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CHAPTER I.

FOR HIS DAUGHTER.

THE Amaldi Palace stands in a small square, not far from the beautiful old church of Santa Maria Novella, fills up nearly one side of the piazza, and is stately enough to be noticeable, rich as Florence is in picturesque and storied edifices.

There are three or four courts, and the vast pile has numerous occupants; but one quadrangle, with its separate entrance, belongs to Violet Cameron. She has not, however, asserted her claims to proprietorship by giving her portion of the mansion a new name; and therein, I think, has shown wisdom. Nowadays, in Florence and Rome, the traveler not unfrequently finds historical dwellings, which have been re-christened under the Anglo-Saxon cognomens of their present owners; but I cannot persuade myself that Palazzo Sankey and Villino Jenkinson sound as well as their original Italian titles.

In the beginning of October, 187–, Miss Cameron returned to Florence, after more than a year's absence, intending to spend the rest of the autumn, and perhaps the whole winter, unless it should prove one of those hopelessly rainy seasons, which the variable Tuscan climate will occasionally disgrace itself by adopting and clinging to for several consecutive months.

At an early hour on the morning after her arrival she was seated in her dressing-room—a pretty nook, with its walls paneled in blue silk, the windows hung with blue

and white draperies, and the easy-chairs and couches covered with the faintest possible tint of azure velvet. A door stood open, and showed a boudoir, rich and quaint as a cinque-cento casket; beyond, other open doors gave glimpses of a long suite of apartments, which were the envy of half her acquaintance, though to attempt a description of the various chambers, with their treasures of art and *virtu*, would only make this page sound like an auction catalogue.

Miss Cameron had drunk her coffee, and was indulging in the luxury of complete idleness, looking her best, too, in an undress which would have been very trying to many women —a gown of some dead white woolen stuff, loosely confined about the waist by a broad ribbon, and her hair (dark auburn, with golden reflections upon it) brushed back from her forehead, and falling in heavy masses over her shoulders. Even in that severely simple toilet and the rigid truthfulness of the morning light, six-and-twenty was the most a close observer would have assigned as her age; but Violet Cameron had counted three years beyond thirty, and reached the era at which her sex, as a rule, is forced to relinquish all claims to appearing youthful. I think it was the indescribable softness and purity of her complexion which kept her face so young; and even feminine critics never tried to hint that the delicate bloom in her cheeks, like the color in the heart of a wild rose, was not natural.

Women did say her eyes were green, and, I believe, rightly; but they were nevertheless wonderfully beautiful eyes, which gained added depth from the blackness of the arched brows, and the lashes so long and thick as to cast that peculiar shadow which less fortunate women are obliged to supply by factitious aids.

She was too small to be called handsome; the features were too irregular for perfect beauty; and her grace and supreme elegance (that highest and most indefinable charm) rendered the term pretty inapplicable. She seemed to have caught certain characteristics of each of the three types, and Nature had managed the combination with such skill that the result was a loveliness as unique as it was indisputable.

Three-and-thirty years of age, and unmarried. So I must call her my elderly heroine, though, in the presence of her radiant fairness, the epithet would have become a positively ludicrous misnomer.

Miss Cameron's meditations were interrupted by the opening of a door; steps crossed the boudoir; and a thin, faded voice, which one would have sworn belonged to an ancient spinster, called, quaveringly:

"Good-morning, dear! May I come in? Excuse this early visit. Clarice said you were up, and I wanted—but it is a shame to disturb you——"

"Pray come in!" Miss Cameron said, as the unseen speaker's sentence trailed off into a sigh. "I may be unentertaining, but I am not dangerous, I give you my word."

The *portière* was pushed farther back by a hand which suited the voice—long, bony, and uncertain in its movements; but it was not until Miss Cameron repeated her invitation that their owner appeared. She gave the effect of unusual height, from the fact that each separate part—neck, waist, and limbs—seemed unduly elongated; and she was so thin that apparently only skin and bones had been left after that drawing-out process.

Fifty-five at least; tiny wrinkles, like cracks in yellow porcelain; straggling cork-screw curls; a perpetual smile; a habit of carrying her head on one side—of breaking her sentences with inexpressibly irritating little gasps—these were Miss Bronson's chief characteristics, whereto I may add a morbid taste in the matter of faded pink bows, which she had a mania for pinning on every available spot, from the crown of her head to the toes of her slippers.

"Good morning, Eliza," said Miss Cameron. "I hope you have slept off the fatigues of the journey."

"Oh, perfectly! And how fresh you look!" with a sigh so much deeper than ordinary, that Miss Cameron added:

"What have you got on your soul or your conscience? Something troubles you, I know. Your voice is more Eolian-harp-like than usual."

"My love, I am in a state of such painful uncertainty!"

"My love, people say that is the normal state of all us spinsters. But sit down and reveal your woes. I don't ask you to weep on my sympathetic bosom, but I will do anything short of drying tears to show my tender interest," said Miss Cameron, laughingly.

Miss Bronson seated herself, slipped from her arm into her lap a canvas reticule worked with worsted flowers of

such discordant hues that they gave her friend a sensation like incipient sea-sickness, and shook her head pensively.

"Are you carrying your trouble in that preposterous bag?" Miss Cameron asked. "It is ugly enough to hold all the ills of Pandora's box, though Hope would die in disgust if shut up there."

"I declare, my dear, you are as witty as a play; but I don't know—is it now—at least among foreigners——"

"What, in the name of goodness?"

"Exactly *the* thing to talk so differently from everybody else," sighed Miss Bronson. "Please don't be offended at my mentioning it, but several times people have said to me, they should know you were an American just by your conversation."

"I hope so! I don't propose to cultivate stupidity for the sake of being supposed a native of some other country. Perhaps, too, I talk through my nose."

"Oh no! You have nothing of the nasal intonation."

"Do say twang, Eliza! We are not school-mistresses any longer, and there is no necessity for using long words," said Miss Cameron, laughing outright.

"I wish you would not speak so often of having been a schoolmistress," expostulated Miss Bronson; "it does not matter for me, but with your wealth and beauty——"

"My dear, the wealth gives me the privilege of saying what I please! I am proud of having been a school-ma'am! Why, I should be heartily ashamed of myself if I had always led as useless a life as I do now! I am very doubtful whether fate did me any kindness in putting an end to my drudgery. Good heavens! ten years gone since then—and I meant to have done so much! And here I am thirty-three, and have accomplished literally nothing!"

"You know what French people say—'that a woman in reality has only the age she looks,'" said Eliza, glancing in the mirror as if to determine how many years this privilege would take off her own record.

"French people have talked nonsense in regard to women since the foundation of the Gallic empire" ("Erroneously declared by many authors to have begun with Charlemagne," parenthesized Miss Bronson), "and will continue to do so until the day of Judgment, whenever they began," pursued Miss Cameron. "But never mind

my age, or the follies of the Gauls: what secret have you got shut up there?"

At this reminder of her errand, the spinster made a sudden nervous movement which sent several sealed envelopes flying out of the reticule.

"Ugh! I was right to compare the thing to Pandora's box!" shivered Miss Cameron. She stooped to pick up two of the epistles which had fluttered close to her chair, adding, in the playfully teasing way whereby she often perplexed poor Eliza: "They are for me! Why were you hiding my correspondence in your sack? If you mean to turn postman I shall buy you a uniform."

"Oh—oh! don't look—wait till I explain!" cried the antique virgin despairingly, as her friend was about to open the envelopes. "Please don't look!"

Miss Cameron laid the missives down and watched the spinster execute a kind of weird waltz, which was rather like a caricature of Dinorah's Shadow-dance.

"This is exceedingly mysterious," she said; "even awe-inspiring!"

"My dear," continued Miss Bronson, as soon as she reached the speaking stage of her eccentric exercise, "I have a message which is, so to speak, a key to the whole matter."

"Then pray give me the key, else I shall force the lock," returned Miss Cameron, with a glance towards the letters, which caused Eliza to dance anew.

"One moment—I wanted to break it——"

"I hate broken news as I do broken china," interrupted Miss Cameron. "Pray give it to me entire, whatever it may be. If it comes in fragments it will be sure to excoriate my temper, just as broken china would my fingers."

"You make me laugh so! He! he! ha! ha!" And, as a proof that her merriment was heart-felt, Miss Bronson began to cry.

Any person unaccustomed to the spinster's vagaries would either have been alarmed or ready to shake her from sheer impatience, but experience had taught Miss Cameron that emotion of any sort in the presence of Eliza's small agitations was usually emotion wasted, for, as a rule, the slighter the cause, the more force she put into her demonstrations. So now her friend only said, composedly:

"You will tell me when you can."

"Yes—I--wanted to break—" sobbed Eliza; then gave

a great gulp and burst out, "Your cousin George Danvers is dead."

Miss Cameron changed color, put her hand over her eyes, and remained silent for a few seconds, during which Eliza sat choking behind her pocket-handkerchief, and by the time she emerged from its depths Miss Cameron had resumed her former attitude.

"He died to me so many years since that I cannot pretend to be deeply affected," she said, in a voice which was awed rather than saddened. "If he can see me—or cares to see—he is certain that I have no hard feeling towards him. Once I thought I could never say this, but I can now, freely."

"Oh, my dear, that is like you! But only think—he had lost his fortune—every penny. His daughter is left absolutely destitute."

"Do you know, I had forgotten he had a daughter," returned Miss Cameron, with a little wonder in her tone. "That shows me how completely I had put him and his out of my mind! Yes, he had a daughter—she must be eighteen. His wife died?"

"To be sure; and he married again. It seems the poor girl and her stepmother are not good friends—oh! his letter is heart-breaking!"

"He wrote to you?"

"And to you," said Eliza, pointing towards the epistles on the table. "Only think! they have been lying here more than a month; and oh, he does so plead—it would soften a stone! The wife can go to her relations—but the unfortunate girl will not be received by them——"

"I think the quickest way to make me understand the whole matter will be to let me read the explanations," Miss Cameron interrupted, with a mildness which spoke volumes for her powers of self-restraint. "Give me your letter first, please."

Eliza declared that she had already done so, and was astounded when accused of guarding it still in her Pandora's box. She handed out a packet of cough lozenges, then a roll of knitting, then a receipted hotel-bill—insisting wildly that each article in turn was the required epistle, and weeping bitterly all the while. Finally, Miss Cameron took possession of the bag and turned its multifarious contents upon the table. Eliza shrieked over the confusion her

friend was making, but Miss Cameron did not heed her distress. She found the document at length, and said :

"You can pick up the things while I am reading. Please don't speak to me till I have finished ; I am so dull that I can only attend to one thing at a time ;" which was as near a reproof as she ever went in her dealings with his sometimes troublesome daughter of Vesta.

Eliza began collecting her treasures, and Miss Cameron read the letter through, then observed calmly :

"What a miserable opinion the poor man had of human nature up to the very last, since he thought it necessary to write you this piteous appeal to try and touch my hard heart."

"Oh, my dear, he felt he had wronged you so terribly !"

"And he supposed I would be unforgiving. It was natural, no doubt, for him to fear that, since in my case he would have been——"

"But the poor girl? And he is gone where——"

Miss Cameron held up her hand and finished the sen tence thus :

"Where the things of this world must look very unimportant, since they do so to us ten years after their happening, however weighty they seemed at the time."

Miss Bronson feared that the assertion sounded sadly unorthodox, and went out of the room in silence; partly because she perceived it would be cruel to inflict further companionship on Violet, partly to meditate over this speech, and prepare herself to convict her friend, in case conscience and certain old Calvinistic writers, in whose gloomy polemics she had a faith which we will hope is rare in our day, should decide that the sentiment savored of heresy.

Miss Cameron examined her letters, opening first the epistle from George Danvers—the utterance of a dying man; and, as such, according to the creeds in which we have all been reared, a communication to be received with solemn respect.

An odd thought crossed Violet Cameron's mind as she read—one which others of us have had under similar circumstances, and been startled thereby, because so utterly opposed to our theories—namely, why, because the man was dying, should any particular weight attach to his request ?

Fathers, on their death-beds, ask pledges of their children, which must fetter those children for years; husbands beg wives never to marry; wives entreat husbands not to wed some particular woman. Having received the desired promises, the departing spirits go tranquilly out of the world—go away, we believe, to an existence fuller of fruition than this, to a happiness of which happiness here can give no conception—certainly not regretting the friends they have left, else they could not find peace even in heaven—living new lives, untrammeled by any duty to their mourners on earth, who are considered worse than heathens if they fail to obey every wish of the dead, however unreasonable, however difficult, or, indeed, impracticable, the changes of this mortal sphere may render such obedience. Violet indulged this reflection; then was a little shocked; then thought herself silly for being so. But George Danvers had asked nothing which she deemed unreasonable or shrank from granting.

Miss Cameron's widowed father had died soon after her seventeenth birthday. George Danvers settled his estate. The orphan was declared penniless, but the executor speedily became wealthy. A few people suspected him of cheating. Violet felt assured of his guilt; for her father, during his brief illness, had shown her that the property he left (consisting of large coal and iron mines), though involved, would afford her an ample income, if matters were honestly and wisely conducted.

She had refused to become a pensioner on her relative's bounty, and had told him her certainty that he was a robber. He had grossly defrauded—he admitted this in his letter—but he had always meant to right her when he should grow rich enough! Now death stood near; a sudden financial crisis had ruined him; and in all the world there was no human being to whom he could appeal in his daughter's behalf, save to the cousin whom he had so deeply wronged.

The stepmother wrote, just after her husband's death, a letter full of complaints and self-commiseration. Her own fortune had been swallowed up, and she could not ask her relations to burden themselves with the care of a girl who, ever since her father's second marriage—an event which had occurred some six years previous—had plainly

shown that she considered his new wife and her connections interlopers and foes.

The third letter was from the orphan, Mary Danvers, written still later—girlish, highflown, but not a bad letter by any means—its whole tenor proving her ignorance of the causes which had separated the cousins for so many years.

Miss Cameron recollected that, owing to the long delay, the poor child might have suffered torments worse than those of purgatory ; at least, no more time should be lost. She prepared a telegram for her lawyer in New York, telling him how and where to communicate with Mary Danvers, and promising letters by the next steamer ; though, if any suitable escort offered before their arrival, the young lady might start on her voyage. This done she wrote to him and to George's daughter ; and, as she finished, Eliza Bronson appeared again, with her eyes and nose in a pitiable state, and her doubts in regard to Miss Cameron's heresy still unsettled.

"Read these, Eliza," said Violet, holding out the epistles.

The spinster slowly perused the two, and exclaimed :

"Really, dear, you are almost an angel, if only you wouldn't give in to foreign carelessness about spending Sunday !"

"Please have the dispatch sent at once, and the letters put in the post," said Miss Cameron. "And just call Clarice. I shall go for a ride. The air will do me good."

"Yes," Miss Bronson assented ; but her tone and manner showed that she still had a weight on her mind, and desired to be questioned.

"What is it ?" Miss Cameron asked, resignedly.

"About—about mourning. Shall you put on black ?"

"No," Miss Cameron replied, without hesitation.

"My dear, that will look so odd ! Everybody does it for a few weeks—say six, if not a very near relative."

"George Danvers has already been dead almost two months," said Miss Cameron. "To go into black now would only be exposing myself to hear and answer the same question forty times each day for the next fortnight."

"Yes, but custom, my dear—custom !"

"Since people do not know what has happened, their prejudices cannot be shocked."

"Very well!" sighed Miss Bronson.

"Eliza," said her friend, coldly, "when my father died, I was so poor that I could not buy mourning. Do you think it fitting I should adopt it for his—for George Danvers?"

"I—I—perhaps not," murmured the spinster.

Miss Cameron went into her bedroom. By the time Eliza had reached the boudoir, she called:

"I dare say you are right! I will wear white and lavender and gray for a few weeks. Now I hope your conscience is at rest."

Miss Bronson wept again, and retired, so satisfied in every particular, that she could not have been more complacent had they just heard of a wedding instead of a death.

CHAPTER II.

THE FORBIDDEN PATH.

MISS CAMERON mounted her horse and rode off into the Cascine, finding the lovely wood deserted, as it usually is, save for an hour or two before sunset.

Away to the right, Fiesole and its range of blue hills, glorious with sunshine, shut in the view; on the left, through the aisles of trees, Violet caught glimpses of the Arno and the plain beyond. A low breeze sang among the branches like a harp accompaniment to the songs of the birds—the sky was a vast dome of turquoise, flecked here and there with opal clouds—and, in spite of her grave preoccupation, the beauty of the scene did not escape Miss Cameron's eyes. She loved nature, as she did everything else beautiful, with a genuine love, and Italy possessed for her that peculiar attraction which it must have for all imaginative people. She was given to day-dreams, which, had she transcribed them, might have made her known as a poet; but she never thought of doing this—they were her

chief treasures, which she liked to keep sacred between herself and her soul. She had learned to guard her secret when in girlhood life suddenly assumed an aspect so bald and commonplace that she fostered this visionary faculty in order to forget now and then the coldness and closeness of existence. A governess inclined to dreams would be a *lusus naturæ* intolerable to parents or the wise heads of scholastic institutions, and Violet's fancies were not allowed to interfere with the conscientious fulfillment of her duties.

In the early days she had been forced to struggle hard for patience—had felt like a caged bird—as if she must die if relief did not come. But by degrees she conquered that restlessness, gradually grew accustomed to the routine and restraint, and, if not happy, perhaps as nearly reached contentment as youth often does.

Violet did not remember her mother; when she was a little child Miss Bronson had been selected for her governess, who, if not a woman of powerful intellect, was at least well-informed, prudent, and loved her charge most tenderly.

When orphanage and poverty overtook Violet, Miss Bronson would gladly have toiled for and supported her, but this the girl would not permit, so Eliza obtained situations for both in a boarding-school where she had herself been educated. Violet, at first received as a pupil-teacher, rose rapidly in rank till, before her season of toil ended, she stood next to the stately lady who ruled in those halls of Minerva, and the destiny to which my heroine had looked forward was of one day becoming mistress of the establishment.

The change to her present position had arrived as unexpectedly as the tempest which at her father's death flung her from luxury into want—it possessed, too, a certain halo of romance.

During a summer vacation she accompanied one of the scholars to her home, and there formed the acquaintance of a gentleman who had known her parents. Mr. Goring was no longer young—a widower, and standing very much alone in the world. He fell in love with the beautiful governess, and her friends thought her insane to decline his hand. Reason and common-sense urged her to accept, but, at the end of the six months' probation he had begged, she definitely refused his offer. It was hard to cast aside the

future which showed so bright in contrast to her surroundings—harder to give him pain, for his whole heart centered in his plea. But, to her mind, a marriage unsanctified by love—love so strong that it could work miracles—became a bartering of body and soul, from which she recoiled with unutterable loathing. Other women, feeling the respect and esteem which she felt, might have accepted—been right in so doing: to her it was simply impossible.

Eighteen months later Mr. Goring died in Brazil, and, with the exception of legacies to his dead wife's relatives—he had none of his own—bequeathed his vast fortune to Violet Cameron. There would be nothing specially interesting in the records of the ensuing decade, looking back from which the old workaday epoch seemed strangely unreal. It had passed as it might have been expected to do with a woman rich, beautiful, and unmarried—save in one particular: nothing like love had touched her heart—not so much as a brief fancy which she could weave an idyl over. She had lived in the world, been surrounded by admirers; but no voice from any man's soul had possessed power to waken a response in hers.

Even women never thought of setting her down anywhere near her age; if she told it to some confidant she was not believed, and Eliza Bronson, exaggeratedly scrupulous in general, burdened her conscience with many prevarications to prevent such possibility.

That she had gone so many years beyond all claim to girlhood appeared inconceivable to Violet herself, even when she laughingly adopted the title of old maid. She was as young in her feelings as her face—naturally enough, too, since love, life's profoundest mystery, remained only a name and a dream.

Violet rode on more and more rapidly, trying to forget the hosts of perplexed, inexplicable fancies which beset her, following in the wake of the recollections roused by George Danvers's letter. She turned her horse so abruptly down one of the side alleys that she nearly exterminated a gentleman who had just emerged into it from the recesses of the wood.

They caught sight of each other at the same instant. The gentleman sprang aside, and Miss Cameron reined in her steed so suddenly that she sent him back on his haunches. She received a somewhat reproachful glance

from the stranger, then Selim engaged her attention, for, offended at the unexpected and vigorous check, he began to stand on his hind legs and perform antics more like those of a trained horse in a circus than was agreeable to his rider.

Her narrowly-escaped victim stood watching the exhibition, no doubt with the intention of coming to her aid if assistance should prove necessary; but in a very few seconds she convinced Selim that wisdom would dictate a return to his duty and the legitimate use of his limbs. Violet was about to speak some words of apology and hurry on, when she dropped her whip, which the gentleman picked up, and she, sufficiently vexed with herself and Selim to be unreasonable, hastily decided that even the ceremonious lifting of the stranger's hat conveyed a fresh reproach.

Of course she could do no less than offer her thanks, and, as she looked full at him, she perceived her blunder; the dullest woman living could not have mistaken the expression in his face for anything save wondering and respectful admiration. Still she could not resist saying:

"I must beg your pardon. I ought not to have ridden so fast round the corner; but it is very unsafe for any person to walk in these alleys, meant only for equestrians."

He smiled slightly, still he did smile, and evidently in amusement at her neatly-combined apology and reproof.

"The next turning is the one the signora should have taken," he said, with a bow. As he spoke he pointed to a signboard at the side of the road, and Violet read thereon, printed in very legible characters and in two languages, "Peri pedoni—for foot-passengers."

"It seems I was in the wrong every way. Pardon again," she said; and, to make matters worse, she felt herself coloring like a school-girl.

Her groom rode up at this juncture, and repeated the announcement that his mistress had strayed into forbidden paths; but Violet urged Selim on, and the groom was obliged to follow, and her haste lost her the slight satisfaction of hearing that the guardians of the wood might bear a portion of the blame for removing the bar which ought to have obstructed the route. The gentleman went his way and Miss Cameron went hers—or the way not hers by

right—and of course both took with them some thought of the brief encounter.

Violet had spoken in Italian, and the stranger had replied in the same tongue, but her trained ear caught a foreign accent.

"Not English, however," was her reflection. "He looked like some of those handsome men one sees in Athens. No doubt he is a Greek—a worthless race as a rule; and I would wager anything he is no exception."

As for the gentleman, his meditations, conducted in the same language as her own, ran somewhat in this fashion:

"What a superb creature! However, I dare say she never looked so well before and never will again! Difficult to make that woman turn back, whatever path she had started on. How old? Not a young miss, certainly—five-and-twenty perhaps. How vexed she tried to be with me just because herself in the wrong! However, it was like a woman—like anything human, for that matter, though we men always pretend to think such little errors are monopolized by the softer sex."

Miss Cameron reached home for the twelve-o'clock breakfast, and found a note from a friend awaiting her.

"You dearest, wickedest, most delightful of creatures!—Carlo heard last night of your arrival. If you meant to let the day pass without sending me word, don't admit the fact, else I never, never will forgive you! We are out at the villa. I am literally tied fast by the foot, or ankle, which I managed to sprain a week ago with an awkwardness that merited the punishment it received. Half a dozen people—only among the nicest of our set—are coming this evening to condole with me; be sure to brighten us by adding yourself to the number. As a reward I will present two or three charming new men—only you are a hard-hearted wretch, and this will be no inducement.

"But come at all events, that I may hate you for having grown more beautiful and bewitching than ever, as everybody who met you last winter says you have. The idea of your stopping so long away from our dear Florence, where we are all as charming and sinful as usual, and adore you as you do not deserve to be adored, icicle of a barbarian that you are, and nobody more devoted than your affectionate

"Nina Magnoletti."

Then followed a long postscript, which carried the note into the middle of a second sheet, and still left some bit of wonderful news unfinished—the whole written in graceful French, though apparently a spider's leg had been employed as a pen—caressing, careless, *décousu;* in short, a letter very characteristic of its writer, a pretty little Russian, who several years previous had gilded afresh one of the old Florentine titles with her roubles, carrying a heart into the transaction and receiving one in return, which she still owned, in spite of numerous temporary aberrations on the part of its original proprietor.

"I shall go to Nina's to-night," Miss Cameron said to Eliza, more thoughtful of her old friend than Madame Magnoletti had been. "I don't ask you to go with me because I know you are tired, and besides, they are sure to play baccarat, and that always shocks your scruples."

"My dear, do not call them scruples."

"Your morality, then—any fine-sounding name you please."

This was said late in the day, as the two were driving in the Cascine.

"It is too early to expect Florentines to be back from their *villeggiatura*, but I see quite a number, and a good many foreigners," pursued Miss Cameron, as they approached the open space where it is the habit for carriages to halt; a habit formed in the days when a band played there, and people stopped under pretense of listening to the music—a thing nobody ever did by any chance. Then she added hastily, "Oh, that horrid Greek!"

"What horrid Greek?" asked Eliza.

"I don't know, and I don't want to! I nearly demolished him this morning, and he was so exasperatingly polite that I hate him."

"That gentleman on the gray horse? Why, he is not horrid at all! What a very elegant man!"

"He shall be Adonis if you choose, but I hate him all the same! For mercy's sake don't look that way; he will know I have been telling you; he is capable of bowing. Those Greeks are equal to any impertinence."

"Did he tell you he was a Greek?" asked the literal Eliza.

"Good heavens! Do you suppose I stopped to inquire into his history and antecedents? No doubt they would

form a sweet tale for virginal ears to listen to! Eliza, Eliza! I begin to fear that foreign wickedness has contaminated you! I shall send you back to America to recover your—what shall I call it?—moral tone. Now that, I think, is a fine phrase!"

"You make me laugh so, that you put everything out of my head!" cried Eliza, as soon as she could recover her gravity. "Did you nearly run over him? Do tell me about it," for the spinster dearly loved anything in the shape of a romance.

Violet was spared answering; the victoria had stopped, and was immediately surrounded by a group of men eager to welcome the heiress, and Eliza received a share of the superabundant compliments, since she lived near the rose, and her good opinion might be of value. But she did not forget the stranger, and suddenly said in English to Miss Cameron:

"There he is again! Such a melancholy face; it is quite attractive! Just ask his name——"

"I would not hear it for the world," interrupted Violet; "don't I tell you I hate the man! You dreadful woman, showing an improper interest in a depraved Greek!"

A fresh invasion of admirers claimed Miss Cameron's attention, and Eliza herself was so engrossed that she had no opportunity to gain any information concerning Violet's enemy, for when she recollected him, and turned to get another glance, the gray horse and its rider had disappeared.

CHAPTER III.

THE OMEN.

MISS CAMERON did not reach the Magnoletti villa until rather late, and she found madame's "half-dozen" friends increased to several times that number, who, with invitation or without, had presented themselves.

In one room there was music—in another men, and women too, were playing baccarat, and the pretty hostess

reclined on a sofa in the center salon, arrayed as an invalid in the most becoming costume imaginable.

She received Violet with rapturous greetings, and made her sit down beside the couch, about which gathered knots of people anxious to renew their acquaintance with the beautiful American; but after a while the two friends were left more at liberty, and able, in the intervals of general conversation, to exchange notes upon matters which possessed a personal interest.

In the midst of some story madame was relating she noticed Miss Cameron start and turn uneasily in her chair.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"I don't know," Violet replied carelessly, though shivering from head to foot. "A sudden chill, as if somebody were walking over my grave: you remember our senseless English saying?"

"Yes," rejoined the marchesa. "But it is not senseless —I believe in it! I am dreadfully superstitious, like any true Russian."

"You are a dear little Muscovite goose—no, duck!" said Violet, trying to laugh, but unable to subdue the singular nervous trembling.

Nina laughed with the same apparent effort; she was startled by her friend's change of color, and the troubled expression in her eyes.

"You are not well," she said, desirous to reassure herself and Violet by assigning a physical cause to the disturbance. "You were tired from your journey, and the drive out here has upset you."

"Yes, that is it—I'm tired," Miss Cameron answered, holding her fan before her face.

Though ordinarily little given to presentiments, the sensation which oppressed her seemed a warning of danger —not bodily peril; as if some element inimical to her peace were about to force itself into her life.

The marchesa beckoned to a gentleman and bade him bring a glass of wine. While she was thus occupied, Violet, wondering at her own folly, could not resist glancing about, half expecting to see some mysterious object start up and, by its hostile presence, explain the omen.

Another instant and her eyes fell upon a person standing in a window opposite. He had not been there a few moments before, she knew. His gaze met hers. She recog-

nized the stranger whom she had encountered in the morning. Violet almost felt that her laughing assertion to Miss Bronson had been the truth—she hated this man! Who was he? what was he? how came there?

He stood leaning one arm on the sill—tall, pale; the mouth shrouded by a long drooping mustache, the thick curling hair somewhat worn off the temples; the countenance intellectual and handsome, stamped with that peculiar melancholy which in another age was regarded as a premonition of early or violent death, though the breadth of the head and the vigor of the finely-molded chin preserved the face from any signs of the weakness of character which usually belong to that type of physiognomy.

Violet turned impatiently away. The messenger had come back with the wine, which she drank to escape expostulations; then the gentleman was dispatched upon some new errand, just to be got rid of, and Violet, making a strong effort to listen, heard Nina say, apparently continuing a sentence lost upon her:

"I want you to know him. He went with us to the lakes, and Carlo and I both like him hugely. Are you better now? Ah, here he comes." And the stranger was standing before her, and Nina saying: "My dear, let me present one of your countrymen. Mr. Aylmer, you told me you had never had the pleasure of meeting Miss Cameron. I shall expect you to be my devoted slave all winter for affording you the happiness."

Mr. Aylmer was bowing to her, Violet, but answering the marchesa:

"Since I am only human, I must be that, whether I will or no."

"Question!" cried Madame Magnoletti. "*Are* men human? My own opinion is that they have no claim to be so considered, in spite of their assertions—*qu'en dis-tu, ma Violette?*"

And Violet, able to bend her head in response to the introduction, leaned back in her chair, and played negligently with her fan, finding some slow, half-disdainful, fine lady notes in her voice wherewith to reply:

"As to the race, female philosophy does not go far enough to decide. In particular instances, it can only admit that a mysterious Providence has granted poor woman nothing better."

"For victims," rejoined Aylmer, laughing so lightly that, in her overstrained mood the pleasant sound gave Violet a shock—a beneficial one, acting upon her mind as a dash of cold water would have done upon her physical nerves.

Straightway her composure returned ; she was ready to smile at her late absurd sensation, to pronounce it simply a result of bodily fatigue ; above all things, to refuse Mr. Aylmer any share in its meaning, even if it were to be considered magnetic or supernatural.

And Nina, watching her, rejoiced to see that the odd discomposure had passed, in no way connecting Aylmer therewith ; in spite of her quickness not having perceived that Violet's eyes had so much as glanced towards him while he stood in the window.

They talked gayly for a few moments, then other men came up, and Mr. Aylmer yielded his place. When an opportunity offered, Nina asked :

"What do you think of him ? I did not say too much. He really is charming—now admit it, mademoiselle la difficile !"

"Which 'him' ?" returned Violet. "You have presented three different men to me within the last ten minutes."

"Your countryman—Laurence Aylmer—the others are of no consequence. You know, as a rule, Carlo does not take to foreigners, any more than Florentines do generally ; but he came to us under unusual auspices," pursued Nina, eagerly. "Alexis is traveling in America—I wrote you so —I am sure it was your fault he went off ! You heartless thing ! why wouldn't you be my sister ?"

"Nonsense !"

"Oh, very well—you are a barbarous wretch ! However, it is not Alexis and his broken heart that are in question now, but this stranger within our gates ! You must know Alexis was out hunting on those dreadful American prairies—tigers—no, buffaloes—or whatever it is they hunt there—and he fell ill with some horrible fever, such as one must go to America to catch, and along comes Aylmer with his party and nurses Alexis, and saves his life. Now isn't it like a story ?"

"Very like," Violet replied languidly.

"You don't care !" cried Nina. "Alexis, and Aylmer,

and every other man might be devoured by fevers or buffaloes, and you would only yawn. Well, I shall finish my history just to punish you. Alexis thought he was dying, and made Aylmer promise to come and break the news to me ; but after all he didn't die."

"Naturally, he did not do what he said he would—being mortal," observed Violet. "But since Count Apraxin failed to keep his word, what sent my countryman in search of you?"

"Oh, he was coming to Europe in any case, it seems. Alexis had written us volumes about him, and of course we received him with open arms ; you know how warm-hearted Carlo is, in spite of his pretense at cynicism."

"Though I did not know his generous impulses went to the length of allowing you to receive young men with open arms."

"Don't be literal—it is always coarse. Well, his whole story is a romance. He lost a fortune through the villainy of some man he had trusted—so he has taken to literature, and comes here to write a book. It ought to be poetry, but it isn't—though he looks a poet, every inch of him! Archæological, Carlo says ; but, thank heaven, I don't know what it means, and when Carlo tried to explain, I went fast asleep : though, I give you my word, I woke up quickly enough when he flew into a rage and said he was going to see Giulia da Rimini. My dear, she is more odious and outrageous than ever. But where was I?" gasped Nina, stopping to take breath.

"I have not the least idea," groaned Violet. "You are worse than the waters of Lodore—if you ever heard of them."

"I have—I know as much English as you! But no matter ; you'll not get rid of my story by abusing me."

"Do you mean to say the story is not ended yet?"

"Well, I am afraid it is—but now own that he looks like a hero! And isn't it quite in keeping for him to be ruined? And of course he must find a princess to fall in love with him—only it seems dreadful he should not be rich ; and I hope that wretch who brought it about has to suffer—Mr. Han—Ban—no, Danvers! A villain, my dear, and one of your countrymen, too, as might be expected—take that scratch for your impertinence. Of course Aylmer has not said a word, but Alexis wrote us all about it, and I remembered the wretch's ugly name—George Danvers."

Another of George Danvers's victims—certainly a reason for Violet to sympathize with the man, instead of trying to fancy that she disliked him because of the morning's unfortunate encounter.

"George Danvers!" she repeated mechanically.

"Yes; but never mind him—he is dead and gone," said Nina. "I want everybody to like Aylmer; he is a great favorite already. Now you won't hate him, will you?"

"Not unless you worry me about him," replied Violet.

"I promise! And I have an idea! There is that terrifically rich little American girl down in Rome—I forget her name; but she would be the very *partie* for him."

And here, to Miss Cameron's relief, other guests came up and engrossed the marchesa's attention. Violet accepted some man's arm and walked through the salons, talking and being talked to, as was her duty—stopping for a little in the card-room behind the Marchese Magnoletti's chair, at his request, to bring him good luck.

After awhile she found herself in the music-hall, and paused to listen to a young professional, with the most delicious tenor voice Florence had discovered in years. Then she suddenly felt a longing to escape from everybody for a few minutes, and seized an opportunity when she could stray unperceived into a gallery beyond. She stood by one of the windows, looking out over the moonlit lawn and gardens. She heard a step on the marble pavement, turned, and saw Mr. Aylmer walking back and forth at the farther end of the great apartment, where a row of pillars cast long black shadows across the dazzling floor.

She moved slowly towards him. He stood still, watching her. The moonlight, which transfigures all objects, rendered her wondrously beautiful. He had an odd fancy that he was seeing her as her soul would appear in a higher stage of existence, freed from the shackles which fetter us here.

"Mr. Aylmer," she said, in her low, clear tones.

He came forward, the admiration, which just then had a certain solemnity akin to awe mingled with it, visible in his face; but Violet was too much occupied with her own thoughts to notice. As he reached her side, she said abruptly:

"I want you to tell me something about George Danvers and his family."

He regarded her in astonishment. Evidently, too, the subject was a painful one to him.

"How did you know they were acquaintances of mine?" he asked.

"Of course the marchesa told me," she answered, and could hear an impatient ring in her voice, which troubled her as a sort of rudeness, though she could no more check it than find a satisfactory reason therefor.

"The marchesa has been told nothing of them by me," he said, a little coldly.

"At least, she knows that you met with losses through Mr. Danvers—never mind how she knew it," returned Violet, marveling more and more at herself; and, indeed, this almost peremptory abruptness was so unlike her ordinary demeanor that her best friends would have marveled too. "You did have trouble through his means?"

"I beg your pardon, Miss Cameron. I do not think I ought to talk of him, unless you have some strong motive for desiring it. He is dead, and I don't want to be harsh or unjust."

"George Danvers was my cousin. I want to hear about his daughter. You know her? Well, tell me what she is like."

"A little—it strikes me now I know she is a relative—a little like you," returned he, after a pause, in which he had appeared somewhat disturbed, naturally enough, after such sudden touching of a deep wound.

"Like me? I am not sure that is a recommendation," Violet answered, trying to get back her ordinary manner.

"Nor is she," he said. "I cannot explain what I mean. There is a suggestion of you in her, nothing more—I don't know how to express it—as there is of a flower in a bud."

"Poetical, but not clear," said Miss Cameron, with a laugh. "So you suffered through that wretched man? I fear he was a very bad one—not even kind to his wife and daughter."

"I fear not," Aylmer replied, and his voice showed that he could reveal more had he chosen—showed, too, that he did not choose. "I never heard Danvers speak of you. Your relationship takes me by surprise," he added.

"No, he was not likely to speak of me," she said. "We

had not met for many years. I wrote to his daughter this morning. I have invited her to come to me. I am sorry you suffered at the father's hands."

"Oh, at twenty-seven, when one loses only money, one ought not to complain," Aylmer replied, cheerfully. "I have health, strength—a good deal left, you see."

"Twenty-seven!" Why should the words give Violet a fresh shock? Why should she mentally repeat them again and again? She did, though vexed with herself the while—more than ever irritated against him, asking her conscience if this rose from envy. Twenty-seven, and a man—his whole life before him! And she thirty-three, and a woman—youth a thing of the past. Even had she numbered only his years, this would still be the case, since —she was a woman.

She began walking up and down between the pillars. Her long silken skirts trailed over the pavement, their soft ivory tint making a pretty contrast to the cold, bluish-white of the marble. The moonbeams wove a crown about her hair, which looked black in their glory; her eyes black too, unnaturally large and bright, from the inexplicable unrest which had troubled her soul during the last hour.

He walked beside her; and for a few moments they talked of Italy, of Florence, of the galleries, and, as suddenly as her unrest had seized her, the feeling died.

"Was ever woman in such an idiotic mood as I am?" Violet thought. "I am frightened, cross—everything that is silly, and all without reason." Then she said aloud: "Now I must go back. After all, you have told me nothing about George Danvers's daughter. You shall do that another time."

Again he looked somewhat troubled, but she had her head turned away.

"Whenever I have the pleasure of seeing you again," he said.

"The marchesa will bring you to my house, if you like to come," she answered. Then that same ill-disposed impulse rose in her breast anew, and she added, "I am just off a long journey; after awhile, when I get rested, I shall begin to receive people."

She moved on so quickly that he could not help understanding he was not to follow, and he remained gazing

after her as she glided away like a spirit among the moonbeams.

Violet, reflecting that her behavior during the entire interview had been open to censure, again marveled what could render her this night so unlike herself, and, once more back in the salon, rushed into her gayest mood and charmed everybody. Later, she caught a glimpse of Mr. Aylmer standing silent near the marchesa's sofa. After that she did not see him again.

Violet's carriage was the last to leave the villa ; Nina had kept her for more confidential talk over nothing, and Carlo insisted upon his right to a little attention, vowing that he had been afforded no opportunity even to speak to her.

"You should make opportunities," said Nina.

"As I am neither baccarat nor Giulia da Rimini, I cannot expect him to take so much trouble," rejoined Violet.

Carlo wrung his hands, and declared that, between his wife and the woman he worshiped, no man was ever so ill-treated as he, and altogether they wasted a good half-hour in nonsense which would not repay for the trouble of setting down in black and white, though it amused the speakers sufficiently.

Violet drove away up the dazzling white road, so preoccupied that she did not notice how fast the horses went, or that several times her faithful Antonio, seated on the box, spoke reprovingly to the coachman, who remained obstinately deaf to his expostulations.

The night was unusually warm for Tuscany at that season ; summer seemed to have come back during the last few days. The landau had been left open, and a soft breeze, odorous of fields and woods, kissed Violet's cheek ; the moon glowed like a great disk of illuminated alabaster in mid-heaven ; the farther hills rose shadowy and gigantic in the silvery, mysterious light.

Now the sound of rapidly rushing water became audible, and a sharp turn in the road brought them close to a stream swollen by late rains to ominous dimensions.

The highway grew very narrow here ; a break in the wall which guarded it on the side of the torrent, had not been mended. The horses took fright at a dog which ran past barking fiercely ; they swerved and reared. The coachman plied the lash ; Antonio shrieked at him in angry

alarm, and Violet suddenly roused herself to a sense of the danger by which they were menaced—a fall over the precipitous bank.

Before she could move, a man started out from the shadow of a tree close to the edge of the stream, waved his hat full in the faces of the terrified animals, and as they backed, seized them by the bridles. At the same instant, Antonio snatched the reins from the coachman, and tugging thereat with all his force, helped to turn the horses' heads into the road again.

The danger was over, but even as Violet thought this, the beasts plunged forward, and the pole struck the man's shoulder with such violence that he fell backwards.

There followed a few seconds of partial insensibility, fuller of agony than any pain she had ever endured, from the ability her mind preserved to take in a sense of utter helplessness ; then the horses had been stopped, and she saw Antonio stooping over a body prostrate in the dust. Presently—how she got there she could no more have told than if she had been in some dreadful dream—she was beside him, looking down into the face of Laurence Aylmer —cold, white, fixed ; the face of a dead man, she thought ; a man killed in the very act of saving her life.

Violet heard her own voice—though the words seemed spoken without her volition—saying :

"Is he dead ?"

"I cannot tell," Antonio replied, in the same half-whispering tone. They both stared anew at the white face that he supported on his knee, and another question broke simultaneously from their lips :

"What are we to do ?"

The coachman came up ; he had fastened the horses to a tree, where they stood quiet enough now the mischief was done, and he himself appeared perfectly sober, whatever he might have been before the accident occurred.

He leaned forward, studied the white face in his turn, and muttered :

"*È fatto di lui !*"

"And if so, you murdered him !" returned Antonio, in a fierce whisper ; "you drunken assassin !"

"I was not drunk," said the coachman, hoarsely ; "I had a presentiment of evil on me—ask the marchese's cook if I did not tell him so."

Violet caught the explanation, and with difficulty refrained from a burst of hysterical laughter. There was something hideous, revolting, in the fat, coarse creature's looks and speech in that presence, which hurt her like a broad farce intruded in the midst of a tragedy.

"And you fulfilled your presentiment?" said Antonio.

"Holy Saint Joseph, only listen to him!" groaned the coachman, flinging up both arms.

"Hush!" Violet said sternly, and her voice silenced the pair. She turned sick and cold, but the lethargy which had locked her senses and kept her powerless as a person in a nightmare, suddenly passed — she could think and act. "You must put him into the carriage," she said. "Quick, Antonio! don't lose any more time."

Both men were sane enough to carry out an order, though neither would have been capable of suggesting an idea. They managed between them to lift their burden into the landau. Violet took off a thin scarf, which was wrapped about her head, and bade Antonio dip it in the water, a command which, after several abortive efforts, he succeeded in obeying. As she moistened the forehead and lips of the insensible man she felt a slight quiver stir his frame.

"He is not dead!" she whispered, and now her strength came back.

Antonio laid his hand on the feebly-pulsating heart, and, after an instant, repeated:

"He is not dead! Shall we take him to the villa, mademoiselle?"

"Yes—no; that would only be wasting time—there is no doctor there. How far are we from the town?"

"More than a mile, mademoiselle."

Violet stepped into the carriage.

"Drive on—drive fast!" she said.

What a journey that was—what an endless period those brief moments seemed to cover. Violet sat supporting the heavy, helpless head, unable to move her eyes from the face which showed ashen and rigid in the moonlight. Her presentiment! Was this what the dreadful warning had meant? Killed—killed under her wheels! George Danvers had ruined this man, and now she was the means of sending him out of the world! By what strange fatality had she and her race proved such a curse to him? Hosts

of vague, wild thoughts rushed through her brain—others came—she could exercise no control over her mind; it wandered where it would. Was he dead already? If so, where had it gone—that soul? She stared up at the moon and stars: heaven itself seemed so pitiless, so mocking in its tranquil beauty!

Oh, the time—the time! Would the drive never end—never?

Then Antonio's voice roused her. They had reached the city gates. Antonio leaned down in his seat and said:

"Where are we to go? Does mademoiselle know where the poor gentleman lived?"

Miss Cameron's lips framed a mute negative.

"And it is two o'clock—every place shut—not an hotel would open to let *that* in," moaned Antonio, emphasizing his meaning by a gesture towards the motionless form.

Violet shivered from head to foot in an icy chill; then a thought suggested itself: no, some power extraneous to her faculties appeared to suggest it.

"Drive to Professor Schmidt's," she said; "Via della Scala."

Doctor Schmidt was an old German physician, retired from practice; a man with a European reputation. She was certain of his being in Florence—they had come from Venice together.

The carriage rolled down the street. What a noise the wheels made on the stones—it sounded like thunder in her ears! All the while she was watching that face; she wanted to look away—she could not! Heavier and heavier grew the weight upon her shoulder; was he dead yet—dead?

Then the landau paused in front of the professor's house. It chanced that the old savant had been reading late; just before the carriage stopped he had opened a window of his study, which was on the ground-floor, and stood looking out. Violet saw him.

"Come—come quick!" she called in German.

The doctor laid his great pipe down upon the window-sill, lifted his spectacles and stared open-mouthed.

"*Ach Gott!* Fräulein Cameron!" he exclaimed.

He hurried out of doors; the instant he caught sight of the face resting on Miss Cameron's shoulder, he cried:

"*Gott in Himmel*—it is Laurence Aylmer! What is this? What is this?"

It required only a brief explanation to make him understand what had happened. Violet gave it clearly enough, in spite of her fright and horror.

"Is he dead?" she whispered.

A moment's dreadful silence, then the professor answered:

"No, not dead. He must be got home. Take him home."

"I don't know where he lives," groaned Violet.

"No hotel would receive him—these brutes of Florentines!" added Antonio, who, in his quality of ex-courier, spoke every civilized language like his mother-tongue.

"True, true!" muttered the professor. "And I have no room. The fools are altering my apartment. I have hardly a place to put my bed."

"To my house!" cried Violet. "Get in, professor; we are losing time. Come—come!"

The doctor rushed back into his study, and returned quickly with a square box in his hand.

As the carriage dashed off, Violet heard the coachman croak again like some bird of ill-omen:

"*È fatto di lui!*"

"My poor Laurence!" said the professor. "He came to see me this very morning."

"Oh, then you know where he lives?"

"No; he was just changing quarters—agreed to come to-morrow. I knew him well in America—a splendid fellow! To see him like this! *Ach Gott!* but it is of no use lamenting," he broke off gruffly.

They reached the palace. The porter was still up, and Miss Cameron's maid awaiting her return; every other member of the household had been in bed for hours.

The ground-floor contained a suite of rooms which Violet had fitted up for friends who might chance to stop with her. Was the place in order? she asked. Surely, in perfect order, the porter averred. So the men carried their burden into the apartment, and laid it on the bed in the sleeping-room; Violet following mechanically.

The professor turned quite fiercely upon her, as his manner was, saying:

"You are to go away, Fräulein; you are not wanted here."

"He is not dead?" again she whispered. "You are certain?"

"Plenty of life in him yet—plenty! There, there, get to your bed; get to your bed."

But though he growled out the order and frowned blackly from under his beetle-brows, he led her gently to the door, patting her hand as if she had been a child.

She found her maid waiting above stairs, and dismissed her without mentioning what had happened, unable to bear questionings or feminine lamentations just then.

After a little she went out on the landing again and listened—no sound was audible from below. It seemed to her that she waited a long time; the suspense became unendurable. She crept down to the entrance-hall and peered into the lodge—it was empty; probably Giovanni's services had been required. She paused near the door of the apartments in which the injured man lay, then mounted the staircase again, treading as cautiously as though her step could disturb the sufferer.

She paced the antechamber and adjacent salon. An hour elapsed. Her vigil remained unbroken; but go to her room, even keep still, she could not. She felt so guilty, so wicked! She recollected her haughty words in the morning, her ill-disguised irritation of the evening, with a shame almost as passionate as remorse. Verily, the trouble presaged by her soul had come, but not of the nature she had dreaded. The omen had been fulfilled, but he was the sufferer. The time dragged on; yet, though exhausted by fatigue and excitement, she must have news before she tried to sleep.

Through the arched casement, which almost filled one end of the antechamber, gray gleams began to break across a gap in the shutters. Day had come again. She wondered what it would be like, after the awful experience of the night.

At last she heard a sound—the careful opening and closing of a door—then steps on the stairs. Antonio, entering, found himself face to face with his mistress, so pale and wan that her appearance fairly startled him.

"Is it all over?" she asked, in a hoarse whisper.

"No, no, mademoiselle! There is every hope!" he

cried eagerly. "I could not come before. I did not dream that mademoiselle was waiting."

"I wanted to hear," she answered, drawing a breath of relief. "How is he hurt?"

"The left shoulder is dislocated—the blow from the pole did that," Antonio explained. "He fell with such force on the back of his head that it has caused concussion of the brain."

"Then he is insensible!"

"Oh, completely—may stay so for forty-eight hours; but the professor is sure everything will go well," he added hastily, seeing her shrink. "Mademoiselle must get to her bed; she will be ill. The doctor remains. I only came up to put out the lamps; I had forgotten them."

"He will not—not die—the professor is sure?"

"There is every hope," Antonio asserted, more resolutely than he had warrant for doing. "The doctor is so skillful—kind, too, though he does speak roughly sometimes! But the thing now is for mademoiselle to get to her bed. Yes, indeed, that is what is imperative!"

Violet found a certain sense of relief in receiving any positive direction. She went away to her room, undressed, and lay down, and, before long, fell into a deep, dreamless slumber.

CHAPTER IV.

A BOUQUET OF JESSAMINES.

SLEEP calmed Miss Cameron's nerves sufficiently, so that she was able to appear like her ordinary self.

Clarice brought her Antonio's report. There was no change in the injured man's condition. The professor had gone home, but would return at nine o'clock. Miss Bronson appeared, greatly excited by the news which had reached her—naturally enough eager for particulars of the accident; and, to avoid giving them, Violet hurried her off to an early church service which some saint's day offered.

After the professor had visited his patient, he came up stairs and explained the state of the case. The stupor was the inevitable result of the hurt to the brain, and might last from thirty-six to forty-eight hours. After that, if everything went well, recovery need not be a long affair. But, hopefully as he tried to speak, Violet could see that he was very anxious.

"And he must stay where he is till cured," said the professor; "no removing for him. So make up your mind to it, Fräulein Cameron. Ah, how do you do, Miss Bronson? You look as fresh as a field daisy," he added, as the spinster entered just in time to hear that closing verdict, which filled her with horror.

Her mind had been sorely disturbed by the remarks of acquaintances she encountered at church; and even her sympathy for suffering paled momentarily before her dread of the reports to which the accident and the stranger gentleman's presence under that roof might give rise.

"Here the poor fellow is, and here he stays!" continued the professor.

"From the way you speak, one would think I wished to send him away," returned Violet.

"No, no; I am not likely to think that! Still, it is unfortunate," said Schmidt, rubbing his nose.

"Most unfortunate," sighed Eliza, as she sank into a chair.

Now the old German and Miss Bronson were antipathetic to one another, and the instant she echoed his words, Schmidt could not help rejoining:

"Why so, Miss Bronson?"

"Such talk as there will be—you know Florence!"

"I know the galleries and museums, but I don't know your gossips, if they are what you mean by Florence," said he.

"Please don't call them *my* gossips," retorted Eliza, bridling; "I think no one—not my worst enemy, if I have an enemy—could accuse me of a taste for such society."

"I have accused you of nothing! An enemy—why shouldn't you have one, or twenty, as well as another—tell me that, Miss Bronson?" cried the professor, triumphantly.

"You said yourself it was unfortunate," sighed Eliza.

"But I was not thinking of the gossips."

"Well, one has to think of them! Oh, they will say

dreadful things! A young gentleman in the house with two lone ladies."

The professor put his hand to his mouth and made a grimace behind it which Eliza did not catch, but Violet laughed outright.

"We can hardly be called 'lone,' with such a troop of servants," she said. "Really, Eliza, I don't think we run much risk."

"I know what will be said, as well as if I had heard it," replied Eliza, with prophetic voice and mien; "it will not be the Italians alone, though the Americans and English always do ascribe the slanders to them, I know!" and she began to fan herself with a newspaper which lay on the table, fixing her eyes with mingled sternness and reproach on the physician, as if the whole affair were his fault.

"She would make a splendid model for a picture of Cassandra," said old Schmidt, taking a pinch of snuff; "now would she not, Fräulein Cameron?"

"I am not thinking of models or pictures," returned Eliza, loftily.

"No, no, you make us think of them," said the provoking savant; "that is your mission."

"Come, Eliza, don't be miserable," added Violet. "If people abuse me, I will exonerate you from any share of blame. What could I do?"

"Mr. Aylmer has aresidence of some kind—somewhere—I *suppose*," replied Eliza, with withering emphasis.

"But I did not know where, my dear."

The doctor took snuff and studied Eliza with a slow, German appreciation.

"You will have to endure it," he said. "Miss Bronson, your character will be ruined, but you can come out in a new one, that of martyr. You are a religious woman—you believe in the saints, and all the rest of the family! You ought to be thankful that martyrdom is permitted you. The early Christians were eager for it, so their historians say: you must imitate them—imitate them."

"Professor Schmidt, I do think you are the cruellest man alive!" whimpered Eliza; "but you might spare me jests on that subject! You may be a materialist; but it is no reason——"

"Wait, wait!" broke in the savant; "what is a materialist? Do you tell me that first."

"A man who believes in nothing—like you," cried Eliza, growing vexed enough to turn upon him.

"Wrong," said the professor, in a tone of enjoyment, "entirely wrong! Now, about those early Christians of yours——"

"Do not try to shake *my* faith," broke in Eliza; "you cannot do it. I believe the Bible, and the Apostles' Creed, and——"

"And fore-ordination and general damnation, and all the other 'ations,'" finished the doctor, while she was taking breath. "Well, well, don't get excited—it is bad for the digestion. What you call the soul may not be of much consequence, but the stomach is."

"Violet, it is dreadful to hear him talk so. I wonder you can let him!" moaned Eliza.

"My dear, I grew accustomed to hearing you two quarrel last summer in the Dolomites. I am past being shocked by what either of you can say."

"Now suppose we take St. Paul," continued the savant. "Admit that he wrote the first four of the epistles which bear his name, what have you proved? He made a gross blunder—he said the end of the world was at hand. Now, one of two things: either he was deceiving others, or he deceived himself. Assume the latter to have been the case. You do away with all possibility of his being inspired—you——"

"I won't hear!" shrieked Eliza, and, putting her hands to her ears, she ran out of the room.

The savant looked at Violet with a mingled humor and satisfaction.

"I thought I could find a way to make her leave you in peace," said he. "She'll not worry you about her gossips again to-day."

"I dare say she was right enough in saying that all sorts of nonsensical reports will be spread."

"I dare say she was. But you don't mean to care?"

"No, of course not."

"Come," said the professor, frowning at her with fierce approval; "you remember what the Englishman, Sydney Smith said, about God and the strawberry? Well, I shall apply it to you. No doubt Nature could have framed a more sensible woman, but I don't believe Nature ever did. And now I am going back to my patient."

Violet had known the professor for several years, and knew that his heart was on the same scale as his great intellect. He was an old man now, but vigorous as ever in body and mind. He had given up the practice of his profession a long while before, though frequently called upon for advice in difficult cases, and his decisions were regarded almost like those of fate. He was a naturalist as well as a physician, and had written various books, which had been translated into several languages. Unfortunately, these works so clearly proved the unorthodox tenor of his opinions that many people regarded him as a potent emissary of the Evil One. But, whatever he believed or disbelieved, he certainly carried out more thoroughly the chief precept of the Master than any person Violet had ever met, and she had a warm friendship for him. He never attempted to trouble her religious faith, though now and then he could not resist teasing Miss Bronson, for there were times when she irritated him.

"I cannot tell why she should," he would say, "and you can't tell why the buzzing of a blue-bottle fly irritates you, but it does."

Yet he was very good to her; indeed, his acquaintance with the two ladies began by his curing poor Eliza of a severe attack of sciatica, which seized her while sojourning in the Tyrol, and she felt exceedingly grateful to him, though nobody could shudder more profoundly over his heterodoxy. She would as soon have dreamed of robbing a church as reading one of his productions, and was kept in mortal fear by his threats of dedicating to her a volume which he declared himself concocting upon her favorite Apostle, whose name so often sounded as a battle-cry between them.

"Has he gone?" asked the spinster, putting her head in at the door. "Oh, my dear, when he is doing a kindness he talks more dreadfully than ever! But you are writing; I disturb you."

"I have finished—only a note to Nina. Please ring the bell; one of the men must ride out to the villa immediately. I did not like to send until I had heard the professor's opinion after his morning visit."

When the order had been given, Eliza sat down and sighed vigorously.

"So unfortunate," she repeated; "so terribly unfortunate!"

"If you want to be unhappy, my dear," said Violet, "you must hunt up some less preposterous bugbear, else I can offer you no sympathy. You forget that poor man was hurt in saving me from danger."

Eliza was silenced and ashamed, but not convinced. She could not help still regarding Violet as a heedless girl, only saved from indiscretions by her companionship; occasionally falling into them in spite of that—witness the present instance. Poor Eliza felt confident that if she had gone to the villa, matters would somehow have been different, and she dwelt upon this idea, notwithstanding its manifest absurdity, until she made herself very wretched.

It was a relief to the spinster when not only the marchese appeared in hot haste, but Nina, though her ankle was so swollen that she had to be carried up stairs.

"Here I am," she said; "and a regular old man of the sea you will find me. Carlo says I must not stir for several days."

"Your presence will be a comfort to Eliza," replied Violet. "You are not very correct, but at least you are married, and so will answer as a dragon to protect us two youthful innocents."

They teased Miss Bronson sadly, not so much for the satisfaction of doing it as to keep from dwelling upon their fears.

Late in the following afternoon Aylmer recovered consciousness, but at first he had no recollection of the accident. The details of the preceding day came back—his adventure in the Cascine—and slowly his mind followed along the track of events till he reached his second meeting with that beautiful woman; but it refused to go further than the moment when, roused from his reverie by the roadside, he saw her in danger, and sprang up with some vague wild determination to save or die with her.

He passed a comfortable night, and the next morning the autocratic professor allowed Carlo to visit him for a few moments. Aylmer could talk but little; he said something in his slow, difficult speech about the trouble he was in all ways to his good friend. Before Carlo could answer he caught the professor's glance, so comically ferocious that he had much ado not to laugh.

"He wants to fret over my holding him fast in my den," said the savant, bestowing a second scowl of intelligence on Carlo, who, with Italian quickness, perceived that the doctor had concealed from the patient the fact of his being in Miss Cameron's house lest the knowledge should worry him.

"I am sorry I haven't you out at the villa," the marchese observed, "but you couldn't be better off than in the clutches of our ogre."

"Just so!" returned the professor, nodding his appreciation of the speaker's acquiescence in his wise deception. "However, it makes no difference what anybody is glad or sorry about. I propose to have him up very soon, but he has got to belong to me, body and soul—recollect that, young American! And now you have talked more than enough. Magnoletti may take himself off, and don't you so much as wink till I give you leave."

Carlo went back up stairs to give an account of his interview.

"What with Nina established in your drawing-room and poor Aylmer down below—a sister already provided for nurse, and the professor evidently intending to keep his quarters here, I think, Miss Cameron, you had better open the house as a public hospital and be done with it," he said.

"As it will not be for moral or rather immoral incurables, you will stand no chance of admittance," returned his wife, "nor will Giulia da Rimini either."

"Positively the first time I have heard her name to-day!" cried he.

"She will be here before it ends—see if she is not," said Nina. "She has been making eyes at Aylmer ever since he came to Florence."

"Nonsense, Nina!" and Carlo's voice sounded a little nettled.

"I know it is nonsense, Carlo, for he never so much as looks at her if he can help it. He does not share your abnormal tastes; he hates black women."

"He tells you that just because you are a colorless little thing," retorted Carlo, and received a severe pinch for his impertinence.

Eliza considered the whole conversation improper, and sighed over Violet's fondness for this careless-tongued pair,

though she had almost as great a weakness for them herself, in spite of her disapproval of their talk and habits of thought.

Although Miss Cameron's arrival had been so recent that as yet she had paid no visits, the news of the accident afforded people too good an excuse for calling to await such ceremony. Not only many of her friends came, but numerous persons, mostly waifs from the American and English colonies, took that opportunity to try and establish an acquaintance, or at least renew relations with Miss Bronson. Few of the visitors saw Violet, but Eliza appeared and received so many kisses from enthusiastic Anglo-Saxon ladies, that her nose felt quite tender. She related the adventure so often, that she succeeded in giving it with great dramatic effect, and tried so hard to explain how it happened the hero was lying under Violet's roof, that the simple facts grew into a mystery which would have been enough to ruin the reputation of a dozen ordinary women.

But common rules could not apply to the conduct of a lady so rich as Violet Cameron; whatever she did was well done, from hiding a man in her house to cutting off as many heads as Bluebeard. Women might slander her; might believe and say the most atrocious things as they did of each other, but they would bow down before her all the same and lick the dust at her feet—for it was gold-dust.

"I have told everybody how it came about," Eliza said, triumphantly. "No one thinks you did wrong, Violet; it is such a relief!"

"How can you keep from strangling her?" cried Nina, when the spinster was again called out of the room. "Imagine her explanations!"

"I would rather not! But no matter what she says, if she only relieves her feelings. I am very fond of her; it is better she should ruin my reputation than be unhappy."

Presently a visitor was announced for the marchesa, and into the salon floated Giulia da Rimini—dark, haughty, handsome, Roman-looking, and exquisitely-dressed.

"Didn't I tell you she would come!" Nina had time to whisper.

"My dear Miss Cameron—my darling Nina!" cried the duchess, and kissed each in turn. "I went out to the villa, Nina, and heard you came here yesterday. I feared you

were worse and wanted to be near the doctor. My alarm must excuse my rushing in on you, Miss Cameron, in this unceremonious fashion."

"However brought about, I am of course charmed to receive your visit," said Violet.

"I only just heard of the accident," continued the duchess. "Gherardi was inquiring after Mr. Aylmer as I drove up. What an escape you had, dear Miss Cameron—and the unfortunate young—— Ah, yes, Nina, you are right to frown. It is too dreadful to talk about. But, at least, he is doing well, they tell me?"

"Better than could have been expected," Nina replied.

The duchess uttered more flattering and pretty speeches, and, after a few moments, bowed herself out.

"Now, why did she come?" questioned Violet.

"Bah!" cried Nina, contemptuously. "She had heard of Aylmer's being here. I'd wager my little finger she sees him before she leaves the house."

"Oh, even she could not go so far!"

"Who lives will see," said Nina; "and if I were to live a hundred years, and she too, Giulia could never do anything to astonish me. Mark my words, she will visit Aylmer!"

"They must be on very intimate terms for her to risk such a step," Violet answered, with a sudden haughty inflection in her voice.

"Nothing of the sort. I tell you, he can't endure her! But let us talk of something else. That woman makes me ill! I have a conviction she will not get through another season without a scandal that must put her out of the pale; and I own I shall not be sorry."

