

THE
VEILED
DOCTOR



LIBRARY

Un'

of California

"NE

W # 1444



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

Father,
From,
Mary J. Howe & Co.

12-25-95.



THE VEILED DOCTOR

A Novel

BY

VARINA ANNE JEFFERSON DAVIS



NEW YORK

HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS

1895

PS
1524
D3
V4

Copyright, 1895, by HARPER & BROTHERS.

All rights reserved.

THE VEILED DOCTOR

CHAPTER I

WELL out of the course of the present lines of travel there stands a sleepy old town, where the brooding quiet muffles every pulse of modern life. No latter-day institutions profane the antiquity of its streets; no steam-whistles disturb its dreams of former grandeur. Years ago, when this had been a centre of the trade which found transportation in the heavy-bodied, ungraceful schooners and barks that lie rotting now in the grass-grown docks, there had been some talk of bringing the railroad this way. But the city fathers, in blue coats and brass buttons, took snuff together as they discussed the many disadvantages consequent upon such innovation.

They had refused right of way, refused to contribute to the stock of the baby enterprise, refused everything, in short, and so successfully blocked its progress that a different route was decided upon, and the old town, under its canopy of trees, fell forever out of step with the vanguard of commerce. But the retired sea captains who formed its population congratulated each other upon the wisdom of their choice as they smoked in the tiny amphibious parlors among the rare shells and curios gathered in a life's cruising. So, bustling prosperity ebbed away, and, like the tide in the sluggish harbor, nobody noticed its going until it was beyond recall.

In the centre of the old town, a jewel in a fit setting, there stands the largest and quietest house of all. The fan-light above the colonial doorway has looked down upon the same ruts in the streets for over a century, its brass floriated hinges have reflected generation after generation of the same families as they passed to and fro on their business in life. Here the wedding processions must

all turn the corner to reach the old church on which the house's garden abutted. Here, too, the funerals wound their way, and Sunday after Sunday the tiny panes of the windows blinked at the people going to meeting from the time when balloon-skirts and periwigs were "macaroni" through all the changes of fashion, until now, if they think at all, they must wonder if powdered hair be in favor again, for all the heads that cross the road are either white or grizzled; young blood does not take over-kindly to the stagnant town, and soon drifts into more untrammelled channels. In the gambrel roof of the old house a window blinks from under its projecting shingles like the single eye of some sleepy Polyphemus, and behind it stretches a long and pleasant garden, where pear and apple trees peep over the high box hedge at the graveyard beyond.

There was a day when the house was replete with young life; when the high, narrow hall was decorated with flowers, and the great rooms that opened out on either hand smelled sweet with the wealth of many gar-

dens robbed to make her new home beautiful in the eyes of Gordon Wickford's wife. There had always been a Wickford in the old house. Since colonial times, when the first of them built its solid walls, the family dominated the place socially, just as the windows in their roof looked down on the humbler homes around it. To be Madame Wickford was, as the quaint title implied, to be at the head of such society as the town afforded; it was the apex of every well-bred girl's hopes, and the end of every mother's scheming. Consequently, when the last man of the great family returned from college—beautiful, rich, and fired with real enthusiasm for his profession—there was no little cap-setting among his feminine neighbors.

People said he had not been quite as considerate of others' feelings as might be expected in so high-principled a young gentleman, but the reputation of a mild village "Juan" did not harm him in the eyes of the pretty, foolish maidens. There, for instance, was little Alice Marlow, next door, with whom he used to sing so sweetly that

the news of his approaching marriage had obscured all the light in her narrow, quiet existence. She would probably have gone the way of her weak-chested tribe anyhow; but people were more romantic in those days, and blamed him severely when she died, or rather, to be more accurate, they blamed his new wife, who, not being one of themselves—an interloper, as it were—was fair game for gossip.

The woman he brought home from the city was certainly not of a consumptive type, and although there might be a question about her fascination, no one could deny her claim to such perfect beauty that it almost antagonized the beholder. It certainly went far towards her undoing with the good folk among whom she was to live. Her figure was lithe and round, with long limbs that ended in slender feet and hands. There were red flashes in the depths of her brown eyes, that looked out from under straight black brows. Her nose was delicately formed, with just the slightest inclination to aquilinity; her lips were thin and

red—indeed, at times their color seemed almost unnatural against the rosy tint of the skin. It was the scarlet mouth of a sensuous, beauty-loving woman set in a child's face. But her glory lay in her hair; each thread of it, replete with its own glad, golden life, rippled from the very roots in luxurious undulations, and broke at last into a foam of little curls wherever it escaped confinement. How she and her black maid brushed it! How they washed it and rubbed in the pomatums before they built up the towering bows of the fashionable coiffure of that day! It was the pride of her life, and took precedence of the superb young husband she had achieved for herself in her second season. She refused to cut a lock of it for him, but laughingly bade him wait. "You will soon own hair and head too, Gordon," she said, "and I would not injure your future property, not even for your asking." The yellow coils had an odd, incongruous effect above the dark eyebrows; they gave her an unfamiliar, exotic air, which she fully appreciated and made the most of.

Wickford's courtship had been short and fervent. The man prostrated himself spiritually before her beauty, and demanded nothing but the acceptance of his adulation. However, she possessed the grace of receiving it prettily, and it was enough for him. She was well-born, but an orphan, and a poor one; yet, in the humility of his great love, it seemed a little thing to lay his fortune and his honest young heart at her feet. As to her character, his sublime faith in his ideal was pathetically earnest; he believed in her as a savage might in his fetich, and would have bitterly resented the suggestion of any imperfection in his idol. So they were married, and arrived in a private travelling-carriage amid dust, sunshine, and the curious observation of the townspeople.

As yet the trees in the street had not completely hidden their graceful branch-lines in new spring greenery; there were still light young shoots in the box hedges, and the air was full of the breath of the spring. In the old garden long lines of

crocus, yellow jonquils, and single blue hyacinths hedged the grass-plots. The snowballs were covered with great foamy white balls, periwinkles looked up clear-eyed from under the parlor windows, and everywhere the single blue violets were making the air sweet with their spring thanksgiving. The tall standard roses had thrown out pale-green racemes, and the "bridal-wreath" bushes were just commencing to powder their branches with miniature blossoms. A young moon hung like a reap-hook in the evening sky; the bride and groom could see it between a fretwork of flowery apple and pear branches as they paced backward and forward in the soft air.

The woman beside him seemed to Wickford the heart and essence of the spring, and his pride and happiness swelled in him until the burden of his joy grew almost painful. There was only one regret which troubled him—never any more could he enrich his good-fortune tenfold by pouring it into his mother's sympathetic ear. A kind of loyalty to her, a tender desire to

ingraft her memory even upon this moment of supreme bliss, unlocked the door of his reserve, and he began to talk to his young wife of old Madame Wickford. It was she who had planted this very garden with loving hands. He spoke of the gentle influence that diffused itself around her like the perfume of her beloved flowers, which he had piously preserved, every plant and shrub just as she had left them. He told how the garden was to him a stage, over which flitted the figures of his parents, his old aunt, his nurse, and his playmates. All the recollections of his childhood were played out amid its scenery. It was, indeed, a place where memory made sweet music for him among the trees. Here he had dreamed of his future wife in his short bachelor days, "but never, love, could I imagine anything half so beautiful as you," he told her. Here he had mapped out a career for her to the minutest detail, for, as he said, Isabel was now to take up old Madame Wickford's charities where his mother's dying hands dropped them; his profession and ample

means had enabled him to keep track of her former pensioners. "Though what was," he exclaimed, "the little money he could give to the elevating influence his wife would inspire!" Her beauty he intended should carry comfort to the sick and suffering, her knowledge of a larger world help her to grasp and hold the reins of social dominion. She must take the lead in church matters—must be Lady Bountiful. In a word, he concluded, "I look forward to seeing you develop into just such a patient, helpful, saintly creature as my dear mother was. I hope to find you thinking her thoughts, doing her deeds of mercy, and going down to the grave at last blessed as she was by the whole community."

A sense of mutinous impatience began to burn in Isabel's hot young heart; it was certainly not of charities and churches she had been dreaming when she had married the catch of the season. Nor had he a right, she thought, to arrange her existence for her without so much as consulting her personal taste; it was treating her altogether

too much as one of his goods and chattels, and she determined to make an obstinate resistance before she sank into the colorless, goody-goody life her mother-in-law must have led. Besides, this eternal harping on the perfections of another woman was distasteful. It carried a concealed sting of comparison, which was not blunted by her inner assurance that she was of a vitally different clay from the angelic character her husband described. Privately, Madame Isabel vastly preferred being, as she called it, "a woman of spirit" than assuming this rôle of special town Providence, which did not fit her in the least.

Gordon talked on and on, garrulous in his overflowing happiness, while the girl beside him listened sullenly. Never a woman breathed who enjoyed having another woman's perfections thrust under her eyes for contemplation, and the vain, petted beauty formed no exception to the rule. She was physically tired, too, and not a little disappointed by her surroundings; the town seemed so small, the people so out of style;

everything jarred on her nerves, and she unjustly, but not unnaturally, included her husband in the list of trials. Even Wickford's love-making had taken on a didactic, superior tone that she flinched under like a restive horse. She knew he was still lauding that inexhaustible mother of his, although she did not listen closely, wrapping herself in a cloud of disagreeable thoughts. However, her attention waked suddenly as he opened the wicket in the hedge. She looked up inquiringly.

“Come, dear,” he said, “I want you to know where she lies, the sweetest, tenderest, best woman that ever made a man happy. I wish to point out her grave to you myself, for, as I said, I wish you to strive to emulate her virtues in all things. Oh, if she had only lived to lead you up to her own high standard with those loving, tender hands skilled in all womanly arts!”

She stopped short, and her strained courtesy snapped.

“Does it not strike you, Gordon,” she asked, in a sarcastic tone, “that I have been

phenomenally patient under your sermonizing? You could hardly imagine that you have made yourself particularly gay and amusing on my first evening at home, which you have spent lauding another woman's perfections to my disadvantage."

"Why, Isabel!" he exclaimed, bewildered. "I don't understand. I was talking of my dear mother."

"Oh, la, of course you were!" she interrupted, hastily. "I have had your mother for three solid hours by the clock, and though I haven't a doubt she was a most excellent old body, enough is as good as a feast. As for expecting me to live the life of an almoner of your bounty, you might as well give it up, for I am what I am, and it is as useless to make me over as a last year's bonnet."

Gordon stared in shocked astonishment. "You can't mean," he said at last, incredulously, "that you will not—"

"But I most assuredly do mean it," she broke in. "I am not going to spend my time among ill-smelling poor people and quarrelsome old maids, if that's what you

want of me. It's disagreeable to be cross, Gordon, but you have bored me beyond endurance with your retrospects. The dew is falling; I am going in." So saying, she turned on her heel and soon disappeared in the house beyond.

Her contemptuous withdrawal from his confidences stung him deeply. He had been showing her his Holy of Holies, and she found him "boring." There is always something absurd about rejected tenderness, too, and his exaggerated idea of his own importance, fed on the universal adulation of his fellow-townsmen, made him peculiarly sensitive to ridicule. He was a good man, but by no means devoid of a provincial's touchy vanity. It also greatly aggravated the situation that his mother's memory was mixed up with their first misunderstanding. He felt very bitter at the moment, but wisely determined to go out alone, and reconquer some measure of mental quiet before he saw Isabel again. Seated in the rank grass by the side of old Madame Wickford's monument, he slowly reasoned himself back into

good temper, although the jar of his fall from Paradise had set all his nerves jangling.

Doctor-like, he made allowance for Isabel's fatigue and the thousand physical trials that the old stage-coach travel necessarily involved. Her lonely position called out all his manliness, and as the stars came out one by one, and the spring night distilled a stronger essence from the flowers in the garden, peace returned to him, but the untroubled glory of his young love's morning was gone forever.

CHAPTER II

THE wedding of the town's greatest catch was, of course, the event of the year, and no little interest centred around this new member of society, who had become by matrimonial right the leading lady of the neighborhood. Visitors poured in upon her, women arrayed in the past fashion, who were too much taken up with her city finery and too completely awed by her urbane manners to show themselves at their simple best. She drank tea with them out of handleless blue-and-white teacups—true tea dishes, whose size is a constant astonishment to modern ideas. She honestly tried to be civil, but hers was an observation without sympathy, and it froze any expansiveness in her visitors at its very source. The men were in worse case than their sisters; she set cake and wine before them with perfect

if somewhat supercilious politeness. But these unpolished specimens, whose fingernails even were not always irreproachable, became suddenly conscious as she scrutinized them of an unnatural length of limb and the appalling impossibility of tucking their large hands and feet out of her sight. She watched them all coldly, recording their peculiarities with photographic exactitude, to be repeated with such exaggeration of word and gesture as served these good bovine people up so seasoned by her humor that they were endowed with a new spice of comedy, which could have surprised nobody more than themselves. Her husband, naturally, was treated to many such a dish of gossip.

Although he tried to remember that his own point of view was too nearly theirs to enable him to judge his old friends and neighbors, he could not help a dawning astonishment at Isabel's singular blindness to their higher moral traits. She could and did make him laugh with her at times, but he felt an ever-present and growing uneasiness at the strange unlikeness he discovered

between his dream-wife and his real house mistress.

There, for instance, was Aunt Hannah, whose high genealogical pretension she had piously refrained from scrutinizing. Madame once repeated a long dissertation on his pedigree, of which she had been the bored auditor, and ended it with the peroration :

“Why, now, I never suspected I was marrying into such aristocracy. Your aunt told me your family was the oldest in America, for they came over with William the Conqueror, and you know that is, indeed, a unique pretension. Yes, I’ve made a great match and no mistake.” And she courtesied to her image in the convex mirror over the fireplace with a ludicrous imitation of the old lady’s stiff-jointed movements.

He loved his aunt, but he laughed all the same, and caught and kissed Isabel before she ran away on one of her many errands that accomplished nothing.

There was bitterness in it all though, for, like most denizens of small towns, he had a proprietary feeling towards his surround-

ings, and suffered under a morbid aversion to ridicule; even a harmless joke rankled, and real *lèse majesté* affecting his dignity was more just cause for quarrel in his mind than a serious injury. Had she not been part of his very self, her ridicule of his family and friends would have irritated him sooner; but, with a fatuous forbearance, he let her skewer individual after individual with her sarcasm until she marched upon him in open order. She derided his dress, saying it lacked a certain smartness she was accustomed to in her city beaux, and called his rather pompous if sincere love-making, "born, sir, in a land of liberty," speeches, and begged him to save his polysyllables for his patients, as they might pay him and she could not.

She grew impatient, too, as the novelty of her new situation wore off, and seemed to hold him personally responsible for the ennui of her life. Nothing ever happened in the old town; although people married and died even in such back-waters of existence, they took such a long time about it here that

the neighbors were denied the sensation of an unexpected event of even this mild character.

As Wickford became more and more absorbed in his profession she naturally saw less of him, and, finding diversions to her taste, she joined the local sewing societies, went to tea-parties, the respectable dulness of which was proverbial even in that day, and generally took her place in the society it was her lot to fill. However, it was a useless task for her to try to become part of the town's life; she was as foreign to her surroundings as a paradise-bird in a company of thrushes. Her accomplishments were those of a city dame, and these good housewives valued the things they knew themselves more than the unfamiliar learning she possessed. She was accused of that fatal mistake, "putting on airs;" and as one mother in Israel summed it up, "I do suppose her guardians may be proud of her upbringing, but I cannot judge, as she may know what I do not; I have never found her know anything with which I was acquainted."

Vain and unadmired, the lady naturally

turned to her husband for the adulation which was the breath of her nostrils. But he had been so effectually laughed out of his old-fashioned, high-flown expressions of tenderness that he had withdrawn his adoration into a shell of silence where it was safe from pin-pricks. He was, though, one of the many people to whom the expression of affection is a necessity for its continued existence, and in the silence he forced upon himself his love was gradually but surely dying for lack of light and air.

If his sense of humor was latent, his appreciation of the ridiculous was abnormally sharp where it touched any of his own belongings, therefore it was a futile attempt to elicit the desired flattery from him with bait of retailed compliments, which, she said, had been showered upon her everywhere. There were compliments to her eyes, her figure, her grace, and her hair—always her hair, which she likened to a crown of glory, the heart of a rose, spun gold—anything, in short, that was lovely. Indeed, she gave her vanity free rein, with her imagination for a

driver, and so embellished the little expressions of recognition which her beauty really elicited that there was no courtier in all France who could have made prettier speeches than she invented for herself and repeated for her husband's delectation. She distributed the credit of them among the various towns-people, which astonished him at first, for he knew his neighbors better than she knew her own heart. After a while an uneasy doubt that she was lying dawned upon him, a doubt that she was doing the one thing which no barrier of use nor oath of allegiance could bring him to pardon. Ignorance he could forgive, vanity he might condone, but in his calendar of sins lying stood out supreme, a red-letter offence that burned into the very heart of affection and killed it root and branch.

He tried not to reason over her flights of fancy, but in a man of active mind self-stultification is no easy task, and under the stress of it he grew morose, and returned her pretty frequent outbreaks of temper with a stolid silence that maddened without curbing her.

Every now and then he would make some spasmodic attempt to get out of the divergent ruts that were leading their spirits to such different goals. In this vain search after some common interest he tried to talk of his profession, but was met by a half-laughing protest against the introduction of "shop" into his home conversation. He made her dreams nightmares, she said, which was "bad practice," she knew. He had no better luck in his efforts to awaken her interest in the charities about her. Her sensuous spirit revolted at the pitiful sights and sounds she encountered, and sympathy fell dead when confronted by ugliness and squalor. She frankly said she "would not be willing to buy heaven at the price of evil odors," and when he expostulated she told him tartly that she would be charitable her own way or not at all. There was a revolt within her against the sense of being driven into goodness that made virtue itself positively distasteful.

She remembered sometimes how she had kicked and screamed as a child when they

tried to insist on her doing what she disliked; there were times now when she could have resorted to her old tactics with genuine pleasure; her husband's ideals irritated her no less because she was unwilling to fulfil them. However, she was not averse to posing as Lady Bountiful before the world as well as in her private sanctuary, where she sang pæans to her own generous subscriptions to well-known objects for which Wickford paid. It was not that she experienced any unwillingness to stop the mouth of poverty with a bounty that cost her nothing, nor yet was she harassed by transcendental scruples in regard to pauperizing the population. She simply was not amused, nor in her day were there many who, like the Doctor, already realized the right of the poor to the overflow of the rich. Therefore her descents into the shady places of life were by no means frequent, and when she did go, her excursions usually took the form of visits to the poor-house and the board-schools, where she could dispense her favors without unnecessary contact with dis-

gusting details, and at the same time garner a sheaf of admiration and applause at slight personal expense.

One of her good qualities was a genuine regard for children, as long as they were not troublesome. In common with most pretty people, she possessed no small attraction for them. This genius for making herself amusing to the little folk won her the only cordial friend she made in the old town—a little six-year-old boy living next door, who toddled back and forth on his chubby legs until he grew really puzzled as to which house he belonged. His unsettled state of mind was resolved by the random question of a passing stranger.

“Where I lives?” replied Johnnie, after much thumb-sucking. “I ’spect I must live in here, ’cause, when I cries, Mis’ Wickford she sends me to mother till I’s good.”

CHAPTER III

WITH the progress of the spring Madame began to fill the house with relays of her fashionable friends. The Doctor, who was destitute of musical taste and cursed with a countryman's sensitiveness to noise, was disagreeably conscious of the piano, rattled all day long by the pretty young women his wife drew around her.

The officers in the barracks outside the old town flocked in, quick to perceive that a new centre of attraction had sprung up amid the wastes of bourgeoisie respectability. To help out the military contingent there were every now and then parties of young exquisites down from the city off on a frolic and determined to make the most of it. Madame had a genius for entertaining, and was the envied possessor of a good cook. Even the Doctor's taciturnity could be forgiven him

when one remembered the unexceptionable quality of his cellar. As Captain Read confided to Miss Channing, "It was like drinking with an Egyptian mummy, but this particular mummy, to be sure, footed the bills, and that made a world of difference."

As a whole, Madame's friends were not an ill-natured swarm of ephemera, and only partook of the failings of their class as well as its virtues. Their real sting consisted in the conviction, which they harbored and impressed upon Isabel, that she had very much under-married herself. "The gray mare was the better horse," as the men said to each other.

The old house was large, and under the gay young mistress the silence was broken that formerly brooded sanctuary-like over the great reception-rooms. There were impromptu dances, reels, and old-fashioned cotillions, there were tea-drinkings and games, merry supper-parties and picnics, rides a-horseback, and, in fact, every form of junketing with which the early part of the century was acquainted. The female portion of the town was scandalized; the old women held up

their hands in holy horror, and gossiped with bated breath over stories of the "doings at the Wickfords'," which, as often as not, had no foundation in fact.

