time that he had heard that name. He could remember now that so long ago as the time preceding Esmè’s engagement it had been pronounced at Skeffington. It was one evening when some neighbours were dining there, and when the talk had turned on music, as it so often did in Mr. Dennison’s presence.

Some one had asked him whether he had

seen Signora Belveda in "Carmen," and receiving an answer in the negative, had, so far as Mr. Morell could remember, remarked something to this effect: "You shouldn't miss her, really; to a musician like you, such a treat is well worth a run up to town."

"Is she a real Signora or a sham one?" asked Mr. Morell now. "I mean, is she Italian?"

"No, I'm not sure what she is—American, I think I've heard; but without the twang, *cela va sans dire*. They've made her into an Italian for stage purposes, I fancy."

"And her looks?"

"Her looks?" repeated the society man, forgetting himself so far as actually to put his tongue to the roof of his mouth and emit a distinct cluck of surprise and rapture. "Do you mean to say you haven't heard of her?"

"I never hear about anything nowadays, I am out of it all," said Mr. Morell, touched with some passing emotion that had a cer-

tain family likeness to homesickness, as he glanced regretfully round the well-known room, and at the toilet-table laden with the hundred and one appliances which have become as indispensable as bread to the old *beau* who still clings to his place in society—aids and contrivances which, in the rural seclusion of Skeffington, he himself had long since abandoned.

“To put the matter in a nutshell, her looks are simply stunning,” went on Mr. Clinton, whom the sense of haste was rendering more and more merciless. “A regular knock-downer, I tell you; figure A 1, face to match, and eyes—where the dickens shall I find an adjective for her eyes?” and he rolled his own lustreless orbs from side to side in the almost convulsive effort to capture a suitable expression. “She wouldn’t really need her voice at all to help her to turn a man’s head, though no doubt it was the voice that began the mischief here.”

“And do you think the mischief has gone

very far?" asked Mr. Morell with a sinking heart.

"It looks like it. Not that it is any business of mine to interfere, but since you have asked me to speak, all I can say is, If you don't want that young man to slip through your fingers, you'll have to keep a precious sharp look-out."

"There can't be any question of marriage, surely?"

"That's what none of us can quite make out. Marriage is supposed not to be much in the Signora's line—she belongs to too new a school for that,—but it is conceivable that such a prize as Dennison might modify her principles."

"It's his money she cares for, I suppose, not himself?"

"I suppose so. The only thing that is certain is, that from the first she has taken unmistakable pains to attract him, singling him out from a crowd of other worshippers. I should say that in this affair it was she who

is the active element, and he the passive; and she's *very* active, I can tell you. They say that no man she has fixed upon has ever got out of her toils whole. Ah yes, she's a deadly fascinating creature!"

Mr. Clinton sighed, and Mr. Morell mechanically echoed the sigh; and then the two old gentlemen instinctively looked at each other, and each wondered whether the other was thinking of the triumphs of his youth.

"This is bad news," said Mr. Morell at last, slowly. The relief he had felt on first scenting an opera-singer had given way to a fresh access of alarm. This was evidently no ordinary stage-figure; once more the matter was becoming serious.

Mr. Clinton had again begun to flap his gloves.

"You *would* have it, you know; and sorry enough am I that it should come through me. But now I can't stop one minute longer; they'll be at table as it is. Mind my words, and look after that boy!" And without wait-

ing to see off his visitor he vanished like a shadow from the room.

When Mr. Morell reached Skeffington next day, depressed and very thoughtful, the sight of Mr. Dennison playing a sonata on the piano gave him the idea of trying an experiment. A short *tête-à-tête* was easily enough managed when an hour later the young man, having taken his leave, started for the stables where his horse was waiting.

“Dennison,” began Mr. Morell, the moment they were alone, speaking with wonderful unconcern, though with a strain of anxious expectation, “I have been considering the date which we had fixed for your marriage, and it seems to me that if you really insist upon it, there is no reason why we should not have it in September instead of December. Perhaps it has struck you too that Esmè has been looking rather delicate lately, and this would give you time to get her to a warmer place before the winter sets in.”

The question of the date had been hotly debated at the beginning of the engagement, though the subject had not been referred to lately, and one of Mr. Dennison's standing arguments when pressing his side of the question was the desirability of wintering abroad.

There was a perceptible pause before his answer came, and, though avoiding a direct look in his face, Mr. Morell could not help fancying that he saw a quick contraction of the black eyebrows.

"In September?" he repeated at last, very slowly, as though to gain time. "Let me see. We spoke of December: it would be rather difficult to change the arrangements now, I fear. If you had spoken of this earlier——"

The groom leading Mr. Dennison's horse here turned the corner at a little distance, and the two men stood still instinctively, so as to avoid getting within earshot.

Now that Mr. Morell could look into his

future son-in-law's face he experienced a very disagreeable shock. To witness the discomposure of a man whose self-confidence is, as a rule, supreme, is always unpleasant, and for Mr. Morell the evident confusion on this particular face bore a fatal significance. It was unlike anything he had ever seen there; evidently the unexpected attack had taken him completely aback.

“What arrangements?” asked Mr. Morell, putting a brave face upon it, though his hopes were fading, for did not these very symptoms point to the urgency of energetic action?

“The alterations in the interior of the house, for instance, and the new ceilings——”

“There would be no hurry about that if you are not going to winter at home.”

“No, to be sure; but still I should like to take Esmè home for a little before we start; and then the settlements take time also, I suppose,” said Mr. Dennison, stumbling about in his phrases like the veriest schoolboy. “Besides, Christmas seems to me such a much

more appropriate time for a wedding than September."

His eye was roving restlessly from side to side, in avoidance of his interlocutor's anxious gaze, but the next words came as a relief.

"Well, well," said Mr. Morell hastily, "there is no need to decide in a hurry. It was only an idea of mine. I daresay you are right about the Christmas season."

He had quickly seen that to press the point further would only lead to an explanation which, of all things, he was determined to avoid. He knew now what he wanted to know, and there was nothing for it but to leave the perilous ground before anything irrevocable had been said.

It was with a friendly smile and a warm handshake that he parted from the young man, but the moment the visitor's back was turned he went straight to his room, and, sitting down with his face in his hands, attempted to survey the situation as it now presented

itself. That Charles was swerving in his allegiance to Esmè was clear to him beyond all doubt. Not all the items of gossip picked up in London had brought the truth so well home to him as the sight of that disturbed face and the sound of those disconnected phrases. Two days ago he had agreed with Mary that something must be done, and he had done something, but unsuccessfully. What should the next step be? For of course there must be a next step: to leave fate to take its course was utterly out of the question. His experiment with Mr. Dennison had failed: was there any other experiment which it lay within his power to make?

CHAPTER XIV.

AT first sight it seemed as though there was none. What did that mean? Surely something very like despair, since, however generous the millionaire might prove to be as a creditor, Mr. Morell recognised the impossibility of owing his financial salvation to the man who had deserted his daughter. In this crisis of alarm it was the mere material side of the question which had again resumed the upper hand in his troubled spirit: sheer terror of the catastrophe which he had believed so happily avoided, usurped for the moment his powers of thinking. There was something almost maddening in the reflection that, but for the inclusion of one particular singer in the Beerman troupe this season, all might have gone so completely well. Mr. Morell began to wonder anew what were

the Signora's ultimate intentions with regard to Mr. Dennison. If it was true that she eschewed matrimony, surely she could not hope to keep him her slave for ever. She must be a dangerously fascinating woman indeed to have succeeded in shaking Charles's so evidently sincere attachment to Esmè. By degrees, as his thoughts began to concentrate around the personality of this woman, on whom so much depended, a new idea, born of the inventiveness of despair, dawned in the depths of his mind. A direct appeal to the man would, he felt, be far too perilous; how, then, if he were to go straight to the root of the evil, by appealing to the woman? It was not likely, after all, that her feelings were deeply engaged, and if she were like most of her kind, one millionaire would be as good to her as another.

He looked at the idea for a moment or two, and then threw it aside. Just at first sight it appeared a little too audacious. But in less than five minutes his mind was once

more busy with the thought—perforce, since there was nothing else to be busy with—and at second sight it already appeared less preposterous. He could remember now that such appeals actually had been made more than once by the families of too impressionable young men, and not always unsuccessfully. Might not the unknown siren chance to be generous; or why should not a round sum of money do the job here, as it had done in more than one case he knew of? Everything depended, of course, on the individuality of the woman. If she should prove to be either purchasable or magnanimous, things might even now go well. The symptoms pointed to a mere subjugation of the senses. From the observations he had made, it seemed clear to Mr. Morell that Charles had fallen into the power of a singularly wily woman, who had deliberately used music as an instrument of enslavement. No doubt the victim himself, ashamed and grieved at his position, though lacking the strength to free himself, desired

nothing so much as to shake off the fatal charm; his whole demeanour to-day seemed to Mr. Morell's experienced eyes to suggest this theory, for there are moments at which a look backwards is of wonderful use in helping a man to gauge a position correctly.