Other visitors were received, and Nina forgot the duchess and her own prophecy, though it rankled in Violet's mind; and she asked herself why, since neither the lady nor Mr. Aylmer were anything to her, save that he was perforce a guest under her roof. But as this rose from the fact that he had risked his life on her account, to entertain suspicions of him would be very unworthy. Still, she could not help feeling that gratitude to a man capable of yielding to Giulia da Rimini's fascinations would seem a galling yoke.

Perhaps an hour later, the professor appeared, having promised to report personally to the two ladies after his

next visit to his patient. He entered in great wrath, exclaiming :

"I'll not have this, you know! If I am to cure that fellow, I'll not allow his room to be poisoned by such trash! It must have been one of you sent them! I expected better things of you both."

As he spoke he flung a bouquet of jessamines on the table between them. Nina stared contemptuously at the flowers for an instant, then burst into peals of laughter, exclaiming :

"Giulia's bouquet! She had it in her belt, and the odor nearly suffocated me. Now, Violet, own I was right!"

"Whose bouquet? What do you say?" growled the professor.

"Never mind," said Violet, in a voice so cold and odd that Nina glanced at her in surprise, and stopped laughing. "Please throw those dreadful things out of the window, professor. The smell is sickening."

"Perfectly so," added Nina, pretending to arrange her hair, but watching Violet from between her fingers.

The professor opened a window, and flung the flowers away. As he returned, the silence struck him ; and he feared that, well as both ladies knew him, and freely as they encouraged his brusque modes of speech, he might this time have annoyed them by his excitement.

"Have I said something to offend you? Don't mind. You know I'm a bear ; and I've a horror of flowers in a sick-room," he said, with a look of comical penitence on his ugly face, which set Nina laughing again.

"Certainly not," said Violet.

"Only don't suspect us of such crimes," added Nina. "We've neither been nor sent to your patient."

"Very strange!" muttered the doctor. "The sister saw nobody ; but then she had fallen to praying, and when she does that, she wouldn't know if a whole regiment, horse and foot, tramped in!"

"I don't suppose your wretched prisoner accused us," said Nina.

"He was in no state to tell anything—muttering and gabbling, with his face as red as fire. No doubt there will be the very deuce to pay!"

"Let us hope the consequences will not prove serious,"

said Violet; and while she and the professor talked, Nina sat thinking.

"Is she offended because it was in her house Giulia behaved so? Offended she is! It can't be on the man's account, for she never saw him till the night before last! Well, I'll not tease her; unless she mentions the matter, I shall not."

When they were left alone, Violet did not make any allusion to the affair; but the next day, out of sheer idleness, Nina began turning over a visiting-list which Violet had been correcting from her old Florentine note-book, and saw a heavy black line drawn across the name—Guilia, Duchess da Rimini.

CHAPTER V.

HER FIRST VISIT.

A WEEK went by. Laurence Aylmer had been very ill since the day the professor found the flowers on his bed. He had managed during the doctor's absence to disarrange his bandages while only partially conscious, and the result was a cold and high fever, which for some time left him no lucid interval.

The old German actually lived in the sick-room, and certain physicians, who did not like him and considered that in taking the case into his hands he had interfered with their rights, since he pretended to be no longer a medical practitioner, declared that in the secrecy of that chamber he was trying all manner of dreadful experiments on the unfortunate man.

Of course these rumors, originating with the doctors, grew into positive and terrible tales in the mouths of other people, and one energetic old maid from Columbia gave a "tea" for the express purpose of expounding her views in regard to the matter. She thought the American ladies ought to interfere in behalf of their countryman, barbarously tortured, nay, slowly murdered, under the hands of this heartless German savant, who, to use the energetic

female's own words, "was capable of sacrificing hecatombs of humanity in pursuit of what he termed the cause of science." She proposed appointing a committee to wait upon the professor, and tell him plainly that unless he would consent to call a consultation of physicians, they, the countrywomen of this luckless gentleman, must appeal to the American Minister in Rome, publish letters in the *Tourist* —call Heaven and earth to witness their protest against conduct which was a disgrace to the latter half of our glorious century.

Many speeches were made, and a great deal of tea and orgeat drunk, but though numerous plans of action were discussed, even to an assault upon the palace and a rescuing bodily of the victim by the Amazons—a proposal which originated with a tiny withered spinster, who, in spite of her size, appeared as determined as if animated by the spirit of Penthesilea—still the meeting proved a failure, so far as carrying any of the projects into execution went.

Poor Eliza Bronson heard all the news, and with bitter tears and mournful wails, warned her friend, and was driven nearly frantic by the laughter of Violet and Nina, who at once informed the professor, and that reckless person laughed far louder than they.

Nina remained Miss Cameron's guest. Some little imprudence had inflamed her ankle again, and the professor condemned her to another week of repose, threatening to keep her in a supine position for the next three months if she did not obey.

Carlo came and went. A knot of Nina's intimate friends were a great deal at the house, so the little lady had amusement; and Violet, still beset by that inexplicable dislike for solitude and reflection, seemed as eager for society as Nina herself.

Both good taste and sympathy caused the ladies to refrain from anything which could come under the head of gayeties, though of course outsiders declared that "revelings and orgies went on in the palace, while the professor's victim groaned under the same roof, helpless in the *octopus* clutches of his Teutonic tormentor"—a fine phrase which was conceived and uttered by the virgin who had proposed an onslaught of Amazons on behalf of the martyr. True, these reports of unseemly revels were contradicted by other tales, that Miss Cameron had been secretly married to the

sufferer, that he was not in the house, not living even, and that the professor was essaying some new mode of embalming. But in Florence it is not difficult for people to believe a dozen stories, diametrically opposed to each other, at one and the same time, and it had been long since the various coteries had found a common subject of interest so engrossing and so dramatic.

On the eighth day Aylmer was better, and Violet went that evening to a concert given by some young aspirant for fame, where the appearance of influential persons would be even more important than their money. She had not before spent the evening abroad, and hesitated about leaving Nina to Miss Bronson's society, which the little lady did not fully appreciate—Carlo being absent on a visit to an estate he owned near Perugia. However, Nina declared that if her hostess stopped at home she would render herself odious, and pleaded so hard with her to go, that Violet changed her mind at the last moment, and accompanied some friends who called for her.

Midnight had struck when she returned. As she was mounting the stairs, the professor looked out of the apartment on the ground-floor and called to her.

"Can I speak to you a moment?" he inquired.

"Of course," Violet said; and bade Antonio go on and tell Clarice not to wait up any longer. She saw the professor appeared worried, and asked quickly, "Nothing wrong? He—your patient is not worse?"

"Not seriously worse, perhaps; but the fever has come back, and he has no business to have fever," returned the professor, in an injured tone. "The obstinacy of human nature is really something stupendous! But come in and sit with me, please. Miss Bronson is doubtless asleep, and so can't be shocked at the impropriety of your visiting a gay Lothario of sixty-seven at this late hour. I have sent the sister to lie down for awhile."

Violet laughed and yielded to his whim, as she fancied it.

Beyond the salon they entered was a second; then came the room where Aylmer lay; at the side of this, one in which a bed had been arranged for the professor whenever he chose to remain.

The doors were open, and Violet could hear the murmur of a voice from the sick man's chamber.

"Who is talking to him?" she asked, in surprise.

"Why, that's himself; he's been at it for the last half-hour—mutter, mutter!" growled the professor. "He gabbles about seeing the carriage on the brink of the river. If I rouse him he answers sanely enough, but in a moment begins to wander again—talking about a garden—places in America—Lord knows what! I thought you wouldn't mind going in for a little; perhaps your voice would quiet him. In that sort of partial delirium sometimes a mere trifle will compose a patient, if it happens to fall in with his delusion."

"I will do so, of course," Violet answered; "but are you sure that seeing me will not agitate him still more? We are such entire strangers——"

She paused abruptly, her utterance checked by a thought engrossing as it was sudden. Strangers? Why, it seemed as if they had known one another for years! Then she began hastily to account for this sensation: it rose from the fact that his accident had been caused by his efforts in her behalf; from his having lain for so many days under her roof; from—but the professor was speaking, and she had no leisure to listen to her own absurd imaginings, or seek solutions thereof.

"That's just it—you mustn't startle him. You are a woman of brains—*ach Gott!* what a different world it would be if there were more of your sort! You can comprehend what I want. You must wait till he begins again about a lady, and flowers, and all that nonsense; then sit down by him—enter into his delusion, so you will be a part of it—you see?"

"Yes," Violet replied, and her voice sounded cold.

The professor's mention of the jessamines brought to her mind that rather stern criticism of the wounded man which she had indulged whenever she recollected Giulia da Rimini's visit. The savant had evidently forgotten his own outbreak and the reason of his annoyance. She had time to be glad of this obliviousness on his part, to wonder why she was glad. Then he spoke again, and all the while, through the swift rush of her fancies, through the effort to listen to her companion's words, she could hear the sound of that painful voice from the sick-room, monotonous, low, yet eager and troubled.

"Of course you understand," the professor continued approvingly; "one is always sure you can—that is the

pleasure of dealing with a woman like you! Come now, stand where he can't see you till the right moment, then go in. You can quiet him—you must! I don't wish to give any narcotics; I depend on you."

He shook his head fiercely at her, and, in his earnestness, seized her loose sleeve, quite unconscious of his rudeness, and hurried her through the adjoining salon to the chamber beyond.

Violet stood still upon the threshold and looked in; a large, lofty room, whose vaulted roof added to the sense of space and height, decorated, like the rest of the suite, with furniture old as the palace itself. A lamp burning upon a table formed an island of light in the center of the chamber, and cast faint rays across the carved bedstead and damask canopy. At first Miss Cameron could distinguish nothing; she closed her eyes for a few seconds. When she opened them, gradually the different objects became visible. A bronze Moor, holding a candelabra, frowned at her near the door; farther on, a marble nymph peeped out of a niche, with a flower-vase in her hand; the single-lighted candle of the Moor's burden struck her face. She seemed to bestow a smirk on the African, and cast an evil glance at Violet from the corners of her dead eyes.

The island of light in the middle of the room grew brighter; Miss Cameron could see the bed distinctly. The curtains were flung back, the sick man lay motionless; she caught the feverish glitter of his eyes, the worn outline of his countenance, and the words he uttered in that weary, monotonous voice were perfectly audible.

"She promised to come—she promised! I am so tired. I shall never be done counting them—she promised!"

The professor, standing behind Violet, touched her shoulder in sign that she was to go forward. She stepped softly across the floor and sat down by the bed. The sufferer saw her, stretched out his hand aimlessly, saying:

"I thought you had gone away! Don't go! I can smell the flowers now! Ah, you have taken me into the garden. I was so tired of that room; it is cool and pleasant here."

His wandering hand rested upon hers—he held it fast; his eyes closed; a smile parted his lips; he lay silent for some minutes. The professor crept back into the adjoining room. Violet did not stir.

Presently Aylmer looked at her again.

"It was very good of you to come," he said; "I wanted you so much."

Did he know what he was saying? He spoke so composedly that for an instant Violet thought him quite rational, but his next words proved her mistake. "I saw the flowers—I knew when you came in—I wanted to speak—to ask you to stay! Then you were gone, and the flowers were gone too; the Moor stole them—he steals everything you send! But you have come back now; you have come back!"

He fancied that Giulia da Rimini had returned! He lifted her fingers to his lips; a thrill of disgust shook Violet; she felt degraded—he mistook her for that woman! She snatched her hand away.

"Don't go," he moaned; "don't leave me!"

Violet looked up and saw the professor in the doorway; he made a warning signal. She must not shrink; she must humor the sick man's odious fancy; repose might be of vital necessity. Whatever he was—however wicked, she could not refuse her aid. She let him take her hand again.

"You will stay?" he said. She did not answer. "She won't speak; she won't speak!" he murmured complainingly.

"I am here—I will stay," she whispered, though the words seemed to choke her, and the touch of his fingers burned like fire. He talked brokenly on, each disconnected phrase only bringing additional proof that her angry disgust was deserved.

"Are you here—are you here? Don't you remember that night? I want to tell you! I hate that Moor; the old man said he was your husband! They are all gone now! Yes, say it over—say it over!"

And so he fell asleep with a smile on his lips, still holding her hand fast. She dared not stir, for fear of disturbing him; and the horror, the sense of degradation, and mingled therewith a sting of disappointment and pain, as if this stranger had been long and well known, and she had suddenly learned how she had deceived herself in regard to him, growing each instant stronger. It was all odious, dreadful!

At last he turned slightly on his pillow, and his fingers relaxed their grasp; she drew hers away, rose, and went

noiselessly out of the room, shuddering from head to foot as if she had escaped from something noisome, yet still with that sensation of pain and regret—at what? Ah, the question was impossible to answer!

"It has succeeded admirably," the professor said, as he followed her into the farther salon. "He will sleep for hours; you managed perfectly! A quiet night, and I shall be at ease about him. Yes, yes, we are on the right road now."

Violet did not reply; she felt giddy and faint. She saw a carafe of water on the table, filled a glass and drank eagerly.

"You are tired; you look pale," said the professor, frowning at her from under his bushy eyebrows. "Come; you have done enough for this time; go you to bed."

"Good-night," she said.

"I shall give you my arm up the stairs——"

"Good heavens! because you have two patients in the house, don't think I must be ill too," she interrupted with a fretfulness which she could not repress.

"Tut, tut! don't contradict me!" cried the professor. "When I say I shall do a thing, I always do it! I mean to give you my arm up the stairs."

Violet accepted his courtesy, just to avoid further words.

"I am well satisfied," continued the professor. "To-morrow our patient shall begin a new life. Fräulein, you are a very sensible person."

"I am not; and if I could be, I wouldn't!" exclaimed Violet, and then began to laugh, though she was shivering still.

"You are nervous," pursued the professor, with a little disdain audible in his voice. "It is an odd thing that, though women can sometimes be efficient in a crisis, their nerves always suffer for it."

"A man's opinion!" retorted Violet. "You may be wisdom incarnate, but you will never understand women, professor; so you may as well give up the effort."

"God forbid that I should lose my time making it!" said he, with pious fervor.

They passed through the entrance-hall, and up the stairs; the professor jesting and laughing in his low ponderous fashion—Violet trying to laugh and speak gayly in reply.

In the vast antechamber — large enough to hold a modern house—they saw Antonio, the trustworthy, fast asleep on a mediæval settle, as hard and uncomfortable as it was picturesque and valuable.

"I can't believe in your dreadful theories that men have been evolved from apes, but I can believe the vital principle in that faithful creature has been in a Newfoundland dog," said Violet.

She dropped the professor's arm, and was about to wake Antonio, when an exclamation from the savant checked her.

"Ten thousand devils!" he growled; but the surprise in his voice formed an excuse for the ejaculation.

Violet's eyes followed his gesture. In the doorway of the salon a human head appeared, wrapped in a scarlet shawl. Two wild orbs glared at the pair for an instant, then the vision vanished.

Repeating his unseemly outburst, the professor rushed forward, and Violet hurried after.

In an easy-chair sat Eliza Bronson, her head wrapped in the red shawl; her right hand uplifted, and grasping an empty phial.

"I have poisoned myself," she said, in a voice where diverse emotions found vent—fear and a sort of reproachful triumph being pre-eminent.

"Great heavens!" cried Violet. "What do you mean?"

"I—have—poisoned—myself," repeated Eliza, separating the words by pauses, in order to give them increased emphasis.

The doctor darted upon the phial, seized it, smelled it, and exclaimed:

"If you dare to have hysterics, I'll let you die, as sure as my name is Schmidt!"

"Violet, perhaps *you* will listen to my last words," said Eliza, bestowing a glance of scorn upon the professor.

"Now, what do you think you have taken?" asked he.

"I know! Madame Magnoletti's liniment! You ought to be aware of its contents. It was your prescription," said Eliza.

"I mean, what antidote?"

"Everything! It is too late! The white of an egg—but that is for arsenic! Some cold tea—no matter! Oh,

Violet, you were down in that man's room! I heard you. Do not deny it!"

"Then why didn't you come after us?" cried the professor.

"Sir," said she, "I can die, but I cannot be indelicate!"

The professor smelled at the bottle again. Something in his face assured Violet that Miss Bronson's fears were uncalled for, but the professor's words were not reassuring.

"Why did you take poison?" he asked.

"I had a frightful neuralgia. I caught up the phial, and swallowed the contents, thinking it was my mixture. The instant I had done so I perceived my error. I looked at the bottle," continued Eliza, in an awful tone. "I recognized it as that which held the marchesa's liniment, though how it came in my room I know not."

Violet regarded the professor. His face remained inscrutable as that of the Sphinx. Eliza leaned back in her chair, and gasped in majestic resignation.

"Salt and water," pronounced the professor, meditatively.

"I have taken a pint!" cried she, triumphantly.

"Then in a few moments you will be very sick," said he; "at least, I hope so. If not, we will think of some other remedy; but you have drunk as good a simple antidote as any. We must wait a little."

Eliza turned her back upon him.

"Violet," she said, "it is a solemn thought that before dawn breaks I may be where I shall hear the cherubs sing."

"Terrible, if they scream like human cherubs," said the professor. "Why, you might as well talk about fairies as such personages! Miss Bronson, you will be resolved into the elements—so much hydrogen, so much oxygen——"

"Peace, railer!" broke in Eliza.

"I suppose you would object to—to—afterward—I mean—to autopsy," said the professor, in an insinuating tone, waving his right hand in the air, as fancying that it held a scalpel.

"Violet, do you hear?—and I still living! In my very hearing he proposes that sacrilege!" moaned Eliza.

"My dear professor, do tell her that she is not poisoned," said Violet, appealingly.

He held out the bottle in answer, with a look so tragic that Eliza began to realize the reality of what she was rather playing at, yet from first to last had been in earnest about—and though this is a very unintelligible sentence, no other language would express her feelings.

"Do not ask him to deceive me," sobbed she.

"No, no," said the professor. "But later, when it's all over, when your so-called self is resolved into the elements——"

"Heathen!" groaned Eliza, drying her eyes. A petition for him to make some further essay of skill had been upon her lips, but his heretical speech roused her wrath and brought back her courage.

"After that," pursued the professor, unmoved and deaf, "would you permit, in the cause of science, that autopsy——"

Eliza interrupted him by a shriek.

"I'll not be autop—top—there's no such word as autopticized," she cried, with her school-teaching instincts strong upon her even then. "But I mean, whatever the word to express it may be, that my lifeless frame shall not become the victim of your sacrilegious experiments. Unless my friend—she whom I have called my friend—will promise, I leave her house this instant. There must be some roof beneath which my corpse can lie safe from your nefarious designs."

"Schnapps!" exclaimed the professor, so abruptly and with such energy that he startled Violet even; as for Eliza, she bounded in her chair as if she had been electrified.

"What?" she shrieked, not catching the word, and afraid he had pronounced some dreadful sentence of doom.

"A sure remedy. I never thought of it till now. Wait, I'll be back in a minute!" and away rushed the professor.

Eliza rolled her head and winked her eyes. This sudden excitement on the professor's part made her certain she was in bad case indeed.

"Violet," she said faintly, "think how it would be with me if at a moment like this I had not a sure faith, a certainty of being among the elect, to give me support."

Whatever the dose she had swallowed, it had evidently affected Eliza's brain. Violet hastened into the anteroom when she heard the old German's step.

"In the name of goodness, what has the poor creature

taken?" she asked, meeting the professor with a square bottle under his arm.

"Nothing of consequence," he answered. "There was laudanum in it; you know even a few drops affect her. The dose has gone to her head, and now I propose to send a glass of schnapps after it; then she will go to bed and sleep like a top."

"And—and your patient?" Violet asked hesitatingly.

"Oh, he is still sound—likely to stay so. The sister is sitting by him," said the professor. "At present, our duty is towards your friend Elizabeth—Eliza, or whatever—and do our duty we must." He hurried into the salon, crying, "Here we are! This is the little fat gentleman that means to save your life, my Miss Bronson;" and he brandished the square bottle before the spinster's eyes.

"What is he giving me?" moaned Eliza, sleepily. "Violet, I feel a strange drowsiness, I see double. Oh! oh! it is the end!"

"*Dominus vobiscum*," chanted the professor, in a deep bass voice, as he began to pour the sparkling liquid into a goblet.

"Do go away," said Violet, and took the bottle from him, concealing her face so that Eliza might not be shocked or hurt by her irrepressible laughter.

She mixed a little of the spirits with a judicious quantity of water, and gave it to the spinster, who drank, and in a few moments grew both courageous and dizzy.

"Sir, you have saved my life," she said, turning towards the professor with majesty tempered by tenderness, while the old sinner stood looking at her and rubbing his hands in glee; "you have saved my life—I thank you! I abhor your principles, I repudiate your doctrines, but I am grateful for your care."

"Good!" chuckled the professor; "schnapps forever!"

"Violet," continued Eliza, "I love you, but I shudder over your future! I warn you now that if you linger in this unhallowed land, and if you do not relinquish Mariolatry, you will lose your soul—lose your soul. *His*," and she pointed a finger of dreadful warning at the professor, "*his* is lost already."

She disappeared; went straight to her room, and as the professor had prophesied, slept sweetly till morning.

CHAPTER VI.

LA BELLE SAMARITAINE.

ONLY the next day Giulia da Rimini again presented herself.

Miss Cameron was seated with Nina in the salon she had appropriated to her guest, and, as ill-luck would have it, Carlo had entered a few moments before.

Nina had a headache, and Violet was bathing her forehead with eau-de-Cologne, when her maid brought in the duchess's card. The marchesa made a little grimace as she read the name, and handed the bit of coronetted pasteboard to her friend, whispering:

"One must receive her!"

"The visit is for you," Violet answered in the same tone, rising as she spoke; "there is no reason why I should stop. She does not come to see me—I have not returned her call."

But Nina caught her dress and pulled her down upon the sofa again, with an eager, supplicating look, while her lips inaudibly framed the entreaty:

"Stay—do stay!"

"What are you two talking about?" called Carlo from the table, where he sat trying some combination of cards; "who is your visitor?"

"He will go away with her if we don't let her come up," Nina murmured rapidly. "If you vex her, she will punish me. Wait till I am gone before you take any decisive step."

Violet stared in astonishment, but the tears in the little woman's eyes softened her, and she bowed acquiescence.

"Have you both lost your tongues?" asked the marchese.

Violet treated him to a contemptuous glance which escaped his short sight, but Nina caught it and muttered:

"Oh, don't!" Then she added aloud to her maid, "Tell madame I am not well this morning, but I will see her."

"What madame?" demanded the persistent Carlo.

"The Duchess da Rimini! As you hate women's gossip you had better run away," said Violet, quite savagely.

Carlo laughed, put up his glass, glanced at the speaker, and then at Nina.

"Heaven help us!" cried he; "how have I offended you, Miss Cameron? You snubbed me in such a wife-like tone that I had to look twice to be certain it was not my legal guardian who spoke."

"Your legal guardian is more amiable than I," returned Violet, affecting to laugh, for Nina's eyes, full of supplication, were still upon her; "I am in one of my bad moods, when anything in the shape of a question irritates me."

"Carlo," said Nina, speaking so gayly that Violet wondered at her self-control, "if you know any one of her admirers who means to risk his fate to-day, pray warn him not to venture."

"It would only be Christian charity," he replied, let his lorgnon drop, and went back to his cards.

If there had been, as Violet fancied, a little suspicion in his face, it died out when Nina spoke in that natural way, accompanying her words with one of her childish bursts of laughter.

"So," thought Violet, "Master Carlo has teased her, has he? Well, he never shall again, on that woman's account! Make your visit, madame the duchess! I never expected to be glad to see you; but this time I am—I am indeed!"

She rose, went over to the table and stood behind the marchese's chair, apparently absorbed in the cards spread out upon the cloth, and asking some question in regard to them.

Madame da Rimini was announced, and swept into the room with her customary slow, majestic tread.

"My poor Nina—my dearest Nina! Still tied fast to that odious sofa! Heavens, it is too cruel!" she cried, moving towards the couch.

There was the sound of a kiss; Nina had leisure to respond, and the duchess to utter more sweet, condoling words, before Violet gave any sign of having observed the visitor's entrance or moved so as to permit Carlo to rise. She turned; the duchess was regarding her, endeavoring to look as if now she had leisure to see Miss Cameron, but with another expression visible in her face, try as she might

to hide it, a certain wondering fear if it were possible a slight could befall *her*.

Violet made a low obeisance; but in spite of her gracious manner, no woman could have failed to understand her hostile intentions.

"*Si matinale et si belle, madame la duchesse!*" she cried. "How good of you to come so often to see the marchesa in her imprisonment! You are a true sister of charity in your kindness to the wounded and suffering."

A faint quiver disturbed the duchess's firm mouth, but almost imperceptible as it was, Nina caught it. She waited in a thrill of pleasurable expectation. Violet meant to deal the odious creature some cruel blow, and Violet would do it neatly and well—the Russian could trust her.

But though the duchess feared that her little secret had been discovered, she did not intend to be stabbed by this impertinent American, if her well-trained skill could parry the thrust.

"A visit to so old and valued a friend as the marchesa could scarcely come under that head, *chère demoiselle*," she replied, with a supercilious little smile which put Violet outside the pale of such intimacy as pointedly as words could have done.

The two women of course understood her meaning, but it was Greek to Carlo in his masculine dullness, though he perceived that matters were not going smoothly between the duchess and Violet. He glanced from one to the other, then stole a furtive look at his wife; but Nina, busy arranging her cushions, appeared as innocent as a dove.

"No matter what head her visit comes under, I can't see what I have done that the duchess should refuse to notice me," he said hastily, moving forward as he spoke.

"Ah, are you there, marchese?" returned she in her indolent voice, vouchsafing him a glance very different from that which she had bestowed upon Violet. Sunshine was not softer than the smile he received; a lance not sharper than the look shot at Miss Cameron. She sank into a seat and extended him the tips of her daintily-gloved fingers, which he kissed in his graceful Italian fashion.

"And what news of the match?" she asked eagerly. "Is it to come off or not?"

"Yes; I believe it is decided for Saturday."

"What match?" Nina inquired.

"Between Marco Goldoni's horse and one of Harry Stanhope's," Carlo explained.

"And I have dozens and dozens of gloves on it," cried the duchess, in the same pretty, eager way. "Marchese, do tell me that Marco's gray will win!"

But, interested as she appeared, Nina knew she had rushed into the subject merely to hinder Miss Cameron from speaking. The little woman chafed inwardly that the thrust she felt confident Violet had meant to deal should be so easily prevented, and for Carlo to have aided the duchess, even unintentionally, doubled Nina's annoyance.

During some moments the trotting-match was enthusiastically talked of; Nina took her share in the conversation, but Violet sat aloof, the visitor's own words giving her the right to consider that she had no more to do with playing hostess than if she had met the lady under the marchesa's roof.

Now, if Giulia had left matters on this footing, she might perhaps have rendered it impossible for Miss Cameron to hit her with a buttonless foil; but that lady's courteous, yet palpable negation of any concern in her visit, irritated the Sicilian beyond endurance, and urged her imprudently on to be the assailant in a second clashing of swords, convinced that if the American had been cognizant of her little escapade, she would have betrayed the fact on their first encounter.

Unfortunately for Giulia she did not understand Violet, and rushed on her fate—that of being exposed before Carlo. Some remark of Miss Cameron's, in answer to a question from Nina, afforded the duchess a delightful opportunity to sneer at America and the freedom granted unmarried women in that country.

"It seems odd to us Latins," said she in her sweetest voice, and one must have heard an Italian utter a *méchanceté* to form an idea of the exquisite perfection of tone and manner, "but we are so antiquated, so prejudiced, so ignorant, we European women, compared with the dazzling transatlantic beauties!" She addressed Nina, but by an indescribable something, for she made no gesture, rendered the compliment to American women a tribute of special admiration and delicate mockery to Violet Cameron herself. "How one envies the brilliant creatures! One might admit their supremacy in point of loveliness and

wit, and still be patient, but it is the liberty allowed them which irks us, held in bondage by tiresome old customs."

"Yes, yes," cried Nina, just to push Giulia forward to her doom, ready, Russian-like, to enjoy her enemy's defeat the more from having feared that it would fail. "You are right, duchess; but still, would such freedom suit our ideas?"

"Ah, that is the question! I am afraid we glory in our slavery to custom; it is ingrained in our natures. Still, one envies the Americans all the same! One would like to hate them, but, being women, we appreciate their fascinations too thoroughly to do that."

"Upon my word, Fleur Violette, that pretty speech deserves your best courtesy," cried Carlo, really believing that the duchess desired to be especially agreeable.

"Oh, a man!" was Nina's thought.

"But, duchess," asked Violet, "what do you so particularly envy us Americans?"

"I have said—the freedom granted our sex in your native land."

"Surely, once married, an Italian woman is free enough," said Violet; and the duchess saw her own error, but could not remedy it.

"When freedom comes too late!" sighed she, hoping to silence Violet by the difficulty of finding any answer with a sting in it which would not appear a rudeness.

"How?" exclaimed Miss Cameron. "Freedom cannot come too late!"

Giulia shook her stately head, saying:

"Ah, Nina darling, mademoiselle argues as an unmarried lady naturally would! She does not know those dreadful tyrants as we do," waving two fingers towards Carlo, and giving him a smile, as she spoke.

"Oh," said Carlo, "Miss Cameron is a cruel, icy-hearted creature, utterly indifferent even to attractions like mine."

"There may be a reason for that," laughed the duchess "You must not forget the interesting invalid below stairs! By the way, how is Mr. Aylmer this morning?"

"Better," said Nina and Carlo, speaking at once

"Better," repeated Violet, laughing gayly as she spoke. "But take care, duchess, that you content yourself with

inquiring here! That cross old professor is lying in wait! Oh, if you had seen him the other day dash up here, and shake your pretty bunch of jessamines in our faces, accusing us of trying to poison his patient, when Nina could not leave her sofa, and I could not dream of intruding into the lion's den, being an American woman in a foreign land—and unmarried!"

Blush? Yes, the duchess did, through all her rouge! Carlo gave her one furious glance, and began to rearrange his cards; Nina nursed her foot, in order to hide her face, conscious that its triumph would not bear exposure; Violet sat calm as a summer morning.

"Marchese," she added, "did I not tell you the duchess was a good Samaritan? But, alas, in our century Samaritans meet with a poor reward! The professor still vows that her kind visit to Mr. Aylmer retarded his recovery by at least a fortnight."

The duchess—not quick-witted, though shrewd—tried to laugh; Carlo made a still more miserable pretense at merriment; Nina remained occupied with her foot; Violet's smiling serenity knew no change.

"Warning!" cried Carlo, somewhat too bitterly. "Don't play the Samaritan—one is not appreciated."

"Don't be found out, you mean, else the professors fall upon you," Miss Cameron gayly amended, with a glance at the duchess which sent the Sicilian's blood up to boiling-heat.

Before any additional words could be spoken by either of the group, Antonio announced fresh visitors—witty Lady Harcourt, bringing in her train Gherardi, Harry Stanhope, and several other men.

"I knew if we sent up our names we should not be admitted," cried her ladyship. "So I persuaded these cowards to help me storm the citadel."

There followed a torrent of merry talk. In the midst of it, after trying unsuccessfully to take a part, appear at ease, and at the same time soften Carlo by sundry beseeching glances, to which he, obdurate as a Trojan, paid no attention, Madame da Rimini rose.

"Going to leave poor Nina already?" questioned Violet, sweetly.

The duchess turned on her. The enamel of politeness

cracked in the heat of her wrath, and gave a glimpse of the coarse virago under.

"I have a thousand things to do," she replied; and her voice was so sharp that everybody looked up, but she struggled in vain to subdue nature. "I shall come again when I may be of some use to my friend."

"*Samaritaine toujours*," said Violet, and that wretched Carlo laughed, looking full in the duchess's face the while.

The luckless Giulia stood dumb for an instant.

"Stanhope," said Carlo, "give madame your arm to her carriage; but take Paulo with you to protect her from your fascinations, and to make Lady Harcourt and my wife say bitter things of her, out of sheer jealousy, on account of her cavaliers."

Now the Englishman was elderly and unimpressionable, and Paulo was the duchess's own brother-in-law, whom she hated with a hatred surpassing even that of women.

Nina metaphorically flapped the wings of her soul in delight, but poor Carlo was only a man, and hastened to impair the perfect retribution he had brought about.

"I am master of the house for the nonce," he added, "and cannot leave Miss Cameron exposed to the wiles and enormities of these other male monsters."

"Oh, you goose!" Nina mentally groaned.

The duchess, so pale with anger that the spots of rouge showed like a blotch on either cheek, seized the advantage given by Carlo's superfluous words.

"Miss Cameron will lend you to me to the foot of the stairs," said she. "I am afraid of the dangerous Colonel, and Paulo came on purpose to make love to Nina. You can't in decency refuse him three minutes free from your Argus eyes."

"*Mille diables!* she has the best of it after all!" thought the little Russian.

But the Muscovite reckoned defeat without taking into consideration the American reserve, bent on punishing the offender to the uttermost.

"Go, Carlo, my friend," said Violet; "see the duchess safe to her carriage. The professor lies in wait for her, and if she so much as looks towards the door of the den where he is torturing his victim, he will fall upon her."

"What, what!" cried Lady Harcourt. "Giulia, have

you been trying to prevent that New World barbarian from dying in peace?"

"On the contrary," said Violet, quick as a flash, "she went in the other day and laid sweet jessamines on his pillow, and the professor nearly murdered Nina and poor me, just because we were women too, and the offender—*la belle Samaritaine*—had escaped, and he found only us innocents to visit his wrath upon."

In many circles the bit of comedy might have been wasted, but these types of Florentine society appreciated the scene as thoroughly as ever a knot of Parisian critics enjoyed the most delicately-drawn exhibition of character in one of Victorien Sardou's plays.

The duchess knew it, and the *réplique* rested with her. To remain silent would be to damn herself. Florence might pass over impropriety, but not stupidity. And, difficult as the situation was in itself, her fierce anger increased its difficulties. But she must answer. She could be coarse if wit failed; at least the men would believe what she said witty, just on account of its coarseness.

"I am not afraid of your professor," said she; "I have already appeased him. I agreed to give Carlo up to you, dear Miss Cameron, and to let Nina have the American." But the quizzical glances directed towards her drove her on to add: "To ratify the bargain, the professor is to sup with me on Sunday night. Will you all come? Lady Harcourt, promise in the general name."

"I promise," returned my lady, "promise for all. We shall not forget."

"*Au revoir*, dear," said the duchess, and kissed Violet's cheek.

She floated out on the marchese's arm, and the instant the door closed Lady Harcourt exclaimed:

"I don't understand the *mot* of the charade, but, great heavens! Violet Cameron, you must have hit her hard when she was pushed to the extreme of giving a supper!"

"Don't understand the *mot!*" cried Gherardi. "Well, I fancy poor Aylmer would——"

"Hush!" broke in her ladyship. "We may be scandalous in Florence, but a sick man's room and his female visitors are sacred—silence, evil tongue!"

Going down stairs, the duchess for a little talked any nonsense that would come into her head, just to give it

time to stop whirling, then wondered quickly what explanation would be best, or rather least hurtful to her cause, and ended by ignoring the matter.

"Oh, marchese," she said, "I have to go to that dreadful railway man about the dividends; can't you be good-natured, and bully him for me?"

"I could have done so last week," retorted he; "but Gresham and I quarreled yesterday. I only know one person who could soften him, that's Aylmer—but he is too ill."

The speech was not bad for a man's effort, but it gave the duchess a chance.

"Cruel!" she cried, released his arm, and dropped into an attitude of dignified melancholy. "You could hear me insulted—you can try to wound me after!"

"The odor of jessamine always turns my stomach," said Carlo.

"Then luckily I did not find you that day," exclaimed the duchess, with a burst of truthfulness wonderfully well done. "I did go into the creature's room. The doors were open—I thought I heard your voice. I wanted to tell you I was sorry for having teased you that last evening. But you were not there. I ran out—the bouquet must have fallen from my corsage. Oh, that wretched, malicious woman!"

Carlo waited calmly till she had finished, then extended his arm anew, saying only:

"Shall I tell your people to drive to Gresham's office?"

The duchess shut her lips hard to keep from panting, like a person who had mounted a steep hill too fast. Carlo put her hand in his arm and led her on.

"Where to?" he asked, as they reached the court.

"Home," she answered, faintly; then, making a violent effort to recover herself and speak playfully, she added, "If you like to come, I'll give you some punch, instead of English four-o'clock tea."

"I am heart-broken; but I promised to sit awhile with poor Aylmer," returned he, and helped her into the carriage.

From a window which overlooked the courtyard, that malicious Gherardi watched the pair and cried, utterly regardless of the marchesa's presence:

"He goes—he does not go! Which side do you take, Lady Harcourt; and how many pairs of gloves upon it?"

"He goes!" exclaimed Stanhope. "Fifty pounds to ten!"

"You have lost," said Lady Harcourt, who had reached the window; "and you are fitly punished for speaking!"

Everybody was gone at last; the marchesa and Violet were alone.

You angel!" cried Nina; "but oh, you have made a terrible enemy—Silician—take care!"

"*Che!*" returned Violet, with an accent perfectly Italian and a disregard of consequences purely Anglo-Saxon.

"I had been a little jealous, I will admit now," pursued Nina; "it was the first time—it will be the last where Giulia is concerned! My dear, Carlo will never forgive the blow to his vanity; she had written him a letter only that morning."

"He cared nothing for her; you cannot think he did!"

"No, no; not in earnest—but he is a man! However, it is ended, thanks to you. If ever I can repay you, I vow—no, I won't, for women always break their oaths."

"Don't repeat that stale old slander," said Violet; "not women, only the make-believes."

"But I love you! Let me hug you, this instant! I never was troubled about him before; though, if I repeat that so often, you will not believe me. Well, you have cured him! Oh, the cat! she will never dupe him now—but you—you—oh, my dear!"

"Bah!" said Violet; "did Giulia da Rimini suppose she was a match for us? Let her try to punish me—we shall see! In the meantime, my love, we will have some tea, just to get the taste of her name out of our mouths."

CHAPTER VII.

DEAD AS PHARAOH.

MISS CAMERON did not like to think of her visit to the sick-room, for each time she did so the circumstances connected therewith seemed to increase in significance. Many of her sex would have contented themselves with expending censure on the duchess, but this was contrary to Violet's creed, which recognized the injustice of condemning a woman and letting the man go scot-free.

Still she rejoiced at having punished Giulia. She detested exhibitions of spite, and would have scorned to employ them in her own behalf ; but in this instance her conduct was justified by its motive : she had acted in defense of her friend—had triumphed too. Only the day before the duchess's supper, an opportunity offered of proving this.

Lady Harcourt called at the house to leave some wonderful remedy, for which she had sent to England, and which was to cure Nina's ankle in a magical fashion. Violet and the marchese had been out on horseback, and came in just as her ladyship had risen to take leave.

"I can't even stop to say 'How do you do,' she said, "for I have to go to a breakfast, a concert, and into the bargain sell a picture for a young painter dear to my soul, who is dying of consumption."

"Occupation enough for one morning, certainly," returned Violet.

"I shall see you both to-morrow night," continued Lady Harcourt. "Remember, Giulia gives us a supper ! Never, not even when presented to his gracious majesty on my seventeenth birthday, was I in such excitement, and I do not expect to be again if I should live a thousand years. Dear, blessed Giulia never gave a supper before and will never give another, so I mean the affair to be memorable."

"If she dies when the bills come in, her death will rest on your conscience," said Carlo.

"There will be no bills, *caro mio*," replied her ladyship.

"Every *restaurateur*, from Doney down to the lowest tyro, knows your charming enslaver too well to send so much as a *madeleine* to her house, unless paid in advance."

"Not even a Madeleine *penitente?*" asked Violet.

"She might consider the offering personal," rejoined Carlo.

"She will be one herself, you wicked American witch—is already; not on account of her sins, but her rashness in proposing the supper," added Lady Harcourt, laughing.

"She could prove her penitence and avoid the feast by entering a convent," said Violet.

"Don't condemn her to that," cried Nina. "At least, give her the privilege of a monastery."

"She will get out of the dilemma without adopting any such extreme measures," said Carlo.

"Not this time!" returned Lady Harcourt, triumphantly. "I have written her three notes and sent several men to ask the hour—she can't escape. I told her I should bring some friends whom I had already invited to my house."

"That is fiendish cruelty," said Violet.

"On your part," retorted my lady. "You forced her into giving the supper, Violet Cameron. You put her in a corner, and she had to eat you or be eaten in order to get out. She chose the latter alternative. But wait, my dear. Giulia will pay you before the winter is over, or rather, make you pay, supper and all!"

"Really!" laughed Violet. "How am I in fault?"

"Oh, I don't know; I ask no questions, I await the course of events. I am reasonably fond of you, I adore her—*ça va sans dire!* If she poisons you I'll come to the funeral, I promise that." And off my lady ran, pausing in the doorway long enough to add, "I shall stop down stairs to inquire after poor Aylmer, but the professor need not be vexed, for I have no jessamines to leave, and no reputation. I say that to save you the trouble."

"Supper indeed!" quoth Carlo. "I know one person who will not be deluded."

"But you will go—you must," said Nina; "and you too, Violet."

"There is no necessity in my case. The duchess made it so evident she was not visiting me the day she gave the invitation, that I am absolved from any part therein. But

Carlo is not, and for once in the annals of anybody's history, pleasure will be united with duty."

"Then have some refreshment ready for me when I get back. I shall be starved if I trust to what I get there," cried Carlo.

"*Entendu!*" said Violet. "But be sure you appear in time to partake of it, though Circe and all her nymphs stand in the way."

"I am sick of Circe, and I hate her nymphs," rejoined Carlo.

Nina glanced at Violet from the corners of her beautiful almond-shaped eyes. Carlo was looking at his wife, but he lost the glance, though Violet, whose head was half turned away, caught it distinctly. If the married pair lived to the age of the patriarchs, Carlo would never be permitted to dream that Nina had for an instant been jealous of the duchess. Indeed, while this by-play went on, his thoughts ran in this fashion:

"I swear that little wife of mine is the daintiest, sweetest, most charming creature in the world. It is ridiculous that I could have been attracted by that great coarse Rimini—I never was!"

And, though neither of the ladies were observing him, so far as he knew, both were as cognizant of his reflections as if he had put them into spoken language.

Carlo's fancy for the duchess, already on the wane when her misadventure occurred, had been killed outright as dead as Pharaoh.

He went to the famous supper which would supply Lady Harcourt with gibes and jests during the whole season. There was a mayonnaise and weak punch with the sugar left out, and the duchess informed her guests that one glass of punch would do nobody any harm, and nobody was tempted to try a second.

But beggarly as the feast appeared to the invited, the expense rankled in Giulia's mind. She would without hesitation lavish thousands of francs upon her dress, or lose them at cards—would in both cases, if impossible to avoid the necessity, pay her debts with a reasonable degree of resignation, but in spite of this she was miserly beyond belief. So she had two causes for virulent hatred against Violet, and positively she hated her worse for having unintentionally forced her to give the supper than for deliber-

ately exposing her to Carlo. She did not care about him, but he had lately come into possession of a large sum of ready money. The duchess wanted money, was terribly cramped this season, and she had meant him to pay certain debts, the creditors for which were importunate creatures who gave her no peace.

A caprice for Laurence Aylmer she had, and a singularly strong one, insensible as he seemed to her fascinations. She had been confident the day she entered his rooms that she could do so with impunity.

When she went to the house she had not dreamed there would be a possibility of seeing him, but as she was descending the stairs, she perceived that the doors of the ground-floor apartment were open—not a soul in sight.

The duchess peeped into the first salon—empty. She passed on. In the second room the sister knelt before the statue of some saint, her head buried in her hands, so deeply absorbed in prayer that she was lost to all sublunary surroundings. Giulia noiselessly crossed the carpeted floor and gained the sick room.

Aylmer slept, his head supported high upon the pillows; the open collar of his night-shirt exposing the graceful neck and the outlines of the muscular shoulders.

The woman crept up to the bed, leaned over, and pressed her lips upon his throat. The caress roused the wounded man; he opened his great eyes, into which a sudden feverish brightness rushed, and half raised himself, uttering some incoherent exclamation. She believed that he recognized her, but she heard a step in the room at the side of the chamber, and fled, afraid of discovery—dropping the bouquet of jessamines on his pillow as she hurried away.

She ran out just in time to escape the professor, ran through the salon where the sister still knelt, and reached the outer door, but before she could cross the threshold, met Antonio.

"I have made a most unfortunate blunder," she said quickly; "I thought the Marchesa Magnoletti was established in this apartment! Luckily neither the sick man nor his nurse saw me. Say nothing about my mistake, if you please; it is most annoying to me;" and as she spoke, she actually put ten francs in his hand! She would almost rather have submitted to the loss of one of her perfect teeth, but there was no escape.

During the ensuing fortnight Miss Cameron's visits to the sick-room continued very frequent.

The professor would come for her, and she could not refuse his request; indeed, there was no reason why she should, save the personal shrinking caused by her belief that the patient mistook her for Giulia Rimini, since he babbled about the jessamines and her sudden disappearance. Why had she gone—why? And did she remember ——

What? The often-begun sentence could never get itself finished. His mind was always unable to seize one special incident that he desired to recall, though it haunted his fancy with wearisome persistency.

"I can't tell it—I can't tell it!" he would say, in a despairing tone, then sometimes become vexed that she did not help him, and cry: "You could give me the word, and you will not; you are cruel—cruel!"

But the instant he said this he regretted it, and would snatch her hands and press his fevered lips on them, exclaiming:

"I did not mean that; you know I did not! Say you are sure I did not mean it!"

Violet could neglect no effort to quiet him. The professor told her frankly that the humoring of his fancies might have a great effect upon his recovery. Indeed, if she hesitated about letting the sick man hold her hand, or kept him waiting for an answer to his eager questions, she would immediately become aware of the professor's head thrust in at the door, his lynx-eyes glaring at her from under their bushy brows. Nor did he content himself with glaring; he did not scruple even to shake his fist at her, while he stood on one leg and waved the other in the air like an impatient Mercury preparing for flight.

Sometimes in the midst of her pity and annoyance—her inexplicable bitterness towards the patient—her anger at herself for such emotion—a fit of laughter would seize Violet, forcing her to bury her head in the counterpane to smother the ill-timed merriment which hurt her cruelly all the while. To catch the absurd side of the situation, yet comprehend so clearly its grave aspect, seemed like regarding a dismal tragedy and seeing some evil-disposed imp thrust a grotesque caricature thereof close at its side.

On a certain evening the professor's patience, never his

strong point—a thing noticeable both in great savants and great saints—had been completely exhausted by his patient's having delirium when he ought to be sane, and behaving in every particular just the opposite of what was his obvious duty. So when the doctor heard the outer doors open to admit Miss Cameron on her return from the opera, he dashed into the entrance-hall. In his haste he nearly fell over the lady, and was freshly irritated by the burst of laughter wherewith she acknowledged his presence; standing there so beautiful in her white draperies, that the professor could not decide which emotion predominated in his soul—a wicked desire to shake her, or a ridiculous impulse to go on his knees, as if one of the angelic beings, concerning whose existence he affected such doubts in his discussions with Eliza Bronson, had suddenly appeared before him.

"What have I done that you should try to bring my ill-spent existence to an abrupt close by running over me?" Miss Cameron asked.

"Done!" thundered the professor. "Everybody does the very thing that is out of place and absurd!"

"Witness your trying to crush me when I enter my house," laughed Violet.

"I am not talking about myself," he grumbled. "It is no matter about me!"

"And no matter if I am broken in pieces, I suppose!" returned she, still laughing.

"Oh, very well! If you can do nothing better than sneer, and behave like—like—well, like a woman—*ach, mein Gott*, there is no other comparison serves—then I'll leave you!" thundered the professor.

"First you had better tell me what *is* the matter," said Violet.

"Matter!" he echoed. "Everything—except, indeed, what ought to happen! I swear by the river Styx and the northern god Thor, that never, never—if I live to be old as Methuselah, and visionary as Eliza Bronson's St. Paul—will I ever again take the charge of an American! No, not if we were the only two people left on this terrestrial globe!"

"I know what ails you," said Violet. "You have had no supper."

"I wonder when I could have found an instant to snatch a morsel!" cried he.

"Go up stairs, and you shall have many morsels—toothsome and indigestible as any that even a German cook could devise. Antonio, take good care of the professor, and see he has some beer," she added, looking over her shoulder towards that personage, who stood secretly smiling at the irate savant. "I will sit with your patient while you are gone, Esculapius. I suppose that is what you want."

The professor began to laugh.

"I'd like to say no, just from a spirit of contradiction," he said; "but I should only punish myself. If you don't go, he will rave all night, like the fool he is, and I shall have to watch him; for I notice that blessed sister always enjoys her soundest sleep when there is the most need of her keeping awake! Per Bacco, if your religious fables had any foundation, what a drowsy set the elect would be up in their pearl-gated paradise!"

"My dear professor, eat your supper, drink your beer, and convince yourself that at least your corporeal part is not a delusion," counseled Miss Cameron.

"*Tausend teufels!*" exclaimed the savant, glowering at her. "You really are a beauty! It is a pity you are only so much hydrogen, and oxygen, and——"

"Never mind the rest of the unpleasant compounds, you dreadful old materialistic absurdity," interrupted Violet, and disappeared within the arched portals which led to the sick man's quarters.

The professor snorted, settled his cravat, frowned at Antonio, and ejaculated:

"She is the most wonderful creature in the world—about the only one worthy the name of woman."

"She is, sir," said Antonio, in the meekest under-key of his many-toned voice. He knew that if he spoke the professor would snub him; if he did not speak, the professor would rate him for his impertinence. "She is indeed, sir."

"Mind your business!" howled the savant. "Who permitted you to have opinions? Set you up, indeed! As if you had reached the stage of development when the human animal acquires what they call a soul—the fools!"

Antonio bowed low.

"What are you jerking about for like a monkey?" de-

manded the professor. "Do you know we are all a superior sort of apes—not so very superior either—nothing else, the grandest of us?"

"If you please, sir—whatever you like, sir," said Antonio.

"I don't like it at all," shouted the professor; "but my likings don't change facts. Oh, see here, come up stairs and find me a crust! My stomach is as empty as a balloon—that is what makes me theoretical."

"It is not exactly the word I should have chosen to express your damnable ill-temper," muttered the Swiss, but wisely spoke so low that his commentary did not reach the ears of the irascible savant, who, before they gained the top of the stairs, had forgotten hunger and annoyance in the interest with which he questioned Antonio about a sick baby belonging to some one of Miss Cameron's numerous pensioners.

Violet entered the apartment of the *rez-de-chaussée*. In the salon next Aylmer's chamber sat the sister. Her arms rested on a table, her head reposed on her arms, and she was slumbering sweetly; the slow, measured breathings which escaped her lips at regular intervals sounding so like "Ave—ave—Maria—a—ve," that it seemed as if she must be continuing her orisons in her sleep.

Miss Cameron reached the bedroom. The instant her foot crossed the threshold, lightly as she trod, carefully as she gathered her silken draperies in her hand, to prevent any rustle disturbing the sick man's ear, the voice which she had heard as she traversed the salons ceased its utterance: the sufferer lay perfectly quiet.

The same effect had so often been produced during the past days and nights that Violet could not call it chance. At first she had endeavored to do so, had smiled at the professor's talk about magnetic influence, psychological mysteries, and the rest; but that her presence could always mysteriously soothe the patient was certain. True, there remained the idea that he mistook her for some one else; and that some one else, of all women, Giulia da Rimini! This was hard. It rendered her visits always a trial; mixed something revolting therewith, which would not bear thinking about, and brought back the stern judgment that she had determined to put aside until he should be restored to health.

As she seated herself by the bed, Aylmer looked up, and said eagerly :

"Thanks, thanks ! What a shame for me to trouble you like this !"

He spoke so rationally that, for an instant, she thought he knew what he was saying, then recollected how several times she had allowed herself to be deceived by similar appearances.

He shut his eyes. His fingers, stretched out across the counterpane, moved slowly, restlessly, and would not be still. She knew what she should have to do—lay her hand in his. This little struggle of wills invariably took place between them—invariably she was obliged to yield.

So now, after waiting so long that her conscience reproached her as cruel, she laid her cool fingers upon his palm. His hand closed quickly over hers, a smile hovered about his lips—lingering there even after he had fallen asleep.

She sat still for perhaps twenty minutes—was beginning to wonder the professor did not return—to think she might rise, trusting to the soundness of the sick man's slumber not to disturb him—when he opened his eyes again, saying softly :

"I did not dream it—you are here !"

"Yes, I am here," she answered, humoring his mood as the doctor had bidden her always to do.

"It is too bad you should be troubled ! You were here when I fell asleep—I know ! I can tell the moment you reach the threshold."

How rational his voice sounded ; weaker, slower too than usual. Could he be conscious what he was saying ?

"You did not think I could tell ? I can always recognize your step, even when I am a little out of my head. It does wander very often, I know ; but somehow I can't stop it ! Now it feels steady—that is because you are here."

She could not resist the impulse to discover whether, delirious or not, he recognized her ; or whether, entering his dreams and fancies, he mistook her for that evil-eyed Circe, to be mistaken for whom, even by the disordered imagination of a sick man, appeared a degradation.

"Because you are here," he repeated in a low, contented tone.

"Do you know who I am ?" she asked.

"What a question, Miss Cameron!"

She was so astonished that she tried to draw her hand away.

"Don't!" he said, piteously; "don't! My head will go if you do. And I want to tell you something—I have wanted to so long: it is always so hard to remember! I try when you are not here—I think I shall when you come back; then it goes—it goes!"

Partially sane he certainly was; he must be soothed. This was no time for nonsensical scruples or whims on her part. She must quiet him; it was simply a humane necessity, as much as it would be to give him a drink if he complained of thirst.

"You will recollect presently," she said. "See, I am here—I will sit beside you."

"Not know you? What an odd idea!" he rambled on; "why, I did from the very first, bad as my head was. Though, somehow, that once it did not seem to be you—but that was my head. You just came softly in and laid the flowers on my pillow. Ha, ha!—the fever, you know—I dreamed you kissed me! Yet it didn't seem you—somebody trying to deceive me! Then the doctor carried off the flowers. I wanted to tell him to let them alone, but I could not make him understand. Not know you? It was only that once I had any doubt—only that once!"

So he babbled on, holding her hand fast, recognizing her, but not able to repress the utterance of any fancy which crossed his mind; not sufficiently rational to attempt to do so.

And Violet sat beside him until he again fell asleep.

He had known her from the first: the flowers he had believed her gift! It was not Giulia da Rimini who occupied his thoughts; her censure had been undeserved. The woman's coming was not his fault. Nina had vowed over and over that he disliked the creature! And—and—he had always known her, Violet, even in the height of his delirium.

Yes, the old professor was right! The human soul—intellect—intelligence—call it by whatever name science pleased—held strange, inexplicable mysteries.

He had known her—Violet! She could sit there in peace! She had been unjust to him, and she was sorry, very sorry.

CHAPTER VIII.

HIS DISCOVERY.

AYLMER'S fever yielded, his strength began to return, and the doctor pronounced him convalescent. At first he shrank from any effort at thought; it caused a confusion in his brain resembling the delirium, which, having as a rule been only partial, left him conscious his wits were astray, making him sometimes feel as if an exterior intelligence had lodged itself in his soul, and was watching his mental aberrations with cynical amusement.

Miss Cameron's visits ceased with the recovery of his reason, and Aylmer did not mention her name, afraid of learning that his impression of her frequent presence was as unreal as his other delusions. Indeed, for a while, even the accident seemed a part of those feverish visions. Then that settled into reality, as did the fact of her safety.

He liked to lie with closed eyes and recall the noiseless appearance of that beautiful figure when his wanderings became painful—the touch of her cool hand, the sound of her low sweet voice. As he grew able to reflect, he argued that his fancy was not surprising, since no woman had ever impressed him so deeply from the moment of their meeting, and during the entire day and evening which closed so tragically she had been the prominent subject in his mind.

He had stood at a distance and watched her that afternoon in the Cascine, would not even ask a question concerning her, prevented by some impulse as strong as he felt it romantic and boyish. She had started up before him like a revelation of beauty from some higher sphere, such as the old Greeks believed occasionally granted to mortals, and he wanted as long as he could to keep her separate from ordinary humanity. Though he smiled at his own folly he obeyed it, and carefully avoided several acquaintances whom he noticed conversing with her, lest he should be obliged to listen to verbiage which would at once transform his goddess into common clay.

A few hours later she had appeared again to his sight,

more lovely than ever. For a little he had been troubled by something in her manner which seemed to imply a prejudice against him, but that fear vanished under the charm of her conversation. He had driven out to the villa with a friend, but he desired to escape companionship on his return. The night was so perfect that he determined to walk back to Florence. He had seated himself by the roadside, lost in some vague dream, of which she was the object, when roused by the tramp of the frightened horses.

His last thought before he sank down, down into the dark—so the catastrophe presented itself to him—had been of her danger; every faculty of mind and body concentrated in a wild effort to save her. So it was natural enough that her image should have haunted his delirious hours, and her fancied presence have possessed the power to calm him, as he recollected had often been the case.

The professor wished his patient still to remain in ignorance of his whereabouts, and when the marchesa got able to go down stairs, cautioned her to wear a bonnet, so that she might be supposed to have come from her own house. Carlo also had to be vouchsafed admittance to the sick-chamber, but the savant, fearful of some indiscretion, glared and frowned till the poor man could not talk at all, and behaved so stupidly that ungrateful Aylmer rejoiced over his departure, whereupon the old tyrant chuckled hugely.

More days passed. Nina had paid another visit; Carlo had been sat upon anew, and at last, though the sweetest-tempered of mortals, he could not refrain from asserting himself a little when he and the doctor went up stairs.

"The poor fellow can be removed now," he said; "so he might as well hear the truth. It is quite dreadful for us to make Miss Cameron's house a hotel any longer."

"I don't care!" retorted the savant. "Why did she smash him under her horses' hoofs? I'll tell him when I'm ready, not before. *Ach, mein Gott!* you boy—you *marchesino*—are you to teach the old German?"

Though Violet joined in the laughter with which Nina and Carlo received the professor's testiness, she was not pleased at his refusal to let her offer any sign of gratitude or sympathy to the patient.

"He must think me an absolute monster," she said.

"Hasn't spoken of you," returned the German, in a satisfied tone.

"No wonder! Probably he does not consider me worth mentioning--a woman who does not even take the trouble to inquire after him when he received his injury in saving her! Come, professor, I will not endure such tyranny any longer."

"Won't you, indeed!" growled the professor.

"At least take him a message from her," urged Nina.

"Message!" echoed the professor, in high contempt.

"Or a bunch of jessamines," laughed Carlo, and Nina laughed too with all her heart.

Violet turned and pulled down a blind which let too much light in upon a stand of flowers. A wave of color like a reflection of the sunbeams crossed her cheeks, but luckily nobody noticed it.

"I'll have no risks run," pursued the savant. "I have studied the fellow as carefully as if he were a bit of fossil from which I could make out a new animal that would prove a link between man and his monkey ancestor, instead of that useless phase of development, a modern young dandy."

"Take that, Carlino mio," parenthesized Nina.

"Just so," said the professor. "No, no; leave me to manage matters. I don't suppose the Fräulein really wants to turn us out."

"Now, professor!"

"It was the marchese's insinuation."

"Aren't you ashamed, Carlo?" said Violet.

"I am ashamed of him," added Nina.

"You dreadful old scarabeus of a professor!" cried Carlo. "You bring them down on me in order that you may escape." At this juncture Eliza Bronson, seated in a corner to which she had retired on Schmidt's entrance, heaved an ostentatious sigh. "Pray come to my rescue, Miss Bronson," continued Carlo.

"Oh, marchese," returned she, with a shiver, "please do not ask me. Everybody here knows my sentiments!"

"If you come to anything so tender, I, as that wretch's injured wife, had better leave the room," cried the incorrigible Nina.

"Eliza, I shall be obliged to engage you a mentor," said Violet.

"As soon as my patient is better, I shall feel highly

honored if I can be intrusted with that pleasurable duty," observed the professor, in an insinuating voice.

"Now, Miss Bronson, do not be silenced by their folly," pleaded Carlo. "Speak out; give me your moral support."

Eliza assumed her governess manner, sitting as erect in her chair as if it had been a schoolroom official bench.

"I cannot jest upon a subject which appears to my mind—I do not judge for others—" she cast a glance of condemnation at Nina and Violet, which grew positively withering as it fell upon the professor, who acknowledged it by a second bow, very grave and serious. "If I speak at all—I can be silent if desired——"

"By no means!" cooed the professor, with the amiabil ity of a very hoarse dove.

"Then I must speak sincerely," pursued Eliza.

"Sincerity is what I want," said Carlo: "sincerity and justice."

"I honor your sentiments, marchese," replied Eliza, as incapable of comprehending a jest as a statue of Minerva would be. "I have told Miss Cameron—I said it at first—I have warned her again and again what would be the result of that ill-advised step—ill-advised at least in my opinion—remember I only speak as a unit—of introducing that stranger gentleman under the roof of two lone ladies——"

"*Ach Gott!*" snorted the professor, unable to control his delight.

"Yes, and I repeat it now, repeat it with energy!" cried Eliza, glaring at the disrespectful savant. "Neither gibes nor sneers shall prevent me, when called upon to testify, from speaking the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth!"

"Sir Samuel Johnson!" the professor remarked to Nina, in an audible whisper.

Eliza paused to overwhelm this troubler of her eloquence with the proofs of his own ignorance.

"The great man whom you mention only bore the title of Doctor of Arts, nor was he the author of the sentiment I quoted," said she, with lofty condescension. "But in your character of German professor both errors are perhaps excusable, Mr. Schmidt."

"Miss Bronson, I thank you for setting me right, and promise never to interrupt you again," replied he suavely.

"I have been silent," continued Eliza, "because I per-

ceived that my opinion was not desired, but now I am called on, and must declare that my worst fears have been more than fulfilled. Yes, Violet, you may smile—you, marchesa, may encourage her thoughtless levity—but I, her real friend, the guide of her youth, I shudder at the reports which are current."

"Miss Bronson, your verdict overwhelms me," cried the professor.

"Sir," said she, "I should be glad if I could think you spoke seriously, with the gravity becoming so renowned a man."

"How neatly she mingles condemnation and compliment!" cried the unabashed professor, lifting both hands in sign of admiration.

"Wherever approval is possible, be it much or little, I hope I always accord it," said Eliza. "I trust that at least I am a just woman——"

"Then you are a phenomenon indeed!" cut in he. "Why, even your pet St. Paul——"

Eliza interrupted him by rising. She swept to the door, paused, and addressed the company generally, rolling up her eyes as if to include the cherubs on the ceiling in her explanation.

"I must excuse myself," she said, in a voice at once tremulous and dignified. "I have learned to endure a great deal, but not sneers upon sacred subjects and characters—not that!—no, no!"

"St. Paul declared that women——"

But Eliza was gone. The professor laughed till his eyes were full of tears, and the others laughed too, even while reproaching him for his unmerciful teasing of the poor spinster.

"It does her good," he declared, "puts new life in her, and she enjoys it. The worthy Miss Bronson belongs to the type of women who is happiest when most miserable."

The truth was that, independent of his professional solicitude, the doctor had motives for wanting to defer explanations as long as possible. He disliked the idea of the separation which must ensue, the going back to his bachelor abode, and the isolation he had always declared necessary to a student.

The society of those gay young people had come to the professor like a breath of fresh air, a season of repose in

some summer garden among sunshine and flowers, and he hated to relinquish it, though he spluttered dreadful sounding German imprecations over his own folly, and added many opprobrious epithets not in keeping with the learned titles he had a right to claim.