The younger members of society were, perhaps, not so rigidly censorious, and had Madame included them in her invitations, as her husband wished, she might have avoided the mortifying social ostracism which afterwards fell upon her. But for the present her own little set was all sufficient. They wrote in each others' albums, sketched deformed Cupids shooting impossible bows, bleeding hearts, and the like; the women exchanged patterns for tambour-work, took and gave confidences, copied music, and made abominations before the Lord in Berlin wool. There were duets and trios with the male contingent, and sleepy neighbors anathematized "The Minute-gun at Sea," "We met, 'twas in a crowd," and the like antiquated ditties that floated out into the perfumed night through open windows.

Individually, the Doctor found his wife's friends intolerably stupid company; their

gods were too emphatically not his gods for much mutual interest to exist between them. However, he had not anticipated the coming of their guests entirely without pleasure, hoping that the variety of human interest about him would relieve this intolerable watch over the death of his ideal. He considered, too, that it was quite possible that his microscopic and continued observation of Isabel might have brought on a kind of mental strabismus, which had cost him his sense of moral proportion and made him unfit to judge her.

But he had, indeed, counted without his hostess when he hoped for a betterment in the condition of his home life; for, with the advent of a sympathetic audience, ten mocking devils worse than the first seemed to have entered into her. She spared neither age nor physical infirmity, nor did she stay her ridicule for any consideration of his family feeling. The vagaries and absurdities of his relations made excellent fun for her city people, and the very knowledge that she was in a measure confounded with them increased her acute sense of their peculiarities,

and made her more anxious to disassociate herself from her surroundings in the eyes of her old companions. It is always those who laugh most who are most fearful of ridicule, and with her the dread of being absurd before her own little coterie was overpowering.

It happened once that she followed him into his office after one of these bursts of mimicry where his paralytic uncle had been the subject under discussion. Wickford was disgusted with the vulgarity and displeased with the heartlessness of it all. His keen physician's sympathy taught him the sanctity of pain, and rendered it as impossible for him to laugh at deformity as to have joked about the good name of his dead mother. He had come away to be alone and smooth his soul's ruffled plumage as best he could.

It had been raining, and although the sun was now shining, turning the dripping leaves to diamond-edged jewels, here inside the room it was damp and the atmosphere heavy with the odor of wet soot. In the black fireplace a great puddle of inky water had gathered.

“Why, it has been raining down the chimney again!” Madame exclaimed. He did not appear to notice her as she entered, but continued to gaze abstractedly at the unsightly hearth. She was sorry to have hurt him, only she thought him vastly unreasonable to be offended, so she touched him on the arm, saying, half-laughingly:

“Wake up, Gordon, do, for goodness’ sake! Was there ever such a man! Why didn’t you call Chloe and have that fireplace mopped up before it ruined the hearth-stone? Ugh! It’s as dank as a grave here. Come outside, I want you to drive over to the Hills’ farm with Kittie Johnston and me.”

He turned suddenly and pressed her face between his hands, looking long and questioningly into her eyes, then—

“Pussy,” he asked, “would you laugh at me, too, if I were disfigured? Good God! I’d rather—” He broke off, kissing her to stop her protestations, and turned to the door, saying: “No, no, dear, make no promises. Make no promises. Let us pray you may never be tempted.”

CHAPTER IV

THE city visitors took their flight with the arrival of midsummer heat ; yet the military visitors still kept Madame company, and time jogged along in the old house with an ominous creaking of wheels. But although the rift between the Doctor and his wife grew daily greater, neither had probably any adequate idea of its width until an incident, trivial in itself, pricked the habitual screen of courtesy with which he shielded her from his incipient contempt.

Wickford returned late one night from a business journey which had detained him a little over a fortnight. He was too tired and travel-stained to make anything but bed and supper agreeable. He had not anticipated anything but a solitary home-coming, and it was a pleasant surprise to find Madame awaiting his arrival and considering him in a

thousand unaccustomed ways. She insisted on carving his cold turkey for him, and mingled with her solicitude for his comfort all the little bits of mild local news she had gathered. Absence had laid a quieting hand on his fevered irritation, the power of her beauty asserted itself anew, and her little efforts to amuse flattered him. At last she ceased talking, and, resting her chin upon her clasped hand, stared at him with a quaint look of mock desperation on her pretty face.

“Well,” she queried, “how long am I to wait?”

The Doctor looked up. “Why, my dear Isabel, you must excuse me; I supposed you had eaten supper hours ago. Let me help you immediately.”

“Oh, la! Was there ever such an exasperating man!” she laughed. “I am dying to hear news; news, my dear Gordon, not turkey, is what I am hungry for. Who did you see? What did you hear? Where did you go? I am simply mad to know what is going on in the city.”

Wickford smiled back at the beautiful,

eager face across the table. "You have given me a multitude of questions to answer all in a breath," he said. "But I will do the best I can. Let me see. Who did I see? There was Colonel Yates and Doctor Polteney; I visited them yesterday. Then, of course, I called on my old friends in Main Street. That brings me, by-the-way, to what I heard. There was some very interesting talk while I was there about the new tariff; it seems to be a burning question among the commercial men as well as our farming neighbors; Mr. Fletcher said—"

Madame broke out in a peal of laughter. "For Heaven's sake, Gordon, did you think I wanted to hear political news? There's a dear, tell me how Fanny Fletcher was doing her back hair, and if you found out the particulars of Julia's elopement."

"I did not mention that unfortunate escapade. I knew it must be a painful subject to her family," Wickford returned, gravely. "I imagined the news about the great political movement might really interest you. However, I do know something you might

care to hear. There is an Italian opera company at one of the theatres—I was really too busy to remember which.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, with sparkling eyes. “A real opera! How I wish I could have seen it! I am dying to know all about it. Tell away, tell!”

“Since you seem to be amused,” he said, regretfully, “I am sorry I didn’t witness a performance; but I have so small a liking for that school of music that it seemed absurd to waste time and money hearing a singer pursue an ‘if’ or ‘and’ through the whole gamut, like hounds in full cry after a fox. You remember what Addison says—”

Madame’s slender stock of patience was running low. “I don’t care what Addison says,” she retorted. “Nor do I ever understand how you can be so insensible to the beauties of music.” It was one of their stock differences, so Gordon braced himself to silent endurance in punishment for his unlucky speech—expansiveness usually brought him into trouble—when, to his astonishment, she suddenly stopped her tirade in mid-career

and, running round the table, perched herself on the arm of his chair, vowing that all the music in Christendom should not make her quarrel to-night. Sitting thus with her hand on his shoulder she catechised the Doctor about the playhouses, the dresses of their acquaintances, and the like, but with such poor success that she was glad when his fatigue gave her an excuse for escaping to bed.

It was so unusual to be thus petted and made much of that, in spite of physical exhaustion, Wickford could not sleep for delight and wonder. If, indeed, love was returning to him "after many days," would it not be sweetened by the long waiting for her slow-born tenderness? He began to build castles for himself, and, although she was the ever-present heart of all things, he determined that in their new relations he would carefully refrain from any effort to key her nature up to the pitch of his ideal. He now realized what had been the discordant note at the beginning of their married life. He would not believe she was vain or untruthful. Nothing so supremely fair, he

argued, could be the casket of such mean vices. She had imagination in excess, that was true; he would teach—no, he must not assume the rôle of school-master any longer. He would make allowances. But to compromise was to admit falsehood in her, and he tried to bully his convictions into the belief that he was mistaken. His memory travelled back and forth over the familiar avenues, seeking in vain a clew to her conduct in a thousand instances which should not lead him to the same *impasse*—a sore conviction of her want of rectitude. In the midst of his chaotic, tossing thoughts a suspicion began to crystallize that she had been actuated by some ulterior motive in this new assumption of amiability. She had wanted something, and was buying it with feigned affection. Although he drove the unworthy thought from him, it recurred insistently in spite of his angry self-contempt.

The gray dawn found him still sleeplessly tossing with wide, strained eyes. At last the day broke rosy and splendid over a steel-blue sea. He would go out in the garden,

he determined, and in the rich glory of the summer flowers forget everything save that his life was young and the year was at its full. As he dressed and ran down the steep stairway he knew just how the perfume of the roses would greet him through the open door, how the long, four-sided grass-plots would sparkle with dew, and here and there the spider's gossamer would be spread out to bleach. Yes, he would go down to the great apple-tree, where he could see the top of his mother's monument stretching above the box-hedge, and all these ungentlemanly suspicions would take unto themselves the wings of the morning.

"The wings of the morning," he murmured; "it is a beautiful image. I will go seek them, and they shall waft my burdens to the uttermost ends of the earth." So meditating, he pushed back the bolt and stepped out into—a desert, whose tumbled desolation was only appreciable when contrasted with the picture his imagination supplied.

The old greensward was gone, the lilies

dug up, the roses cut down, the bridal-wreath planted at his christening destroyed, and of his mother's violets not a plant remained. Even the giant hollyhocks over in the corner of the hedge, that yearly waved the summer such a brilliant farewell, had been completely exterminated. There remained no trace of the old garden save a few pear and apple trees, which had been spared for their utility's sake. Fresh gravelled paths traced odd geometric patterns in the brown earth, and on these beds stood plants, their drooping heads and perfunctory manner of holding themselves marking them as new-comers to the soil.

Some were large growths that showed their artificial breeding, and were evidently getting their first taste of mother-earth; others were tiny seedlings. But everywhere bloom and leaf proclaimed them members of one family; they were, without exception, calceolarias. Some glared at him with scarlet faces, others protruded great spotted underlips of brown and buff. There were blossoms with hairy, yellow mouths too. But all

were equally scentless and gaudy—"like her," he thought, bitterly. He recognized them as the cultivated sisters of the snap-dragons he played with as a boy, squeezing their scarlet jaws that he might look down the flowery throats at the long stamens, which were, he said, the dragons' tongues. There was here even an exaggerated suggestion of this imaginary affinity with evil. The swollen, pouting flower-faces reminded him, somehow, of poisonous things; these unperfumed, soulless blossoms were suggestive of all that he would have gladly believed foreign to his wife. He could certainly, at the cost of a scene or two, have the garden restored to something like its former condition; but the sentiment, the inner heart of it all, was, alas, gone beyond recalling.

It added a second sting to his sense of loss that here was a simple explanation of all her last night's tenderness, then he thought bitterly of his foolish dreaming. The indirectness about her method of meeting the consequences of an offence swelled the long list of her prevarications, and carried away an-

other one of the defences with which he tried to fortify his belief in her truth.

“If she had only been frank about it,” he thought, as he fumbled at the lock of his office door. The two rooms were semi-detached, and possessed a separate entrance where patients could go out and in through the garden without disturbing the household. As no one outside of his immediate family knew yet of his return, he felt reasonably safe from intrusion here. It was a place where he might be alone to face his disappointment, and master his anger before he met his wife, or could deal reasonably with her. She had at once defied and robbed him of his dearest possession. He knew if he spoke now he would say vastly too much.

As the lock yielded under his impatient hands he heard a shuffling step behind him, and, turning, faced his mother’s old factotum, the presiding genius of the garden. The old man stood twirling his cap in his earth-stained fingers. The fustian breeches and knitted stockings he wore were also spotted with new mould, but his bent shoulders seemed

to straighten themselves as he looked up into the eyes of the young master he loved. As Wickford gazed at the ugly Irish face that beamed welcome on him, the hope flashed through his brain that there might be a mistake somewhere—the gardener, perhaps, misunderstood some trivial order, and worked this dreary ruin on his own account; even yet he might bear Isabel blameless.

“This is a bad affair, O’Connor,” Wickford said, pointing to the bare brown beds and the sickly plants upon them. “How did it come about?”

“Sure, Master Gordon, it’s meself that should be askin’ that same question,” replied the old man, with no little reproach in his manner. “Your lady gave me the orders, but I was for holdin’ out agin cuttin’ up all the pretty things your mother planted—may the saints preserve her! I wanted to write you a letter to tell you what the young Madame was afther, and ask if it was accordin’ to your taste. Sez I, ‘Madame, maybe you know a dale more about these plants than I do who have been tendin’ ’em since afore you was

born, but maybe again you don't. I'm not forgettin', though, that the first gardener lost his job without a charakter all along of takin' a woman's advice—bad cess to her!—an' I'm waitin' for my young master's word before I begin.' Sez I—"

"Well, well, why didn't you write?" interrupted the other, impatiently. O'Connor was destroying his new-found excuses, and it irritated the Doctor.

"An' I did so, your honor. But you never came, and sorra a word did ye even send to yer old servant, till a week gone Thursday my lady she comes out here with a letter in her hand, and sez, 'John,' sez she, a-shakin' it at me, 'I'm mistress in this house, and mistress in this garden too, I'll have ye to understand, an', as sure as there's a sky above us, out of it ye go if my orders bean't obeyed, and that quickly, an' here is his honor's letter to prove it.' Well, I haven't lived to my time o' life without l'arnin' that ivery pretty live woman gets what she wants mostly, spite of dead people's wishin's, an', savin' yer honor's pardon, your blessed mother's been in heaven

nigh on five years. Thinks I, Master Gordon has given up as usual. So when she got some people down from the city I made no more bother, and between us we put the garden in the mess it's in now, with all them sick little plants that the Virgin won't favor."

"Did she—did she say I had ordered the work done? Did she show you the letter?" Wickford asked, but his voice sounded far off and strange to him, and his throat contracted as if he were strangling.

"Sure she told me right enough, and I saw the outside of the letter, but not the writin'. It hurt me heart, sir, so it did, to be cuttin' down the plants I've been nursin' since before you was knee-high to a duck. You did write, didn't you?" queried the old man, peering up into the set white face above him. Wickford made some sort of rejoinder, he never knew exactly what, and turned into his office, locking the door behind him. There, alone with his discovery, he set himself to face the calamity which had overtaken him. In the bitterness of his conviction that she would lie, lie even to

gain a childish whim, he looked back upon the time of his slumbering suspicion as on a very heaven in comparison with his present painful certainty.

He threw himself into a high-backed chair, and sat staring at the empty fireplace, his head bowed under a sense of personal disgrace that was almost intolerable. Anything but this he could have forgiven; but to prevaricate—nay, to lie, for, though the word stung him, there was no other that fitted her proceedings—gave a *coup-de-grâce* to his lingering affection. Time slipped by; the hot, heavy air of the closed room, charged with the odor of many drugs, was stifling, but the abyss of his mental dejection made him oblivious to time and condition. The andirons blinked at him, and the broken sunbeam stole unheeded through the chinks of the closed shutter, and crawled inch by inch across the floor as the morning advanced. Some one came knocking; he heard the butler's voice calling him to breakfast. The very thought of meeting Isabel made him shrink with a positive physical sickness. How was

he to take up the burden of his life now that he knew? And yet, did he know?

Was it fair to condemn her unheard on the testimony of a servant, even if he had found O'Connor habitually truthful for twenty years? After all, he had received no letter from the gardener, and his sense of justice answered quickly to the call of an almost moribund affection. There was yet a chance she might be able to explain. How he prayed that she might—prayed as people do in great extremity, with convulsively clasped hands and silently moving lips!

CHAPTER V

MADAME WICKFORD was not enjoying her usual morning nap either. She was perfectly aware of the outrage to his sensibilities that she had committed; but as she considered herself well within her rights as house-mistress, and from experience felt that she could rely upon his just temper answering her appeal to reason, she was only excited and not alarmed. After all, she thought, it was as much her garden now as it had once been his mother's. Of the real danger of her position she was totally ignorant. She had wanted the garden done, and done quickly, before he could return and interpose. The obstinacy of the old Irishman maddened her, as opposition usually did; therefore, with her characteristic impetuosity, she applied the first expedient that occurred to her, confiding in her personal charm to carry

her through when the reckoning time arrived.

However, there is no need of losing points in a game, even when one is sure of winning, so she gave more than usual care to her breakfast costume, although she was at all times too appreciative of her own beauty to be careless of its setting. As she came down the staircase her short and scanty "India muslin" skirts clung so tightly that they half revealed the movements of her long, supple limbs. Her thin, low-heeled slippers were attached by black ribbons that crossed and recrossed her ankles until they disappeared under the embroidered hem of her petticoat. Great puffed sleeves enhanced by contrast the slenderness of her short waist, and the full column of her throat rose superbly out of its setting of lace and frills. The little head was heavy with its wealth of spun gold, which fell in curls on either side of her face, and towered above her in a huge bow of hair supported by an immense Spanish comb. There was a freshness on her cheeks and a dewy look about

her eyes that seemed to answer to the glory of the new day, and to proclaim her an integral part of the summer morning.

She could not find him in either hall or rooms. She looked into the wasted garden, but there was no one, save O'Connor under the apple-trees tying up the weak-stemmed flowers, his shoulders expressive of rebellious contempt. No one to see her, no one to recognize how beautiful she looked in her new frock. It occurred to her Wickford might be over in the office; so, gathering her skirts well out of the way of damp and soil, she tripped across, and began to beat so vigorous a tattoo on the closed door that it made an impression even on the senses of the unhappy man within.

He, like most conscientious people of narrow imaginations, endowed the culprit with his own adequate sense of the vulgarity and disgrace of falsehood. Nor did it ever occur to him that had such an appreciation of its nature existed, the temptation would have been robbed of all charm, and have, therefore, ceased to allure. He had been thinking of

her as all besmirched with a contemptible vice, and this moral aspect so completely occupied his mind that her jocund beauty burst upon him with a strange sense of unfamiliarity—a kind of revelation of loveliness that gave him heart to hope again. The old protest stirred in him anew. The custom of believing that pretty is as pretty looks, which is taught even in the nursery fairy-tales, had struck firm root in his character; and though away from her he could think and weigh evidence, the spell of her physical beauty dwarfed his judgment. It seemed preposterous to associate anything cowardly with the proud perfection of the woman before him. For a moment his soul was besieged by the thought that this was, indeed, a time when ignorance was bliss. Perhaps he had better go on doubting than put his faith to the test where so much was at stake. Yet the doubt itself was, he felt, an insult to her if innocent, a gross injustice to a life-long servant if, on the contrary, she were guilty. He would ask her, and she would tell him the truth, he proudly

decided, looking at the regal carriage of her head.

“Come in, dear!” he said. “I have some questions to put to you. Sit down.” And he motioned her to a chair.

“Gracious powers!” exclaimed she, looking at his drawn face. “But you are ill—are you not?”

“No,” he returned, “not ill, but very unhappy. It was a surprise to me to find the garden—”

“What a pother!” she broke in. “Is it all about a few flowers, of so common a variety that you may see their like in any kitchen-garden?”

Her defiant attitude angered him, and he cut her short with a peremptory gesture that silenced her with astonishment; then, waiting a moment to regain command of his voice, he began:

“Of course you are perfectly aware that my mother’s garden is destroyed beyond repair, that the best part of what I call home has been laid waste to gratify a foolish fancy, which has neither beauty nor charm to excuse it. Your vandalism—”

“Vandalism, indeed!” said she, with a toss of her head. But he continued without noticing her interruptions, speaking in a singularly low, distinct voice.

“It was vandalism of the worst kind—heartless vandalism at that. However, let me congratulate you, Madame, upon having succeeded in producing altogether the ugliest garden I ever saw. My servant tells me that he expostulated and sought in vain to restrain you until I should have returned. He says he wrote to me, that he awaited a reply to his letter which I never received, until you gave him orders to go on with this work of demolition—orders which purported to come from me, and which we both know you never received.”

So far he had controlled himself admirably, although her stormy face and angry protests robbed his speech of gentleness; but now the fear of what she would say shook him like an ague. He strode up to her, and, seizing her wrists with unconscious violence, glared down at her in an anguish of uncertainty. If she harbored any latent intention of facing the

matter out on open lines, his set mouth and burning eyes frightened it away.

“Let me go, Gordon,” she cried; “you hurt me, you hurt my wrists.”

He shook them impatiently. “Answer me!” he hissed, “and tell me the truth—if you never did before.”

But in that moment of time her brain had been working rapidly, and in the midst of her astonishment and terror she had formed her decision—the letter must have been lost. O'Connor's peculiarities of penmanship and spelling were very much against its ever turning up again. As matters stood there was no proof that it had ever been written. The whole circumstance simply resolved itself into a case of assertion against assertion—her word against the old Irishman's. With a sudden movement she twisted herself free, and sprang up facing Wickford furiously.

“You are behaving like a ruffian,” she said, lifting her angry eyes to his. “I will defend myself for my own good pleasure, understand, and not from any regard for you or your estimate of me. You have

gossiped with a servant about my doings, which is despicable enough, at any rate. And now on this valuable testimony you presume to accuse me of falsehood." She had instinctively taken her one line of defence. Her red, bruised wrists pleaded against him, and covered him with a sense of shame at his ungovernable excitement. This outbreak had completely reversed their respective positions; as she presented it, he was now the offender, to be arraigned before an injured wife.

"It's a pack of lies, of course," she continued; "but it never occurred to you that the old man was wild to try the newer plants, and merely got up this absurd story under the stress of your badgering. As you remember, no letter came, and I don't suppose you accuse the whole postal service of being in league against the existence of your mother's precious garden. You would hardly have dared use the physical violence to O'Connor with which you have treated me. He was a man and could defend himself."