Maybe the appeal he contemplated was an absurd thing to do, considering the risk of hurrying on the final break; but he could think of nothing else to do in its place, and to do nothing at all meant almost certain ruin.

For more than an hour he sat there, turning over the arguments in his mind, but unable to come to a final decision. But the decision was to come before he slept that night.

It was at the moment of parting for the night, while touching Esmè's forehead with his lips, that the burning heat of the fair skin arrested his attention. A keener look revealed to him the feverish brilliancy of her eyes, and the nervousness in the smile which

met his questioning gaze. In the strange game of see-saw which his material and his paternal fears were playing in his mind, it was once more the latter which took the ascendant, and his features contracted as though with physical pain. Before the door had closed behind Esmè his mind was made up. He would go to Signora Belveda and plead for his child's life—on his knees, if need be,—for his child's life even more than for his fortune. After all, many a battle had been gained by a forlorn hope.

On the following forenoon Mr. Morell was once more on his way to London.

As Mrs. Morell turned from the entrance, where she had exchanged the last hurried words with her husband, her heart was heavy within her. Last night she had had a brief account of his discoveries in town; but she was ignorant of his mission there to-day, and supposed nothing further than that he was going to pursue his inquiries. But what she knew already was enough for Mrs. Morell.

It was some vague fear lest Esmè's own attention should have been aroused by her father's evident disturbance of mind, and this abrupt return to town, which now led her to bend her steps towards the girl's room, in order to see whether there was any comfort which she could give.

Esmè was sitting beside her work-table, but there was no work in her hands. She sat quite still, staring straight at some small glittering object which lay before her on the table. As Mrs. Morell softly approached, she saw that it was her engagement ring, which she had pulled from her finger, probably for the first time since the day on which Charles had placed the costly sapphire there himself.

“Oh, I did not hear you, mother!” she said, with a violent start, as she felt a hand on her shoulder and instinctively snatched up the ring. Glancing up into her mother's face she saw that there were tears in the quiet grey eyes.

“What are you doing, Esmè?” asked Mrs. Morell very low.

Esmè had first flushed scarlet and as quickly grown pale again.

“Nothing,” she said, almost coldly. “I was looking at my ring, that is all.”

“And did you need to take it off to look at it?”

“Oh, I wanted to see what it would look like off my hand,” said Esmè, quickly pushing it back to its place. “Surely that is a very harmless occupation,” she added, with a forced laugh.

Mrs. Morell said nothing; while Esmè, hastily pulling a strip of embroidery from out of her basket, began with trembling fingers to thread a needle, as though to indicate that the subject was closed.

There was a minute's silence, while the mother stood beside her daughter and watched and struggled with herself. All at once there was a little cry; Esmè had pricked her finger, and at the same moment Mrs.

Morell snatched away the work and took hold of her daughter's two hands between her own.

“Don't, Esmè, don't!” she cried, with sudden vehemence. “You are doing what I have done so often; don't pretend to be happy when you are not! I also have pretended, and I know what it leads to. You would be like me, I see the symptoms, but I will save you in spite of yourself. Speak, I tell you, speak!” she persisted, in a tone almost of command, which came strangely indeed from the lips of this mild little woman.

“Open your heart before it breaks! Tell me that you are unhappy—for you *are* unhappy, are you not?”

In her first surprise Esmè had risen to her feet, striving to free her hands, but they were held too firmly for that. Her startled face, which she could not hide, and from which all colour had fled, stared back at her mother with wild eyes; yet so strong was the instinct of reserve within her, that even at this mo-

ment her lips moved to form a denial; but before she had succeeded in speaking, the familiar voice said again, more gently, “*You are* unhappy, are you not?” and Esmè fell forward on her mother’s neck in a passion of tears which she had suddenly grown too weak to repress.

It was one of those bursts of grief which, coming all the more violently because they come late, seem in their vehemence to tax even the physical organisation to the limit of its strength. For several minutes Mrs. Morell was occupied solely in supporting the slender frame, which seemed almost torn asunder by deep and convulsive sobs. It was a grief which would have moved a stranger; yet the look on Mrs. Morell’s face denoted, not so much compassion, as a curious sort of satisfaction, touched at moments by a gleam of what looked like triumph. The cause of grief had not been removed, but that obstinate barrier of reserve had been broken down: if her child had to be sacrificed, at least she would

not die in silence, because she had not been able to make up her mind to speak of her secret.

For several minutes Mrs. Morell contented herself with gently patting the disordered hair and stroking the small hands which were wet with their share of the shower. When the violence of the sobs had a little subsided, she helped Esmè to a chair and sat down beside her. Even then several minutes more passed in silence, while the girl struggled to regain a little composure, and while Mrs. Morell sat quite still, contemplating her daughter with an expression very hard to define. She was not aware of it herself, but what she felt at this moment was very like envy. This luxury of abandonment in grief was what she had never known, yet often so sorely needed. She was wondering now what it must feel like to be able to give outward expression to the fear that is slowly killing you, and asking herself what her own life might have been if any one had had the idea of saving

her in spite of herself, as she was trying to save her daughter.

“I was right, was I not?” she asked at last, as, with a deep sigh that was unmistakably one of relief, Esmè’s head sank against the chair-back.

“Yes, mother, you were right,” she answered unsteadily, for she was still trembling from the violence of the storm that had swept over her. “Charles does not love me as he used to do; he is changed, and he changes more every day; and I am so unhappy that I don’t think I can make anybody understand, even you.”

“Go on,” said the mother, taking her daughter’s hand again, as though to keep hold of her confidence. “Say everything else that is on your mind; you *can* make me understand, if you wish. Has he said anything that makes you think he wants to break off the engagement?”

“That is the strange part of it; he will not hear of breaking it off. I myself sug-

gested the idea only the other day, but he got so excited that he quite frightened me. And yet he is not what he used to be."

"Tell me more of what he said."

And presently, pressed by her mother's strangely eager questions, Esmè had, for the first time in her life, opened her heart to its very depths, warming to the unusual sensation as she proceeded, until she came to giving an outline of the conversation that had made the deepest impression on her.

"He is so inexplicable at moments," she finished; "I do not understand it at all."

"But I think I understand," said Mrs. Morell, after an interval of silence. "It is not that he has ceased to love you, but only that some one else has come between you for the moment. There are two sorts of love, Esmè, as you will learn in time—one noble, the other ignoble; and there are two natures in every man on earth—a higher and a lower one. Charles loves you in the right way, but it seems to me that he loves some other person

in the wrong way—somebody who dazzles his eyes without touching his heart; he is a man like other men, after all. It is probably because he feels that your love can save him from his lower self that he clings to it so desperately. Yes, I think I understand.”

Mrs. Morell, like her husband, had judged the case quite correctly, though without the aid of past experience to go by, for a woman's intuition is often a surer guide even than a man's memories.

“If he cares for anybody else——” began Esmè, stiffening suddenly.

But her mother's hand was upon her knee already, with a gently warning pressure.

“Don't put on that face, Esmè,—don't use that tone! You are going to shut yourself up again, and you must not do that, especially not to *him*. If things are as I think they are, the only chance for you both is openness on your part. Do not be afraid of showing that you love him, *if* you truly love him. It is hard, I know. I have tried to do the same

thing often, and have failed. Perhaps, if I had known how to speak in time, my own life might not have been a failure. But our cases are quite different. I always was plain; even at your age I had few attractions: I suppose I had no right to hope for anything better. But you are beautiful. You may be happy. Fight, therefore, for your right; grasp your happiness with both hands before it escapes you. Do not let that terrible reticence, which, after all, is only pride—a false and wicked pride—choke back the words that may save you!”

Wonderingly Esmè gazed back at her mother's transfigured face, at the shining eyes whose gentle, everyday glance had never once betrayed the pathos of a wasted life; and as she gazed, understanding how terribly true must be the emotion which had led her mother to step so far outside her individuality, the stubborn pride within her began slowly to bend,—the bitterness passed gently away, leaving only the hot pain of unsatisfied love.

“*If I love him!*” she repeated, in a voice that rang through the room; and now her eyes, too, took fire. “Oh mother, I love him so well that I cannot sleep for thinking of him, and sometimes I think that if he abandons me it would be better not to live at all!”

It was now Mrs. Morell’s turn to gaze astonished at her daughter. Only once before, on the day of Mr. Dennison’s proposal, had she caught a glimpse of the capabilities of passion which lay behind that flower-like face; but that had been but a momentary, half-frightened self-betrayal, while this was as a definite tearing away of the veil.

She felt that to that passionate utterance there was no answer which she could make, and for several minutes more the two sat side by side in silence, each thinking of the other, for truly in this last half-hour mother and daughter had learnt more about one another than they had known since the beginning of their respective lives.