Occasionally he caught himself wondering whether there might not be a strange happiness for a man who, instead of consecrating his life to science, lived the existence of common mortals, loved, married, and possessed children to brighten his age—beautiful, clever, appreciative daughters like the marchesa and Fräulein Violet—a son gifted and full of glorious promise as this Laurence.

But, in spite of the professor's care, the disclosure which he desired still further to avert, came the very day after Eliza Bronson had gratified the party by an exposition of her views as to the present state of affairs in Miss Cameron's household.

The savant had left Antonio to assist the patient to bathe and dress; that operation concluded, the invalid must rest for half an hour—sleep if he could—then take some soup, and later be allowed to sit up awhile. Each detail in the day's programme had been carefully expounded, and both Aylmer and Antonio knew that no shadow of infringement upon his commands would be permitted by the professor, any more than if he were an Eastern satrap.

His toilet completed Aylmer lay down again; Antonio seated himself near the bed, and before very long his charge appeared to have sunk into slumber. As Antonio was congratulating himself on the fact, he suddenly remembered that he had forgotten to give the porter a message, and as any forgetfulness of duty constituted a crime in the faithful creature's code, he felt suitably guilty.

The nurse was in the adjoining salon—he would beg her to repair his error. So he stole to the door with elaborate caution, and succeeded in attracting the sister's attention from her book of "Hours."

"I must not go out," he whispered, as she approached; "the professor bade me not. Would you be so good, *ma sœur*, as to tell Giovanni that Miss Cameron——"

"I can't hear," interrupted the sister, in a mournful voice, like a wind across a burial-ground.

"Tell the porter that my mistress—that Miss Cameron says——"

These words reached Aylmer's ear. He was not asleep, only lying quiet, recalling those hours of delirium brightened by the fancied companionship of that beautiful woman; just tired enough after his recent exertions to enjoy the sort of waking dream wherein her image floated up from the misty depths of the past days' mental wanderings, only all the while conscious of a vague regret that there had been no reality in them.

And straight across his reverie Antonio flung her name; he heard it distinctly, cautiously as the man spoke.

"My mistress—Miss Cameron!"

Aylmer half raised himself on his pillow, listened eagerly, but not another syllable could he catch. He sank back again, and when Antonio reached the bed, his face was turned towards the wall: apparently he still slept.

There he lay thinking—thinking. He did not wish to ask a question yet; only to lie in luxurious invalid ease, and dwell upon the new reflection which warmed his very soul.

That recollection so strongly impressed upon his mind was no part of his delusions! She had been there—again and again—appearing in her loveliness to quiet him when that fear of some inexplicable danger which she ran, rendered his fancies insupportable pain. She had sat by his bed; it was no trick of imagination that he could still feel the touch of her hand on his—hear the sound of her voice which, even while he thought his conviction of having heard it a cheat, thrilled his heart like a strain of music.

It was all real! She had cared—she had come to him! They had, as he remembered telling her over and over, grown friends. He could recall other avowals he had made—of having known and loved her in some existence anterior to this; where, where? No matter! He had found her again, and they should never part any more—never! She had promised!

And he had actually uttered these declarations to her—not to a creature of his imagination assuming her likeness, but to her! He exulted to think those interviews had been no fantasy! Then he recalled the visit when he had spoken to her about the flowers, and they really had lain upon his pillow, and her hand had placed them there! And thinking these things, at length he fell asleep. When he woke, Antonio had disappeared, and the professor stood at the foot of the bed regarding him with an affectionately ferocious glance.

"Upon my word, young man, you will soon equal the exploits of the Seven Sleepers," said he. "I told you to rest twenty minutes or so, and you have slept like a rock for more than an hour, and your soup has twice been sent back to keep hot."

Aylmer laughed in a joyous fashion. The thought which had gone with him into slumber was uppermost in his mind when he woke.

"Odd," quoth the professor, "that only men and hyenas share the capacity for laughter. Ah, I forgot, the animal called the Australian jackass. But the folly is perhaps excusable in a fellow so weak bodily and mentally as you."

"I feel strong as a second Hercules! I am well—you have cured me, old Esculapius—do you hear? And I want my soup; if it doesn't come instantly, I'll eat the sister!"

"What an overdose of religion you would get," said the professor, eyeing him narrowly. "Yes, you are quite yourself again! I forgive your sleeping longer than I ordered, since it has done you so much good. And here comes the soup, and—— By the hammer of Thor, did I bid you bring chicken, too, you silly she prayer-monger?" cried the professor, scowling at the sister, but, luckily for her peace of mind, uttering the epithets which closed his sentence in German. She had grown accustomed to his ferocity, and enjoyed his grim humor in her demure fashion, though his jokes often caused her to say many extra avès (and she said enough at any time), because afraid such hearty laughter might be a sin.

"Yes, you did, and I mean to eat it to the last scrap," said Aylmer.

He fortified himself with his repast before he took any further notice of the professor, who studied him attentively while pretending to read a newspaper.

"That hour's sleep would not account for the change," thought the savant. "Some mental shock—a pleasant one—has happened to him. A shock! How?—who would dare give my patient a shock without permission, I should like to know!"

He scowled towards each corner of the room in turn at an imaginary offender, finally concentrating his gaze on the marble nymph, and so formidable was he of aspect, that had the figure been Galatea newly awakened to life,

she certainly would have speedily petrified under his awful stare.

"Professor!" said Aylmer, abruptly.

"It is coming!" meditated the savant. "Whatever it may be, it is coming! After all, better than for him to be brooding over fancies."

Though the learned man did not know it, this reflection was an excuse he offered his conscience for the curiosity he felt to learn the cause of the convalescent's high spirits, and as curiosity is a weakness unworthy a philosopher, he gave it another name in order to avoid self-contempt.

"Professor!" repeated Aylmer, with the impatience always considered allowable in a person just turning into the highroad of recovery after a dangerous illness.

"Eh? did you speak?" asked the wise man, deceitfully pretending to rouse himself with difficulty from some interesting paragraph, and holding the journal partially before his face.

"Please to lay down that newspaper for a moment," said Aylmer.

"What, what!" growled the professor. "He begins to order his doctor about. The school-boy rises against his master, the pot questions the potter! Come, come, none of that, you rebel, else I'll find a dose that will make you as obedient as you were two days since."

Aylmer laughed again. There was such a ring of returning health and strength in the merriment that it sounded like music to the professor's ears.

"Whose house did you tell me this was?" demanded Aylmer.

"So!" said the savant, mentally. "I thought that was it!"

"Can't you answer? whose house?" persisted the patient.

"Did I say?" returned the professor, in a questioning tone, as if trying to call to mind any such information on his part.

"Yes, you did," retorted Aylmer; "you know you did. You said it was yours."

"Oh, very well; if I told you, there is no necessity of interrupting my reading in order to ask again," said the professor, coolly. "Here is a very interesting *résumé* of

a speech by Gladstone ; if you like I'll read it to you, as a reward for being so well to-day."

"I don't care a fig about Gladstone's speech—it is yours I am thinking of," answered Aylmer, gayly. "You did say this house was yours !"

"You have already made that assertion ; you have made a great many other foolish ones during the last weeks. I hope you are not losing your head again—not much of a head, to be sure, but, as it is the best you've got, it would be wiser to stick to it," said the professor.

"Come now, leave prevarication to your pet Bismarck and his fellow-diplomatists. You said this was your house."

"What a persistent devil ! Very well, for the sake of peace, admit that I did ; what then ?"

"Why, it is not."

"Then we have come to the end of the matter, and I can read my newspaper," replied the professor.

Aylmer snatched the journal with boyish playfulness.

"You can't escape that way," said he. "You said it was your house, and it isn't, and so——"

"I told a lie, that's all," interrupted the professor, complacently.

"Of course you did : what for ?" questioned Aylmer.

"To keep you from fretting and worrying and making an idiot of yourself, you ungrateful development of a protoplasm," cried the professor, laughing too.

"Then it *is* Miss Cameron's house ! She did come to see me—I did not dream it !" exclaimed Aylmer, excitedly.

"And if you are going to lash yourself into fresh fever I'll go away !" thundered the professor.

"No, no—don't, don't ! Tell me all about it, like a good-natured old fellow as you are."

"I'll not be called good-natured ; that is one insult too many," cried the professor.

"What a dolt I was to let myself be convinced that her coming was a dream," Aylmer continued half aloud, with a sudden color in his face, a sudden brightness in his eyes, which caused the doctor to make a hasty clutch at his wrist to ascertain what story the pulse was telling.

"If you excite yourself I'll shave your head at once ! I've had worry enough over you," said he.

"I've no more fever than you," retorted Aylmer. Then

he laid his hand on the professor's and added coaxingly "Ah, now tell me all about it. See, I am perfectly quiet, and I want to hear."

"Well, well," grumbled the professor, charmed with the spirit in which his patient received this discovery. "The *all* is easily told. After the horses tumbled you over you were put into the carriage, and she—Miss Cameron—brought you into Florence and drove to my house. We didn't know where you lived; my place was upset. We couldn't exactly consign you to a hospital, so she brought you here. That's the whole."

"I did not dream it," Aylmer was thinking. "She has been here often, talked to me, held my hand, sat in that very chair." He glanced towards the fauteuil in which the professor was established, and exclaimed imperiously: "Get up out of that chair; take another!"

"There, he is mad again; I was sure of it," snarled the professor.

"I will be, unless you do exactly as I say. It's my turn to give orders now," said Aylmer, laughing, but tugging at the savant's hand with such force as he could muster.

"Come, I'll take this one," said the professor, rising. "Now tell me why, you rebel."

"Oh, I couldn't see you so well——"

"That's not a prevarication—that's a falsehood!" broke in the savant.

"You perceive what your example has done," said Aylmer. "It was just a sudden whim that made me wish you to get up. I may have whims—a sick man's privilege."

"Well, well," returned the professor, "you may do pretty much what you like. I am content with you for taking the news as you do. You can understand why I let you think yourself in my house. You would have worried over being a trouble, perhaps have insisted on being removed, and that—well, that would have made a pretty kettle of fish," concluded the professor, inelegantly but forcibly.

Aylmer was dreaming again. That voice rang in his ear—the touch of those slender fingers thrilled his pulses anew. He roused himself, becoming suddenly aware of the professor's last speech in the odd way in which, when occupied with some engrossing thought, one does recall

words that one was not aware of hearing when they were uttered.

"All the same, it is shocking to think what a bore I have been," he said, but there was slight compunction in his tone. "I can be removed, and I must be;" and now his accent sounded regretful enough.

"Nothing can be arranged to-day. You have done enough, and too much," replied the professor. "Lie down like a sensible fellow, else you will not be fit to stir for another week. So, so! be a good boy, and listen to Gladstone's eloquence."

Aylmer consented with praiseworthy obedience, glad to have another half-hour with his pleasant fancies. The reading would not disturb their course, and the professor was as well aware of this fact as the patient.

"Yes, read to me," Aylmer added absently, as he lay back among his pillows.

The doctor took up the newspaper again, and readjusted his glasses, then dropped both, struck by a new thought.

"Sapperment!" he exclaimed; "how did you find out? Who told you—who dared, after my express orders?"

"Never mind how—I know it. Nobody told me. I evolved it out of my inner consciousness, as if I had been a German professor," said Aylmer.

They both laughed; then the savant began the speech, and Aylmer lay quiet, and for a whole hour there was no sound in the room save the reader's slow, deep tones.

"But he has not heard a syllable," thought that gentleman, glancing up as he turned a page. "No matter, it keeps him quiet; that is the important thing just now."

CHAPTER IX.

HER COMING.

THE afternoon passed—evening was drawing on. Before the professor set out for a walk he looked into Aylmer's room. He found his patient sitting up, but not in the easy-chair from which he had obliged the doctor to rise—he had refused that—bidding the sister place it opposite

him. She obeyed his direction, too much accustomed to sick people's vagaries to give his whim a thought, any more than she had done his sudden fussiness over the arrangement of his hair and the difficulty he made about his attire, insisting that he would not wear a dressing-gown, and giving her no peace until she found among his wardrobe a certain loose breakfast-coat, which proved a very picturesque and becoming garment, with its wide sleeves and the tracery of dark blue that relieved its gray tint.

"I'm all right," Aylmer replied to the professor's questions. "But it begins to be confoundedly lonesome staying cooped up here by myself."

"So!" thought the savant; then added aloud: "I mean to bring you a visitor—but mind, if I find you excited and feverish when I get back, you'll not see a human face again, except that salad-in-a-cellar looking sister, for another week."

"I'll be as good as gold if only I'm not left alone," returned Aylmer; "but let me go into the salon. I want a change."

The professor assisted him into the next room, coaxed him to half lie down on a sofa and promise not to stir; then he went away without having vouchsafed any information in regard to the visitor, nor had Aylmer so much as asked.

It was sunset; through a great arched window swept a soft glow from the western sky. He could look over a stretch of green lawn, across a group of oleanders, down a broad alley, which led away into the recesses of the garden —one of the largest and finest in Florence.

In the distance, walking slowing up the path, he saw a woman's figure—a figure which he recognized. (Remember, he was just escaping from the dominion of that Giant Despair called illness, so wild thoughts and irrational fancies were excusable!) It was not the Miss Cameron whom the world knew—the lady he had only seen on four occasons while able to recognize her as a real presence. It was the beautiful vision that had so many times appeared at his eager summons when in his hours of delirium she alone could keep his soul from drifting down the blacker gulf which loomed beyond. The vision he had addressed so freely—the incarnation of the spirit he had known in some lost world where their union possessed such complete-

ness that their two lives formed a perfect whole—one, yet dual, and this duality had made the bliss of living, and——

But he recognized the absurdity of his reflections, and almost thought himself insane again. He sat upright and looked eagerly out at the approaching form, trying to subdue those vagaries of imagination by the force of his will.

Involuntarily he uttered her name, then began to wonder how he knew she was called Violet; but he had no leisure to recollect, for unawares he spoke aloud and roused the sister seated in the adjoining salon. She supposed he had summoned her, and, dropping her half-counted rosary, appeared in the doorway.

"Does the signore want something?" she said.

And he, impatient, afraid to turn his eyes from the casement lest the figure beneath the oleanders should fade, and so prove to him that he was the victim of fresh delusions, only waved her back with a gesture at once imperious and supplicating. The good sister, trained by long experience in sick-rooms till her commonplace mind had reached a knowledge of what it was best to do under any and every circumstance, quietly returned to her chair, and fell to counting her beads again.

And still, through the window-pane and the oleander boughs, Aylmer watched with his soul in his eyes, and to convince himself of his own sanity, tried to separate Miss Cameron the actual from the visionary creature of his feverish dreams—tried, but could not.

He positively studied each detail of her dress in his effort to be rational. She must have just come in from a drive; her long green silken petticoat swept over the ground in heavy folds; above it was looped a tunic of some thick dead white material, bordered by the brilliant plumage of tropical birds; beneath her cavalier's hat with its drooping feather, he could see the bands and falling masses of her auburn hair which the sunlight turned to gold.

She stopped to examine a flowering shrub—lifted her arm to pull a branch within reach. The rays fell full upon her face—sent a wave of light into the great eyes—flitted over the melancholy mouth as if seeking to win a smile.

It was she—the woman the world knew—Violet Cameron; all the same, it was the vision of the past days—his friend—his queen—his soul of soul!

Then he heard a voice call abruptly, and came back to reality with a shock. A pane of the window stood open; he could not see the sage, but there was no mistaking those tones.

"Fräulein," they said, "I have been hunting for you! My adored Miss Bronson told me that you had come in from your drive. Why do you hide in the garden like a Dryad when I want you?"

She did not answer; waved her hand to the unseen speaker and disappeared.

With a sigh and a sensation of terrible impatience which rendered each second interminable, Aylmer leaned his head back against the sofa cushions and waited.

He would not look out—the garden appeared suddenly to have grown dark; its depths, thick with shadows, reminded him of the blackness into which sometimes in his fever he had been forced to gaze. He waited, that burning impatience growing stronger. During his illness the vision had always appeared at such moments: would Miss Cameron come now and thereby prove her identity with it? Or was this present instant only part and parcel of the former fancies—nothing real—even the discovery of the morning delusion also?

So far he reached in his questionings, then his strained senses caught the opening and closing of a door; caught the rustle of female garments nearer—coming nearer.

Where he sat he could not see into the rooms beyond, but the sweep of those silken robes, soft as the plash of water in a crystal basin, thrilled him till the ecstasy became pain, because it roused anew the fear that everything—face—glorious eyes—slow gliding step—musical rustle—was a fantasy. Then he heard her voice—ah, it was all real—her voice!

She was speaking to the sister, making some kind inquiry, then he heard nothing more. His pulses surged up in such united, tumultuous beat that he grew deaf and blind.

After this dizzy pause came her tones again, close at hand, addressing him, bringing him back to reality, but a reality which was a higher heaven even than his dreams.

"The professor bade me come and sit with you. Nobody ever ventures to disobey the professor, so you cannot send me away."

The whirling mists cleared from before his eyes, and he saw her standing on the threshold. Through the arched window floated a broad ray of red-golden light, and illuminated face and figure as she stood. In his excitement he forgot the courteous phrases he was trying to frame—could only stretch out his hands in eager welcome, crying, uncertain whether he addressed the creation of his fancies or the living woman :

"I thought you would never come again ! I thought you would never come !"

And Violet, mistress of herself as she supposed, was forced, in order to convince something in her soul of this supremacy, to inform reason that the strange thrill which shook her rose out of a fear that the professor had erred in thinking his patient wholly recovered from fever.

"So I must humor him," she thought, moved towards the sofa, let him take her hand, and said aloud :

"I am glad to see you so well. But you are not to tire yourself. The professor will never forgive me if he finds that a visitor has excited you."

"It is such a rest—such a rest !" Aylmer murmured, for a few instants unable to lift his dizzy head from the cushions, unable to check or regulate his utterance ; holding her hand fast ; his eyes, unnaturally large from illness, fixed yearningly upon her face. "It is not a dream—say that it is not a dream !"

With an effort Violet roused herself to the requirements of her *role* as visitor to an invalid, accredited by the physician with sufficient sense to render her coming a benefit, not a harm.

She drew her hands away gently, though obliged to employ a certain force to release them, and sat down in an arm-chair by his sofa, saying, with a playfulness which was a greater effort still :

"The professor does not permit his patients to have fancies when they are able to sit up and receive guests. So take care, for one never knows when he may be hovering about. Any way, I see his great meerschaum pipe with the ogre's head lying on the table ; I am certain it is listening, and will repeat every word. How wicked it looks, to be sure ! I always tell him it is his familiar."

Aylmer recovered self-control to recollect that he risked making this interview the last if he did not manage to get

back reason enough to separate dreams and reality, and behave like an ordinary convalescent receiving an ordinary visit.

"I am afraid he has smoked the rooms out of all possibility of ever being habitable—Miss Cameron."

The little pause before pronouncing her name was caused by the effort required to repress a word which would have utterly ruined the success of his speech in proving his sanity—he had come so near saying Violet.

"Oh, no," she replied; "I shall like the trace of his presence. I have a great weakness for the good, gruff old doctor."

The fright which his hardly repressed blunder occasioned Aylmer helped him on to a tolerable pretense of composure.

"Good to me indeed!" he said. "How am I ever to thank him or you, Miss Cameron?"

"I should think, where I am concerned, forgiveness would be the difficulty, since but for me you would not have met with your accident, would not——"

She left her sentence unfinished.

"I am so thankful I was there," he half whispered.

Again his hand stretched out to take hers; then he remembered that such privilege was at an end; and she, noting his gesture, had to recollect that obedience to his caprices was no longer a necessity, so natural would it have seemed to let her fingers drop into his.

"We must not talk of all that yet," she said, as he hurriedly drew back his arm. "Some time thanks will be mine to offer, if I can find words."

"No, no——"

"The ogre is listening; his grim eyes plainly say, 'No exciting subjects,'" she interrupted, laughingly. "I am very, very glad to find you doing so well, Mr. Aylmer. You have had a weary bout, but thank heaven it is over."

"Yes, I am quite sound again. I shall be able to remove and let your house end its term of serving as hospital," he answered, conscious that his words were fairly ungracious, yet unable to check them. He felt hurt by her determination to keep the conversation on an ordinary footing, even though he had just been mentally admitting the necessity.

"The professor will settle all that," she answered. "He

will permit no interference, especially from his patient. As for me, I am sure I do not need to tell you how glad I have been that I could be of the slightest use in any fashion."

"In more ways than one you have shown that kindness," he said, a fresh eagerness quickening his voice. "I can remember—everything begins to come back quite clearly—how good you were to sit with me when I had driven the professor to the end of his resources and his patience."

He remembered? Surely only the fact which he had just stated—nothing beyond the certainty that she used to sit with him and possessed an ability to soothe his pain. He did not recollect his delirious utterances, when to quiet him she talked as great nonsense as he—humored his fancy about the lost world where they had known each other—allowed him to kiss her hands! Oh, assuredly he did not remember those things. To think he did would render their future intercourse difficult, for they had yet to become acquainted. This was the strangest part of the matter, as strange to Violet as to him.

"You had a visit from the marchese this morning," she said abruptly, just for the sake of breaking the silence.

"Oh yes, he is very good-natured," Aylmer answered wearily. "But men, though they are well enough when one is strong, are so out of place in a sick-room. Carlo fell over a footstool and upset a glass of water on the bed. He meant it all for the best; but it is trying, you know."

"Very, no doubt," Violet said, laughing. "However, those trifles will soon cease to annoy you; you are recovering so fast that before long it will be your turn to upset furniture and spill goblets of water over sick people."

"Oh, no doubt, though the professor says I must take great care," said Aylmer, with a sudden wicked repulsion against this rapid recovery, which would involve being cast out of Paradise.

No doubt it was delightful to have health, but really illness had its compensations. So great did they appear at this instant that Aylmer would have resigned himself if the professor had entered and pronounced that his patient must not stir from his sofa or change his companion for at least a month.

Somehow Violet perfectly comprehended what gave

rise to the petulant, even undignified answer, since one is always ready to smile at a man's willingness to be careful of his health. She was gratified by his dislike to go away, though she hastened to tell herself that this was natural and right on her part. He had saved her life ; she ought to feel an interest in him, to like him, to wish to be pleasant in his eyes.

Then, after a pause, so filled with thought to both that neither knew how long it lasted, Aylmer added :

"But all the same, Miss Cameron, I don't propose to keep indefinite possession of a whole floor of your house. It is quite shocking, and I ought—well, I ought to be much more ashamed than I am."

"Ah, I forgive you the rest, for the sake of the end of your sentence," returned Violet. "Nothing—considering the manner in which you received your injury—could pain me more than for you to suppose that your presence under my roof was any *gêne.*"

"Thanks. Yes, somehow I do know," cried he. "You see—please don't be vexed—I forget that you can't feel as if you were acquainted with me. I seem to know you so well! I mean, I got so used to seeing—to expecting you when I was ill."

Here he broke down ; Violet sat with bowed head, and did not offer to help him.

"I say it all very badly. I am afraid it sounds dreadfully impertinent," he continued, despairingly trying to make amends if he had said anything wrong, yet conscious that if she chose to be offended, each word led him deeper into the slough ; "but I have to try and say it the best I can in my clumsy way! You don't mind, do you? And you have been so good to me that I can't seem just like a stranger—they say people never do to whom one has been kind! I am sure I only confuse things worse each word I speak ; but you do understand ?"

And Violet, ashamed of the sudden fit of shyness which had kept her silent under the eager glances that pointed his speech, looked up and smiled, holding out her hand as she did so.

"I understand that we are very good friends and mean to remain so," she answered.

"Ah!" was his only response, but the tone held such a ring of contentment that it spoke volumes.

He did not seem inclined to let her hand go now he had possession of it, but she drew it away presently, and began to talk of other things than those which had immediate connection with themselves.

The room had filled with the shadows of twilight—neither knew. Violet was brought back to a sense of the length of her visit by noticing that the sister had lighted a lamp.

"I shall be late for dinner," she said, rising; "as I have guests, it will not do to keep them waiting. I hope before long you will be able to join us, Mr. Aylmer."

"Yes, I hope so!" Then, very dolefully, "Must you go? Oh, I beg your pardon! It was so kind of you to come."

"How is he, that newly-come-back-to-life atom?" called a voice from the door, and the professor entered.

"Much better, I am sure," Violet said.

"Yes; Miss Cameron's visit has done me more good than all your drugs," said Aylmer.

"As if I gave drugs! Well, never mind. Yes—better: pulse good. Come, come, it is all right! Miss Cameron must promise to visit you to-morrow."

"Mr. Aylmer wishes to run away at once," she said.

"I forbid it!" cried the doctor. "He must not make any change for some days yet. I'll not have him upset the good effects of my care by any nonsensical scruples."

Aylmer would have liked to hug the old man.

"You are quite right," said Violet; "it would be very ungrateful."

"I really am in earnest," the professor continued; "a change from one house to another is a serious matter. Do what we might, it would be like a new climate."

"You hear?" said Violet, once more offering her hand to the invalid. "Try not to regret your imprisonment too much; we will lighten it all we can."

She went out of the room, leaving the faint perfume which hung about her dress to soothe him by its fragrance, and he, without remonstrance, yielded to the professor's order that he was to go to bed; and, once there, slept soundly and well.

CHAPTER X.

MI-CARÊME.

TOWARDS the close of Aylmer's imprisonment he was able, with the help of Antonio's arm, to get up stairs several times.

On his first visit, to the intense amusement of the observers, he achieved a wonderful exploit—thoroughly charmed Miss Bronson. From that hour she forgot all fear for her own and Violet's reputation. Whenever Aylmer remembered to enter some feeble protest against remaining any longer a nuisance, Eliza proved the most urgent in her warnings that he must have patience and commit no imprudence, and waxed pathetic over his using a word which might imply that he thought his friends capable of wearying in the pursuance of what was at once a duty and pleasure—the careful guarding of his convalescence.

She fretted him a good deal by rushing about in his wake with footstools, unexpectedly burying him under rugs or shawls to avert insidious draughts, uttering doleful little squeaks when he rose suddenly, convinced that he was about to fall, and selecting her stateliest phrases to reprove the others for their lack of attention. Once the professor declared that in his opinion his late patient was a lazy young dog who pretended weakness in order to excite sympathy. Eliza, as usual, accepted the jest as a serious accusation, turned sharply on the old German and informed him that it was sufficient for a man to be an atheist—to add hard-heartedness to this sin rendered him a monster.

But Aylmer bore her well-intended persecutions with outward patience, and would not allow Nina and the savant to tease her nearly so much as they wished ; her very peculiarities had a sacredness in his eyes, because she was intimately connected with Miss Cameron.

So the little party, containing such apparently incongruous elements, passed many pleasant hours. It grew the habit for them all to spend a great deal of time in Aylmer's salon. Carlo sacrificed the attractions of *cercle* and cards

in an astounding fashion, and Eliza accused the marchesa and Violet of downright cruelty if they ventured to interfere with the convalescent's claims by going out to drive or accepting any invitation for the evening.

But these enjoyable days came to an end. Aylmer grew so well that he needed more exercise than occasional walks in the garden afforded, and of course when he could leave the palace inclosures, there was no excuse for his returning in the character of resident.

The professor decided that a breath of sea-air would prove beneficial, so one morning he carried Laurence off to Spezia. Carlo and Nina went back to the villa, and the two "lone ladies" were free to resume the propriety so precious to Eliza. To Violet's great diversion, before the day was over that return caused the spinster a slight sensation of boredom, and she positively snubbed the most potent of all the American colonists who chanced to pay her a visit, and, learning that Mr. Aylmer had been able to quit the house, ventured upon some congratulatory remark.

"You were quite savage with that stately dame," Violet said, when the guest had departed.

"My dear," replied Eliza, "I trust I shall never fail in my duty towards you, nor can I submit personally to glaringly gross injustice. To hint that it must be a relief to have Mr. Aylmer gone was to imply that we were too selfish to entertain sympathy for illness and suffering."

Violet good-naturedly refrained from reminding her what her own opinions had been until recently, as the accusation of inconsistency would have cruelly hurt the oversensitive Eliza, who believed herself entirely free from that weakness so common to humanity.

The next morning letters came from Mrs. Danvers and her step-daughter.

"The poor lady has been ill," Violet explained. "Mary has nursed her. Mr. Danvers's death seems to have brought them closer together—that is a comfort."

"And when does the daughter sail?"

"There is no time set; she cannot leave her step-mother yet. Who knows? perhaps they would rather keep together. I shall write to-day and make that possible, if they prefer it."

Violet was conscious of wishing that they might; she had an odd shrinking from George Danvers's daughter.

Then she reproached herself therefor, and wrote kindly and heartily.

Ten days went by—days during which a strange restlessness asserted its supremacy over Violet's will, changing its form at pleasure with Protean facility; now assuming the guise of despondency, anon of elation, and vexing her always by its lack of foundation in reason or common-sense.

At length she received a note from Nina, begging her to spend a few days at the villa.

"I have taken cold, and am feverish and miserable," the little lady wrote. "Those dreadful workmen have not yet left the house in town, so I am forced to remain here. Carlo is good as gold—though I do not care to put him forth as transferable currency—but I am sure he is terribly bored. So do come, like an angel—or like yourself, which will be better. I am afraid to ask dear Miss Bronson to accompany you, because, in order to keep Carlo at home, I encourage waifs from the gaming set every evening, and the house resembles a small Monaco; but if she can support the wickedness, I shall be charmed to see her."

Of course Violet would go. Nina's society was always a pleasure, and a change of any sort acceptable just now. She gave Miss Bronson the invitation, but that wise virgin shook her head in disapproval.

"I have my soul to think of," she said; "and I must think of yours, since you are so heedless! No, Violet, I cannot countenance gambling. I do not wish to be severe on the marchesa; I pity her for the strait to which she is driven, but I blame her too. Ye shall not put a cushion under sin—nay, not even to bolster up a weak husband!" added Eliza, in a terrible voice.

It was evident she fancied herself uttering a quotation from some Calvinistic divine whose authority stood next that of the Bible, and Violet felt the mistake very natural, since the phrase sounded so like the eloquent denunciations of those stern judges.

She reached the villa towards dusk. As the carriage drove up Nina came flying out into the portico, followed by a pack of dogs, big and little, which barked so furiously that for a few seconds not a word of their mistress's salutation was audible.

"I can only hear the greetings of your abominally

spoiled pets, but I suppose, from the expression of your face, I may conclude you are glad to see me," Violet said, when the noise died away a little.

"Indeed I am! You were so late I began to fear you would not come till to-morrow. Don't abuse the dogs; they are only showing their delight at your arrival. Trot is not here; she is the happy mother of five such pretty puppies. I'll give you a choice among them. You must go and visit her, else her feelings will be hurt."

"I congratulate Trot on her increase of family, and I cannot say I miss her voice," said Violet. "And how are you? Really not well, or was that only a pretext to frighten me into obeying your whim?"

"A happy mingling of truth and falsehood, my dear, as a woman's assertions ought to be," replied the marchesa. "I have had neuralgia, and I meant to be ill if you refused. But come in! We have some people to dine—Carlo invited them," she continued, as she led her friend into the stately old entrance-hall; "you'll not mind, however, as they are all men."

"How often must I tell you not to disgrace yourself by repeating such cant phrases!" cried Violet. "I like feminine society, and so do you; the fashion women have of declaring it a bore is disgusting! I hate their novels for that very reason. They seem to think they show the superiority of their heroines by making them detest every other woman—moan over the English after-dinner hour—say and do everything to afford men a right to despise the sex from its own confessions."

"I stand convicted—you are right. I'll never hint such a thing again, even if I think it; at least, not to you," returned Nina. "Ah, here is a listener who I am certain approves every word you have uttered with such overwhelming energy."

The hall widened in the center to a vast room where couches and chairs were placed, statues lived in the niches, and pictures decorated the walls—a favorite haunt of the household. They had reached the arch as Nina spoke. Violet look up; the broad space was lighted by several concealed lamps; in the soft mysterious radiance she saw Laurence Aylmer standing at the foot of the marble staircase which he had just descended. He came quickly forward, face and eyes aglow with pleasure.

"I am so very glad to see you!" he exclaimed. "I went to your house as soon as I reached town, but you were out—Miss Bronson out too! I was quite in despair, since I could not call twice in the same day. Luckily I met Magnoletti, and he invited me to come home with him, promising me the pleasure of finding you here."

"Makes no account whatever of his hostess," cried Nina. "Oh, wretched young man! I would never forgive you, only you have come back looking so well that one must pardon you anything—is it not so, Violet?"

"He certainly seems quite recovered," Violet answered, giving him her hand and a cordial smile.

He had appeared so unexpectedly that she felt startled—of course, only on that account—she had leisure to assure herself of this even while she went on to express her gratification at the evident benefit he had derived from the sea-air.

"Did you hear her diatribe?" Nina presently demanded.

"Yes, and agreed thoroughly with it," he said. "I never could comprehend that lack of *esprit de corps* which women show. If they hold each other cheap, they cannot blame men for holding them all so."

"That is unbearable! I am obliged to endure Miss Cameron's abuse, but I will not yours. Where are Carlo and those familiars of his?"

"They went into the billiard room."

"Could not exactly venture to sit down to baccarat before dinner, so must console themselves with a milder sort of gaming; and without even waiting to pay me their respects! Upon my word, I believe Gherardi and Pisano take this house for an hotel, and the rest are as bad."

"You were not here to receive them: the marchese made your excuses—said you were probably dressing, and proposed the billiard-room by way of consolation for your absence," Aylmer replied.

"Of course you will defend them! I notice men always stand by each other in an odious fashion."

"In order to set a lofty example, and cure women of that great error Miss Cameron so justly condemned."

"Nonsense! You do it because you are all so horribly wicked you are obliged to hang together like brigands," retorted she. "There is no hurry about going up stairs,

Violet; it is not much after seven. I don't mean to dine until half-past eight; I shall keep those monsters from the card-table as long as possible."

"Now I wonder—I do wonder what her real reason may be!" said Aylmer. "Can you imagine, Miss Cameron?"

"I shall watch to find out; she is certain to betray herself before the evening is over," Violet answered.

"And she talks about the necessity of women's keeping faith among themselves!" cried Nina. "My dear, as a reward for having shown that you are no better than your sisters, I'll tell you! My delightful gallant countryman, Prince Sabakine, is coming. He was obliged to go as far as Milan with the Grand Duchess—could not reach Florence before now—must take a special train in order to do that—there is devotion for you! Well, then, time to dress—forty minutes to drive out here, even with his horses; so you see, I had to say half-past eight! Now, admire my frankness."

"Since you only confess your iniquity because you knew we should discover it," said Violet.

"I shall go off to the billiard-room," vowed Nina. "You are both too malicious for endurance, so I may as well recollect that I ought to show a little courtesy to Carlo's evil spirits."

She ran gayly away. Violet sat down upon a couch just inside the arch, annoyed with herself for a ridiculous impulse to follow her friend. Something in Aylmer's eyes brought a remembrance of those visits the professor had forced her to pay his patient. To recall the broken revelations of his delirium always fluttered her, and just now the sensation vexed her. It was too absurd to remember what a man had said in fever—as if he knew whom he addressed or what he uttered!

"And my dear old Diogenes, is he quite well?" she asked.

"Oh, yes; kind as ever, and as resolute to be considered a Black Forest wolf," Aylmer replied. "I can give you no idea of his goodness since we have been away. But indeed the sympathy I have received in quarters where I had no right to expect it, leaves me bankrupt in gratitude."

"We agreed not to talk about that," Violet said, "since I have certain debts which I cannot pay."

"You know I consider it the greatest favor fate

ever showed me that I was permitted to be of use to you," he exclaimed.

His voice and eyes lent this speech a meaning far beyond compliment, but the phrases themselves sounded like the exaggerated flattery any man might have felt it his duty to offer, so they afforded her an opportunity to retreat from the subject with a jest, though it hurt her to jest upon that theme.

Aylmer at once followed her lead in the direction she gave the conversation, perhaps a little afraid to dwell upon the serious side of the adventure which had carried their intercourse so far out of the ordinary track—afraid lest he might utter words he had no right to speak. Such liberty would be worse than ungenerous, since the peculiar footing on which they had been placed by his accident and its consequences would render it difficult for her to check his presumption as easily and decidedly as she might have done in the case of another who committed the blunder, after so brief an acquaintance, of betraying a secret which his heart or fancy had garnered. So they talked of any trifle which either could snatch at, gayly, carelessly, as befitted the moment, yet there was a subtle difference which rendered the conversation unlike an ordinary *tête-à-tête*—a difference perceptible to the woman as to the man, though she would not allow her soul to admit the fact, while he gloried therein.

Miss Cameron began admiring a stand of plants near the sofa ; he selected some graceful drooping blossoms, and wound a few green sprays about them.

"There is nothing so pretty in the hair as these little fern leaves," he said, as he handed her the bouquet, and his eyes asked her to wear his gift.

"Unfortunately, neither the blue-bells or the ferns suit the color of my dress. One can't venture to be inartistic in these days," she answered ; and then recollected that she had replied to his glance rather than his words.

"You ought never to wear anything but white," he exclaimed, quickly. "I always think of you as you looked the night I met you here. You were in white, too, the first evening you came into my prison——"

He paused, conscious that a word more might take him back to unsafe ground, then added, with a laugh too tremulous to perform its duty well : "I was so much indulged by you all during my illness that I forget I have lost the

privilege of being autocratic in my opinions. I still occasionally find myself scolding the professor, and before I had been here an hour the marchesa had to remind me that I was no longer absolute."

Nina appeared again at the instant, and spared Violet the necessity of any reply.

"I am going up stairs," she said; "I could not miss being ready for my model Russian. Come and see how pretty I have made your rooms, *Violetta mia!* I expect you to be so charmed that you won't have the heart to desert me, or them, for a fortnight. By that time I trust the workmen will leave Casa Magnoletti free, unless they have some special reason for forcing me to spend my life in the country."

When the marchesa had left Violet's dressing-room, Clarice said to her mistress:

"I have laid out that new green costume for mademoiselle."

"I shall wear white," returned Miss Cameron.

"Mademoiselle has lived in white of late—positively lived in it! People will think she has only one dress!" pleaded Clarice, in despairing accents. "And the green costume is a perfect picture—*vert tendre*, mademoiselle!"

Violet was putting her flowers in water. She dropped them hastily into the little vase, slightly uncomfortable as she thought why she had dissented from the maid's choice.

"*Vert tendre* be it," she answered.

"And mademoiselle will look like an enchanted princess," cried Clarice, gratified, as humanity always is, by having her own way. But when half dressed, Violet glanced at the flowers. Surely she need not be ashamed to do so little a thing as wear a particular color to please a man who had saved her life. The absurdity was in hesitating—as if there were any reason why she should hesitate! "I don't like the green; I am too pale this evening. I shall wear white," she said, with decision."

And white it was. Clarice never attempted expostulations when her mistress spoke in that tone.

Her toilet completed, Violet took the bouquet, separated it, put a part in her hair, and fastened the remainder in her corsage. As she was thus occupied, a bloom so delicate yet so rich stole into her cheeks, a light so brilliant yet so soft flooded her eyes, that when she turned from the mir-

ror, Clarice, with a magnanimity few mortals would have been capable of displaying after such recent rejection of their advice, cried out :

"Mademoiselle was right ! She is fairly dazzling !"

"You are a prejudiced little goose," Violet said, laughing.

But she was looking her loveliest, and she knew it. The vivid blue flowers over the white brought out the fairness of her neck, which the square-cut bodice revealed ; and the open sleeves showed the matchless arms, which were the admiration of every sculptor in Italy.

Aylmer was standing near the door as she entered the drawing-room. He got no chance to speak, for the marchese and the guests who had not yet seen her came forward to claim her attention. But Violet caught one glance from those dark eyes, so eloquent in its appreciation of her compliance with their owner's wish that she had an uneasy sensation of having done wrong in obeying his caprice.

Then Sabakine was sent by the hostess to bring Miss Cameron to the sofa where she was seated, and altogether Aylmer found no opportunity to address a word to her, and he betrayed his annoyance so plainly to the marchesa's keen eyes that she took occasion to say in his ear :

"I told you this morning that after Carnival comes Lent."

"So it does, and one submits ; but it is a shame of you to forget there is a *mi-carême*," he replied, with a readiness which delighted the appreciative Russian.

"You are very near it—trust me," she said.

When they entered the dining-room he discovered what she meant. Of course, Miss Cameron fell to the host, but Aylmer's seat was at her other hand. Nina, occupied by something Sabakine was narrating, found time to dart a quick glance towards Aylmer, and gave him an infinitesimal nod, which said distinctly :

"*Mi-carême* at last, you see !"

And if he had been her adorer instead of her friend, she could not have received a look of more fervent gratitude.

CHAPTER XI.

SET RIGHT.

SO the dinner proved delightful to the young man; one of those banquets of the gods whereof each of us has partaken in turn.

In the drawing-room afterwards everything went well for a time. Under a pretense of wanting to smoke, Carlo and his friends strayed into a distant salon; Sabakine and Aylmer remained with the ladies, and a *partie carrée* is by no means unpleasant to a man when he has not reached a stage where he is at liberty to utter his thoughts freely to the object of his fancy.

But presently into the quiet came the sound of carriage wheels, and directly there appeared a knot of people sufficiently intimate with the marchesa to come uninvited for the purpose of enlivening her seclusion.

Foremost among the group entered Giulia da Rimini, stately and Cleopatra-like as usual, on her lips that indolent half-smile, and in her heavy-lidded black eyes that inscrutable expression which Nina so cordially hated. The duchess took the explanation upon herself, making her voice distinctly audible through the comments and laughter of her companions, low and unemphatically as she spoke:

"We were all at the opera; it was worse than usual. Then nobody had a reception—nobody had offered a supper, so I proposed that we should drive out by moonlight and see you, Nina darling."

"You are always having happy inspirations, dear Giulia," returned the marchesa, with her sweetest smile.

"Who would venture on a supper, duchess?" exclaimed Sabakine. "You have rendered that impossible by your brilliant success. I shall never pardon you for having given it while I was away."

Nina was in ecstacies—so was everybody else—but the duchess proved equal to the occasion.

"I am ashamed now, prince, to recollect that our friends made themselves so charming, I had no opportunity to miss you," said she, and passed on to greet Violet. "My dear

Miss Cameron, what an unexpected pleasure! Why, Mr. Aylmer, is this you or your double? I thought you safe at the sea-side, in the hands of your doctor."

"Heavens!" muttered Nina. "If she could only teach people to tell falsehoods with such grace, she might earn a fortune."

"She makes a very fair living at cards as it is," returned Sabakine; "don't suggest the idea, or between the two professions she will ruin us all."

Nina's implied belief that the duchess had known whom she should meet was perfectly correct, and her proposal to her friends to drive out to the villa had been caused by that knowledge.

Carlo had so far proved obdurate to every attempt to lure him back to his allegiance. If she changed her tactics, showed a willingness to let him go and give Aylmer the benefit of her smiles, the marchese might be roused to dispute the post of honor by her side, and she could then assert that her conduct had been inspired by a wish to punish his lack of faith in her explanation of that unlucky visit to his friend's sick-room.

Society might say what it liked about her; so long as she did not violate certain conventionalities, Florence could not turn the cold shoulder—her position and family influence would prevent that; and if she avoided such penalty she cared little whether people called her a high-born swindler or names which designated vices more especially feminine.

So to-night she affected a certain air of familiarity with Aylmer, still preserving her majestic indolence. She forced him to attend exclusively to her, and covertly watched Miss Cameron, in the hope that lady's self-control would not be perfect enough to repress some sign of trouble or annoyance, in case Aylmer had gained any special hold upon her thoughts during the past weeks.

But Miss Cameron, engrossed by half a dozen men, apparently found no leisure to notice the duchess and her companion. That Aylmer had a strong fancy for his beautiful countrywoman, the signora was able to decide to her own complete dissatisfaction. He could not keep his eyes off Violet; he started each time the duchess's voice recalled him to a sense of his duty, and once was positively guilty of the enormity of asking what she had said, and, to add to

the crime, apologized for his absent-mindedness. These things nettled the lady; still they acted as provocatives, and rendered her more determined and eager than ever to dazzle the man and bring him to her feet.

"Where is the marchese?" she inquired.

"In the card-room," Aylmer replied.

"Of course! I need not have asked! I want to look on at the game—you know cards have a fascination for me."

He rose with alacrity, hoping that, once within sight of the table, her arch-passion would assert its supremacy and cause her to join the gamblers.

"Mr. Aylmer and I are going to see them play baccarat," Giulia said to Madame Magnoletti.

Nina had no objection. While courting the goddess Chance, Venus herself might stand close to Carlo, and he would offer no homage beyond an indifferent bow and smile; besides, the marchesa never wavered in her conviction, founded on a thorough knowledge of her husband's character, that the capricious creature had escaped forever from the Sicilian's thraldom.

When Carlo looked up and saw the duchess beside his chair, he made a little grimace under his long mustache very like one of Nina's childish *moues.* Giulia was leaning on Aylmer's arm, apparently absorbed in his conversation even while she tapped her host's shoulder with her fan by way of salutation. Carlo's Italian astuteness fathomed the signora's wiles as quickly as if he had been a woman, and his eyes brightened with sudden amusement when he glanced towards her companion.

"Is fortune favorable?" she asked. "How very cross Gherardi looks!"

"Because you stopped beside Carlo's chair instead of mine, *duchessa mia,*" said that gentleman.

"Has Carlo lost his tongue?" she continued, employing the marchese's Christian name with the familiarity so common in Italy, and so shocking to dignified Anglo-Saxons.

"I was only trying to find some suitable phrase of welcome. You know I am a slow creature," he answered. "Useless, I suppose, to ask you to join us?"

"Later, perhaps," she said, smiling at the manner in which the question was put. She fancied his tone

betrayed pique, and flattered herself that her new line of conduct would speedily bring him out of his pretended indifference.

The other players offered each some remark, then the duchess passed on.

"You do not mean to play?" Aylmer asked, finding it difficult to repress his disappointment within decent limits.

Indeed, his state of mind was perfectly evident to the marchesa when she met them in the conservatory, where she had gone to show Sabakine and several other people some marvelous plant her brother had sent from America, and the mischievous lady derived great amusement from his sufferings, as she adroitly allowed him to perceive.

The duchess believed that he had determined, if possible, to resist her spells. In her present frame of mind this credence, instead of rousing her fierce temper, rendered her more bent on conquering him—that he strove against it was a proof he comprehended his danger. Did he want Violet Cameron's money? Well, perhaps later she would help him win it, but just now the heiress should not stand in the way, either from the inducements her fortune offered or any caprice Aylmer might have for the lady herself.

Altogether, nearly an hour elapsed before the wretched man could escape. The duchess recollected that she must not let Carlo's pique attain too keen an edge, else it would not serve the purpose for which she meant to employ it. Aylmer deposited her at the card-table with the ungrateful reflection that he knew exactly how Sinbad felt when he got rid of the Old Man of the Sea, and hastened away.

Madame da Rimini was not sorry to see him go. She knew that when she wished to fascinate, she never ought to play cards in the presence of her victim. In ten minutes she had forgotten Aylmer—everything—in the interest of the game. Her eyes blazed with a cold, keen flame like that on Damascus steel; her mouth set so hard that the lips were a mere scarlet thread; two deep lines disfigured her forehead; her fingers shut with claw-like tenacity: her attitude so fixed and rigid that the cords stood out on her neck, and marred her chief beauty, till she seemed suddenly to have grown years older.

Nina and Sabakine stopped to exchange observations concerning her as they strolled through the room.

"She is actually unrecognizable," Nina said.

"One sees the real woman," he replied: "a horrible caricature of what she manages to appear under ordinary circumstances."

"She is a dreadful creature!" ejaculated Nina.

"Well, yes. If she had not had the good luck to be born *grande dame*, she would undoubtedly have found her way to the galleys before now. Thanks to her being Mazzolini's daughter and wearing Rimini's title, she will probably manage to die decently in her bed," said Sabakine, with that entire freedom of speech concerning acquaintances which is so marked a characteristic of Florentine society.

"Where is the duke now?"

"In Paris, as usual. They divide France and Italy between them, and manage to keep the best friends in the world. '*Une femme forte*,' he said to me last spring, in speaking of her; 'but she gives me an abnormal taste for human blood—an unfortunate mania on my part, as it prevents my enjoying her society.'"

"He is worse than she!"

"Hum! I could not say that. He as nearly approaches her gifts as a man can. But he is wise to remain in Paris. There is no doubt that on the last visit he paid the house of his ancestors she set fire to his bed-curtains when he was asleep, and locked him in his room."

"I never did quite believe that story."

"He told me himself as a good joke; it would have been a better one if he had burned to death, as he came near doing."

Aylmer found Miss Cameron in the drawing-room, but she was so constantly surrounded that he could not get within reach; and he wandered about in a restless fashion, hoping that at least after the guests' departure he might have her for a few minutes to himself; but when he came back from seeing some lady to her carriage, Violet had disappeared.

"Miss Cameron has gone to bed, like a sensible woman," said Nina, "and I shall follow her example—I am tired to death. My Russian bored me, Carlo has been losing money, and you have neglected me shamefully, Mr. Aylmer. The world is dust and ashes, and I shall go to sleep. Good-night."

After she had gone, Carlo, who prided himself on conducting his household according to English principles in

many ways, asked Aylmer to have some sort of liquid refreshment and a cheroot—oblivious that his Anglo-mania failed in the present instance, as he was drinking orgeat and seltzer instead of brandy and soda, and his smoking-room, as usual, the place where he chanced to be when in a mood for a cigarette.

But Aylmer declined these mild Italian attempts at dissipation, and went off to his chamber, feeling that the evening, which began so charmingly, had ended in a very dismal fashion.

The next morning the professor came out to see his late patient, and amused them all by his account of an interview with Miss Bronson. He had gone to the house, unaware of Miss Cameron's absence, and found Eliza in a very elevated mood, from the effects of an æsthetic tea given by some old maid on the previous evening.

She delivered a long lecture upon his heterodoxy, warning him of the evil repute it would bring in this world and the Dives-like destiny it must inevitably procure in the next. He drove her nearly frantic by declaring that the book he had so often proposed to dedicate to her was ready for the press, and improvised an inscription which asserted that her sympathy with his peculiar views had been his sweetest solace during the long hours devoted to the preparation of the volume.

"I left her in tears," said the professor, with grim delight; "and I affected to think it was the proof of my esteem which touched her. The more she tried to explain and to reject my friendship and my heresies, the duller and deafer I grew. At the hour it is, I am certain she has assembled a conclave of all the spinsters among her acquaintance, and is searching for some means to avert the awful fate which hangs over her."

Aylmer was haunted by a fear that he had fallen in Miss Cameron's esteem. He could not say that her manner had changed—she talked freely and pleasantly; but, in spite of his efforts to believe himself mistaken, the impression remained in his mind that a certain distance had come between them—as if he suddenly stood on the footing of a mere acquaintance, instead of enjoying the friendly relations which had grown up during his convalescence.

But in what way could he exculpate himself? He inwardly rebelled, as circumstances often force a man to do,

against sundry injustices in the social code which give women like the duchess an opportunity to place him in a very unpleasant position without the privilege of defense—a position where silence is self-condemnation, yet to open his lips must make him appear a conceited idiot.

The marchese and Aylmer were in the billiard-room before dinner. Aylmer was saying that he must drive into town to inquire concerning some letters which had failed to arrive.

"Keep out of the duchess's way," said Carlo, who was almost as much given to teasing as the professor himself. "If she gets those pretty tiger-claws of hers on you, my friend, you will not be allowed to come back to us."

"Confound the duchess!" returned Aylmer. "Never—never—in any country did I meet a woman so odious! I used to wonder how you could dance attendance upon her, but I see you have recovered from your folly."

"Come, come, that is turning the tables on poor me with a vengeance, just because I gave you a friendly counsel out of the goodness of my heart!"

"Your goodness of heart be—blessed!" said Aylmer.

"I saw how she was worrying you last night," continued Carlo, laughing. "I would have gone to your rescue, only I was busy. If you wouldn't make it so plain that you are blind to her fascinations, la belle Giulia would ten to one let you alone."

Before Aylmer could reply, Miss Cameron came in from the conservatory.

"Marchese," said she, "Nina says you purloined the little microscope the professor gave me yesterday. Positively, you are as bad as a magpie for hiding everything you can pick up in your pockets."

"Friend of my soul, magpies don't wear pockets. It is odd that though the feminine mind conceives comparisons in profusion, they are always incorrect," cried Carlo.

"Less incorrect than your habit of petty larceny—it quite amounts to—to—what is that long word, Mr. Aylmer, which it is proper to use when a marquis steals, instead of a poor common wretch who must go to prison therefor?"

"Kleptomania, do you mean?"

"Exactly! Take care, Carlo, or it will lead you to a lunatic asylum! Do you intend to give me my microscope? We want to examine some leaves."

"What a persistent creature! I have lost it—I never had it—I gave it back to you," said Carlo, hunting in the multifarious recesses of his coat, which he fondly believed a thoroughly English garment, and finally pulling out the desired article.

"Here it is, after all; I must have picked it up by accident."

"I notice that your sins are always committed by accident," returned Violet, "and I never knew a man who met with so many misfortunes."

"All the same, I suppose Aylmer and I may go and look at the leaves; he is an ignorant young person, and needs to improve his mind in various ways."

"I certainly chose ill when I selected your society for that purpose, my dear Carlo," rejoined Laurence.

"You will have to adopt his pet excuse—the victim of accident, Mr. Aylmer," said Violet.

She spoke carelessly; she smiled with even more indifference, yet Laurence's heart bounded; he knew that his peace was made—the distance had been bridged over—the ice which had spread between them, chilling him to the soul, imperceptible as it was, had melted suddenly—he was back in June warmth again.

She had heard the marchese's words—fortune had favored him indeed. He could have hugged the unconscious bringer-about of this present state of affairs.

"After all, one can't help liking him in spite of his errors!" said Laurence, clapping Carlo on the shoulder by way of giving a little relief to his feelings.

"Praise is sweet, but it may be too forcibly expressed," said the marchese, pretending to groan.

"May we go and have a peep through the microscope, Miss Cameron!" Aylmer inquired. A few minutes before he would have felt as if taking a liberty in asking anything of her, but his courage was entirely restored.

"Violet Cameron!" Nina called from the terrace upon which the windows of the billiard-room opened. "If you think to leave me to study botany alone, while you monopolize the only two men available, you do not know the woman with whom you have to deal! I am amiable and I am self-sacrificing, but there are limits, I warn you!"

"She might at least have sent you the microscope," said Carlo, "if she had any conscience."

"The most powerful microscope ever invented would fail to discover any such treasure in your anatomy," retorted Nina.

"What did I say about women's inability to make comparisons?" cried Carlo, triumphantly. "Angel of the house, conscience is not a treasure—learn that before you turn on your husband when he generously comes to your assistance."

"And a statement is not a comparison, Master Carlo," said Violet; "learn that."

"Oh, good heavens! These displays of rhetoric all come from the professor's leaving that horrid microscope; pray break it, Mr. Aylmer, or there will be no living with the pair," cried Nina.

The three joined her on the terrace and laughed and talked nonsense and were very happy, while the day drew to its close and the western sky waxed glorious as if the farthest heavens had suddenly opened Woods and fields glowed with amber radiance—the very highway became a band of dazzling light—the river a halo. In the distance appeared beautiful Florence, a sweep of burnished roofs and glittering walls—Giotto's tower and the vast dome of the cathedral rising in the midst, while on the height above, San Miniato's church seemed floating in space; every object glorified, transfigured, by the supernal light.

CHAPTER XII.

THREE-AND-THIRTY.

THE four spent many such idle, pleasant hours, and time fled with the rapidity it displays when life has reached, as it does occasionally, a season where no important event occurs to mark its course, though each day is so full of tranquil enjoyment that our usually restless souls forget to look back or forward.

Their intimacy with Nina and Carlo insensibly drew Violet and Laurence Aylmer into an intimacy almost as

complete, affording them an opportunity to become more thoroughly acquainted with each other's real characters than months of ordinary intercourse could have done.

On the eighth day Lady Harcourt drove out to the villa, and insisted upon taking Carlo home with her to dine and meet some friends whom she had invited.

"I must have an even number," she said, "and of course Nina and Violet can more easily spare the mated masculine bird than the one with unclipped wings."

At table the marchesa was seized with a nervous headache, and obliged to go to her room.

"As you both belong to the Anglo-Saxon race, I need not offer any absurd excuses, or carry Miss Cameron off," she said. "I will lie down awhile ; then I shall be ready for some tea and your united fascinations. Make yourself agreeable, Mr. Aylmer, and remember I give you permission to smoke—Violet doesn't mind in the least, sensible creature that she is. You shall have your coffee on the terrace. It is a shame to stop in-doors such a lovely night. And now I will retire, while I can do so with grace and elegance."

So the two guests were left to entertain each other.

"We were told not to stop in the house," Violet said, walking towards an open window. "Obedience and inclination can be united for once. What a marvelous evening !"

Aylmer followed her out upon the terrace, and they sat down. The old major-domo came with the coffee-tray, and placed it on a tiny table between them. He brought also a wrap for Miss Cameron, saying :

"Pardon, signorina : but one gets a chill so easily."

"Hardly in this weather, Pietro ; it is like summer," she said, amused at his addressing her by that girlish title.

"And not weather to be trusted, because it is unseasonable," persisted Pietro.

"Certainly this is the realization of one's dreams about an Italian autumn," Aylmer said, as he put the shawl over Violet's shoulders.

"Yes, and you are very fortunate, since it is your first experience. As a rule, the nights at this season are almost as sharp here in Tuscany as in our own middle States."

They sipped their coffee and conversed in a desultory fashion upon any and every subject that chanced to float up—of their friends, Carlo and Nina, people in Florence,

some new books, the lovely effect of the moon on the hills, the tints a painter would require to express the shadows the cypresses cast—shadows which looked black, but were not, one discovered, after studying them.

Gradually the conversation grew more earnest, as talk about books brought forth individual opinions; and sitting there in the moonlight, Violet Cameron's loveliness heightened tenfold, and wrought its natural effect upon the man beside her.

A brief silence ensued; something Aylmer said set Violet dreaming, and he did not recall her; but when she glanced towards him, he was regarding her so earnestly, with such involuntary revealings in his eyes, that she felt the color deepen in her cheek.

"I was wondering where you had gone," said he.

"I was only watching the moon," she answered.

"More than that—you looked as if your soul had drifted off into the farthest brightness."

"How very poetical!"

"That was the way you looked. I began to fear you would never come back. It would have been worse than the distance that seemed to come between us just at the beginning of our visit here," he said, trying to speak jestingly, though an undertone of earnestness was very perceptible.

"Now that is more fanciful than your other poetry," returned she.

"No, no," he said, "it was not fancy; and I felt quite frozen—as if I had been exiled into some bleak Arctic region."

"I hope you have come back from your exile," she answered, laughing, though with a little effort. "It must have been voluntary."

"Indeed, no. But I have come back—please don't banish me again," he pleaded, with an impulsiveness the more striking, the more attractive, too, from its contrast to the usually quiet manner which made him appear older than he was. "Say you will not! If I do anything, or seem to do anything of which you disapprove, try to think you misunderstand—to believe I would cut my right hand off sooner than risk your censure."

Before he finished the sentence he had ceased even to attempt a pretense of playfulness.

"At least I can assure you there is no distance of my making between us," she said. But this phrase did not exactly suit the exigencies of the case, so she continued, before he could speak: "No distance at all, I mean. I hope we are very good friends. You may be certain that if I do misjudge you—and I may often, being an impatient woman—I shall never hesitate to atone for my blunder."

"Thanks!" he exclaimed, with more emphasis than was necessary, extending his hand as he spoke.

Now Violet did not want to take his hand; it would give a seriousness to the explanation from which she shrank, yet to refuse might appear a ridiculous, prudish calling him to order. Still she hesitated, vexed with herself for so doing, as a rapid question flitted through her mind. Was she afraid? if so, of whom—him or herself?

And he was waiting with his hand outstretched, his eyes on her face—only a second, of course, long as the interval seemed to her. She got her wits back—oh! the shame of having lost them even for the space necessary to demand the reason of her soul! She tapped his fingers lightly with her fan, and said:

"This is not a last dying speech, that we should grow tragic over it."

"I told you those weeks of imprisonment had made me exigeant," returned he, trying to speak calmly. "But, after all, it is not my fault—everybody spoiled me."

"Then I suppose we must have patience with our own work, unless you make it absolutely necessary for us to put you on a moral diet of bread and water," said she, with a radiant smile, which set his heart beating so rapidly that he almost thought she must hear its pulsations.

"You could not fail to be kind and generous," he answered, the unsteadiness of his voice giving a significance to his words which made them too earnest for mere compliment. "I will try to deserve it—at least you may be sure of that."

The tone, the eager look in his eyes startled Violet still further out of that deceitful calmness which she had kept unbroken during the past days by treating her own soul with as much reticence as if it had been a stranger's, but she replied with assumed lightness:

"Take care you keep your good resolutions. If that

were as easy in practice as it is in theory, what admirable creatures we should all be!"

"I never felt my own failures as I do since I have known you. You are so much better and nobler than other women that you make one ashamed of common thoughts and aims," he cried, carried so completely beyond self-control that he could not weigh his speech.

He had never spoken like this. Violet's troubled sensation grew stronger, not at the words themselves—she was too accustomed to men's flatteries to have noticed these—but the tone in which they were uttered—the passion of his eyes, which said so much more than voice or phrase—fairly confused her, and rendered difficult the effort to treat his remark lightly, skilled as she was in the knowledge whereby a woman accustomed to society increases her natural feminine tact.

"You forget, only yesterday we agreed that exaggerated compliments were very uncomplimentary things in reality," said she, laughing; "a presupposing of inordinate vanity on her part who receives them."

"You know I did not intend a compliment—I was just thinking aloud!" he exclaimed, each instant carried further away from the restraint he had hitherto managed to put upon himself.

"Monologues went out along with the old-fashioned novels," returned she, that effort at playfulness growing still more difficult.

"I seem to know you so well; all those weeks of illness make the beginning of our acquaintance look so far off. Oh, I don't think it had any beginning where I was concerned; it was just as if I had found something I had lost and been searching for ever since."

She was so beautiful in her quiet pose; the moonlight made her complexion so unearthly in its fairness, her eyes so superhuman in their dark glow, that the man lost his head altogether; forgot all his wise resolves, forgot everything save that in this glorious creature he had found the ideal perfection which had haunted his fancy so long.

What did he say—what did she answer? Neither could have told! He did not make love to her in the ordinary sense of the phrase, but he let his whole soul out as he hurried on in eager talk of those blessed days when she brightened his sick-room with her presence, and Violet was

moved by his eloquence to forget for a few moments that just below the height to which his imagination had floated them, the bleak rocks of reality showed sharp and cruel in the common light of the common world.

Then the very fire of his speech forced reflection upon her. What did this language mean? Was she to think that his heart—— Oh, she would not even complete the absurd thought! Mere compliments—empty trash—such as young men talked to any woman tolerably pretty and attractive, who chanced to sit with them in the moonlight! Part of a young man's education, but not the style of conversation for her to listen to—for her, sobered by the weight of her three-and-thirty years! How nonsensical to be fluttered even for an instant! Was it possible that the dreamy idleness of these past days, whose spell upon himself he described so vividly, had enthralled her too? No, no! Back to the realm of common-sense and commonplace! Wisdom, Violet Cameron, wisdom! An old maid—yes, an old maid! No Juliet of eighteen on her balcony with Romeo below; a spinster, well on towards middle age, just as near as if her face were plain and wrinkled already (as it ought to be), instead of keeping, from some absurd freak of nature, a semblance of youth—a cruel freak, since it exposed her to this—to the bitter consciousness that not only had fancy led him astray, but she, she had let the charm of this lotus-flower-crowned season wile her into forgetfulness.