“I protest,” he murmured. “I did not intend—”

“Oh, spare me!” she interrupted. “I have but little more to say before I am done. It was I who was persuaded into changing the garden, therefore I had no object in fabricating orders from you, nor would I allow any servant in my house to bandy words with me for an instant. You must, I hope, see by now that this accusation is as improbable as it is untrue, and I hope that you’ll understand that O’Connor must go immediately. Either he or I leave this house before night.”

“But he has grown old in my service,” Wickford expostulated.

“And I,” she retorted, “have that unfortunate prospect before me. I will leave you to choose between us.” Wherewith she swept out of the room as the servant deposited a package of letters on the table. She had silenced him effectually, and he turned to open his correspondence, in a nervous desire to find something that might change the current of thoughts which raced through

his brain, now shadowed by doubt, now bright with surety. But everything was tinctured by disappointment with his own bearing in an interview in which he had hoped to be so judicially cool, so perfectly self-contained.

There were some medical journals forwarded from the city, a newspaper, and one or two letters from patients. He opened them, but could not command his attention sufficiently to grasp their meaning as yet. He was astonished to discover a packet directed in the hand of his man of business, whom he had left only two days before in town.

It startled him to be thus closely followed by a letter from that quarter, and he opened it quickly, dreading some new form of disaster, he hardly knew what. An enclosure fell to the floor; he let it lie as he hurriedly read on through the usual excuses that accompany delayed letters—"a careless clerk, changes in the office," and so forth—that preceded his lawyer's expressions of regret at the oversight.

Wickford sickened with fear as he bent

down and picked up the belated letter. It was a queerly folded, rather dirty paper, sealed with a thumb-mark on red wax.

“To His Honor Gordon Wickford, who is a doctor when he is home, but now is visiting in P—— with Mr. Johnson.”

He broke the seal, and the letter he had devoutly hoped never to see stared him in the face.

“Your honor,” it ran, “the mistres is thretnin to tare up the garden i am not plesed so to do untill you say so so you had beter com hom imegitly if not sooner. The second grass is growen not to say nee hi but we nead some clover seeds wich please bring when you com wich i hope will be imegitly John O’Connor gardener.”

CHAPTER VI

THE Doctor did not appear until late that afternoon, when the servants saw him enter the still-room where Madame was busy with her preserves. They were locked in for an hour together, and the listening negroes could hear their voices rising and falling in angry tones. Then followed the sound of a woman's sobbing, and the Doctor talking in a low voice. At last the key grated in the lock, the door opened suddenly, and he strode out, calling to his man to follow as the servants fell to various occupations with suspicious haste.

That evening my lady met William passing down the hall with his arms full of the Doctor's clothing.

"What are you doing?" she queried. "Those things should be taken up in the green-room."

“I begs your pardon, Mistess,” replied the man. “Massa giv’ me de order to fix he’s things in de room next de office. He say he gwine to sleep dere.” So this was the end. Oh, if she had only known earlier, only understood what she was losing before it had been lost indeed! She was one of those women cursed with the masculine trait of valuing that object most highly which is hardest to obtain and most difficult to hold.

In the midst of his hot reproaches and cutting speech a new-born respect for her husband had kept her silent. When he went out of the room, leaving her sobbing on the hard, round bolsters of the old sofa, she did not realize that such a flood of invective could never pass the lips of a self-contained spirit without blurring all the tender outlines of his love. She now understood the strength of his passion for the first time, and recognized that so high a pressure of feeling was alone possible in a nature strong to resist and strong to bear. Up to this time she had been conscious of a sense of superiority, as of one more *au fait* with

the latest movements in the fashionable world, less ridden by the narrowing tendencies of sectarianism in religion, and broader in her mental atmosphere. Indeed, she had posed to herself as one unfortunately matched with a slower yoke-fellow, whose good qualities must be rated at their full value to render them commensurate with his want of spirit. It was a revelation to be bullied by him. In the intense ennui of a village life even a disagreeable incident was welcome, if sufficiently unexpected. Reconciliation she believed possible, nor did she see that love which is patched with mutual excuses is a sorry garment in which to wrap a sensitive spirit. Explanations rather pleased her, it had always been so easy to get what she wanted, and rely on her charm to mask the obstinate pertinacity with which she held to her desire. As she thought of it she smiled in anticipation, and so thinking arose and went to her room, where she bathed her red eyes, and dropped off to sleep like a child tired with crying. When Isabel came down refreshed and armed for

the fray in full panoply, she might, indeed, have relied on her physical beauty to carry her through worse straits than this, but she had been unfortunate enough to marry a man with an ideal whom the mere excellence of outward seeming ceased to attract when his respect for her spirit was moribund. It is not alone to the individual who harbors it that ideality sometimes proves a scourge; it has a way of whipping the idealist's neighbors as well.

The window was open on the garden, and the summer air fluttered the curtains to and fro; it made the candles gutter in their silver sticks, notwithstanding their tall glass shades, and lifted the light curls on either side of Madame's face as she looked across the table at her husband. The negro butler came and went with the dishes, the Doctor answered her questions courteously, but never sought to catch the clews of talk which she industriously threw out to him. In the stillness between her tentative efforts at conversation the clicking of the silver and china seemed preternaturally loud, and the cry of the cicada

outside in the shrubbery was almost deafening. She looked in his blue eyes, but she could find nothing there. They reflected no answering ray of tenderness, and surveyed her critically without even apparent recognition of her beauty. She remembered he had worn the same expression when he had set her Blenheim spaniel's leg. "I am only a 'subject' to him, after all," she thought.

It was according to her nature to become irritable under even temporary defeat. She felt a sense of injured innocence too, for had she not tried to be pleasant? Her good intentions were so patent to her own eyes that they hid the complexion of her past offences. Therefore she could not understand why he did not respond more promptly to her flag of truce. The irritation increased her characteristic disregard of consequences, and she broke out at last:

"What are you sulking about, anyhow? I've done my best to talk on fifty different topics, and you let them drop one after the other so hard I can almost hear them fall. At the worst the garden is only in decent

order—certainly I had a right to cut down a few common old flowers—and here you are sulking, if you please, when, by rights, it is I who am the injured party. You are perfectly insufferable, Gordon.”

He deliberately laid down his knife and fork and stared at her; his eyes blazed with green lights. Then he quietly sent the butler away on some pretext before he began in measured tones.

“Madame, it is, indeed, my misfortune to have given you a right in my house and a claim upon my forbearance. God knows, were I lucky enough to be free again, no persuasion of wealth, no temptation of beauty, should shackle me to so miserable a destiny as that of being husband to a liar. You have neither sensibility nor decorum; your cheap wit is distasteful to me, your explanations odious. Had you only uprooted my mother’s garden, it would have been enough cause for serious anger; but that is not your greatest offence. Keep the flowers as you like, now; you have destroyed more than that, for by your deliberate falsehood you

have killed my respect, my love for you. Damn it, Madame, I stand no more badgering in my own house, either now or hereafter." His anger flared up at the last to a white rage. He sprang up, overturning his chair with a crash, and strode out of the room before she had time to collect herself. In a moment she heard the door of his office bang behind him, and through the silent halls of the old house imagined she could catch the gratings of the bolt in its staple.

So it was all about that despicable old Irishman! Well, Wickford could do as he pleased, there was no more crying for her now; her face was flushed with anger as she made her way into the parlor. If he wished himself free of her, God knew she was pretty enough to win favor from other men. Yet, somehow, the appreciation of strangers had suddenly grown tasteless to her. She had, tucked away somewhere in her heart, a drop of real affection for her husband, and that modicum of genuine feeling now began to leaven her whole thoughts. If she had cared for him a little more, or even a little less,

self-respect might have aided her at this pass. But the sense of rejected affection goaded her, and there was no underlying stratum of principle to support her against temptation. She was dominated by the instinct of a strong animal—to strike back when it was offended; she would strike, and strike home, too, she thought. If he did not realize how precious a possession he held she would teach him her value by— And at this moment the servant announced Captain Read. The weapon lay to her hand, and she was in a temper to use it.

As the tall, broad-shouldered man entered he was obliged to bow his curly head in the low doorway. Although he wore the white stock and bottle-green coat of a civilian, there was a military suggestion in the carriage of his whole body and the graceful promptness of his movements that proclaimed his profession. Somehow he possessed the dangerous faculty of making the men about him appear ill-dressed and slouching, which quality had been the cause of several broken engagements marking the gallant Captain's course

through the towns at which he had been stationed from time to time. His character was neither very good nor very bad; its strong traits were a certain happy-go-lucky philosophy with which he looked upon life, a fund of brute courage, and a dangerous liking for pretty women wherever he found them. Madame Wickford was pretty enough, Heaven knows, and recognized his jokes with flattering rapidity; besides, she happened to be the discontented wife of a rich man, and the house was a pleasant one for lounging. The cook was good, and there was wine in plenty. Although the Doctor drank little himself, he was an irreproachable host as far as passing the bottle went. So if the Captain was to be stationed out of the world for a time, "these were mighty pleasant quarters," and, to do him justice, he made the most of his opportunity.

Such was the man who opportunely appeared to add point to Isabel's vague purpose. Vain as herself, he was able to swallow doses of flattery too direct to be altogether refined—red-blooded compliments

which knocked sledge-hammer-wise at the door of his affection. She therefore felt quite certain of her game. A stormy atmosphere brooded about her which he noticed immediately, but wisely ignored. "Poor little devil," he thought, "I wonder if it's the husband or the mantua-maker this time." She threw down the embroidery she was finishing nervously—it was one of the Doctor's disappointments that she would not read—and came forward to meet her guest with outstretched hands.

"Where have you been?" she asked. "It is two weeks since I saw you. Two vastly dull weeks. We looked for you in church even, hoping you might have renounced Tom Paine. You know a body always finds you in the most unexpected places."

He pressed the two little jewelled hands he held, saying:

"Not at all, my dear Madame. Here I am in the very place where you of all people ought to know I would turn up as soon as I got back from the city. I came this afternoon, and you see I have hurried to re-

mind you of my existence. Yes, I will take this chair; I can see you better from here. I have been up to P—— to hear the great Mademoiselle Garcia. What a voice! You know her father always sings with her; strange—is it not?—to see parent and child acting together.”

“Yes, strange indeed,” she answered. “But is she pretty? You men are such sly dogs that a woman might sing like the angels if she were ugly, and she could only gain your sympathies from behind a screen.”

“She is pretty, very pretty,” he returned. “But, you know, I have been beauty-struck by fair hair, and she is dark. I assure you my case is worse than being blinded by lightning, so far as that Spanish type goes.”

She laughed, and bade him not be silly.

“’Tis true all the same, and, moreover, I have the weight of public opinion on my side. Who, for instance, ever heard of an angel with anything but yellow locks?” he continued.

“Caught, caught!” she laughed. “You have been ungallant at last, for whoever

heard of a black-eyed angel either. And see —my eyes are as black as a `sloe.”

“My dear Madame,” he protested, “even St. Peter is only a beatified man, after all. Do you suppose any member of the male sex could withstand such glances as yours? He will throw both gates open and rig triumphal arches in the golden streets for your reception, I warrant. I wonder how you could forget that the eyes of all sailors’ sweethearts have been brown since the days of Black-eyed Susan. And you know a woman who places her affections on ship-board must needs be an ‘angel,’ in honest truth.”

“Oh, you army men always have your little fling at the navy,” she answered, laughing. “But, you know, I have a cousin on the *Reindeer*, and so have heard the other side too. Sailors say a regiment leaves more broken hearts behind when it marches off than a whole fleet does as it sails away.”

“Dear lady,” he said, sinking his voice. “Since you champion the navy I begin to

be dissatisfied with my profession for the first time."

"Oh, la!" she exclaimed. "It never rains but it pours. Here have I been for a solid week without a compliment big enough to make a school-girl change color, and now you come back from town to turn my head with an army of pretty speeches."

"I would gladly turn it my direction if I could," he whispered, drawing closer to her, and at the same moment the thought flashed in his mind: "It's the Doctor this time; I wonder how far she would go?"

But Madame was new at the game, and drew back haughtily. It was true he was good company enough, and a fit person to rouse her husband's jealousy, but for all that he should keep his distance, she would see to it.

"I am more interested in what you saw in town than in discussing my own poor charms," she said, coldly. "Be kind enough to open the door into the hall. It is warm this evening." He did as he was bid, and seated himself at a more respectful distance,

feeling a little as if he had been treated to a shower-bath. But he had no intention of going, for all that. Therefore he plunged into a budget of news about the people they both knew in the city, the new fashions he had seen on the streets, the last novel, some fresh songs he had brought, and how people were laughing at the story of old Johnston's quarrels with his young wife. He told her how Jim Jones had married Polly Smith, how this one was dead, that other impoverished. In a word, all the chit-chat about her former friends, from whom her country life and the high rate of postage cut her off. It was nectar to her thirsty soul, and, after long weeks of silence, she drank it in with the provincial delight which belongs to a city dame exiled from her old haunts. "Now here is a man with his wits about him. Gordon came back from town with his finger in his mouth," she thought, angrily, "like a yokel from a country fair."

She did not know how time flew, for under all his chatter there lay an exhilarating sense of his admiration, too delicate to be defined,

but which assured her that she was succeeding in her plan of conquest. She felt that the magic of her beauty was working upon this man of the world, who, being of her own kind, breathed the same moral atmosphere in which she lived, a man whom she could understand, and with whom she therefore felt at home. The knowledge of it filled all the sore places of her vanity and made them whole.

When the Captain took his leave, he too was elated by a sense of conquest, little less agreeable than her own. And as he rode along whistling through the summer night he smiled to himself over the anticipated pleasures of this budding flirtation.

CHAPTER VII

THE next day they rode a long way together into the green fields and the leafy wood beyond. He told her stories of the Indian wars and of that great fight at New Orleans where, boy as he was, he had ridden up to an English battery to reconnoitre and been cheered by the very enemy for his daring. There was nothing she loved like physical bravery, and his tales of wild adventure made her eyes sparkle and her cheeks burn with an incense of admiration which was sweet in the Captain's nostrils. When she returned home late for supper that night—the Doctor hated irregular meals—she walked into the dining-room in no very submissive mood. She felt an exhilarating sense of conquest and defiance. What was the opinion of this sober-sided man compared with the adulation of such a Mars as the Cap-

tain? Her mind was full of the blare and dash of Read's war stories, and the quiet heroism of a life voluntarily subjected to daily contagion was completely lost upon her. The Doctor opened doors, set chairs for her, and picked up her handkerchief when she dropped it; but except for such necessary interchanges of speech as a divided pocket-book and a regard for the servants' opinion compelled, there was no conversation between them. She tried once or twice to put herself on a more amicable footing, but her husband met her with a wall of courteous but decided antagonism which only added fuel to her flirtation. In this unhappy condition they passed through the summer.

About this time Madame remarked a little red spot appearing on Wickford's face; believing it only a pimple, she paid no attention to it at first. But as day after day rolled on and the angry place still burned on his cheek, it impressed itself upon her more vividly. Had she been as free as formerly with him, she would have asked about his health, for he ate almost nothing; his eyes looked yel-

low and feverish, set in dark rims, and she knew he slept badly too. Sometimes, if she were restless in the night, she could see the light from the office window streaming out across the garden. At first his vigils gave her pleasure, for she fancied her scheme was succeeding; but as time wore on, uneasiness took possession of her. He made no sign of relenting, nor did that storm of anger arise which she relied on to break down his iron reserve and make a new channel where their old love and tenderness might flow back and irrigate all her desolate existence. Could he love her and not be jealous? To her mind this was an impossible anomaly; it must be, after all, the thought of her that troubled him. So she tossed her pretty head with a reassuring sense of supremacy, and went her own road, taking small notice of the town's whisperings—for people had begun to whisper, and with some purpose, too.

The truth of the matter was that the Doctor at this time was wading through such deep waters that he was blind to her doings. The shadow of his life had fallen upon him;

the dread that had made him a melancholy boy and a work-loving man took possession of him now. He threw himself heart and soul into his work of healing, hoping in a dim way that, for the worth of the cures he made, he might buy an answer to his prayer that this cup pass from him. He could not sleep quietly, for his dreams were haunted with the indescribable horrors of cancer cases, where as yet no merciful disinfectants and anæsthetics mitigated the disgusting character of the disease. Waking, he was pursued by the remembrance of his father's fearful death, which was constantly before his mind's eye. Sometimes he would beat his hands together wildly in impotent protest as the great fear shook him, then he would throw himself down on his knees praying, until great beads of sweat rolled from his face, that twitched with the earnestness of his supplication. The shadow dogged him day and night.

When he sat looking at his wife a thousand bitter imaginations tortured him. He believed that she would gladly welcome her

freedom—that she was even heartless enough to laugh at him and make game of his impending disfigurement. So there grew within him a fierce sense of antagonism towards her that steered perilously close to hatred. She, who was never ill, would be impatient of him in his coming loathsomeness he decided, remembering her derision of other sufferers. He was goaded by the recollection of a thousand hard things she had said, a thousand slight indications of thoughtlessness to which he attached undue importance in the face of his impending calamity, and which hardened his resentment against her.

At first he smothered his own recognition of the disease with a persistency born of despair. He hoped fatuously that he might be mistaken in the diagnosis of his own case, promising himself, day after day, that he would go to the city shortly and consult medical authorities about his condition. But there were so many ready excuses with which he could stave off this ordeal that the weeks wore away and the months followed them without the fateful journey being undertaken. He would laugh

uneasily when the sense of what he called his cowardice overwhelmed him.

“Ah, well!” he muttered, in extenuation of his own dilatoriness. “Even Ædipus thought twice before he questioned the Sphinx. Occasionally she ate the people, which was unpleasant for her interlocutors.”

The furious ardor with which Wickford pursued his calling took him more and more from home, and it happened thus that, although Captain Read was constantly in and out of the house, they rarely met.

Autumn had dressed the old town in sober suits of brown, laced with yellow and red; there was a sharp tang in the salt sea air that sent the blood dancing. The smell of the ripe apples, crushed by the cider-presses, pervaded the orchards, and in the fields the stacked dried corn showed the unsuspected wealth of golden pumpkins that grew between rows. Out in the woods the ferns had grown wan and pale, and the fading leaves began to carpet the dead summer's undergrowth. Day after day the officer and the lady rode away from the tree-shaded

streets to the silent autumn forests where silver-gray oak-boles upheld canopies of brown velvet leaves. The gum-trees burned like fire, and the hickory and sassafras gleamed golden over the red sumach and whortleberry that made the old fields seem deluged with the blood of some mighty battle. At times the long lines of homing ducks would pass them, or a V of wild geese would sweep over their heads, crying "honk-honk!"

"Look," he said one day. "They remind me of your good Aunt Hannah over the way. She seemed just as scandalized as they do when we rode off."

My lady laughed a little tremulously. "Yes, I am a public benefactor," she said. "What would they do for talk without me? I don't suppose you know that these estimable women have decided me unfit to associate with them."

He turned on her in blank amazement. "Poor little girl!" he exclaimed; then leaning over and patting her bridle arm, "Would to God it were my right to defend you!" He had grown really fond of her in their

close intimacy—as fond as a man of his class ever is of a woman by whom he believes himself beloved. He did, indeed, possess the animal instinct which would have prompted him to fight for a creature that was his own ; but as for rendering any one the tribute of perfect continence, it was as far beyond him as the moon. Like the great Villiers, he would have even been astonished had such a thing been demanded of him. The Doctor was perfectly incomprehensible to him in many ways, but most in this, that, although it was evident that Wickford was on strained relations with his wife, there was no other woman who had the faintest right to boast of his devotions. She turned her head away to hide her tremulous lips. It was very, very lonely at Wickford house, and this man, who asked nothing of her save the cordial welcome so easily given, who indulged and petted her as though she were a child, flattered, sang, laughed, and rode a-horseback with her, had come to be the one cipher representing pleasure in the barren sum of her existence.

“Don’t!” she said, almost rudely shaking off his hand. She knew she must keep rein on herself or she would cry. She touched her horse with her riding-whip and they started forward, galloping briskly, until they fell into a quieter pace as they threaded the narrow woodland paths.

“Did you know I was going to take tea with you to-night?” he asked, laughing. “I hope you remembered it, because I shall be ravenous.” He was making talk to save her, and she recognized it gratefully.

“No, I did not remember, for the best of reasons—you were not invited; but come along, and take what O’Connor elegantly calls ‘pot-luck.’ The Doctor’s away, but, for the matter of that, I might as well be ostracized for a sheep as a lamb.”