CHAPTER XV.

WHEN the curtain rose in Covent Garden Theatre that evening Mr. Morell was in possession of one of the front seats. He had left Skeffington with the intention of visiting Signora Belveda that same day, but the sight of a poster with her name in gigantic crimson letters and the announcement that she was to sing in "Carmen" that same night, meeting him at the very station, had caused him to modify his plans, by giving rise to a new idea. Yes; decidedly he would have a look at her first on the stage, so as to have, at least, some notion of what to expect tomorrow, and possibly to be able to judge of his chances. It was conceivable that a glance, or the mere intonation of her voice, might, by giving an indication of character, tell him

whether there was any hope of moving this woman.

In the strain of feverish expectation in which he had spent the afternoon, it had seemed to him that the evening would never come, and once seated before the lowered curtain, it appeared to him that it would never rise.

When at length the well-known square in Seville, with the cigar factory to the right and the guard-house to the left, familiar to him from his worldly days, was disclosed, there were still five weary scenes to be sat through before Carmen's appearance. The words of the chorus:—

“Here she comes!
Behold la Carmencita!”

were the signal which put the final strain on his already strained attention.

And at last she was there before his eyes; and, curiously enough, the effect of his first glance at her was to calm his over-great excitement by causing his heart to sink with a

sudden, hopeless sensation. If *this* was the woman into whose hands Dennison had fallen, there was small prospect, certainly, of delivering him. He had known that she was beautiful, but he had not been prepared for anything so brilliantly seductive, so victoriously commanding, as was this dark-eyed gipsy queen whose white teeth flashed derisively at the youths pressing around her. Alas, this woman was beautiful enough to turn far older and far maturer heads than that of Charles Dennison!

Within the same minute he heard the first note of her voice, but was conscious of no more than a pleasant oral sensation, so deeply was he engrossed in the contemplation of her person. Upon the first almost instantaneous impression of discouragement there had followed a second, for which he could find no explanation—the impression, namely, that he had met this woman at some other period of his life. She had distinctly surprised him; and yet, paradoxically enough, after the first moment

of surprise, he was aware of something about her—her voice, her gestures, her eyes, he could not have said which—that was inexplicably familiar.

By the time she had sung her first air the impression had almost vanished; he seemed to have lost sight of something that he had perceived in a passing flash. But it was not gone; he caught sight of it again at the moment when Carmen, having flung her flower-bunch into Don José's face, escapes towards the cigar manufactory. In that half-wild, half-shy movement he had recognised something that he had most certainly seen before, though, plunge into his memory as he might, he could not lay hold of either a name or a place.

Once or twice again in the course of the evening the impression returned, always to sink again out of sight, though never definitely vanishing. But his deeply preoccupied mind had no leisure to give to what seemed a mere mockery of imagination; to him the *prima*

donna was only the woman to whom he was going to appeal to-morrow, and all his attention was concentrated on the attempt to read her disposition in her face and her very movements. It was long since he had seen the opera, and not until towards the middle of the evening did he suddenly seem to himself to be looking on at the very history of his unhappy daughter. Was not the fair-haired peasant girl Micaëla a very Esmè in her innocence and true affection? and was not Esmè's fate hers, since from both the man so faithfully loved was stolen by a wanton woman? By degrees the idea of this resemblance took such possession of him that, under the mingled influence of his excited nerves and of the insinuating music, he began to forget that the drama unrolled before him was fiction and not reality, and unconsciously to look for indications of hope or fear in Carmen's very words, losing sight of the fact that they were just Carmen's words and not those of Signora Belveda. The strange way in which the indi-

viduality of the singer seemed to melt into that of the Spanish cigarette-girl, only helped to bewilder him still further, by supporting the illusion. It was but a poor sort of hope that he could gather in this deceptive fashion. When Carmen sang in mocking tones—

“I count my lovers by the dozen;
Not one of them can please me quite”—

he tried to find comfort in her evident instability. If, indeed, she counted her lovers by the dozen, why, then, Charles was only one of a dozen, and could be easily spared.

And again, from out of Escamillo's announcement, that Carmen's love does not outlast six weeks, he desperately tried to extract an illusive hope.

Surely, yes, surely this woman with the provoking glance and the bold smile could not love for longer.

But after that there came a moment which seemed to kill hope. This was when Carmen gives Don José contemptuous leave to go:—

“Yes, to depart the best would be—
A smuggler’s life will ne’er suit thee.
Yes, start without delay.”

The words, indeed, should have gone to strengthen the former impression; but in the look and gesture which accompanied them, there lay so merciless an indifference to the victim who has ruined himself for her sake that Mr. Morell felt himself at this moment brought back with a start from fiction to reality. Surely that look, those accents, were a true revelation of character, not of Carmen, but of Signora Belveda herself. How much, indeed, of those cruel lines about the mouth and of the light in the almost savagely gleaming eyes belonged to the imaginary Carmen, and how much to the living actress?

In this moment of bewildered emotion it was hard to say; but dating from this scene in the opera, Mr. Morell was conscious of a new feeling of discouragement. Was it indeed possible to hope for any mercy from the woman who could smile with this fiendish brilliancy?

He went back to his hotel depressed, but still determined to do what he had come to London to do. The chances seemed to him smaller than they had appeared yesterday; but unless he had tried this thing, there could be no rest for him.

Next afternoon, towards three o'clock, he stood at Signora Belveda's door. No one was received before that hour—so he was informed. The question was, would *he* be received at all? He asked himself this while he stood at the door, having sent in his card by the uncommonly blazing "Buttons," and during the few minutes that passed before his return. Now that the decision was so close at hand, he was conscious of no special trepidation. The nervous strain had been spent yesterday, and the forenoon had been passed in that state of fictitious indifference which often follows on excitement too long sustained. It was almost mechanically that he had made his way to the fateful street, and he waited almost quietly in the hall. Very likely the answer

would be negative. After all, why should she receive a perfect stranger? But if she refused, what should his next step be?

He had come to no conclusion when the servant came back again and begged him to step forward. The Signora would certainly receive him, and would be with him in a minute.

And with this explanation the boy left him alone in a large and splendid but strangely disordered apartment. His first impression was that he must have come to a wrong address, for this mixture of objects lying about on the floor and piled beside open packing-cases that were evidently waiting to receive them, seemed more to belong to a private museum than to a lady's drawing-room. What, for instance, should a woman want with these daggers and spears, or with such a strange variety of musical instruments, all of which, be she as great an artist as she liked, she could not be humanly capable of playing? It was not until he caught sight upon

a chair of just such castanets as he had seen Carmen clash together last night that he began to understand. A glance at the mound of wreaths in the corner finally made the situation clear. No doubt this was a museum, a museum of trophies, or more truly a temple erected to talent by the possessor herself, a place of self-worship, where she could sit and gloat over the triumphs of her life, and over her own beauty too, as the photographs on the wall soon told him, for on as many as he looked at he found again the same face that he had seen yesterday above the footlights, though each time in a different setting, sometimes with neck and shoulders freely displayed in the Renaissance fashion, and again with a medieval ruff mounting to the very throat, and with hair drawn stiffly off the forehead under Mary Stuart's pearl embroidered cap, and again, close by, with a flood of dark locks streaming to her knees, and her splendid form vigorously moulded under Aïda's queenly robes. For long did Mr. Morell stand in deep

thought before this last picture, and it was with a puzzled frown on his face that he at last turned away. That same face, always that same face, whichever way he looked. No, here was another face at last, that of a man. From the top of a heap of loose music Mr. Morell took up the oval frame, which had already been removed from its place on the wall, preparatory to packing. He had expected to be confronted by Charles Dennison's features, but what he saw was a faded and very mediocre representation of a hard-worked-looking man of about thirty, in rough attire; a square, stolid face, relieved by a certain steady and yet sombre light in the rather deep-set eyes, which stared straight out of the picture. Where had Mr. Morell seen that face before, or one very like it? The question which he had asked himself more than once last night rose to his lips again now, for this face too was not the face of a complete stranger.

While still holding the photograph in his

hand, Mr. Morell all at once started nervously. He had thought himself alone in the room, but now from the other side of a table piled with books there came the unexpected sound of a prolonged yawn. Looking about him, he for the first time perceived the oxidised silver cage, and a pair of yellow eyes gleaming through the bars. So this was the style of pet Signora Belveda inclined to! Surely another curious indication of character, and not a particularly reassuring one. And yet, for all that, his spirits were unconsciously rising, and the reason lay close at hand—namely, in the disorder around him; for if Signora Belveda was leaving London, as of course she would soon do, since the end of the season was fast approaching, there would be a far greater chance of inducing her to give up Charles and of keeping him henceforward out of her hands.