And all the while he went on speaking, and all the while her heart and soul were thrilled by his eager words, even in the midst of her ability to listen to the upbraidings of her suddenly-roused judgment.

What was he saying—oh, what was he saying?

"Ah, admit that all these things at once put our acquaintance on an exceptional footing—that they prevent my seeming just like the ordinary crowd about—at least say so much!"

"We are very good friends, and mean to stay so," she heard her voice say, not speaking from any volition of her own; she felt as if some guardian power spoke through her, good-natured enough to wish to save them both future pain: save him at least—no matter about her—an old maid's sufferings from a wounded heart were only laughable! Well, well! in order to waken him it was only

necessary to tell her age; his dream—if he had been dreaming—had occupied his imagination merely—a young man's fancy! Yes, tell her age and he would speedily discover that he had deceived himself in regard to his heart having stirred, just as her face by its deceitful smoothness had deceived him into a belief that she was young enough to be the cause of such commotion.

"How old are you?" she asked, abruptly.

Aylmer was not exactly confused, but a little taken back by this interruption to his blank verse. Some vague remembrance of speculations in regard to her years, which he had several times overheard, flitted through his mind—influenced his reply too.

"I am twenty-eight," he said; "at least I shall be so soon that I may call it my age."

He was exactly three months and four days past twenty-seven, but then mathematical precision always sounds sententious and absurd!

"I am twenty-eight," he repeated, as if the second assertion would do away with the fact of the birthday not having yet arrived.

"And I am thirty-four; at least (to quote your words), I shall be so soon that I may call it my age," returned she, with the merriest laugh that ever made music on the lips of a girl at sixteen. Laugh she would—laugh gayly too, if the effort killed her: though if she could not have laughed, she would have been ready to kill herself, she said mentally.

I am trying to relate events exactly as they occurred—to give a description of feelings just as they arose, whether wise or foolish, orderly or inconsequent—so I must tell the whole. Aylmer felt as if he had suddenly received a douche of ice-water full on his fired fancy! An unmarried woman of four-and-thirty is almost an old woman—that was the one conscious, stupid thought in his mind.

"Yes, I am thirty-four," continued Violet, still following his speeches as models—no bitterness, no hesitation in her tone—her voice soft, airy, careless, and full of enjoyment. Somehow, she did feel a certain triumph, as if crushing her own vanity. Later, a measure of sadness and regret might mingle with the remembrance, but for the instant the comical side of the situation appealed to

her, and her amusement was perfectly genuine. "Too old, you see, not to have exhausted the pleasure of exaggerated compliments; especially averse to being treated to them by my friends—my real friends."

Still under the influence of that sensation, which I can only describe by my comparison of the douche of ice-water, he looked at her again as she sat laughing—her eyes brilliant, her color heightened, her complexion soft and transparent as a child's. She was jesting—quoting the verdict of some envious woman—curious to see if he would credit it.

"No doubt you will be thirty, and thirty-four, if you live long enough," he said, laughing too.

He recognized the doleful commonplaceness of the remark, but he was too determined to consider what she had said a joke to attempt compliments which might imply any faith in its having been serious.

A certain bitterness seized Violet; whether towards him on account of his unbelief, or against Fate for its cruelty, she could not have told.

"Must I bring a certificate of birth in order to end your courteous doubts?" she asked. "I shall be thirty-four years old within the twelvemonth."

She was in earnest, he perceived that. Further expression of incredulity would appear an impertinence. Yet never had he seen her look younger—never so beautiful!

"You'd better not let the girls of seventeen know the fact, else they will certainly strangle you," he blurted forth, with a school-boy sort of honesty so ludicrously out of keeping with his six feet of stateliness that somehow the answer sounded as complimentary as it did absurd.

"Promising young man!" cried Violet, laughing again, though now her laughter stung away down close to her heart. "But no more pretty speeches, please. I told you the truth to do away with the necessity. I am tired of sugary talk; I have had enough! No need of it, even between a man and a woman, when the two are friends."

She held out her hand, recollecting as she did so how a few instants previous she had shrunk from accepting his; but the recollection only rendered her more resolute in her frankness—she was three-and-thirty, and could claim the privileges of her age.

But the spell of her beauty was too potent for any wise

warning of hers, any flash of disappointment, long to affect its influence; it surged back with redoubled force from the very reaction of that brief shock.

"Friends!" he echoed, pressing his lips upon her fingers.

He might have said more—have shown her that he pronounced the word in repudiation of his willingness to be kept upon the calm ground of friendship, but she prevented any such dangerous avowal by interpreting his exclamation into an acceptance of her tacitly-proposed treaty.

"That is right—thanks! And now you will remember that flowery phrases are a little—just a little out of place—say twelve or thirteen years too late!"

Her determined jesting, though it hurt and vexed him, produced one fortunate effect—it brought a conviction that if he did not acquiesce in thus pushing the conversation back to an ordinary footing, he should risk vitally injuring his own cause, and, agitated as he was, he managed with more address than many men would have shown.

"I'll weed out all the flowers carefully henceforth," he said, trying to imitate her playful tone.

"The sure way to keep me good-natured," she answered. "The rose-bud style makes me feel silly."

"Oh, there are exceptions to all ordinary rules," said he. "If you will have eternal youth you must take the consequences, as the few other women so endowed had to do in their time."

He stopped short. Ninon's name had been on his lips as a comparison; then he remembered that Ninon and every other woman whom history had chronicled as holding, past youth, past middle age, the undimmed loveliness which gave them absolute sovereignty over men's hearts, had been women whose conduct rendered any reference to their names exceedingly out of place in this connection.

"True," said Violet, quickly, by the strange clairvoyance which the great sympathy between their minds gave her, reading his thought as plainly as if it had been uttered. "But unfortunately, as you reflected after speaking, all the examples you can think of were wicked women."

"Oh!" he exclaimed, with an indescribable impatience.

"Well, well, I am sorry they were bad," said she, pitilessly.

"And to compare——"

"Yes, yes, never mind—don't be shocked. Recollect that a woman of my age has a right to talk freely on all subjects. The years which have lost me youth give some compensation—I may say things a girl could not, and yet be neither indecorous nor indelicate."

She resolved to cure him effectually—to cure herself too, or rather so to sear any possible wound by the hot iron of sarcastic speech, that it should close and heal without delay. The scar would remain, no doubt—ah, even physical wounds received after early youth leave an indelible scar! Well, the sight of it, maybe the ache of it now and then, would be good for her soul.

She found time, in the instant which followed her last remark, to elaborate with womanly quickness her thought much further and more clearly than I, with my clumsy pen, have been able to express in that paragraph of description, yet be ready before he could speak to pursue her advantage by another thrust of the hot iron which was to scorch them both into recovery.

"Good heavens! surely I may say what I like! Past thirty-three! Why, if I had married at sixteen, as so many American girls do, I might have almost grown-up daughters about me. No freedom of speech would have been considered unfitting then."

She had overdone her work! He looked at her as she spoke, immortal in her youth apparently, rose quickly, and held out his arm, saying:

"Come into the house a moment, please."

She obeyed, thinking that, whatever his reason for the demand, compliance therewith would put an end to the conversation, which had gone far enough.

He led her into the salon, where the lamps were burning brightly, and, before she suspected his intention, conducted her towards a great mirror and pointed to the radiant image shining therein.

"I can't help laughing," he said; "it is too absurd."

Violet gave one glance at their figures reflected side by side, and turned quickly, saying, with as much iciness as her voice could muster:

"Facts are stubborn things; dates the stubbornest facts of all."

"I don't care about dates," cried he; "they have no significance when so utterly refuted. I don't care!"

"But I do," said Violet, and removed her hand from his arm.

Before he could answer, Nina appeared in the doorway, exclaiming :

"Oh, there you are! My headache is quite gone. Please to amuse me and make me forget my dreadful dream! I saw Giulia da Rimini pushing a woman over a precipice, and I screamed out ; and it was you, Violet—I saw your face then. Mr. Aylmer was trying to save you, and somebody—a young girl—looking helplessly on! Oh, it was horrible! don't let me think about it! Ring the bell, Signor Lorenzo ; we will have some tea. I need it, and you ought to, after all my trouble in my dreams about you both."

CHAPTER XIII.

SHE ACCUSED HERSELF.

ALONE in her room that night, Violet sat down opposite her mirror, looked sternly at the reflection therein, and began to ask it certain questions, determined to have them answered if she waited till the sun rose.

What ailed her—what had come over her during these past weeks—and to what must she attribute the strange mental aberration whereof she boldly accused herself?

Laurence Aylmer had conceived a fancy for her—very probably he called it love ; a young man's fancy was the correct name, and Violet nodded severely as she put that portion of her soliloquy into words.

"You are not a girl, not even a very young woman, that I should call in any modest reticence to your aid," she told the image, which smiled at this remark, thereupon appearing so youthful in its radiant loveliness that Violet cried out in wrath : "You may try with all your might to look twenty-four, but you are an old maid just the same! You will be four-and-thirty your next birthday, miss—you can't delude *me!*"

But this thrust, which gave her the more satisfaction

because it hurt either her heart or vanity, had no effect on the image; it smiled at her still, serene in the arrogance of beauty.

"Four-and-thirty!" repeated Violet, venomously, and tried to wrinkle her forehead, but the image would only copy her pretty dimples, apparently regarding the frown as a mere shadow not worth photographing.

"He is seven-and-twenty," pursued Violet; "seven-and-twenty—why, a boy still, who must indulge in a score of fancies before he learns what love means! And you like him—yes, you do! I am too much ashamed of you to give a stronger name, though you deserve it. And you have been dreaming about fate, and called your acquaintance with him something set outside common laws, because a few little romantic circumstances surrounded its commencement. And you never have loved anybody; destiny wasted your girlhood so far as love was concerned—except once, and then you had neither soul nor brains to appreciate the man who came to you with the offering of his great heart—a man worth a score of this Romeo you are poetizing over!"

But here the image looked such utter and overwhelming unbelief, that Violet was forced to retract the assertion if she desired to fulfill her vow of being perfectly honest.

"No, I don't mean that. He is as clever and honorable and good as he is handsome; oh, I am not afraid to speak the truth!" and she fairly shook her clenched hand in the glass. Then hearing her own voice clear and distinct, started and glanced over her shoulder, with a nervous fancy that she was not alone with her own reflection in the mirror, but that some supernatural agency was directing the whole matter. A sudden feeling of pity struck her for that beautiful face, and she exclaimed: "It is hard—hard! Life gives you everything when it is too late—too late!"

She leaned her head upon the table and sobbed like a child, she, whose tears so seldom flowed without good reason, and then were usually caused by the woes of others, not her own.

In the commonplace light of the morning, Violet felt reassured of her own strength—felt a little grave, sad too; naturally, she admitted, after recalling the chill uneventfulness of her girlhood, the emptiness of that spring which ought to have held experiences enough to crowd all later

years so full of happy memories that even age would not appear barren.

This thought kept her from being ashamed of her tears. She had reason to regret her youth, left void of what renders youth beautiful. Neither gratified dreams nor hopes had come within its reach ; it had waned and died without attaining youth's highest apotheosis—love. She had been defrauded, and neither here nor hereafter could existence atone for the wrong. She might be happy in this world and the next, but that void in memory would always remain. No compensation could be made her ; the blank could never be filled, because it was now too late to let her heart waken, even if the enchanter were to call with such power that his voice sounded like the summons of Destiny itself.

Love was for the young ; to her age belonged moderate sentiments. Friendship, esteem, affection, if one pleased ; but four-and-thirty and love were anomalies as absurd as low-necked dresses on some spinster of Eliza Bronson's years, and the consequent display of bones which had done such good service for half a century, that it seemed at once ridiculous and unfeeling to expose them now.

The very passion of Violet's mood would have proved to another person that in spite of her assertions she had not reached a stand-point so wholly within the control of reason and common-sense as she believed. Some vague idea of this nature occurred to her, and she gave a new fling at the image, which, though a little pale and sad-eyed, only looked the more lovely in its softened guise.

"It is silly even to think of what might have been," Violet said to her victim ; "wicked too—a rebellion against Providence."

The image stared at her with a sudden bitter smile on its beautiful mouth—a sudden fire in its beautiful eyes, and seemed to say :

"I hate Providence then, if it is the fault of Providence that I am to have no youth !"

Violet started up, frightened, as you and I have been more than once when our souls have cried out with supernatural strength against their human miseries, roused by some catastrophe to utter the unanswerable demand of a reason for those griefs and disappointments, to bear which

has seemed at such moments the sole ground to assign for our creation.

As Violet was leaving the hands of the skillful Clarice, the roll of carriage-wheels became audible; voices, too, from below made themselves heard in the dressing-room, situated in an angle of the building that commanded a view of the entrance.

"Why, I am sure it is Mademoiselle Bronsone!" exclaimed Clarice, running to a window and peeping out. "Yes, yes, it is—and the professor. She weeps, the poor demoiselle—oh, how she weeps!"

"What can be the matter?" cried Violet, hastening towards the door.

"Mademoiselle should not disquiet herself," counseled Clarice, philosophically. "The good Demoiselle Bron-sone weeps so easily! The professor laughs; he pretends to be comforting her—but he laughs, the wicked one! He is always happy to tease the poor lady! It is nothing—mademoiselle may be assured it is nothing."

When Violet reached the lower corridor, she saw her friend standing in the door, talking excitedly to old Pietro, though with no other effect than to make him look utterly helpless and imbecile, as in her agitation she spoke English, while the professor leaned, calm and dignified, against a pillar, regarding her with his most Sphinx-like smile.

"I want Violet!" moaned Eliza, breaking off in what appeared to be some recital of disaster, and turning desperately upon the sage. "Oh, professor, don't stand there like a bronze statue, but say it so the creature can understand, for I am so troubled that I cannot speak my own language, much less his! Violet—I must see Violet!"

"And here she is," said that lady, moving forward.

Miss Bronson uttered a shriek and fell upon her neck, weeping bitterly. Pietro discreetly disappeared, and, in his wicked enjoyment of the spinster's distress, the professor stood on his left foot, and with difficulty kept from waving his right leg in the air after a fashion which would have been highly unbecoming a man of his reputation and scientific acquirements.

"I hope there is nothing serious the matter," said Violet, loosening the clasp of Eliza's arms, so as to be able to breathe and speak.

"Matter!" groaned Miss Bronson, and paused, choked by sobs.

"How do you do, Fräulein?" asked the professor, as beamingly as if Eliza had been chanting a humorous ditty. "We have come to make you an early visit—give us welcome!"

"I perceive that you have," replied Violet, unable to repress her laughter at the ludicrous contrast between Eliza's misery and the savant's determined, not to say diabolical, cheerfulness.

"Don't laugh—don't!" moaned Miss Bronson, sinking into a chair. "Oh! oh! the ceiling fell and ruined everything! A wreck—a mere wreck! I said I'd better escape with my life, and so live to tell you; and I brought the professor—most improper—but not a time to stop for ceremony! And, oh! I did all I could—I'd have held it up with broomsticks till I was crushed; but how could I support a whole house? And I warned you not to buy it—you must admit that! I begged and prayed you not to buy it! Two lone ladies in a corrupt foreign land! So do not blame me; oh! that I cannot bear! it is too much—too much!"

"What does she mean, professor?" demanded Violet.

"All fallen in—all!" cried Eliza. "Yes, tell her, professor; break it as gently as you can. Be prepared, Violet—be prepared. And I begged you not to buy it; I prayed you to flee from the wickedness of this Papistical country!"

She sobbed so loud that it was impossible for the professor to utter a syllable, but he reassured Miss Cameron by a glance which in a less distinguished personage might almost have been considered a wink.

"Try not to sob so loud, Eliza," said Violet; "you will rouse the whole household: besides, you don't give the professor an opportunity to tell me what is the matter."

"Speak, professor, speak!" ordered Eliza, "when I have begged you, implored you to tell the tale! Oh, was there ever a man so perverse?" and her sudden irritation against the savant helped to compose her slightly.

"Miss Bronson has been somewhat agitated," the professor began.

"*Somewhat!*" repeated Eliza, in a strangled scream.

"In fact, she had a little fright——"

"A *little* fright! Oh, if that is the way you state mat-

ters, pray let me break the awful news myself," said Eliza, putting her handkerchief to her eyes, and then removing it to bestow a withering glare upon the sage. "I *thought*—yes, I own it, I thought, professor, that at such a moment your much-vaunted friendship for Miss Cameron would have asserted itself! I fondly believed that you would employ such mental resources as you could command to break gently to her the catastrophe!" Then her dignity failed, and she began to wring her hands, crying: "Oh, Violet, Violet! the whole house may have fallen in by now —everything ruined! and I begged and besought——"

"Yes, I know you did," interrupted Violet. "Come, whatever the accident—and I suppose it must be something terrible—at least you are alive and unhurt. And here is the professor safe too, and ready to unfold the tale, if you will allow him."

"Oh, the professor!" exclaimed Eliza, in high scorn; "he is safe enough, and as useless as only a man can be. Standing there, dumb and deaf, when he came on purpose to help me impart the news; though a person who pretends to have a dozen Oriental languages at his command might, one would think, find some tongue in which to reveal the tidings!"

"If I had a pencil I would attempt to make it clear in hieroglyphics on the door-post," said the professor.

"And that is the way he has treated me during the whole drive!" cried Eliza, spreading wide her hands with a gesture of despair. "I could not have believed—no, unless he had proved it himself—I could not have believed that any human being would behave as he has done to a friend —a lady!"

"Heavens, professor, what do I hear?" said Violet.

"I did my best to soothe her," replied the professor, every feature of his grim face lighted with ecstatic enjoyment. "Why, she was quite composed, and laughed heartily during our drive. It is only seeing you that has unnerved her."

Eliza gave him another disdainful glance, and turned away her head, rising slowly and with majesty.

"Violet," she said, "if you will permit, I shall go up to your room and repose myself for a little. Now that you know the worst—now that I have told you what has happened—I feel the effects of my late terror. It only re-

mains for me to thank Professor Schmidt for the great assistance he has given in this moment of need, and to assure him that I heartily regret having burdened his scientific mind with our troubles."

She swept down the corridor towards the stairs, looked back over her shoulder to say :

"You have your usual rooms, I suppose, Violet?"

"Yes, my dear," replied Violet, mildly, and Eliza disappeared.

The professor rubbed his hands and chuckled.

"Fräulein," said he, "I have seen her under the influence of many varying emotions, but I don't think she ever gave us anything so delicious as this! She really has surpassed herself! I wish—oh, I wish I could have embalmed her with that expression on her face!"

"Now tell me what foundation there was for her distress?" asked Violet. "I suppose the house is not quite in ruins?"

"A bit of the ceiling fell in one of the anterooms," the professor explained. "I had gone to the house to beg our beloved Eliza to send you a little parcel (only some pamphlets you wanted), and then I thought I might as well go up stairs and write you a note. She dashed out just as I reached the landing, with half a dozen women after her as frightened as herself; it was even better than the poisoning scene, I assure you."

"Poor Eliza, to have to depend upon you for sympathy!" laughed Violet.

"Nobody could have been more sympathizing than I was," said the professor. "She finally decided to drive over here and tell you the fatal tidings, and as I had nothing to do, I thought I would accompany her and see you all. Everybody is well, I hope? Have you taken good care of my Laurence?"

"Here he comes with the marchese, so he can speak for himself," Violet said, as Aylmer and his host appeared from the garden. She exchanged greetings with the two gentlemen, then went away to find Miss Bronson, not sorry to escape the eager, questioning looks which Aylmer's eyes cast upon her.

She would return home; that determination seized her while mounting the stairs. The accident which Eliza had come to report would serve as an excuse, and she wanted

to get away. Just now, to remain under the same roof with Aylmer would give him so many opportunities of renewing the conversation of the previous night that she should be at a disadvantage. After a few days of not seeing her, he would have had leisure to attain to a more sensible mood, be ready to listen to her wise arguments, and not trouble the course of their friendship by any further approaches to romantic folly.

She found Eliza established in an easy-chair in her boudoir, drinking sal volatile and water, and relating the accident to Clarice, who listened with well-simulated interest.

"So a bit of the ceiling fell in the antechamber," said Violet, as the maid retired. "Quite a special interposition of Providence. I always hated those frescoes."

"Really, Violet," observed Miss Bronson, looking horrified, "it is positively wicked to speak in that light way——"

"But since no harm was done!"

"Such a state as the room is in! And we might all have been killed—every soul in the house, and half the people we know into the bargain!" cried Eliza. "And you to speak so carelessly instead of being grateful—yes, prayerful, over our escape!"

"I'll be as grateful as you like, my dear; but I can't help rejoicing at the opportunity for changing those frescoes. You are safe, and so is the rest of the household—our friends are, too—no damage done that I can discover."

"It is downright cruel of you to speak like that, when you know how fond I was of that dear little rococo dog; and he never ought to have stood on the anteroom table, and now he is smashed to atoms, and nothing left but the end of his beautiful little red tail with a black spot on the tip!"

"My dear, he was only china! We'll stop at Janetti's this very day, and I'll buy you a more picturesquely ugly one even than he. I saw a charming beast there—vivid green—mediæval—with no tail at all, but he had two heads to make up for the lack! So don't be downcast, Eliza."

"It is your levity that troubles me," said Eliza; "if I could only teach you to see that life is a serious matter—that we are creatures of an hour; here perhaps to-day,

and to-morrow—ah, where? Who shall say—gone like sparks——"

"Or your little blue dog with a red tail!" interrupted Violet.

"Heedless, unreflecting girl!" sighed Eliza.

"Signorina!" muttered Violet, thinking of the previous evening, and feeling so near mingled tears and laughter, that she felt herself as absurd as Eliza. "If I don't take care we shall be two hysterical old maids together!"

"What did you say; Violet?"

"I say that I am going back to town with you. I have an excuse, and, to own the truth, I am not sorry to get away."

"Why, nothing unpleasant has happened, I hope? Nina hasn't done anything to annoy you?"

"What an idea! And the marchese——"

"Oh!" broke in Eliza, lifting her hands and eyes towards heaven, and beginning to shiver, "Oh, after that nothing will ever surprise me! But you don't mean it. He wouldn't—he hasn't——"

"Hasn't what, in the name of goodness?"

"Yet why need I be surprised? Those Italians—one is never safe! But, for Nina's sake—poor Nina!—oh! I hope he hasn't——"

"What do you mean?" cried Violet. "Speak out. You quite make one's flesh creep."

"Creep! yes indeed! The wickedness of these Florentines is enough! I need not wonder; and yet—and yet—oh, try to think you were mistaken! He hasn't——"

"Yes!" shouted Violet in desperation. "Now are you satisfied? If so, try to become sane and talk of something else."

"Oh!" ejaculated Eliza anew, "I knew he would, sooner or later—I expected it—I warned you!" she added, with the resignation of a person who, after enduring suspense for months, feels a certain sensation of relief when the blow falls. "Those dreadful Italians—all alike! Poor Nina—his wretched wife! My dear, I'll break it to her if you think she ought to be told. I will not shrink from duty, however painful. I will not desert you, my poor darling!"

"Well, that's kind of you, at all events."

"And he has—he has! I thought you looked pale—no wonder! You are right to leave the house. Oh, if you

had only gone before !—it is too late now to prevent what has happened——"

"Suppose you tell me what that is ?" asked Violet.

"You said the marchese had been making love to you ! If you told it as a jest, then I can only say I think it very unbecoming and indelicate to joke upon such matters !" cried Eliza, angrily, as Violet's peals of laughter warned her that she had misunderstood the state of the case.

"Poor Carlo, I am sure he would think it a great hardship," Violet said, as soon as she could speak. "Now, Eliza, rein in your vestal imagination for the rest of the day ; it really is too brilliant for anybody but a sensational novel-writer to own."

"I think you are very unkind, Violet. I know you don't mean to be, but you always forget how sensitive I am ! You are so heedless, so unreflecting, so——"

"Young !" added Violet, with mocking emphasis. "Don't leave out that item in the count ! And now let us go down to breakfast. Mind you stand by me, for Nina will be outrageous and try to keep me ; but I must go—I really must ; I do so want to get home !"

"Something has happened, I am sure of it !" cried the spinster.

"Something will if you don't stop teasing me," returned Violet, laughing again. "I shall certainly do you a mischief, my blessed Eliza, before my ill-spent existence comes to an end—I know I shall ; I feel it looming in the future, as the poets say."

Then Eliza laughed too, and felt greatly relieved—she always did after having made a scene ; and luckily, by allowing her that privilege now and then, during the rest of the time she managed to conduct herself with very tolerable equanimity, and was not, in reality, taking the year together, more trouble or annoyance to Miss Cameron than any human creature must be who is flung on one's hands the twelve months in and out, even though that segment of humanity had a genius equal to Michael Angelo's, or a face as pretty as Madame le Brun's portrait, painted by her own partial brush.

Violet expected the marchesa to be horridly indignant over her departure—perhaps uncomfortably curious as to its cause ; but nothing ever happens as one anticipates.

Carlo had brought news that the workmen had at last left Casa Magnoletti free.

"So we shall flit ourselves immediately," Nina said; "and therefore I forgive your desertion, Violet."

"Going to-day, Miss Cameron!" cried Aylmer, dolefully.

"Going!" repeated the professor, saving her the trouble of reply, "and so are you, young idler! You are to get to work; I have plenty cut and dried, and came on purpose to carry you back to it."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE ARABIC LESSONS.

MISS CAMERON returned home, and amid the plenitude of sage resolves which she indulged at this period, determined that she would no longer consume so many hours in idle visits and amusement.

On the way to town she admitted the professor into her confidence, and consulted him upon the feasibility of studying Arabic as an employment which could not come under the head of frivolous recreation. He encouraged the idea because he was to be her teacher, though he knew as well as she that the whim would only prove a means for wasting his time and hers; but with the usual determined blindness of humanity, he no more admitted the fact to himself than Violet allowed her motives and feelings to stare her in the face without some vail of pretense flung across their features.

The professor grew enthusiastic over her plan, and endeavored to discover numerous benefits certain to accrue therefrom. He labored so hard and failed so ignominiously, that Violet at last burst out laughing, and the professor laughed as heartily as she, while Eliza Bronson looked severe disapproval of their levity.

"I can see nothing ludicrous in the project of serious

study," she said; "and I do not know, Violet, whether I am most surprised at you or the professor."

"I am as serious as the grave," began Violet, but Eliza lifted her hands to enjoin silence.

"Do not be profane," she cried with a shudder; "do not!"

The professor bounced in delight—no other word can serve, savant though he was—he bounced, and Violet nodded her head in responsive enjoyment, while Eliza stared coldly upon them, and presently observed with fine disdain:

"As you are not Chinese mandarins strung on wires, but reasonable, rational human beings——"

"Not I, at least," interrupted Violet.

"With immortal souls," pursued Eliza, impressively.

"Not proven!" broke in the professor. "We are simply, my dear, dearest Miss Bronson, huge masses or agglomerations of molecules."

"Violet, stop the carriage!" shrieked Eliza. "I'll walk—I'll walk every step of the way from here to the city gates, rather than be exposed to listen to such horrible theories! After the escape we have had—when the very ceiling fell as a warning, to hear him talk like this!"

"*Ach, mein Gott!* now she accuses me and my heresies of causing that disaster," exclaimed the professor, with a hypocritical attempt at a groan.

"Sir," said Eliza, "I accuse you of nothing—I leave that to your conscience——"

"No well-organized animal has one," interposed the professor.

"And your Maker!" added Eliza, in a sepulchral whisper. "Beware, Doctor Schmidt, beware!"

"*Potztausend!*" gasped the professor.

"Spare me the coarse horror of those Teutonic oaths," said Eliza, with majesty. "For many years an instructress of the young—a position which I trust I held with credit to myself, with good effect upon others——"

"I am sure of it," cut in the professor.

"I became (if you will hear me out)," pursued Eliza—"I became too conversant with the harsh intricacies of your native tongue, not to comprehend those expressions which, alas! are only too redundant in your language—too ordinarily on the lips of men who ought, from their talents and position, to be models——"

"*Sapperment!*" faltered the professor, shrinking into a corner of the carriage.

"Like you," continued Eliza, following up her advantage.

"Then, if I am a model, that enough."

"As you ought to be," cried Eliza, making the sentence all capitals by her energy.

"And is not," said Violet; "so, my dear, the professor and I will return to Arabia, and settle about the hours for our wanderings there."

Eliza pulled her vail over her face, leaned back in her seat, and withdrew her attention from all mundane matters and sinful triflers, sporting recklessly on the verge of the abyss, which was the good spinster's favorite appellation for the mystery-shrouded existence beyond this earthly sphere.

The first decisive step Miss Cameron took, in accordance with her resolution to waste less time, was to deny herself to Giulia da Rimini.

"She is at home, and *he* is with her!" thought the Sicilian. "Only wait! I will punish her for her insolence before three months go by—only wait!"

The flash in her black eyes so startled her footman, as he stood at the carriage-door awaiting further orders, that he afterwards told the coachman he would rather break stones on the highway in a galley-slave's dress than call himself Duca da Rimini, so long as that fiery-orbed dame lived to bear the title of duchess, though Alps and Apennines and all the other mountain-ranges of Europe might tower between him and her.

Violet insisted upon commencing her Arabic studies without delay, but, to her astonishment, when the professor appeared on the appointed morning, he came accompanied by a second pupil—no less a person than Mr. Laurence Aylmer.

"I had already promised to give this ignorant fellow some lessons. I can't afford to waste time over two separate scholars—you must just stumble on together," the professor explained, with an easy assurance which quite took Violet's breath away—with such dogged determination, too, in face and voice, that in any case she could hardly have ventured to question his dictum.

"I expect speedily to grow so Oriental that I shall talk

in hexameters, or whatever may be the Eastern equivalent for that unpleasant form of verse," said Laurence, so far from making any excuse for the liberty the professor had taken in presenting him, that he seemed to Violet triumphant; as if he had managed to thwart her in some way, and, for the life of her she could not help coloring under his glance, though she felt vexed with him and herself therefor.

"I hope Mr. Aylmer is willing to begin with first principles," said she, opening at random the book nearest to her hand.

"At the very alphabet, and to work his way up step by step," replied Laurence, with an odd ring in his voice.

This time she would not so much as look towards him; she had no desire to see the significance of his speech accentuated by the light of those dangerous eyes.

The professor glanced at each in turn from under his shaggy brows.

"Humph!" said he. "One strange language at a time. I am here to teach you Arabic—don't exercise your wits before me in a tongue that I cannot understand."

After this speech a silence came upon his two pupils, and he took advantage of it to expound his peculiar theories as to the way in which Oriental languages should be studied; proved conclusively that anybody who could not acquire them with great facility, in a very brief space of time, by pursuing his original method, must be a dolt; and wound up by informing the pair that he did not expect either to do him or his system any credit, though it would undoubtedly be the fault of their powers of application, and not of their brains.

Then, without rhyme or reason, he glared anew at the pair; then he ejaculated, in a growl like that of a hungry lion:

"*Sapperment!*" and neither of his scholars asked him what he meant, or what had caused the unseemly outburst. Violet had her eyes fixed on the trimmings of her gown, as if counting the threads in the fringe; and Aylmer was finding difficulty in settling his arm-chair at a proper angle as to the table, and the professor glared in vain.

"So!" said he, and flung open a volume with a bang. "Begin, you male pupil, because it is a masculine right, and it is only a false, unnatural and depraved state of soci-

ety which has given rise to the habit of offering precedence, out of a mawkish sentimentality styled courtesy, to the female animal. Begin, I say !"

And his pupil meekly obeyed.

"Upon my word," chuckled the professor, when the lesson was finished, "I take great credit for my power of discipline, and I must say you certainly seem inclined to prove yourselves prize scholars in point of obedience."

And this time Violet, feeling Aylmer's eyes upon her, did not hesitate to glance towards him and to return his smile, which thereupon grew so joyous that her troublesome conscience immediately began to reproach her for having already failed in the letter as well as spirit of the bond she had signed and sealed with Wisdom, leaving the regulation of her conduct entirely in the guidance of that goddess.

About a fortnight later, Violet received a letter from America announcing Mrs. Danvers's death—news for which previous epistles had prepared her. The date of Mary's sailing was not fixed. A friend in New York, with whom she was now stopping, would make the voyage with her, so her cousin would have no reason for anxiety, but at present Mrs. Forrester found it impossible to name the day for starting.

The weeks went by ; autumn waned ; December came, but the weather retained its amiability, and there was not even a suggestion of ice or Tramontana in the air.

It seemed to Violet that she lived more quickly during this period than in her whole previous life—lived so much and so far, that often she had to count the weeks day by day in order to satisfy herself that they were so few : yet even after doing this and being numerically convinced, the sense of time—of a great length of time having passed since her return to Florence—remained as strong as ever. Pleasant, pleasant weeks, save when now and then she roused up to fear that she regarded life less practically than she ought, but finding always excuses wherewith to content reason, with whom she still regarded herself as on the most intimate terms.

The Arabic studies speedily sank into a farce, whose name neither professor nor scholars had the assurance to mention, though the lessons continued, and formed an excuse for many delightful hours. Often the teacher would

fail to appear, or would come very late, giving as a plea that he had been occupied and forgot. But Miss Cameron's fellow-pupil never forgot; he was always punctual to the moment, and Eliza Bronson, who, with her habit of taking things seriously, believed in the lessons and several times presented herself as a spectator, was so edified by the diligence with which during her visits Mr. Aylmer studied the big books with their mysterious characters, that she felt confident of his rapid progress, and convulsed the professor by declaring that she had known from the first he would possess great capabilities for the language.

"By the shape of his head?" suggested the savant.

"No," said Eliza; "I have relinquished phrenology as a failure, so have all thinking people. I am surprised you should betray any faith therein, professor—you, who have so little to spare."

"For that reason I cultivate it whenever I can," said the professor.

"By the shape of his nose," pursued Eliza, regardless of the savant's mild attempt at exultation. "I tried to get you to read that interesting pamphlet in regard to the expression of noses, but you would not. Now, Mr. Aylmer's nose is as purely Arabian as if he were an Arab, and so——"

"Is a second-hand clothes-dealing Jew's," added the cruel professor.

He had great difficulty to make his peace with Miss Bronson after this offensive speech; any remark which militated against Mr. Aylmer's superhuman excellence, physical, mental and moral, being a positive crime in her eyes.

It would be useless to deny that learning Violet Cameron's age had given Laurence Aylmer a certain shock: no man could discover that he loved a woman so much his senior and not feel the situation an anomaly.

"Why, when I was forty she would be almost fifty; a man is young still at forty. Marrying a person older than himself would seem like choosing a guardian instead of a wife!"

So his thoughts ran on several occasions, but were always speedily checked by the reminder that he had no reason to suppose Miss Cameron would ever dream of wedding him. In his penitence he said bitter things against his own conceit, unjustly too, for he was far from that com-

monest form of masculine vanity—the belief that every woman who smiled at him must be his incurable victim, and that he needed only to mention marriage to the Venus di Medici to transform her at once to flesh and blood, and cause her to descend from her pedestal as meek and obedient as an odalisque gratefully stooping to pick up her sultan's pocket-handkerchief.

Indeed, those reminders of her age speedily faded; the thing simply seemed impossible in the presence of her fresh loveliness. He perceived, too, that in feeling she was as youthful as in her face; younger far than he, for his somewhat morbid, reserved temperament had given him opinions and habits of thought more like those of a person who had passed the meridian of life than of one still so distant from that era.

Day by day his love for Violet grew the ruling power in his soul, and he knew that there had come to him an affection which must be as lasting as existence itself.

He loved her, and chafed restlessly under the restraints which she managed to put upon their intercourse. She treated him like a valued friend both in public and private, but frequently as he saw her alone, she contrived, with a tact few even of her sex could have shown, to keep their conversation aloof from dangerous subjects, to prevent any avowal in words.

His eyes told his story plainly enough, however—those beautiful eyes, whose passionate utterances made her heart thrill tumultuously—whose light haunted her in lonely hours, often weakening her wise resolves till she was ready to believe she wronged him in calling his love a mere fancy, making her weep sometimes over her lost youth, and causing her to repeat that bitter complaint:

"Everything comes too late! Life is cruel to me—very cruel!"

CHAPTER XV.

ANNOUNCED—"MISS DANVERS."

THE last rays of the setting sun brightened the room where Violet Cameron sat idle and meditative after a long morning given up to visitors.

Nobody else was likely to appear at this hour. Miss Bronson had gone to her own apartments, believing she told the truth when she announced her intention of reading a sermon by way of a little improving occupation, so as not to feel that mere mundane matters had wholly engrossed her day. In reality, she went to enjoy a short nap, but the tortures of the Inquisition could not have forced her to admit even mentally that she was capable of giving way to such a weakness of the flesh, wasting any of the precious spare moments which ought to be devoted to "improving the time"—a phrase often on her lips.

So Violet, left to solitude, yielded without scruple to the luxurious indolence which crept over her, and let her fancies wander whither they would, unconscious that in these days she indulged herself more and more in the visionary habit which only a few weeks previous she had assured reason she was determined to relinquish. Had she been roused suddenly she could not have told the subject of her reverie. A thousand vague thoughts flitted like strains of music through her soul; hosts of events connected with the past autumn, unimportant yet strangely sweet, wove themselves like soft rhymes into the melody, and not a measure but held some reference to the friend linked so closely with all the pleasant recollections of this season—her friend Laurence, as she called him always in her reflections—the very title a safeguard against any importunate warning from conscience or common-sense.

Antonio abruptly flung Aylmer's name across the idle sweetness of her reverie. It so often happened that he appeared at similar junctures that occasionally Violet was almost startled by the coincidence—only almost, for even if one were unpractical enough to admit the idea that some

subtle magnetism of thought brought the coincidence about, it would only be a proof of the sympathy which must exist between two minds in order to render friendship perfect, and that this their intercourse was, and was to remain, Violet had so thoroughly impressed upon her soul that very rarely did any troublesome doubt intrude.

And he entered now, eager and glad, through all conventional calm of manner; she glad too—right and fitting surely on his part and hers, since he was her friend—her friend Laurence.

"Is it past all decent hours for a morning visit?" he asked, as he sat down opposite her, after paying the first salutations.

"Entirely! Well-regulated people are beginning to think of their dinners."

"But I am not well regulated."

"It is fortunate Miss Bronson does not hear. You would risk your lofty place in her esteem by such a humiliating confession."

"Well, then, I forgot it was so late. Would that excuse satisfy her?"

"I am afraid not; it is so palpably an after-thought that even my credulous Eliza would not be deceived."

"Then it is better to take refuge in truth," said he. "I waited on purpose till I was certain everybody would be gone. One never gets a chance to speak to you when you have a crowd of people about."

"What a shocking accusation! A good hostess can make each of her guests, no matter how many she may have, feel himself especially noticed."

"I fear I am dull to-day—not equal to social requirements," said he.

"The idea of paying visits in such a mood! I expect people to amuse me."

"You don't look in a humor for it; I saw that as I came in."

"Pray how did I look?"

"Like a Sybil—like some priestess of Apollo——"

"Oh, worse and worse! Miss Bronson would give you up in despair! Even moderate exaggeration is distasteful to her—but this! Besides, she considers any reference to the heathens or their deities highly indecorous, not to say wicked."

"How lucky she is absent! In my present state of mind I should be certain to ruin myself hopelessly," he answered; but the smile on his lips belied his regret so expressively, and the light in his eyes grew so dangerous, that Violet wished the spinster were there. She perceived that he was in one of the moods which would recur in spite of her prudence, when he became difficult to manage—moods which disturbed temporarily the conviction she insisted upon considering settled, that no vagrant fancies were to trouble the even tenor of their friendship.

"Ah, you admitted you felt dull," said Violet, catching quickly at any advantage; "I think Eliza would not condemn that severely. She has great patience with dull books, why not dull people?"

"You mean to impress my unlucky choice of a word on me—three times in that one sentence!"

"Good gracious! do you wish to insinuate that I am dull too?"

"Even my blankest stupidity could not carry me to such a point. Sometimes I wish you were; you would not be so quick to flay and scarify every little truth that utters itself in spite of me."

"What a quantity of long phrases! And it is not the truth I find fault with—scarify, as you poetically term it—only that bad habit you will not cure of paying exaggerated compliments. I have told you over and over that such nonsense between friends was unnecessary."

"I didn't think you would call speaking from my heart nonsense," said he, rushing on forbidden ground at once—assuming, too, the purely masculine privilege in such an encounter, of seeming hurt by her levity or indifference; let a woman feel as deeply as she may, her sense of womanly dignity must prevent her employing that weapon. "Say a liberty—an impertinence, if you will—but not nonsense."

"We won't quarrel over mere words," returned Violet, pleasantly, with the comfortable assurance of being mistress of herself and the situation.

"Excuse me, but it is a question of feelings, not words!" cried he, with another dangerous flash from his eyes, which shook her confidence as to the ease with which she should keep the ice of conventionalities unbroken—nay, worse still, brought a swift fear that she had too

hastily exulted at her victory over the image in the mirror. "Only listen—only let me explain!"

"Compliments do not need explanation," returned she, holding fast desperately to that signification for his utterances. "A woman who has seen as many seasons as I, and heard as much persiflage talked, does not hold a man *au pied de la lettre* for every poetical speech in which he may think gallantry compels him to indulge."

"That is unkind!" said he.

"Come, I'll not acknowledge it! If you had said uncivil, I might have owned you were right, but unkindness implies an intention to wound. I am sure I don't wish to punish your bad habit of paying compliments so severely."

"Compliments! How you insist on using that word, when you know it is utterly misplaced; unwise, too, considering your stand-point."

"How unwise?" she asked, and realized that she had given him an advantage, but the question was uttered.

"Because such very determined affecting to believe everything I say persiflage, looks almost as if you were afraid of recognizing my earnestness, and you know——"

She knew what he was going to say; another instant, and he would hurry on in passionate speech, which would effectually destroy the guise of friendship to which she had, with so much trouble, confined their relations. She knew it; the delicious utterances thrilled her as if already pronounced, but prevent their expression she must.

"You are right," she said; "I am afraid!"

"Violet!" he exclaimed, speaking her name for the first time—a passionate joy breaking out in face and voice. He made a quick movement to seize her hands, which were resting upon the table before her. She did not remove them out of his reach, but she clasped them hard together till they looked cold and firm in the shadowy room as two sculptured hands, while something in her eyes, as she looked full at him, prevented his carrying out his intention, though again her name broke from his lips: "Violet!"

"Let me speak," she said, outwardly calm, in spite of her agitation. "Yes, I am afraid—I will tell you why. I do not wish to lose my friend—I do not wish to have our pleasant intimacy (so very pleasant to me) disturbed; and this must happen if he will not remember that any approach to flirtation on the part of a woman of my age

would be as unworthy her, as any brief fancy on his for a person years older than himself would be misplaced and unnatural."

She spoke the words very slowly, very composedly; but oh, they hurt, they hurt, in spite of her strength and courage!

"Oh, all that——"

"Is truth and common-sense," she interrupted smiling. "So now let us be sensible, my friend—Laurence."

And she spoke his name too for the first time. If a voice from the portals of heaven had called bidding him enter, the tones could not have sounded more entrancing to his ear. Every effort she made to break his chains only riveted them closer.

"So we will get back to the regions of common-sense and stay there," she continued before he could speak, smiling at him still, even while her heart shivered and ached as if she were pressing a weight of ice down upon it. "Remember, if you talk in a way to make me feel silly, I shall think it is because I have been trying to affect the graces of a young girl, and so be obliged to despise myself at almost thirty-four; recollect, Laurence, almost thirty-four!"

He dared not continue—he knew that he should receive his dismissal then and there if he did; yet to let himself be so effectually checked was not only painful, but irritating.

"You are hard—hard!" he exclaimed, wisely taking refuge in an affectation of petulance which would afford her an opportunity to pretend to think it only his man's vanity she had wounded. "I wish I were ill again—I wish I had never got well!"

"Upon my word!"

"I do! You were kind then. Ah, I dare say you have forgotten; but I remember everything—the slightest detail—even to that day when you laid the flowers on my pillow."

How stupid she had been not to tell him the truth long before! Yet perhaps it was fortunate after all that she had not—it would come with more force now.

"I have never forgiven the professor for robbing me," he added.

"You could easily have had more from the same quarter," said she, laughing.

"Why, you have never so much as given me a rose-bud since!" retorted he.

"Oh, I had nothing to do with the matter! You must thank the Duchess da Rimini! It was she left the jessamines—romance is not my forte."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say—romance is not——"

"No—no! You did not put the flowers there?"

"Most certainly not! I hope I am free from prudery, still nothing but necessity would have induced me to pay you visits."

"And you have let me deceive myself all this time!" he cried, with mingled anger and disappointment.

"Really, I did not suppose you recollected the poetical incident," said she, laughing again.

"Oh, you are hard to me—hard!" he exclaimed, bitterly.

But before he could add another word the door opened, and Antonio's slow, measured voice announced:

"Miss Danvers!"

CHAPTER XVI.

FROM AMERICA.

THE interruption was so unexpected, Violet's thoughts so engrossed by Aylmer's words and her own efforts to keep the conversation upon the safe ground of banal compliment, that for a second Antonio's announcement only caused her a vague sensation of wonder, and she repeated the name in a low tone, almost as if trying to recollect what connection her mind had therewith:

"Miss Danvers!"

"From America," added Antonio, his varied experience enabling him to take in the position at once. He felt as guilty as though he had committed a willful sin—more so,

perhaps, for in Antonio's peculiar creed a stupidity was less pardonable than a crime, and he retreated sorely crest-fallen, thinking, "I deserve to be thrown down stairs! I ought to have remembered, though it is an at-home day, there are visitors and visitors, and not have intruded so suddenly when mademoiselle was alone with *him!*"

Miss Cameron and Aylmer had risen simultaneously; she got her wits back in a flash (at the same time becoming aware of a very odd expression in Aylmer's eyes), and saw the new-comer hesitating near the door. A young girl dressed in deep mourning, with a heavy crape vail, which might have befitted a widow, falling over her face, so that she was obliged to push it back, and she did so in an annoyed fashion. A pretty girl—prettier than ever in her embarrassment, wherewith mingled an attempt at self-assertion which might end in anger or cause her to run away in a fright if she were not received in a fashion to assure her that her visit was welcome. But though all this showed so plainly in countenance and attitude, she appeared neither bold nor disagreeably missish; somehow she gave the effect of a child playing at being a woman.

Violet hurried forward, and the little visitor cried:

"Oh, I have come to see my cousin, Miss Cameron, if you will please tell her! I am Mary Danvers—if you don't believe it you can ask Mr. Aylmer! He can say who I am if he chooses, and not some pretender, though he acts as if he didn't remember me! And—and—my cousin asked me to come!"

She looked inexpressibly tired; a burst of tears was evidently imminent, in spite of her determination.

Violet reached her side, embraced her cordially, and placed her in the nearest chair, saying rapidly:

"My dear child, I am delighted to see you! You took me so by surprise that I couldn't think at all for a second. I am so very, very glad you have got here!"

"Oh, thank you," returned the other, in a hurried way, rather shrinking from Violet's caress. "If you will please tell my cousin—Miss Cameron——"

"My dear, I am your cousin!" cried Violet, putting both arms about her. "Welcome, a thousand times!"

Mary Danvers stared in astonishment—almost incredulity.

"Are you Violet?—are you really?" she exclaimed.

"Why, of course I am; for whom do you take me?" laughed Miss Cameron, pushing the heavy vail still farther back, from the eager, wondering face. "You are tired out——"

"Oh! but I needn't be such a goose!" broke in Mary. "And to think of my not knowing you! I thought you would look el— I mean——" She stopped in confusion.

"You couldn't know me by instinct," said Violet, caressing her. "I am so sorry there was no one at the station to meet you; if you had sent me word——"

"Oh! weren't you expecting me?" interrupted Mary again. "Didn't you receive the telegram?"

"No, indeed; but never mind—you are here!"

"Oh, she sent one from Paris—I wouldn't stop—and after all you did not receive it; and to fall in on you like this! Oh! I don't like it!" cried the visitor, and it was plain that it required a great effort to keep back a sob.

"And who came with you? Of course you did not make the journey alone?"

"I told you she sent a telegram," rejoined Mary, in that injured little voice, and her chin, which she had with much difficulty just quieted, began to quiver anew. "But maybe she forgot—she did forget so; and I ought to have attended to it myself: but I had such a dreadful headache. Oh dear, it is too bad to have taken you by surprise!"

"Not of the least consequence—don't think of it. You have come, and that is enough," said Violet, very sorry for her, though unable to repress a feeling that so much confusion was misplaced, even while she appreciated the girl's efforts to overcome it. "You are worn out by your journey, poor dear, and that makes you nervous."

"Yes, that is it," assented Mary, but Violet saw her blue eyes wander towards Aylmer, who stood waiting till the first salutations between the cousins were over before he came forward to renew his acquaintance with the younger.

"Here is some one you know," said Violet. "Come and speak to her, Mr. Aylmer; the sight of a familiar face will do her good."

Was there something peculiar in the manner of both? Aylmer, at least, had recovered his usual demeanor by the time he reached the ladies. He held out his hand to the new-comer, saying:

"How do you do, Miss Danvers? I am very happy to meet you again."

"Thanks; you are very good," returned Mary, primly. She let him take her hand, but quickly drew it away, and said, looking at Violet: "I—I have not seen him since before poor papa died."

Now she sobbed outright, but controlled herself in a moment.

Violet, anxious to change the current of her thoughts, began to speak of her journey. Aylmer joined in about its fatigues, and, as soon as an opportunity offered, added:

"I will take myself off, Miss Cameron, and give you and your cousin an opportunity to make acquaintance. I shall come to-morrow, if I may, to hear if she finds herself quite rested."

"Yes, pray do. *Au revoir*," said Violet, pleasantly; but she did not offer him her hand, and Aylmer noticed the omission.

"Good-morning, Miss Danvers," he continued.

"Good-morning," Mary answered, and gave him another of her odd glances, at once mutinous and reproachful—like a child who feels that it has suffered injustice, and does not quite know what form of defense it ought to assume; is a little afraid, too, that its self-assertion will be laughed at.

Aylmer went his way, divided between a natural masculine annoyance at the interruption of his interview with Miss Cameron and the reflections which the sight of George Danvers's daughter roused in his mind.

Violet saw her cousin glance after the retiring guest, and noticed that odd expression on her face; but in the poor child's present state, it was impossible to decide whether emotion or physical weariness unnerved her. Then, too, this arrival in the house of an unknown relative afforded reason for a certain excitement.

"And who was your *compagnon de voyage?*" she asked.

"Oh, please don't speak French!" cried Mary, almost irritably. "It makes me homesick! I've studied it, and I can read well enough; but it doesn't sound a bit the same when people talk it. Oh, I don't mean to be impolite, you know!"

"It is just a silly habit of mixing languages that persons living on the Continent fall into," said Violet, rather amused to hear how very apologetic her voice grew.

"I should not," replied Mary; but she spoke so like a naughty, willful child that the words did not sound rude.

"And who took care of you on the journey?" asked Violet.

"Why, Mrs. Forrester. Oh, you didn't get the telegram! It is that makes it so awkward, and me such a goose! I thought you would know all about it, and be expecting me."

"But I am just as glad to see you, my dear—a pleasant surprise is always welcome," said Violet, feeling ashamed because the girl's behavior rendered a little effort at patience necessary. "Mrs. Forrester? oh yes—you wrote me you were to sail with her. But I did not think you could have reached Liverpool yet."

"She changed her mind just after I wrote, and we left a week before we intended," said Mary. "I got your dispatch to say you would send to England to meet me—it came the day we sailed; but Mrs. Forrester was coming down to Florence, so I did not want to trouble you. I might have written from London," she added, contritely; "but we were so busy the few days we were there—sight-seeing all the time—and she said a telegram would do."

"Of course, my dear—don't think about it. But where is Mrs. Forrester? why didn't she come to the house, so that I might thank her for taking care of you?"

"That was another thing that hurried us," cried Mary. "The day we left London she got a message from her sister in Rome, who was very ill; and I wouldn't let her lose any time: so I changed trains at Pistoja and she went on. I knew I could do well enough for that little journey, even if I didn't speak Italian, but——"

She had got on so easily in these last speeches that Violet thought the embarrassment all over, and now the child suddenly turned scarlet, her eyes grew so bright they looked angry, and then the tears gathered in them again, and a fresh sob broke her voice; but Mary struggled gallantly for self-control, and once more conquered.

"Lean back and rest a little longer; then we will go to your room, and you shall get your wraps off," Violet said kindly.

"I am very comfortable, thanks," answered the small personage, sitting upright as a dart, though too pretty and slight for the attitude to seem ungraceful.

"But you look so tired," said Violet, for the sake of saying something.

"It doesn't rest me to loll in a chair," replied Mary, still busy subduing her freshly-returned excitement; "I like a hard one best." As she spoke she removed herself into a straight-backed mediæval affair, in which no creature of the present ease-loving generation had ever before been known to sit.

This bit of assertion seemed to do Mary good, but she was still longing to cry, Violet perceived, and the fact kept her from mentally styling her new inmate disagreeable; odd enough, to be sure, but a rather attractive oddity.

"Did you have a good passage—across the Atlantic, I mean? Were you sea-sick?" Violet asked.

"Mrs. Forrester was; I never suffer," announced Mary, with the air of a veteran sailor. Perhaps Violet's face expressed a certain wonder as to where she gained her experience, for the girl added quickly, as if her veracity had been called in doubt, "I went to Florida and back by sea when I was a little girl, with papa."

Another sob here. Violet caught herself wondering how strange it seemed there should be any person to weep over George Danvers's loss! He had certainly made plenty of people shed tears by his misdeeds; then she felt ashamed of such hard-hearted reflections in this poor girl's presence.

"You shall have some tea," she said; "that always rests one." She rang the bell, and Antonio appeared in his customary speedy fashion. She gave her order, adding, "Everything is ready is Miss Danvers's rooms? Have her boxes been carried up?"

"Pardon, mademoiselle, none have come; I was about to ask mademoiselle if I should send——"

"Oh, my baggage—I forgot it!" interrupted Mary, springing out of her chair. The recollection of an odious adventure which she meant to keep to herself checked further speech. She had hurried through the station, and sprung precipitately into the nearest hack, only thinking of escape; and from that moment to this had not remembered those trunks which had weighed so heavily on her mind during the whole journey. And she could offer no explanation. Cousin Violet would believe her heedless and silly, and conceive a prejudice against her; but a recital of

the facts would afford still stronger grounds for censure. Girls had no business to meet with adventures. Mary had no creed more firmly fixed than this. Cousin Violet would be shocked—decide that she had been ill brought up—perhaps condemn her father therefor. A dread of blame falling upon the memory of her dead parent was always her first fear in these days. She had lived for months in a constant state of watchful defense, which would have gone far to render a girl less healthy in body and mind either hopelessly morbid or downright vixenish.

And the trunks might be lost—stolen; not only her wardrobe, but every precious relic she possessed, gone in a single fell swoop. Did ever such miseries befall another? Why, all the woes possible came upon her at once, big and little! As a crowning stroke to her discomfiture, she had said "baggage," and that was an Americanism—she had read so in an English book! And Cousin Violet, who had lived so long abroad, would think her uneducated as well as silly! In her troubled bewilderment she could pay no attention to some question of her cousin's, but caught herself muttering, "Buggage!" a wild, impossible combination of the two words, which made her feel that her brain was positively softening.

But Violet had turned to the man again, without noticing her insane ejaculation; and, oh, she was speaking calmly about rooms and arrangements; and the trunks might be stolen—had been already, no doubt! Mary started forward with some confused idea of rushing off in search of her property—heard Violet exclaim:

"Don't stir, dear child!" and dropped back into her chair, and again her lips muttered that impossible word:

"Buggage!"

"What did you say, dear?" Miss Cameron asked.

Mary only shook her head; she was past speech; so completely exhausted by fatigue and varying emotions that she did not care what became of the trunks, or herself, or anything in the world.

"Just give Antonio the ticket for your boxes," Violet said; and Mary managed to find her pocket-book and extract the paper, but, oh, she was sure she appeared hopelessly idiotic. And she could not explain; and between vexation, weariness, and a shuddering disgust to recall her adventure, she turned positively sick and faint.

After Mary had drunk her tea, she felt somewhat restored ; yet all the while, as Violet sat talking in a kindly cheerful fashion, an odd sensation that everything was unreal oppressed the newly-arrived visitor. She could hardly yet believe this the cousin whom she had pictured as faded and elderly, perhaps pretentious and affected, on the strength of having been a beauty—this lady, so youthful, so lovely, so like Mary's exalted ideas of what a princess or a poetess ought to be ! She found it difficult to accept this brilliant creature as a relative in place of the ideal which she had formed and elaborated with the positiveness of her age—had shrunk from a little, too—and, while glad to discover her error, she indulged a certain sense of injury thereat. Mary was a model to girls in general for her readiness to admit that she had made a mistake or been in the wrong, but she had a trick of retaining that injured feeling under her penitence as a sop to her dignity.

"Now I will show you your rooms," Violet said. "Come this way, dear."

For a space Mary quite forgot her troubles and annoyances in admiration of the charming nook which Violet had furnished with such care.

"My bedroom is next yours," she explained, as they sat down in the boudoir, "and Miss Bronson's apartments are next this room, so you will not feel solitary."

Mary showed so much pleasure, and expressed her gratification so prettily, that Violet ventured to hope she had got quite at her ease, and that now they could begin to make acquaintance.

"My house is a rather gay one," she said presently, *à propos* to some details about her daily life, "but you shall not be worried at present."

"Oh, I noticed you wore no mourning," rejoined Mary, and stopped, confused and vexed at having spoken the words ; yet the sense of injury came back.

"I did for a few weeks," Violet replied quietly ; "as long as is customary, unless for one's immediate family. You must recollect that I had not seen your father for many years."

"Yes—of course—I beg your pardon ! Oh, I don't know what ails me ; I say everything wrong ; I never behaved so in my life—and you are so good to me !" cried Mary, her features working tremulously.

"You are tired, that is all," Violet said. "Now, my dear, I am going away, so that you can lie down and rest before dinner; you will feel better then. Try to sleep, and wake up remembering that you are at home!"

She kissed the girl's forehead and went out of the room. Left to herself, Mary indulged in a hearty fit of crying, which did her good. She slept afterwards, and by the time she met her cousin and Miss Bronson, had recovered sufficient self-control to behave sensibly, though still embarrassed enough to be stiff and precise; a bearing which caused Violet serious doubts as to the probability of her proving a satisfactory companion, but which prepossessed Eliza at once in her favor, stiffness and dignity being synonymous terms in the spinster's mind.

CHAPTER XVII.

GIULIA'S GREEK.

"HAVE you seen Giulia's Greek?" asked Lady Harcourt, as she established herself in the coziest corner of Nina Magnoletti's salon.

It was the little Russian's reception-day, and a knot of people, Violet Cameron among them, was gathered in the room. Her ladyship had just entered, and barely gave herself time to exchange salutations with her friends before she put her question.

"Has Giulia found a Greek?" demanded Nina.

"'When Greek meets Greek, then comes the tug of war,'" quoted Sabakine, with mock sententiousness.

"I knew you would get off that stale old quotation," cried Lady Harcourt. "Yes, Nina, she has; he only arrived yesterday! Oh, my dear, there is the most wonderful history attached——"

"Already?" broke in Sabakine.

"Be quiet, and let me tell my news—not a soul of you had heard! How delightful to be first in the field for once! And how do you suppose she came by him?"

"Advertised!"

"Made a compact with the devil!"

"Won him at cards!" This last suggestion was Sabakine's.

"No, no; nothing so hackneyed and commonplace as either of those devices," said Lady Harcourt.

"And she would have nothing to offer his Satanic majesty, since she gave him her soul long since," Sabakine added.

"Do tell me!" pleaded Nina. "Nobody will ever guess."

"Miss Cameron is the only one who does not try her powers," said Lady Harcourt, "Yankee though she be! Yes, I understand," she continued, as Violet only smiled rather disdainfully in response. "Not worth the trouble! My dear, you never will appreciate Giulia, in spite of all my efforts to make you."

"Oh yes, I think I do," returned Violet.

"At her value," added Sabakine, "which is above rubies! But don't drive us mad with curiosity, Lady Harcourt! Who made the duchess a present of a Greek?"

"Her husband!"

A chorus of incredulity followed; Miss Cameron alone remained silent and indifferent.

"Her husband!" repeated Lady Harcourt, nodding her head impressively, and looking slowly around the circle till her eyes rested upon Violet. "Miss Cameron is the only polite person among you," she added; "I shall tell my story for her special benefit."

"So kind of you," said Violet, laughing at her mischievous friend's efforts to tease her.

"One may be less doubting than Thomas, still there are limits to one's credulity," said Nina.

"Lady Harcourt evidently thinks not," observed Sabakine.

"Hush, you pair of schismatical Muscovites!" cried her ladyship. "Yes, a gift of marital affection, and a very nice-looking one too: who could ever say a harsh word against the duke after this?"

"Are we to accept the duchess's unaided testimony as to the quarter from whence the *cadeau* arrives?" asked Sabakine.

"Not a bit of it; he comes under the husband's seal. I saw the proofs," said Lady Harcourt.

"Ah, do tell me!" urged Nina. "It is cruel to play with all the better feelings of our natures in this fashion."

"My dear, I have to work up gradually to my fine effects; one is not allowed such a marvel to relate every day! Well, then, I drove to Giulia's to carry——"

Her ladyship was interrupted by the entrance of Carlo and Aylmer.

"How do you do, Mr. Aylmer?" cried Nina. "Oh, don't speak, either of you! Lady Harcourt had just begun to tell us something so interesting."

"I can begin again."

"Pray lose no more time! Giulia has got a Greek—her husband sent him—Lady Harcourt went to the house and found him. Now, now, please go on, my dear friend."

"Oh, that story; have you only just heard *that?*" cried the provoking Carlo.

"I have long suspected you of being the most depraved of men, and now I am convinced!" retorted her ladyship. "You only want to spoil my dramatic effects—you know nothing about it!"

"And what business have you here on my reception morning, I should be glad to learn?" demanded Nina.

"Don't I know, my lady?" cried Carlo, holding up a letter. "Nina mia, behold my excuse for this unseemly intrusion!"

"What is it—let me see!" pleaded Nina, hurrying forward and playfully trying to snatch the letter; but he held it out of her reach, while allowing her to look at the seal. "The duke's crest—positively!"

"Certainly this is the age of miracles!" said Sabakine. "Da Rimini makes his wife a present of a young Greek. Did you say he was young, Lady Harcourt?"

"And handsome, too!"

"And selects Carlo, of all people in the world, as his confidant," pursued Sabakine, who was exasperating Aylmer by keeping the seat beside Miss Cameron.

"Oh, at this rate we shall never get at the facts," cried Nina, sinking back in her chair. "Lady Harcourt, if you have a heart in your bosom, go on with your story."

"And I'll come in with the Greek chorus," said Carlo.

"I drove to Giulia's to carry her some of my wonderful embrocation—her little girl had hurt her hand," explained her ladyship.

"Ah well, the poor little thing stands a chance of being cured, since she can be treated for nothing," Sabakine whispered audibly.