“Do you mean,” he answered, gravely, “that I am the cause of all this hubbub? Because, my dear young lady, I would not for the world get you into trouble with your most excellent husband or his very respectable kin. I don’t want to take my marching orders if I can help myself, for, indeed,

though you won't let me say so, it will be a hard day for me when you turn your back on me. My life has not been one of roses; it's the thorns I ran against mostly, and until you came into it there were precious few influences to help me keep straight. If it worries you, little woman, say so; for though the time I may have with you will probably be short now, it would be sorry affection—I mean friendliness—that would let you suffer for my salvation. You have been friend, comrade, angel, and—everything since I have known you. There never was so good a woman that was so beautiful, or so beautiful a woman that was so good." He had played prodigal at too many women's knees not to be letter-perfect in his part; he really did like Madame, and his big blue eyes ended his appeal with a look eloquent of much that he dared not express as yet in set phrases.

"What! Going?" she said, with a start.
"How soon?"

Her pained surprise flattered him. "I don't know exactly," he returned. "There has been a rumor of our being ordered out

to the frontier; our time for idling is almost over. The Colonel was talking about it at mess to-day; it will be the hardest break-up I ever made."

She was playing with fire, and she knew it; to be sure, she might burn her fingers, but a sense of the danger gave her dull life a zest it had lacked heretofore. Her love for Wickford, though of an inferior variety, was vital enough to protect her from any illusion in regard to her present state of feeling. She knew she did not love the Captain, yet the rectitude that would have sent her beautiful lover to the right-about was beyond her. He was so handsome, she argued, and at least he cared for her. Who else minded where she went or what she did? Who else believed her good, or felt elevated by her influence? Not even that cold, silent man she called husband, who packed himself off in the stage-coach the other morning without even so much as a good-bye for her. There was a good deal of childish in consequence about Madame which she had not laid aside with her short petticoats,

and just at present flattered vanity on one side, and wounded pride on the other, lashed her into a frame of mind in which she hated everybody but the Captain, and would not "be good" at any price. What was the use of trying to win back a love she had completely forfeited? She would make Wickford pay for her rejected advances! Because she knew it would displease him for her to sup alone with the officer she was doubly determined to do so.

"What do I care for a pack of toothless old gossips?" she broke out. "You are my friend, and Heaven knows I have not a plethora of that commodity; my husband does not trouble himself to object. Come along then, and let us feast together; I believe there is a duck and some salad, and we will shock Aunt Hannah a little more. It may act as a tonic for her blood, instead of those nostrums she is always taking. I wonder if I told you how she dosed me with herb tea when I was first married and imprudently acknowledged to a cold.

"There were bottles and bottles of all sorts

of decoctions setting along the window-ledge and topping the mantel-piece the last time I was there—vastly ornamental to be sure! I protest it smelt so like Gordon's stuffy office that I felt at home for the first time."

He laughed good-naturedly, and answered: "I don't half blame the women for hating you, you're so confoundedly pretty, and you do make such game of them."

"Please don't you, too, begin to lecture me," she implored. "Gordon used to, once upon a time, on the vanity of human wishes, I believe, when I wanted a new dress, or the respect the Spartans showed the aged if I told him about the absurdities of those old frumps. Dear, dear, but applied classics were tiresome until I routed out my school history in self-defence, and found out about those disgusting people. The next time he began, 'My dear, I regret to see you display a levity in your conduct towards the aged.'" She mimicked the Doctor's measured accents to the life. "'The Spartans, who were the nation best fitted to preserve their autonomy in the Peleponnesus—' I

let him get that far, and I made up my mind I would not be bullied by the old impostors any longer."

"What did you say?" queried the other, bending a twig out of the way of her broad plumed hat.

"Thank you; what did I say? Why, I told him that I had more than my fill of reproaches for my general impiety, and if he would only be consistent in his demands I should be most happy to amend my manners. He naturally stared at this, so I explained. He was half worrying the life out of me about that time to get me to visit a sort of child's hospital he has at the edge of town, full of all sorts of deformed, ugly little creatures—it makes one lose one's appetite to think about them. He had also been expostulating about the soup; it was bad, too—I saw to that," she added, with an upward glance and a ripple of laughter at the memory of her stratagem. "Well, to come back to my story, I asked him if I were wrong in supposing that it was the Spartans who exposed unsightly children on the

mountains. 'Yes,' he answered, bewildered. 'What has that to do with it?' I went on: The Spartans ate precious bad food, too; they went a-hunting slaves when the game was scarce, and told lies for a very living. Now, as I am a thorough-going woman, if I were to follow the example of these truly genteel people at all, I insisted I should do it consistently. He must therefore stop tormenting me about his hospital, which was a highly immoral institution from a Spartan standpoint; he must give up complaining about the dinner; and, I said, 'I will trouble you to leave Thomas alone in future when I send him with a message that I am not at home.' I have heard nothing of the Spartans since," she concluded.

They laughed together over the Doctor's defeat, the Captain as merrily as a man may at the mishaps of a supplanted rival, but in Madame's heart there arose a longing for the old days. Even if her husband scolded her, they were better, infinitely better, than the eternal silence that crushed her like a nightmare. Oh, he should say something,

he should, even if it were only to anathematize her! She was one of those coarse-fibred women who revel in violent emotions of any kind, but to whom silent disapproval is torture. Had the Doctor stormed at her it would not have disturbed her nearly so much as did his studied civility; quarrelling and "making up" formed part of her ideal of happiness.

She was rather silent on the way home, while he drifted into stories of hunting experiences in some Western post, to which she answered at random. Though he recognized that her attention was not with him, he talked on kindly to fill in the pauses, imagining that the news of his near departure was the cause of her abstraction. A gray sea fog had blown up while they rode, and now muffled the whole country in ghostly indistinctness, through which the waning twilight struggled feebly. A colony of swallows were holding some kind of conclave on the stone-wall by the wayside. Every now and then one or another would rise a few feet in the air, and, cir-

cling about a moment, rejoin his fellows again.

“Look at them!” said the Captain. “They are as uneasy as a regiment under orders to march. They’ll be going soon.”

“Ah yes!” she answered. “It is a bad presage; don’t talk about orders or marching, it makes me nervous. I believe there’s a storm brewing somewhere; as Aunt Hannah says, I feel it in my bones.”

They turned into the lane by the graveyard. The place looked more desolate than ever, choked with its withered summer weeds and rank grass dripping with the dampness. In her overwrought state the gray head-stones seemed to grin at her, and the long white shaft over old Madame Wickford loomed up like a shrouded figure in the mist. Isabel shuddered, and pressed on to the garden gate.

“Come in here,” she said; “it’s too late to horrify the neighbors, so let’s give up going round to the front door. We will have tea just as we are, and afterwards we will try over the new music you sent for. Let us get in to the light; it’s eerie

out here. I feel like something was going to happen to me to-night." He jumped from his horse, and, lifting her lightly, set her down by the gate. A negro hostler led the animals away as Madame and the Captain crossed the garden. The calceolarias had thriven during the summer, but the earlier frosts had made a sad havoc among them; it was a desolate-looking place on this dull evening.

"You don't know it," she said, "but this garden is tragic ground."

"How do you mean tragic?" he returned.

"Never mind now, it's a long story," returned my lady. "And you are to be as hungry as a hunter, remember."

"Well," he laughed, "it's the plain truth. I would appreciate it better after supper. 'A sad tale's doubly saddened when it is long,' you know."

As they entered the dim-lit hall a little figure came running towards my lady, eagerly exclaiming, "Granma's sick, and mother's gone. So I've come to take tea and spend the night, please."

“Dear, dear,” said Madame, kissing Johnnie. “I am vastly popular to-night, to be sure; you are my second uninvited guest. But you are very welcome all the same, little man.”

The Captain groaned; he and Johnnie were fast friends, but there was such a case as having too much of a good thing, and the child was a very good thing, indeed, when he was replete without being sleepy. The two grown people made a good deal of the baby, however, for he came in the nick of time, to save what the Captain called “the position,” and Madame “the situation.” Johnnie ate and drank four times as much as was good for him, and revelled in preserves and sweetmeats to his heart’s content, but greatly to the detriment of his little stomach.

CHAPTER VIII

THERE was a wood fire crackling on the hearth, and the candles were all lighted when the three entered the sitting-room.

“I can’t get this place to look like home,” Isabel said. “These straight-backed old chairs always seem as prim and uncomfortable as children with their company manners on.”

“I ain’t uncomfoble,” proclaimed Johnnie from the Captain’s shoulder, “and I ain’t prim either.”

“Of course not, of course not; you’re the nicest little gentleman that ever was,” Madame hastened to assure him. “But we are going to play music now; don’t you think Chloe had better take you up to by-by.”

“I don’t wa-a-a-nt to go by-by,” began the boy, with a suspicious prolongation of

his vowels that presaged a howl. "Johnnie ain't sleepy."

"Come, come, little soldier, don't pipe your eye!" exclaimed the Captain, hastily putting the child down. Both the grown people had some experience of that young gentleman's staying powers when he once went fairly on the war-path.

"If Johnnie will be quiet he may stay where he is, then," said Madame, wisely discreet in the face of danger. The child settled himself on the bear rug before the fire, and began to amuse himself famously with the numerous playthings his hostess provided, talking merrily to himself the while. There were picture-books full of beautiful ladies with high foreheads and very long necks; there was the silver snuffer-tray for a wagon, in which he drove the glass paper-weight around the hearth-rug. He had thoughts of demanding the late dahlias blooming in a vase on the centre-table, but luckily his intimate friend the cat appeared just at this juncture, and he forgot about it.

In the meantime Madame threw aside her

broad plumed hat, and, gathering up the ample skirts of her riding-dress, searched here and there for the music she wanted.

“I must have left it up-stairs,” she said. “Wait a minute while I run and see.”

The soldier, Johnnie, and the cat were all in a high romp when she returned ; between them they were making such a noise that it completely drowned the sound of her fumbling at the door with overburdened hand. At last she got it open, but in the effort her long skirt dropped from her arm and tripped her when she tried to move forward. As she stumbled, Read sprang forward and caught her in his arms. She broke away from him as soon as she could regain her footing, exclaiming, with a scarlet face :

“How awkward I am, to be sure ! But here’s the music ; let us begin at once.”

The Captain bent to pick up something from the floor ; his pulses throbbed violently, and a thousand thoughts that are the better for imprisonment knocked tumultuously at the gates of expression.

“Wait an instant,” he said, to gain time

for self-command. "I have found some most attractive metal; how did this get here?"

"Oh, that," she said, indifferently, glancing over her shoulder. "It's an old picture of me that Gordon doesn't like; my candle blew out, and I knocked it over in the dark. So, rather than keep you waiting while I set things to rights, I brought it along. Come, let's try the music now; see, here's a duet." She began humming as she ran over the notes. He laid down the little gold case, and joined her at the piano as he was bid.

"O'er the far blue mountain, o'er the dark sea-foam,
Come, thou long-parted one, come to thy home"—

rang the two voices through the house, flooding the rooms with profane melody under the very noses of the sour-faced pictures of ministers and lawyers, who had each sat in their father's place, successively, since the Wickfords began to be a great family.

The little miniature which she had dropped was one that Isabel ordered for her husband in his courting days. Some post-marital

comment about the likeness annoyed her, so she had taken it away from him, and set it up on a little stand among the essence-bottles and brushes that littered her spindle-legged dressing-table. When he begged it again she refused, saying, laughingly, that she wanted a standard to judge her age by when the wrinkles came.

Song followed song, sometimes one and then the other, sometimes the two voices married in perfect concord. They were thin, commonplace tunes, but are even now sweet with the perfume of past years. In the cupboard of the old house the same yellowed copies of music from which they sang that night lie mouldering quietly. There is

“From the white-blossomed sloe my dear Chloe requested
A sprig her fair breast to adorn,”

which he set ringing through the house on the tide of his splendid barytone. There, too, is

“’Twere vain to tell thee all I feel,”

that she trilled to him, and

“Quick mount thy gay and gallant steed, my soldier
boy,”

its cover adorned with a picture of an impossible horse, with legs of unequal length, the bridle held by a deformed Greek soldier in a semi-Turkish uniform, who touches the hand of a lady in a steeple cap, floating veil, and bloomer costume. She is supposed to urge him to

“Mount, the foe is near—
Greece calls thee in her hour of need,
And who but thou shouldst hear?”

One feels dread forebodings for a nation defended by such a solitary trooper.

Somehow the tinkling old tunes reflect the spirit of those times when the lives of men and women swung between the two poles of war's brutality and a super-refined sentimentalism which seems mawkish to their more prosaic grandchildren. To us these songs are only interesting as musical curiosities, over which we smile indulgently; but for the man and woman at the piano they were the living melodic expression of their generation, and

in the shadow of their coming separation the notes throbbed with a burden of sorrow, of dreaded loneliness, and a weight of unspoken passion that wrought them both to the highest pitch of nervous tension.

The little boy on the hearth-rug had gone to sleep long before Madame shut the piano.

“I suppose I had better have him carried up-stairs now,” she said, tentatively, looking down at the child’s figure, relaxed in perfect repose. “See, he has got hold of my miniature, too, and has gone to sleep with it in his hand.”

“I would let well enough alone, if I were you,” returned her companion. “Listen. Who can be knocking at this hour? It’s nearly eleven by the clock.”

The clatter of the brass knocker continued. “Here, let me go to the door. It may be some one who wants to see the Doctor.”

A sudden apprehension shook her, every overwrought nerve in her body seemed strained to listen; the wind had risen since dark, and was moaning in the chimney. She heard him fumble with the bolts; it seemed an

age before the door flew open with a crash, and the storm rushed in whooping, making the candles flicker and starting the smouldering logs into a blaze. Some one was talking to the Captain in the hall; now the door closed, and she heard his quick step coming back alone. The presentiment of impending evil that had oppressed her all day now took the form of anxiety for her husband; her fear grew into an awful certainty of misfortune as she listened for the Captain's return. Could Gordon have been taken ill? Was there an accident on the journey? Could he even be dead? "Oh, God," she prayed, dumbly, "not without saying good-bye—not angry with me, and without good-bye!" She stood with clasped hands waiting her doom as Read entered. His face was white and set; he walked up to her and took both her hands. "It's come, Isabel," he said, simply. Her anxiety lifted her out of the level of small things, and she hardly noticed the use of her Christian name.

"Not dead! Oh, for Heaven's sake, say he is not quite dead!" she implored.

“Who’s not dead?” queried the mystified Captain. “Worry has turned your brain, child. There ’ll be many a poor fellow stiff and stark before we get back; but we’re alive enough now, all of us. The Indians are out on the war-path again, and the regiment’s ordered to the front.”

The relief from the horror of her imagination was too great a transition for her overstrained nerves; she broke out into an hysterical fit of weeping, which the Captain totally misunderstood.

He dropped on his knees beside her, and drew her suddenly towards him. “Ah, beloved!” he said, “don’t make it worse for me; God knows it’s hard enough to leave you as it is.”

She struggled away from his embrace, startled from the total absorption in her own fears. “Worse for you!” she exclaimed, springing up and facing him. “Worse for you, because he is alive. Ah, why should you care? It is I who ought to be glad if he died—I, whom he tortures, who love him in spite of it all, and would give my life, drop by

drop, for even a little of the tenderness I did not value when I had it. Oh, if you knew what it is to sit face to face with the corpse of your dead happiness, as I do every day and all day, you would understand what hell is!"

The Captain staggered to his feet. Here was a revelation indeed. He had always thought of Isabel with a half-contemptuous tenderness, as of a pretty woman fallen an easy conquest to his fascinations, but the discovery of her absorbing love for Wickford piqued him. "Why, in God's name," he thought, wrathfully, "had she the bad taste to hanker after that curmudgeon of a doctor, who didn't even possess wit enough to keep his wife out of harm's way?" He realized perfectly that her tragic love set her beyond his reach, and respect for her wifeness made itself heard amid the crash of his falling illusions. This respect, which had been absent before in his feeling for her, put her whole personality in a new light. It is doubtful if he had ever been so genuinely fond of Isabel as he was at this moment of his awakening.

She looked very little and desolate, huddled together with her face hidden on the arm of her chair and her slender body shaken by sobs. A great pity for her surged through him, sweeping away the lingering remnants of disappointed vanity, and leaving a regretful, compassionate friendship in its place. If he could have stayed now, he thought, he could have been so much to her; he might have taken her part in brotherly fashion. In his new-born respect there was contained an instant oblivion of his past, that enabled him to imagine himself capable of friendship with a woman unalloyed by any baser impulse.

The clock ticked stolidly on, the moments were flying, the night was already old, and there were many things to be done before sunrise. It was time to say good-bye.

“Haven’t you a word for me?” he murmured, reproachfully, as he bent over her. “I am going into certain danger, perhaps to my death. God knows, little friend, if we will ever meet again.”

She caught his hand, and laid her wet

cheek against it. "Forgive me," she sobbed; "I had no right to burden you with my griefs, to-night of all others. You have been so good to me, though, all this dreary time. Ah, why must I give you up, my one friend, my one friend!" And a new paroxysm of weeping shook her. He knelt down beside her again, saying:

"All things have an end, Isabel—even this dear summer, that shall ever be sweet with the memory of the only good woman who has ever called me friend. Won't you believe me, dear, and kiss me good-bye, just as you might if I were dying? Only once," he pleaded; "this once for good-bye."

She lifted her head and stared into his face with terrified, questioning eyes. In his calm, clear gaze there was no vestige of passion, only the kindly sorrow at parting that his words betokened.

"I will not touch you unless you say so, dear," he assured her.

"I cannot, I cannot," she cried. "He would never understand; I could never tell

him. Oh! my friend, anything but that—only I cannot do that.”

A sudden thought took possession of her; she rose swiftly and passed over to the child before the fire. He had awakened, and was sitting up regarding the man and woman with sleepy eyes.

“Johnnie, give me the picture,” she said, as she gently disengaged his clasp from the tiny case. She next caught up a pair of scissors that lay beside her tambour-work and cut off one of her bright curls.

“Take these,” she said, holding the two keepsakes towards him, “and remember I shall pray for your safety, day and night, with all my heart. God bless you, and now—good-bye, good-bye.” The tears were streaming down her beautiful face as she stood before him. The Captain received the little tokens speechlessly. He had not intended to say anything but a formal farewell. But the temptation was too great; the habit of his life had formed no barrier to stem the tide of his desire. He stooped and kissed her hastily where she stood. Before

she could recover she heard the great door clang behind him and his horse's hoofs beating the road in a rapid gallop.

"I want my 'ittle picture," wailed the child on the hearth-rug. "You's a bad girl to take it, and I won't love you. I wa-a-ant my 'ittle picture."

As Madame stumbled up-stairs, bearing the kicking, crying boy in her arms, she paused on the landing in astonishment, for a long finger of light pierced the heart-shaped openings in the office shutters. Fatigue and sorrow clogged her mind, and she only wondered, in a dull, befogged fashion, how the Doctor had managed his arrival so quietly.

CHAPTER IX

WICKFORD returned from the city bearing his death-sentence with him; he had heard the worst, and the worst had exceeded even *his* expectations. Indeed, although he thought he was fully nerved to meet whatever doom awaited him, the assurance of such speedy disfigurement had broken down the guards of his fortitude, leaving him a prey to the purely animal longing for sympathetic companionship. He would have given the world if there had been any one to whom he had the right to carry this intolerable burden of sorrow, with the assurance that he should find consolation and comfort. He felt doubly cut off from humanity by the loneliness which oppressed him and added to the misfortune that would shortly make him a sickening horror to his fellow-men. In his supreme distress he even

went so far as to form some project of throwing himself upon his wife's mercy. But the memory of the unfailing ridicule and disgust with which she contemplated all traces of bodily deformity made him pause. Yet he had, at last, decided to see her and tell her the full extent of his misfortunes—information which he judged it her right to possess; he would then be guided in his subsequent conduct by the manner in which she received the very bad news he brought.

There were only two inside passengers in the coach that night—himself and a thin, inferior-looking man, burdened with an appalling number of bundles, that caused him great uneasiness as the coach rattled and bumped along the road. A sea fog engulfed the surrounding country. The window-glasses dripped with moisture, until a great wind sprang up rolling the mist aside like a curtain. Wickford cleared the pane with his handkerchief, and looked out at the wrack of the coming storm blown across the face of a watery moon. The trees “stretched bare, protesting arms,” which the

tempest whipped in its anger, tearing from them the few dead leaves they could still boast.

“It looks as though we were in for a wild night, stranger,” said the little, weazenefaced man beside him.

“Like enough,” said the Doctor, folding his arms and drawing up the cloak round his face.

“Be you going far from here?” the little man continued. “I won’t get to my stopping-place till to-morrow noon.”

“I get out at the next change of horses,” Wickford answered shortly, and fell silent again.

“Excuse me, stranger, but how did you come by that sore on your face?” the other persisted. “My wife she had one just like it, and it killed her a year come Christmas. She was a fine-looking woman when I married her; but before she died—Lord! her jaw was clean eat off, and her nose—”

Wickford glared at his neighbor until the very dimness seemed luminous with his anger. “Who permitted you the imperti-

nence of putting personal questions to me?" he thundered. "Be silent, or I will wring your miserable little neck."

The little man shrank away to the far corner of the coach, flattening himself against the opposite side of the seat, for he felt secretly assured that he was shut up with either a cutthroat or a dangerous lunatic. Therefore he concentrated his mind upon keeping still as a rat until help should be at hand.