Mr. Morell was still thinking of these things, and gazing with a certain dreamy fascination into the panther's dilated eyes, when

the door at the other end of the room opened abruptly. He turned in time to see a tall woman in hat and veil enter, holding his card in her hand.

CHAPTER XVI.

BEFORE she had traversed half the space between them, Mr. Morell saw to his astonishment that she was far more visibly excited than he was, for her lips were parted and her bosom rising and falling so rapidly that she seemed to be struggling for breath. As she stood still, straight in front of him, he was met by the gaze of a pair of eyes almost as yellow and almost as fierce as those of the panther in the cage, and shining lurid and threatening from behind her sprigged lace veil.

“ You are Mr. Morell? ” she asked, with a queer catch in her voice. “ Mr. Robert Morell? ”

He bowed, himself moved by an acute return of excitement.

“ What do you want of me? ”

“ I came to speak of a man who is a—

mutual acquaintance of ours, and to ask a favour from you with regard to that man. I have no right at all to ask this favour or anything else of you, but I have no other resource than to throw myself on your mercy.”

He had learnt his lesson well in the long sleepless hours of the night, while tossing from side to side in the hotel bed, and the first few phases went smoothly enough. But at this point he began to waver, either with the sudden understanding of what he was doing, or under the influence of her angry stare; for by this time he could see quite plainly that her excitement was an angry excitement,—the twitching of her mouth and the manner in which she turned about the card in her hand as she listened impatiently to his speech were unmistakable. He was astonished, and also troubled with a tenfold return of that trouble which last night already had touched him at sight of this woman. Now that he saw her near at hand, he understood that it was her eyes which chiefly stirred

that dormant chord of memory. Where had he seen that peculiar gleam before? he asked himself, even while repeating his studied phrases.

“It is a difficult matter to enter upon,” he continued in a less assured tone of voice, “and, if I had not a certain confidence in your generosity——”

But here she broke in, trembling with impatience.

“It is not a difficult matter at all; I know what you want. The name of the man whom you call a mutual acquaintance is Charles Dennison, is it not? And you have come here to beg for the liberty of your daughter’s *fiancé*, who shows more interest in me than is convenient in a *fiancé*. Oh yes, I know exactly what you want, but you shall not have it; your trouble is wasted, I tell you!”

She was crumpling up the card in her hand as she spoke, though evidently without knowing it, and Mr. Morell, more and more astonished at her vehemence, stared at

her aghast, forgetting to speak immediately. That she should refuse his request he had been prepared, but that she should fling him so fierce a denial before he had even spoken, this caused him to lose his cue. In all his surmises concerning the reception which awaited him this strange anger had had no place.

When after a moment or two he had found his voice again, he began to speak rather at random, forgetting his prepared phrases and plunging straight into the heart of the matter.

“But why, but why?” he asked in bewilderment, throwing off in an instant his sham composure, as one throws off an ill-fitting garment. “You have not heard me yet; you know nothing; wait till you have heard me, I implore of you! My daughter’s life as well as her happiness may depend on your decision; it is for her sake that I have stooped to beg for mercy. For her there is only one man in the world, only one chance of happiness; while for you, is not the world at your feet every day? Most likely his hom-

age is but a pastime to you; give him back to her, I beg of you. I am a very unhappy father, and you will have done one great good work in your life."

"I will not give him back," she harshly repeated. "I have told you so. No, no; I will not."

He turned pale, but went on speaking all the faster.

"You cannot mean that as final; think again. At least give me your reasons. Every one says that you do not love him, that you do not mean to marry him. You will be saving two lives, for I do not think I can survive the ruin!"

He had not meant to bring in his financial position—rather to confine himself to his daughter's situation; but the feeling of terror engendered by the probable failure of his mission made him forget his programme. And in his panic he once more, and this time finally, lost sight of everything but the near danger to himself.

“Do you call a broken engagement ruin?” asked the singer disdainfully.

“For me, yes,” he wildly replied, carrying his hand to his forehead, “since nothing but that can save me.”

She seemed to grow suddenly more attentive. “Save you from ruin?—material ruin? But I thought you were rich?”

“I was once what people call very well off; but that is all over, and without Dennison’s money I shall probably be a beggar tomorrow. You may know that too, if you like; perhaps that will make you think again.”

“I knew nothing of this,” she said reflectively. “You must tell me more. I should like to hear exactly how matters stand. Will you not sit down?” she added, as though with a sudden recollection, seating herself as she spoke in the nearest easy-chair. Until this moment they had both been standing opposite one another in the middle of the room. Mr. Morell followed her example with the air

of a man who is not quite aware of what he is doing.

“Go on,” she said, before even he had found a chair. “You have had losses?—great losses?” She had all at once grown strangely quiet.

“I am on the verge of bankruptcy,” he recklessly replied, and went on in rapid words to paint his situation. The chief acknowledgment once made, it became almost easy for him to speak. He even found a certain grim pleasure in courting the pity of this stranger. It was more acceptable than the pity of an intimate would have been.

She listened carefully, putting questions from time to time which betrayed her close attention.

“Go on, go on!” she said when he paused in his narrative, settling herself in her chair the better to listen; and thus encouraged, he went on, unveiling all those secrets which were known only to himself and to his man of

business, and beginning each moment to hope a little more.

“And without this loan you would not have been able to get along?” she asked at last, when he had said all there was to say.

He shook his head.

“And there is no one else upon whom you can count?”

“No one,” he hoarsely replied.

“So you would be ruined, failing this, quite ruined?”

“Yes,” he said, with his haggard eyes fixed questioningly on her face.

“I knew nothing of this,” she repeated. “How could I have guessed?”

“You see now what I meant when I said you would be saving two lives?”

He stopped short and looked at her apprehensively, for she was smiling to herself—such a strange, inexplicable smile! It was at this moment that he began to be puzzled by her manner.

“You see it?” he repeated more diffidently.

“Yes, I see it,” she said in a new tone, sitting suddenly upright, as though the better to confront him. “You have told me everything, have you not? Now it is my turn to speak. Listen to me, or rather—no, you had better look at me first. Do I remind you of nothing?—of nobody? Look well!” She was undoing her veil with nimble fingers as she spoke.

“Look well!” she said again, as she quickly pulled off her hat, and, still in feverish haste, untied the bow at her throat, and with a rapid movement of her shoulders threw off her frilled lace cape. “Whom am I like?”

She was leaning forward in her chair, with her closed hands planted on her knees, and her face only a few inches from his. He looked in amazement, looked again, and suddenly, in one instant, a veil was torn within him.

“Eva Birke!” he exclaimed in a tone of pure astonishment.

It was the yellow light in the eyes so close to him that had pierced the cloud of his forgetfulness. Yes, those were the very eyes of that half-shy, half-wild creature who had haunted his memory for quite a long time—almost a whole year—so long ago.

“Eva Birke was my mother,” she said, looking straight at him.

“Your mother? How then? Let me see, she went to America, I think, and married there?”

“No, she never married.”

He looked at her blankly.

“Do you not yet understand? Have you really quite forgotten those five days you spent at Nettlefield, and all the delightful strolls by the river? To you they were a charming pastime, no doubt; what they were to her you can perhaps imagine, since I tell you that I am her daughter.”

His widely opened eyes were still fixed on

her face; he did not seem to have the power to remove them, though he felt a cold sweat slowly breaking out on his forehead. At this moment his face was so void of expression as to appear almost imbecile.

“That is impossible,” he said at last, uttering the words thickly, as though his tongue had been lamed. “I should have known; she would have let me know.”

“You think so? It is quite evident that you knew her for only five days! Did you ever trouble yourself about her subsequent fate?”

“I asked about her a year later, and was told she was in America.”

“And that of course satisfied your conscience. And in face of this tender solicitude of yours you wonder that she did not come crawling to your feet for favours. Are you not able to imagine that a labourer’s daughter need not necessarily be base?”

Mr. Morell had at last removed his gaze from her face, to sink it heavily to the floor.

While stupidly following the pattern of the carpet he actually saw nothing of it. Visions of a sun-flecked, shadow-speckled river-side, and of those far-off June days full of green leaves and soft breezes, had risen to blot out the present. He was beginning to realise that there was nothing impossible about the situation, which at first sight had seemed so preposterous. Without being aware of it, he believed already, believed so completely that when Signora Belveda said briefly, "If you require proofs I can give them to you: the date of my baptismal certificate will be enough to convince you, I suppose?" he merely shook his head. He required no certificate with those eyes before him; all he wondered at was that he should not have identified them at first sight. They were fiercer in the daughter than in the mother, less like those of a startled deer, more like those of a beast of prey, but they were the same eyes, nevertheless. For several moments more he sat in complete silence, still too numbed by astonishment to do

anything but contemplate the discovery without attempting to draw conclusions.

“Have you nothing to ask?” she began again, seeing that he did not speak. “Would you not like to know what became of my mother?”