Nina menaced him with a paper-knife.

"And there sat Giulia and the Greek! I thought at first I must have been let in by accident; but no! Giulia received me with unbounded enthusiasm, and begged permission to present Giorgio Dimetri—a great friend of her husband's. He had just brought her a letter; the duke particularly requested her to do all in her power to make the signore's stay in Florence agreeable. How could she begin better than by bringing him to the notice of a person, etcetera, etcetera, as myself—spare my modesty! Then we talked; the fellow is well-mannered enough and certainly handsome. I should say a consummate rascal—and—well, I don't know how to explain what I mean. I got an idea that Giulia was afraid of him. I did, positively!"

"Giulia afraid!" exclaimed Nina.

"It does sound absurd. However, he was exaggeratedly courteous and complimentary, and then he went away, and I thought how fortunate I was not a censorious person, else I should be wondering where she picked him up! But Giulia knows this is a wicked world, and she treated me as if I were as wicked as Sabakine himself—brought her proofs. Actually showed me the duke's letter—so very prettily worded—joining praise of his wife and his friend so neatly, that I cried out in admiration."

"And what did she say?" asked Sabakine.

"'Dear Alfredo is such a superior man!'" quoted Lady Harcourt, with so perfect an imitation of the duchess's manner and languid voice, that everybody laughed.

"And now for your part in the comedy, Carlo," said Nina.

"What a changeable world this is!" cried Sabakine.

"To what is that *à propos?*" asked Nina.

"*À propos* to Carlo's turning out the duke's confidant instead of the duchess's," returned Sabakine, coolly.

Everybody laughed again, Nina as heartily as the others; each week convinced her more thoroughly that Carlo's cure was too complete for any danger of a relapse. With all her arts, Giulia da Rimini could never again move him any more than if he had been made of stone

instead of the sadly inflammable materials which entered into his composition.

"Read your letter, Carlino mio," said she; and Carlo read aloud the gracefully-worded lines in which the duke recommended Signor Dimetri to the marchese's friendly offices.

"It really does all seem like a charade to which one hasn't the clue," said Lady Harcourt. "Carlo, had you written to Da Rimini that Giulia was rather lonely these days?"

"How could I, while Aylmer was here?" replied mischievous Carlo.

"Ha! sits the wind in that quarter!" exclaimed her ladyship; then she added meditatively: "That supper is not paid for yet."

She glanced from Nina to Violet. Besides themselves and Carlo, no one comprehended the allusion, but the trio recollected what she had said to Violet; and now, for the first time, it struck Miss Cameron that the countess sometimes went a little too far in her pleasantries; then, meeting her friendly, merry gaze, thought herself absurd to be piqued.

"Have I a supper to pay for, Lady Harcourt?" asked Aylmer, just because he must say something after Carlo's speech, which had turned all eyes, except Violet's, upon him.

"H'm!" said her ladyship. "At all events, it was prophesied that——but never mind! And did you receive the Greek with open arms, Carlo?"

"I should have done so, but unfortunately I was out when he called," Carlo replied.

"I want to ask a favor of you, Carlino, but I suppose you have no time to spare," said Sabakine, so soberly that, quick-witted as the marchese was, he thought the Russian in earnest.

"Of course," he answered; "always at your service. Why should you think I hadn't time?"

"I thought you would have to put the Greek up a little in his new *métier*—the retiring shopman always coaches the fellow that takes his place," said Sabakine, as grave as a judge.

"Attend to your manners, Alexis," said Carlo. "Nobody cares about your morals, but——"

"One moment," interrupted Lady Harcourt. "Get me some jeweler's cotton, somebody, if Carlo is going to dissect Sabakine's mental anatomy. My ears are not hardened enough to endure that."

As soon as there was a lull in the laughing chatter, Miss Cameron rose to take her leave.

"Going already, Violet!" expostulated Nina.

"I must. You know my cousin arrived yesterday. I promised to take her out to drive."

"A cousin—a feminine one! You are less fortunate than Giulia," said Lady Harcourt.

"But my deserts are so much less, you must remember!"

"I hope Miss Danvers is well," Aylmer said, as Violet's rising brought him within reach of her.

"Rather tired yet—a little shy and disconsolate, too, I am afraid."

"She certainly cannot be so long in your house."

"I hope not," Violet replied.

"I was going to inquire after you all," continued Aylmer, "but I saw your carriage pass in the street. May I come to-morrow?"

"Of course. By the way, the professor has promised to dine with us *en famille*. Pray come too, if you are not better occupied."

"As if that were possible! I shall be delighted!" returned he, with more energy than the occasion absolutely required; but fortunately the others were listening to some remark of Lady Harcourt's, and did not hear.

A rose that Violet wore in her corsage dropped on the floor. Aylmer picked it up, and she held out her hand, saying:

"Thanks!"

He bent over her gloved fingers as if in leave-taking, holding back the flower and looking at her with such an eager entreaty to be allowed to keep it that permission or refusal seemed important, trifling as the matter was. So Violet simply appeared unconscious that she had lost the rose, and turned to exchange some last laughing words with Nina and the rest.

Carlo came forward and offered his arm to conduct her down stairs, and Aylmer thought his friend a monster for not leaving the pleasant duty to him. He longed to take his departure also, but his *culte* was so sacred that he

never could bear doing the least thing which would render his attentions to Miss Cameron pointed in the eyes of their acquaintances. His precious secret must risk no contamination from premature exposure to those sharp-witted, careless-tongued people, who made a jest of every subject under heaven, from an idyl to a tragedy.

This time he had a little reward for his self-denial in listening to her praises. As the door closed behind Violet and Carlo, Lady Harcourt exclaimed, with unusual earnestness :

"That charming creature always affects me like a breath of pure air."

"I really believe she lives in some higher sphere, and just stoops to us occasionally," said Sabakine ; then, as if ashamed of ever speaking seriously, he added with a laugh : "To leave her is like going out of church, without any of the bored sensation."

"Oh, nobody could pose less for a saint," rejoined Lady Harcourt. "She is never prudish, never shocked ; yet somehow, bright and witty as she is, she gives me the feeling of a Una set in the midst of our—I mean your—wickedness."

"Because she is the best, purest creature that ever lived !" cried Nina, enthusiastically.

"Isn't that her one fault ?" asked Sabakine. "She is a thought cold—her atmosphere is a little too rarefied."

"She has a heart equal to her head, and that is saying a great deal," responded Nina.

"Only no man has ever succeeded in waking it," said Sabakine.

"I hope, for her sake, none ever will," observed Lady Harcourt. "It would be curious to watch her under such circumstances, but she is so earnest, so enthusiastic beneath her coating of ice, that the experiment would probably prove dangerous, considering what you men are."

"You need not compliment her at our expense, eh, Aylmer ?" pronounced Sabakine, with a mischievous glance.

"I agree with Lady Harcourt," Laurence replied, so quietly that Nina indulged in a hasty wonder if it could be possible her idea in regard to the state of his feelings was without foundation.

As the marchese was helping Violet into her carriage, she said :

"There come Giulia da Rimini's yellow liveries down the street; you will have the happiness of handing her up stairs. No doubt she has brought her Greek to exhibit to Nina."

Carlo was not sensitive, but he had no mind to endure the quizzical looks of his friends when he returned with Giulia and the new-comer, as he should have to do in case Violet's supposition proved correct; and he did not wish a *tête-à-tête* with her on the stairs if she came alone.

"Which way are you going?" he asked.

"Home," she replied.

"Couldn't you drop me in the Piazza Maria Novella? I have an errand there," he said.

"Oh yes; get in—if you choose to risk Mrs. Grundy's censure, supposing we are seen. Dear me, what a mortal terror you must have of Circe, since you are willing to sacrifice both our reputations in order to avoid her!"

"I thought you would admire my strength of mind," returned Carlo, laughing, as he stepped into the carriage and gave the order to the footman.

"Or your prudence," amended Violet.

"Do you really suppose I am obliged to cultivate that cowardly virtue where the Rimini is concerned?" said Carlo, for though exceedingly sensible in most respects, he could never keep his overweening vanity from crying out at the slightest possible prick.

"I should be sorry to have so poor an opinion of you," she replied, and changed the conversation: jests on the subject were disagreeable to her.

Carlo was very attentive and tender to his wife in these days, often stopping away from the club and resisting the attractions of baccarat to remain with her. He always behaved like this after one of his wanderings of fancy; it was the certainty that the vagary would soon pass which kept Nina from becoming jealous enough for real unhappiness, and she possessed the wonderful wisdom and tact to receive the offender's return with a sweetness which few women would have been able to emulate. She never reproached him; appeared neither sad nor sulky; she simply ignored what had happened, and rendered herself as fascinating as if he had been a new victim to be immolated on her shrine.

By pursuing this line of conduct she kept a firm hold

over the butterfly nature of her husband. He always came back—usually came speedily, too ; for, besides the masterly talents she displayed in her treatment of him, she seldom failed very soon to find means of putting his temporary goddess at a disadvantage. The woman for whom he conceived one of his violent, short-lived fancies, Nina was sure to pet and make much of ; seek her society, offer her entertainments, lay little pitfalls, and sit serenely by and watch the lady fall into them, and so disgust Carlo ; and she did it all so innocently that he never discovered the dispelling of his dream was Nina's work. He only decreed the other woman an idiot ; he beheld her commonplace, vapid, mere clay, unadorned by any poetical light, and marveled that he could for an instant have imagined her anything else ; and turned towards Nina, such a pleasing contrast, and adored her with all his might.

But into the contest with Madame da Rimini, Nina had carried more active sentiments, growing too jealous to behave with her customary tact. She had reached so high a pitch of exasperation at her impotency to counteract Circe's spells, that she might have risked ruin of her peace by open hostilities, had not Violet come so adroitly to her aid and ended Carlo's thraldom by the blow to his vanity.

"I never, never can repay you, Violetta mia !" Nina would say. "You see how effectually he is cured—thanks to you. Oh, a man—was there ever anything so weak !" Adding this latter exclamation with the sort of pitying scorn one so often notices in women's words, and in their treatment of the opposite sex. Violet understood her state of mind, and only wondered that such commiserating contempt had no effect upon her tenderness for her husband. It seemed to Violet that she should never be able to behave as Nina did, though she acknowledged the wisdom of such conduct. She could never condescend to similar warfare—to those little plots—those crafty efforts to recall the wandering masculine fancy ; nor, when the infatuation passed, could she receive the delinquent with such complete ignoring of his misdeeds —such entire unconsciousness that he had strayed into forbidden paths.

Were the case her own, she should hate him ; she was sure of that. Still, she could admit that such conduct

showed real wisdom, though admitting it with a certain disdain which would speedily have chilled her friendly feelings for almost any other woman than Nina.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN UNWELCOME CONFIDENCE.

THERE was a little stir of curiosity in the room, carefully suppressed, of course, as the duchess entered with the Greek, and attended by her withered, weedy *dame de compagnie*, whom she always remembered to produce when desirous of appearing intensely respectable.

"She must have picked him up somewhere, and forged the letters from the duke," Sabakine said in a low voice to Lady Harcourt, while Giulia was presenting her cavalier to the hostess. "She is always deep in deviltry when she drags out that unfortunate *âme damnée*."

"Who always reminds me of a squirrel set to guard a boa-constrictor," returned Lady Harcourt in the same undertone. "But listen—isn't she delicious?"

"Such a shame Carlo is gone!" sighed Sabakine, and the genuine disappointment in his tone, and Lady Harcourt's sympathetic glance in answer, were a proof that the absent one had been wise to beat a retreat.

"Cara marchesa," the duchess was saying, "let me present to you a dear friend of my husband's! I knew the surest way of enchanting Signor Dimetri with Florence would be to bring him at once to your house, dearest Nina."

"Where you and your friends are so welcome, duchess; though the signore will soon learn how you overrate its attractions—unless he is always careful to come in your company," returned the marchesa, bestowing a courteous smile on the stranger, though her intimates perfectly understood the reservation that last clause held, whatever might be the case with the Greek, who bowed and answered with sufficient readiness and ease.

"Is this your first visit to Florence, Signor Dimetri?" Nina asked.

"My first," he replied; "and I am already wondering how I could have deferred it so long."

"I hope you left the duke quite well," continued Nina; and again Sabakine and Lady Harcourt exchanged covert smiles, delighted by the adroitness with which the little Russian signified to the duchess that she was no longer afraid of defying her.

"Still suffering from that tiresome sciatica, which forces him to keep within reach of his Paris doctor," responded Dimetri.

"How could Shakespeare declare there was nothing in names," said Sabakine, in a fresh aside to Lady Harcourt. "Only think what a blessing for a worn-out debauchee like Rimini to find such a moral-sounding title to cover his ailments; a saint might have sciatica, you know!"

"My husband gave Signor Dimetri a letter to Carlo," said the duchess quickly, and she pronounced the words "my husband" with a tender stateliness which caused Sabakine's face to express such ecstatic delight, that Lady Harcourt had much ado not to laugh. "So you and he will have to share in my pleasurable duty of playing cicerone."

"Carlo will appreciate the duke's compliment, dear Giulia," said Nina, sweetly; "but any efforts of his will seem so very poor beside yours! The marchese received your card, Signor Dimetri. Too bad, he is out, Giulia; Violet Cameron carried him off only a few minutes since."

The duchess smiled and turned to speak to the assembled group, but she meant to make Nina introduce the Greek whether she would or not, and said:

"I presented the signore to Lady Harcourt at my house" (the Greek bowed, and her ladyship returned the salute), "so he will be quite one of us without loss of time when you have named him to your masculine adorers."

"And will speedily discover that I have no power over them when you are near," said Nina, perfectly concealing her vexation at being forced by her antagonist to do what she had a moment before resolved she would not on any terms.

"Upon my word, Giulia's gigantic audacity deserves the overwhelming success it meets," was Sabakine's com-

ment in Lady Harcourt's ear, as he moved forward in obedience to the hostess's appeal :

"Prince Sabakine, the duchess desires me to present to you her husband's friend, Signor Dimetri."

"Quick-witted little fairy ! She has managed, after all, to put the onus on Giulia," thought Lady Harcourt, regarding her with admiring eyes.

Sabakine was charmingly courteous, but very grand seigneur, as he could be on occasion, and the Greek made his bows and speeches to him and the others, as the marchesa named them, with a composure which Lady Harcourt decided held an undefinable something which proved that his ease proceeded from effrontery, not thorough breeding.

A fresh installment of Nina's exquisite Caravan tea was brought in for the new-comers, and her ladyship said :

"I cannot resist, though if I drink any more I shall be near a *crise de nerfs!* May I trouble you, Signor Dimetri ?" she added to the Greek, who stood near the table on which the smoking samovar had been set.

She moved to give him a place on the sofa beside her, and conversed most amiably for some moments, while laughing talk went on, and the result of her ladyship's study was a meditation which ran in this wise :

"You are an adventurer, but your manners are good enough, and you certainly are very handsome. You are not a coward either—a score of devils stare out of your eyes—and you are perfectly incapable of fear, moral or physical. Giulia is certain to rush into one of her passions for you, you broad-shouldered, passionate-eyed, cruel-mouthed creature ! and you look capable of beating her if she offended you—and I am sure I hope you will ! Now why did the duke send you to her? Have you got a hold over him? did he owe you money? No, you are not that sort of man. Did he project his soul into futurity, and gloat over the prospect of your one day murdering Giulia, and so freeing him from the pair of you? or what was his motive? Well, time will show—at all events the doubt gives something to look forward to. Perhaps now Giulia will relinquish her designs on Aylmer. Oh no, she won't ! —she hopes to tease Violet Cameron. Can she? H'm ! I am puzzled there. Ah, she has captured Aylmer, and taken him behind the flower-stand in the window. Now she

peeps to see if the Greek notices—she *is* afraid of him! And he sees her, though he does appear so occupied with what he is saying to me—he sees her! He is one of those creatures that can look in every direction at once—a faculty left from that stage of development in which he was some sort of feline animal in a tropical jungle."

The duchess, who had strayed away to examine the flowers, managed to catch the trimmings of her gown in a jardinière, and summoned Aylmer, who stood nearest, by pointing out her mishap. While he was extricating the lace, she said, in a voice inaudible to the others:

"Mr. Aylmer, will you do me a favor?"

"I shall be most happy, duchess—you are sure of that!"

"Ah, I don't want compliments. I mean a real favor, though it is not a difficult one for you to grant."

"You have only to tell me what it is," he answered.

"I saw you were not prepossessed with him," making a slight gesture of her finger towards the Greek.

"I assure you——"

"Oh, I saw! I am very quick to notice even little things," she continued rapidly. "I want you to promise me to be friendly with him—do your best to make the rest so."

"Any person whom you introduce, duchess, is certain of meeting with every attention," he replied, rather evasively.

"Promise me—do promise!" she exclaimed, speaking scarcely above her breath, but with an earnestness which was reflected in her eyes.

"I can certainly promise to show every courtesy in my power," he said.

"It is very important to me," she continued. "I will tell you why—I cannot here. Will you come to my house? I am going home. Please come. Ah! if you knew, I am sure you would not refuse! You at least have some generosity, some feeling! you are not like all those people there, who would not lift a finger to save friend or sister from a burning house!"

She spoke with a repressed passion and bitterness so evidently unfeigned that, distasteful as she was to him, he could not help a certain sensation of pity.

"Will you come?" she repeated. "Will you do me the favor?"

"Please do not call so slight a thing a favor—of course I will come," he answered.

"Oh, thanks—thanks!"

She moved away and sat down beside Nina. Lady Harcourt released the Greek, and the conversation became general. Out of sheer sympathy for any creature who appeared solitary and miserable, Aylmer several times drew Giulia's faded *dame de compagnie* into the talk; but, though her habitually anxious, startled face showed she appreciated his kindness, she seemed nervous at the very sound of her own voice. A lady born and bred—a sensitive woman with weak nerves and, originally, principles and a sense of right and wrong—forced by the exigencies of fate to accept an anomalous position in Giulia da Rimini's house! It was no marvel that after living through five years of such an existence she looked, as Lady Harcourt expressed it, "like a mouse caught in a trap—a mouse possessing gleams of a soul instead of a tail."

"Mademoiselle de Roquefort, I think we must go if we mean to drive to the hospital," said the duchess. "Signor Dimetri, it would be cruel to drag you away."

But that personage was too astute to prolong his visit.

"I have an appointment with the Brazilian consul," he said, "and must make my respectful adieus to the marchesa."

A couple of the other men took their leave at the same moment.

As the duchess passed Aylmer, she shot a reminding glance at him; but, rapid as it was, that terrible Lady Harcourt caught it.

"She made an appointment as they stood by the jardinière," thought her ladyship. "Oh, Laurence Aylmer, is it possible that after raising your hopes to Violet Cameron, you can abase them 'to batten on carrion'? But you are only a man! Perhaps, after all, I do you injustice; time will show that too."

As soon as the retiring guests were safe out of hearing, a chorus of voices arose.

"Was ever impudence like hers?" cried Nina.

"Her new man to be one of us immediately!" said Sabakine.

"He seems well enough," said Nina; "but what an evil mouth!"

"Very handsome," pronounced Lady Harcourt, "and I

hope sufficiently wicked to have invented some new sin; one is so tired of the old vices."

"And to be forced in on us like this," said somebody else; "not knowing anything about him, or where he came from!"

"He came straight from the duke," said Lady Harcourt. "I am sure it would be a comfort if one knew nothing about three-quarters of the people we meet in this blessed town."

Fresh visitors were announced, and she rose to go.

"Be grateful, marchesa, that Da Rimini's present is at least presentable, since you have a share in him. *Au revoir.* I shall see you all at Potaski's to-night? Mr. Aylmer, be good enough to aid my tottering steps with your arm—you look as if you were just going to take leave."

"You pretend that because you want to carry him off," said Nina, gayly.

"Only to the foot of the stairs—I have no sheep-dog to guard me, as dear Giulia had," laughed her ladyship

When they reached the anteroom, she said to Aylmer:

"I did not mean take leave of your senses, you know."

"Have you seen any signs?" he asked.

"I see nothing ever—absolutely nothing!" she answered. "That is what makes me the safest person in the world."

"I shall remember your words when I have a secret to confide," said he.

As she got into her carriage, she continued:

"Can I set you down anywhere? I don't pass the Palazzo Amaldi, but I do the Rimini."

"Thanks; my lodgings are not in the direction of either," he replied, laughing in spite of himself.

"I see nothing," repeated she; "not even a flower-stand when it is near enough for me to fall over it. Good-by, Don Melancholy—at least you always look like one, though I can't perceive that you are. You ought to wear a cavalier's dress, you know. Don't forget my evening—and——"

"I am not likely to, Lady Harcourt."

"*And* just remember that sometimes elaborately private flower-stand performances are seen and watched—are meant to be, by the female wit which arranges them."

She nodded, smiled, and drove away, thinking:

"Of what use would warnings be? If fate and Giulia

mean to make him trouble, they will. Besides, I never meddle—that has been the ruling principle of my life : it is necessary to have one of some sort."

And Aylmer felt confident that she knew where he was bound as well as if she had heard the duchess's words.

"If she were not the woman she is," he thought, "what a dangerous creature she would be, with those lynx-eyes and unfailing intuitions."

He walked on, wishing heartily destiny had not thrown him in the duchess's way that morning, and thereby spared him the present interview. He was a man so singularly free from vanity it had never occurred to him to suspect that Carlo's jests in regard to the lady's fancy possessed any foundation, and even had masculine weakness prompted him to think so, the duchess's efforts to attract his attention would have been as much thrown away as now, from the fact that Violet Cameron's image filled his heart and soul, to the utter exclusion of every other member of her sex.

But he would gladly have avoided the interview ; he had no desire to become the duchess's confidant, to have any part whatever in her secrets. The woman was distasteful to him, had been from the moment he set eyes on her, and he vaguely mistrusted her—not on account of the aspersions cast upon her by her associates, for in Florence no two friends ever appeared to meet without having scandalous stories to relate of their mutual acquaintance, but because he felt her to be false and cruel—as utterly without principle as she was destitute of pity. Her very beauty was in a style antipathetic to him, and he had vexed Carlo sorely by declaring, when he first met her, that he preferred the plainness of the most faded blonde to the voluptuous charms of a big, black woman with fiery eyes, like the duchess, which, even when they wore their softest aspect, reminded him of a midday in the torrid zone.

However, there was no escape ; he must go to the Palazzo Rimini, and he tried to find a little sympathy for her by reflecting that her agitation and trouble had been real ; but the wish would come back that she had chosen her confidant elsewhere.

The duchess was at home, the porter told him—would he please to walk up stairs ? The servant at the entrance of the great gloomy antechamber, where on a dais still stood the two faded gilt chairs in which dukes and duchesses

of bygone generations used to sit in state to receive their dependents, had evidently been given his orders. Aylmer was ushered without delay through several dingy, cheerless salons into a room somewhat more habitable, in which the duchess usually spent her mornings.

She was there now, standing by a window looking down into the narrow street where the sun never penetrated save for a brief space towards noon, and the lofty palace opposite seemed frowning at its neighbor with inimical glances.

She turned as Aylmer was announced—swept forward to meet him, her long black velvet draperies trailing over the square of Turkey carpet spread like an oasis in the midst of the desert of cold pavement—her face appearing at its best in the sad, troubled expression which lay like a cloud upon it

"Thank you very much for coming," she said, in the sweetest tones of her indolent Southern voice, whose slight tremulousness was the more noticeable from the contrast to its customary slow, firm ring. She extended her hand, then seated herself on a couch which would hold two comfortably; but Aylmer took possession of an easy-chair by the table placed in front of the sofa. "It was very kind of you," she added.

"Pray do not use such an inapplicable word," he pleaded.

"It is the right one," she replied, shaking her graceful head. "Do you know, even after begging you to come, I was almost ready to bid them refuse you admittance! But I could not have excused my seeming rudeness, and besides—no, it is stronger than I—I must speak to some one—I cannot endure my burden in silence!"

He scrutinized her narrowly; she was not acting, he decided; but why, of all people, she should have selected him to reveal the strait in which she found herself, remained a complete puzzle.

"I do not, of course, understand what you mean; at least, if any trouble has come upon you, signora, you can be sure of my profound sympathy," he answered, and wondered if he looked as awkward as he felt, mentally congratulating himself that the speech sounded less stilted in Italian than it would have done in English.

"I was sure of that," she said, "else I should not have spoken to you as I did." She paused a moment; seemed trying to control herself, then suddenly exclaimed with in-

finite passion and pathos: "Oh, Laurence Aylmer, I am the most wretched creature alive!"

Now if a man be ready to fall on his knees or open his arms in order to console a woman who makes a declaration of that nature, the hearing it no doubt possesses a keen interest; but Aylmer was not prepared to do anything of the sort, nor did he for an instant suppose the duchess desired either of such methods of consolation. Unfeignedly astonished by the outburst, he could think of nothing to say except:

"Oh, signora, signora!"

Luckily for him, face and voice were as expressive as can be bestowed upon a human being, and Lady Harcourt would have vowed that he resembled a cavalier or troubadour more than ever, as he leaned forward and fastened his melancholy gaze on the duchess.

"The most wretched creature alive!" she repeated, flinging up her hands in protest against earth and heaven. Then, with an effort at calmness, she added: "I did not mean to behave like this! You will think I am acting—you Northerner! Remember how difficult it is for us impulsive Italians to be calm and composed as your icy ladies are, no matter what comes."

"Northerner though I am, be certain I can sympathize with suffering," said Aylmer, and wished himself on the other side of the Alps.

The duchess's trouble was real; her fright real too (and she was not a woman easily frightened), but neither distress nor alarm impeded her invention or dulled her craft. When she entered Nina's salon and saw Aylmer, the idea flashed across her that even the dilemma in which she found herself might be turned to use where he was concerned. She could trust him with her secret; she knew that, whatever happened, he would never give a hint of his knowledge to any human being, and her confidence must unavoidably effect a closer intimacy than her arts had hitherto succeeded in bringing about. What she mentally termed his exaggerated chivalry would prevent his refusing friendly counsels to the woman who had trusted him, as often as she might recur to the subject, and intercourse established on that footing so easily glides into more tender relations! And now, though she would have preferred a free, expansive gush of sympathy in return for that dramatic enunci-

ation of misery, it was a great step gained to have touched his generous impulse to the quick.

"I know you can," she said; "only that knowledge could have encouraged me to speak when we met to-day. Do not think me bold and unfeminine because I transgress the laws which hedge us poor women in! Ah, if you could imagine the comfort it was when I saw you! I had felt so utterly alone. The trouble had fallen so suddenly! I could not think—could not tell how to act, and I said to myself, at least there was one human being to whom I could speak without fear!"

Oh, if she would come to an explanation of her woes and be done! He was sorry for her; he would help her if he could, hard as he thought it that she should have singled him out for the task; but he grew terribly impatient to get to the end.

"If there is anything I can do to serve you," he said, "only tell me—it shall be done at once."

"Nobody can help me!" she cried.

Then why the deuce did she fall upon him? he reflected with a sudden irritation which chilled his pity.

"Nobody can help me, and I am powerless!" added the duchess.

"We are all apt to think so when trouble comes," he answered. "Surely your straits cannot be so hopeless. I am speaking in the dark; remember I do not know what has happened."

"Let me try and get my poor wits back and behave rationally," she faltered, pressing her hand to her head. "That Greek—I want you to be friendly with him, to make the others."

"I will show him every courtesy in my power, I promise you," he replied, still busy in subduing his irritation.

"Yes, I must tell you why. I cannot throw myself on your generosity without good reasons. Mr. Aylmer, my husband sent him! Wait—I can make you understand more easily if I give you the letter."

She opened a little casket that stood on the table, tossed about its contents in an agitated way, and finally placed the duke's epistle in his hands. Aylmer read the page; it held neither mystery nor menace that he could discover. On the contrary, it appeared a production

which the most devoted husband might have written to his wife for the purpose of introducing a valued friend.

"There certainly is nothing here, duchess, which can account for your alarm," he said, his impatience increasing.

"Ah, that is his craft," she answered, with a bitter smile. "I must tell you the whole, since I have begun! That man is sent as a spy, to watch me, to misrepresent, to twist everything I say or do into evidence which can be used to my hurt! I am impulsive to an extreme—I shall always be! I cannot weigh my words, calculate my conduct, and it is easy to blacken a woman who is frank, perhaps imprudent, because, conscious of her own rectitude, she believes her truth will be her shield."

The duchess was about as impulsive as a *cobra di capello*, and her frankness of a kind that would have won Machiavelli's admiration, but one needed to know her as thoroughly as poor Mademoiselle de Roquefort did to discover this; therefore small blame to Aylmer that, in spite of his acuteness, his limited acquaintance led him to put faith in her opening assertions, whatever his opinion might be of her uprightness and rigid principles.

"A spy!" she repeated. "Only look in his insolent, perfidious face; one can see at a glance that the creature was well chosen for his work!"

"Surely you must be mistaken, duchess!"

"No, no. Listen, Mr. Aylmer! Though my husband's conduct forces me to live apart from him, nobody can say I ever went about detailing my wrongs—my worst enemy could not—nor could he deny that they have been many."

A fact, Aylmer knew. The duke was a man positively steeped in vice; almost as shameless in his open exposure thereof as the mediæval ancestors from whom he derived the base instincts which he had fostered with perverse assiduity.

"The time came when I could endure no longer," she hurried on, "but since his departure I have never opened my lips except to speak kindly of him! I have affected to consider our separation the necessity of circumstances. That the world comprehended the truth, I was aware; his outrages had been too public for that not to be the case. But I would have no pity. I held my peace—you know that society, cruel as it is, admits this."

"I do," he replied; "and supposing your separation an

amicable one, I am at a loss to imagine what motive the duke could have for such conduct as this."

"His motive—it is easy to explain! He believed that I would live with him again—he used every inducement to make me. I could not; if it had been possible I would; but, oh, there are limits to a woman's endurance!" She stopped with a shudder, then after a moment continued more quietly: "During the last few months he has ceased to urge me—ceased to hope it. Now he wants his revenge; oh, it is too dreadful! My life has been my safeguard, so he devises this plot. If he could manage to entrap me as he thinks, not only would he be relieved from paying the greater portion of the income I have now, but he could take my child—my child; yes, give her to that horrible woman who is his companion in Paris—who helps him on when his man's invention fails."

Aylmer uttered an ejaculation of wondering horror.

"It sounds incredible," she continued; "but it is the simple truth. I knew they were at work, but was at a loss to imagine what form their machinations would take until the very day of this man's arrival there came information which made it easy for me to understand his errand."

"Yet you received him——"

"Good heavens, what could I do?"

"I should have turned him out of doors," replied Aylmer, bluntly.

"And so added personal vindictiveness to the inducements which have set him to dog me like a bloodhound! No, no; a man might be so fearless—a woman cannot. I must temporize, act a part, odious and difficult as it is to my nature; I must let him visit me—be friendly. Ah, you blame me—I see it in your face."

"It seems to my view that no good——"

"Remember my child—my innocent little daughter!" she interrupted. "She would be taken from me—given to that demon! Oh, I almost feel that if it were not for her I should cry out: 'Do what you like—I can struggle no longer!' I would bow my head and creep away into obscurity, and let the world believe what he wishes—believe that I am what he tried so hard and so long to make me."

She hid her face in her hands.

"I have said the worst now," she went on in a choked

voice. "Oh, I know that it seems terrible for a woman to speak to any man as I am doing! but try to understand—think how suddenly this trouble has come! I have been strong and brave, but for the moment to-day I was at the end of my courage. I spoke to you before I realized what I was doing; after that—after such a request—I was bound to explain. You will not misjudge me as one of my own countrymen might—you will let me feel that I have one friend who pities—who would help me if it were possible?"

"That I certainly would," he answered, though again he wished devoutly that she had chosen her confidant elsewhere, especially as she had no task to set him; he could aid her in nothing beyond the negative assistance of being civil to the Greek, and he would have been that at her request without this tragic scene, as useless as it was painful.

"What can I do, what can I do?" she moaned.

Difficult to tell the lady that it behooved her to be exceedingly circumspect in her conduct, yet this counsel alone suggested itself to his mind, causing him to feel more uncomfortable than ever.

"Surely if this fellow has come on such an errand as you believe, every door would be closed against him, were it known; any man of your acquaintance would horsewhip him out of Florence with pleasure."

"And ruin me!" she cried. "No; I must meet craft with craft—I must learn how to do it—to feign, to dissimulate; oh, I had learned to be silent, but I never thought to stoop so low!"

"And you hope in this way to foil his intentions?"

"Yes; he may be deluded into betraying himself—that would render him utterly powerless. If not, then, seeing what my life is, he will discover that even his ingenuity cannot distort its open candor to serve his wicked purpose, and so he may give up the game. Think of every side—am I not right?"

"Indeed, duchess, I am at a loss how to advise——"

"Ah, you blame me—most of all perhaps for speaking—for yielding to my consciousness that I could trust you!" she exclaimed.

"I can only feel honored by it," he said.

"I should have borne my burden as I had hitherto—alone—if I had only had time to reflect—to get my courage back," she continued. "Do not condemn me; do not think

me unwomanly! Oh, if you knew what a relief it is to speak, even though I feel ashamed in so doing! Oh, these past ten years—ten years! I was only eighteen when they married me to him; they took me from a convent, as ignorant of the world as a babe—no suffering, no degradation has been spared me! Ah, I think I am mad to talk like this! yet I cannot have you judge me harshly. I was wrong to say a word—very wrong; but having done so, I must make you comprehend how desperate this new danger has rendered me. Oh, I have self-respect enough left to be ashamed!"

"No, no!" he said eagerly. "Pray believe that you have my warmest, fullest sympathy—only I feel so terribly helpless."

"Give me that—you can do nothing more. But sympathy is a great deal to a woman so completely alone as I!"

"Rest certain you have it, duchess."

"Thanks—a thousand thanks!" she cried. "And you will try to judge leniently?—try not to think me wrong in telling you the truth?"

"I have no need to try," he answered truthfully; for the man does not live so destitute of vanity that he could very harshly condemn a woman because she offers him her confidence, however troublesome it may be to find himself the recipient of such trust, or however much he might censure her for bestowing it upon any other.

"Now, I want you to go. Do not think me rude in sending you away so unceremoniously. You will not see me like this again! I shall endeavor to act for the best; but recollect we women cannot boldly attack our enemies like you men—we must outwit them. It is the penalty we pay for our weakness—for the unjust laws by which your sex has hemmed us in. Stale old complaints, I know, but terribly, terribly true!"

She rose and gave him her hand with a mournful smile. He had never seen her look so interesting as she did at this moment. Repressed misery, patience, regret at her own frankness, yet a sense of comfort in having spoken—all these feelings were expressed in her face, and she dropped slowly into one of her majestic attitudes, which would have inspired a sculptor.

Aylmer reiterated those protestations which the position actually forced upon him, and took his leave.

The duchess was tolerably satisfied with the results of the interview, though the gentleman certainly had not approached the verge of tenderness by so much as a word, but, keen-sighted as she might be, Giulia da Rimini had sufficient confidence in the power of her own charms to believe that no man could long resist them when they were fully put forth, and she naturally supposed Aylmer's very eloquent glances must mean something beyond mere commonplace commiseration. His failing to make the use of the situation which many men would have done, only became a proof that she had so thoroughly preserved her dignity that he feared the utterance of warmer sympathy might bring upon him the reproach of repaying her trust by an insult.

It would have been difficult for most of her acquaintances to credit the statement, but every syllable she had uttered was the literal truth. Yet not only could she rejoice over the arrival of a crisis which afforded an opportunity to establish a bond between herself and Aylmer; but, in spite of her terror of the Greek, she felt no personal repulsion towards the villain—his exceeding beauty prevented it. So far from despising the baseness which could have induced him to undertake an errand like his, she considered his doing so a proof of ability, and she admired the unlimited faith in his own powers which he must possess to imagine that it would be possible for him to out-general her.

Ah, she should have a great deal upon her hands—full occupation—and excitement was always welcome. She had by no means given up the hope of reclaiming Carlo—she had the Greek to subdue, either by turning his head or finding some more profitable bargain to offer than the duke's; Laurence Aylmer to lead through the realm of friendship into a maze from whence escape would prove an impossibility; and Violet Cameron to punish! Oh! nothing could be more imperative than that duty, and her hatred was increased by the certainty of her intended victim's caring for the heiress. She only wanted to be sure that Violet's feelings were interested, then subjugation of Aylmer would afford revenge upon the haughty, scornful creature.

And Laurence went his way, not in the least softened in his judgment of the duchess by his pity, though he gave her that freely, and no more reflected upon the possible

false position into which the sentiment might force him than any other generous, impulsive man does where a woman is concerned.

CHAPTER XIX.

DIOGENES'S ADVICE.

"SO you and Miss Bronson have been doing a little sight-seeing, Mary," Miss Cameron said the next evening, as her cousin entered the room where she sat awaiting the two guests whom she had invited to dine.

"We went to the Uffizi gallery," Mary answered, "and to San Marco."

"And you were pleased?" Violet asked, making room for her to sit beside her on the sofa.

"Oh, yes," Mary replied, and said no more, and Violet wondered if her relative were as unenthusiastic as she seemed undemonstrative; but something in Mary's face—an eager, yet satisfied, expression which brightened it—warned Miss Cameron that she might be judging hastily. Perhaps the girl was capable of both enthusiasm and demonstrativeness, but still felt too new and strange in her present surroundings to betray either.

"I am glad to find that Mary has a very proper appreciation of art," said Eliza Bronson, who appeared just after Miss Danvers, from which remark Violet comprehended that Mary had listened patiently to the spinster's dissertation thereon. She saw a quickly repressed smile flit over her cousin's lips as Eliza spoke, and it struck her that perhaps, too, the little creature possessed a sense of humor, demure as she was. Violet hoped so; long experience of Miss Bronson had taught her that intimate companionship with a person who has none is frequently a trifle wearing. "I think she quite enjoyed San Marco, also," pursued Eliza; "and I was able to give her some details in regard to Savonarola and Fra Angelico, and—you have not forgotten the other, Mary, my dear?"

"Fra Bartolommeo," rejoined Mary, with the prompt obedience of a child repeating its lesson.

"Ah, I am glad you remember! I foresee that we shall acquire real benefit from our researches," said Eliza, complacently. "But, my dear, we must recollect that, gifted as they were, those men were very benighted creatures after all—monks, only monks!"

The spinster uttered these words with a prolonged shiver, and again Violet saw the dimples deepen about Mary's mouth, but the girl caught her glance and tried to look serious, as if afraid of disapproval, and then seemed comforted when Violet laughed outright.

"You cannot deny it, Violet," said Miss Bronson, severely.

"I don't mean to," returned Violet, "so please do not scold me for my weakness in regard to them. I am sure you had a pleasanter morning than I—forced to make a quantity of visits and go to a charity concert into the bargain. Oh, I hate charities!"

"Violet, Violet!" remonstrated Miss Bronson. "Recollect that Mary is not yet acquainted with your rather—what shall I say?—exaggerated mode of speaking, and——"

"Mary, my dear," broke in Violet, "be sure you don't let me contaminate you! Eliza, your example may serve to protect her."

"Surely you know that was not what I meant to imply," began the spinster in horrified tones, but Violet pretended not to hear.

"What pretty hair Mary has," she said, secretly determining as she spoke that before long she would have it differently arranged: it looked too prim and stiff to suit her ideas. She really must lighten the child up somewhat—that severe black raiment seemed so unsuited to her. She rose, and went round behind the sofa, took some white roses out of a vase, and fastened two or three in Mary's tresses so deftly that the girl did not feel her touch: indeed, her mind was occupied with Violet's remark:

"I am going to introduce one of my dearest friends to you, Mary, old Professor Schmidt, the best man in the world."

"If he were not a—a skeptic!" cried Eliza, hesitating over the word, as if even the pronouncing it were a sin.

"He was in America once," said Mary; "I read some lectures he delivered—they were delightful."

"I trust at least that none of his pernicious doctrines crept in," said Eliza, with a deep sigh.

"I don't think so. They were given at a girls' school --one was on botany, another on astronomy," Mary answered; and broke off to add, in a hesitating fashion, "Oh, Cousin Violet, you are all in white! Is it a party? I'd rather not—I——"

"No party at all, my dear," rejoined Violet, as Mary paused. "Just the professor and another gentleman whom —ah, I hear their voices in the anteroom."

Antonio announced the German and Mr. Aylmer. Violet, standing with her hand on Mary's shoulder, felt her cousin start as the latter name was pronounced, and as she moved forward to greet her visitor, she glanced at Mary's face: it wore the same disturbed expression which had struck Violet when on the day of her arrival the girl caught sight of Laurence Aylmer as she entered.

"Fräulein," said the professor, seizing both her hands in his, "I am so hungry that I shall eat you if dinner is not served in two minutes. You look like a goddess!"

"Some heathens beat their gods—you want to devour yours," returned Violet. "It was very good of you to come, even if you do threaten to eat me, my dear old Diogenes."

"Very good to myself," said the professor. "Ah, Miss Bronson, charmed to see you. You are looking unbelief of my having a deity of any sort."

"Professor, professor!" said Eliza, in a warning whisper that was perfectly audible to the others, and a glance towards Mary to emphasize her words. "Let me entreat you to avoid certain subjects which distress me at all times, but which, in the presence of a youthful mind——"

"Ah, Miss Mary Danvers? I'll be so discreet that if you tell her I am a disciple of Calvin she'll believe you," interrupted the professor, in an intentionally loud aside. "Fräulein," he added, unceremoniously breaking in on Aylmer's salutations to the hostess, "leave that young man to the neglect he deserves, and present your musty, fusty old adorer to your cousin! My dear, I am very glad to welcome you; I shall call you my dear, though I spare my excellent Miss Bronson that—in public."

"Professor!" cried Eliza, indignantly. "Mary, he never dares at any time!"

"Mary—the very name for her! Oh, Miss Bronson, Miss Bronson, trust to my discretion. I will not betray our little secrets."

"Secrets!" echoed she, in mingled distress and scorn. "Excuse me, Professor Schmidt, but really your spirits carry you away."

"My legs carried me on a tramp of ten miles to-day," said he, "and that wretched Aylmer pretended an engagement just to avoid a little exercise; he is hopeless, utterly hopeless, Fräulein! I shall speak to our clergyman, Miss Bronson, about his excommunication."

"I could wish that you had a clergyman," said Eliza, with dignity.

The other three were laughing, but all the same Violet had leisure to notice that one of Mary's little flutters was apparent as she received Aylmer's greeting, even in the midst of her amusement at the skirmishing between Miss Bronson and her persecutor. But the wonder it excited in Miss Cameron's mind was on this occasion divided with another reflection. She had not before seen Mary really laugh, and between merriment, that slight confusion and vivid blush, she looked as pretty as an impersonation of Spring.

Antonio announced dinner, and the professor led the hostess into the dining-room, but gave his other arm to Mary, saying, in a whisper, which so perfectly imitated the audible aside wherein Eliza had a habit of indulging, that with the exception of the worthy lady whom he presumed to mimic, his listeners were forced to laugh again:

"Don't intrude on them, Miss Mary! I have a horrible suspicion that my worshiped Miss Bronson is less faithful to me than she pretends, but I remain blind—blind. I will not verify my doubts, though they rack my heart, yes, to its furthest depths."

Eliza affected not to hear the unseemly jest at her expense, and began asking Aylmer after his health, a ceremony she always went through as regularly as if he had been a confirmed invalid, instead of a person with every appearance of possessing perfect strength and vigor.

"You cannot be too cautious," she added, in response to his assurance that he was never better.

"Indeed he cannot," cried the professor; "I hear every word, my Adeliza—every word!"

"After an injury like yours," pursued Eliza, steadily ignoring the savant's impertinent interruption.

"He will meet with a worse if this continues," said the professor, "and so I warn him! Beware, Adeliza, beware!"

Eliza had to laugh at his comic absurdity, and the dinner commenced gayly enough. Presently Mary Danvers had a fresh disturbing prick; chancing to catch sight of herself in a mirror which hung opposite, she perceived the flowers in her hair; it seemed to Mary they gave her quite a festal appearance, and she doubted if that could be right. Then came the thought, how very good of Violet to pay attention enough to her appearance to put them there. She had half feared her cousin too elegant and fine to think much about a young girl! Oh, she herself must be inclined to ingratitude! The bare idea that she could be guilty of a sin so despicable was dreadful indeed; and Violet happening to look towards her at the instant, marveled anew what the earnest gaze of the girl's eyes could mean.

The dinner passed very pleasantly. After a time Violet led the conversation to graver subjects, and brought out the professor, as she had meant to do. He talked in his most interesting fashion, and even Eliza Bronson, as she listened, forgot all his shortcomings in admiration. He was one of those rare people who own the faculty of conversing upon scientific or abstruse subjects in a manner so clear that the most ordinary mind can comprehend. He had wandered over the four quarters of the globe, seeing with the eyes of a naturalist and a philosopher; he possessed a poetical appreciation of nature, and though he never talked for effect, never indulged in ornate periods, when he got fairly launched, his descriptions were so eloquent and vivid that it seemed positively to bring the scenes he depicted before his listeners.

It proved a blissful evening to Laurence Aylmer, though he talked less than usual; he felt in a mood when just to sit in the presence of the woman he loved and study her face unobserved was happiness.

He knew very well that any yielding to the impatience which at times he found so difficult to control might fatally injure his cause; but when alone with her, his eager heart fought for utterance, till often he could not master its emo-

tions, and he recognized that it was fortunate on each occasion she had either successfully prevented speech, or that some interruption had occurred, as, for instance, on the day of Mary Danvers's arrival.

Ah, Mary Danvers! he saw that she was fluttered, almost ill at ease, in his society, and did not like to speculate upon the cause; he wished he could think it arose solely from her knowledge of his having met with pecuniary losses through her father, but once, while he and George Danvers were friends, the gentleman had dropped a hint that he should look favorably upon Aylmer's attentions to his daughter. Laurence rendered it unmistakably evident that no such idea had entered, or could enter, his mind; he regarded Mary as a mere child; had scarcely taken the trouble to become acquainted with her, though he visited the house frequently, for Danvers could make himself very agreeable when he desired. And not long after that conversation, Danvers's manner had changed a little; he devoted his powers to drawing Aylmer into those business schemes which proved so disastrous. When the losses came, Laurence could not help thinking that, as soon as the man discovered there remained no hope of providing for his child against the ruin which he knew must overtake him in a few months, by the marriage he had contemplated, he recklessly and ruthlessly employed his arts to obtain the money to fling after his own into the pit of speculation.

These losses had involved the discomforts of a sudden change from ample means to a comparatively limited income, but his future would be independent of them. On the death of a relative he must come into possession of a large fortune bequeathed to her for life only, and she was now an elderly woman. Laurence was the last man in the world to calculate on such an event, but since his acquaintance with Violet Cameron the recollection that a few years would give him affluence became a pleasant thought; he had no necessity to hesitate or fret over the fact of her wealth, since before long he should fully equal her in that particular.

He was not given to talking of himself; even to the professor he had never mentioned that certainty as to his future—indeed, he regulated it in his own mind without such reference. He had come to Europe meaning to revisit places already familiar, study the countries he had not yet

seen, then return to America and devote his energies to a political career. But meeting Violet entirely changed his projects of travel; he could not tear himself away from Florence, and in her eyes, as well as those of the professor, he had a reason for remaining. He was a facile, brilliant writer, well placed in the best reviews of England and America, and besides occupation of that sort, busy with a work upon certain periods in Florentine history, which, often as the whole chronicle has been written, it seemed to him might be presented in a new aspect.

The professor, enthusiastic over his plan, and the most helpful assistant imaginable in researches among musty old tomes and parchments, felt confident that the result of Aylmer's labor must establish his reputation so thoroughly that the young man, convinced literature was his legitimate sphere, would relinquish the idea of rushing off into the dreary labyrinth of American politics.

To-night, as they were walking homeward together, the professor, roused out of a reverie which had afforded Laurence leisure to listen to the farewell words of Violet Cameron, still ringing in his ears, seized Aylmer's arm, stopped directly under a lamp-post, and glowered at him.

"Aren't you a fool?" demanded the savant, in a mild, insinuating voice, as if offering some highly complimentary remark.

"I dare say I am," returned Aylmer.

"And I dare to say so too," said the professor, with a Jupiter-like nod and a tone of exceeding triumph. "I have been watching you for weeks, and I *know* that you are."

"Rather a waste of your valuable powers; doesn't speak much either for your perspicuity, if it has taken you so long to arrive at such a self-evident fact," retorted Aylmer, for once wishing the dogmatical old man a thousand leagues away.

"Don't you sneer in your fine gentleman dandified fashion, else the first time you fall into my hands again as patient, I'll—I'll poison you!" cried the professor. "Yes, I've been watching you——"

"So you just said!"

"And you're a fool!"

"You told me that too; as I knew it already, there is no necessity for repeating it."

"There is! The human animal is so dull that you must

hammer at it with a fact before you can bring conviction to the mind in regard to the thing it knows perfectly well."

"That sounds very fine and very German, but I don't think it means anything," said Aylmer.

Then they both laughed, and walked on for some moments in silence.

"You don't want advice? I never saw the human being who did when he really stood in need of it," quoth the professor, suddenly. "Well, well! here we are at the Duomo Square; let us walk round the cathedral, and study the effect of the moonlight on the side where they have been cleaning the walls—done with vitriol, they tell me, which will cause them to decay rapidly; but as the beautiful old edifice will last our time, we won't grumble at having it made more beautiful."

They passed under the shadow of the vast pile, and stopped behind Giotto's tower, which rose airy and majestic—a crown of stars seeming to rest upon its summit. The moonlight fell full upon that part of the church—illuminating one doorway which had a narrow casement on either side. Every detail came out with wonderful distinctness—the figures in the window-niches, the Virgin behind her shrine above the portal—the whole a mass of such marvelous and intricate carving, that it looked like some gigantic ivory casket wrought with black and silver.

It was late—not a person in sight—not a common street sound to vex the air. Suddenly the Campanile bell—that sweetest-voiced singer in Europe—slowly chanted midnight in its soft, deep, velvety bass, ringing down from the tower's height with such superhuman melody that it seemed to Aylmer's dreamy fancy he must be catching strains from the very courts of heaven—counted its orison, and was mute, leaving the echo of its sweetness on the listening air.

Presently they went along the Via Calzajoli to the Piazza Signoria, and paused before the Palazzo Vecchio with its lily-like tower (the only comparison, stern gray stone though its material be), watched the yellow glory gild Orcagna's Loggia, brighten the bronze Perseus, mantle Fedi's group—then, still in silence, wandered through the statue-lined colonnades of the Uffizi, and came out upon the Arno. At the right, the quaint, picturesque Ponte Vecchio shut in the view; away to the left, San Miniato blazed with lights; and beyond, the outlines of the distant

mountains showed like cloud-castles in the transparent atmosphere.

"*Ach*, what a beautiful city, what a beautiful world!" the professor boomed forth. Then he took a long German pipe from the pocket of his ulster, lighted it as carefully and lovingly as if it had been some sacred censer, the kindling whereof was a religious rite, puffed a column of white smoke into the air, and descended from philosophical meditations to deliver the lecture which he had deceitfully allowed Aylmer to think was to be spared.

"Young man, I do not wear a petticoat and I am not perhaps exactly what one might term a beauty, but I propose to render this interview useful to your benighted faculties, even if I cannot make it interesting."

"Heaven help me!" groaned Laurence.

"Be silent, you!" commanded the professor, looking sternly out from a halo of smoke. "You are in love with *her*—you would be an ass if you were not!" Aylmer made a quick, indignant gesture. "Listen to the oracle," pursued the savant; "there is more behind! She is in love with you, though you did not know it, nor does she."

Aylmer's rising irritation vanished. He could not have offered any confidence; coming from another man he would have regarded such words a gross impertinence, but he loved and honored the professor so highly that he was content to learn that the sage had discovered his precious secret, and hear him plunge with brutal frankness into a discussion thereof.

"She is growing gradually in love with you," amended the savant, slowly and emphatically. "Don't contradict—don't deny!"

"I have no intention where I am concerned," Aylmer replied, "but in regard to—to her—your wisdom is at fault. After all, why should she care for me—what man would be worthy——"

"Stuff!" broke in the professor. "Nature never is guilty of that kind of blunder. No matter what the race or the sex of the animal she has in hand, she always makes a mate for it—a fitting one, too."

"In this case, though, the word you employ——"

"Come, don't fight over words! If you are offended because I said animal, I'll substitute swan—nightingale! I can't go so far as seraph to content you, because I am mak-

ing a statement of facts, and, therefore, no imaginary creature will serve for a comparison."

"Confound your materialistic ideas!"

"I did not dispute the existence of seraphs, but as nobody ever saw one, touched one, why the race belongs to the domain of faith, that's all. Come, you put me out—seraph, if you insist upon it, though no account we have of the myth includes females."

"What a provoking old wretch you are!" cried Aylmer, laughing in spite of himself.

The professor laughed too; suddenly he checked his merriment, laid his hand on Aylmer's arm, and said in an altered voice—a voice positively sweet and tremulous with feeling:

"Don't think me a nuisance! See here—I have not been so fond of any two human beings in double the years you have lived as I am of you and her. Believe that, and let it be my excuse."

"Dear old man! there is no excuse needed," returned Aylmer, grasping his hand cordially. "I don't in the least mind your knowing what is in my heart. I am glad to talk to you, since you are interested enough to care."

"Care!" repeated the professor. "We must care about something—something human, too. No matter how old and ugly we get, we never live beyond that necessity. I used to believe we could; I have grown wiser, and I know that existence would be more incomplete than it is were not this as much a truth as any axiom in geometry."

Aylmer only answered by a pressure of the hand.

"Now, according to the verdict of the whole world, there can be no greater instance of folly than a man well on towards seventy holding such views; so if I called you a fool, you can console yourself by thinking it is much worse to be one at my age than at yours," continued the professor.

"Oh, I don't mind admitting that I am a fool, but yon must give me something else than your last declaration as a proof of your folly before I believe in it."

"That's because it happens to be you I like. Human vanity always stands in the way of a correct, cool judgment where self comes," said the professor, dogmatically. "Do you know what idea will disturb her when she begins to see the truth?"

Aylmer intuitively comprehended what his friend meant.

He did not answer, but the savant went on as if he had received a reply :

"Yes, that will be it—her seniority. Now I dare say that as a rule it may be a mistake for a man to marry a woman older than himself—but she is an exception. She is more beautiful to-day than she was at twenty—look at her picture—and no older. At forty-five she will appear thirty—an affair of physique—one of those marvels Nature occasionally likes to show us, like——"

"Don't !" broke in Aylmer, certain that the professor, in his turn, was about to compare her to Ninon.

"Ah, I understand. But all that feeling about De l'Enclos is stuff and prejudice. She followed natural selection. Well, well, don't fidget—leave that part. This woman to-day is years younger in face and feeling than you. By the time you are thirty-three you will be as gray as a badger where you are not bald, and so grave and worn that she will seem girlish beside you."

"All that is nothing ! If I could only believe she cared—could ever be brought to care !"

"Bosh ! nonsense ! You are as blind as a bat—blinder !" cried the professor. "And you are going to work just the right way to lose her ! Do you hear ? to—lose—her !"

"I have tried every——"

"A great many too many ! Leave her quiet, that is what you have to do. Rouse her suddenly, and you'll frighten her—she will arm herself with scruples and send you off ! Let her alone, and she'll float on unconsciously till you will become too completely master for her even to struggle against your supremacy. Why, just the very name she gives you when we talk together shows me what delusive haze she blinds herself under—'our friend Laurence !' "

"Oh, friendship—friendship! she is always bringing me back to that !" Aylmer cried impatiently.

"Exactly. I am old and ugly, but I know how she is to be managed better than you, young Adonis on a colossal scale though you be ! I'd help you, if you would promise to obey implicitly."

"I will promise ; I am at the end of my own resources."

"But you'll forget to keep your word ; you'll hurry—go frantic—upset everything at some inopportune moment.

No, take your own course; I'll not meddle—take it and lose her!"

"Come now, don't be a monster. Give me your idea."

"Simply to carry out her pet theory—friendship—pure, simple, poetical, perfect friendship! Let her think she has convinced you that ought to be the only tie between you, that no fancy or whim any longer disturbs your peace. Of course you are not to adopt this line too abruptly; work up to it gradually."

"After all, she wouldn't be a woman if she were content, even if she never learns to love me."

"The first sensible thing you have said yet. Of course she'll not be content, and her dissatisfaction, after trying to believe she has reached the state of affairs she wanted, will win you your prize."

"To wait, to be patient when one's very heart is on fire!—I don't care if I am talking like a fool, it is such a relief!—do literally nothing——"

"That your *role*—masterly inactivity. Always difficult for human nature; it wants to manage, direct—like me, for instance."

"But your idea is the right one, I am convinced of that."

"Then follow it, and in less than six months you will have reason to thank me for giving it. Come, I am going home to bed; I can't lose my sleep worrying over your affairs."

He put his arm through Aylmer's with a gentleness that belied his brusque words, and they walked on in silence.

CHAPTER XX.

A GIRL'S TROUBLES.

IT must be admitted that the two cousins began their intercourse with certain preconceived opinions on either side which seemed likely to prevent a thorough understanding or warm friendship making rapid growth between them. Mary was remorsefully conscious that on the day of her

arrival she had behaved in a way which could scarcely fail to prejudice Violet against her, and this consciousness rendered her for a time troubled and embarrassed under her relative's good-natured effort towards acquaintance.

Unfortunately, embarrassment with Mary took a form which caused her to appear stiff and unresponsive. She was constantly haunted by the idea that she, a grown woman, had no right to settle down in idle content upon the bounty of another woman. Worried, too, by fear that she must be awkward and provincial, liable at every turn to shock this elegant Violet, whom she saw courted by persons the very mention of whose names seemed to Mary like reading a romance. Mary did not mean the rich people or the people with grand titles who gladly bent at Miss Cameron's feet, but the authors and painters and sculptors she had dreamed of—men who had won a position in the world by their genius—to find herself in the same room with whom caused the girl's heart to thrill in that enthusiasm which is so charming at her age, laugh at it as cynically as we older critics may.

And Mary had a great horror of being laughed at; she would not for worlds have allowed anybody to know that a few days after her arrival in Florence she took advantage of Violet's and Miss Bronson's absence, and while Clarice supposed her tranquilly and correctly strolling about the garden, she had entered a cab, given the order "Casa Guidi" to the coachman, and driven away to worship the dwelling rendered sacred by having been the home of England's greatest poetess.

The coachman did not seem surprised that when they reached the house she sat still and stared up at the windows; no doubt he had carried more than one young enthusiast on a similar errand. He descended from his perch and leaned in at the carriage door, talking volubly, and though her limited knowledge of Italian prevented her understanding all that he said, she did comprehend that he was speaking of Elisabetta Browninga and claiming her as "*la nostra*" with as much assurance as he would have done Michel Angelo, and she felt unlimited confidence in him at once.

That confidence was a little shaken presently. On gaining the street that led into the piazza where the Amaldi Palace stood, she motioned him to stop; but when she ten-

dered the legal fare he unblushingly, though very insinuatingly, demanded double the sum. Mary, in spite of her romance, was a practical soul, and she had taken pains in advance to ask Miss Bronson casually the price per hour; and now, though frightened, she laid on the seat the correct amount, and informed the faithless man by a very expressive gesture that he could take it or leave it at his pleasure —she was not to be cheated. And he understood as plainly as if she had spoken in pure Tuscan, and liked her the better for her shrewdness, assisting her with elaborate courtesy to alight, and Italian-like, sending a benediction after her pretty face into the bargain.

Mary felt guilty, but very happy, as she hurried through the square and entered the house, unperceived, as she fondly hoped. She might have been, so far as the ducal-looking porter was concerned, for he sat serenely dozing in the depths of his retreat; but unfortunately the Argus-eyed Antonio, returning from his daily walk, crossed the street just as she stopped the carriage. Antonio gave one glance to assure himself that his wandering sight had not cheated him, then plunged into the shadow of a *porte-cochère*, and watched to see what she would do next. Hurrying home as fast as her feet would carry her; but where had she been?—that was the question! Antonio's heart sank beneath a virtuous pang! He had served in too many high and mighty families, and grown familiar with "the ways that are dark" of too many demoiselles of lofty descent, not to entertain certain suspicions in regard to her escapade, and indeed the only thing which astonished him was that he could have been sufficiently mistaken in this fawn-eyed American girl to feel any surprise.

"But she looked so innocent—she did indeed; and to think of my being deluded by that!" Antonio thought. Then, a little to soften his feeling of humiliation, he added: "After all, she is a woman! Solomon himself was deceived to the last!"

All day and all the evening did Antonio meditate over his discovery, and try for means to warn Miss Cameron that she ought to keep a sharp watch upon her cousin, without at the same time exposing the young lady's delinquency; for, in spite of the belief forced upon him by experience, he hesitated to believe as ill of this innocent-looking creature as his reflections warned him it was his duty to do.

He bore his indecision and trouble with the exemplary patience which characterized him; attended on the ladies at dinner; even deprived himself of the solace of his club in order to have ample leisure to decide upon his line of conduct. But when his mistress came home from the opera and paused in the anteroom to speak a pleasant word to him, as was her wont, duty conquered. He must be just to his lady, even though he sacrificed the demoiselle with eyes like a fawn and tricks that would have been appropriate to some more feline-orbed animal.

"Signora!" he sighed, as Miss Cameron moved on. His voice sounded so doleful that Violet turned back, and as she glanced at him the mournful expression of his face, eloquent with sorrow and a determination to fulfill his duty at all costs, caused her to smile, supposing, from her knowledge of his character, that an infinitesimal dereliction on his own part, or that of some other member of the household, occasioned this tragic demeanor.

"What is it?" she asked, laughing. "Have you broken one of my china images, or has Clarice smiled at the new footman?"

And to excuse her lack of dignity, I must remind the reader she had lived so long in France and Italy that she had forgotten it was indecorous to address a servant as a human being, even after years of such attachment as Antonio had shown.

"Ah, mademoiselle, it is more serious than that," replied Antonio, looking ready to cry.

He told his story at last, with much circumlocution and all sorts of kindly efforts to soften the blow, and thus rendered his account enigmatical and appalling. Violet's first impulse was to tell him a fib—say that she had been aware of the expedition. But she knew that such shallow subterfuge could not deceive Antonio; on the contrary, any attempt to screen the delinquent would only rouse darker suspicions in his mind, so she said gravely:

"You were quite right to tell me, but you must not think my cousin had any secret to keep—she probably wanted to visit one of the galleries or churches by herself. You know English and American girls, when they are new to the Continent, forget that many things, perfectly correct at home, are not permissible here."

Antonio caught eagerly at this possible excuse for the

stranger, in favor of whom he had the prejudice any man, whatever his degree, has for a pretty face, and after begging mademoiselle to excuse his interference, and to believe that he was actuated by a strict sense of duty, he bowed himself out of the room.

Violet felt it necessary to speak to Mary, and though she had not a shadow of doubt as to the entire innocence of the expedition, she dreaded rendering the task of making acquaintance with her cousin more difficult by assuming the character of judge or inquisitor.

"She gets on better with Miss Bronson," thought Violet; "but if I set poor Eliza to arrange the matter, she will blunder, and cause Mary to believe me a regular Gorgon. Really, although I was a governess for so many years, I am afraid nature did not mean me to be a guardian of young ladies. I am quite at a loss what to do."