They bumped and rattled on through the night, and in the silence within the vehicle Wickford could hear the driver calling to his horses and cracking his long whip now and then to urge them to renewed exertion. The sounds and sights around him partook of the unreality of a dream, compared with the sharp sorrow that was gnawing his heart. Sometimes he wondered if he would not awake and find himself in his own carved four-poster; the terror of his situation was too stupendous; even this little human weasel remarked his disfigurement already. "Oh!" he thought, "if I only had the right to

die—if I could only kill myself with a clear conscience!” He revolved in his mind the thousand instances of self-destruction that his classic education had taught him to respect, and remembered with a wan smile how he had admired Seneca for heroically playing with the ebb of his existence. To die now seemed so simple a thing in comparison with the duty of living, which his ingrained religious prejudice thrust upon him.

At last, with one supreme jolt, the stage drew up at the door of an old inn; the lanterns flashed back and forth as the stable-boys busied themselves about the steaming horses. He heard the men calling to each other, and the driver’s half-laughing curses on their tardiness. Why should he wait to be driven the few steps to his own door? He decided he would walk home and send down for his traps in the morning. The still watches of the darkness, he hoped, might help him to face his sorrow quietly and become acquainted, in a measure, with the aspect of his own horrid fate. He opened the stage-door and disappeared into the night.

No sooner was the coast clear than the little, thin man burst out of his castle of bundles and stumbled down the coach-steps with shaking knees. "Where's the landlord?" he cried. "Show me the landlord." Mine host hurried up. "For God's sake, give me a drink quick!" stammered the little fellow, his teeth chattering with fright. "I have been shut up with a lunatic all the way from K——."

There was a great deal of bustling about, and the little man was at last wrapped in a huge quilt by the tap-room fire, with a stiff tumbler of hot toddy in his shaking hand. The broad-shouldered driver came in to warm himself and hear the latest particulars of his passenger's woes.

"What's the matter with that fellow?" he asked, as he strode into the circle of fire-light. "There warn't no crazy people in the coach at all. Him and Doc. Wickford was the only passengers inside. I reckon he won't pretend the Doctor's crazy."

The liquor and light had revived the spirits of the man with the bundles. "What ails him, then, if he ain't cracked?" he de-

manded in a shrill voice. "I was passin' the compliments of the day with him, and I sez, sez I, 'Stranger, what might be the matter with your face?' Then I told him about my old woman, how she died of cancer, just as polite as could be. I tell you, sir, he turned on me like a rattler, and bid me hold my tongue, a-threatening to kill me if I opened my mouth again."

"Humph," ruminated mine host. "His father died that way, and his grandmother, too. Maybe that's how he come not to like hearing about them diseases."

"Well," returned the little fellow, in whom the toddy began to breed false courage, "it may be all very fine, but it ain't to be expected that every passenger in a stage-coach is up in his family history. I'll go as far as anybody to keep up the conversation, if agreeable, but if not—well—" And he threw out his hands with an expressive gesture of helplessness. The horses were in now, and the travellers resumed their places. The whip cracked and the coach lumbered off on its night journey.

Wickford entered the garden by the wicket in the hedge, so no notice might be given of his coming. He was unstrung and totally unfit to meet his wife at the moment; he labored under the oppressive aloofness begotten by sorrow, which endows even the most familiar objects with a strangeness borrowed from the new relation that we thenceforth bear to our dead selves. The old landmarks seemed to be obliterated by the torrent of his anguish, and he felt no more of the balm he anticipated from a sense of home-coming than he might have experienced in entering any way-side tavern. His disease created a spiritual alienation from all things, and in his heart, like the Jewish lepers, he cried out perpetually, "Unclean! unclean!" proclaiming his eternal separation from humanity. He saw the light and heard the bursts of music swelling out from the drawing-room, and vainly tried to smother an unreasonable sense of resentment towards Isabel because she was enjoying herself so thoroughly, while he shuddered under the lash of his fate out here in the cold. No

doubt she had guests ; he decided he would not disturb her then ; it would be time enough to thrust his sinister presence upon her when they were gone.

Everything in his office and the adjoining room was just as he left it, with a fire laid against his coming. He soon kindled a blaze upon the hearth and threw himself into his high-backed chair, where, in the deep silence, broken only by the howling of the wind and the distant booming of the surf, he determined to fight out his great fight alone, and win such quietness, born of desperation, as was to be his spiritual meat and drink until he died. In the tense agony he endured he took no note of time ; all the forces of his nature waged war within the narrow confines of his heart, and their storming was mightier than the rage of the winds without. The temptation to self-destruction surged over him from time to time, and his belief in a personal devil made him feel almost as if he could see the dim spectre clutching at his laboring soul. There was a supreme moral courage in the man that sustained

him in the midst of this spiritual upheaval, and at last the silent dignity of resignation began to settle upon him. He would live—yes, and carry on his work, too—until the end, nor should any man see him in the last stage of his fearful malady; his plan was fixed. Now he would go and say good-bye to that sweet temple of all his ruined hopes. He would look on her for the last time face to face; he would see the sheen of her hair, the rosy flush of her skin once more, for from the morrow all things would only come dimly to him seen through the fold of a black veil. The fire burned brightly, but he lit a candle. Who knew when he would come back? Perhaps she would meet him with tenderness; perhaps, after all, the difference between them might be bridged. There were all sorts of half-fledged thoughts nestling in his heart as he strode out into the night; the music was silent, so her guests must be gone, yet there was still light burning in the drawing-room. However, he would look in before he intruded upon her merry-making. Thus thinking he drew close to

the window, his footfalls silent on the carpet of damp, dead leaves. The picture in the cheerful, warmly-lighted room seemed ever afterwards etched into his brain as by lightning. In a flash he saw her cut the curl, he saw the Captain take it with something else that glittered, he saw the kiss, and the soldier's hurried departure. Then, with an inarticulate cry of rage, like a tiger's snarl, he rushed madly through the garden towards the street; but it was too late, he could discern only the rapidly vanishing figure of horse and rider as they galloped through the night.

In his blind fury he ran forward, yelling to stop them, but the wind drove his voice back in his teeth, and clutched his garments as if to hinder his mad race after vengeance. Bare-headed and panting, he struggled on until in his wild career he caught his foot in a protruding root and fell heavily to the ground, striking his head.

He never knew how long he lay there, but when semi-consciousness returned to him he staggered up, and with shaking limbs re-

traced his steps. The whole night seemed full of demons to his bewildered senses— devils who howled and laughed in his ears, and blazoned his shame on the very house-tops. He was obliged to sit down and rest at times, but after a while he found himself at his own door.

All the candles were snuffed out, the great lower rooms lay in utter darkness save for an occasional flicker of the smouldering logs in the drawing-room. There was light upstairs in Madame's apartment, though. That room he thought of, even in his present half-crazed condition, with a great heart-throb. It was the nest he had prepared for her with so much loving care; the chamber whose threshold he had not crossed since that day, in midsummer, when his respect for his wife suffered an untimely death.

Madame was nearly ready for the night; she had sent her maid away and was gazing into the mirror unseeingly, with the full tide of her hair rippling over her bare shoulders and hanging on either side of her tear-stained face in curling profusion. The sense

of utter desolation and overwhelming fatigue oppressed her, so she could not even summon the energy to go to bed, although every nerve in her body ached with a separate pain of its own. She heard the door open behind her.

“Go to bed, Chloe,” she said, listlessly. “I told you I should not want you any more unless the child waked.” Hearing no answer, she looked up into the mirror, and there above her was reflected her husband’s wild, white face, the purplish spot on his cheek glowing with sinister distinctness, and his hair disordered and clotted with blood. Screaming, she hid her head in her arms, cowed with abject terror at what she believed to be an apparition.

“Woman, make ready, I have come to do the vengeance of the Lord,” he said at last, and his voice sounded toneless and unnatural, like that of a sleep-walker. “You shall give up that beauty with which you sought to kill men’s souls. What you denied me you shall give no man.”

The heart seemed to go out of her, and

she slipped down to the floor, grovelling in her agony of fright. "Ah, don't kill me!" she begged, huddled at his feet. "For the love of Heaven, don't kill me, Gordon. You will be so sorry—so sorry afterwards." She threw her white arms around his knees in the insistence of her pleading, and the glory of her gold hair lay along the floor where he stood.

He dragged himself from her clasp. "Back!" he cried, his eyes burning with delirium. "Back, woman! do not try to mesh me in your toils again. I saw you give those tokens to your lover, and, by the living God, I will shear you of your attractions, as Samson should have shorn Delilah, then would he never have been delivered bound to his enemies."

"Ah, spare me just this once!" she pleaded. "I will go away, Gordon; only don't kill me. Oh, for God's sake, don't kill me!" she begged, crawling along after him on the floor.

"I will not kill you now," he muttered, still in the same dull, cadenceless voice.

“Not until I can kill him too, for there is no justice in sending one soul to hell without the other to bear it company. You shall go down with your paramour when your time comes, but it is not yet; stand up, stand up, I say! your gold hair shall wreck no other man’s soul.”

“It is not so,” she sobbed. “Oh, Gordon, you don’t believe that of me? You can’t believe me that bad?” But, half lifting her, he pushed her into a chair; then, seizing the scissors that lay upon the dressing-table, he cut away the heavy masses of hair that hung about her. She could hear the hiss of the scissors as they reft her glory from her, but she had neither strength nor voice left to protest. She felt now that her life was safe for the present, but even in her first relief from the greater terror vanity asserted itself in a throbbing sense of loss as he strode to the chimney-place and thrust the glittering mass into the heart of the fire. He rammed it down with his heel, and in a moment the room was heavy with the stifling odor of burning hair. She watched his move-

ments with fascinated eyes as he disengaged a long gold filament that had caught upon his sleeve-button, and cast that in too, scrupulously examining if any thread remained about his person. Isabel's limbs seemed paralyzed by fear, she could not have moved hand or foot even to save her life.

When nothing was left but a black mass among the wood ashes, Wickford passed out, muttering:

“And I have made a holocaust unto the Lord, a burnt-offering—” and his voice died away as he descended the staircase. Isabel tottered to the door and bolted it before she crawled into bed and covered her head with the blankets. Thus she lay shivering with nervous chills until towards morning, when she dropped at last into a leaden, unrefreshing sleep.

CHAPTER X

MADAME WICKFORD awoke with a startled sense of some one banging on the door. The sun was streaming into the window, but her mind was so sodden with yesterday's fatigue that she did not recollect the cause of the depression which settled upon her. She involuntarily put her hand to her head, and started up with a frightened realization of all the events of the past night. In the mirror she saw her white face surrounded by stiff, ragged tufts of newly cut hair. But she was denied even the poor consolation of time in which to collect herself, for the door resounded with continued knocks, which augmented in force as she listened.

"Mistiss, mistiss, please come!" wailed a voice in the passage. "Master don't know nobody."

Isabel hurriedly slid back the bolt. "Here,

help me to dress," she called to the frightened maid.

"Lord, Mis' Isabel! what's the matter wid yo' hair?" exclaimed the negro, paralyzed with astonishment.

"Never mind that now; get me my clothes, and don't stand mooning," returned Madame. As she went on dressing rapidly she extracted the particulars of her husband's sudden seizure from the negro, whose unsatisfied curiosity about her mistress's shorn locks for once silenced her love for the horrible in all its details. Madame learned that nothing remarkable had occurred during the night. O'Connor, discovering the office-door open at an unusual hour in the morning, and fearing robbery, had examined the place; he found everything undisturbed until he penetrated to the sleeping-room beyond, where the body of the Doctor lay face downward along the floor. They carried him to his bed, but he did not appear to know any one.

"Sometimes he do speak, mistess, but he jes' talk nonsense—'bout offerin' a whole lo-

cust to the Lord. Dat show he plumb out of his head, 'cos eve'ybody knows Goad 'ain't got nothin' to do wid locustes," observed the maid, as Madame threw a scarf over her disfigured hair and hurried down the stairway to her husband.

The innate love of excitement, of which a servant's life is so barren, had brought the entire household together. They were crowded around the supine figure, talking in excited voices, and too wrought up to remember even the respect due Isabel as their master's wife. Their disregard stung her into asserting her right of command.

"Let me pass," she demanded, imperiously, as she pressed through them. "James, ride for Dr. Stern; you can take the bay mare, and don't spare her. William, go over to Miss Hannah, and ask her to come immediately. Tell her your master is ill. The rest of you had better get back to work; I will look after the Doctor."

The servants, white and black, took their different ways reluctantly, but they went,

nevertheless, for she was not one to be disobeyed with impunity, even in a crisis.

Madame felt that at any cost she must retain the reins of governance. All alone with the man she loved and feared at once, she sat looking at his flushed face, where the red spot burned hotly; her mind flew back and forth, like a weaver's shuttle, among the events of last night. In a moment Aunt Hannah would be here; how and what should she tell her—or should she tell her anything at all? No one had really a right to know the particulars of their quarrel. She wondered now at the impulse of helplessness that had prompted her to send for the old woman at first. Certainly, Isabel would gladly take the whole nursing upon herself; if she could only win him back to her what sacrifice would seem great, what labor hard? But when the events of last night arose in her mind, the memory of her recent terror made her shudder at being left alone with him in his delirium. If he were indeed mad, as she believed, what was to prevent his murdering her at any moment,

even now if he awakened? Her unstrung nerves trembled at the thought, and she turned her face towards the door with an instinctive effort to assure her possible retreat.

The clouds had lifted a little, and every now and then a beam of watery sunshine lighted up the desolate garden; the chilly, damp air was redolent of bruised, dead leaves—that spicy fragrance that only belongs to autumn. She shivered with cold, yet she feared to shut herself in with him, for as long as she could see the outside world there seemed an opening for her out of this cage of despair and a possibility of near help in time of need. Aunt Hannah would probably come by the passageway connecting the two rooms with the house. What an interminable time she was about it! thought Madame, face to face with dangers whose extent she could not divine. Ah, there they were at last!

The door by Wickford's bed opened and admitted the messenger accompanying an old woman wrapped in an Indian shawl. Her stiff, muslin cap, covered by a black

silk handkerchief, bordered the wrinkled face, whose kindly expression was marred by a huge pair of horn-rimmed spectacles. Her withered hands, worn with ministering to the unhappy, were incased in cotton mitts, and her bright blue merino dress hung around her shrivelled form without any pretensions to style or fit. With all there was a dignity and a suggestion of native force about the plain, unfashionable figure that brought a sense of relief, and assured assistance to Madame as she sat staring in dull hopelessness. Aunt Hannah had been too often rebuffed to make any advances towards friendliness with Isabel, but she greeted the girl kindly as she bent over her nephew.

“Here, William,” she called, “you get that stock off your master, and undress him as quick as you can; he’s had a fall somehow and hurt his poor head.” She blew the fire into a blaze, shut the door, and pulled down a window-blind to shield her patient’s eyes from the light.

“Can’t I do something?” queried Madame, humbly. Why had she not thought of all

this before Aunt Hannah came, she wondered.

“If you want to help, Isabel, you better go tell them to heat some bricks for his feet and bring me a little warm water.”

Madame ran on her message like a bidable child, and returned bringing the water herself. Although there had been plenty of willing hands to do it, she felt happier rendering even such little personal service as she could, than sitting idly thinking. She watched Aunt Hannah bathing his face and snipping away the stiff, clotted locks around the wound.

“It isn’t this that’s the matter with him. I’ve seen him with a dozen cracks in his head worse than this when he was a youngster. I wonder—” The old woman broke off, looking at Madame with curious eyes. Then she fell to examining the tiny wound again. The sick man stirred uneasily once or twice and opened his eyes, moaning. Madame gathered hope from these signs of returning life; perhaps, after all, it was only a fall; she might have been unreasonably

anxious. But as his gaze rested upon her the pupils of his eyes contracted, and he began to throw himself about in bed, writhing his long body like a serpent. "To the Philistines!" he muttered; "she has given me bound to the Philistines! Ah, they will put out my eyes!" he screamed. "They'll put out my eyes!" and he clung to his old aunt as he had clung to her in the helplessness of childhood. "Send her away! oh, send her away!" he implored.

"You'd better go out, Isabel," the old woman urged. "It'll raise his fever to fret so. Maybe after a while he'll know you and come round."

"He knows me now, Aunt Hannah!" returned the girl, bitterly. "He knows me; that's what's the matter." So saying, she went out quietly, but the shadow on her heart lay black as night.

In an hour or two the physician arrived, and, emboldened by his presence, she slipped into the sick-room behind him. Wickford had been lying comparatively quiet, moaning at intervals, but as soon as he caught

sight of her harassed face he started up, crying:

“She has come back—look how she glares at me! For God’s sake, send her away before she puts out my eyes!”

“Gordon,” she pleaded, “Heaven knows I would lay down my life for you. Oh, let me stay! let me take care of you, dear!”

“Look at her head,” he muttered, his voice dropping to a hoarse croak. “There are snakes that grow there. I killed them, but they will come again, and they eat men’s hearts. Ah, they are biting me now!” he screamed, as he twisted himself loose from his aunt’s arms.

It was no use; his hatred of her was stronger than disease. The physician motioned her to leave, and she went silently. He had brain-fever, the medical man told her afterwards; she must not worry about his strange delusions. They often took unaccountable dislikes to their nearest and dearest, these fevered patients; indeed, it was best for her to keep out of the way. Miss Hannah was so excellent a nurse that

she need fear no neglect. Yes, on the whole, it was better not to excite him; and, indeed, Madame herself looked almost as bad as the patient. "The sensitive hearts of women were so susceptible." So the physician drove away in his gig very much pleased with his own tact; and the day wore on in its dreary length till night came.

It was tea-time; Aunt Hannah had come out of the sick-room for a half-hour, and Madame Wickford knew that now the ordeal was to begin, yet she had not decided what explanation she should give for her shorn locks; those gray eyes, behind their horn-rimmed spectacles, would see through any flimsy tale, she knew. What if she told the truth? No one would believe her, no one in all this little gossipy place. People were moved here by great simple motives, and they would not understand how her soul was swept hither and yon by a maze of counter-currents. She decided, at last, to throw herself on the old woman's mercy. At the worst she could only tell the town;

and as the town must know, anyhow, sooner or later, they might as well hear the truth. Isabel threw aside the lace scarf which she had wound about her head, and waited the coming of her inquisitor. There was Miss Wickförd turning down the hall; she would come in in a minute. Madame braced herself and waited.

“Please, Aunt Hannah, I have something to say to you,” she called, and her voice shook in spite of her. The old lady turned and caught sight of the disfigured head shining in the candle-light.

“Good lack!” she exclaimed. “You poor child, what have you done with your pretty hair?” This one drop of kindness broke down the gates of Madame’s last defence and loosed the sluices of her tears. She threw herself at the old woman’s feet, and, burying her face in the merino lap, sobbed out the full story of her woe.

“I know I am bad,” she ended, “but oh, Aunt Hannah, I am not—not what he thinks me! I never loved any one but him, and now he believes—oh, I can’t tell you what

he believes; it chokes me!" she cried, wringing her hands above her head in impotent appeal from her husband's judgment.

Deep down in Miss Hannah's withered old frame there dwelt a spirit of all-embracing motherhood, which spread its sheltering wings over whatever unfortunate creature came a-begging for her sympathy. It was hard not to be just when equity lay upon the side of her favorite nephew, but the girl sobbing across her knees was infinitely appealing in her lonely and unfriended condition. It was only a moment that the old lady let injured feeling and a sense of outraged propriety stagnate the movement of her good heart. Then she gathered the girl in her arms and rocked her to and fro soothingly, patting and talking to her as if she were a child.

"There, there, Aunt Hannah's pretty! don't cry any more, don't make your dear eyes red. When Gordon's well I will make him understand. There, there!"

Isabel had little hope of the result of any mediation between her and the stern man

whose hate dominated even the delirium of his disease; but the sense of being kindly treated lay warm at her heart, and she kissed the old woman lovingly when Miss Hannah returned to her patient.

CHAPTER XI

THE weary weeks dragged themselves along; sometimes the news was that Wickford was improved, and again the word would come that he hung between life and death. Then his wife would crouch in the passageway outside his door, listening with indrawn breath to his incessant moaning, dreading lest at any moment it cease forever. Once Aunt Hannah had spoken of her fear that the red blotch on his face was the herald of the hereditary distemper. The old woman's acquaintance with disease in many forms had blunted her sensibilities to some extent, and she would have been astonished and unhappy had she known what intolerable pain her description of her brother's death gave Isabel. To think of Wickford as disfigured was monstrous—her beloved, whose physical beauty had cap-

tivated and held her, in spite of their vital unlikeness. She would not believe it; it would be even better that he go now than awaken to such a living death as that, she thought.