“She went to America,” he mechanically repeated.

“She never reached America. In the autumn of that year her father died—of a broken heart, people said; and her brother—you remember John Birke perhaps, I have his likeness there—decided to sell the cottage, and emigrate with his sister.”

Mr. Morell could now remember the brother quite well,—the sullen, taciturn young man who had always been in the way, and who had scowled at him so vindictively whenever he had met the stranger in his sister’s company, but to whose evident ill-humour he had paid no further attention.

“Neither of them felt able to face the disgrace which had come upon the house, and

which had killed their father," went on the singer, "for though they were poor, they had always stood high in the opinion of the neighbourhood. If you had happened to meet John Birke in those days, you would not be sitting here to-day. I believe it was my mother who kept him from finding you out and killing you. On the voyage out I was born, and two hours after my birth my mother managed to escape from her cabin and threw herself overboard."

Mr. Morell raised his head with a spasmodic movement of astonishment, shuddering suddenly from head to foot and turning of a yellow pallor. From the motion of his lips he was evidently trying to speak, but she went on deliberately with her narrative.

"Some people said she did it in delirium, but I don't believe it; I believe she knew exactly what she was doing. My uncle landed in New York with me in his arms, and became to me guardian, father, mother, everything

I ever had. The money with which he provided for me was earned often with bleeding hands and sore limbs, for ill-luck pursued him into the New World. He was an unhappy man, and people thought him hard and cold, but he never forgot his sister, and he never forgot *you*. He told me my own history long before I could understand it, and from the time that I could speak he told me that I had only one thing to do in life, and that was to avenge my mother. Once when I had scarlet fever and he thought I was dying—I may have been nine years old at the time—he went into a rage, and told me that I had no right to die until I had accomplished my task. I believe the thought of not being able to reach you through me made him almost as unhappy as the thought of losing me. And because of his hatred of you, he hated your whole class. He would read to me incidents out of the papers, episodes which resembled the story of my mother, such trite episodes as occur daily, and he would tell me always and

always how all the misery and ruin in the world comes of the arrogance of the rich towards the poor, of the creed which the high-born have made for themselves that the low-born are there only for their service and their pleasure. He would purposely harrow my feelings with descriptions of my fair young mother, and a hundred times he gave me the details of her terrible end. The more bitterly I cried the better was he pleased, and those were the moments he chose for driving the idea of revenge deeper and deeper into my soul. And thus the thought grew up as I myself grew, and when my uncle died, leaving me alone before I was fourteen, it was strong enough to stand alone without his aid. How it was that I did not starve after his death I cannot exactly say. For a time I ran messages for shops, and for a time I sold flowers in the streets. It was in the street Mr. Huxley found me. He was a great theatrical director, with a talent for discovering talent, and he accosted me as I was offering him a

bunch of daffodils. I was told later that there was something particularly dramatic in the way I offered the daffodils. It may be, for I remember that I had had no breakfast that day, and most likely I held out my bunch as though I were presenting a pistol at his head. He actually took the risk of having me trained for the stage at his own expense. It turned out a better speculation than he had hoped, since within a few years my voice was discovered, and he was able to bring me out as an opera-singer. At seventeen I made my first appearance; and it was no immediate triumph, for the full power of my voice developed but slowly. There was much, very much, to go through before I became what I am to-day, and through it all I have never forgotten my uncle's teaching."

There was silence when she had done speaking. After a minute Mr. Morell dropped the hands with which he had covered his eyes, and even in the height of her excitement she was struck with the sudden look of age upon

the face that had been handsome only five minutes ago.

“At least you have been successful,” he said, uncertainly. To himself he seemed at that moment to be acting a part in some old-fashioned melodrama. This story of the long-lost child, of the guilty father, surely he had met it over and over again in penny papers, but he had never thought of seriously applying it to real life.

“Successful! Yes, I have been successful, but I owe my success to myself. It is no thanks to you that I did not die in a gutter. And what are these things to me, after all?”

She looked round contemptuously at the scattered trophies. “Wooden and paste-board playthings that I would sell any day for a home. Do you think that all the applause and all the flowers they fling at me can make me forget for one minute that I have been robbed of my childhood, and that it is you who robbed me? In the abstract I have always hated you. If my uncle had lived

he would probably have framed a methodical plan of revenge, but it is not in me to make plans. It was enough to have the vague hope, I may say the almost instinctive certainty, that in my world-wide wanderings I should meet you some day, and that fate would show me the way to avenge my mother. And it has come as I hoped. I knew all about you within a week of my arrival in London. Since then my eye has been upon you, so to say; and when Charles Dennison ran across my path, and I found that he was the promised husband of your daughter—the *other* daughter, you know, the one you are not ashamed to acknowledge—I felt happy for the first time in my life. Never before have I taken such trouble to fascinate a man; he *could* not escape me, and, of course, he did not. I had calculated rightly in supposing that you would love *her*, the other one; and I told myself that, if I could succeed in breaking her heart, I should succeed in striking you, and that then my mother, my young beautiful,

ill-used mother, might sleep more quietly in her grave—no, what am I saying?” she interrupted herself, with a harsh laugh—“not in her grave, since she had none, but at the bottom of the sea, among the sea-weeds. At that thought I triumphed already, but I had never foreseen such a triumph as this, for I could not know that I was ruining you as well as making you unhappy. I think that now even my uncle would be satisfied. I have hoped—yes, I have even prayed for such a moment as this,—and it is to *me* you come for mercy! What a joke! oh heaven above, what a joke!”

She had risen impetuously as she spoke, as though cramped by her sitting attitude, and breaking once more into a discordant, over-excited laugh. Mr. Morell instinctively imitated her movement. He looked at her with a feeling that was almost like terror, mixed with a bewildered admiration. With her hotly flushed face and dark disordered hair, disarranged by the vehement removal of

her hat, she seemed to him more beautiful than any woman he had ever seen, and for one passing pulse of time the thought that this magnificent creature claimed to be his daughter caused a fleeting thrill of something, which could only have been pride, to pass through his perplexed brain. But it was repugnance, after all, which had the upper hand, for at this moment there was about her beauty a character so ferocious as to be almost more animal than human. Just so had Carmen looked last night when she dismissed her inconvenient lover—he recognised the very gesture; and despite the strain of the moment, despite her head flung up and queenly stature, he recognised also the labourer's daughter, untamed in her instincts, ungoverned in her passions, to whose vigorous nature a tardy process had never been able to give more than a surface polish. It was the cigarette-maker of last night whom he saw before him.

Her words still came, exultant and bitter, but he no longer heard them. She was still

speaking when he stooped and began to grope about on the floor.

“What is it?” she asked, breaking off abruptly.

“My hat,” he replied, in a flat, indifferent voice.

“Here, I have got it.”

Without any further word he turned towards the door.

“You are going? Have you nothing more to say?”

“No, nothing more.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know yet, I must think.”

He waited for another moment, as though to see if she were done speaking, and then went out, grey in the face, but holding himself erect.

Signora Belveda stood for some moments looking at the closed door. Was this all? She had expected a more demonstrative despair than this; she had wanted to be further implored, in order to taste the delight of re-

fusing. The unexpected reticence of the victim blunted the point of her triumph at this supreme moment of her life. Something like a chill began to settle on her artificially heated spirit.

“I wonder what he will do?” she asked herself musingly, still staring at the closed door.

CHAPTER XVII.

By the time Mr. Morell got back again to the hotel he knew what he was going to do.

To him it seemed the only possible escape. That sin, committed so long ago as to be all but forgotten, blocked every other road. On one side stood his own ruin and disgrace and Esmè's loss of happiness, on the other that other dark thing which he preferred not to name, even while resolving to go through with it;—and since he did not feel the strength to face the one, there was nothing for it but to face the other. He had been a coward morally, but never physically, and the sense of utter despair had the effect of giving back to him all his lost sense of dignity. His hands scarcely shook as he packed his portmanteau for the return journey, for after a little reflection he had determined to do the thing at

home rather than here. The idea of being found by the hotel servants and treated with indifference, possibly with disrespect, was repugnant to his fastidious taste. To be sure, the worst shock might thus have been spared the two women at home; but, though sincerely sorry for the pain he was about to cause, Mr. Morell could not see there a sufficient reason for altering his plans. What could a shade of horror more or less matter, since the chief fact remained irrevocable? Besides, he had nothing convenient here to do it with; while at home, in its Russia leather case, there lay that exquisite little revolver along whose steel handle he could even now in spirit see the light play.

The hansom he had ordered was announced while he was considering these things. He rose, glancing slowly round the room and out into the street. It was not thus that he had imagined himself taking his last look of London.

At Skeffington there was Mary's question-

ing look to encounter—he had not thought of this before—and Esmè's white face to stab his soul afresh. Fortunately it was late enough to make his plea of having dined in town sound plausible.