As soon as she had taken off her evening dress, and had her heavy masses of hair freed from their confinement and left to stray over her shoulders in a fashion which made her perfectly bewildering in her loveliness, she sent Clarice away, and sat down to meditate upon the wisest course of conduct—naturally, first pausing to cast a little blame on poor Antonio.

"If he hadn't eyes all over his head, and wasn't always in twenty places at once, he would not have seen her, and then there would be no difficulty," she reflected impatiently.

The doors which connected the rooms that comprised her suite of private apartments stood open, according to habit, a sense of space being one of the necessities of her nature. She began walking up and down—"prowling," as Nina Magnoletti styled the performance, with that intimate knowledge of English, including even slang-phrases, which characterizes an educated Russian.

As Violet paused in her march, and stood in her bedchamber, she was startled by a sound like a stifled sob. She listened, and presently heard the noise more distinctly. Her fancy had not deceived her—it was a sob, and it came from her cousin's room.

She pushed back the thick curtains which hung over the arch, opened the door, and entered. A night-lamp burned dimly on a table; by its light she could see Mary sitting up in bed, weeping as if her heart would break.

Whatever its cause, there was a real sorrow here, and Violet forgot everything in her desire to soothe it.

"Mary!" she said, moving quickly across the floor. "Dear little cousin, what is the matter? Don't think we are strangers—remember that we are relatives—that I want to love you very much! If you have any trouble, let me share it."

"Oh, oh!" shivered Mary, in a fright at this sudden entrance. But the touch of the caressing arms folded about her subdued the alarm, and presently she was able to answer Violet's pleadings. "It's only that I'm a fool—no less. I have been ever since I got here. There is nothing else the matter. I am so sorry I wakened you; I forgot that your bedroom was next. I didn't mean to make a noise—indeed I did not."

"Then I am glad you sobbed louder than you intended," returned Violet, speaking playfully, in the hope of thus restoring her composure.

"You—you will hate me for disturbing you!" groaned Mary.

"Why, what a cross old thing you must think me!" said Violet, with good-natured raillery.

"No, no! You are so beautiful—and you seem so young! Why, that's part of it! Every time I look at you, I am so ashamed of that contemptible little speech the day I came."

"Part of what, dear? Come now, don't cry! Let's get at the bottom of the matter and understand each other, and be good friends. I often feel the need of a sensible little body to whom I can tell all my nonsensical feelings," said Violet, inspired by a great sympathy for the poor girl as she remembered the troubles which had come so suddenly upon her own girlhood; conscious, too, that she had rather put Mary aside since her arrival, and remorseful from a fear that the child's distress might rise out of this very fact.

"Oh, I used to think I was sensible," replied Mary, drying her eyes with the sleeve of her night-gown, "but I have behaved so like an idiot ever since I came, that I begin to believe I must always have been one without knowing it."

"The thing is not to find it out," said Violet; "I've no doubt I have been a goose for a great deal longer than you

are years old, but I prefer to remain innocent of the knowledge."

She laughed and made Mary laugh too, though in a somewhat tumultuous, nervous fashion.

"You are so good to me!" cried she. "And that makes me feel all the more guilty!"

"Good heavens, child, don't say such things!" exclaimed Violet, a little startled by the strong term the girl employed, even while telling herself it had no significance —proceeded merely from the exaggeration of thought and language natural at eighteen. "Just tell me what you do mean! Come, dear, this is quite the hour for confidence; maybe you and I will not find in months so good an opportunity for getting really acquainted and growing fond of each other, as we ought to be, since neither possesses another near relative in the world."

"That is it too—just another part of it!" cried Mary, and the very assurance she appeared to have that her exclamation rendered her troubles clear, left the phrase still more mysterious and annoying.

"A part of what?" demanded Violet, inclined to grow exasperated, as one is when self-convicted of having been impulsive, even "gushing," to no purpose. But she controlled her impatience, and added, "Now begin at the beginning, as the children say when they are promised a story. I can't answer as I ought if you talk in riddles."

"Oh, I am so stupid!" replied Mary.

Violet caught herself thinking rather cynically that doubtless some bit of girlish romantic folly lay at the bottom of this agitation—that really it required more patience than she possessed to fill well her *role* of elder cousin if such scenes were to occur frequently! Yes, yes; some missish fancy and disappointment—some elegy over a disturbed dream as empty as it was poetical—these were the sorrows she must hear chanted. Could the hero be Laurence Aylmer? She stopped short in her reflection, called herself a heartless, crabbed, envious old maid, and held Mary tighter in her embrace, determined not only to display, but to feel sympathy, whatever the tidings which awaited her.

"A part of what, childie?" she repeated, pressing her lips on Mary's forehead. "There! I seldom kiss even Nina Magnoletti; if that does not unlock your pretty mouth I

am at the end of my resources," and was quite unaware what absolute arrogance and complete faith in the potency of her own fascinations the sentence implied.

"Yes," said Mary, speaking somewhat breathlessly; "I'll tell you—I'd rather tell you; I mightn't get the courage again, and I should seem so ungrateful! But I could not stay—indeed I could not, unless—unless we had it out," she added, taking refuge in the expressive school-girl phrase, after trying in vain to substitute one more elegant. "If you really do blame him, it would be so mean of me to live on—on your bounty—and oh, I hate the idea, anyway! I am grown up; I ought to take care of myself—and then it seems more wicked than all the rest to think of that! And oh, sometimes I wish I had been drowned coming over, and then there would have been an end of it all!"

She pushed Violet almost harshly away, and buried her head in the pillow; and Violet, certain now that she had to deal with some real sorrow, forgot her impatience, put aside every personal sensation in her longing to comfort this girlish sufferer, who looked like the phantom of her own early youth, moaning in the desolation which overtook it so unexpectedly, but which no human creature had possessed the power or even the desire to console.

Violet was too thoroughly versed in the ways of her sex to increase Mary's agitation by petting or weeping with her, though, as a reversion from her recent cynical thoughts, she felt strongly inclined to lay her head down by Mary's and sob too. For no reason, she took pains to assure her conscience, only because ashamed of her own hardness, and because the sight of tears always made any woman a little hysterical. Women were always wretchedly weak creatures, she mentally added, with a misanthropy for which she would have soundly rated Nina Magnoletti, had she ventured to display it.

"Now you are such a sensible little body," said Violet, calling herself to account as well as Mary, in this assurance, "that I know you mean to sit up directly and tell me all about it! Why should you think of going away? My dear, your natural home is with me. Girls must have a home, however clever and brave they may be; I know that by experience."

"Why, that's the rest of it!" cried Mary, lifting her tear-stained face.

"Good!" pronounced Violet. "Now that we have arrived at the whole, in its entirety, as the newspapers say, try to make me understand what it is all about."

"She said it was through papa," returned Mary, with an ominous sob, quickly checked. "He lost your money, and you had to go to teaching! And oh! if you think he did it on purpose—if you think he wasn't honest, let me go away! I'd rather starve than live with anybody who could believe ill of my father!"

"Ah, it is all clear!" exclaimed Violet, with an odd feeling of relief at discovering that Mary's trouble related to her dead parent. "Eliza Bronson has been talking to you. My poor Eliza! she is the best soul in the world, and whatever she ought not to say is the very thing she always says. My dear, you must learn not to mind her talk; if I did, a hundred times a day I should think myself a lost soul, both for this world and the next."

"You want to make me laugh—you want to turn it off!" cried Mary. "I'll not let you—it is not kind! If I am to speak out, you must also! He did lose your money—she said so—but oh, if you think he was dishonest——"

"I have no harsh feeling towards your father, Mary," Violet interrupted; "if I had, I should not have asked you to live in my house. I have the letters he wrote me; you shall read them; they will satisfy you;" and she was careful to put no audible emphasis on the final pronoun, though she did internally. "My father's affairs were left in a bad state by his sudden death; my cousin George did what he could; you will see that by his letters. Now understand that I have no harsh feeling in my mind."

"Oh, I knew nobody could blame papa who really was acquainted with him!" said Mary, then adding quickly, "But you went to earn your living; you did not stop dependent on him."

"Your father was at that time in difficulties himself—he told me so," Violet replied, giving that last clause a significance to her own mind which did not reach Mary's. "He offered me a home—recollect that! Come, do not make me say that I was headstrong and obstinate, in order to convince you that you would be wrong to rush out to battle with the world, when you can be guarded and taken care of—have love, too, if you will accept it."

"Indeed I will!" cried Mary. "I'm more ashamed

than ever of myself—but I am glad it has all been said! Oh, I have been so lonesome—tormented myself so!"

"My dear, perhaps I was wrong to leave you so much. I thought you would get on better first with Eliza, as you seemed a little shy with me. I forgot her unfortunate genius for blundering."

"Oh, that is no matter now—don't blame her!" said Mary. "And it was my fault that you left me to her. Oh, I have been so ashamed; I don't know what ailed me the day I got here. Why, I made a regular prickly pear of myself!"

"Let us say a moss rose-bud, very imperfectly developed," laughed Violet, glad so easily to have set the girl's mind at rest. "But you understand that I did not mean to be selfish. As your mourning prevents your going into society, I thought Eliza would take you about to the galleries, and see after Italian lessons and music, if you liked it."

"Oh, she is very good," sighed Mary. "I *am* so wicked! Now, I love music, but I can't bear to study the piano, and she was so hurt when I said it. And she wants me to write long letters to nobody, to improve my style. And, oh, Violet, it seems sacrilege to hear her talk in the galleries! She won't let me admire anything unless the guide-book says I shall, and she drives me quite frantic! I am so bad!"

"So am I—be consoled," returned Violet. "Come, you shan't be given over to her tender mercies! You see, you are such a prim, proper little thing, that I never dreamed of your showing your relationship to me by having an ill-regulated mind."

"Oh, I shall never be like you!" said Mary. "And she says—Miss Bronson says—it is immodest to draw from casts, and that is the only thing I care for; and I hoped sometime, perhaps, I could be a sculptor—other women have. Oh, don't think I'm a fool! And when she saw, by accident, a little figure I had tried to do, she cried and wrung her hands, and begged me never to let anybody dream that I had any such talent; she said it was so unladylike."

"My good Eliza! Well, well, I am neither good nor ladylike, according to her ideas! To-morrow we will look at that figure."

"Oh, I broke it!" interrupted Mary—"I did! She thought I was penitent, but I was angry—and I oughtn't to have been. You can see how horrid I am!"

Here was her commonplace little charge turning out an embryo artist, with aspirations and longings; well, Violet liked that better than the prosaic conception of her own to which she had given the girl's name. They conversed for a long time, and Mary had completely recovered her peace of mind before Violet remembered Antonio's revelation, and then it was difficult to speak, but she did, and found relief in Mary's confession.

"I am so glad to find you are a romantic puss," said she. "I felt quite afraid of you, you seemed so superior."

"Oh! And I thought you would consider me an idiot!"

"My dear, I once walked ten miles to sit on a stone where they said Washington Irving used to sit. There, now you perceive that where what Eliza would call folly, is concerned, I can sympathize to any extent."

They might have talked on, oblivious of the lapse of time—Mary entranced, Violet feeling more and more as if she were holding communion with that dreamy phantom of her girlhood—but they were disturbed by a sudden loud knocking on the wall in Miss Bronson's bedroom.

"Oh, good gracious!" exclaimed Violet, "we have wakened her; oh, shan't we catch it! I feel as if we were both in a boarding-school, and had just been surprised *in flagrante delictu* by the lady-abbess."

"She's coming—I hear her!" whispered Mary, choking with laughter.

The corridor-door opened, and the spinster appeared on the threshold, looking about ten feet high in a loose flannel dressing-gown, with a row of curl-papers sticking out like miniature horns along her forehead. She carried a candle in her hand, which she held aloft, regarding the pair with great severity.

"Is either of you ill?" she asked.

"No, no," said Violet; "we got to talking and didn't remember how late it was."

"And we are so sorry to have disturbed you!" added Mary.

"That is of no consequence, though of course now I must lie awake the rest of the night," returned Miss Bron-

son ; "but it is important to keep regular hours at Mary Danvers's age. Violet, I am surprised at your forgetting the fact."

"I'm a miserable sinner ; I'll never do it again—please don't scold !"

"I hope I never scold," said the spinster, in an injured tone.

"Oh, Eliza, you do look so funny !" cried Violet, giving way to her laughter, in which Mary joined.

Miss Bronson read them a long lecture on their present iniquity and the general misconduct of their lives, then consented to be appeased, and was made to laugh too, and forgot to drive them to bed for a full half hour afterward.

CHAPTER XXI.

BEFORE THE POPE'S PORTRAIT.

SO, sooner than could have been expected from the unpromising aspect of affairs on her arrival, Mary Danvers found her own particular niche in her cousin's home—fitted into it so perfectly that she was at ease herself and a pleasure and satisfaction to Violet and her household.

Miss Bronson was highly elated at the good understanding between the two, and expressed her sentiments with a delicious blunder-headedness which, in the case of many women, would have served to alienate the two relatives forever.

"I told you how sweet she was ; I begged you to have patience and study her. I am glad that I have convinced you at last !" she would say to Violet.

"My dear, you had only one grave fault in my eyes—I thought you did not quite—quite do justice to your incomparable cousin !" was her reproachful plaint to Mary.

Now in order fully to appreciate the situation, it must be understood that she uttered these remarks when both ladies were in the room ; calling first one, then the other, under transparent pretexts of asking advice concerning her

worsted-work, or to read aloud some passage from a book, and framing her jubilant sentences in a tone perfectly audible to whichever of the pair she supposed in delightful ignorance of her words.

Violet and Mary laughed heartily in private over her manias, and the fact of sharing a secret subject of amusement brought them still closer together, as such confidences always do people who have a keen sense of the ludicrous; and that quality Mary Danvers proved, to Violet's satisfaction, to possess in a high state of development, in spite of her demure ways.

And Violet, influenced by complex motives, as people usually are in their conduct, gave a great deal of time to her young cousin's society; partly because she was attracted towards the girl now that she found what an impetuous, aspiring soul lived under that restrained exterior, partly out of kindness, in order that the child might not again feel lonely and desolate; and a little from her spoiled princess gratification in a new plaything. But she remained unconscious that this latter reason existed, and it is only justice to her to add that she would have been heartily ashamed of her own pettiness had she discovered the fact.

She spent a great many mornings in going about to the galleries with her charge, refusing engagements, and denying herself to friends in order to do this, and was amply repaid for any slight sacrifice of pleasure by Mary's enthusiastic delight, which, her fears once removed, she displayed to Violet as freely as if she had been thinking aloud.

The more she became acquainted with the girl the more genuine grew Violet's liking, and her impulsiveness—that long and uselessly-combated weakness of her nature—helped to render her admiring, because she recollected with a somewhat exaggerated self-reproach, that at first she had been inclined to underrate her relation.

The very discrepancies in Mary's character interested, even pleased her. The girl had led a life of singular repression between the two antagonistic influences—her father's and stepmother's—under which she had grown up. Violet, in her fanciful way, used secretly to compare her to a wild flower early transplanted into a garden and taught to grow primly and according to rule, taking so kindly to the training that it learned to stand erect and well-regulated, only showing here and there, if one examined closely, cer-

tain tendrils beneath its leaves stretching out to the right and left in a discursive fashion, which gave signs of the adventurous spirit it would have possessed had it been left free to follow the dictates of nature.

Mary would not in the least have answered for a modern girl-heroine, according to the type presented in autobiographical novels written by the women of our day. These heroines are always blowsy, not to say dirty; great stress is laid upon the fact that their dresses are invariably crumpled and torn, their shoes down at the heel, and their hair in a state of disorder which defies description. These heroines never "weep" as those of old-fashioned romances did; they never cry as girls do in real life—they "blubber;" they never laugh either—they "yell;" they never kiss their fathers, they "give the governor a resounding smack on each side his dear old ugly face, which knocks his hat off;" and when the unexpected appearance of their lovers causes them any emotion, it is not what the antiquated novelists would have called "a thrill of blissful confusion," nor what we should term in ordinary parlance a natural embarrassment, it is "a red-hot sensation from head to foot, which makes their backs tingle as if somebody had applied a hissing flat-iron to the tenderest spot in their spinal marrow."

She was, in fact, a lady, a gentlewoman in thought and action, such as we happily find numerous examples of in real life, though, if we were to trust to the veracity of those aforementioned modern heroines, who relate the story of their youth in language as startling as the sentiments, principles, and adventures which it portrays, we should believe the species had utterly disappeared from among the human race.

Faults enough she certainly had—the faults of her age; hasty temper, bursts of impatience, a yielding to impulse, thereby cracking the fine varnish of conventional breeding in a way which older people learn to avoid—but she was a lady.

She had not been fostered into precociously becoming a woman in feelings and views of life; she was exactly what she ought to have been at her years—a girl, and a healthy, pure-minded girl, with all the charms and asperities which belong to that season.

Violet's laughing comparison was perhaps the best that

could have been applied—a moss rosebud a little too well enveloped ; still, for those who had eyes to see, the tender bloom which heralded the perfection of the flower was distinctly visible.

And Violet enjoyed her companionship, as imaginative people past their youth do enjoy the society of what is young and fresh, provided those people are free enough from envy and jealousy—though of course hiding their real sentiments from themselves under reproaches directed towards the frivolousness, ignorance and presumption of adolescence—to be able to appreciate it.

Her friends began to grumble at what they termed her neglect of obvious duty—namely, attention to themselves—since the arrival of the cousin to whom she was determined to prove that she had fallen into thoroughly sympathetic guardianship—and the first and loudest among these grumblers were Nina Magnoletti and Mr. Aylmer.

"One never sees you lately," that gentleman said one night when he met her at Lady Harcourt's.

"Just what I have been telling her," cried Nina. "It is positively shameful !"

"It strikes me that I saw you both last evening—twice even—once at the opera, and afterwards at the Morelli's," returned Violet. "My memory is better than yours. Seeing me makes so little impression on your minds that you forget the fact within twenty-four hours."

"Of course she would manage in some way to twist our reproaches so as to put us in the wrong, Mr. Aylmer," said Nina.

"And she knows very well what we meant," rejoined he. "Her doors are hermetically sealed ! Now and then she appears late in the evening at somebody's reception or ball—flashes past one like a meteor, and is gone."

"I think that is blank verse," retorted Violet, "and everybody knows that poetry is not truth."

"What an awful heresy, Miss Cameron !"

"And only uttered to avoid telling the truth herself," said Nina. "Now, misguided young woman, I insist on knowing where all your mornings have been spent for the last week ? I have called, heaven knows how many times, at your house, and the answer was always the same—out, and nobody had an idea where ! To say the least, such conduct is very mysterious, and Florence does not permit

mysteries. People may be as wicked as they like, but they must not make a secret of their peccadilloes."

"If either of you ever visited a picture-gallery, or any other place improving to the mind, you might have found me," said Violet.

"I flatter myself that my dwelling comes within that catalogue, and you certainly have not been seen there," returned Nina.

"Well, if you had called it a museum of unnatural curiosities, considering the people you and Carlo get about you, I might have agreed with your remark," said Violet.

"And as I go there almost daily, permit me to thank you, Miss Cameron, for my share in the compliment," cried Aylmer.

"She is hopelessly hardened in her sins," sighed Nina. "It is all the fault of that wretched little new cousin—I hate her!"

"That's because she is pretty," said Violet.

"The same reason would not apply to Mr. Aylmer, since he is a man," replied Nina, "and he hates her too."

Aylmer laughed. Was his laughter slightly constrained, or did Violet only fancy so?

"Why don't you leave your Bronson to show her the sights?" pursued Nina. "She is a walking encyclopædia of knowledge, and her society might be of service to the child, while you are as ignorant as the rest of us, and can be of no benefit whatever to her mind! I wish she had stayed in her native wilds, or been drowned in crossing the ocean, if she is to usurp your attention in this way."

So it came about that only the next day, as Violet and Mary were standing in the Apollo salon of the Pitti Gallery, Violet perceived Laurence Aylmer in one of the smaller rooms opposite, conversing with a gentleman. She made another discovery at the same instant—it was that Mary saw him, too, turned, and became absorbed in Raphael's portrait of Leo X., with dark, inscrutable-eyed Cardinal Medici standing beside the pope. But she did not move quickly enough, for Violet caught the sudden color which bloomed like sweetbriar blossoms into her usually rather pale cheeks.

The two men were standing with their backs towards the ladies. Violet's first impulse was to turn away as Mary had done, but she checked it. She did not

choose to be flattered, missish, silly ; she would not stir. She had time to think this and many other things in rapid succession ; uppermost rushed the thought born in her mind the day of Mary's arrival—the girl loved Laurence Aylmer ! And he would love Mary. His fancy for Violet Cameron would fade speedily, as it ought—for Violet, past her youth—Violet, who had no business with dreams such as were fitting at her cousin's age ! Why, presently she should be ancient, wrinkled, withered—old maid that she was ! Of course Aylmer would turn to this opening bud, which possessed the charm of promise that the already fading rose had lost.

And Mary loved him ! Here was an additional reason why she, Violet, should prove incapable of the preposterous folly of caring for a man younger than herself. His caprice would not last ! No man could love (no, she meant admire—lose his head over—some term that expressed folly or temporary aberration of intellect, was the most applicable !) for any length of time, a woman so many years his senior ! And Mary loved him, and Mary should have her happiness !

No doubt, when he met the girl in America, Aylmer had been attracted towards her, but was unaware of the impression he had made. Violet would not admit the possibility of his being a trifler—capable of wittingly gaining the innocent creature's heart and flinging it carelessly aside —no, no !

Circumstances had abruptly called him away before he learned the truth ; here, in Europe, he had encountered this Violet Cameron, and had conceived for her one of those brief infatuations such as his sex will in similar case —the wisest and best men being weak creatures ! But the delusion must die out rapidly, now that fate had again flung Mary in his path. He would quickly learn the difference between illusion and reality—fancy and affection ! Why once, as a compliment to the girl (long ago—oh, that first night at Nina's house !) he had said that she reminded him of Miss Cameron. Ah, he would discover that the compliment had been to Violet herself in suggesting that she retained sufficient signs of youth to leave any trace of resemblance between her and this child, whose face was holy as dawn, with waking hopes and dreams.

But Aylmer and his companion had caught sight of the

pair, and as they approached, Violet perceived that the latter gentleman was well known to her; a young artist who had not been in Florence since her return—a great favorite with her, too.

Seeing him gave her a reason for greeting Aylmer rather briefly, and hastening to welcome the new-comer.

"Why, Gilbert Warner!" she exclaimed. "What an unexpected pleasure! How very glad I am to see you! I thought you had vanished forever. Where have you been—to the Antipodes?"

"Only to America," he answered, shaking her hand with unfashionable fervor, excusable, since he was a painter, not a dandy.

But while Violet poured forth a torrent of questions and ejaculations with an animation less pardonable than his warmth, since she ranked among the order of fine ladies, and so ought to have been incapable of enthusiasm, she was not so absorbed but what she could observe the meeting between Mary and Aylmer.

"Are you so lost in admiration of that wicked pope that one may not even say good-morning?" he asked.

She turned and gave him her hand, but her laugh sounded nervous; and Violet, strong in her determination to be of service, would not leave the girl to betray her confusion.

"Mary," she called, "let me present my friend Mr. Warner——"

"I have had the pleasure of meeting Miss Danvers," broke in that gentleman, quickly; "we were fellow-passengers across the ocean. I trust she has not forgotten me!"

He hurried up to Mary, and Violet gave her another rapid glance, wondering if by any possibility she had been mistaken as to the person who had caused the girl's little agitation.

No; it was not Gilbert Warner. Mary held out her hand to him with exemplary composure—answered his greetings as calmly as even Eliza Bronson could have considered fitting for the manner of a young lady; and so far from coloring, looked almost pale again—else the contrast to that recent vivid flush made her appear so.

Then, as was her duty, Miss Cameron took the adjusting of matters into her own control. She began to talk, and kept the conversation general for a few minutes. They all

walked on to look at the pictures in the farther rooms, and Violet, with her woman's quickness, perceived that Mary (involuntarily, Violet did her the justice to think,) half turned from the artist, as if to claim Aylmer's companionship.

So it should be, Violet decided, and she addressed some remark to Warner which brought him to her side; she detained him there, as they strolled along, leaving the other pair to follow.

When Miss Cameron announced that it was time for her and Mary to go, the gentlemen accompanied them down stairs.

"Remember, I shall expect to see you immediately, you runaway!" Violet said to Warner, in that gracefully autocratic fashion of hers, which men found so irresistible. "I shall come very soon for a peep at your new sketches; but recollect, no pretense of work will serve as an excuse for neglecting me!"

Warner persuaded her to set the next day for visiting his studio with her cousin; then Aylmer claimed her attention, and Violet had not time to notice that the painter looked at Mary with as much gratitude as if the promise had come from her; but Mary was busy extricating a bow of her cousin's dress which had caught in the carriage-door, and did not raise her eyes.

The two men stood watching the landau as it rolled down the descent in front of the palace, and Warner said:

"Upon my word, Miss Cameron is more beautiful than ever. She ought to have been Empress of all the Russias. Yet, though she shows so plainly that she is accustomed to have the whole world on its knees when she passes, she is as natural and unaffected as a child."

Aylmer's first thought was that which always enters the masculine mind when another man ventures to praise the special object of the listener's admiration—"Like your impudence indeed!"—and his next to feel his heart warm suddenly towards his friend, because he had eyes and brains to appreciate his deity's loveliness.

"I am awfully glad you have come back to Florence, Warner," cried he, enthusiastically and irrelevantly. "I was thinking about you the other day, and hoping you would get here before the winter ended."

And, as the carriage passed down the narrow street towards the Ponte Vecchio, Violet said:

"Such a charming man, and so good! You know him already."

"Why—yes—oh, you mean Mr. Warner?" said Mary, coming out of a reverie with another blush, which faded too quickly as she went on to speak of him for any probability that it or the start with which she roused herself to answer had the slightest connection with his name. "Yes; he is a relative of Mrs. Forrester's. He came to see us very often in New York before we sailed, and was very kind and good-natured during the voyage."

"And you never remembered to speak of him, you ungrateful puss!"

"We have had so much to talk about, I've had no time to recollect my journey; and you did not speak of him either," said Mary.

The carriage had reached that quaintest of mediæval bridges, and Mary became too busy regarding the odd little shops to have further leisure to bestow on Mr. Warner; as for Laurence Aylmer, his name found no mention from either of the ladies during their homeward drive.

They talked a great deal, however, and Mary was made happy by a decision that she should be allowed to pursue her inclinations. An old sculptor of Violet's acquaintance had promised to let Mary enter his studio and have the benefit of his counsels; but it was agreed between the cousins that at present she must not allow her love for the plastic art to interfere with other studies. She should go to the studio a certain number of times each week, and work a certain number of hours. As Mr. Vaughton's atelier was on the same floor as his dwelling, and he had a good-natured sister, who would be only too glad to play chaperon to the young girl, there existed no necessity for troubling Miss Bronson.

"I wash my hands of the whole business," Eliza said, when later she heard the affair discussed; and as she spoke she rubbed them violently with her pocket-handkerchief, as if the lavatory process were already finished, and she wiping away any last traces of responsibility which might still linger. "I disapprove, but I remain silent. Water colors in moderation, if young ladies please; though, to my mind, they are sticky things, and ruinous to one's dress—

but sculpture! No, Violet, I cannot help wondering at your encouraging the child in a fancy which is positively unnatural—yes, I must say it—almost depraved!"

By this time Mary knew Miss Bronson too well to feel either frightened or hurt, and the professor, who chanced to be present when the news of Mary's intentions was broken to the spinster, highly enjoyed her dismay.

"You must do nothing by halves, Miss Mary," he said. "A thing worth doing at all is worth doing thoroughly."

"And an improper thing touched ever so lightly is still improper," cried Eliza, bridling, as she always did when she felt that she had uttered some emphatic truth.

"Half the people who call themselves sculptors know about as much of the human frame as—as our dear friend Miss Bronson does of those hypothetical human souls she likes to dream of."

"Professor!" said Eliza, in mingled pain and wrath, "at least spare that young girl those evil theories! Do not add to your sins by essaying to contaminate her youthful spirit."

"No, no; I had something else in my mind," returned the professor, with a chuckle. "Fräulein Violet, little Miss Mary must study anatomy. I shall give her lessons myself, if you permit, and she will accept me as teacher."

For a moment Eliza sat speechless, staring open-mouthed, straight before her, so Mary had an opportunity to say:

"Oh, how kind you are! Do thank him, Violet!"

"My dear, your face is doing that better than I can," said Violet, laughing in advance at the scene which she knew Eliza was about to make; which the professor himself awaited with gleeful impatience.

"We will begin to-morrow, Miss Mary!" cried he. "Now the bones of the——"

"One instant," gasped Eliza; "one instant."

"Certainly," said the professor, with elaborate politeness.

"I desire to ask you a single question, Violet," pursued Eliza, in a voice at once tremulous and dignified. "Do you mean to allow this contamination of a youthful female mind, committed to your charge, to be carried into effect?"

"I am afraid I must. You know how obstinate the pro-

fessor is—he always will have his way," said Violet, with mock sadness.

"And now about the bones—if I do not interrupt Miss Bronson," continued the professor, with a profound bow towards the outraged spinster; "the bones of——"

"Mary Danvers!" broke in Eliza.

"Hers, if you like," said the professor, "as good an example as another."

"Peace!" cried Eliza. "Mary, I appeal to you! I urge you in the name of——"

"Too late!" interrupted the professor, in his turn "The lesson has begun. Now only listen, Miss Bronson. This is a fact which will interest you!"

"Violet, you must excuse me if I withdraw," said Eliza, rising.

"Only just listen to this," urged the professor. "The bones——"

"Sir," exclaimed Eliza, "from this moment we are strangers, remember that—remember, too, my final words. There is an unpardonable sin—I believe you have reached it at last. After that, we are taught that judgment comes speedily and tarrieth not! If you cannot tremble, at least I trust these misguided creatures whom you are leading astray may be granted grace enough to do so."

And Eliza swept from the room with a demeanor that was a happy mingling of stateliness worthy Queen Katherine, and a saintly resignation which would have enabled her to pose as a model for a picture of Alexandria's martyred virgin.

CHAPTER XXII.

A BOLD STROKE.

THE next day, while the cousins and Miss Bronson were seated at breakfast (one must call it so, in accordance with continental customs, though served at noon), Violet said:

"Mary, we promised to go to Gilbert Warner's studio at one o'clock. He is in the same building as

Mr. Vaughton, so we shall 'kill two birds with one stone.' I beg your pardon, Eliza. I know proverbs are vulgar, but don't look so shocked."

"I was not thinking of the proverb," returned the spinster mournfully, as she laid down her knife and fork with the air of a person whose appetite has been effectually destroyed by some untoward remark. "It is this scheme of Mary's——"

"My dear, that is settled, and discussion could only make Mary uncomfortable," Violet interrupted, good-naturedly, but firmly. "Console yourself by remembering that talents are gifts, not matters of choice. If Mary has talent as a sculptor, it would be as wrong for us to attempt to interfere with its cultivation, as for her to neglect her powers."

"I have no more to say," Eliza answered. "I have borne my testimony—my responsibility ends there."

The cousins had much ado not to smile, and Violet changed the conversation; but Miss Bronson remained pensive and injured, refusing even to eat apricot-marmalade—her favorite sweetmeat.

"Will you go with us, Eliza, and see Mr. Warner's new sketches?" Violet asked, as they rose from the table.

"Not to-day, if you will excuse me. Your real errand is to Mr. Vaughton; I could not answer to my conscience if by my presence I seemed tacitly to admit approval," Miss Bronson replied, and she regarded the pair with mingled regret and condemnation.

So the cousins drove away alone, laughing a little between themselves at poor Eliza's scruples. They were received by the young painter with a delight which he took no pains to conceal. After a brief conversation, while he showed Miss Cameron the sketches he had taken during his absence, Mary, who knew most of them by heart, strolled about, regarding the collection of valuable curiosities and relics with which the studio abounded, for though not a rich man, Warner had already met with sufficient success in his profession to be able to indulge his artistic tastes in the furnishing of his atelier.

Presently Laurence Aylmer made his appearance, and again Violet noticed in Mary that slight agitation which meeting him seemed always to produce. Gilbert Warner

observed the change also, and a cloud came over his bright, genial face; but it faded speedily when, a few moments later, he got Mary to himself under the pretext of showing her a rare old cabinet, while Violet and Aylmer were busy with the sketches.

Then the cousins went to visit Miss Vaughton, and arrange with her brother about the days on which Mary was to work, and from there they drove to Janetti's *bric-à-brac* shop to inquire about a present which Violet had ordered from Paris for Miss Bronson, to take the place of her much-regretted china dog with the red caudal extremity.

Miss Cameron left Mary standing near the door looking at a deliciously absurd porcelain mandarin squatted on a carpet, and walked to the farther end of the shop. Presently Mary hurried up and caught her arm so quickly that Violet looked round in surprise.

"What is the matter?" she asked. "Why, how you tremble!"

"That dreadful man—I was frightened!" returned Mary, still rather breathless. "He saw me and came in—oh! there he is!"

Violet turned and saw Giulia's Greek walking towards them; he had been pointed out to her, and she had at once conceived a strong aversion to his handsome, feline face.

"Do you mean him? What is it?" she asked.

"Oh, I didn't want to tell," said Mary, more composedly, "but I had better. He was in the railway-carriage with me from Pistoja. He eyed me so and talked so that I was frightened, and he followed me through the station, offering to see me to an hotel. Oh! that was what made me forget my trunks—and—behave so, you know!"

The Greek was moving forward, his insolent eyes fixed on Mary. Violet stepped from behind a great vase that concealed her and took Mary's arm.

"Come, my cousin," she said aloud in French, and as they passed the Greek she looked full in his face with a menacing glance which there was no mistaking.

The fellow stood dumbfoundered for an instant; he recognized Miss Cameron, and knew that by his offensive gallantry to the pretty, unprotected girl in the railway-carriage, he had jeopardized his social standing in Florence.

The cousins passed on, and he watched them with an

evil glance. The scorn in Miss Cameron's face did not touch him a whit, but he had been anxious to rank among her acquaintances, having already learned how important her favor would be; and now there not only remained no possibility of that, but it was very probable she might cause her friends' doors to be shut against him.

He muttered a hearty curse, and to add to his wrath, some hasty movement of his arm knocked a Viennese china cup and saucer off the counter, for the breaking of which he had to pay a hundred francs. He could hate with the ferocity of any other wild animal, and a fierce desire to avenge his mishaps upon Violet Cameron sprang up in his mind.

As the carriage drove off, Mary told her little story:

"I was alone in the compartment; he got in at the last moment, else I should have changed. Oh, he was civil enough in what he said, but he frightened me. Luckily, at the next station but one, some ladies came in. I was ashamed to tell you. Girls have no business to meet with adventures. I feared you might blame me."

"You know me better now, dear."

"Yes, indeed! But, oh, when I got out in the station, and he kept by me, and—and—— Well, I won't think of it!"

"The wretched, panther-looking creature!" exclaimed Violet. "He is fit to be Giulia da Rimini's friend! He was startled enough—he recognized me, and knows very well that I can punish him as he deserves."

"Don't tell anybody—not even Miss Bronson!" pleaded Mary. "Oh, I should be ashamed; promise, Violet!"

She was so earnest, that Miss Cameron gave her word not to mention the occurrence.

"Perhaps you are right," she said; "anyway, he is not worth the trouble of punishing. I shall simply refuse to allow him to be introduced to me, if he should venture to attempt it."

But the Greek was careful not to expose himself to such risk. The days went on; he perceived by the manner in which Miss Cameron's acquaintances treated him that she had not betrayed his conduct. They met several times at houses where the duchess had presented him, but he kept aloof from Violet's vicinity.

Indeed, it soon became evident that the Greek would

not be troublesome in a society-way, and that inclined the men of Giulia's set to permit him more easily to glide into familiar acquaintance with themselves. Since he was content with occasionally appearing at a reception or ball, they did not mind riding and driving with him, allowing him the entry of the club, or gaming and supping with him.

The duchess's house was the only one he visited regularly. She knew that he watched her—made himself cognizant of her habits, her engagements, her associates—but she had recovered wholly from her fright, had matured her plans, and enjoyed the situation.

In a short time she perceived that she had gained a great advantage—the man had fallen in love with her; at least the passion was what both she and the Greek would have dignified by the name.

He displayed a strong jealousy of Laurence Aylmer, though Giulia considered that her subjugation of the American advanced very slowly. Could she have known the state of his mind, her belief that at least she was making progress would have been rudely dispelled. The duchess had become a positive burden. She employed most adroitly the terms upon which she had managed to place him by her unwelcome confidence; she waylaid him on every possible occasion, sent for him to her house on plausible pretexts; and Aylmer saw more clearly each day in what a troublesome position he was put.

He still did not suppose that she desired to fascinate either his heart or fancy, but aside from the fact of her being the last woman towards whom he wished to act the part of sympathetic counselor, he feared, certain of Miss Cameron's aversion towards her, that the appearance of intimacy which she began to parade whenever she could seize an opportunity, would injure him in the quarter where a favorable opinion was of more importance in his eyes than the verdict of the whole world.

The duchess read that cherished secret clearly, but still without anger towards him. The struggle to gain a supremacy only increased her determination, and she grew more and more confident that, besides gratifying her whim, it would afford her revenge against Violet Cameron, upon whom she concentrated the wrath which Aylmer's insensibility aroused in her soul. If she could only subdue him, she should have no wish to prevent his marrying Violet;

nay, she should be glad, and before the honeymoon ended, the haughty creature should learn that she, Giulia, stood between her and her husband. Naturally the duchess's vanity assured her that, once acquired, she could keep such hold, and her experience of men had not taught her to think any member of the sex likely to be much fettered by the marriage vow.

Carlo Magnoletti's conduct had at length convinced her that her power over him was completely lost, and she hated him almost as deeply as she did Miss Cameron. And Nina, who, under the guise of friendliness, never met her without showing in face and words that she exulted over her! actually daring to sting with vailed allusions and honeyed speeches—she, who a few months before had been afraid to offend, lest Giulia should punish her through Carlo!

And everything was Violet Cameron's fault! Her revenge! Oh, she would have it, and it should include the trio! She could wait; she possessed the fortitude and nerve of a red Indian; vengeance would taste the sweeter for this waiting—and it should come.

But in spite of other occupations, she found time to watch the Greek as narrowly as he did her. He was losing his head—she saw that; she would foil the duke with his own instrument—a second vengeance, exciting and pleasurable to her soul.

At first, as Dimetri's air of gallantry grew more pronounced, she feared he might be trying to fulfill his mission by fascinating her—putting her in an equivocal position towards himself, which would afford the duke his wished-for proofs. But she was not afraid; even if that were his object she could baffle him, aye, and yet yield to the caprice which her affection for Aylmer did not prevent her indulging.

But the Greek's passion was no simulated matter; her experienced eyes soon discovered this by signs which the wariest and most astute man could not have feigned, and the knowledge rendered her task much easier. True, she never doubted that he would betray her just the same, unless she could make it for his interest to join her side—pecuniarily his interest, she meant; she could imagine none so potent—and she thought she could manage to do that; do it without putting her hand in her own purse, a meager one this season, from her losses at cards: and she knew only

too well that she had exhausted the resources of borrowing in every quarter open to her, under every possible pretext, from that of wanting money for charity, to pretending that she had been robbed of sums intrusted to her care, and if left unaided must suffer disgrace as lasting as it would be merited.

The Greek had been barely a fortnight in Florence before Giulia saw her way clear towards managing him, and with his assistance to carry out her plans for punishing Carlo and his wife, and dealing a first blow at Violet Cameron through her affection for them.

She must throw off disguises to a certain extent, but she always deceived most successfully when she was not only in appearance but in reality frank, so far as a portion of her motives went. He had hitherto treated her with an affectation of respect which could be nothing but mockery from a confidant of the duke's, for the duke was one of the few people who knew her thoroughly. She had appeared unsuspicious of the man's being Da Rimini's spy, had refrained from a single harsh word against her husband, and given Dimetri the footing of a friend because of the source from whence he came. And now she learned something in regard to him which she could turn to use. A Sicilian who had formerly been the duke's courier passed through Florence, and came to pay his respects ; he saw the Greek, and recognized him. They had been in San Francisco at the same time, and Massi knew that there Dimetri had met with a misfortune. In Paris and Vienna, though well known as a gamester, he was not suspected of being a cheat, but in California he had once been found out. However, he shot the discoverer across the card-table.

This was all Giulia wanted, not to employ as a threat—she did not wish him to suspect her knowledge ; but now she saw how completely she could depend upon his aid. So many men who would stop at nothing else absolutely refused to cheat at cards—from dread of exposure, Giulia supposed, not because there could be any vice from which human beings would recoil. Massi only waited over a single train, so there was no danger of his betraying the Greek to anybody besides herself, and indeed he would in any case have been silent at her request.

The next morning the Greek presented himself, as had grown his daily habit, and found her seated in her dingily-

magnificent boudoir, looking like one's ideal of a mediæval sorceress, in her black-and-gold-wrought amber draperies. She had a fondness for embroidery, and her skill in the art was marvelous. As he entered she was occupied with her favorite work. She set the frame on the table beside her and held out her hand, saying :

"You have come precisely at the right moment. Please be useful, and hold this skein of silk."

He bent laughingly on one knee as she threw the scarlet threads over his fingers, gazing up into her face with a passionate light in his wicked black eyes.

"You are to look at the silk," she said, with a smile—not coquettish, she was too stately for that word to apply—"else you will tangle it hopelessly !"

"As you have done with my heart," he answered, boldly. It was the first time he had spoken any words beyond the gallantry which even idle fine ladies, who consider themselves strict, regard as quite permissible. "You certainly are the most beautiful woman in the world ! It is for me to beg *you* not to look ; you make me dizzy !"

"So that is part of your plan," she said, smiling still.

"My plan ?" he echoed. "I don't understand."

"But I do," she said. "Signor Dimetri, how much did my husband promise to give you if you got him proofs that would obtain him a separation on his own terms ?"

The Greek started to his feet.

"You insult me, madam !" he cried ; and, though his indignation might be acting, his astonishment to find himself discovered was genuine enough.

"You are tangling my silk," she said, softly. "Please to go down on your knees again. So—now we can talk quietly."

"Great heavens !" he exclaimed ; "how could you speak to me like that ?"

"Because I want to know," she answered. "I may be able to offer a better bargain than his."

"You torture me !" he cried. "You know your power over me, and use it—oh, shame, shame, to wound me like this ! I had not spoken—if my eyes told my story it was not my fault—and you punish me with such words ! Am I to blame because I could not resist your witcheries, because I adore you——"

"You may get up now; the skein is wound," she interrupted, in an unaltered voice. Then, as he sprang to his feet again, she continued: "So you have decided to make love to me yourself, since you find there is no other man whose folly or mine will help you to win your wages."

"I cannot bear this!" he exclaimed, and hurried towards the door—looked back and added, "I have been wrong—mad—but oh! if you had any heart you would pity too much what I suffer to stab me with such a relentless hand!"

"Come here," she said, gently.

He complied, crying out against her cruelty in eloquent phrases.

"I am a fool—a coward to obey," he faltered. "Ah, say you did not mean it—say that you do not believe me false and vile!"

"Falsehood and truth are only words," said the duchess. "There is nothing so important as money! The man is honest who wins his salary by thoroughly doing his work."

"Again! You call me back to outrage me anew!"

"You are only wasting your opportunities, Signor Dimetri," said she. "I am not angry. I admire your courage, but I am not a weak woman—I mean to turn my husband's weapons against himself! You love me, and I know it—he should have remembered that possibility when he sent you here."

"I do love you, but you cannot think——"

"Let us leave that part. You are too shrewd not to see that acting is useless with me."

"Yes—he did beg me—I own it. I refused——"

"At least you will aid me instead of him, since you love me—if I can make it worth your while?"

"Only a word, a hope, and I am your slave!"

"Don't get on your knees, please. Sit there, opposite me—so. Look in my face; study it well. If I lie, you are keen enough to discover it. You can't earn your money, for the simple reason that I have no lover."

It was useless to peruse that inscrutable countenance, which expressed what she desired it to do, and nothing more. He began to speak, but stopped abruptly.

"Say it," she said calmly. "I shall not be offended."

"There is a man whom you—you——"

"You mean I flirt with Laurence Aylmer? I do. I

would drive him mad if I could ; I will tell you why. The woman whom I hate the most of all created beings loves him—her name is Violet Cameron."

"The American—curse her !" muttered Dimetri.

"She can know nothing of you. Are you afraid of her ? I remember now—you have never tried to be presented. What is the reason ?"

"I met a pretty girl in the train, and frightened her by talking a little nonsense ; she turned out that woman's cousin," he replied, and went on to relate Violet's treatment of him.

"I am glad of it," the duchess said quietly ; "at least, you will be ready to help me where she is concerned."

"And you hate her, because that Aylmer——"

"You had better let me explain my own motives," she broke in ; "you can believe me or not, as you please."

"I know about her making you trouble with Magnoletti," he said, devouring her with his passionate, hungry eyes.

The duchess retained the most perfect composure ; she knew that one thing at a time is the golden rule for doing all things well. Just now business was the matter of moment.

"He may be vexed if he likes," she said, "but he loves play too well not to come to my house, and he has about three hundred thousand francs ready money ; when he has lost that, he and his fool of a wife may go their way."

"He is very lucky at cards——"

"Heavens, don't I know it !" she interrupted coldly, impatient as her words sounded. "But two people playing against him—two people with nerve and courage enough not to stop for the scruples that cowards call honesty, could be more than a match for his luck."

She looked full in his face and smiled. He started up and caught her hand in both his.

"You are a wonderful woman !" he exclaimed.

She drew her hand slowly away, still smiling in his eyes.

"Would half that inheritance of Carlo's overbalance Da Rimini's offer ?" she asked.

"I will do anything—consent to anything—only say that you love me !" he cried.

She rose and stood leaning her hand on the table ; any attitude she took always seemed the perfection of grace.

"When Violet Cameron is punished—when the Magnoletti are reduced to such straits that Nina's jewels are in pawn—you will at least have earned the right to tell me that you should prize such an avowal," she answered. "Wait—let me finish! I have shown you my plans freely; I am not a coward; I fear you as little as I do the duke! Fight with me, and we conquer together; fight against me—and trust the foresight of a woman who has held her own so far against foes, against personal inclinations, against Fate itself—you will go down among the vanquished!"

"Oh, I believe it!" he exclaimed admiringly; she seemed great in his eyes. "Together—ah, together!"

"Then, till victory comes, you speak no such word as you have done to-day," she said steadily; "if you do, you will never enter my doors again—I swear it! The duke himself would tell you that in a case of this kind I never break my word."

She moved towards a door which led into her dressing-room, looking back at him over her shoulder.

"Ah, don't go!" he cried eagerly; "don't!"

"*A rivederci—a domani!*" she answered; waved her hand with a slow, sad smile which sometimes gave a certain pathetic expression to her rather stern face, and passed out of his sight.

The Greek stood for a few seconds lost in thought.

"Da Rimini is an idiot—a beggarly twenty thousand, indeed! What a woman—she would beat the devil himself!"

And he went his way.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN THE STUDIO.

MARY DANVERS began her labors in the old sculptor's studio with the delight of a person who has found the work which is most congenial, and her success equaled her enthusiastic industry. But she was too sensible and too conscientious to neglect her promise to Violet of not allow-

ing the occupation to prevent her attending to other duties. She studied Italian under a good master, and made rapid progress ; she was already well grounded in French, lacking only the facility in conversation which is a matter of practice, and which she soon attained through the opportunities afforded her. She found time to read a great deal also, though obliged to put by poetry and romances in a measure, and this at her age appeared a little hard.

"Never mind," she said to Violet ; "when one has a good solid dinner every day, it would be silly to grumble because the sweets are sometimes left out—would it not ?"

Violet smiled at the homely illustration, but approved of the resolve, and not only the liking for her cousin, but respect for her talents, increased daily. Even Miss Bronson applauded the girl's industry ; she had only one reason for dissatisfaction—Mary grudged the hours spent over the pianoforte, and at last rebelled in her quiet fashion.

"If I meant to make music a profession," she said, "it would be another thing, but I shall never become more than a very mediocre player."

"Don't tell me you do not love music !" sighed Miss Bronson.

"I think it is because I do love it that I am discouraged by my own performance," returned Mary; and she appealed to Violet.

Only that day Mr. Vaughton had come to the house full of enthusiasm about his pupil ; he pronounced her a genius, and vowed that anybody who tried to hinder her devoting herself to sculpture would be doing a wicked thing, and sacrifice not only her talents but her happiness.

The professor had been allowed to study her efforts with his severely-critical eyes, and he came too, and added his verdict to that of Mr. Vaughton.

Violet was in ecstasies, and Miss Bronson reduced to silence by these proofs of the demure little maiden's having chosen the work really fitted to employ all her powers.

So Mary was allowed to toil as assiduously as she pleased, and soon went regularly each morning to the studio. One only needed to look at her changed face to see that she was happy ; and now that her shyness had worn off, her manners were full of charm. Violet found her a most agreeable companion ; and Mary, completely

won by the sympathy and appreciation she met, knew no bounds in her love and admiration for her beautiful cousin.

Visions of a future filled with successful achievements began to haunt the girl ; but a dream brighter than that of fame gilded her path, though as yet she did not recognize its potency, even while it permeated every thought, and made the crowning brightness of her way.

It commenced with her meeting Gilbert Warner at his relative's house in New York. Then followed the voyage, during which the weather remained so glorious that one almost forgot it was not Indian summer still. Some accident occurred to shaft or wheel—not serious enough to cause alarm among the passengers—only a lucky misfortune, which prolonged those charmed days to twice their allotted number ; from first to last a voyage in a fairy bark across an enchanted sea, with the marvelous Old World of history and tradition awaiting beyond its golden haze. The dream continued : the journey up to London was no prosaic railway travel to those young pilgrims ; the land looked like a garden even in its winter dress ; in the background, towns, towers, castles, starting up in rapid succession, whose very names were words of romance, and the objects themselves seemed to rise out of the depths of the storied past and fling their shadow as an additional poesy over the beautiful present.

There Warner decreed that his relative must rest, and he said to Mary laughingly :

"One last opportunity to breathe a little freedom—we are still in the air where young ladies are permitted to do that. Once across the Channel, and a prisoner in an Austrian dungeon would not be more closely bound ; so let us make use of the respite, and thank the gods therefor."

And London—somber, denuded, at which a woman of the world would have shuddered—the Park an empty wild, the Lady's Mile a desert, Kensington Gardens the confines of the globe—but all the same, a city of magical delights to Mary.

Oh, the dismal, would-be aristocratic, and therefore so much the more dismal, lodgings—how bright they looked to Mary, though Mrs. Forrester, seeing all objects through another atmosphere, was made sea-sick, according to her own account, by monstrous yellow chairs, hideous stuffed green parrots which served as ornaments, breakfasts of liver

and bacon, and a fiendish, red-faced landlady, who chanted as a daily litany the self-same bit of personal biography without ever pausing for breath :

"Which, if you'll h'excuse me, except h'out of the season, mum, as I've scarce 'ad (meanin' no disrespect to furreners) h'anybody under a barrow-knight and 'is lady since I put up my name on the door-plate Mrs. 'Arriet 'Amilton Howens which it is Welsh as it ought to be for 'e was from Wales and traced back by a geology as long as a queen's train to Hadam *and* Heve if not further, and hoh, it's my constance prayer that where 'e be among the seraphim a playing the 'arp with 'is wings that perwented 'e is from a moral sense of what's befalling 'is inconsolable relict which by her this memorium was erected from his tombstone in 'Ammersmith cemetery as 'e may read who paces its solemn depths and well for us hall, mum, if we did more frequent and thereby realized our latter hends and its consequences !"

Then the trip across the Channel, away up the Scheldt, Warner having assured his relative that it was safer far to take that route than trust to the cockle-shells which periled people's lives between England and France. Then Antwerp, with its old cathedral, its pictures ; then a vision of Ghent—of the town where they stood in the square and recited, "In the market-place of Bruges stands a belfry old and brown ;" then a rest in Brussels—the dream waxing brighter and brighter as it neared its close. Then a sudden break—the weariness of travel—the common earth again—for the two had parted.

But the knowledge that they should meet soon, and his arrival in Florence so short a time after her own, prevented Mary's learning her secret through the discipline of waiting and unrest.

Man-like, Gilbert Warner had been less reticent with his heart ; he knew that he loved this fair girl, with eyes clear and pure as a woodland brook, with her odd compound of shyness and courage, common-sense so strong that sometimes, to a careless observer, it became too practical, gleams of genius breaking through her talk and shining from her countenance in moments of emotion strong enough to make her forget timidity, or in the society of those with whom she was sufficiently in unison to let her real self appear.

Like many artists, Warner was disinclined to general society, but he proved a frequent and welcome visitor at Violet Cameron's house, and became almost as great a favorite with the professor as was Laurence Aylmer. The shrewd old German found keen interest in watching the romances he perceived in progress about him, seeing more clearly the real state of affairs than the actors themselves; but, save for that warning to Laurence, he kept his own counsel, confident that any little mistakes would gradually be set right, since they were all honest and true.

The hour came when Mary's little spasms of embarrassment in Aylmer's presence—her avoidance of him at one time, her evident pleasure in his society at another—struck Warner as forcibly as those signs appealed to Miss Cameron, and gave him food for troubled thought in his solitude; but the first opportunity for a pleasant talk with the girl always caused him to forget his fears, and to settle back upon the conviction that Aylmer had neither eyes nor ears, except for Violet Cameron, and that Mary knew it.

One evening, when Warner was dining at the house, Violet chanced to express a wish that she had a good portrait of her cousin, *à propos* to her disapproval of some proofs of a photograph for which Mary had sat. She had the style of face which protography always maligns; it reproduced her as a serious washed-out looking little damsel, hardening the physical contours, and utterly refusing to give a glimpse of the expression which rendered her more than pretty.

The very next day Warner took advantage of this wish to give himself a great pleasure. That girlish countenance, so full of beautiful possibilities, haunted him as he sat at the easel, busy with his historical picture, often to the exclusion of the group of martial figures growing into life upon the canvas. He had been for some time thinking that if he could only paint the face, he might be able to work more easily; at present his longing to do so hindered him sadly. While tracing the bronzed lineaments of one of his heroic Gauls, that idea of painting her would grow so strong, that not unseldom he found himself putting Mary's pensive smile on the bearded lips, or softening the stern glance of the eyes with the dreamy expression which beautified hers.

Here was an opportunity not to be wasted; considering

the reason he had to give, she could hardly refuse; so he went into Mary's room to try his powers of persuasion. The house stood on a corner, and the entrance to the sculptor's quarters was in a different street from Warner's, but a long passage connected his studio with the chamber assigned to Mary, on one side of which was the sculptor's atelier, on the other his living apartments. A door led into a salon where Miss Vaughton habitually spent her mornings, and, to satisfy Eliza Bronson's scruples, it had been agreed that this door was always to be left open during Mary's working hours.

"Does she think those plaster-casts Mr. Vaughton means to leave in my possession will contaminate me?" she said, laughingly, to Violet. "I am not likely to have any visitors except herself and you."

Mary had not taken Warner's propinquity into consideration; but on that very account his coming in and out could hardly fall under the head of visits, was the way she settled the matter later in her mind, when his appearance on one pretext or another proved a daily occurrence.

So this morning Warner tapped at the corridor door, and was bidden to enter by a voice which fluttered a little in unison with Mary's heart—that familiar knock always set it beating more rapidly.

The chamber was picturesque enough; Violet had insisted upon fitting it up according to her own ideas, and when finished, Mary was rather horrified at the thought of what all its elegance must have cost.

The walls were hung with tapestry; the casts artistically arranged; here and there stood easels supporting pictures; near the fireplace was spread a great Turkey carpet. There were carved chairs and couches covered with rich Eastern stuffs, marvelous cabinets filled with choice curiosities, books and ornaments in profusion, but everything in keeping with the purpose for which the room was meant.

"It is too fine," said Mary.

"You could not work any more easily in a den," returned Violet.

"It is beautiful!" cried Mary. "I used to dream of one day having a wonderful studio, but I couldn't even imagine anything so perfect as this! Oh! you spoil me; you make me walk on velvet; I shall grow too lazy and self-indulgent to be as industrious as I ought!"

But Violet had begun to read her character too well to have any such fears, and Mary soon discovered that her picturesque surroundings were a help rather than a hindrance.

Warner entered, and, after they had exchanged salutations, seated himself, and Mary continued her modeling; it was a part of their bargain that his "dropping in" should never be allowed to interrupt her work. While they talked he sat and watched her with the mingled admiration of a lover and an artist, for she never looked prettier than in the gray costumes, made according to Violet's fancy, which she wore here instead of her ordinary somber black.

"I couldn't sit for a likeness," Mary declared, when he had led the conversation up to the matter which filled his mind. "I have a horror of it—portraits always look so stiff, and mine would look stiffer than anybody else's!"

"Now that is casting a doubt on my capacities," said he.

"Oh, you know what I meant!"

"It would please your cousin so much," he continued. "We would keep it a secret, and surprise her with the picture."

"But I should lose so much time," urged Mary.

"Come, you shall neither be forced to pose nor lose your time," continued he. "I will make a study of the room and you at work. Ah, do consent! remember how delighted Miss Cameron will be."

I doubt if the artful wretch ever meant the painting to go out of his own possession, but Mary could not know this, and it seemed ill-natured to refuse his request, especially as it was intended as a means of gratifying Violet. Then Warner appealed to Miss Vaughton—a difficult and noisy undertaking, owing to her excessive deafness. For some time she thought he was telling her that Mary proposed to enter a nunnery, a mistake caused by the excitement of just having heard that an acquaintance had embraced Roman Catholicism and immured herself within the walls of a French convent; and she pleaded piteously with Miss Danvers not to follow so shocking an example.

However, when Warner, after shouting until nearly breathless, at length succeeded in making her understand what he was talking about, she highly approved; so did

her brother, who entered while the matter was under discussion, and his verdict settled the business.

Warner rushed off in search of the canvas, which he had provided in advance, brought an easel and color-box, and set to work at once. His rapidity of execution made him the envy of his fellow-painters, but his progress with this picture was very slow indeed, and he insisted on copying the hangings and adornments of the room with pre-Raphaelite fidelity.

So the days floated on, and the sweet idyl of youth and love grew in beauty and interest; though there would be nothing new in its details, if translated into words, bright and fresh as it seemed to those young hearts.

He uttered no open avowal—the time had not come for that. Had Miss Vaughton been less deaf than she was, her presence would have proved no restraint. But the poem of their lives went on, each additional page a sweeter melody, until that mediæval room became a fairy haunt, lifted so far above the common world that no echo of its fret and din could reach the pair in their enchanted quiet.

CHAPTER XXIV.

LIKE JONAH'S GOURD.

GIULIA DA RIMINI had long since perceived that Miss Cameron's neglect of her visits sprang from a settled resolution to limit their intercourse to the most distant terms, but she appeared unconscious of the slight, and never failed to greet Violet with affectionate fervor when they met at the houses of mutual acquaintances.

Even during her previous stay in Florence, Miss Cameron, disliking the woman from the first, had never done more than leave an occasional card or an invitation when she gave a general party; but certain that this season not even so much attention would be accorded, before Violet had announced her day for receiving, Giulia adroitly found it out from Nina and adopted the same, and as

Violet gave no balls or other large entertainments this winter, outside of her little knot of special friends, nobody's attention was drawn to the fact that any change had taken place in her relations with the duchess.

"Nevertheless, Violet Cameron will have to pay for that supper," Lady Harcourt said one day to Nina and Sabakine.

"I hope the fair Giulia may try to make her," returned the prince. "For I have an idea the American will outgeneral her completely."

Lady Harcourt shook her head.

"Good gracious!" cried Nina, "you don't mean to say you think Giulia as clever a woman as Violet? She is crafty enough——"

"Ah," interrupted her ladyship, "you have hit on the very word! Violet Cameron is as honest and truthful as the light—that is just where Giulia will gain the advantage."

"For once in her life she would be puzzled to find out a way of doing any harm," said Sabakine; "Miss Cameron is above the reach of her malice—common mortals are not."

"And since she is, we do not need to render ourselves unhappy," rejoined Lady Harcourt, calmly.

"Violet would never forgive any of us for venturing to think solicitude necessary," said Nina.

"No doubt of that," replied Lady Harcourt, "so we should be saved the exertion in any case. Well, well, it is none of our affair; one may like Miss Cameron and adore Giulia, still we can't force them to rush into each other's arms."

"That would be as unexciting to Giulia as kissing a pane of glass," said Nina gayly, and took her departure.

"She is quite ready to regard Giulia as harmless now that Carlo is safe out of her clutches," said Lady Harcourt.

"I am afraid she makes her exultation and security a little too palpable to Giulia," returned Sabakine. "The ides of March are not over!"

His words were more significant than he knew. At the time Giulia established her confidential relations with the Greek, she entirely changed her tactics towards Carlo. She had on several occasions worried him with scenes—

tender, jealous, upbraiding—but neither exhibition had any effect except to make him avoid her because he objected to having his indolent comfort disturbed.

Had she continued those persecutions, he would speedily have hated her ; but when her behavior convinced him that she meant to submit with a good grace to the inevitable, he was ready to be on pleasant terms, and rather admired the tact with which she accepted the position. Their gambling propensities formed a bond between them, and for some time after their intercourse had been relegated to that of familiar acquaintanceship, Carlo's luck at cards took a favorable turn which inspired him with a feeling of general benevolence in which Giulia had a lion's share, from the fact that on several occasions when they played against each other, she was a considerable loser.

At last, one night at the club, when he had suggested *écarté* to the Greek, that worthy regretted his inability to remain ; he had promised to join Gherardi and a few others at the duchess's house to indulge in a little "poker," which had become a favorite game with them all, and into which the Greek carried the benefit of his Californian experiences.

"Why not come too?" Dimetri asked. "It is just an impromptu affair ; we happened to meet her this morning at the Skating Rink ; she said then if you had been there she would have asked you to join us. You had better go than stop moping here."

Having nothing to do until midnight, when he was to meet his wife at Potaski's, Carlo went to the duchess's, and found "poker" so attractive that on Giulia's proposing a similar party a few evenings afterwards, he consented without hesitation.

"I thought you meant to quarrel with me," said she.

"I am sure you could not have thought that," he replied. "Quarrel with you, duchess? As well expect a man to quarrel with the light—the sun—any beautiful thing, the sight of which is necessary for happiness !"

"It would be very silly in both of us," she said with her frankest smile. "Nothing forms so sure a bond of friendship as a little sentimental folly of which two people are cured—it is odd that one could not go back if one tried?"

"Now that is very uncomplimentary !"

"Nonsense, Carlo ; you know what I mean ! Come, we are to be good comrades ; yes, and help each other if either

should want help. Only don't be stand-offish—nothing would be so certain to make people gossip, after our long friendship."

"I never dreamed of being so," said he, a little nettled at finding that her cure was as effectual as his own, even while he secretly applauded her wisdom, and rejoiced that she did not mean to make cards a bore in her society.

"Oh, I knew very well whose work it was," returned Giulia, with stately pleasantry. "My dear Carlo, I shall be charmed to see you soften the American icicle; but surely, even if Miss Cameron is too virtuous to play herself, she need not grudge you a little relaxation."

Carlo laughed, but he knew that any disclaimers would be wasted; nobody was better aware than Giulia that he would as soon have thought of flirting with a sister as with Miss Cameron, but he reflected that if he vexed her too far, refused to game at her house, she might invent reports which would disturb Violet, and he was too well acquainted with Florence to forget that the more improbable the slander, the more readily it would find credence.