Except for the variations of the sick-room, her life moved with silent monotony. However, there was one event which transpired about this time that momentarily shook her out of the voiceless misery that inwrapped her; one day a package arrived for Isabel containing the little miniature, dented and broken, and a blood-stained curl. It enclosed a letter, too, from a boy-lieutenant—one of her old acquaintances in the regiment. He told the story of a surprise by night—a massacre and a rescue—a nameless battle, replete with danger and devoid of glory. The Captain's body was recovered; he spared her the details of its condition, and, recognizing her face in the miniature over his heart, his friend sent it back to her, "hoping she would understand that a soldier's honor was involved in the inviolable secrecy he would preserve." The boy was

only twenty-one, and secrets still smelt sweet in his nostrils.

Madame cried over the letter and felt sorry for a time, but her husband's illness soon swallowed up all her thoughts again. Although she regretted the death of the Captain, yet, as he had been the cause of much of her present unhappiness, her grief was of a temperate nature. Hers was not a character large enough to harbor more than one deep sentiment at a time; and at present her anxiety for Wickford absorbed all her small store of sympathy.

Gradually he crept back to life, reason illuminated the darkened recesses of his disordered brain, and he began to gain a little strength. But as yet his nurses did not dare to mention Isabel before him. Madame awaited events with what patience she could muster, although she fully appreciated her mortifying position.

"I am classed among the disagreeable subjects which everybody taboos before the sick, like undertakers and importunate duns," she thought, bitterly.

Wickford recovered slowly, for even his youth and sober life were small assistance to a constitution already undermined by disease and broken by the stress of the emotional pressure under which he had lived. The autumn went, flecked with rain and sunshine, but left him still an invalid. It was not until the first snows whitened the ground that Miss Hannah dared her initial tilt for her new *protégée*.

Wickford was sitting by the window looking out at the purity of the untrodden snow and enjoying a new overwhelming sense of the world's beauty which comes to so many of us when we crawl back exhausted out of the Valley of the Shadow. Animal content with his surroundings lapped him about; he was glad merely to eat and sleep and wake to eat again; everything was new and good to his freshly recovered perceptions, and he shrank from facing the problems he knew awaited him like hungry wolves on the other side of his sick-room door. The very contrast between what lay before him and his present state enhanced its comfort.

The click of Aunt Hannah's knitting-needles and the crackling of the wood fire was all that broke the stillness; even the occasional rumble of the carts or the beating of a horse's feet in the street beyond were muffled by the white blanket that covered everything. He heard the gate click and the mingled laughter of a child and a woman. Then his face set, for Johnnie crossed the garden, followed by Madame, who was wrapped in a long velvet pelisse bordered with ermine; a great beaver bonnet nodding with lilac plumes framed her rosy face, all flushed with cold and exercise.

"So the wolves will not wait longer on the other side of the door," he thought, as the old bitter contempt and anger began to glow within him. He had grown almost diseased in his estimate of her, and although he would not have admitted it, she was the one person in the world to whom he was incapable of either justice or mercy. She had offended him in his weak point: she had wounded his self-esteem, and he could not forgive her. He felt Aunt Hannah's eyes

upon him. "Her good spirits do not appear to be much depleted," he observed, contemptuously, as the radiant figure passed out of his field of vision. The old woman stuck her needles into her work and seated herself beside him.

"I have got something I want to talk to you about," she began. "It's no use my beating round the bush; that poor child told me everything concerning your quarrel that night, and, although I can't say but what it looks bad from your standpoint, I don't believe there was anything in it that—that a foolish girl might not have done in a pet."

He moved impatiently in his chair. "There's no use fussing, Gordon," she continued. "I'm going to have my say, and you might as well bear it quietly, my boy. I'm not pretending I was pleased at your marriage; the very name of her—Isabel, forsooth, instead of Mary or Jane or something else sensible—showed her mother before her didn't have any common-sense. A girl that's named that way is bound to be

flighty, 'as the sparks fly upward.' I didn't suit her nor her fine friends any better than they suited me, and so I told her at the time."

"If I remember rightly, there was, indeed, not much love lost," he said, with a grim reminiscent smile.

"That's neither here nor there, Gordon," the old woman interposed impatiently. "What I'm coming at is that if she did carry on with the soldier, you've given her a fine opportunity to exercise her Christian charity in your behalf. You can't justify yourself in my eyes, nor your own when you remember what Paul says about the cutting of a woman's hair; how her hair is her—"

"Will you kindly inform me what you are talking about?" inquired the Doctor with an irritated politeness. "I have so far missed the point of your remarks. When I was, unfortunately, in love with the present Madame Wickford, I had the bad taste to request a curl for a keepsake, which she promptly refused. Really, my dear aunt, I don't think you can find any sentence in the

whole New Testament with which to condemn me for so usual a demand—sentimental, silly if you please, but certainly usual.” He turned his head away, and looked out of the window as if to dismiss the subject. But Aunt Hannah was not to be silenced.

“Nonsense, Gordon,” she returned. “The child had a girl’s vanity about her pretty curls; you had crushed it out of her quite successfully before she ever heard of Captain Read.”

“Aunt Hannah,” he broke in, “what Isabel chooses to tell is between you and her, but as long as she is presented as my wife I cannot let even you connect her name with any man’s.”

“Well, well,” said the old woman, pettishly. “If you wish to ride your high horse, of course I have nothing more to say; but, as you are so monstrous particular, what, in the name of common sense, induced you to cut off her hair and make her character common talk about town?”

“Good God, aunt!” he exclaimed, with irritation, “where did you hear such non-

sense? Ask Isabel herself—even *she* will tell you that I never did a brutal thing to her in all my life. We don't get on, that's the truth; but as for cutting her hair off, you ought to know that I am too much of a gentleman for any caper like that. I wonder you believed it. When I am out of this I'll make somebody answer to me for such stories. Who is your authority?"

"Why, Gordon," the old woman replied, looking him full in the eyes, "Isabel told me herself. The day you were taken ill she showed me her head with the curls all hacked away, and said you did it the night before when you came home."

"She lies!" he burst out; "you know she—" Then he controlled himself with an effort, and continued more quietly: "No, if she says I did it, let us accept the statement for civility's sake. I don't know what her object is, but if my wife told you I was guilty of this unwarrantable act, pray tell her from me that— No, don't tell her anything. Give me a pencil and paper. I want to write

her an apology; it is more polite," he concluded, with a bitter laugh.

The old woman laid a detaining hand on him. "My boy," she said, "you were very ill that night and greatly excited; maybe you forget. Think, you might have been out of your head when you did it."

He was still suffering from the irritability of weakness, and this startling accusation, which he believed to be one of Isabel's inventions, stung his pride. He caught the kind old hand and laid it across his eyes where the hot tears were starting.

"Even you, dear old aunt! even you! Ah, if I only could forget what passed that night! Don't let us talk about it; bring me my portfolio, and we will put an end to this forever. Surely you know what that means," he said, touching his livid cheek. "A man does not lie when death has set its finger upon him, and I swear to you that I never harmed— But what is the use? I have my death to face alone. In the presence of such a calamity one aspersion upon my character, more or less, makes but little difference to me; she

will have everything her own way soon, at any rate."

"But, Gordon," she insisted, "you were crazy with fever, maybe—"

"Aunt Hannah, I tell you I could not do such a thing under any conditions. It is impossible. Did she say any one else saw me? I'll be bound there was no other witness?" He waited for an answer. "Ah! I thought so. Well, I will write now, and it would be kinder for you to deliver the letter yourself, I think. You have done so much already, may I ask this one service more?"

She brought him writing materials, and kissed him as she passed out of the room, puzzled and anxious.

Thus he was left alone with his dilemma, to thresh out, as best he might, the motive that had induced his wife to be guilty, as he believed, of this new perfidy. The insistent credence the old woman gave her shook his inward assurance for a moment, and before he put the final end to their relations he wished to be doubly sure of his justice towards Isabel, as he intended to show her no

mercy save such consideration as the protection of his own name demanded. He tried the case in the courts of his own mind, setting her assertion against his self-respect; and although he sought to be an impartial judge, it was beyond nature for any man in his position to refrain from clothing the evidence on his own side with undue importance. There was, he reasoned, the fact that he had been found in his own room, which he had entered by the garden door, that would indicate that he came in immediately out of the night, nor could he believe that the most callous-hearted woman, though he placed his wife high in that category, could have locked her door quietly and have gone to sleep, leaving the dangerous maniac she pretended to believe him loose upon the community. Yet this must have happened if Aunt Hannah's theory was correct. Again he assured himself that his memory could have played him no tricks about the events of that fateful evening. As he sat looking out at the sharp blue tree shadows traced on the snow, and the glinting of the evening sun on its

crystals, he could recall every incident of the scene in the fire-lighted drawing-room. Even the smell of the damp leaves under foot and the sound of the dripping eaves came back to him. The picture was bitten into his brain by an acrid hate that spared him no detail. He perfectly remembered the mad race through the storm, the fall, and had even dim glimpses of the struggle homeward; but of the interview in Isabel's room there remained, strange to say, no vestige of remembrance to cloud his conviction that she had borne false witness against him. Having sacrificed her hair to some caprice of her own, she now utilized the loss, he thought, to throw odium upon him in the eyes of his neighbors. He was puzzled and curious to discover the motive that actuated her in the first instance, and, after much cogitation, came to the conclusion that a morbid liking for theatrical effects, coupled with the terror of the results of her imprudence, had induced her to create the situation and the accompanying tale of ill-usage as a catch-sympathy for the women of the town, and more par-

ticularly for his old aunt, whose heavy respectability, if enlisted, would shield even a worse reputation than Madame's.

Although the Doctor honestly believed that there was no question about her guilt, he had no intention of rushing into the divorce courts with his family disgrace. He belonged to a class and age when the soiled family linen was most rigorously cleansed at home, though, as was sometimes the case, the culprit was rubbed out of life in the washing of it. Nor had he any idea of taking the law into his own hands further than he judged his position as head of the family demanded. But the rift between them was far too broad to be bridged by ordinary courtesy, and that he intended to make her understand. He drew his portfolio towards him and wrote :

“MADAME,—I am informed by my aunt, Miss Wickford, that you allege I cut off your hair the night of my return from the city. How you have managed to make an impression on so upright a soul I cannot imagine,

unless your success has arisen from the innocence of guile which has characterized my aunt's whole life—an innocence which I am sure you will agree with me is very foreign to so tortuous a nature as your own.

“I am led to understand, from what I hear, that you are aware of my discovery in regard to your amour—probably you saw me through the window—and I infer from the unmitigated falsehood of which you have been guilty that you justly dread the consequences of such revelations as I could make. However, let me assure you that the mutilation of your good looks was perfectly unnecessary. It has not been the custom in my family to blazon misfortunes from the house-tops—disgraces we had none until you honored us by marrying me.

“I am a man stricken by disease over whom the doom has been spoken; were it otherwise, I might be swayed to sever the connection which, I regret, shackles us to each other. When, however, a person has but a few years to live at most, he harbors less concern for the happiness of his future than for his present

tranquillity. I therefore shall permit you to continue to bear my name and appear at the head of my household, although I suppose it is unnecessary to say that between us all relations have absolutely ceased, save such surveillance of your conduct as my good name dictates. I warn you that any further indiscretion will be as summarily dealt with as your past levity might have been had not the death of your accomplice in crime removed you forever out of the way of the same temptation. From this, my decision, there is no appeal, save by way of the courts, and you will, I fancy, hesitate before you place your conduct under the light of legal examination.

“GORDON WICKFORD.”

He folded and sealed the paper, then he lay back among his cushions with a sense of rest in the certainty of his decision. The lines of his lonely future were painted in dark colors, but at least they had assumed a definite pattern, and anything definite was bearable, he thought.

The shadows crept out of the corners of

the room, ingulping one object after another, the lights in the houses beyond the hedge began to glimmer, and the snow took on an unearthly bluish tint in the light of the young moon. Yet he sat there gazing out of the window, "seeing all his own mischance with a glassy countenance." Memories of his dead mother, of the first bright promise of his manhood, the short but all-absorbing dream of his love, the rude awakening against which he had struggled manfully, the falling of his hereditary malady upon his devoted head—all this he could endure with the fortitude of a strong man; but the disgrace of his wife's conduct, as it appeared to him, presented to his soul a cup whose bitterness seemed greater than he could bear. The sense alone of having something to hide was distasteful to his open character, yet he would shelter her to the extent of giving her a name and place in society—this his family honor demanded, but more than this his self-respect forbade.

CHAPTER XII

WICKFORD'S reverie was disturbed by the entrance of a servant bringing candles and his evening meal; his aunt followed in a little while.

"You have been asleep?" she queried, hopefully.

"No," he answered. "My letter is written. I have not slept, Aunt Hannah."

"Gordon, dearie, I hope you have been kind in what you wrote; and have you thought over what I said?" she suggested.

"Yes, yes," he replied, listlessly. "I have thought it all over again and again, but I'm just as sure as I was before that I am innocent of the brutality with which she charges me. Delirious or sane, the general trend of a man's character is the same, and, whatever I may be, I am at least a man and a gentleman; to have used physical force towards her

would have been to forfeit my claim to both distinctions.

Miss Wickford began to remonstrate, but he stopped her pleading. "Dear aunt, let us not talk about it any more," he said. "What I have written is written. Come and sit beside me, and tell me about yourself. Tell me about yourself—won't you? Do you remember how you used to keep me quiet with the stories of grandfather's Indian adventures when I was a boy. What I want to hear now is of your own doings. Somehow your life always seems so wholesome and of a piece—not like the patchwork that most of us make of our existence." She knew his every turn of expression, and she understood that expostulation would be useless now. Indeed, as she looked at the firm, set face, where the bones were sharply articulated by illness, the assurance she harbored of her power to heal the breach between Wickford and his wife began to ebb away and leave her high and dry on the sharp fact of their difference.

When he was tired she bade him good-

night, and, picking up the letter, went to find Isabel, hoping, good soul, that she might help the girl through the first bitterness of the bad half-hour before her.

Madame was toasting her feet at her bedroom fire, too anxious over the fate of Miss Wickford's mission to occupy herself in any way. She looked so pretty in her "loose gown" and short, curling hair that Miss Hannah wondered if it had not been unwise to interfere instead of sending the young creature to make her own peace with beauty for advocate. The girl greeted her lovingly.

"Well?" she asked. "Tell me quickly; what did he say? Will he see me? Oh, Aunt Hannah you have a letter—give it to me—give it to me quickly!"

"Isabel, my dear," said the other, "don't be in such a hurry; I'm afraid this isn't a very nice letter Gordon has written you, though I said everything I could think of in your behalf. I told you he could not remember; and if he don't—God help you, child, for the Wickfords are powerful set in their ways. There, there, don't look so white; we still

have shot in our locker—as my father used to say ; you must see him yourself if it comes to the worst.”

The young woman took the letter containing the decision of her fate ; she tore it open with feverish haste, and carried it over to the far table, feeling unable to face its possible contents under even such kindly scrutiny as Miss Hannah's. Madame read it through with that lightning rapidity which great anxiety begets. It seemed only a few lines to her in her breathless hurry, but in that moment any illusory hopes of happiness she might have entertained were stripped from her, and she was brought face to face with the extent of his overwhelming contempt. “Read it!” she whispered, with white lips, extending the letter ; it rattled in her shaking hands. “Read it, and see what hope there is for me.” It seemed to her as if hours elapsed before the old woman's spectacles were adjusted and she had mastered the contents of the faint, trembling lines which bore testimony to the writer's bodily weakness. Somehow the tremulous hand-

writing made the harsh resentment of the note more impressive by contrast.

“Poor child! poor child!” murmured Miss Hannah. “Don’t lose heart, Isabel; give him time, dearie—time does a deal in this world, though it’s hard for the young to believe it.”

“No,” the girl returned, in a queer, stifled voice. “He has written exactly what he means. I shall not try any more; the spirit has gone out of me. I will stay and bear my punishment for folly no greater than many another woman has been forgiven. Aunt Hannah, as God is my judge, I have been guilty of no crime, save a foolish flirtation. You will go now, dear, won’t you? I shall be able to talk in the morning. Just now I am too unhappy.”

The old woman called her servant, and with a lighted horn lantern to guide her footsteps—for the moon was now long abed—she picked her way through the snow to her own door.

Isabel wrote a pitiful little protest of her innocence, begging forgiveness for her follies,

which she sent the Doctor, but he took no notice of it, and she subsided into despair. Her spirit was, as she said, gone out of her. She performed the ordinary daily tasks that presented themselves, getting through one thing after another with a stolid determination not to be idle, for she knew very well that she could only keep back her insistent sorrow by unremitting employment. The countless avenues of helpfulness that her position would ordinarily have opened were hermetically sealed to her by the ostracism of society. Although she was debarred from natural relations with her equals, there were always abundant opportunities in a seaport town for the expenditure of energy and money among the suffering. These chances of unselfish occupation she seized upon, and sought out cases of distress with real eagerness, hoping always that Wickford might some day understand that her tardy love for him and a longing for his approval was the charm which lured her into these unaccustomed places.

In spite of her internal revolt against the

repulsive squalor of poverty, she tried to inaugurate physical comfort and humanizing influences in the hovels of the very poor; but it was a mortification to find that even here, although her money was accepted readily enough, it was impossible for her to get into any personal relations with the women. The actual assistance she gave they treated as their due, but her timid advances to kindness were repulsed, and any morsel of advice she hazarded was overlooked with a certain hauteur that these blameless wives felt justified in assuming towards one who had, as they said, "not a shred of character to bless herself with." Formerly, her pride might have taken up arms at the rebuffs she experienced, but in her desolation it had completely deserted her, leaving her a prey to a great hunger and thirst after affection, in which she gladly accepted even such crumbs of toleration as fell to her share. It was strange to remember the vanished sense of personal power and the combative desire to meet a difficulty more than half-way which had formerly characterized her, when, at pres-

ent, she was conscious of a morbid shrinking from an issue of any kind, and even her manner was permeated by a deprecatory courtesy with which she sought to buy every one's suffrages.

Although Miss Wickford championed her loyally, insisting that a decent amount of consideration be shown Isabel, even the impact of the old woman's immense influence could not compel those cordial and intimate relations which are the best substitute a country town can offer for city gayety. A certain number, indeed, did call upon Madame Wickford when it was clearly understood that the Doctor intended to uphold her reputation, but there was absolutely no spontaneity in their coming, and both hostess and guests were painfully aware that their presence was a tribute to the position of the Wickford family, and in no sense any indication of their belief in Madame's personal respectability. Probably the only pleasure anybody derived from these visits was the mutual relief they all experienced when the door closed behind the departing callers.

With the exception of Aunt Hannah, there was really only one person who came to the old house for love of its mistress. Johnnie ran in and out as usual, welcomed with new tenderness by Isabel, who found a great solace in the child's companionship. While she was with him it was possible to throw aside the eternal sense of disapprobation that oppressed her in the presence of grown people; she could laugh, talk, and run about without any fear of misconception, and the very quaintness of the channels in which his childish thought flowed seemed to drain the stagnant morasses of her heart, whose natural outlets had been unfortunately dammed. It was one of the few pleasures of her life to play with him and tell him stories by the hundreds. They were once sitting by the fire in the twilight, hand in hand, as she finished the account of the miseries of the unfortunate prince and princess whom the Yellow Dwarf persecuted so shamelessly.

“So the mermaid turned them into two beautiful palm-trees by the ocean, and although they are near together and the same

breeze bends them to and fro, they never touch—and they never will touch, Johnnie, never as long as the world stands,” she concluded, gazing into the hot wood fire. The child also sat silently thinking for a few moments, then he looked up at her.

“Aunt Isabel,” he demanded, “what makes all your stories end up bad? Mother’s always have ‘So they lived in peace and died in Greece’ at the finish, and ‘Once upon a time when pigs were swine and peacocks chewed tobacco,’ to begin wif.”

“Ah, little boy,” she replied, “I expect that’s because mother has you all for her own to love her. Maybe if you belonged to me my stories would turn out better, too.”

The child ruminated for a while, then he announced: “I ’spec I can’t give you much of me, ’cos father and mother wants such lots, but”—with an air of great generosity—“I’ll give you the end of my nose all for your owny own if you’ll tell me Jack the Giant-killer.”

She put her black mood from her, and laughingly kissed him before she bought the

right in his very small pug at the price demanded. They had their tea together afterwards, and, as usual, Johnnie ate too much, but was perfectly happy after his own fashion. The peculiar strain of childishness which permeated Isabel's character made it no great effort for her to bring herself into tune with the little fellow's amusements; indeed, she enjoyed his companionship only less than he did hers during the long days of her husband's convalescence, when the sharp fear of present danger had given place to the reactionary lassitude that comes with the assurance of danger past.

CHAPTER XIII

WICKFORD had not yet come out of his room, but Aunt Hannah, who visited him daily, told Isabel that she might expect to see him about at any moment. The good old woman kept her further observation of his condition to herself. It was impossible for her to add to the girl's already heavy burden, and although she reproached herself constantly for the cowardice, as she called it, that fettered her tongue, the time never arrived for telling Isabel of the ravages of the cancer, as it progressed with alarming rapidity in the Doctor's weak condition. The disfigurement was already very noticeable; it could not be very long before his face would become disgusting, Miss Wickford thought, with heavy forebodings of the suffering that lay before these two, whom she would so gladly help, were it possible,

but whom fate and inherent spiritual difference had put asunder.