“You shall know everything to-morrow,” was the only answer he gave to his anxious wife, as, pleading fatigue, he went straight to his room.

And now at last he was alone, and with a sigh of relief, as of one who has reached the haven, he sank on to his favourite chair.

There was not much left to do; he had arranged all the details in his mind during the journey down, even to the position in which he would be discovered, and the spot on which the mouth of the revolver should be placed. Some people took the shot right into their mouths, but that idea he had rejected immediately as involving almost certainly some hideous disfigurement of the face, and even in this extremity the former “beauty man” could not bear to think of being dis-

torted into a caricature of himself. He remembered having read somewhere of a wretch who had shot himself with a rifle, which, by means of his big toe, he had discharged into his face, and of the results of this manœuvre, even to the particles of brain that had been found sticking in the window-curtains. Mr. Morell shuddered gently at the recollection; there was no need to do the thing so inartistically as that.

In a few moments more he fetched the revolver and laid it loaded beside him on the table. Then he settled himself well into the deep chair, from which he did not think there was any danger of slipping to the floor, for to be found sprawling on the carpet would not have suited him at all. It was with an almost feminine care that he had foreseen every contingency. As for written explanations, that idea too had been rejected, since to acknowledge the truth would be too humiliating, and to invent a falsehood would mean to be unmasked.

There was nothing to do now but to wait until the house had gone to sleep—for many reasons he would prefer the discovery to be made in the morning; and as he sat thus passive, the situation in its total outline passed once more before his mind's eye. Poor Mary! It was a hard lot he was leaving her to; but, curiously enough, it was not round the woman who had been his wife for twenty years that his thoughts now lingered. They had escaped from him, and had slipped back, far back, into the long dead years, out of whose vague shadows there shone the outline of another woman's face, the only woman who had been able to make even a small mark upon his self-absorbed, though not vicious individuality. And that woman had died because of him. After the shock of the discovery, it would have seemed to him quite natural if some one had told him that he too had forfeited his right to live.

And yet, although it was he himself who had condemned himself to death, it was not

so much self-disgust which had driven him to this, not any remorseful thought of the child from whose lips he had to-day heard such well-merited reproaches, but simply the recognition that for him the situation had no other outlet. It was towards the mother he felt inclined to grow soft, not towards the daughter. This dull pain in his soul was not only sorrow for the world he was leaving; mixed with it was a vague regret, difficult to seize and impossible to define. Perhaps, after all, if Fate had thrown him more constantly into the path of that woman now forgotten for so long—that lowborn and yet so strangely enthralling woman—he might have discovered in himself the faculty of loving.

Mixed with this cloudy regret there was yet another sensation. Mr. Morell had always been of those who hold greatly to the esteem of their fellow-creatures, not only loving the salutations in the market-place, but used also to being surrounded with affectionate care. To discover suddenly that for thirty

years past there had been somebody in the world who had hated and despised him, filled him not with pain alone, but also with a sort of naïve surprise, from which he could scarcely recover.

It was over this point that he was still puzzling when eleven o'clock struck in the hall downstairs. He listened again—not even the sound of a distant door—surely the house was asleep at last.

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It is the common practice of opera-singers to make up for enforced late hours by breakfasting in bed, and this is what Signora Belveda was doing two days after Mr. Morell's visit. These two days had been not quite so full of the sensation of triumph as she herself had expected them to be. Having attained her object so completely, she knew she ought to be revelling in the thought; while, instead, a curious flatness of sensation was making itself felt. Perhaps it was just because the object had been so perfectly attained, and

there was nothing more to do in that direction, that the fierce zest which for months past had been her motive power had suddenly abated, or perhaps it was something in the face of the broken man who had left her without a word of self-defence, which had awakened within her an unsuspected chord of pity.

A creature of fierce instincts and undisciplined will, Julia had become what she was by the mere force of circumstances. That vigour of emotion and that energy in the pursuit of an object, which, two days ago, had turned her almost into a wild beast, were qualities which, guided into other channels, might have brought better results. The idea of revenge having been early presented to her mind, and by a rudely eloquent teacher, had been seized upon with all the intensity of her nature, just as a higher and better idea might have been equally seized upon, had it chanced to be so presented; for, though there was much that was brutal, there was nothing that was ignoble in her nature. That stolid-

looking British workman, whose soul was so little stolid, had much to answer for when he gave to this woman her task in life, and thus coloured all her character.

Possibly her vivid imagination and her dramatic instinct helped her to deceive herself a little when she spoke of this task as the one object of her life, for a life so full of luxurious enjoyment as was hers necessarily distracts from the pursuance of any single purpose. Although she never forgot her uncle's teaching, it was quite conceivable that, but for the chance circumstances which put the means of revenge into her hand, that lesson might never have been acted upon.

In Julia's relations with Charles Dennison there had been three distinct stages, the two first of which had been indicated by herself in her interview with Mr. Morell. At first, when the millionaire had crossed her path, there had been nothing but the instinctive desire of bringing another rich man to her feet, for this child of mixed conditions possessed

an almost insatiable thirst for luxury in every shape, and had thereby become greedy of money, only to fling it away again in handfuls. Then had followed the discovery that this man was betrothed to her father's daughter, and with it the flaming up of that spark of hatred which for years had been smouldering in her. From the moment that she had formed her plan she cared no more for his money; his infidelity to "the other one" had become the sole object to be aimed at.

But upon this second stage there had followed a third which she had not indicated, of which she was in fact not yet distinctly aware. Her arts had been successful—or so she supposed, the long hours spent with the black-eyed Spaniard, under the combined influence of music and of voluptuous surroundings, had accomplished what she had meant them to accomplish; but was it quite certain that they had not done more? Until now it had been her boast that among all those who raved in her praise and poured out their for-

tunes at her command, not one man had succeeded in troubling her peace; but this time—this time—no, the idea was too absurd; why, the man was her instrument only, an instrument with which to wound others, not herself. She scorned herself for the passing doubt; and yet, as she reclined on her down pillows, luxuriously sipping her morning chocolate and glancing lazily through the morning paper, with the costly lace of her *peignoir* falling softly about her wrists and her throat, the outline of the sallow face with the dark eyes came more than once between her and the printed page. She was asking herself whether she should give him *rendezvous* at Paris in autumn, or whether it would not be better to insist on an immediate break with his betrothed and on his accompanying her straightway. She did not doubt her power of doing this.

All at once, right through the hovering vision of his features, a single printed word took possession of her eyes. She had caught

the name of "Skeffington," and for months past she had never missed the tiniest notice that referred to the place. Here in the society column, between the notice of an At Home at the Duchess of Brotherton's and of a meeting of fashionable clergymen, she was curtly informed that Mr. Morell of Skeffington had been found dead in his bedroom on the morning of the 11th inst., with a remarkably clean shot through the heart, and a revolver, of which five chambers were still loaded, beside him. "Suicide from unknown motives" had been the verdict at the inquest.

Signora Belveda threw down the paper and stared blankly about her, then took it up again and looked closely at the date. The morning of the 11th—yes, that was exactly the morning after he had visited her.

After that she lay still for a long time, slowly collecting her thoughts and trying with difficulty to realise what had happened. And yet it was not very hard to realise; the development of events was quite easy to follow.

She went over again the words she had spoken, she thought of his face as she had seen it last, and she understood that it could have ended in no other way. It was even incredible that she had not foreseen this. When, after a long interval, Signora Belveda's maid came in, she found her mistress lying still, with a strangely white face and closed eyes, and the chocolate barely tasted beside her. She was shivering under her silken covers, not with the chill of the raw London day, but with a quite new horror. This should have been her supreme moment of triumph, and she knew it, and yet could only close her eyes in terror of the picture that pursued her. Her craving for revenge had been satisfied to the full in the cruel interview so lately passed. Now that she had destroyed him, she was able to remember that that man with the grey hair and the grey face had, after all, been her father. And what had she attained? "He killed her, and I have killed him," she kept saying to herself in monotonous iteration. And was there not

something almost too awful, even for so robust a nature, in the thought of the dead father and the dead mother, both slain by their own act?

With wild eyes and suddenly burning cheeks Julia flung herself out of bed, then stood for an interval holding her hot head between her cold hands. Without being quite sure of her own intentions, she felt pushed to immediate action, something that could free her from the intolerable self-reproach which was beginning to tear all that was generous in her nature.

In a few moments more she had caught sight of the only thing there remained to do; again a few moments, and her thoughts, working at high pressure, had pointed out to her even the details of the plan.

“Watson,” she said to the returning maid, for whom she had hastily rung, “pack up my dressing-case and trunk at once; never mind the rest of the luggage. I leave London by the two o’clock train.”

“But you sing to-night,” came from the astonished girl.

“Do I? Yes, to be sure; but I can't help that. They must just do without me. I tell you I am going.”