So he quite put his going down to a care for Miss Cameron's reputation, and really felt very virtuous in being able to shield the gratification of his master-passion under such fine motives—they would give an unanswerable reason also to Nina, if she discovered that he had been drawn back to the enchantress's bower. She would consider it better for him to risk losing a little money to Giulia than, by breaking with her completely, rouse her anger to such a pitch that she would revenge herself by scandals against Miss Cameron, well knowing that she could hardly choose any form of retaliation so painful to both husband and wife.

The duchess belonged to the order of schemers which, though capable of inventing plots on a grand scale and possessing the generalship to carry them out, is petty and crafty enough never to neglect the smallest cunning device which can prove of personal use or the means of annoying another.

One rainy day three or four ladies and as many gentlemen were killing time by playing baccarat in her salon—old Mademoiselle de Roquefort forced to sit by and act as duenna; not that her presence checked either the betting or the reckless conversation to which, accustomed as she was, her unfortunate conscience could never grow indiffer-

ent, but a duenna Giulia must have—it was almost her sole sacrifice to appearances, and poor mademoiselle's sufferings rendered it a pleasure too.

Somebody mentioned Miss Cameron's name, and it struck the duchess this was a favorable opportunity for making it appear that she and the lady were on visiting terms. She had taken several cards of Violet's out of the baskets in the salons of mutual acquaintances, a couple of the purloined bits of pasteboard lay among those left by her own visitors, and she possessed another which she had devoted to a special purpose.

She quitted the room on some pretext, got the card and gave it to her footman, ordering him presently to enter and present it as if Miss Cameron were waiting below.

"It is just to play a joke on Signor Gherardi," she said; "be sure you are very serious, and do your part naturally. Wait twenty minutes or so, and then come in."

Before the time had elapsed, Lady Harcourt was announced. The duchess would rather not have had a person so intimate with Miss Cameron a witness of the maneuver, but she reflected that it was very doubtful if her ladyship would pay sufficient attention to the matter ever to mention it to the American, and in case she did, a denial on the creature's part of having come to the Palazzo Rimini would appear a palpable fib.

Any way it was too late to countermand her order; the new-comer had scarcely got seated before the footman appeared. Giulia, occupied in dealing the hands, said aloud, as the man presented the card:

"Who is it, Alessandro?"

Gherardi sat next her; he unceremoniously leaned over and read out the name before the servant could speak:

"Miss Cameron!"

"Oh, good heavens!" exclaimed the duchess; "what will she think to find us playing cards at this unholy hour—and the room is blue with tobacco smoke!"

"We shall all be ruined in her estimation," laughed Gherardi.

"Oh, you may laugh, but I am really afraid—she is so strict!" cried the duchess. "What shall I do, Lady Harcourt?"

"Let her come up, by all means," replied her ladyship, calmly. She looked the picture of indifference, but all the

same she was watching. Giulia's agitation struck her as a well-done bit of comedy, played for some secret purpose.

"I would not," added one of the other ladies—a country woman of Miss Cameron's, to whom baccarat by daylight was a rather stolen amusement. "What is the good of shocking anybody who has scruples?"

"You are right," said the duchess, looking relieved. "Alessandro, did the porter say I was in?"

"He said that he was not certain—he would see, eccellenza," returned Alessandro, with true Italian readiness.

"Then say you are out!" cried Gherardi; "gone to vespers."

They all laughed as if the idea were a capital joke, though in reality the duchess was very regular in her devotions, and Sabakine vowed that when she had a new sin to commit, she always went through a novena to insure success.

"Will you all promise not to betray me?" she asked. "Lady Harcourt—Gherardi—all of you?"

"Yes, we promise," they answered.

"Then bid the porter say I am out—he did not know it—I had gone out through the garden, Alessandro."

"Gone to vespers, and I went with her," added Gherardi.

The servant retired, grave as a judge.

"The Anglo-Saxon race has such odd ideas!" cried Giulia. "No better than us Latins—I beg your pardon, Lady Harcourt, but one never knows what trifle English and Americans may be shocked at."

"Don't mind me—I have no prejudices," returned her ladyship.

"I really do admire Miss Cameron so much," added Giulia.

"I hate her," said Gherardi, "because I know her beauty and her money are out of my reach. But even the fair American must not be permitted to interfere with business."

They resumed their game, and presently Lady Harcourt took her leave. She did not happen to see Violet Cameron until a couple of days afterwards, but she had not forgotten the little episode.

"Have you been at dear Giulia's lately?" she asked.

"No," Violet replied, paused an instant, then added:

"You ask me that just in the hope of teasing! I told you and Nina I had not been at her house this season, or invited her to mine, and had no intention of doing so."

"I thought perhaps you had changed your mind," said er ladyship; "you know I told you at the time that it is always useless to make an exception of a person whom everybody receives."

"I dare say it is," was all the answer Violet returned.

"Now I enjoy dear Giulia's society; I like to watch her maneuvers. Usually they are so deep it is difficult to find them out, and that always interests me."

"She does not happen to interest me."

"A pity, a pity," rejoined Lady Harcourt, laughing, though her voice held a tone of warning. "But I know you are adamant when once you have made up your mind, so I only say—a pity! Have you seen Bellucci's new picture?"

She entered into a dissertation concerning the merits of the painting, and seemed to forget the duchess as completely as Violet did, but as she was driving home, she said to herself:

"Miss Cameron will certainly have to pay for that supper! Well, I can do nothing! If I talked a month it would only make her more contemptuous of Giulia's power; it is best to leave matters alone. Trying to guard a person against trouble is the surest way to help it forward."

But she thought often of the matter, and her suspicions that Giulia contemplated mischief grew stronger; though, well informed as she usually kept herself, even her ladyship did not know that as time elapsed these impromptu parties at the duchess's occurred more and more frequently.

At last, without hesitation, Giulia said to the men:

"Why shouldn't we have regular evenings? Come, it shall be a private club! I will furnish the rooms, and you shall divide the expense of wine and seltz and cigars among you—then we shall all be perfectly at our ease."

In spite of her eagerness to entangle Carlo hopelessly in this new web, the idea of going to any expense weighed on her soul. She could stop even while counting up that ready money of his to regret each glass of punch which she had to pay for, and finally hit on this method, perfectly indifferent as to what any of them might think of her parsimony.

The others applauded her proposal, but Carlo hesitated a little; he was afraid Nina might hear of the matter and suspect that under such excuse he had drifted back to his old intimacy with the duchess, though his fear did not arise so much from consideration for his wife's feelings as from a dread of her believing him weak enough to be deluded anew.

Giulia read his thoughts easily enough, and determined to render refusal impossible.

"Carlo says nothing," she cried playfully; "he has to ask consent!"

"What an idea!" said Gherardi. "You forget, duchess, that Carlo's matrimonial tie is a garland of flowers, not an iron fetter!"

"I beg your pardon," returned she, with the grave dignity by which, when she chose, she could control any one of them; "even in jest I do not like such an insinuation! Nina Magnoletti is the dearest friend I have in the world. Carlo might play cards the week through in this house without scruple on her part." Then she added, with a relapse into playfulness: "No, no; the restriction would come from a very different quarter, eh, Carlo?"

Lightly as she spoke, the glance she fastened on him warned the marchese of the direction her anger would take in case he refused, and the eagerness with which his companions called on Giulia to explain, showed how easy it would be for her to set the ball in motion.

"No influence could count against a wish of yours, duchess; you know that only too well," said he.

"Bravo!" she cried. "Then it is a bargain! And we will keep our club a profound secret, else we shall have a crowd—is that agreed?"

They all consented, and this removed Carlo's last scruple, as Giulia had been sure it would do, and no one caught the rapid glance of triumph which she flashed into the Greek's wickedly smiling eyes.

Carlo's increasing infatuation for cards caused Nina a great deal of uneasiness, but he had behaved so well in the affair of the duchess that she feared this winter to attempt any open opposition in regard to his crowning weakness—thankful to compound for a form of amusement which, if it caused pecuniary embarrassments, was at least engrossing enough to spare her the pain of seeing him rush into a

fresh flirtation. His good fortune, too, lasted for some time, and he told her of it: so she quieted her fears by trusting that his lucky vein would continue, and as she believed that he usually played at the club when he had no card parties at home, she remained quiescent.

"He must amuse himself—he has a right," she said to Violet; "and oh, my dear, I'd pawn my diamonds with satisfaction, if it were necessary, just to reward him for the pleasure it gives me to see how all Giulia's efforts are wasted."

For that astute lady did not hesitate in Nina's presence to affect pique when the marchese paid attention to some new lady, and would say to the little wife:

"Carlo runs away from me as if I were the plague! Violet Cameron has made him hate me—ah, don't you let her make you hate me too!"

"She never tries; she could not if she would," returned Nina, wondering whether Giulia was most piqued at Violet's having betrayed her to Carlo, or at the difficulty she found in winning Laurence Aylmer from his allegiance to his beautiful countrywoman.

But as the weeks went on, though her mind continued at rest as to her husband's cure, she felt less confident in regard to Aylmer's ability to resist the duchess's wiles. Giulia's infatuation only deepened, and her resolve to subdue Laurence waxed stronger with each fresh proof of the slight progress she was making. She persecuted him a great deal, and the ground on which she stationed herself appealed so keenly to his chivalry that, though he grew more and more impatient and heartily cursed his ill luck, he could not refuse to listen when she poured her troubles into his ears—inventing marvelous stories, pretending fear of her very life, declaring that she had been warned of a plot to poison her if all other means failed to give the duke his victory, showing letters from a faithful friend in Paris who kept her informed of what her enemies there were doing (letters written according to her own dictation), and playing her part so well that he could not help feeling sorry for her, though his distaste grew into positive aversion.

Nina saw many signs which disturbed her; Lady Harcourt and Sabakine saw them too, and they were all genuinely troubled, for they had set their hearts on Aylmer's winning Miss Cameron.

"I did not think he would be such an idiot," said Nina; "I really believed he was a little less weak than the rest of his sex."

"Oh, my dear, it is just because of his looking superior and poetical," rejoined Lady Harcourt; "he is made of the same clay as the others, only the outside stamp is different."

"He can't get rid of her, that I believe is the truth," said Sabakine, with a generosity marvelous in one man's judgment of another.

"He shouldn't have put himself in a position where any such effort would have been necessary," cried Nina.

"Come now, be merciful!" laughed Sabakine. "There is no male animal in all history whom you women despise as you do Joseph. You can't expect any fellow of this generation to incur your scorn by following his example."

Nina would have liked to warn Laurence, but her two friends advised her to leave matters alone—interference would only make them worse--and, to her relief, Miss Cameron's persistent seclusion this winter kept her from perceiving Giulia's arts, and no hint of the rumors which began to be whispered about were carried to her ears.

There were other rumors too, which did not reach Nina or Aylmer any more than they did Violet—that Carlo had transferred his devotion to Miss Cameron; but they were very softly whispered, and even Lady Harcourt and Sabakine failed to trace them to their rightful source—the duchess and her ally the Greek.

Then, as time wore on, Carlo and Aylmer became less intimate. They were perfectly friendly and cordial, but did not see each other so often. The duchess managed that easily enough by letting each know things of the other which caused mutual disapprobation. Aylmer was aware that Carlo played more and more heavily, and lost a great deal, and Carlo wondered that Laurence could foolishly risk his chances with Violet, and felt, in spite of his genuine indifference to Giulia, that vague jealousy a man usually does feel towards his probable successor in a woman's regard, however glad he may be to recover his own freedom.

So the duchess was kept busy, and her excitement continued. Besides all the rest, she had a good deal of difficulty in restraining the Greek's jealousy of Aylmer within

bounds, and equal trouble to keep the American from displaying his contempt for Dimetri; and the days flew on with her, and her loves and her hates grew like Jonah's gourd, though they were deeply rooted and full of vitality as forest trees.

CHAPTER XXV.

MARY'S RESOLVE.

THE bas-reliefs were cast in plaster, and just then the Florentine artists opened an exhibition for the benefit of some charitable scheme.

Mr. Vaughton sent Mary's productions without her knowledge, and they received high encomiums, pleasing a connoisseur so much that he ordered them in marble. Mary's delight at her first commission, and her first breath of praise and success, can only be realized by one who has known a similar moment in early youth.

Not only the pleasurable hope of independence—that strongest longing in every noble nature—but those visions of fame which are so dazzling to the young, these were Mary's now, and to Violet it was delightful to see and sympathize with her happiness.

One cloud still lingered on Mary's horizon, heavy enough sorely to dim its brightness: she could not feel at ease in Laurence Aylmer's society, and the recollections from which this discomfort arose sorely troubled her, in spite of her absorbing occupations. About this time—she had now been nearly two months in her new home—she came to a resolution in regard to the matter which weighed so heavily on her mind. She could not endure longer, she must set herself right. The task seemed very hard—bold, unmaidenly almost, she feared—but good heavens! anything would be better than to let this misconstruction remain; to have him think—think—— Oh, even in her solitude Mary shivered, and broke off abruptly in her meditation. She must speak, that she determined upon, and it so happened that the very day after she came

to this resolve, an opportunity to carry it into effect was afforded her.

Mr. Vaughton had gone out, she knew, and she had been waiting to consult him about certain changes in her work—the bust of a friend which she was making from photographs. After a while she heard some one in the adjoining studio, and supposing that her master had returned, tapped on the door and opened it without waiting for permission to enter. There stood Laurence Aylmer.

"Good-morning, Miss Danvers," he said, walking towards her. "The workmen in the outer rooms told me Mr. Vaughton was not here, but I wanted a peep at the new group, so I came in. May I not see what you are working at too! I have just come from the Exposition, and heard a great deal of praise of your bas-reliefs; they are excellent."

"Pray come in," she answered, mastering, as best she might, the trouble caused by this unexpectedly speedy granting of her wishes.

"What a *beau idéal* of a studio!" he exclaimed, following her in, and closing the door behind him. "I have never been permitted to enter it, you remember. Thanks for removing the embargo."

She felt herself color as she recollected that once, when Violet had spoken in his presence of bringing him, she had received the proposal in silence, and perceiving her cousin look at her in surprise, had murmured an excuse about wanting to wait until her bas-reliefs were finished before she admitted visitors.

She said something of the same sort now, conscious of saying it very tamely, fancying, too, that a little of her discomposure was reflected in his manner, as she had often in similar moments been tormented by thinking the case.

"What a charming nook it is!" he added quickly.

"My cousin's taste, you might be sure! She is much more genuinely artistic than any artist I know," said Mary, glad not only to give vent to her enthusiastic admiration of Violet, but to distract his attention from her annoying blushes; and she had decided long since in her own mind that to mention Violet's name was enough to make Laurence Aylmer forget everything else.

"Yes," was all he said, but Mary saw his eyes wander

about the room with a positively caressing expression. She had noticed the same look in them frequently, when, during his visits to the house, he would, thinking himself unobserved, touch some object that belonged to her—a book she had just laid down; a fan or glove thrown carelessly on a table.

"As you are one of her special friends, you shall have her particular seat," continued Mary, pointing towards a great carved easy-chair that stood on the Turkey carpet.

He turned towards her with a quick smile—she thought an inquiring one. Then he caught sight of old Miss Vaughton, seated just beyond the arched doorway, leaning placidly back, a newspaper on her knee, and her spectacles on her nose; but it needed only a glance to discover that she was sound asleep.

"I won't disturb her by speaking," he said. "It would be positively wicked; but, oh, what a negligent duenna!"

"Pray don't tell Miss Bronson, else she will want to come herself," replied Mary, trying to speak naturally.

"Ah, Miss Bronson would never fall asleep on the post of duty, I am certain," he said, laughing.

"Never," said Mary, laughing too, though a little nervously.

"But I think she would let me in," he continued. "I flatter myself that she is good enough rather to like me."

"Oh, she considers you absolutely perfect, I believe," said Mary. "She is never tired of chanting your praises to Violet and me."

"That must be somewhat of a trial to you both."

"We bear it," said Mary, with a demurely mischievous manner, at which he smiled.

"We must have crosses in this world," he replied, exulting in his soul to think that he was often a subject of conversation in Violet's house and presence.

"Yes," said Mary; and recollecting the cross which had lain so heavily on her of late, and her determination to get rid of it, no matter how difficult the exertion, she made no further effort to continue that playful badinage.

Aylmer moved forward, and laid his hand on the back of the chair which Mary had called her cousin's; and the girl, partly to give him a moment to himself, partly to find some occupation wherewith to steady her mind, turned to her clay and began moistening it.

Aylmer had come to Vaughton's studio in the hope Violet might be visiting her relative, so that he could enjoy her society for awhile under the pretext of wishing to see Miss Danvers's work. Actually he had not seen her for six-and-thirty hours! He had missed her on the previous night at both receptions where he went; had called at her house a little while before, and been told she was out.

He fully recognized the wisdom of the professor's suggestions, and meant to obey them to the letter; but deprivation of her society he felt would only render his *role* more difficult when they did meet. Absence filled his heart so full that to repress its eagerness and appear contented with the friendship she offered must severely try all his powers of endurance.

He was glad now that she and circumstances had combined to force upon him the reticence which he knew the time had not arrived to break; left to himself, he should certainly have broken it, in spite of his determination, and perhaps have ruined his hopes utterly by forcing a decision upon her before her heart had spoken loudly enough to overcome her scruples and what she termed the voice of reason. She did care for him—she must! It could not be that this love which pervaded his whole being by its strength, was utterly without power to move her. She cared—a thousand trifles assured him that she cared! If he continued patient and prudent he should overcome her causes for hesitation and win his prize!

He roused himself to recollect that this was neither the time nor place to indulge in reverie. He crossed the room, and stood beside Mary—praised the bust, asked questions, examined the photographs—waiting, hoping that she might speak of her cousin again: even to hear Violet's name mentioned by this sweet, pure girl who loved her was a pleasure. And Mary endeavored to talk quietly, clutching the while at her wits to find courage to begin the subject upon which she wished to converse—reviling her own folly, since such hesitation might lose her this opportune chance.

Miss Vaughton might wake; he might take his leave hastily, as he almost always did if by any hazard he found her alone when he called at Violet's house, and he must not go till she had spoken—he must not! She might have to wait weeks before so favorable an occasion arose again, and she was wasting the time! This reflection nerved her into

desperation, that tolerably well supplied the place of her ordinary courage, which had so cruelly deserted her.

And he, a little preoccupied—disappointed at not having found Violet—unable to tear himself away without at least learning whether there was a hope of her yet coming, halted in conversation almost as much as Mary. Then, growing conscious that she would find his visit a terrible bore if he could not be a little less dull, he caught at some topic for talk, and unfortunately, as he thought, hit on some reminiscences of the days when he used to be a frequent guest at her father's house.

"It seems a long while ago," he said, "still longer when I look at you and see how you have changed."

He stopped suddenly. How much or how little her father's death had let her into the secrets of his affairs he could not tell, but she did know there had been difficulties between himself and George Danvers, and worse than all, she knew something of the plan the latter at one time conceived in which she was to have a share.

How idiotically stupid to remind her of that season! What might she not think! He glanced at her—she had become scarlet; then, before he could remove his gaze, she grew deathly pale.

Now she must speak! She had been wondering how she was ever to find words, but the consciousness of having betrayed such agitation rendered her more frantic, and she burst out:

"Mr. Aylmer, there is something I have wanted to say to you ever since I came to Florence—I can never be at ease with you till I have. Maybe it is wrong for a girl to speak——" She broke off, reflected an instant, then, though the color came back to her cheeks in a torrent, and she trembled in every limb from nervous excitement, she lifted her head proudly, and added in a firm voice: "No, it cannot be wrong for a girl to set herself right! There is something higher than conventional scruples—womanly dignity."

"And I never saw a girl with more, or who knew better how to make it respected," he said, gently, though he looked a little uncomfortable.

"I thank you," Mary answered. "I know you are honest and good—you will not misunderstand me. Wait,

please; if I don't say it quickly I shan't be able to say it at all."

She pressed her hand hard against her heart, trembling more violently, but her tones were firm still as she went on:

"I know what my father once talked to you about. During his illness he told me. Oh, he thought at one time that a—a marriage between you and me would be possible—that—that—— Oh, I can't tell you how it has humiliated me to think you might suppose I had—had cared for you! And when we meet now it is always in my mind. Then I act so silly that I am afraid other people might notice—and—and—oh, it drives me almost wild sometimes! I can't endure it—I can't have you think I ever felt so much as the ghost of a girlish fancy for you! Oh, I never dreamed of such a thing, any more than you dreamed of considering me a grown woman!"

"I am sure of it, Miss Danvers," he answered. "When your father honored me by suggesting that such an alliance would not be displeasing to him, he assured me that he had not spoken to you—that he did not know if you could entertain the idea."

"You are very good to try and spare me," she said, "but papa told me everything when he was ill. Oh, Mr. Aylmer, I am sure that for months and months before, his head was affected by that dreadful disease which killed him! Oh, it was that made him commit so many mistakes in business; and he lost other people's money as well as his own, and they thought he was wicked."

"It is very probable he suffered as you say," Aylmer replied. "But indeed, Miss Mary, it is useless to think of those things!"

"Yes," she sighed, "useless. I cannot right these losses. Oh, if the time should ever come! But I can set myself right! I do beg you to understand! Why, I couldn't have dreamed of marrying you, if you had been the only man in the world—oh, I did not think how that sounded! Please, please don't call me rude—I like you very much—I know how clever and good you are—oh, I am only making it all worse!"

"Indeed you are not," he said, with a smile—so composed that he quieted her. "I am sure your very strong asseveration was not meant to be uncomplimentary. Believe

me, I perfectly appreciate your motive in speaking; if you were uncomfortable, we could never get on easy, friendly terms—and I hope you mean to let me count myself among your friends, Miss Mary."

"Indeed, I shall be very proud if I may!" she cried; and tears rose in her eyes, but they were signs of relief, not trouble. She had got a great weight off her mind. He believed her, and received her abrupt revelation with such perfect tact, that her embarrassment vanished.

"Good, firm friends," he went on, "and ready to congratulate one another when each finds that heart and love which is said to await every human being somewhere—sometime!"

His smile grew soft and dreamy. Ah, he had found the realization of his ideal—Mary knew that! She sat down on the sofa, and he placed himself beside her. She looked up at him with a sigh of relief, saying:

"I am so glad I have spoken—I wish I had done so before! I wanted to tell my cousin—to tell Violet. But it all seemed so silly—it was so difficult to explain to anybody; and I was afraid if I tried, and worked myself into one of my excitements, I should only make it look as if I had—had cared."

"But now you have spoken, and are at rest," he said. "Believe me, I never had—could not have—any thought of you derogatory to your dignity in any respect."

"Ah, but when you saw me behave so foolishly as I did!" cried Mary. "I acted very often as if I was frightened—sometime I talked rubbish, just out of bravado! Plenty of men would have been stupid enough to think I cared. Oh, I thank you a thousand times!"

"It is for me to thank you for your good opinion," he said, with another kindly smile. "And now that everything is cleared up, you will be quite at ease with me, and begin to look on me as a friend?"

"Yes, indeed! And, oh, Mr. Aylmer—I know you lost money through papa—try not to blame him! You wouldn't think he cheated! Why, a bad man would have managed to save his own money—and he lost all his."

"Since I entered into speculations voluntarily, it is myself that I must blame, Miss Mary."

He could say that, but he could say no more. Danvers had certainly deceived him egregiously. He often won-

dered if, at the time the man sounded the ground to see whether a marriage between Aylmer and his daughter might be possible, he meant in that case to spare his friend's fortune. But even if he had, he could not have done it—his mania for speculation would have carried him away.

At this moment some one in Mr. Vaughton's studio knocked for admittance, and before Mary could answer, the door opened, Violet Cameron appeared on the threshold, and just behind her stood Warner.

The pair seated on the sofa rose quickly, but the intruders both took in the tableau which their entrance disturbed —Aylmer bending over Mary, she looking eagerly up into his face ; beyond the arched doorway on the other side of the room good Miss Vaughton tranquilly reposing in her arm-chair, dreaming, doubtless, of far different things than those duties of chaperonage which Eliza Bronson had endeavored to impress upon her mind.

Mary hurried forward, and Aylmer followed ; for a few moments they all stood and talked together, but Violet was the only one of the four who seemed at ease—Violet, calm, gracious, smiling, and all the while with a sensation at her heart as if a hand of ice had suddenly been laid upon it, chilling its pulses with a mortal coldness. The interview was torture to Warner. His jealous suspicions, so long combated, so often thrust aside, surged up in an angry storm which he feared face and voice must betray, and he took his departure so abruptly that poor Mary's agitation increased, though she did not assign his displeasure to its rightful cause.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"THE END OF OUR ROMANCE."

TEN days elapsed—the most restless and miserable Violet Cameron had ever endured.

I have said little in reference to her feelings towards Laurence Aylmer as the winter went on, because it seemed wiser to set the record all down together in the place where it rightfully belongs

—the time when Violet forced her unwilling soul to admit the truth—clearly, openly—without pity for its shame, without mercy for her aching heart.

She loved Laurence Aylmer. The attempt to shelter the feeling under the guise of a fancy had speedily proved unavailing, from the fact that reason told her fancies did not belong to her years. Then for a season she called the sentiment which engrossed her by the easy name of sympathy. He was so superior to the ordinary men who hovered about her, so much more elevated in intellect and refined in tastes, with aspirations and ambitions of which they were as incapable as butterflies of singing like nightingales. His enthusiasm and perseverance, his determination to carry out his aspirations, made his life a real life: all these things had attracted her towards him, helped to forge the tie between them.

Weak as her other pretense had been! She loved this man—loved him with the poetical fervor which destiny had prevented her youth from developing—loved him with the strength of her womanhood; and those girlish dreams which had found no object whereon to spend their riches, which she had thought worn out, lived beyond, rose from their quiescence, eager, importunate, and cast their glow across the secret of her maturity.

She loved him! Useless to argue, to say that she did not even know him well: heart and soul gave her the lie, smiled triumphant over common-sense, and intrenched themselves in that overwhelming assertion. And this strong love which had come to her out of season, belated—like a flower blooming after the first frosts of autumn—must be crushed, though she trampled her heart into atoms in order to effect its destruction.

Since that certainty of Mary's affection had forced itself upon her, Violet had held many a bitter, savage communion with that rebellious heart which insisted so wildly upon possessing its happiness. Was she to let a girl's dream—such a weak thing at best—stand between her and the fullness of bliss! And from their first moment of meeting, this man had loved her—her—Violet! And the very force with which her heart uttered that assurance brought a reaction. Say that he loved her—more, admit that she was beautiful enough to win any man's love—what then? Why this: her factitious semblance of youth, already

unduly prolonged, might fade any day; the least mischance —a passing illness, a sudden trouble—might bring the wrinkles into her forehead, the gray into her hair; worse still, might freeze and kill the freshness of thought which had kept her soul young, and that soul, worn and tired, reflect its weariness in her features, and help more speedily to obliterate the last trace of beauty which had brought men to her feet.

If she were to marry him and then the change should come, after just months enough of perfect happiness to render life unendurable if she were forced to accept any portion of bliss which could be counted, having known happiness in its unmeasurable fullness!

Such a season often came into the lives of women who married men older than themselves, but under those circumstances the sufferer could have the relief of feeling that she and her husband were growing elderly together.

But this love which beset her—Violet! If she were to marry this man towards whom her heart had gone out, she must see herself age—see the lines come in her face, the gray into her hair—while he, as a man, had claims to youth still; live perhaps to hear the world wonder what could have induced him to such sacrifice—or, worse yet, live to know that he wondered himself. And if he were noble enough to remain true, that would make matters worse for him; each time girlish charms attracted his eye he would have to check the bitter reflection that if he had only waited, only resisted a fancy, he might now in his prime have taken that loveliness to his breast, have prolonged his own youth by its possession; whereas, through his folly, he had rendered such happiness impossible. He was tied—bound—chained—married—to the worn, wrinkled, middle-aged woman who face hung like a ghost between him and the sun!

"No, better to give him up of her own free will than live to endure such misery; forced absolutely to pity him, to curse her own idiocy, as perhaps he would be too generous to do, and so, through sympathy with his pain, bear his burden in addition to her own. Better give him up, teach him gradually to content himself with friendship; aye, be the one to show him that in Mary he would find peace and rest for both present and future.

And now it seemed that she had indeed acted her part

well : she had convinced him that he could hope only for her esteem. Had he, without aid or counsel from her, turned for consolation towards Mary? Had he recognized, as Violet believed she had done, indisputable signs, unwittingly betrayed, that the girl had crowned him the hero of her dreams, and been flattered and touched thereby into rapid recognition of the truth that his fancy for the elder cousin was a delusion ; that here stood the realization of his ideal?

It looked so, Violet thought, as she recalled that scene in the studio. She went back over the events of the past week. Why, since Mary Danvers's arrival, she had never once found it difficult, even in their *tête-à-têtes*, to keep the conversation from the perilous ground to which several times before he had led it forward! More and more patiently he had accepted the terms on which she had told him their intercourse must remain—friendship.

And, during these last ten days, Mary's manner to him had undergone a complete change : she was never shy in his presence now, never unnaturally gay one moment, and moody, sometimes almost abrupt, at another ; she showed her pleasure at his visits, and frankly took her share of his society. Ah, she had gone beyond the region of doubts and fears ; she was lulled into security so sweet that no reflection came ; a repose where she just floated passively on. Violet knew! During that period at the villa, after his illness, had it not been the same for a little while with herself? But what a triple fool she was to compare her idyl to Mary's! Mary a girl, with a right to dream—and she an elderly woman—oh, an old maid, who might almost have been a grandmother to-day, if fate had allowed her to love and marry as early as most American girls.

Wanted to cry, did she? Well, there should be no exhibition of lachrymose weakness—she had borne enough from her own folly—there should be an end! And Violet shook her clenched hand anew at the image in the mirror. It had grown her habit to hold bitter monologues before her glass, and now, on this tenth night, which completed that round of useless misery, she had come home from a ball additionally angered with herself because aware that she had tried to forget trouble in the pleasure of Aylmer's society.

"You look as if you were painted," she informed the

image. "As for your eyes—they are disgraceful! But you are just as much a pretense—a ludicrous, ridiculous pretense—as old Mrs. Sinclair, with her dyed hair and her made-up brows. Keep me fretting in this way, and I'll very soon show you yourself as wrinkled and yellow as she would be if somebody rubbed off the red and white—you caricature of youth, you sort of original mummy that has had color left in it by some wonderful nowaday forgotten process!"

She laughed aloud, but I think a burst of tears would have followed that tirade against the satin-robed, jewel-crowned reflection, had she not been roused by Mary's voice calling:

"I hear you; may I come in? I have been awake ever so long, but was afraid to disturb you; since you are laughing, let me come and laugh too."

In sixty seconds by the clock, Violet Cameron went through every imaginable phase of emotion, from a longing to mutilate her own face till its mocking beauty should no longer torture her by its arrogant assertion against the years, to an insane desire to open the door suddenly, spring on the girl waiting beyond and do her some deadly harm then and there!

The very madness, the positive imbecility of her fancies, brought her back to reason, as it does the rest of us in similar crazed moments, else the chronicle of crime would increase until scores upon scores of additional daily sheets were all too few to contain the list.

"Come in, you naughty girl," said Violet, softly; and Mary appeared upon the threshold, looking like a nymph or a dryad in her long white gown, with her wavy hair vailing her shoulders. "What do you mean by being awake at this hour? I would scold, only you look so pretty I've not the heart."

"How the light hurts my eyes!" cried Mary, holding up both hands to protect them. "And, oh, how beautiful *you* are! You must be like Mary Stuart or Semiramis——"

"Or Helen of Troy, or some other bad woman whom you've no business to have heard of," interrupted Violet. "I wonder, when people want to find comparisons for me, why they always choose the most dreadful women in all history?"

She was thinking of that night in the autumn—oh, how

far off it appeared; how the reflection of its moonlight seemed to scorch her brain, soft as it had appeared then; how every sight and sound repeated itself in a flash, with all its sweetness turned to pain!—that night on the terrace of the Magnoletti villa, when she had laughed at Aylmer's unfortunate comparisons—laughed without any bitterness; sore and angry as the recollection made her now.

"I don't believe they were bad," cried Mary; "other women invented the stories out of jealousy! Oh, the light and the dazzle of your diamonds—and you still more—quite blind me!"

"Go back into your room, and I'll come as soon as I have got out of this impossible gown; oh dear, I can't unfasten it, and Clarice has gone to bed."

"See what a famous waiting-maid I make," said Mary; "only come into my chamber—I can't bear this light. I will take in a dressing-gown—here is one! What pretty *robes-de-chambre* you always have—don't say I'm not beginning to talk French—only it must be sinful to spend so much money on a thing just to wrap round one!"

"Bless me, mouse, whatever is the matter with you?" asked Violet. "You are usually the most demure of mice, and here you are chattering as fast as a monkey."

"I don't know why," said Mary; "I was gloomy enough a little while ago, though I couldn't have given any reason for that mood. I can for my present elated one—it is you and your beauty."

By this time they were in Mary's room, and Violet seated in a low chair near the window, while her cousin unlaced her dress.

"Do you never feel sad?" continued Mary. "I have often thought your high spirits must just be for society, but when I heard you laughing so heartily in there all by yourself, I knew I had been mistaken. To be sure, you may well laugh—you have everything in the world."

"Don't envy me my 'everything' too much," replied Violet, recollecting what had caused her laughter.

"Envy you—no—I hope I am not capable of that! Though, after all, I don't know! I am forever finding out I am so much more wicked than I dreamed possible," sighed Mary.

"I am afraid that is what very often happens to most of us," returned Violet, recalling the insane impulses which

had flitted through her mind when Mary's sweet young voice roused her from her bitter reverie.

Mary sighed again so dolefully that Violet, remembering how at her age one is given to exaggerate any wrong thought till in one's penitence it almost assumes the proportions of a crime, added :

"Don't groan as if you had a murder on your soul, my dear ! Bad thoughts may come without any fault of ours —all we have to do is not to act upon them. I remember reading a saying of an eccentric Wesleyan preacher who lived early in the century in America—Lorenzo Dow—that I have always considered very expressive : 'We can't hinder the birds flying over our heads, but we can keep them from building nests in our hair.'"

"Oh, I must recollect that—it is excellent," said Mary.

"Is it not ? Fancy, I repeated it once to my dear old Miss Bronson, and she begged me never to quote it again, for it sounded really vulgar."

"I suppose if a bishop had made the remark she would have called it sublime," said Mary.

"You have hit the truth exactly," returned Violet. "Really, mouse, you are such a quiet little thing that you often quite startle me by the way you read people's characters."

"I didn't know I could," said Mary. "Any way, you needn't be afraid of having yours read."

"I wish somebody could make me understand it," replied Violet. "I don't suppose it amounts to much, but it puzzles me more every day I live. Dear me, small one, it is a great comfort to talk to you. One doesn't have to dot every *i* and cross every *t*—you comprehend at half a word."

"I'm so glad you like me !" exclaimed Mary, sitting down on a footstool at Violet's feet, and leaning her head against her cousin's knee. The shutters were open ; the moon cast a soft radiance through the chamber—heightened Violet's beauty into a mysterious splendor and turned Mary's thick-falling hair to dusky gold.

"You look like a Sibyl !" cried the girl, gazing up at her cousin with the admiration it is so pretty to see one woman bestow upon another.

"And I think I must have you painted as Una," returned Violet, gayly. "And now that we have finished our mutual compliments, tell me what was the reason you lay awake

into the small hours, instead of being fast asleep like a sage damsel?"

"No reason, unless because I was goose enough to drink tea after dinner—that always keeps me awake."

"Oh, you practical little wretch!" cried Violet. "I thought the moonlight would inspire you with some poetical confession."

"I haven't any to make—girls ought not to have," said Mary, with a dash after the primness wherewith she had a habit of hedging herself in.

"Oh, my dear, if one did only what one ought!" replied Violet. "Well, at least tell me what you were thinking about."

It might be a long while before another opportunity to get at her young relative's thoughts and feelings would offer so favorable as this. Violet wanted to do it—not to force the girl into any avowals which later she might regret, but to crush her own folly with proofs uncontrovertible; and the very fact that something within her shrank from the work rendered Violet the more determined.

"Thinking? All sorts of things, or dreaming rather, I suppose," said Mary. Then she was silent for a little. Suddenly she moved her head impatiently to and fro on Violet's knee, and continued, in a slow, reflective tone, oddly at variance with her restless movement: "It is very difficult to be a girl."

"My dear, it strikes me it would be more difficult to be anything else when Nature had arranged the matter," returned Violet, laughing outright.

"Oh, you know what I meant! I never can get my thoughts to express themselves correctly," said Mary, drumming on Violet's knee with the fingers of her right hand.

"Now, what is one of the things, for instance, that you find so difficult, mouse?" asked Violet.

"Oh, I don't know that I could put any of them straight, and if I did, I suppose they would sound dreadfully silly," said Mary; and now she beat Violet's knee with her little clenched fist.

"But we agreed long ago that we would say as many foolish things to each other as we pleased, just as a relief from having always to talk wisely and decorously before Eliza," urged Violet.

"I'm sure she is very good and kind, but oh, how awfully stilted and impossible!" cried Mary.

"She was everything to me when I sorely needed a friend," said Violet. "I am attached even to her peculiarities. I would not change her any more than one would change an old-fashioned grandmother. Bless me! it is lucky she does not hear my comparison!"

"I am sure she never even thinks in words of less than ten syllables."

"Dreams in hexameters, I am certain," said Violet. "But now about your nonsensical thoughts, puss, and the difficulties you find in being a girl—though I don't know how we are to remedy that misfortune."

"Don't make me laugh, else I'll not tell you. But I don't believe I can, even if I try."

"Just pour out the fancies pell-mell; perhaps I can find the heads and tails—oh! shade of Eliza, forgive me!—caput and caudal extremities," said Violet; and then felt vexed with her own weakness for keeping aloof from the truth, of which she wanted to be convinced beyond the possibility of doubt. The hour of conviction had arrived—something told her this—a conviction which must aid her to carry out unflinchingly the stern resolves which she knew were the only sensible ones in her case—must make an additional reason, in fact, for her to put by, cast out, trample down, the foolish dreams of the past week, since their indulgence would not only render her own future doubly desolate when reality came, as come it must, but would blight the heart and happiness of this girl, who had youth and early womanhood in her reach—all the dearly-prized gifts which Violet had lost—lost, too, without ever having had the opportunity to enjoy in their fullness.

"Come, now!" she persisted. "About this hardship of being a girl! Well, girls are 'cribbed, cabined, and confined'—there is no doubt of that."

"Just it," said Mary, in that slow, introspective, thinking-aloud tone. "Why, everything is improper, even to wonder about—yet it seems so natural. How is one to help it, though one is a girl? Now men are not troubled in that way! They may be fond of—I mean they may like a person, and tell themselves so at the first glance—and we only call that manly—but girls!"

"Yes, girls?" returned Violet, in an insinuatingly inquiring voice, as Mary paused.

"You know I don't mean me," Mary hastened to add, explicit if not elegant. "I don't know what set me thinking about it all—some book I've been reading, perhaps."

"I dare say—some book—well?"

"And a girl mustn't think about liking a man, no matter how much attention he may have shown her, until he tells her outright that—that he loves her. Oh, now I know what set me off in such a silly way!" cried Mary, in a tone of relief. "It was Eliza Bronson. She said, *à propos* to some novel, that no young lady with a well-regulated mind would permit herself to think of a man until she was betrothed to him; and as for loving him, well, that she seemed to consider would be indelicate until they were safely married—she did, upon my word!"

"I have no doubt of it," replied Violet; "but you and I may have our private opinions, and express them to each other, even if we refrain from shocking the good Eliza by promulgating the same. I am sure that phrase is fine enough to content even her!"

Still with the same effort to keep the conversation upon that footing of half-jest—but now not from any shrinking to hear the truth which she must arrive at—only to prevent Mary's suspecting the force of her own disclosures, and so suddenly shutting her heart over her secret, like a sensitive plant closing at the breath of a breeze which stirs its leaves too roughly.

"I don't think it is fair!" ejaculated Mary, still pursuing the train of her reflections. "And yet a girl does feel ashamed if she finds herself thinking that a man likes her, though he may have shown it so plainly she could not help knowing."

"I see no reason whatever for shame," rejoined Violet, as her cousin's speech faltered, and found no conclusion. "Not the slightest! No shame either, in admitting frankly to her own soul that she likes him in return! Come, you see how bold I am; you need not be afraid of shocking me by any such thoughts—I should say theories," she added, and Mary's quick response proved that her substitution of the latter word had been a comfort.

"Yes, theories—that expresses it! I suppose one ought not to read so many novels—Miss Bronson says so!"

"Of course! But though she keeps 'Sismondi,' or some other tiresomely wise book, open on her table, I have discovered that she generally has a romance hidden in the drawer. Our pattern Eliza is as artful in her way as the rest of us! Mouse, don't be troubled—read your novels, and indulge in your thoughts——"

"Theories," amended Mary.

"Exactly—theories! Where were we in our discussion? As usual, when women try to theorize, we grow so discursive that we lose the thread of our sermon every other minute!"

"I haven't lost it," said Mary, eagerly, quite at ease now, and finding great relief in putting forth her thoughts, since Violet had found such a convenient, generalizing term under which to class them. "I think the sort of girl who fancies, every time any man pays her a compliment—and men are so absurd about that—it vexes me—do they suppose we are all idiots?"

"Most human beings are, mouse; but in your energy you let your sentence evaporate in a parenthesis!"

"Yes—pays her a compliment—I know where I was! Well, plenty of girls think the man must be in love. Now, that is downright silly. I've no patience with such nonsense!"

"Nor I! But we are talking of sensible girls—girls so certain of their own desire to do and *be* right, that they are not afraid to probe their hearts away down to the bottom. Now, when such a girl has reason to believe a man loves her, she is neither indelicate nor foolish in considering the matter and asking herself point-blank if it is true that she——"

"Likes him," put in Mary, hastening away from the dangerous word Violet had ruthlessly employed.

"But the type of girl we are talking of wouldn't reach that point unless the man had given her good reason."

"Just so! And if he stops there—doesn't say outright what his looks and—— Oh, you know what I want to say!"

"Of course I do! I am always meaning to write a novel which shall turn on that very position. I am always meaning to do so many things that I never accomplish!"

"Oh, and you could write such a beautiful one. I never

heard anybody talk like you. I am sure you're a genius, Violet."

"I have not the slightest doubt of the fact, mouse! Well, I am making a chapter of my novel now. Let me see if your theories can't help me thoroughly to understand my heroine. She always gets so complex that she puzzles me hopelessly, else I should long ago have presented her to the world in three volumes."

"Very well! Put it that she has reason to believe the man likes her—so much reason that she knows she has a right to believe so, though she does reproach herself for thinking it, because he has never said it out in so many words."

"Never revealed his passion, you mean; don't be so prosaic when you are helping to compose a novel, mouse! Surely there is no shame to her for thinking—for knowing?"

"Oh, but if she began to think that after all she had made a mistake; if he did not speak—if——"

"I won't contemplate that possibility for my heroine," interrupted Violet. "In her case, the hero is a true, honest, earnest man; he would be incapable of the meanness of trifling. He might wait—circumstances might force him. Dear me, if she were very young, he might doubt if she could know her own heart yet! Why, he might half try to fancy an older woman for a little——" She was going too far; she stopped; added quickly: "No, not that for our hero, though even heroes have their weaknesses, else they would not be men. But the sort of man we are describing——"

"Imagining," suggested Mary, softly. "What does he do, Violet?"

"He waits—to be certain, both for himself and her; then some day he comes to our little heroine and tells the whole story," said Violet, and her voice was like the echo of sweet music.

"To be certain of himself! Then he might go!" cried Mary, indignantly. "I would never listen if he had to wait to be sure; I mean our heroine shan't, in the novel! Why, she would despise him and be ashamed of herself."

"Well, well! There might be other reasons—plenty! He might not be sure of her feelings—afraid to startle her, not just in a position to marry at once."

"Oh, yes, that might be," said Mary, with a sudden

reflection of contentment in her voice. "It would account for any little odd changes in his manner that had seemed like caprice sometimes!"

"And he could not be capricious, of course! No, no; the fitting moment arrives at last, when everything is made clear, and the dream becomes a blessed reality."

"Reality," echoed Mary, then became silent for a time.

And Violet knew the truth; there remained no possibility for her foolish heart to cheat her reason by declaring those intuitions which days and days before had warned her, to be mere suspicious fancies—the coinage of her own restless brain. She had been determined to reach such absolute confirmation that her weakness could no longer plead the lack of proof—she had gained it now!

Somehow the very sound of content in the girl's tones, revealing the comfort she had derived from her cousin's words, which showed her that her sensation of maidenly shame was uncalled for, roused Violet to a positive frenzy of bitterness.

Why should she sacrifice herself to this child—this baby? Why should she not snatch the happiness within her reach, enjoy it to the full? At least when it faded she could die!

Yet all the while, as she looked covertly down into the sweet, pure face which, unconscious of her scrutiny, had turned towards the window, and was gazing out at the white, resplendent moon, it seemed to Violet that she was watching, not Mary, but the phantom of her own youth, pleading mutely with her for its happiness.

And Mary, rousing herself from her dreams, looked up, still letting her head, with its long vail of moonlight-tinted hair, rest upon her cousin's knee.

"I am sure you are tired, and I have been keeping you awake to listen to my absurd fancies—theories, I mean," said Mary. "Why, how pale you are—you are not ill?"

"Only cold," shivered Violet; "so cold—away down into my very soul!"

Mary brought a shawl, folded it carefully about her, and kissed her forehead with an affectionate freedom.

Violet submitted to the caress, frightened by her own wicked thoughts; ashamed too, which was worse.

"Kiss me again!" she said suddenly.

"Why, you are shivering yet!" cried Mary. "You are

tired out! Come and lie down on my bed. I shall be worried if you shut yourself up in your room."

They lay down and both slept till the moon hung low on the horizon, half hidden, so that she was a mere blade of light; then they woke at the same instant, and Violet's first thought, as she felt the soft pressure of her cousin's arms, was one of gratitude that her wicked thoughts had fled.

"What were you dreaming?" Mary whispered.

"The end of our romance," Violet replied, "and the heroine was very happy at the last. Go you to sleep, childie!"

And both slept again.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AGAINST FATE.

THE next day came—her day for remaining at home and receiving a host of tiresome visits, Violet remembered, and felt inclined to shut her doors against the whole would, to shut her windows against the sun, and sit down in a gloom in keeping with the darkness which had fallen upon her soul.

But this feeling was worse than folly, as contemptible as that which caused her to shrink this morning from Mary's kiss when she entered before departing to her work. She would not sit there idle, making present and future more unsupportable by listening to the misanthropic complaints of her heart, since it must be admitted it was her heart that ached—ached so bitterly. She had no time to waste in regrets and repinings—youth might afford to do that when trouble came; but at her age it was necessary to be up and doing, trying to make amends for neglected opportunities, misspent hours, before the night came, in which no man can work. But what was she to do by way of being useful? She could give money—she had always done that liberally since she had the power. Tend the

sick, visit the poor—common sense told her that a paid nurse could perform the first duty much better, and observation had shown her that the poor decidedly object to such inspection from the rich, and gird under advice as sorely as their finer neighbors.

Read, study, paint, practice her music? All very well; but those pursuits could no more fill up life than indulging in a spinster's legitimate outlets for affection—dogs and cockatoos—could bring contentment. All her attempts at usefulness, at occupation, would be just as many make-believes: therefore why essay to deceive herself into hoping she could find peace through these means? She was a poor, weak, silly thing: her romance, her maudlin poetry, as much out of keeping with the mental state befitting her years as the physical appearance of youth, which even this morning looked at her from the glass, untouched by sleeplessness and trouble, as if it were quite independent of the mind it held in its keeping. Ah, there was Miss Bronson knocking at the door—Miss Bronson, commonplace as a type of existence itself. So much the better: the companionship might be of service in controlling her ridiculous mood, and she would keep to it. Go out with Eliza, shop a little, visit the charity-school a little, talk gossip and religion a little, cheapen a parrot, discuss the merits of foulards and friends in the same breath—go decorously through the decorous round of employments natural and fitting to old maids like herself and Eliza.

She carried her mocking resolve into effect, then came back to a *tête-à-tête* breakfast with her friend, for Mary took that meal with the Vaughtons in order to save time, and Eliza waxed jubilant over their delightful morning—they had done so much! it was so pleasant to be together!—and her listener reflected that she might accept this morning as a type of her future. Oh, the years! the years!

Finding herself moaning anew, Violet devised a new punishment—she sat down at the pianoforte and practiced German duets with Miss Bronson; and of all created sounds, those were what she loathed the most! Altogether, when the hour arrived for visitors to begin their intrusion, Violet could feel that she had inflicted about as severe a season of pin-and-needle torture upon her troublesome

heart and imagination as could have been devised, or even their weakness merited.

People came and went in constant succession, drank chocolate, talked nothings, grinned and grimaced, and Violet decided that she grinned and grimaced and uttered platitudes as well as anybody. She joined in the excitement over the news that Cica, the new ballerina, was expected, disputing vehemently whether the sylph could really stand poised forty seconds on the great toe of her left foot or only thirty-five ; went into the depths of despair because, after all, the municipality would give no subvention to the Pergola. Oh, she had proved herself as accomplished a butterfly with the soul of a grub as any of her neighbors, and could be content.

Then, into the midst of the chocolate drinking, and the scandalmongering, and the flirtations, and the vapidity, floated Nina Magnoletti, and in her wake came Laurence Aylmer, and the touch of his hand and the glance of his eyes sent a thrill through Violet which shook her out of her elaborately-studied inanity, and caused her such bitter wrath that for an instant she was almost ready to visit it on him by chilling words or covert slights.

Was she mad? Did she want to publish her secret, her shame, not only for his reading but for the delectation of her fellow-grubs with butterfly wings? Who was he? Why, the friend that had saved her life—her friend Laurence, to be received as he always had been, frankly, cordially ! He might amuse himself with insects, but he was neither butterfly nor grub—he was a man, with aspirations, resolutions, a career ; certain of a man's weaknesses clinging to him, no doubt—he would be superhuman else—but at least among the best specimens of his kind ; and she was glad to see him, very glad—her friend Laurence !

He, like everybody else, remarked upon her high spirits and marveled at her heightened beauty. The women decided that Miss Cameron had taken to rouge at last, and both men and women decided in addition that the whispers in the air must be true : she had chosen a lover—Carlo Magnoletti, of course—and her sisterly cordiality with Aylmer and her affectionate demonstrations to Nina were correct religious tributes to the goddess of appearances, so well paid that nothing was left to be desired. A woman who sacrificed so strictly at the great deity's shrine might

have twenty lovers among her lady friends' husbands behind the altar if she saw fit; as long as she behaved as she did now, her fellow-worshipers need see only the clouds of perfume rising from the censer which she swung so gracefully before their eyes.

Nina and Aylmer appeared late, and gradually the other visitors departed, and they were left alone with Miss Cameron. Then the professor was announced, and the three exclaimed in wonder, for receptions were his aversion.

"I concluded your menagerie would have dispersed by this time," he said; "and I knew I should be busy tomorrow."

"You might have come the day after," said Aylmer, with laughing impertinence.

"There's a simpleton in this room," cried the professor, frowning affectionately at him. "It is not old Schmidt, and all simpletons are males——"

"Don't trouble yourself to repeat such well-known facts in natural history," broke in Violet. "How nice of you to give me the surprise of a visit to-day! I have not seen you for an age. What have you been doing?"

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do," returned the professor; "leave your and the marchesa's perfections and Laurence Aylmer's sins behind me for a week or ten days."

"What a shame!" pronounced Violet. "And where and why are you rushing off in this barbarous fashion?"

"As for the where, to Venice and Trieste," replied he; "as for the why, a company wants to buy some land I own in Austria. These are matters which must be regulated personally between me and their president. I won't journey all the way to Vienna, and, as he is ailing, I can't make my old friend come here; so we compromise on Trieste. I wish you were going."

"I wish you owned no land, and I wish, since you do, it was so worthless nobody would buy it," cried Violet.

"There's friendship for you!" laughed the professor—the very word sounded cold as ice to Violet. "Laurence, I shan't ask you to go with me."

"I shouldn't if you did," said Aylmer; and he was indulging in a private reflection as it chanced, roused by that word the professor had employed. There might easily be

such a thing as carrying a good resolution too far. Friendship! His forbearance was exhausted; he could continue this pretense no longer! Before the professor's return he would tell his story—try as Violet might, she should not avoid the hearing; and she must care a little—she could not banish him without a hope! Oh, how beautiful she looked to-day! somewhat tired now, perhaps, but, if possible, all the more lovely; only so calm, so composed—that irked him.

And Nina was upbraiding the professor.

"At least you might have begged me to run away with you. I have always wanted to: ask Carlo. You have no eyes or ears except for Violet, and I hate her!"

"You are so close in my heart that I see and hear you whenever it beats. Don't say I can't talk poetry!" cried the professor.

"Nina," said Violet, "can't you and Carlo dine with me to-morrow night?"

"I can," Nina answered; "I may as well admit now that I had already made up my mind to do so. Carlo is going off to some horrid dinner where only his own species is invited."

"Are you one of the unfortunates, Mr. Aylmer?" Violet inquired.

"No; it is some half-political affair."

"Then, as I intend to make the professor dine here, whether he will or not, please come too. I will ask, let me see—whom shall I ask? We shall be four ladies—ah, Gilbert Warner. Nina, I can't have any of your Italian adorers. Now it is agreed, so let nobody forget. Here comes Miss Bronson! Eliza, prepare your pocket-handkerchief—the professor is going away for a week."

And then, to prove that it is natural for human beings to persecute defenseless animals, they began to tease the spinster, and the professor went on his knees and quoted verses, and the whole group talked a great deal of nonsense, as even sages must and will.

The trio departed; Violet dressed, and went out to dine, then to the last act of the opera, then to some festive gathering, where, out of compliment to Lent, even the relief of dancing was omitted; then home and to bed among the small hours, but not to sleep, tired as she was—overtired, she told herself—nothing else ailed her. She was

not fretting—not moaning; she just felt cold and lethargic, and inexpressibly weary.

The next morning Mary received directions, when she went to the studio, to give Violet's invitation to Gilbert Warner, and make sure that he would come, previously engaged or not. So Mary had to send one of the workmen to ask Warner to come in to her atelier—half glad to have so good an excuse—half ashamed to request a visit on any grounds, for during these last days Warner's abrupt changes of manner (the more noticeable in a person of his even temperament) had troubled the girl exceedingly. He came at once, but just to show that her message had caused him no perturbation, he carried his palette on his thumb, and his mahl-stick in his hand, and Mary's evil genius prompted her to regard this as a method of hinting that she had disturbed his labors.

"I beg your pardon for interrupting you," she said, enveloping herself in the quaint stiffness habitual with her when embarrassed. "I begged Violet to write you a note, but she said she had not time. It is only she wants you to be sure and come and dine to-night—she will take no refusal—along with Mr. Aylmer and Madame Magnoletti—because the professor is going away—I mean, of course he is to be there—and she wishes you all to meet him."

Having hastily enunciated this not over-clear explanation, Mary began wetting her clay as eagerly as if it had been left dry for a week, and, as it was too wet already, an ill-advised pat she gave the bust sorely disturbed the symmetry of its Grecian nose. The effect was exceedingly ludicrous; she and Warner saw it at the instant: he was deciding to refuse the invitation, and she wondering if he noticed how her hands trembled. Both were excited and nervous, and they suddenly burst out laughing, then looked at each other, half-pouting, half-appeased, like two children.

"Psyche with a cocked-up nose!" said Warner.

"It is your fault. I was just turning round to see what made you so long in answering," retorted Mary.

"I think—I am afraid I have an engagement," he said, recovering his gravity at once.

"Cousin Violet will never forgive you if you leave her with so many unsquired ladies at her dinner-table," Mary urged.

"Oh, indeed," said he, waxing cross again; "I am sorry I can't make myself useful in filling up a gap."

Mary, fearful her speech had sounded rude, forgot her irritation in penitence and regret.

"I am sure you know how cordially Violet likes you," she said; "please do not disappoint her!"

She looked at him and smiled, blushing a little; he could not resist that half-appealing glance; forgot his suspicions—forgot Laurence Aylmer for the moment.

"Will you say that you would remember to care if I did not come?" he asked, with a certain seriousness under his playful manner.

"I wish you would accept," Mary said, honestly, then relapsed into her stiffness. He had been so odd and changeable of late, that she was afraid of seeming undignified or forward if she betrayed too much solicitude over a matter which ought to be treated as a trifle.

"Then I will," he said.

And now she smiled so cordially that the sunshine lighted his soul. They began to talk—of the bust, the weather, no matter what; any subject would serve, and, who knows? the conversation might have drifted on and on, until Warner's heart would have overleaped bounds, and the clouds been dispersed so effectually that any later gathering into gloom would become impossible. But Fate would not permit this; she sent a messenger in the person of old Miss Vaughton, who suddenly appeared on the threshold of her salon with a bunch of flowers in one hand and a head of lettuce in the other. Cook had just come home from market, and Miss Vaughton had brought the roses to leave as a friendly gift, and the lettuce to exhibit as a marvel of size considering the season.

Nor would she retire in search of some household occupation, as she usually did at this hour; no indeed. She called her woman to take the lettuce, and began to arrange the flowers in a vase. Nor would she be taciturn and inoffensive, according to custom. She insisted on talking. Even her loquacity might have been endured without calling down Warner's secret maledictions on her venerable head, had she been content to remain deaf as ordinary, in which case, whether other people talked or not during her monologue, she would have been none the wiser; but she heard in that diabolical fashion deaf people will now and

then, and what she did not catch she would have explained —she, always the mildest and most deprecatory creature in existence!

She stayed and she chattered until Warner, mentally declaring his belief that the devil had entered her, betook himself to his studio in despair, and fell a-dreaming instead of doing his work in a sensible fashion.

During the afternoon, while he was wondering what excuse he could devise for paying a second visit, in order to be certain that the sunshine still lasted, the professor came in to look at his picture, and, before he had finished criticising it, sent desolation to Warner's soul by exclaiming:

"I thought that dawdling Aylmer was just behind me! I told him not to interrupt Miss Danvers's work any longer."

Five minutes passed; the professor criticised and praised; ten minutes passed! he was talking still, and Warner trying to listen and answer—but no Aylmer appeared. The sunshine was all gone; the young artist drifting down into a gloom black as night!

Presently the offender entered, but Mary accompanied him, and she looked smiling and happy—and oh, surely she was blushing; ay, and that Aylmer fairly whispering in her ear to the very door!

"Since you were to be interrupted, Mr. Warner, I let myself be persuaded to come too," said Mary, serene in the belief that the atmosphere of the morning still continued.

"I am fortunate that such was the case," he replied, and the very sound of his voice warned Mary that they were back in the chill realm of discord. She felt vexed with him, ashamed of caring, ready to disbelieve Violet's hopeful theories, and quite forgot to examine the picture, in her interest in something Aylmer was telling her about Sweden, *à propos* to a sketch of Warner's.

The painter was inclined to refuse the invitation to dinner after all; but that would be rude now, so he dressed and went to the house at the appointed hour. The marchesa was already there, having come very early, but the two remaining guests had not arrived. The respite proved of no service to Warner, however. The other three ladies made him welcome, but Mary did not choose to appear forward, and sat almost silent, never once looking in his direction after she had returned his salutations.

At length the professor's voice sounded in the anteroom, deep and agitated, like the notes of a bass drum.

"*Potztausend!* That pamphlet I put in my pocket for the Fräulein. I had it when I got out of the hack! Run, run, you blessed Antonio, and see if it is on the stairs! Laurence, you needn't wait, announce yourself while I get out of this confounded great-coat, the builder of which ought to be consigned to the rack—the rack!"

The ladies' laughter from the salon replied. Laurence pushed back the curtains and entered, laughing also.

"Mr. Aylmer," he announced. "Miss Cameron, if I do your footman's duty I shall expect to be paid accordingly."

Ah, Mary could brighten now—Warner saw that. She could receive and answer this new-comer's greetings with evident pleasure. Violet saw it too, and thought how rapidly this change had come about from the old shyness in the presence of—ah, yes—her friend Laurence!

Then, the professor having freed himself from the great-coat, made his entrance, dropped his handkerchief before he reached the center of the salon, and, in stooping to pick it up, turned his back to the group, and was astounded by hearing a second burst of laughter, in which all the spectators joined. Neither ill-humor nor the demands of courtesy could have hindered any human creature from yielding to merriment. The professor was dressed in correct evening costume, even to the flower in his button-hole, but one of the swallow-tails of his coat was wanting—had been cut off close up to the body of the garment, presenting an effect indescribably ludicrous.

The professor raised himself, turned a wondering face on the group, and cried:

"Have you all been taking laughing-gas?"

They tried to check their mirth, but found it impossible; so Violet hurried forward, seized the savant by the shoulder, and stationed him so that he could see his own image in a mirror.

"What have you been doing?" she demanded.

The sage was betrayed into one brief expression of surprise, then he stood and stared at his own reflection, stoical as an old Roman.

"After all," said he, slowly, "it is an improvement. A coat with swallow-tails is a ridiculous thing—when you

cut off half the caudal extremity it can only be half so ridiculous."

As the laughter gradually died away, he condescended to explain. He had been busy with some chemical experiment, and wanting a piece of cloth at a critical moment, ran into his bedroom, scissors in hand, to cut a bit off an old coat he had left hanging on the bed-post. The woman, in arranging the chamber, had hung his festive costume over the ancient garment, and in the gloom, the professor ruthlessly snipped off the left tail and went back to his task, becoming so absorbed therein that it grew late before he recollected his engagement. He dressed in a great hurry, his mind still occupied with his work, and put himself into the coat without noticing its disfigurement.

"I shall not go home unless you send me, Fräulein," he declared, perfectly unabashed, as he finished his explanation. "I would try the resources of Antonio's wardrobe, but he is smaller than I, and I suppose my *paletot* would be as objectionable as my present plight? Come, decide; will you have a mutilated swallow, or shall he fly off and hide his shame and misery in his desolate nest?"

"If you forgive our lack of generosity in laughing, we can easily forgive your lack of caudal appendage," said she.

By this time Warner had remembered his sense of injury, and Eliza Bronson to be a little shocked at such an accident, but the general hilarity soon seized them again. Of course they all sat down at table in a most nonsensical mood, and Violet did her best to keep the conversation at that pitch as long as she could—the more trivial the subject the better, in her frame of mind.

It was a gay evening, but, with the exception of Nina and the professor, the gayety required an effort. Eliza Bronson felt twinges in her neck which warned her that she had taken cold, and should probably have an attack of neuralgia, and the others were troubled by twinges sharper than her physical reminders.

Aylmer found Miss Cameron's friendliness too composed and frank to be satisfactory. She could have no feeling whatever for him. If his love had touched her heart, she would find it impossible to preserve this sisterly calm without a break. It was a new dread, and all the more stinging on that account. As for Violet, she had placed Aylmer between Nina and Mary, and a dozen times during dinner,

perceived fresh evidence of the intimacy which had grown up between her cousin and Laurence, and the open pleasure which the young girl showed in his conversation. Gilbert Warner saw these signs as plainly as Miss Cameron, and reviled his own folly in having come to be tortured in this fashion. He chafed and fretted till he felt as if consumed by fever, and condemned all dinners as hollow mockeries, and their present feast the most hollow of all.