Strange as it may seem, if Madame harbored hope from any quarter, it was in her husband's very infirmity that she saw her one chance of reconquering some portion of Wickford's affection. There were no trained nurses in that day, and from what she heard as well as from what her recent charity-visiting among a scrofulous, fish-eating people had taught her, she knew that in the course of the disease it would reach a period when constant and arduous nursing was demanded. It was then that she reckoned upon the sacrifice of her entire life, winning from him some belief in her protestations of innocence and love. Even this mirage of a reconciliation, which must, she knew, take place under the shadow of death, was something in the desert of her loneliness, and it enabled her to bear the succeeding days of a life that had lost all savor.

Upborne by the thought of possible reunion even under such circumstances and after so long a time, she plunged into the

slums of the seaport town, helping where she could, and neither sparing herself nor her purse in the effort to fit herself for the care of that dear sufferer whose approval was now the inspiration of her life. She managed at the cost of incredible patience and effort to create a place for herself in the old town, although her reputation clogged her at every step, and at times she cringed under the sense of the unjust proportion her punishment bore to her offence.

“It is like paying off a mortgage,” she said to Miss Wickford. “With my uttermost efforts I only seem able to keep down the interest on gossip, but never to reduce the principal of my past folly.”

The two women had become very fond of each other, and spent much of their time together. But, as it happened, the old lady was not with Isabel when Wickford made his appearance, after so many months of seclusion.

It was one of the soft days that come now and then in late winter—truant children of spring, that deceive even the home-

keeping birds into a summery twittering, days that make the evergreens hold up their heads, sure that their verdant doublet is the "only wear," and sometimes tempt gold crocuses and over-anxious trees to an untimely blossoming. Although Wickford had seized upon one excuse after another to delay his first appearance, there seemed to be no further reason imaginable why he should not resume his duties, if he ever intended, as he said, "to do what good he could, instead of skulking behind closed doors with despair for a companion."

In his silent meditations he had more than ever determined that no human eye should ever look upon his disfigurement, and his preparations for hiding his face were already made. There, in a box, lay the broad-brimmed Quaker hat with a deep ruffle of doubled crape sewn on around the edge of its brim. Sooner or later he must let that veil fall between him and all the glory of the outer world — that dear, beautiful world which called him to forget his misfortunes in ministering to suffering

humanity. It seemed to him as if he were assuming the position of chief mourner at his own funeral—indeed, the feeling of human kinship between him and the healthy people around him was buried under a weight of suffering that was great enough to have ground out all human sympathy in a lesser man.

Evening had come on, and the bare boughs were etched black against a lemon-colored sky, which melted into orange where it kissed the horizon. He could see even the rough little swollen buttons on the nearest tree that betokened the coming blossoms. A soft blue haze permeated the still atmosphere, through which the smoke of the chimneys rose straight as an arrow. If he were going, "then it were well it were done quickly." All this gold and purple, these red browns and tender grays, must henceforth come to him dulled by his veil. He looked about him, greedily drinking in the flood of color as a man might for whom the executioner waits. Then, with a gasp, he settled the hat upon his head, and the black crape fell between him and the outer world—forever!

He strode out into the garden, too full of his own sad thoughts to notice Johnnie as he passed him. The horrors that his veil covered were too deeply impressed upon his imagination for him to realize fully the strange and repellent figure he presented, so soon do we become familiar with any phenomenal circumstance that is allied with our individuality. He was astonished, therefore, to hear a child's scream behind him, and, turning with his natural instinct to help anything in distress, he lifted the frightened boy in his arms.

"Why, little man!" he exclaimed, as Johnnie redoubled his howls, twisting himself like an eel in the Doctor's grasp. "You must tell me what is the matter—what hurts you."

"Oh, let me go — please let me go! I'll never be bad no more!" wailed Johnnie, quite sure that the devil had him in very earnest this time. He was too wrought up to heed Wickford's expostulations, or to answer his questions.

The puzzled man did his best to soothe

the child, for he was by this time nearly frightened into a fit; his screams had become hoarse and his lips were livid when Madame, hearing the commotion as she sat at her embroidery, ran down bareheaded to find out what was the matter.

As she stepped into the twilight she, too, shuddered as her eyes fell on the gaunt, sinister figure, with the crape-covered face, whose clothing bagged over emaciated limbs.

“Who are you?” she demanded, in as decided a voice as she could muster. “Put the boy down — don’t you see you are frightening him?”

Then the situation dawned upon the Doctor. He set the child on his feet, and the little fellow lost no time in hiding his head in Madame’s skirts. She laid a reassuring hand on the boy’s head, and turning towards the veiled figure, “If you are a patient of the Doctor’s,” she said, “he is too ill to see any one; if not, you are trespassing most unwarrantably.”

Wickford looked at her, and even the twilight revealed to him the tangle of short, sun-

ny curls and the new wistful expression that gave her an appearance of almost preternatural youth. If he noticed these changes in her, they must both be changed indeed, he thought, since she evidently did not know him at all. There was a certain bitter humor in being ordered out of his own house, and a low, mocking laugh came from behind the veil. "Why don't you go?" she demanded, as Johnnie began to sob anew. "You have no business here; you are frightening the child."

"He must get used to me as best he can," Wickford answered. "I am his mother's physician. As for you, it matters very little whether you like my appearance or not, as we shall not often have the ineffable felicity of seeing each other."

She knew the voice instantly, and staggered back under the revelation of the dire wreck disease had wrought.

"I—I—did not know you," she stammered, and her words died in her throat. The Doctor was walking down the garden now, without noticing her halting excuses.

Ah, God! that she should have stabbed him thus on his first return to the world.

“Johnnie, dear!” Isabel whispered, “you were frightened at nothing. It was only your dear Doctor—please run after him, Johnnie, and tell him you are not afraid any more.”

“But I am ’fraid! And I don’t want to go after him,” cried the boy.

“Ah, but it will hurt him so. Do it just because you love me,” she pleaded.

“I won’t go! It ain’t my dear Doctor, an’ I’m scared!” cried the little fellow, resolutely clinging to her skirts.

“But I thought you were such a man, dear,” she argued.

“Well,” said Johnnie, lifting his tear-washed eyes to her face, “I’m a man when it’s day, but I’m jus’ a ’ittle boy now.”

It was no use arguing any longer; the gate clicked as the tall figure turned into the road and was soon lost in the waning light.

Wickford was hurt and grieved to an unreasonable degree by the boy’s terror. It

brought home to him the sense of his disfigurement in a new and poignant fashion.

He had always been a special favorite with children, and he remembered now that his old nurse once told him that God gave the love of His little ones as indemnity to men fated for sudden death or great misfortune. The prophecy had been fulfilled in his case, and he now prayed humbly as he walked that at least this consolation be not taken from him in his affliction.

Remembering Johnnie's fright, he chose an old paralytic whom he knew to be beyond surprises for his first attempt at professional visiting. But even here the bitterness of seeing the effect he produced was not spared him, for the servant at the door fled screaming to assure her mistress that a masked footpad was below. Wickford controlled the almost ungovernable impulse to return immediately to his own rooms, where he might at least be spared the sight of the horror he inspired. It was probably the hardest and longest ten minutes of his life when he stood there waiting

with outward quietude, but inwardly tortured by the anticipation of what lay before him.

This was a household of women, and he could hear the flutter of skirts and the whispering going on up-stairs before the mistress put her head over the banister and tremblingly asked what he wanted.

“I am Doctor Wickford,” he answered. “I have come to see your father. May I come up?”

Again the beauty of his voice claimed recognition, and the old man’s daughter bade him welcome. But although she would have given a finger to have known his reason for wearing it, she could not muster courage to ask him the explanation of his crape veil. There was a silent dignity about him that kept impertinent curiosity in check. People questioned his aunt, his wife, even his servants, but somehow no one had the temerity to ask him personally about his peculiar dress.

Indeed, in an incredibly short time the town became accustomed to the strange

figure of the veiled Doctor, and he excited as little comment among his neighbors as the town pump. It was true that some of his old patients talked of calling in another physician, but they came back before long, glad to buy his superb skill at the cost of a few disagreeable sensations that soon wore off. As for the children, if they, like Johnnie, cried at first, it was not a great while before he reconquered their suffrages and taught them to search his capacious pockets again for sweetmeats just as they did before his illness. He was astonished and pleased to find how rapidly the excitement over his appearance wore away, and he gradually came to forget it even himself until a chance encounter with some stranger reminded him that he was not and could never again be a man like other men.

So Wickford took his old place in society, healing and comforting wherever his profession called him, infinitely pitiful, infinitely tender to all conditions of suffering humanity save always the one woman who sat in his desolate home. Gradually his mind ac-

customed itself to the burden he had to bear, and the strength of the man enabled him to accept the inevitable at first with silent stoicism, which custom softened into resignation.

CHAPTER XIV

EVEN an insignificant occupation, followed systematically for its own sake, will reward the devotee with at least temporary relief from mental depression. But Wickford's genuine enthusiasm for his profession did even more than this for him. By-and-by it filled all the waste places in his life with a sense of vital and personal usefulness to humanity, that brought him a peace so nearly akin to happiness that he rarely missed the other acutely.

However, with Madame there was no such beneficent result attainable, primarily because, womanlike, the chief energies of her existence concentrated themselves in what she felt rather than in what she did, and for the second reason that her whole life being planned with a view towards the reconquest of her husband's affection, her mind was

consequently occupied with the reflection of her charities on him more than with the direct good she accomplished.

She saw him going back and forward on his rounds, and although she sought once or twice to get speech with him, he would walk on without heeding her until she gave up her attempts in despair. Aunt Hannah argued with him in vain ; he did not defend himself, but remonstrances made no variation in his conduct.

Once when the spring had become well established and the swallows were returning to their old nests, she ran across him in one of her visits to a house where poverty and disease had made themselves direfully at home.

The child slipping away from life in this tumble-down place possessed a certain angelic beauty that fascinated her and awakened a tender interest she could not feel for the bedridden old men and women or the loathly diseased creatures who claimed her assistance. His delicate beauty separated him from his surroundings, and she

fancied he must suffer under their dearth of prettiness as much as she would have done in his place. Therefore she usually added to her basket of dainties something that might amuse the little invalid, shut in by four mouldy walls. To-day it was a crab-apple branch she carried; full of soft pink bloom and rosy buds, it made the air sweet with its rare, fresh perfume, the most delightful essence that the whole year distils.

As she stopped a moment on the threshold, the sinking sun turned her curls to a golden aureole and the soft wind blew her light skirts more closely about her; standing thus, with her flowery bough as sceptre, it seemed to the weary Doctor within that she must be the embodiment of Spring herself passing through the land. Her beauty appealed powerfully to the æsthetic impulses of his nature, which were tortured with the hours he had spent watching the dying child in the fetid atmosphere and unlovely surroundings that belong to the narrow quarters where poverty makes its grim fight with starvation.

Isabel did not see Wickford at first; all

the glory of the outer world was still in her eyes and blinded her to the half-darkness of the cottage. She crossed the room and laid the apple bough near the child's thin hands.

"How are you, Tom?" she asked, kindly. Then, as her sight became accustomed to the dim light, "Why, poor little fellow!" she exclaimed, "you don't seem as well as usual. Mrs. Saunders, has he been worse? Why didn't you let me know?"

A gaunt woman, in rusty black, who sat staring before her at the foot of the bed, looked up stolidly and answered: "It ain't no use, Madame Wickford. He don't know nobody now; he'll go out with the tide, same as his pa did a year ago."

Isabel looked over at the wasted little figure, the transparent claw-like hands, the white face where purplish eyelids lay over soft eyes that had always greeted her so gladly. Was this stillness death already? she wondered. She had never seen the King of Terrors; he awed her, and made her throat contract and her heart beat violently.

If she could only run away, she thought, or if she could help Tom; but to sit here quiescent, waiting for the awful presence, as his mother did, was intolerable. In her effort to find help somewhere she exclaimed:

“But you must send immediately for the Doctor; maybe he can do something yet.”

“I am here already; there can be nothing more done,” answered a voice from the gloom, and, coming forward, Wickford felt the boy’s fluttering pulse.

Isabel could have screamed with her sense of nervous terror as the tall, veiled figure emerged out of the gloom. Her impulse to flight was almost irresistible. Every nerve trembled as she looked from the Doctor to the child, and then to the stony, hard-faced mother, with her gnarled, work-worn hands clasped before her, awaiting the last flicker of the fading life. If only the woman would cry out, if only Wickford would speak again; but they sat silent, while the child’s labored breathing and the ticking of the clock were all that broke the stillness in the chamber of death.

The rosy glow in the west faded to ashen gray as the day burned itself out ; still they sat there waiting. Sometimes the woman would rise and look at the child for a moment, or lay her hand on him with an awkward but infinitely tender caress. Sometimes the Doctor's rich voice broke the silence reciting a comforting text, or he would pass over to the bedside and stand beside it.

The woman made no protest against her grief; she was acquainted with sorrow, and bore it with that pitiful stoicism the very poor acquire from long familiarity with misfortune. Isabel felt herself outside of the relations which her husband had established with the other two. She belonged to a different world; in joy they might bridge the chasm that lay between them, but in great sorrow she must always stand aloof.

It was a still evening, but the little house stood so near the docks that the faint lapping of the water on the wooden piers was sometimes audible. Isabel strained her ears to catch the soft, rippling sound the tide makes when it turns, that tide which was to carry

the child out alone into the Unknowable. She knew the superstition was a common one among the towns-people, and although at another time she might have laughed at it, her present credence was commanded by the stony agony of the woman before her.

There it was now—she caught it at last! —the sibilant voice of the receding waters. The mother heard it too, and leaned over the bed with a white, twitching face. Wickford drew near and laid a kindly hand on her shoulder. The child's eyelids fluttered for a moment, then they opened; he seemed to recognize his mother, and smiled. Near the window where Isabel was sitting a cat cried; the animal suddenly sprang to the window-ledge and began scratching at the panes. Isabel's blood curdled; she sickened at the idea suggested, and started up as the desolate wail of the bereaved mother rang out, filling all the silence:

“Oh, my God! my God! He was all I had!” Isabel felt as if her ears would burst; her terror choked her, and she fled out into the soft, spring night, leaving the Doctor

to comfort the childless woman as best he might.

In the blaze of contempt he felt for his wife's unwomanly cowardice her last chance of reconciliation was consumed.

As she sped on under the light of the young moon, the oily waters that crawled in and out of the dock-yard piers seemed to hunger for her life ; her shadow dogged her steps ; every bush was a hiding-place for some skulking terror. If her thin skirt caught in twig or bramble she ran on heedlessly, tearing it loose, afraid to look behind her. When she reached her room at last she lit all the candles she could find, and kept her maid with her, on one pretext or another, until the shadow of this frightful presence had lifted a little.

This, then, was Death, the one certain thing that must come to her—to him—to every creature under the sun. If one were shot like Captain Read it would be bad enough, but to lie still and have those invisible fingers slowly strangle one was too fearful to think about.

She belonged to an age when the physical side of dissolution was painfully prominent in the mind of humanity. Society had lost the delicate Greek sense of proportion which had ornamented the very sarcophagi of the ancients with processions of all that made life lovely, and suggested thereby the hope of a happier future existence. She was accustomed to the horrible mortalities which made the tombstones of her own generation hideous.

“Though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God,” Wickford had said.

“Though worms—” Her mind reeled at the thought of what must come after death, and it was characteristic of her animal nature that bodily corruption should occupy her thoughts to the exclusion of spiritual beatification, as she tossed to and fro during the long night. The idea that she had run away tormented her also—run away in the face of distress—deserted under the eye of the man in whom she most desired to inspire confidence.

She formed all sorts of projects for the bereaved mother's assistance, and anticipated their fulfilment with a glow of self-gratulation. It did not strike her that, to one unacquainted with the nervous shock she received in watching this, her first death-bed, her conduct must seem selfish and heartless in the extreme.

Next morning she told Aunt Hannah about the scene in the cottage, and they did what they could together to help Mrs. Saunders. But Miss Wickford appreciated the effect Isabel's flight might have upon the Doctor much more justly than the girl herself could do. She judged accurately the contempt which he would visit upon the head of any one possessing less stoicism than he had trained himself to exercise. She lost no time, therefore, in paying him a special visit, when she dwelt upon the extenuations of Madame's conduct with all the eloquence at her command. However, Wickford pursued his tactics of absolute taciturnity with regard to his wife; and as the old lady said to her-

self, "no man can open an oyster with his fingers."

She thought it best to tell Isabel what a grave mistake hers had been, and Madame's sense of being in disgrace aggravated her morbid dread of meeting her husband. When they found themselves together in the houses of the poor she would slip away as soon as possible, making the excuse that as the Doctor was here now, there could be no possible need of her. She fancied that she had thus mystified these ignorant people about the relations existing between her husband and herself until a woman once stopped her at the threshold, saying :

"You won't want to come in just now—the Doctor's here." Much as she would have liked to run away, Isabel did pay her visit, nevertheless, for her pride's sake, but she got off as soon as she could without exciting comment.

CHAPTER XV

THE summer came, but it brought no guests to the great house. Autumn followed, spreading its rich India carpet of leaves before the retreating footsteps of the dying year. But Madame never rode a-horseback now. Her pleasure-loving nature starved in the existence she was enduring; it could hardly be called a life where so much of her personality perforce found no food.

Her affection belonged to Wickford—not to humanity; yet she devoted herself to the sick and suffering, and her husband seemed to reck nothing of her doings. Even the love that animated her life was not of the variety “which casteth out fear.” She was torn between her desire to be with him and a nervous dread of his reproaches, should they ever find voice. The internal conflict robbed her of any elasticity she had preserved, and

her joyless mode of living began to tell upon her physique. She grew thin, and people said Madame Wickford was losing her good looks. When Isabel heard it, the idea of becoming less beautiful gave her sharp pain even in the midst of her more serious troubles. Sorrow had brayed her as in a mortar, but the vanity of the woman survived all her other characteristics.

During the second winter she was astonished to see how often the Doctor made use of his gig in paying his visits even in the immediate neighborhood. In roundabout ways she picked up scraps of information which she pieced together, and thus learned that his disease was beginning to sap his vitality perceptibly. Aunt Hannah told her that even his voice was changing to a harsh, metallic sound; personally, though, she knew nothing, as she had not exchanged a dozen words with him for a twelvemonth.

Her solitary holidays were nearly the hardest hours of Isabel's life; the feast tides were associated in her mind with the junketings which she had known as a girl.

But she had a sentiment about going away from home at Christmas or Easter; it was to her as if she were trying to shirk her portion of the burden of loneliness which had fallen upon the old house. So she would eat her turkey and mince-pie over against the empty chair she always ordered placed for the master of the house, who never came.

Two years slipped away in this dreary fashion. People had accustomed themselves to the rift between Wickford and his wife, much as they had grown familiar with the Doctor's veil. There was a certain amount of pity for Isabel in her neighbors' hearts, not unmixed with contempt, as pity is apt to be. She could not keep her own husband, the prosperous mothers of families averred; and "that always showed there wasn't much in a woman, after all."

As for Wickford, his popularity was an integral part of the man. He fitted exactly into his niche in society; he was essentially of the same weave with his neighbors, only of a finer texture. They understood him;

therefore the towns-people loved him as one of themselves, who only had attained the greatest possible elevation of character. It used to be a saying among the fishermen that "Doctor Wickford would make the finest funeral in the county," which here, as in the old days of Egypt, was, after all, the real test of a man's acceptability to his fellows.

It was in the autumn of the second year that Wickford's indomitable will succumbed to the ravages of disease. He had, of course, been obliged to keep his room at times when he passed through some ephemerally dangerous crisis. But the periods of seclusion had of late grown more frequent and of longer duration; he had struggled with a nearly superhuman endurance against the inevitable, but physical weakness vanquished him at last; he knew his end was near, and he concentrated the energies of his whole soul in the effort to preserve his distorted features from the scrutiny of strange eyes.

The thought of being talked over, as he knew only too well the dead are discussed

in every country town, commented on, and described with a plethora of disgusting detail, was intolerable to him. The same sentiment that had induced him to shroud his face in crape during his life animated his preparations for the death he expected, at furthest, in a few days. There had been a hemorrhage during the night and he was very weak, but he managed to dress himself after a fashion, and, adjusting his veil, rang for the man-servant whom he had reason to believe loved him enough to follow his injunctions to the letter, even after he should be forever beyond enforcing his orders.

When the man came he bade him put fresh sheets on the bed, and set the room in order. "Ain't you goin' out, master?" the negro inquired, as he went about his work.

"No," Wickford answered; "I don't think I'll ever go out again, William; that's what I want to see you about."

"O Lord, master, please don't say that; it's just a-begging of death to come 'long,

de way you's talkin'!" the servant exclaimed.

"I don't think supplications one way or the other would make much difference," the Doctor answered. "Stop blubbering, William, and listen to me."