“But they can't do without you for the 'African'; and besides, there are four more nights to come. Surely, ma'am, you're not going to break your engagement?”

“Yes, I am going to break my engagement,” said Julia, fiercely. “Nobody can force me to sing if I will not. Do at once as I bid you. I go alone. You will stop to see about the luggage.”

“Very well, ma'am,” said Watson, intimidated but bewildered. She had seen many of her mistress's caprices, but never anything equal to this, for this attendant of *artistes* knew what a broken engagement meant.

Julia knew it too, but she gave no thought to that side of the question. What she meant to do must be done to-day, while the impulse was strong upon her, or possibly it might

never be done; she knew herself well enough to be sure of that.

Having scarcely buttoned her dress, she sat down to write the note which she had mentally composed while putting on her clothes.

“DEAR CHARLES,—It is time to do what you have often asked me to do—viz., to let you run. I think it is better that there should be no good-byes, so it is no use trying to see me again, for by the time you get this I shall be off English ground. Don't look for me in Paris either; I have changed my mind, and am not going to sing there. I have taken a fit of homesickness, and hope to be in New York by this day week. It is better to tell you straight out that I have only used you for purposes of my own, and that you never were anything to me.”

“I wonder if that is a lie?” said Julia to herself, as she stared at the last line with a

puzzled frown on her face. "Anyway, it's probably the only thing to keep him from following me. I've written plenty of this sort of note before. It's queer, isn't it, that this one should actually hurt a little bit?"

She reflected for a moment longer. "Shall I tell him to marry the other one? No—better not; that will come of itself."

When she had folded the note, she held it for a few moments in her hand.

"It is too early to send it yet; I must not post it till I am at the station. I wonder if he *will* try to follow me: perhaps he is not thinking of me at all; he may be with her now, drying her tears. I should have liked to have had just one glimpse of her. If it were not for that—*thing*—which I know is now lying in the house"—and she shuddered violently all through her magnificent frame—"I would have gone to Skeffington and made the attempt; but this way—I cannot!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHEN on the following morning Mr. Denison found beside his plate a note of a size and colour he knew, he took it up half reluctantly, and yet with a certain guilty eagerness in his eyes.

Lately it had happened to him more than once to spend several days running in his town rooms, and it was here that he was breakfasting to-day. Fatigue, both mental and physical, was written upon his dark expressive face as he sat before the solitary but well-spread table, on which the tempting dishes as well as the pile of newspapers seemed likely to remain untouched. Newspapers had never had much of his attention, and for many days past he had not even glanced at a telegram. He had slept but a few hours, having spent most of the night he scarcely remem-

bered where—not at Signora Belveda's, curiously enough, having turned back on the very road there, in obedience to one of those fits of repugnance which occasionally assailed him at the mere thought of the singer. A deep discouragement was upon him this morning; daylight had made him ashamed of the means he had taken to drown the thoughts that were becoming ever more troublesome. At moments he foresaw the danger of sinking into the sort of man he had always despised, even in the thoughtless days of his earliest youth, and in those moments he actually hated the woman to whom he knew that he owed his moral deterioration.

His state of mind just now was one which to himself seemed inexplicable, but which yet a looker-on with the necessary qualities of observation could easily have explained.

His whole thoughts were at this moment divided almost equally between two women, with only this difference, that the thoughts that turned about the one woman were black

thoughts, and those that turned about the other white thoughts; that the one set filled him with pride, the other with shame. Julia had from the first swayed his imagination and excited his senses, while the chief note of his feeling towards Esmè was a half-unwilling yet enthusiastic reverence. So little had the mere senses to do with this affection that he could not with any certainty have said whether he was more in love with her soul or with her body. He loved her—of that he was certain; but was he ready for her yet? The violent reawakening of those desires which he believed Esmè's innocent glance to have killed within him, and which it did not occur to him to think of as the last convulsive efforts of those instincts which had had too much opportunity to expand, made him almost fear that he was not. He told himself in those moments of doubt that his hands were not clean enough to gather that snow-white flower just yet, while the thought of leaving it ungathered for a while, to be plucked perhaps by

other hands meanwhile, filled him with a sense of unutterable desolation; for, as has been said before, this man was one of those who imperiously require a woman's influence, the resources of whose nature are never fully developed until they have found their mate, whose individuality even is scarcely complete without that indispensable feminine element. Had he the right at present to marry the woman he loved? Thus queried this sick soul, which yet was not nearly so sick as it imagined itself, but rather cramped, and to some extent warped by the unnatural influences under which it had grown up, and wanting only the right medicine to cure it of all its ills, real and imaginary. They say that for every sickness on earth there grows a herb, for every poison an antidote; and this Denison knew in his hopeful moments, and knew even the name of the poison which had worked so disastrously on his life, and of the antidote he required, while at other moments he lost sight of this hope.

Scarcely had he read the note which he had found beside his plate when he started to his feet and ordered a hansom. Within five minutes he was on his way to Signora Belveda's house. He could not yet believe the announcement written in the note, which he had crumpled into his pocket. Even the assurance of the servant at the door did not convince him; it was not until he had pushed past the astonished youth and stood in the middle of the dismantled drawing-room, whose gaping door showed him the empty bedroom beyond, that he began to think this might be possible after all.

"And she started yesterday?" he asked abruptly.

"By the two o'clock train, sir."

"And where is she now? She must have left her address?" and he looked threateningly at the frightened boy.

"Her address is New York, sir. She must have sailed by this time."

“I don't believe it,” said Mr. Dennison, as he precipitately left the room.

The rest of that day bore for ever after in his memory the blurred character of a bad dream. He could not remember having had any distinct intentions, or formed any consecutive resolutions. What he did was done without any conscious volition of his own, as though in obedience to some power outside himself. The terror of never again seeing that so eloquent and so troubling face, of never again hearing that magical voice which had first enthralled him, had for the moment sole possession of him. He felt only aware that he must see her again, must hear her speak, if only for one single moment—if only to say the last word which should ever be spoken between them.

It was the force of this thought which carried him first to Covent Garden to make one final inquiry, and which then, when the last doubt had been removed, had made him start straightway for Portsmouth, without once

stopping to reflect where this mad pursuit must lead to. There followed a few hours more of feverish research, at the end of which he learnt, beyond any possibility of doubt, that Signora Belveda had sailed for New York in the early hours of this very day, and understood at last that Julia had escaped him.

When he reached home next day—Stedhurst this time, and not London—the strain of excitement was only just beginning to relax. Pure bodily exhaustion would probably now have taken the upper hand, had he not been met on the threshold by another startling piece of news—the news of Mr. Morell's suicide. And it was news three days old, too, since to his confusion he learnt that a message had come for him immediately after the discovery, but had found him absent.

In one instant his thoughts were violently wrenched out of the course which for two days they had been pursuing. What had he been doing? In God's name, what had he been doing? While pursuing in the wake of a

woman who had dismissed him even from her acquaintance, Esmè, his chosen bride, had been going through such a trial as does not come to many lives; she had wanted support, and he had not been near. The self-reproach that assailed him at the thought was as sharp as a knife that is turned in the wound, and his first impulse was to hurry straight to Skeffington.

But before he could act upon it, a doubt, sprung from his own guilty conscience, had intervened. A little reflection showed him that the only possible explanation of this abrupt catastrophe lay in the supposition that Mr. Morell, having gained cognizance of his relations with Julia, and foreseeing a rupture of the engagement, had suddenly despaired of his financial position.

The remembrance of the last interview he had had with his future father-in-law, and of Mr. Morell's sudden anxiety to hurry on the marriage, now rose in his mind to confirm this view. Would not that mean that it was he

who had helped to make Esmè fatherless? It almost seemed to him so, though, even in the midst of his bitter self-accusations, he yet wondered a little at Mr. Morell having lost courage so suddenly, when he could not yet have known how great the danger really was. There was something here which escaped him.

Beautiful, hateful Julia! It was she who had done this evil; it was she who, by using him for her own purposes—whatever that might mean—as the perfumed note said with cynical impertinence, had sacrificed one man's life and probably ruined the happiness of another. Now that the brief madness of that wild pursuit was over, he was able to look at her image with clearer eyes—able even, though as yet only indistinctly, to feel something like gladness at having failed to reach her. What would have been the end if he had succeeded? He scarcely dared to think. Already, right through the midst of pain and reproach, an immense feeling of relief was slowly working its way. He was

downcast, and yet vaguely conscious that some fearful load had been lifted from his life. He had been too weak, or too infatuated, to break his own chains; but he was sane enough to thank God that they had been broken for him. Already, too, his thoughts were turning back longingly to the only woman who had ever really touched his heart; but beside the great yearning which would have drawn him mightily to her, there stood the overwhelming sense of his own unworthiness. All his instincts told him that she was his moral salvation; but had he any further right to approach her, guilty as he felt in part of her father's death, and unfaithful to his allegiance to her—at least in the eyes of the world? Was it likely even that she would suffer his approach, since he could scarcely suppose her quite ignorant of that which her father had evidently known? There had probably been some letter of explanation, something that must have opened her eyes to the true state of the case.