The man grew quiet instantly.

"If any one wants to come in," Wickford continued, with an intensity of utterance that might well have impressed a stronger mind than the negro's, "stand at the door and prevent it—by force, if necessary. Tell them my curse—the curse of a dying man—is on the one who crosses this threshold before I am cold. And listen, William, if you never listened to a word of mine before: get O'Connor to help you watch; let nobody—you understand?—nobody, not even your mistress, enter this room while I am alive, or, as I believe in a living soul, I will haunt you till the day of your death!" There was something terrible in the concentrated energy of the last words, spoken in a generation when the belief in ghosts was prevalent among all classes. The negro's

eyes rolled in their sockets and he shook with terror.

“I won’t, Mars’ Gordon—hones’, I won’t; only please, sir, don’t ha’nt we all. If yo’ got to die, fur de’ Lord’s sake don’t come back no mo’!”

“Very good,” resumed the Doctor, in his ordinary tone of voice. “Now get me some milk, and leave it there by the bed. Take out that suit of black broadcloth in the bottom drawer and a change of linen; lay them on a chair by the bed, too. I will then have a letter to give you, and we will say good-bye.”

The negro sobbed once or twice as he moved back and forward, occupied with his task. Wickford’s slender reserve of strength was nearly exhausted, but he got up and tottered about, making such ghastly preparations as he deemed necessary. There were the dressings and bandages, a pencil and paper in case he had anything to say at the last moment; now everything was complete save this letter, which he must get off his hands at once, then he could die easily. The

pain gnawed him so, he could hardly command his mind as he wrote with trembling fingers :

“MY WIFE,—This is the second letter I have had the occasion to address you in our short married life. There never was any real congeniality between us, and your levity and unfeeling conduct have alienated any affection I ever bore you. Our marriage was a huge mistake ; but now that I am a dying man it would ill become me to sit in judgment on your conduct. We do not love each other, and, in the best sense, there was never any real affection between us. On the brink of eternity let us not prevaricate, even to ourselves. Some men could have perhaps forgiven you your unchaste conduct and your habit of falsehood ; I could not.

“I may have been to blame towards you in some regards ; if so, I shall soon stand before a tribunal where all things are made clear. What is past is past ; but what I have to say to you relates to the present. As I wrote, I am a dying man, completely in your power,

therefore it rests with you to earn my everlasting gratitude, or my curses, which shall dog you for the remainder of your life. Of course, you can order the door of my room broken down, and force yourself or let others thrust their presence upon me in my last moments. What I beg of you is, that you use the power conferred upon you by your position as my wife to preserve the quiet of my end, and keep the secret of my disfigured face inviolate even unto my burial.

“When I am found I shall be dressed as I wish to be for my last sleep, and I conjure you, by all you deem holy, that you follow my instructions and lay me in the grave as you find me. If you do so, I grant you full and hearty pardon for any of your offences against me, and I pray God I may have opportunity in the Hereafter to thank you for the service you will have rendered me.

“My will is in the safe in the office; you will find I leave you everything, outside of a few legacies to the servants, on condition that you follow this my last request. Praying that no diseased curiosity or false idea

of kindness will tempt you to transgress my commands,

“I remain, what I have always been,

“Your faithful husband,

“GORDON WICKFORD.”

When he had folded the paper, addressed and sealed it, he extended his wasted hand to the waiting negro.

“You have been a good friend of mine, William,” he gasped. “Better than many a one who deserved more from me. I have remembered you in my will—see when I am gone.”

“Oh, Mars’ Gordon!” the poor fellow sobbed. “Please git well; I don’t want no money nor nothin’! You has been a good master, and I jes’ want to see you round again like you used to be. You cured such a lot of people, Mars’ Gordon—can’t you cure yourself?” he queried.

“No, William,” the Doctor answered. “It is my time to go now; we must say good-bye forever.”

“Lemme stay with you—please lemme

stay," the negro urged, "for Goad's sake, Mars' Gordon! I won't never breave a word of what I sees; only lemme stay and take care of you."

Gordon smiled faintly behind his veil. "I can't, my poor fellow," he answered. "You are making it unnecessarily hard for me. Go now; tell Miss Hannah good-bye for me, and say I did not send for her because I was afraid she might insist on staying and seeing the last of one to whom she has always been most kind. Go now, William, and God bless you."

As the man passed out of the door sobbing, Wickford shot the bolt behind him, and tottered over to the bed exhausted.

CHAPTER XVI

MADAME was not in the house when William looked for her to deliver the letter, so he ran over to Miss Hannah with the message; such portentous news was too big for him to hold alone. He rushed into the sitting-room, where the old lady was busily sewing.

“Oh, Miss Hannah, Miss Hannah!” he gasped; “Mars’ Gordon’s dyin’, an’ he done shut we all out of his room. He say I mus’ say good-bye to you, and tell you he don’t want no one fussin’ roun’ him, or he’d have sent for you befo’ he goes.”

“What’s that you’re saying?” said the old lady. “The nigger’s crazy!”

“No, ma’am, I ain’t crazy!” asserted William. “Here’s a letter I mus’ give Madame Wickford; does you know whar’ she’s gone?”

“No, I don’t; but I’m going right over to see Gordon myself,” she answered, with a de-

cided snap of her old jaws. She remembered another letter her nephew had written his wife, and she determined to shield the girl from the contents of this one if it were possible.

“You kyant go see him, Miss Hannah,” the negro urged. “Ain’t I done tole you he say nobody kin come in?”

The old lady did not stop to argue, but sailed over the street, the cold autumn winds fluttering the strings of her cap and blowing out her shawl as she walked. She stalked through the office, and was about to try the inner door when William pushed in front of her.

“Don’t, Miss Hannah! please, ma’am, don’t!” he said. “’Cause I ain’t a-goin’ to let you git in, an’ it’s no use talkin’.

“Stand back!” she exclaimed, peremptorily. But William kept his place, protesting,

“I don’t want to hinder you, Miss Hannah; but, ’fore God, you kyant go in dere as long as I’m a livin’ nigger!”

“Gordon!” she called — “Gordon, come,

open the door! It is I—Aunt Hannah; won't you let me in?"

There was no sound from beyond, and the old lady stood wrathfully surveying the black guardian of the door.

"Wait till your mistress comes home, and we'll see—" she said, at last, as she realized how helpless she was to carry her point in the face of such opposition. "Give me that letter to Madame Wickford!" she demanded, and, seizing the paper, she hurried away in search of Isabel.

Madame had come in from her morning walk, and was in her own room, laying aside her plumed bonnet, as the old woman entered.

"Good-morning, Aunt Hannah!" she said. "You're over here early. Sit down, I want to talk to you about Gordon; he has not been out of his room for days. Won't you look in on him, and see what is the matter?"

Aunt Hannah said nothing for the moment. How was she to break the news to this poor tarnished butterfly she wondered. "That's

just what I came to talk about," she said, at last.

Madame turned and looked at her. There was something strange in the old face that made her tremble. "Oh! is anything more the matter?" she faltered; everything in her poor young life had gone so vitally wrong that the unexpected must, she thought, always mean the most terrible.

"Don't get frightened, dearie!" the old woman said, reassuringly. "William came to me with some trumped-up story about Gordon's having locked himself in and forbidden any one to come near him. Do you believe it, that crazy nigger won't let me pass the door!"

Madame sat down; her knees would not bear her any longer. Could he have taken the one hope from her—was she not even to claim the right to be his nurse, and assuage the final torture as much as was humanly possible?

"I've got a letter here that your husband wrote you; have you got strength to bear it, Isabel?" Miss Hannah queried, gazing com-

passionately at the young woman's white face and trembling hands.

"Yes; give it to me," Madame answered. "I will take it now."

She read the letter through; then, as she had done on that other night which seemed so long ago, she handed it to the old lady, saying, simply, "Read it, Aunt Hannah." She could not cry, she could not storm, and she sat there wondering at her own impassivity in the face of such fearful tidings. One thing was clear in Isabel's perturbed mind. She would grant his strange wish, even if it killed her, for she was determined to buy one kind thought, at least, from him before he died; for this she would pay any sacrifice he demanded.

Miss Wickford had finished the letter now, and looked up grieved at the shocking news it contained. She was astonished, as well, at the unusual request it embodied. "You are not going to hear to such nonsense, are you, Isabel?" she queried. "His shutting himself up in this way is just like an animal dying in his hole. It

isn't a decent ending for a Christian gentleman."

"Please don't think ill of me," Madame answered. "You see what he says; I can never convince him now that I was not a wicked woman, but at least he shall know that I was an obedient wife. I'm not going to let any one go in there unless he wants it."

Miss Wickford was crying softly. "But, good land!" she exclaimed, "if he should think better of it, think what he is going to suffer, child! It's downright unnatural of you to leave him alone. I shall go myself if you don't." She arose as she spoke, and started down the steep stairway to help speed the last of the Wickfords on his long journey.

Memories thronged about her: figures of her former self; of her parents; of that boy-officer who had gone away to the Revolution, never to return; of Wickford as a child; of his father. The family ghosts were haunting her as she took her way along the cold passage to Wickford's inner room; it was useless to argue with William at the office en-

trance. She knew Isabel was following, but the girl had been so bidable for years, and so malleable in Miss Wickford's hands, that the thought of her interference never occurred to the resolute old lady. As she reached the door Madame passed in front of her.

"Dear aunt, I don't want to worry you or do what you think wrong, but you must not try to go in," she said, softly. Her face was white, and her eyes shone out of dark sockets; it touched Aunt Hannah to see the stolid misery of the girl. Even a year ago Isabel would have cried out under the lash, but now she felt the futility of protest.

"Let me pass, you poor child," the old lady insisted, trying to brush her aside.

"I cannot," Madame returned, with a spice of her old decision. "He is master in his own house, and even if he wishes what is not wise, he shall be obeyed. You cannot pass here." If a tame pigeon had flown in her face, it could not have astonished Miss Wickford more.

"Why, Isabel, are you crazy?" she asked, in amazement.

“No; but as long as I have the power I shall keep watch beside this door. His bed is so near I can hear everything, and if he wants me even at the last— Oh, Aunt Hannah, even if he whispers that he wants me, I shall hear it!”

She crouched down on the sill, and leaned her head against the door with a look in her brown eyes that reminded Miss Wickford of a faithful dog. She saw it was useless to reason with the girl now. She got Isabel a shawl to wrap herself in, and determined to see what could be done later. The young woman thanked her for the covering, and then fell to listening again, every nerve strained to catch the faintest rustling on the other side of the door.

Miss Wickford sat with her for a time; she then bethought her of the minister, and hoping that he might have the necessary influence, she determined to bring him to argue with Madame. In about an hour they returned together, and found the same huddled figure keeping guard over the door. The gray-headed old pastor greeted

Madame kindly; she hardly seemed to notice him.

“My child,” he said, “you must try to look at this matter reasonably; the hand of the Lord is heavy upon you, but you must strive to bear it with meekness. This is a foolish idea of Wickford’s, and although a wife should always be submissive, looking up to her husband as ‘the church does to the Lord who is its head,’ yet in this case I would counsel you to place wisdom before obedience. There is no question about it, his request is the result of delirium; I consider it even your duty to disregard it for his good.”

He waited for an answer, but as she made no sign he continued: “The wisest thing is to insist upon doing what religion and medical science could accomplish for his relief. Break open the door!”

Madame sprang up to her full height, stretching out her arms across the doorway. Her eyes blazed as she turned on the old man.

“Who are you that talk of breaking doors

in my house?" she demanded, imperiously. "Understand now, once and for all, both of you, that the Doctor's wishes shall be obeyed as long as there is life in my body to enforce them. I am his wife, and mistress here in his absence. Leave me alone, I say; I will watch by my own dead." She sank down again on the threshold, moaning softly to herself as she heard a stifled cry of pain in the room beyond. They tried to reason with her from time to time, but she would only shake her head and bid them leave her. The day wore on, and the sun streamed in the little passage window looking westward. The old man bade Aunt Hannah good-bye, and passed out, leaving the two women together.

As night fell Miss Wickford brought Isabel food, and, although she refused to eat anything, she drank some water greedily, and then fell back into her old position.

"Won't you go to bed, dearie?" Miss Wickford asked.

"No, Aunt Hannah, I'm not going to leave him; he knows I am here if he wants me," Madame answered.

With the habit of an experienced nurse Miss Wickford determined to save herself wherever she could; she knew there might be more watching to do than one person could manage, so she settled herself as comfortably as possible, and dropped to sleep after a while. In the stillness of the night Isabel could hear Wickford stirring on the other side of the door.

“Husband,” she whispered, “won’t you let me come in?”

The queer, metallic voice answered her, “No; go away.”

“Gordon,” she pleaded, “I will keep every one else out; but oh, for our old love’s sake, let me help you, dear!” She waited, but there was no answer. “Believe me, for God’s sake; I am an innocent woman! Oh, let me in! If you knew how I have tried to make myself ready for this time, when I might serve you! how I have done everything I hated and given up everything I liked, you would believe me! Don’t you remember that day under the plum-trees? Please let me in, dear—please! I won’t come

unless you say so, and no one else shall either, unless they force me away. Won't you let me in and kiss me good-bye, beloved?" She waited to listen, and to her horror she could hear nothing. Her brain reeled as she crouched there. "Speak to me!" she pleaded; "only tell me you are alive, and I will be silent. Oh, for Heaven's sake, speak to me!"

"I am alive," a faint voice answered her. So she lay on the door-sill listening to his intermittent moanings, all her being concentrated in her ears, while the night waned and the dawn broke in the east. Miss Hannah sought to persuade her to take food, but she would not eat. From time to time the neighbors dropped in; they joined the old woman in her remonstrances, but Madame Wickford heeded them not; she hardly seemed even to hear them as she sat, every nerve strained in her watchful listening. All her faculties seemed absorbed in her watch, and the nearer sights and sounds came to her muffled by her abstraction.

It was equally useless to argue with the negro and the old gardener; threats and

bribes made no impression upon them; the master-will of the sick man inside there still swayed all the members of his household. He had said he wished to die alone, and they banded together to carry out his injunctions, irrespective of their neighbors' opinions in regard to their conduct. That he deemed it advisable seemed enough for them, which spoke volumes for his just and wise sway in former times. It was a great scandal to the town; but what was to be done? O'Connor and William watched alternately at one door, the grief-stricken woman sat at the other. Without violence there could be no intrusion upon the Doctor possible, nor did any one feel authorized to use drastic measures in the face of Isabel's decided protest. Although she was discredited in the town's eyes, yet she was Madame Wickford and in her own house; that still counted for something.

CHAPTER XVII

DAY and night had become the same to Isabel, except that in the quiet darkness she could better hear the microphonic sounds and the occasional stifled groans that told her Wickford was still alive. Sometimes, when the silence lasted an intolerable time, she would plead with him to let her understand, if he could, that he knew she still watched beside him, and the queer, unfamiliar voice answered faintly, yet her quick ear caught it with glad assurance that he could respond.

Towards daylight on the second night the moans became more frequent. There was a cry of agony, which broke the stillness. She writhed on the hard boards of the passage as though she would bury herself out of hearing, mental torture shook her like an ague, but she never moved from

her post. Miss Wickford had dropped asleep in her chair, and, looking at her, Isabel wondered how rest was possible with that fearful cry pulsating yet through the empty house. She heard him moving now; it seemed as if he had fallen somehow; now he was up again. Oh, if she could only help him! From the quiet that intervened between the small rustlings he seemed to rest every now and then. At length all was still. She waited for what seemed an age; then she called his name. There was no answer, but she heard a little motion from within. Perhaps she troubled him with her insistence; she determined, therefore, to lie still and wait.

Again the dawn swept up out of the sea, rosy and clear; she could see the pink light of a new day on the western walls of the passage; she wondered to herself if Wickford slept, he was so quiet. Her own eyes, though, seemed as if they were buttoned open. At last there was a scream from the other side of the door—faint, but freighted with untold anguish. The old woman heard it, and awoke shuddering. The Irishman

and the negro heard it, and drew closer together. To Madame it was only an assurance that he still lived, while to these others it meant the beginning of the end.

Everything was silent again; the day moved on in majestic glory of blue and gold. There was the banging of an opening shutter, a cart rolled by, and some one passed on horseback. Then the multiplicity of sound became tangled in her ears as the town awoke, but within there all was deadly quiet. She would try again to awaken some response. "Gordon!" she called, but only her own voice echoed down the bare passage—"Gordon, speak to me! make some sign! Oh, my love, my love, be merciful! Make some sign; the suspense is killing me!" Her voice reached a cry of anguish; but the dead are silent sleepers, and there was no answer. The old woman sat looking at her pitifully.

"He doesn't answer," Isabel whispered, turning her questioning eyes on her companion. "Could he be— Oh, Gordon, Gordon!" she cried, "won't you speak to me

this once?" Springing up in her agony of terror she beat upon the door with open palms, screaming to him, calling vainly to dead ears, begging vainly for an answer from dead lips. Miss Hannah tried to soothe her, but she shook off the old woman's detaining hands and struck the door with frenzied force, bruising her delicate flesh in the mad effort to make him hear her.

The lock was old, and the wood around it too rotten to resist even her slender strength. It gave way under her hands, and she stumbled forward into the dark room, falling senseless across the bed, where he lay stark and stiff, dressed for his burial. The great hat was tied down upon his head, the veil drawn about his face, and in his waxen hands there was a paper. He must have been dead for hours.

It was Aunt Hannah who took the letter from between the stiff fingers and deciphered the faint, wavering scrawl :

"I have heard it all, dear wife ; you have endured even unto the end. God bless you, Isabel ! Forgive me ! I have no strength

for more. Bury me as I am, for Jesus' sake!"

So they buried him according to his wish, and the green mound over by old Madame Wickford's marble shaft hides forever the secret that his veil kept for so many years.

CHAPTER XVIII

ISABEL did not die. The towns-people wondered why she remained among them instead of returning to her own kin in the city; but she preferred to live on alone in the old house, where all the fires of her life burned themselves out during her short years of marriage with the veiled Doctor.

It required a spiritual upheaval, such as her long vigil before Wickford's door, to awaken the sleeping soul that had been so woefully tardy in taking upon itself the governance of her actions. The good or evil she had done heretofore proceeded from momentary impulses as evanescent as a child's, for, having no settled principle to give cohesion and purpose to her life, she had drifted rudderless amid the temptations that surrounded her, and whatever spiritual wisdom she had at last achieved was solely the outcome of

bitter personal experience. Her mistakes were plain enough to Isabel now, and in looking back upon her past she could recognize the falsehood that had injured her cause with her husband on one side, the foolish vanity that had ensnared her on the other. It did not detract from the bitterness of her retrospect that this knowledge had come all too late to prevent the shipwreck of her youth. She grieved heartily, yet she grieved according to her kind. Therefore, at first, her own mistakes, her own losses, occupied her exclusively. Sorrow's furnaces had a mighty work to do in refining away the mass of vanity and exaggerated selfishness that formerly had blocked all the outlets of her sympathy.

It is impossible that a crisis such as the one through which Isabel had passed should leave any spirit unchanged, but it remains for the individual to determine if his soul's road thenceforth shall lead up or downward, though the degree of this elevation or descent is fixed by the original nature of the spirit itself. Isabel was no embryo

saint, for whom only the forcing-house of suffering was required to produce an inflorescence of holiness; yet, faulty and all human as she was, a gleam of higher light had fallen upon her in her sorrow, and lifted her above her old self for all time. Whatever germs of good lay hidden in her natural disposition now shone out purer and stronger for the trials through which she passed.

When she again took up the round of charities that had occupied her before her widowhood, she was conscious of a new quality within herself that bridged the dislike and prejudice which formerly divided her from those she helped. Perhaps neither she nor they could exactly define the difference in their relations, but that a vital change had occurred was recognized by both sides, and for the first time since her coming to the old town she began to feel a comforting sense of being at one with the community in which she lived. It was sweet to know that she was no longer an Ishmaelite among her husband's friends.

Isabel's charities were not now a mere

scattering of alms. She spent her sympathy generously too, and in return the love of those whom she served sprang up about her and refreshed the barrens of her wasted existence.

Nor did her solace stop here; with her childish faults nature had also endowed her with a childlike capacity for forgetting the disagreeable, in a kind of day-dreaming, in which she saw the past as she would have it rather than as it really was. Thus in the recesses of her bruised heart she created for herself an ideal of Wickford woven from the few happy moments they had enjoyed together. She dressed out her dead love in this shimmering array, and so successfully muffled the horrors of her old life that, as time still further blurred her memory, she could think and talk of her husband with a tender pleasure that would have been incomprehensible to a woman of keener sensibilities.

Living thus amid the transmuted scenes of her past life, she drifted into a quiet and not unhappy old age, useful and beloved

among her neighbors, and enshrined to their eyes in a kind of perennial romance, which was hers by right of the tragedy of her stormy youth.

So at last she fell peacefully asleep, and the old house passed into the hands of strangers.

THE END

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



A 001 394 435 0