CHAPTER XIX.

ANOTHER day all but passed, and Charles, dreading to convince himself of the wreck of his hopes, had not yet dared to go to Skeffington. It was a long and weary day, spent in going restlessly from room to room, in looking from the windows, and in moodily watching the clock-hands. He was waiting for something, though he could not have said what it was.

In the afternoon hours, when the sun lay full on the terrace, he wandered down one of the paths of the park in search of fresh air. The day had been hot and glaring, one of those days that mark the moment at which summer has reached its height, when every grass blade has grown to its tallest, every flower expanded to its fullest, every leaf is at its broadest. Mosses have grown thick and

weeds luxuriant. Every coil is unfurled, and in the woods there stands not one fern which is not feathered to its tiniest tip. After this moment there comes a pause. Nature is resting from her labours, but not for long. Presently she will begin, little by little, to undo again the work she has done.

Here the long, juicy grass thickly fringed the running water, and overgrown ferns, almost tropical in their luxuriance, had fallen forward with their own weight and trailed heavily in the clear pools. With the dry season the water's voice had grown thin; there were no martial songs to-day and no dance music in the air, nothing but drowsy lullabies, or tiny plaintive murmurs, as subdued as the whimper of some stricken animal.

“It was here that my fate was settled,” said Charles to himself, standing still beside the small cascade, now reduced to a mere rope of crystal sliding down the face of the rock, and where a newly constructed bridge replaced the plank over which he had carried Esmè

in his arms. With the thought there returned to him, like a whiff of flower-breath, the whole charm of that April afternoon which he had spent with her under these very oaks—then still leafless, now wrapped in their thickest green—the whole ardour of his first hopes, the whole freshness of his budding joy. How could he have guessed that it was destined to flower for so short a time? And to think that he himself had blasted the bloom through a fault which already he was beginning to view with a species of surprise!

Instinctively, as he wandered on farther, he began to look for other spots that were more closely connected in his mind with that happy afternoon, retracing the very paths they had followed together, and marking the stations in his mind, as though they had been those of a pilgrimage. The memories that they stirred within him were drawing him more and more mightily back towards the one woman, whilst the sensation of relief at being freed from the other, of which he had begun

to be conscious yesterday already, grew more unmistakable with every moment.

Hours had passed, when, just as the cloudless sun was touching the horizon, he found himself standing on the river-bank. The colouring of the landscape had abruptly kindled into a more living hue, as it generally does at this hour. The stretch of stones across the river, after having lain grey and colourless, even under the mid-day sun, now warmed into a yellowish flush. Every willow-stem over there grew conspicuous for a few minutes, glowing like a red torch from out of the gathering shadows; the willow leaves have become transparent, the water is strangely illuminated. All sorts of common objects, stones, sticks, and stalks, are picked out by the capricious sun and glorified for a passing moment. In a few minutes more it is all over. Both the high lights and the contrasting shadows are gone; the stones are grey again, and the willow-stems again sober and neutral-tinted, and over everything the veil of dusk is slowly falling.

Mr. Dennison watched the lights go out, and turned homewards with a sigh. The day was over, and it had brought nothing.

Having reached the house again, he paced the rooms once more, the rooms that had been prepared for *her*, and ended by sitting down at the piano. For a few moments his fingers strayed uncertainly over the keys, then settled down into a consecutive melody. He sang the words to it under his breath:—

“ Du bist die Ruh, der Friede mild,
Die Sehnsucht du und was sie stillt;
Ich weihe dir, voll Lust und Schmerz,
Zur Wohnung hier mein Aug und Herz.”

Since he knew Esmè, Schubert's exquisite song had become a favourite of his. No other words and no other music expressed her to his mind as this did.

“ Kehr ein bei mir und schliesse du
Still hinter dir die Pforten zu;
Treib andern Schmerz aus dieser Brust ”—

He heard a sound, and, turning round, was able to distinguish in the fading light a short,

broad figure in deep mourning, standing at only a few paces from him. He had heard neither the opening of the door nor her approaching steps.

“Mrs. Morell!” he said, rising in astonishment.

“Yes, it is I,” she answered, very low; and then the young man and the already grey-haired woman looked at each other in silence for a long minute.

“I have come to fetch you,” said Mrs. Morell, very simply, at last. “Esmè is waiting for you.”

“Has she sent for me?” he asked, with sudden hope in his eyes.

“No, she has said nothing; she does not even know that I am here, but I know that she is waiting for you, all the same. She is ill—no, do not be afraid, she is not going to die. It is only that she was not strong before, and the shock has been too great for her. A little joy will make her well again; that is why I have come for you.”

“You would not have come if you knew all,” said Charles, slowly.

“I do know a great deal, and the rest I think I have guessed.”

“Did he—did your husband leave any— explanation?”

“No; but that also I have guessed. I knew that we were in difficulties, and I have learnt since that we are ruined.”

“Did he speak of his doubts regarding me? I know that he had doubts.”

“Yes, he spoke of them.”

“Did he mention any special name?”

“Yes; the name of a very beautiful woman.”

“And do you think he was mistaken in his suspicions?”

“No, I do not think he was mistaken.”

“And knowing all this, you still have the courage to recall me! What can you possibly think of me?”

“I think that you have been weak, but that you love my child.”

Charles looked at her in astonishment. There was a new composure about her usually so uncertain manner, a new dignity about the small homely figure, which sufficed almost to create a new individuality. Nothing but the consciousness that on her shoulders alone lay the care for her daughter's happiness could thus have transformed the timid woman. Even she had never suspected herself of this intrepidity which was able to go so straight to its object, without stopping to ask how the world would judge the efforts of the woman who had just acknowledged herself a beggar, to bring back the millionaire husband to her pauper daughter's feet. What cared she what they thought of her, so long as she saw the light rekindled in Esmè's eyes?

“ You *do* love her, do you not? ” she asked, with a gaze that seemed ready to pierce to his very soul. “ Were you not thinking of her just now when I came in? I have heard you play that song before; it is the one you used

to say must have been composed in her honour.”

“ I love her, and only her; but oh, you do not know all, even now! You must listen to the whole of the wretched story before you decide whether I deserve my happiness or not.”

And in hurried sentences he told the story of his abrupt dismissal and of the wild rush to Portsmouth, baring his soul to her eyes as much as he dared, and confessing the very bottom of his weakness.

It was almost dark when he had done speaking; but despite the shrouding shadows, he had not courage to look into the face on which he knew that his sentence must be written. With bowed head and lips compressed, he stood waiting for the condemnation he expected.

The short black figure had moved a little nearer to him.

“ But you love her? ” was all Mrs. Morell said again, laying her black-gloved hand on his sleeve.

“ God knows that I love her!” he said with a gasp that was almost a sob, “ and have never loved any one truly but her.”

The black-gloved hand took hold of his.

“ Then come with me,” she said, almost impatiently. “ Why are you so long? I have told you that Esmè is waiting.”

Two hours later Charles knelt beside the bed on which Esmè had been tossing in fever for three days, and almost timidly pressed his lips to the small burning hand which lay so trustfully within his own; while the eyes, that had wanted their light for so long, grew calmer and clearer with each moment that they sunk deeper into his. He could have wept with pain at the sight of that wasted face, and in the same instant could have laughed with the joy of knowing himself forgiven. A quiet satisfaction was all that showed upon Mrs. Morell's plain features, as she stood at the foot of the bed silently looking on. She was not even aware of having done anything especially bold.

“I have brought him back,” was all she had said to Esmè as she led Charles into the room, “because he did not dare to come himself.”

And Esmè, looking in her mother’s face with a glance of startled inquiry, had read there that all was well, even if it had not always been so, and, unable any longer to repress the yearning that was killing her, had turned on the pillow and silently stretched her arms towards him.

It was their second betrothal, not so joyful as the first, but standing on the foundation of bitter experience, and solemn with the solemnity of this house of mourning.

And the dead man who slept below, pending to-morrow’s burial, did not know that the sin so long forgotten had been condoned, and that by his death he had gained that which, alive, he had not been able to reach.

THE END.

A FORGOTTEN SIN

A NOVEL

BY

DOROTHEA GERARD
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AUTHOR OF
A SPOTLESS REPUTATION, AN ARRANGED MARRIAGE,
THE RICH MISS RIDDELL, ETC.



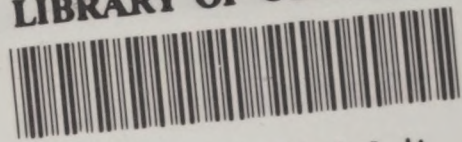
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