Late in the evening, while Eliza Bronson gratified the professor with selections of Wagner's music, Mary and Warner seized the opportunity to bring new clouds between themselves by a little disagreement about an article of Laurence Aylmer's in a late review: Warner, with elaborate candor, admiring the style, but condemning the sentiments with polished ferocity; and Mary, taking the opposite side, partly from irritation, partly because she hated injustice, and Warner was unjust. Laurence sat at a distance talking with Violet and Nina, and Violet received her warning—proof that her careful, persistent efforts to restrain their intercourse to the safe grounds of friendship had done its work!

Nina was telling a story of a marriage which had lately taken place between two of her acquaintances. The engagement had been a long one—the man away in Japan for several years. Time and absence, perhaps, undermined his affection: at all events, he fell in love with the daughter of one of the foreign consuls at Yokohama. He behaved well according to his lights: sailed for Europe, the preparations for the wedding were made, and it was only at the last moment, through the stupidity or malice of a connection lately returned from Japan, that the lady learned the truth. She taxed her lover with his unfaithfulness, and he told her the whole tale, announcing his readiness to fulfill his promise—and she married him.

"One would like to have her walled-up alive!" cried impetuous Nina, as she ended her narrative.

"I blame the man as much as I do her," said Violet, firmly.

"And you, Mr. Aylmer? Now for a masculine view," added Nina.

"I cannot blame him," he answered slowly, rather hesitatingly, in reality wondering a little over Miss Cameron's remark. "Under such circumstances an honorable man

must feel himself guilty—base! No—he could not speak—he must fulfill his vow—keep silence utterly!

"I cannot imagine a greater wrong," said Violet. "To a true woman there could be no cruelty like that. His duty was to tell her the plain facts, to ask for his freedom. Do human beings love or unlove at pleasure? He was not to blame for the weakness of his heart, but he was to blame for sacrificing his own future, bringing a sharper unhappiness on her than the truth, bad as it might have been, could have brought if told in time."

"Well, I never expected to hear Miss Cameron uphold infidelity, eh, Mr. Aylmer?" Nina exclaimed.

"No," he said constrainedly.

"I do not," Violet replied. "But people make mistakes—even good, honorable, yes, resolute people. Such blunders are not always a proof of weakness either."

"It is certain," said Aylmer, "that even people who know their own minds as a rule do err in affairs of the heart. It is so difficult often to decide what is love, what fancy. But if a man mistakes a caprice for a real sentiment, he ought to abide by the consequences."

"The woman must be blind indeed who could not perceive it, mad or cruel if she did not free him willingly," said Violet.

"That would be easy enough if she had only taken him on probation," observed Nina, laughing. "Men's vanity will not let them believe it, but half the time we women are drawn into engagements just because an adorer is importunate—one pities him, tries to believe that sympathy is affection—and so yields."

"Very true," rejoined Violet. "And often, often she would gladly find an excuse to draw back! How thankful she must be if his heart does speak, and show him, that what he thought love was only a fancy! All he has to do is to be honest. Why, he could have no surer, more devoted friend in the world than that woman!"

"I think he would pass a good many uncomfortable hours," said Aylmer. "I suppose, if she showed him that she saw the truth and was content, his part would be easy enough; that is, in the case you mention, marchesa, where she had only been trying to learn to care for him."

"Yes, perhaps," Nina replied.

"He would be put out of all difficulty at once," said

Violet. "She would not, if a true woman, leave him an hour in doubt after she knew the facts. She would speak, or so plainly show him that she saw—be his tacit assistance in the quarter where he really loved—that he could either tell his story or be certain that he might look upon matters as already settled."

"There may be truth in the often-repeated assertion that men are fickle," said Aylmer; "that special weakness being such a sore spot for a man to contemplate in his own nature, is perhaps a proof."

"No man need be ashamed of making a mistake," said Violet; "he need only be ashamed of the weakness of not acknowledging it."

"Very harsh doctrines, if modern women had hearts like the heroines in old-fashioned novels," laughed Nina.

"A right doctrine," said Violet.

Just then Warner came up to take his leave, and the conversation ended. In a few moments the guests were gone, and Violet went at once to her room.

She understood everything now. Aylmer had recognized the difference between fancy and love—he had feared to appear weak or false in her eyes, and so had sought to guard his heart against Mary's smiles.

"It is all clear," Violet said to her image as she rose and stood before the glass, after a long meditation. "Are those tears? Come, I did not know you had been crying! I'll not scold you—a little nonsense might be admissible as long as there was a doubt. But you know the truth now, you see your way, and you mean to walk steadily therein. Fears he may look weak! No, no—we knew it was only a fancy, knew it from the first! I told you so—wanted it so—you are quite at rest, quite satisfied—and he is my friend Laurence!"

And when the dawn appeared she woke from a mocking vision in which he stood beside her, told her that she erred—he loved her!

"I will cry!" she moaned; "I have a right—not for him, not for my silly dream! But Fate was cruel to send me dreams so late, and it is against Fate, not my heart, that I battle!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"SHE SAID GOOD-BY."

TWO days went by, which, busy as she kept herself, gave Violet ample leisure for reflection. She comprehended that neither anger nor self-contempt would help her case. She must admit as a truth that the experience, without which she had always said no woman's life could be complete, while believing it would never come to her, had set its ineffaceable seal upon the present and future.

And almost as soon as she had learned that it was Love who stood beside her, she had been forced to see that the garland in his hand was withered already. Well, faded flowers were appropriate, typical of her age! Ah! she was trying again to be mocking and severe—why should she? Surely she might show a little tenderness to her heart—yield a little to the pity she felt for herself. Renunciation—sacrifice—those were the lessons she must learn now; bitterness and wrath would only render the task more difficult.

How interminable these last eight-and-forty hours appeared as she looked back over them; how this present day dragged; how tired she was; how ashamed of the petty irritability which beset her—the desire to turn away from Mary's morning welcome with stinging words, to be sharp and abrupt with anybody who approached! It seemed, too, as if every human being near deliberately chose that time to be as annoying as possible: to do whatever ought to be left undone and say everything that ought to be left unsaid, from worthy Miss Bronson down to Clarice.

"My dear," said Eliza, "how pretty Mary grows. Really she begins to look very like you when you were young—I mean, when you were her age."

"Which comes to the same thing," returned Violet.

"I don't know if you have noticed—but I have—oh, I have been certain of it for some time," pursued Eliza. "However limited the range of my mental faculties may be, at least I possess the ability of observation—of seeing

things clearly. You will own that I can say so much without betraying undue vanity."

"No doubt," said Violet, and longed to add that she had a wonderful faculty for seeing everything wrong, and felt more ashamed than ever at this impulse to turn upon a creature so defenseless.

"She likes him," sighed Eliza, "but has only lately discovered the state of her heart. You may not have observed —but I can enlighten you now, for I am sure he likes her—perfectly sure! So suitable in every way, is it not? I am so pleased; you will be too, I know, when you think it over. You are surprised—admit it! Oh, I have kept their little secret."

"Has one been confided to you?" Violet asked.

"No, no, not a word; it was not necessary. Why, I saw from the first how it would be. I hinted it to you in the beginning. Oh, you must recollect—now, don't you recollect?"

"I dare say you did."

"Just reflect; you must remember."

"Oh, perfectly," said Violet, desperately plunging into the falsehood to get rid of further importunity.

"Ah, I thought you would. Yes, yes! What does Moore say?" Eliza maundered on, "'There's nothing half so sweet in life——' How does it run, Violet?"

"I am eighteen years too old to remember," said Violet.

"'Nothing half so sweet——' Is it sweet, or bright? —as—as—'Nothing half so——' Dear me, how very odd that I can't recall it."

"I think I shall go out," said Violet.

"I'll go with you if you don't mind. 'There's nothing——' how vexatious! 'A peri stood at the garden gate——' Oh, mercy, no!"

"Please, Eliza," broke in Violet, "do go to the library and hunt up Moore if you are in the mood for his sugary inanities."

Enter Clarice.

"Oh, mademoiselle, I am desolated. I beg mademoiselle's pardon, I so seldom forget, and the letter mademoiselle gave me yesterday quite went out of my mind."

Business letters, of great importance too. And on Clarice's heels appeared Antonio.

"I am very sorry to tell mademoiselle——" Then a long story about the necessity of discharging a gardener.

"'There's nothing half so sweet in life as love's young dream!'" sang Eliza, triumphantly, putting her head in at the door just after Violet had got rid of the other importunates. "Pretty, is it not?"

Fate is never satisfied without thrusting an under-current of broad farce into our tragedies. Any human being who has suffered knows this—knows, too, how it grates and jars, denuding suffering even of the dignity which might give a certain support.

Violet ordered the carriage in desperation, but go with her Miss Bronson would, and chattered like a magpie all the time. They were passing the Palazzo Rimini when she uttered a sudden exclamation:

"I am surprised that he visits her—I really am! But he just went in; did you see him, Violet? Mr. Aylmer——"

"Certainly has a right to visit where he pleases," interrupted Violet, and fell to wondering if, after all, Laurence were less frank and honest than she had thought him. But this fancy was only in keeping with her other pettiness. She was in a mood to suspect any and everybody—to be harsh and unjust. Oh, how contemptible to let trouble affect her in this fashion!

They drove to the Cascine, Eliza recurring to the compliments on her own perspicacity, and relating the growth of her discovery with "damnable iteration," till Violet felt she must spring out of the carriage to escape the sound of her voice.

"I have never said a word until this morning. I did not mention Mr. Aylmer's name, you may be sure—but oh, if you had seen how she colored up, and ran away——"

"Home, Gregorio!" called Violet to the coachman, unable to bear these gnat-stings any longer.

"It is early yet. I think I will stop at Mrs. Eaton's," said Eliza; "I have not been there for so long."

"I would, by all means," cried Violet, almost enthusiastically. "Stop at the Hôtel de Russie, Gregorio."

"On the whole, I think I will wait till to-morrow," said Eliza. "Aren't you a little pale, my dear? Have you got a headache? Oh, my love, here comes Colonel Falkland! Now you can ask him about taking that package to Eng-

land for his sister. Gregorio, stop at the corner. Ah, Violet, at least I remember things at the right moment. I'll tell you about Mary when we get home—here comes the colonel—she did look so pretty in her blushes. Oh dear! have I lost my handkerchief?"

The worthy spinster had selected this morning of all others to torment poor Mary as much as she had been worrying Violet during the last hour. To increase the sting of her words, Mary thought she was alluding to Gilbert Warner, and departed for the studio with a fresh arrow in her heart. Not only had she deceived herself in regard to his feelings, but she had kept her own secret so poorly that even Eliza Bronson suspected its existence.

Mary's solitude in her studio was as hard to bear as the inflictions Violet had undergone; and just as she had reached a pitch of desperation Gilbert Warner's evil genius prompted him to present himself. He came, after swearing over and over to his soul that he would stop away—came in a miserable, resentful, injured mood, when he was ready to say everything he ought not, and misconstrue every remark of hers, and found Mary in a humor to return his errors in kind.

A lately-printed lecture of Ruskin's that lay on the table formed a capital subject of difference. No two people ever did discuss Mr. Ruskin without quarreling. In less than five minutes the demigod produced his usual effect, enabling them to display the deliciously obstinate determination of widening "the rift within the lute," which is a characteristic of humanity—to be blind and deaf to the truth just at the moment when such conduct might entail consequences fatal to their whole future. Had they quarreled outright, there would have been a hope of some good result—but they did not. They bickered, and were sarcastic and indifferent; and though any looker-on—even a mole—could have seen the real state of affairs, and set them right in a flash, they went on as recklessly as two perverse, fascinated children playing with fire; but in their case, pain and jealousy made it a grave contest, in which neither would stop, though conscious of getting severely burned, until satisfied of having at least scorched the other.

When they had exhausted Mr. Ruskin's capacities for creating difficulties, they dragged in Victor Hugo by his gray hair, and after that employed the sacred memories of

Raphael and Michel Angelo as shuttlecocks, and by the time they had finished were exasperated enough to utter certain personalities very thinly disguised in the garments of polite words.

Puerile—silly! No doubt; but three-quarters of the misery we suffer comes about from as slight causes, and the pertinacity with which we all at untoward moments trifle with our happiness or fling it away—see white black, and misunderstand those who love us—is a sight to make angels cease weeping, and decide that a race so vacuous must be as incapable of real joy or grief as it is of using its boasted reason.

"We seem fated to disagree to-day," said Warner.

"At least I trust that I have been neither cross nor uncivil," Mary said, with a slight emphasis on the personal pronoun.

"And that means I have?" returned he, in an inquiring tone.

"Pray do not dignify my words by assigning them occult meanings," said Mary, conscious that the speech sounded worthy of Miss Bronson, and rendered more angry by the thought that her stateliness held a touch of absurdity.

"I only adopted the signification which was obvious even to my dullness," Warner replied, waxing a little Grandisonian.

Perhaps now, had they been left alone, one or the other might have pronounced words so sharp that penitence would have brought about a better understanding, but an interruption came at this moment—deferred, one would almost be ready to say, by some malicious imp, until it could do harm instead of good.

Some person in Mr. Vaughton's studio knocked on the door—it proved to be the sculptor's head workman, bringing a note.

"Is there an answer?" Mary asked.

The messenger was waiting to know.

"Will you excuse me, Mr. Warner?"

Warner bowed. As Mary tore off the envelope it flattered to his feet; glancing involuntarily down at it, he recognized Laurence Aylmer's writing. He looked back at Mary. She was reading eagerly—oh, her color changed! he was sure of that—her very fingers trembled! She had

been changing color rapidly and trembling for some moments before, but he had not noticed it.

As she looked up their eyes met; he thought she seemed amazed at his scrutiny, afraid, perhaps, that she might have betrayed her pleasure in perusing the page.

"Yes—and my best thanks—tell the man to say," was Mary's observation to the workman, who bowed and departed.

Warner stooped for the envelope, and handed it to her.

She accepted it with a gesture of thanks, and put the note back therein. At another time she would very likely have shown him the missive—a cheerful little billet, inclosing an address of some mutual friend, which she had asked him for on the previous evening.

"I am glad to see something pleasant has happened to you," said Warner, determined that she should have no doubt as to whether he had perceived her agitated manner while reading the page. "One never can fail to recognize that peculiar writing—pray don't think I picked up the envelope for the purpose of looking at it."

"I do think you are rude!" cried Mary, indignantly. "You have no right to suppose me mean enough to harbor such a suspicion."

"I beg your pardon again. Really I am so unfortunate in my remarks that I think I had better bid you good-day."

"Good-day," echoed Mary.

"I will leave you with Mr. Aylmer's letter"—affecting to laugh—"that will be agreeable, like its writer."

"Mr. Aylmer is always good-natured," said Mary.

"Oh, a *preux chevalier*."

"Good, honest, noble. I thought he was your friend."

"He is; and he is all that you say," replied Warner; then, with another pretended laugh, he added: "The woman who marries him will be fortunate, however great her own deserts, and"—still laughing—"I fancy I know who that woman is."

Mary had turned towards the pedestal which supported her clay. She looked back, and momentarily forgot anger in a desire to warn him not to open his lips to anybody else, supposing that he referred to her cousin Violet.

"Please don't say it; oh, he has never—I mean——"

Her eagerness resembled embarrassment. He grew fairly sick and blind. He had been answered indeed.

"I beg a thousand pardons," he interrupted, caught his breath, and gasped: "Don't fear my speaking!"

Oh, he must get away, the room reeled! He snatched at his watch, stammered something, heard Mary ask the hour.

"Four o'clock," he said; "I—I had forgotten an engagement on business. Good-morning, Miss Danvers."

"Good-by," replied Mary, not by any means appeased, and hastily resumed her work.

He hurried across the room, paused and gazed at her for an instant, then went out and closed the door.

He reached his studio, flung himself into a chair, but not a moment's space for recovery from his agitation was given. The servant entered with a letter. He opened it, hardly knowing what he was about: took in the meaning enough to understand that it contained a proposal to go to Greece. An immediate answer was requisite.

"She said good-by," he muttered: "it shall be good-by! I have learned the truth at last; there is nothing to keep me here any longer."

CHAPTER XXIX.

A MORNING RIDE.

THE next morning was so bright and beautiful that Violet felt sorely irritated by her inability to get away from her gloomy misanthropic fancies. She tried divers employments, from music to needlework; but piano and harp only seemed to give out mocking voices under her touch—voices cognizant of her folly and full of unpitying reproaches therefor. When she sat down to some complicated piece of lace embroidery, which she kept on hand as a kind of penance, she could no more count the stitches correctly than if she had never studied an addition-table in her life, and discovered after a few minutes that she had wrought such eccentric variations in her pattern that the gossamer web looked like a preposterous Chinese puzzle invented by some Celestial laboring under temporary aberration of mind.

She flung aside her needlework, ordered her horse, and was as impatient over the time it took to get into her habit as if she had been late in starting on some momentous journey.

A narrow, unfrequented street led directly from her house to the broad viale which encircles the city. She took this route, gained the suspension-bridge that crosses the river at the entrance of the Cascine, and galloped away down the road beyond the Porta Romana.

The March day might have strayed up from Sicily, it was so warm and bright, only with an exhilarating freshness in the air peculiar to the climate of Tuscany. The sky seemed a vast turquoise sea, with great shallops of white clouds moored here and there in its azure depths; the atmosphere so clear that objects miles distant were distinctly visible. The groves of olive trees cast long gray shadows over the hill-sides; the mountains in the background were crowned with wide bands of amber light; the whole scene lovely and picturesque beyond description, only possessing a sense of peace and tranquillity in every sight and sound which fretted Violet from its contrast with her mood.

She reached the gates of the old Certosa; decided to dismount and go in. She liked to stray about the echoing corridors and neglected garden, tenanted by the dozen or more white-robed monks whom the march of progress has left as the sole remnant of the flock that once held possession, and this remnant only permitted to remain because the famous green and yellow liqueur manufactured within the walls gives a practical, commercial reason for the retention.

Violet waited till her groom rode up, slipped out of her saddle, and passed in at the gateway, to receive a cordial welcome from the old monk who met her at the door of the church; for she had often visited the place, and always left such substantial evidence of her coming that naturally the brethren waxed jubilant at sight of her.

And, wandering about in the garden, she came upon Gilbert Warner, his usually cheerful, animated face looking as if he had been tempted into a long ramble by fancies almost as misanthropic and unfitting the day as those which had driven Miss Cameron out of doors.

It was a relief to see by his countenance, when she

suddenly appeared, that he wished her anywhere else. To have met a person who showed satisfaction and tried for compliments over the unexpected pleasure of this encounter she felt would have exasperated her beyond endurance.

She greeted him with her customary cordiality, a little amused to think that she, the spoiled princess, could at any time or in any place stumble upon a specimen of male humanity who failed to beam with delight at her approach: "I did not dream of finding any other visitor at this early hour," she said; "much less so industrious a person as you. Are you going to make a sketch of the garden and the old monk in the corner (who pretends to be absorbed in meditation, but is not), for a picture?"

"No," Warner replied; "I had an errand out here; besides, I wanted a long walk—a chance to think something over."

"Ah, a subject for a new picture, of course!"

"Who would have expected you to be so matinal!" he said, without noticing her remark. "The last person I should have anticipated the pleasure——"

"Don't finish!" interrupted Violet, laughing. "It is no pleasure to meet Miss Cameron, or anybody else! I am sure you came for the same reason that brought me—because you thought you would not see a human creature except the monks; and they are such movable wooden images they don't count."

"I should not have supposed you ever had moods like those," he said.

"I see no reason why I should be exempt from the chief of human privileges—that of being morose and out of sorts," returned Violet. "And can you find any good and sufficient cause why you should have any more right than I to such enjoyment?"

"I don't think I am morose," he answered. "I was tired—I have that excuse—I have been hard at work for a fortnight."

"And I—oh, you need not laugh! Pray, what can be harder work than having to crowd every moment of one's waking hours with what is called amusement?"

"Yes, I can understand that. I only wonder why people do it."

"So do the victims wonder, you may be sure."

She was studying his face now. She had not seen him

since the night he dined at her house. He did look tired; not so much physically weary, as if some shadow had come between his blithe spirit and the sun. Violet heartily liked the young fellow, with his earnestness and his determination. It occurred to her that perhaps some of the evils so common to his estate—an artist in the outset of his career—had overtaken him. The expected installment of his income might have failed to arrive in due season. He might find himself in a foreign country menaced by that most unendurable of petty ills—a lack of money. She would not do what she had meant to when they met—speak a few pleasant words and turn away; she would make him talk—discover by some means if her suspicion were correct.

"Have you ever made a sketch of the garden?" she asked.

"I began one the last time I was here, but did not finish it," he replied.

"I wish you would," she urged, seeing her way easily to be of assistance in case pecuniary difficulties stood in his path. "I have always meant to get somebody to paint me a picture with my pet monk, Giuseppe, in the foreground—leaning on the picturesque old well, for instance. Then I should like a companion sketch—say of—— Why, what are you shaking your head for?"

"I should, of course, be very much honored by a commission from Miss Cameron," he answered, "but I fear it must wait."

"Ah, well, if you are too busy now, promise to undertake it as soon as you have time."

"Or when I find myself in Florence again."

"You are not thinking of going away? I thought you intended to remain several years in Italy."

"Yes, I did. I told you I came out here this morning to think matters over."

"About going, you mean?"

"Last night I believed my mind made up," he said; "but men are such silly creatures!"

"I am so sorry you think of leaving!"

"Oh, I shall come back some time. I have had an offer to go to Greece. I have never been, you know."

"Naturally, the opportunity is not one to neglect," she said, satisfied now that his trouble had a different source from that which she had supposed, but confident still that

the trouble existed, and, with her usual desire to lighten care or distress, her heart softened more and more towards the young man who looked so weary and sad-eyed, so unlike the happy, self-reliant youth she had hitherto known.

"If you do go, I hope you will not stay long," she said; "but perhaps, after all, you will decide to postpone your journey, since you were only thinking about it."

"My decision must be made at once. If I go, I shall start to-night."

"To-night?"

"Yes. I cannot put off my departure, because I am to meet some people at Brindisi for the next steamer, and I must first go up to Verona. I have business there."

She stood thoughtfully regarding him.

"This is very sudden," she said. "When did you receive the proposal?"

"Yesterday," he replied, his mouth working a little, as pronouncing the word reminded him of the circumstance under which the news had come. "But—but—several times lately I have been thinking of going away: it would be better than to stay here and feel what an idiot——" He broke off abruptly, coloring scarlet to the roots of his hair. "I have not the least idea what I meant to say," he cried; "or rather, why I said it in that silly fashion! I mean I have an idle fit on me, and cannot work; change of scene may cure it."

Violet laid her hand upon his arm as frankly as if he had been a younger brother.

"Come, walk up and down," she said. "Tell me all about it, Gilbert! My friends always tell me everything—I shall fancy that you are not really my friend unless you do."

She spoke truly; even the most reticent people found themselves revealing their secrets to Violet Cameron with a candor at which they might afterwards wonder, though no person ever had reason to regret such frankness.

To go away had proved so difficult that though on the previous evening Warner, as he said, had believed his mind made up, he wanted still time to reflect. That speech of Mary's, which had carried such sudden desolation to his soul, presented itself in a new aspect as he turned it over and over during the long watches of the night. Was it so certain she had referred to herself—would she so openly

have spoken? Or, reading his secret clearly, did her desire to save him further self-deception impel her to betray a truth in regard to her feelings whose utterance must have cost her dearly indeed. He would talk frankly with Miss Cameron—if his suspicions were well founded (a little while before he had called them certainties), if Mary loved Laurence Aylmer, she would know it.

"What is at the bottom of this resolution?" Violet asked in her soft, confidence-impelling voice. "You know it is not curiosity that impels me to ask, Gilbert. I am sure something troubles you."

"Yes," he said.

"Then tell me what it is," she urged. "Remember how often we women discover a way out that escapes you men."

"You are very good—only too good!" he said.

"Hush! don't say that; it sounds like putting me off—a polite way of telling me I am meddlesome and intrusive."

"You know I could not think that."

"I shall believe you do unless you are frank! Come; I am a sort of grave elder sister; this is just the place for a confession. Don't make me afraid you have ceased to like me: you used to tell me everything; at least you said you did. Don't cast me off because you are not a boy any longer."

"No, no!" he said, in a rather tremulous voice. "I—I had a mind to tell you the other night at Lady Harcourt's, only it seemed so silly."

"Silly to have faith in a friend? oh, that is very wicked!"

"To trouble you with my nonsense, of course I mean."

"Nothing that troubles a person I like can seem nonsense," Violet answered. "You know me well enough, I hope, to be certain of that."

"Indeed I do!" he exclaimed, grasping her hand with such fervor that it hurt; his blue eyes fixed upon her in warm friendship and admiration, though they were still misty from the cloud which overshadowed his soul.

"Now let go my hand; what will the monks think if they see you! My old friend Giuseppe will withdraw the light of his countenance, certain that my visit was only an excuse to meet a young man," said she, speaking playfully, just to keep him from an over-strained expression of feel-

ing which he might afterwards regret. Her varied experience in playing confidante had taught her that if people only make their revelations with a certain degree of composure, they are not half so much disturbed in thinking the matter over as they are if excitement has led them into a display of emotion, such as a man in his cooler moments terms "making a fool of himself," and a woman styles "doing theatricals."

They walked along the path for a little while in silence. A sudden light broke upon Violet—she knew what Warner's trouble was! How did it happen that she had been so blind as not to think of it before? Why, he had revealed his secret that first day they met in the gallery after his return; revealed it each time he glanced towards Mary. And she, Violet, had been so engrossed with watching the girl and Aylmer, that she had not even a thought for what poor Warner's face said, though in this rapid instant of recollection its expression recurred so vividly that she could feel an additional sting of shame at having been so full of herself and her miserable weaknesses that the truth, patent as it was, had escaped her. This boy had given his heart to Mary, and she had her heart too completely occupied with other dreams to heed the offering. Ah, just another of those dismally-laughable catastrophes which Fate in her hardness likes bringing about! It was right that Mary should love Aylmer; she was worthy his affection, and, rating him above all other men, Violet felt it fitting that he should have the first chance at the best and highest of Fortune's favors. Still it seemed cruel of Destiny to make this warm-hearted, affectionate, true-souled Warner suffer.

"What was it you had a mind to speak about the other night?" she asked. "Tell me, Gilbert."

It was difficult to resist Violet Cameron when she looked and spoke as she did now. Fortunately, in her case, Nature had not bestowed, as she so often does, that gift of fascination which impels men, even against their judgments and wills, to yield to the spell, upon a woman who employed her singular influence for evil instead of good.

"Tell me," she repeated.

"I believe I meant to ask you something instead," he said. "Still it seems cowardly. I ought to go direct and

ask her—but it is so difficult—for her sake, I mean. If—if—oh, yesterday I thought I had been answered—but the more I reflect the less sure I feel—and to go away without being certain—perhaps, when too late, find I had made a mistake—oh !——" He broke off suddenly, then exclaimed : "What an idiot I am ! I have just been thinking aloud instead of uttering a single intelligible sentence."

"I think I understand," Violet said, in a low tone.

He stopped short in the path and confronted her : he was pale to his lips, but very quiet.

"You mean—that I am too late. I was not mistaken—I am too late," he said slowly, dropping the words out one by one with painful distinctness.

Left to himself half an hour longer, his meditations would have resulted in his returning home, seeking Mary, and boldly asking her the real significance of that speech which seemed to him the more doubtful the longer he pondered upon it. The matter would have been so easily cleared up—the last cloud between the young pair banished ; and now Violet thrust herself in between them and the truth.

She must answer, she must tell him. Oh, every species of hard duty came upon her—but she must speak !

"I will not deceive you," she said ; "it could do no good. Oh, Gilbert, I must not even tell you how grieved I am——"

He checked her by a quick gesture.

"Yes, I know," she said ; "it would only sound like mockery. My dear Gilbert—my poor boy !"

"Too late," he replied. "I was sure of it the first time I saw her with him—perfectly sure ; but I tried to deceive myself—I was such a weak fool !"

How his words cut across Violet's heart—like the echo of her own personal reflections ! She too had been certain that very day—she too for a little had tried to deceive herself—weak fool that she was !

"I don't see why that man should have everything in the world," Gilbert exclaimed suddenly. "Ah well ! perhaps he deserves it all—yes, I believe he does. I won't be contemptible just because he has come across my path—only his shadow has taken away all my sunlight. Ah, my God, how I loved her !"

He turned abruptly away and hurried up and down the garden-path.

Violet stood looking sadly after him. His pain, though different from hers, found such a response in her heart, through her great sympathy for him, that it seemed fairly a part of her own burden—a new bitterness forced upon her soul.

It would be useless—nay, wicked—to follow her first impulse to tell him that she might be mistaken—that he should persevere. Mary's face as she looked that night when they talked in the moonlight rose before her; Mary's quivering voice rang in her ear! She had made no mistake. Better this poor boy should know the truth now—every day of hope against hope, of attempted self-deception, would only increase his suffering. Ah, why could not the girl have given her heart to this young fellow, so good, so clever, so suited to her in every way? Then Violet grew ashamed when she caught herself thinking this, afraid that she thought it because such consummation would have left Aylmer free—and free or not, it was all the same to Violet! Mary had nothing to do with her decision; an impossible barrier loomed between her and him—her age—her age!

Presently, Warner came back to her side again.

"I told you I had not quite decided on my plans," he said. "My mind is made up now; I am going to Greece."

"But not at once——"

"I start for Verona to-night," he interrupted. "The sooner the better! So this is good-by—I shall not see you again."

"Gilbert!"

"Yes, I know—don't try to tell me—I know! You are very kind to care. God bless you—good-by!"

He hurried from her and disappeared before she could speak again. Violet sat down and meditated gloomily enough for a time; then she too went her way, having contrived in her efforts to do right to commit as much mischief as the most evil-disposed person living could well have managed to crowd into one morning.

CHAPTER XXX.

TWO NOTES.

AS Violet was dismounting from her horse, Madame Magnoletti's carriage entered the court.

"Have I really caught you?" exclaimed Nina, as they exchanged greetings at the foot of the staircase. "I fully expected you would be out, but I had made up my mind to wait, even if you did not come home until dark. I should be pleased to know what you have been doing with yourself. I have not seen you since the night before last, and you promised to come to me yesterday."

"I could not——"

"Now don't tell fibs for civility's sake! You did not want to come! You were in one of your unsociable moods, when you did not wish to see a human creature. I know you!"

"I am so glad you do; it saves me a world of trouble," said Violet, teasingly.

"I should like to shake you!" exclaimed Nina, and could say no more, because they were within reach of Antonio's ears, as he stood bowing his respectful welcome on the threshold.

"You must either come into my dressing-room, else excuse me while I take off my habit," Violet said.

"I'll go into your dressing-room. If I don't keep watch you are quite capable of disappearing by some secret door," grumbled Nina.

"Miss Bronson is out——"

"I hate Miss Bronson!"

"My pretty little cousin is at the studio——"

"She is not pretty, and I hate her too!"

"Else I would leave them to entertain you while I change my dress," pursued Violet.

"If you did I'd do them both a mischief!" cried Nina.

They entered the chamber where Clarice was waiting. Nina flung herself into a low arm-chair, and sat silent. Violet imitated her example, glad to have the relief of even

a few moments' taciturnity on the marchesa's part; for, fond of her as she was, she wished that caprice had led the little woman anywhere else this morning.

"I wonder you did not keep Clarice all day!" Nina exclaimed, as the door closed behind the discreet waiting-maid.

"If you display too much ill-temper I can call her back. Pray what ails you, that you should turn so acid? You are like a bottle of small beer that has had the cork left out."

"'Flat, stale, and unprofitable,'" quoted Nina, in English, and began to laugh. "It is such an absurd world; everything goes wrong—so does everybody—you among the number."

"Oh, my dear, I never posed as a model for correct conduct."

"We have made a blunder, and it is more your fault than mine; so you must help me to remedy it," cried Nina, irrelevantly.

"Sorry I should in any way have added to your faults, my child; they are numerous enough when you are left to yourself," said Violet, mockingly.

"Horrid creature! What a pity it is unladylike to break things as the men do in a passion. If it were not, I'd tumble over that great cinque-cento vase just to punish you."

"For what reason? Tell me my crime before you sacrifice my most deliciously ugly ornament. Only look at that delightful little baby in swaddling clothes reaching with precocious eagerness after that preposterous apple, and be softened—towards the vase at least."

"It is improper for an unmarried woman to talk about babies," said Nina. "I have been in America, so I know that."

"Especially when one's married female friends give them no occasion," returned Violet.

"Oh, you malicious wretch! I suppose I might have a baby as well as another, if I saw fit."

"Can't say, really! I am a practical woman, and never assert a thing as a fact until I have proofs before me."

Then they both began to laugh, though Violet felt she would rather cry, and was very suspicious that Nina's mood had reached a pitch as unreasonable as her own.

"Don't laugh!" the visitor exclaimed, "I am very unhappy. Everybody disappoints me--you first——"

"Leave me till the last. Get to something more purely personal, and which will offer a better excuse for unhappiness. What has that tiresome Carlo been doing now to vex you?"

"Nothing—everything! My dear, I'm not such a fool as to care about his endless flirtations. They mean as little as mine do. Carlo loves me as much as he is capable of loving anybody—as much as I deserve! We are both true specimens of the half-made-up people of this blessed nineteenth century. Sometimes I indulge vague visions of being something better, and making him so--mere visions. I'm only fit for the life I lead, and I like it--I shan't deny that. But I am worried just now—I tell you we have blundered."

"Now, see here, Nina! I am not in a mood this morning to be found fault with; I should quarrel with my guardian-angel if he paid me a visit for that purpose. What do you mean by our blundering? Carlo has been losing, I suppose: if it is not your heart, it must be money—excuse my coarseness. But I cannot see how I am to blame. At least, you know if there is any difficulty in which I can aid *you*, I shall be ready, though I own frankly that if he had to suffer for his folly I should not pity him."

"No, no! Things are not so bad as that yet," returned Nina; "though heaven only knows when they may be if we cannot foil her again. Of course Giulia da Rimini is at the bottom of my trouble!"

"Why, Carlo cares no more about her than I do for my slipper—you can't think it! Giulia might as well try to tempt him to eat a *ragout réchauffé* as bring him back to a flirtation grown cold. Now, don't be a goose, whatever you are, when you can be so sensible if you choose."

"She knows that; so do I. She means to revenge herself on me—on us—she is sure you would be hurt, too, for my sake—by tempting him to play. I only found out yesterday what is going on. Gherardi betrayed it, in his blundering fashion, without meaning to. And she can do more harm than ever with the help of her Greek, whom she has forced down people's throats at the point of the bayonet. I cannot understand why Florentine society will submit to anything that woman chooses to do. It knows

her thoroughly—says of her what she deserves—but she goes audaciously on, and rules all the same."

"But about Carlo?"

"For some reason the Greek hates you; I have discovered that. I suppose you have snubbed him."

"He has never been presented—never shall be!"

"And I am sure Giulia blames me for everything: your not visiting her, and all."

"I'll tell her my reasons if you like."

"Don't, in the name of all the saints! though, bless me, why one should invoke them I don't know, since they are always blind and deaf when one needs their aid."

"Come, come, don't speak disrespectfully of them! They mayn't be much good, but we might be worse off without them! About Giulia?"

"Oh, yes! Only fancy! yesterday, speaking of your supper last week, she said to me, with that dreadful smile of hers, 'I see Miss Cameron has forgotten me this winter. I have a better memory for my friends. I don't forget her, any more than I could you, my darling little Nina.' A threat for both of us. Wait! I know you don't care, but I do. She can't attract Carlo by her smiles, but she can by cards. Oh, they've organized a club! It meets two nights a week at her house—just the worst of the lot—and Carlo goes; Gherardi told me so. And she and the Greek cheat; I'll stake my life on it!"

"That would do no good, unless you could prove it."

"Prove it!" broke in Nina. "How can I, when you will not help?"

"Oh, Nina," said Violet, thoroughly exasperated by these incoherent attempts at an explanation which only rendered her meaning the more confused, "if you can't talk intelligibly do let me alone."

For the first time in all these years of warm friendship, the pair were on the brink of a quarrel—over nothing, too; for that very reason likely to be the more disastrous if it came. Without being aware of the fact, both were in a state of such intense nervous excitement, that for the moment a duel of words, which must leave wounds difficult to heal, would have been more in unison with their feelings than any rational attempt to come to a clear comprehension of matters.

Nina rose, gathered her wraps about her, and said: "I

will leave you alone ; I'll never trouble you again either about any affairs of mine—you may be sure of that."

Violet was in a mood so perverse that she might absolutely have let her go in silence had she not caught sight in a mirror of the face Nina kept so resolutely turned away. The tears were streaming down the little woman's cheeks : her pretty mouth quivering like a hurt child's in her efforts to repress an audible sob.

Violet started up, hurried forward a few steps, and flung her arms round her friend's waist.

"I do think we are both out of our senses !" cried she ; "and I am more to blame than you. I don't know what ails me ; I believe I am possessed, like those unfortunates in old days—not by one demon only, but at least a score. Sit down, you poor darling, and try to tell me. I'll do whatever you want ; I promise that in advance."

"It was all my fault," returned Nina, soothed and penitent ; "I dare say I did not in the least explain."

"Well, my dear, I must admit that your explanation failed in lucidity ; still that was no excuse for my being so impatient. Come, commence all over again ; I'll be patient enough this time, to atone for my rudeness."

"Oh, rude you could not be !"

"And nothing could really interfere with our love for each other," said Violet, kissing her, and drawing her towards a sofa. "Now sit down, and I'll sit by you."

"How absurd that we should have come near a quarrel !" cried Nina, beginning, with her usual inconsequence, to laugh, while the tears still stood on her cheeks. "The first time such a thing ever happened to us."

"A warning ! In friendship as in other things, *ce n'est que le premier pas qui coûte.*"

"Bah ! I don't believe in proverbs ; they wouldn't be repeated so often if they had any truth in them," said Nina, her good-humor so fully restored that her spirits began to rise, and she could snatch hastily at more cheerful views of life.

"Don't stop to be either witty or misanthropic, else we may quarrel yet," returned Violet. "Let us get at an understanding !"

"I don't in the least know where I was—you put me out completely !" said Nina, with another baby *moue*, and a sudden disposition to have her cry out after all.

Violet felt that a fit of weeping on her friend's part would completely upset her resolve to be penitent and patient, so she hastened to fling Giulia da Rimini's name into the conversation, in the hope that it would move Nina to anger sufficient to check her lachrymose tendencies—a weakness which it must be said the little woman seldom exhibited for the benefit of any looker-on, even Violet—never for Carlo's; she was much too wise, even in her dreariest moments, to render any matrimonial crisis more desperate by such show of feminine feebleness.

"I don't remember what I was saying," continued Nina.

"You were freely slandering the Rimini and her Athenian; accusing them of being Greeks in the modern slang acceptation of the term," replied Violet.

"And it is true!" exclaimed Nina. "I have not the slightest reason to think so, but I *know* it is true."

"And I am quite ready to put implicit faith in your intuitions," said Violet, "but what can I do?"

"Ah, just the thing you refuse—to let me go to her house the nights their odious club meet!"

"Now, Nina, with the best intentions on my part, that assertion is a little too strong for endurance! I never tried to hinder you or anybody else from visiting the woman. I don't go to see her, and I don't invite her, but——"

"Ah, that's just it," interrupted Nina, triumphantly; "now we come to the gist of the matter at once! I tell you they cheat; I could watch if I were there—but she won't have me without you, and you won't go!"

"I can scarcely suppose that her insolence would carry her to that pitch—why, Carlo would never stand it."

"Oh, Mary, Catherine, Barbara, and all the rest!" groaned Nina, giving herself a petulant shake. "You don't half fathom Giulia yet, clever as you are! My dear, she did it so neatly—it was like a bit out of a play—and made Carlo side with her and be so stupid that he didn't even see her drift! Though I need not blame him, poor fellow, since he is only a man, when you, the brightest woman I ever knew, are just as blind!"

"More digressions!" said Violet, struggling hard to retain possession of her recently-recovered patience. But Nina's sudden gesture, as if imploring those lately-appealed-to saints to aid in bearing her friend's unparal-

leled obtuseness, restored Violet's determination, though the gesture might have failed in its effect had it not been accompanied by that previous threatening tremulousness about the marchesa's pretty mouth. "Now, how did Giulia hinder you from seeing what goes on?"

"Easily enough! She said, 'So sorry no women are admitted; that was the bargain those dreadful men insisted on! I cannot make an exception in your favor, because that would be insulting—would look as if I supposed you wanted to watch your husband!' Then Carlo burst out laughing, and ran off—(we had all met by accident at Lady Harcourt's)."

"Well?"

"Then Giulia said: 'If our fascinating Miss Cameron had not given me the cold shoulder I could have broken my word and introduced her—she might have brought you without leave as her chaperon!' And she looked me full in the eyes with that awful smile. She knew she had settled *me*—she was certain that you would not set foot within her doors."

"Was she!" cried Violet. "My dear, even in the interests of your Carlo I can't turn my salons into gambling-rooms."

"No; but if you would only go to see her."

"She would rather I invited her to my house. Let me think—hadn't I promised you and Lady Harcourt and Sabakine that you might come here to-night after the opera?"

"Certainly, and we mean to keep you to your word."

"Good! And you think the duchess would like to come?"

"My dear, she knows as well as we, *ce n'est que le premier pas qui coûte* in all things! She is afraid of you. If you set the example of cutting her, somebody may follow suit—then she is lost."

"Heaven forbid that I should aid Fate and the duchess's instincts in the work they are sure to bring about," said Violet. She sat down at her writing-table and indited a note, which Nina read over her shoulder. "Beautiful! Read it aloud—let us be sure it is perfect," cried the marchesa.

"She has the audacity to doubt," said Violet, laughing.

"Only listen—you have no idea how well it sounds," returned Nina, and began reading the page aloud :

"'It seems an age since I have had the pleasure of receiving Madame da Rimini ; yet last winter she was good enough to accord me that favor now and then, and I weakly thought the force of habit might bring her occasionally this season also.

"'Better to know one's fate, however disappointing. Half-a-dozen friends have promised to come to me to-night after the opera—will the duchess be so hard-hearted as to make me admit that even in the case of a carefully-arranged *impromptu* gathering I am unable to afford them the happiness of meeting her ?' "

"I should as soon have expected to be guillotined as live to write a billet like that to Giulia da Rimini !" Violet exclaimed, involuntarily trying to seize the epistle.

"Never repent a good action," rejoined Nina, folding the sheet and putting it in an envelope. "Now the address, and the thing is done. *Ce n'est que*—I spare you the rest."

"Besides, I never did invite her, except to large parties."

"She will be all the more flattered by your appearing to think she used to come when you were *en petit comité*," said Nina, holding fast to one corner of the letter while Violet wrote the superscription, snatching it away as soon as finished, and hastily ringing the bell, afraid that if given time to reflect, Miss Cameron might even yet refuse to appease the angry woman. The note safe in Antonio's keeping, and gone beyond recall, the little lady fully recovered her spirits. "You are a darling !" she cried. "We shall have an answer presently. The creature is sure to be at home at this hour."

"She will know it is your doing."

"If she does, she won't allow herself to believe it—human vanity will prevent that. She will decide that you found you had made a mistake—discovered she was not a person to treat cavalierly."

"At all events, it is done. Don't say another word about her. Let me forget for a little that she exists," said Violet, feeling that she had been weak to allow even Nina's troubles to force her into an action so contrary to her sense of dignity and right.

For half an hour the marchesa talked incessantly in her

brightest strain, and Violet made a decent pretense of listening, laughing, and replying, though all the while reflecting in a misanthropic fashion that friendship, like everything else in this hard old world, was a plant which produced more thorns than roses.

At length Antonio's modest tap sounded on the door, and in her eagerness Nina forgot she was not in her own house, and cried out:

"Come in—do!" Then, "Oh, Violet, I beg your pardon!"

"No need," replied Miss Cameron; "it is your errand—quite right you should conduct matters."

The Swiss entered, bringing the expected missive on a salver, which he presented to his mistress.

"Give it to Madame la Marquise," said Violet, unable to bring herself to touch the perfumed billet.

Antonio obeyed and retired, wondering a little at the oddities of the female sex. Why should his lady wish an epistle bearing her address handed over to another?

"Shall I read it?" Nina asked.

"I have a suspicion that if you do not it will remain unread," Violet replied, laughing, but quite in earnest.

"Ugh, that odious perfume!" shivered Nina, breaking the seal. She unfolded the sheet, and began, "'My beautiful queen of flowers'"—stopped, glanced down the page, and cried out, "Heavens, I believe she has the best of it!"

"Nina!" exclaimed Violet, in anger and dismay; "read it—read!"

"Just listen! 'Beautiful——'"

"Skip that," interrupted Violet.

"Oh yes—'flowers!' Hear this: 'So happy to learn that invitations to the Palazzo Amaldi are, like other blossoms of paradise, perennial. I knew its mistress was in as perfect bloom as ever, but I thought the charming informal reunions had failed to put out a second crop. I shall be delighted to renew our pleasant evenings. Unfortunately, I had invited to dinner a friend of my dear husband's, to whom the duke has begged me to show every attention; so I must trespass on your good-nature so far as to bring him, lest in my desire to accede to your kind wishes I should be guilty of a rudeness to Signor Dimetri.'"

"No—I'll not endure that," cried Violet; "not even for you, Nina—I will not! That man shall never cross

my threshold. I have avoided having him presented. I will not receive him !"

"He was there—he dictated it. I am sure he did. She never would have had the wit," groaned Nina, underrating, as she had always done, the duchess's abilities.

"Then his wit fails," said Violet. "I shall write and tell her it is one of my nights for not receiving strangers."

"Oh, my dear !"

"Not a word—it is useless. Come, don't be afraid of the odious creature. We will defeat her yet."

"Oh ! but this will make her furious ! Don't write yet. Let me think !" cried Nina, beginning to pace the room, as Violet seated herself determinedly at her desk.

"Think ; but the fact remains ! Giulia da Rimini shall not force that adventurer on me !" said Violet, firmly.

Nina made no answer. Her course had brought her near a window, which commanded the court ; she saw Laurence Aylmer entering.

"I have it !" she exclaimed. "Leave it to me ; she shall not bring the man ; I can hinder her—only promise not to write !"

"I can't trust to any chance, Nina. There must be no loophole left—no doubt."

"You shall have a letter from her in less than an hour, saying that she has decided it was better to send an apology to Signor Dimetri. Good-bye—I can't wait—only trust me. I will arrange this matter to your complete satisfaction—you'll wait ?"

"Of course ; be very careful !"

"A whole flock of doves and an entire family of serpents combined," returned Nina, and ran gayly out of the room.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN UNPLEASANT MISSION.

WHEN the marchesa reached the staircase, as she had anticipated, she saw Laurence Aylmer coming up.

"His unpardonable masculine recklessness shall be made of a little use," thought Nina. "I would not have believed he could be goose enough to risk offending Violet by dangling about that painted sepulcher, but since he has done it, and fascinated Giulia by his dreamy eyes and his poetical talk, I'll employ her weakness to aid in the plot against herself! Oh, will she never get to the end of her invention—never leave me any peace! Only let me save Carlo from her talons this time, and I believe I shall have done with her—it is only the play that attracts him. If I can make her admit me those nights, at least my presence will be a little restraint, even if I don't succeed in convincing him of her real motives."

Aylmer interrupted her reflections by calling merrily:

"It is quite natural that angelic visitants should appear to one from above!"

"Equally so that demons should appear from below," retorted she.

He hurried on to meet her, and they shook hands cordially.

"I had been wishing to see you," said he.

"A pity that doing so did not rank among forbidden things, then you would not have restrained the wish so carefully, and I might have the pleasure of receiving an occasional visit; as it is, I never set eyes on you unless I deliberately hunt you up in other people's houses."

"I have been twice at your house without finding you. I believe you are never at home!"

"Didn't I say I had to go abroad in search of you?"

"Very likely, when you run away from a place just as I enter!"

"You can't enter here," she replied, with her most ingenuous smile. "Let me spare you a useless mountain climb; Miss Cameron cannot and will not receive you."

"The porter said she was at home," rejoined he, his keen disappointment at her information so plainly visible in his face that Nina felt inclined to forgive him the sin of yielding a little to the duchess's spells.

"After all," she thought, "as Sabakine says, the poor fellow really cannot imitate Joseph beyond certain limits."

"You merely want to tease me," he continued. "The porter would not make the mistake——"

"He could not help making mistakes, you mean, since he is a man," she interrupted. "Miss Cameron is ill—absent—dead! Don't be too wretched, however; she will return to life this evening, after the opera, and you are invited to join a few worthless people like yourself in her abode of all delights. Does that content you?"

"Perfectly, if——"

"I have warrant for saying so? I ought to punish your impertinent doubts by not allowing you to come."

"Since I did not dream of expressing any. I only meant——"

"Something you ought not to mean, no doubt. But be easy in your mind; I am to bring you. Don't fail to appear in my box before the end of the fourth act—nobody ever stops for the fifth—why did Groselli write it?"

"From that unfortunate masculine proneness to blunders upon which you are always so severe."

"Very likely. But my wonder causes me to forget business. You have something to do."

"It must be something pleasant, since the news comes from you."

"More than pleasant. I am surprised you do not divine at once."

"When you are so well acquainted with my hopeless stupidity? It would be useless for me to waste your time in guesses. Pray tell me what it is."

"You are going with me to visit the Duchess da Rimini."

"Oh!" he exclaimed, the little monosyllable expressing such a depth of weariness and annoyance that Nina rushed at the conviction that her fears for him had been unnecessary: he never would become Giulia's willing or passive victim.

"You are quite confounded by the thought of so much happiness," said she, with a laugh of genuine enjoyment;

"but try and merit the boon, for it is to be yours. Now, listen to me. You are to put on all your fascinations; have eyes solely for her. If any other men are there, I will attend to them."

"And the aim of this——"

"Wait! You will ask the duchess if you are to have the bliss of meeting her to-night at Miss Cameron's."

"A sure means of putting her in a frightful rage, because she will be obliged to answer no."

"Which will delight her, because she can answer yes!"

"Why, I thought—I fancied——"

"No matter what; your part is to obey, not question. Now pay strict attention, and try to learn your lesson correctly. You will entrap her into admitting that she means to bring her Greek with her——"

"I really cannot be silent! Miss Cameron will not receive the fellow, of that I am certain."

"Oh, second Solon, Daniel, or whatever! Now will you gratify me and—Violet?"

"Of course!" he exclaimed, with the prompt acquiescence which she had been confident her unwarranted dragging Miss Cameron into her plot would occasion. "I will do anything you require."

"Then you will open your fullest batteries on the duchess; you will be tender and exigeant, impatient and romantic—rise to the heights of melodrama, if necessary—but you will declare your determination not to appear at the Palazzo Amaldi if Dimetri accompanies her adored, bewitching self."

"As if such behavior would have any effect."

"You will make her promise not to bring him," pursued Nina, regardless of his expostulation. "That is the mission confided to you—to persuade the duchess voluntarily to withdraw her proposal of presenting him, and so avoid the necessity of a refusal on Miss Cameron's part."

"But marchesa, marchesa!"

"One would think you were summoning 'spirits from the vasty deep!'"

"I should need their aid to succeed in——"

"Don't trouble yourself to finish! You and I both know that you can manage the affair without the slightest assistance or difficulty."

"Indeed, you sadly overrate my abilities, and I have no influence which could induce the lady——"

"Oh, don't waste precious time in fibs so utterly useless! Tell me at once if you mean to do what I—what we wish!"

It was difficult to refuse her request, yet he foresaw that to grant it would make another bond between himself and the duchess. He must pay the penalty of a demand which only intimate friendship could warrant, by conduct in accordance with the rules governing that relation. The lady would be able more freely than ever to unfold her woes and insist upon sympathy.

"I can only do my best; you must not blame me if I fail," he said, in a rather annoyed tone.

"Don't put me out of temper by such affected modesty."

"And the reasons seem——"

"I believe a man would stop to argue about reasons before trying to save our lives, if we were all shut up in a burning house!" cried Nina sharply, his hesitation rousing a feverish impatience in her mind.

Aylmer glanced at her, surprised by the tone of her voice; the signs of real trouble which he read in her face checked any further efforts to avoid the unpleasant task set him.

"I will do whatever you wish," he said. "I only hope the duchess will——"

"Consent to anything you ask. Now take me down stairs, and talk of something else during our drive. Of course Giulia is a delightful subject for conversation, but mine is a frivolous mind, and it fatigues me to contemplate her virtues long at a time."

She talked gayly upon any trivial matter that suggested itself, and Aylmer seconded her to the best of his ability, though his thoughts were sorely disturbed by the duty which awaited him. He wished that at least he might tell Nina exactly how his apparent intimacy with Madame da Rimini had come about, but that of course was impossible; not only should he appear a conceited fop, but it would be positively dishonorable to confess that the lady had elected him the confidant of her troubles, much against his own inclinations, which rebelled more and more as her exactions increased—and they did increase so rapidly. Why,

only the day before he had been forced to go to her house, in answer to an appealing summons, and she had detained him two mortal hours, and prevented any possibility of his visiting Violet.

Could he have known the displeasure and vague doubts roused in Miss Cameron's mind by seeing him enter the duchess's doors, his annoyance would have been even greater than it was now.

Madame da Rimini received Nina with her customary warmth and exaggerated expressions of delight.

"My dearest, darling child! How good of you to come; I was thinking of you a little while ago—longing to see you."

"It was a mutual longing, you perceive," returned the Russian, allowing herself to be embraced with a composure and sweetness as perfect as if the very touch of her enemy's hand did not give her a thrill of disgust.

"Good-morning, Mr. Aylmer," continued the duchess, turning towards him with that melancholy smile and air of repressed sorrow which she often displayed for his benefit.

"I overtook this graceless wretch at the corner of the street; no doubt on his way here," said Nina. "I made him get into the carriage just to have an opportunity of uttering desperate reproaches—he has not been near me in an age."

Aylmer found it difficult to hide the irritation caused by Nina's superfluous fib.

"As I had done myself the honor of calling yesterday," he said, "I should owe an apology, did not the responsibility of this morning's appearance rest solely with Madame Magnoletti."

"One's friends deserve thanks for frequent visits," the duchess answered.

"But you cannot flatter his vanity as you did mine, by declaring that you had been thinking of him," said Nina.

"Oh yes, I may," Giulia replied. "I made Mr. Aylmer's acquaintance through you, so it is natural I should sometimes think of him when I do of you; and you know, I am sure, how often that is."

"Then I owe to you a double debt of gratitude," said Aylmer; "even to give me a thought would be more than amiable, but to connect me in your mind with a friend

whom you value so much as the marchesa is the height of kindness."

"I cannot help being enthusiastic over the people I like—it is part of my impulsive nature," sighed the duchess.

She fondled Nina's hand again, and gave Aylmer a tender glance, and Nina pressed the taper fingers which held hers, and thought:

"Impulsive! Oh, you boa-constrictor! I must repeat that to Sabakine—how he will enjoy it."

And Giulia was thinking:

"I have frightened you out of your little insolent ways, you small cat—forced your icicle of a Miss Cameron into civility too for your sake—oh, I've not done with you yet—this is only the beginning."

And Aylmer reflected in this fashion:

"I wonder which of us three ought to receive the palm for lying? But my masculine efforts look very poor beside theirs—how easily they do it."

A couple of gentlemen were announced, and after a few moments of general conversation, Nina took possession of the pair, and left Aylmer to entertain the hostess, saying presently:

"Giulia, I am going to break my heart by making sure that your orchids are finer than mine—Signor Landini vows they are. Please come with us, Signor Generale, and be umpire," she added, addressing the elderly military man, whose black and gold uniform gave him the appearance of a gigantic wasp, though he looked too mild and amiable to sting under any provocation whatever.

The conservatory opened out of the drawing-room, and was a very fine one; the marchesa prolonged her examination of the plants to give Aylmer full opportunity to enact his little comedy, keeping her cavaliers so well amused by her sprightly sallies that they had no leisure to be remorseful over their lengthened neglect of the lady they had come to visit.

The duchess afforded Aylmer an opening for what he wanted to say—or rather, what he did not want to, and was half inclined to neglect, in spite of the appealing glance the marchesa had cast at him as she passed, and his desire to do anything that Violet asked.

"Shall I see you at Miss Cameron's to-night?" Giulia inquired.

"Madame Magnoletti was good enough to say she expected me to escort her there," he answered.

"Then we shall meet. I did not mean to go out to-night—I have taken a violent cold, but *la belle Violette* wrote me such a pressing note that I could not refuse."

How it vexed Aylmer to hear her speak of his idol in that familiar fashion—perfectly unwarranted, he knew. At the same time he was wondering how best he could plunge into the task confided to him; but the duchess continued:

"Besides, I have promised to present Signor Dimetri to her. This will be a favorable opportunity, since I need an escort as much as Nina."

"Ah, what an unfortunate wretch I am not to be able to offer my services!" he exclaimed, having the grace to feel ashamed of the falsehood as he uttered it.

"I will own I should have liked it better," she replied; "though it is saying very little after all, since you know my sentiments towards that person."

"Then—excuse me—but I wonder at your afflicting yourself unnecessarily," cried he. "You need not take the man unless you choose."

The duchess sighed deeply and shook her head.

"I am bound in the toils," she whispered; "I cannot offend him. I dare not. Oh, remember what hangs over me, and be merciful in your judgments!"

She thought Aylmer's impatient gesture expressive of anger and distress at the painfulness of her position: it was only a means of relieving his annoyance at the deception circumstances forced him to practice.

"After all," said he, "I fear I shall not have the pleasure of seeing you to-night. I shall be best off at home, so I will stop there."

His abrupt tone and words certainly betrayed pique. the idea gratified his listener.

"What has caused this sudden resolution?" she asked with a smile.

"I think you must know. After what you have told me, do you suppose if—if I have any friendly feeling for you, I can bear to see that man in your society?"

"Ah, my friend—my good, generous friend," she sighed.

"I have never asked a favor of you," he hurried on; "you might grant me one so slight. Tell him it is impossible to keep your promise to-night; that you had forgotten it is Thursday, and Miss Cameron only receives intimate friends—oh, any excuse, but don't let him go."

"Have you really the matter so much at heart?" demanded she, with a still softer smile.

"I swear I have!" he cried, growing energetic from sheer delight at being able to say something literally true. "Do promise—do! Ah, so little a thing as that you might accord!"

"Perhaps," she said; "at all events I will think about it."

Her mind was already made up, but she wanted to hear him plead—see him grow more earnest and excited. In reality, she had not yet informed the Greek of what she had written to Miss Cameron, and she knew that she could not easily persuade him to go; but it would be such a crowning insolence in her triumph over this hated woman to force her to receive the man, that the duchess disliked to relinquish the satisfaction.

"If there is any doubt I must stay away," said Aylmer. "I can't meet him to-night—I really cannot! I—I think I will bid you good-day, duchess!"

"Why, what will the marchesa think?"

"It doesn't matter—that I am a bear. And so you refuse me? Well, well, of course, it was an impertinence on my part—pray forgive it. Be sure I will not offend again in the same way."

"*Mauvaise tête*," she said, but her eyes spoke a language which contradicted her playful words. "And you really care?"

"Can you doubt it? You do not—you——"

"Hush, hush! here they come!" she murmured rapidly, as the voices of the other visitors sounded near the conservatory doors, and she felt furious at their inopportune return.

"Do I go or not?" Aylmer asked, relieved by the interruption. "Ah, I thought it would be such a pleasant evening, but nothing ever happens that one wishes!"

"There shall for once," the duchess said. "Come to-night—I shall go alone. You will tell me then why it is you care so much to have me do so."

The trio were in the room, and Aylmer spared the necessity of a reply. A slight movement of his head assured Nina that her scheme had succeeded.

The duchess exulted in the depths of her soul. Oh, she was beginning to wind in her carefully-arranged threads very rapidly now. She had forced Violet Cameron to invite her; she had turned Aylmer's head till his long-preserved pretense of composure had yielded; she should triumph in every way.

Violet still sat at her desk when Antonio appeared with a second letter. She opened it and glanced at the commencement:

"I have deferred giving my husband's friend the pleasure of coming to your house until another night. I had forgotten that Thursday evening was always reserved for your intimates, but Mr. Aylmer reminded me of the fact when he came in to call a short time since."

Violet read no further. She flung the note aside, and left the room: the odious perfume which the woman always employed made the air suffocating.

CHAPTER XXXII.

GONE!

VIOLET and Miss Bronson went to the opera that evening. Violet fully determined to increase the number of her already-invited guests from among the crowd of male visitors certain to invade her *loge*, and the female acquaintances who would be in their boxes, glad of an opportunity to go anywhere, at any hour of day or night, on the most frivolous pretext for amusement. Giulia da Rimini should distinctly perceive she had been mistaken in supposing herself included in the charmed circle of Miss Cameron's "intimates."

"It seems a petty thing to do; since I have asked her I might as well let the matter alone—but then this wretched

sort of existence makes one 'petty,'" thought Violet. "I declare this shall be my last season in what people stupidly call the 'world.' I am sure any place outside it would hold more attractions. So Mr. Aylmer had the kindness to remind the duchess this was not a night to present a stranger. I think Mr. Aylmer took a liberty in knowing anything about my private wishes. It is not very long since he gave me the impression that he did not visit the lady: I wonder if any man can tell the truth? Sometimes I half fear he is not so honest and straightforward as I believed him. Fickle he certainly is, else his fancy would not have wandered away from Mary as soon as she was out of sight—wandered away to an elderly thing like me! Ah well, it went back quickly enough, and the little girl loves him. After all, he is better than most men; at least, too noble to trifle with her happiness, and he must know now that it depends on him. My poor Gilbert! it seems such a pity—good, generous heart! Heigho, what a goose I am! One of them had to be disappointed, since Mary could not well like both. Only to think of this shy little puss having so many chances, when girls who live in society and rush wildly about from season to season in search of a *parti*, can't find even one adorer!"

In the meantime, the object of her reflections sat alone in her room, busy with a new novel, and deeply enough engrossed therein to forget reality in the companionship of the characters conjured up by the romancer's skill.

Somebody knocked at the door. Mary's faculties were so absorbed that though the sound vaguely reached her ear, it did not rouse any sense of necessity for answering. A second tap followed, sufficiently loud to bring her back from dreamland in great haste, and she called:

"Come in!"

But as soon as she had spoken, she recollected that it was useless to do so in English, indulged in a little wonder how people who did not by nature think in that tongue could ever contrive to think at all, and then repeated her permission in the soft southern accents she was acquiring with the facility of her age.

But when the door opened, Mary perceived that still another language must be brought into exercise for the benefit of that special member of the polyglot household who appeared—no less a personage than Mademoiselle

Clarice, and naturally she, in her character of Parisian, scorned to speak or understand anything save French.

"Pardon! I regret to disturb mademoiselle."

"Not in the least, Clarice. What is it?"

"A little packet, which came just after dinner for mademoiselle, and was forgotten by that very careless Assunta," returned Clarice. "I was afraid mademoiselle might already be preparing for bed—I know she goes very early sometimes when she is tired—so I would not permit any one else to intrude."

"Thanks; you are very good," said Mary, still rather absent.

"It is mademoiselle who is good—the true cousin of my lady," responded Clarice, with her stateliest courtesy. "I lay the packet on the table—see! only some sketches, I think."

"Some photographs I bought to-day," replied Mary.

Clarice again demanded pardon for the interruption, and went her way. Mary sat holding the book, but the spell was broken. After a little, she rose and took up the package. It struck her that it did not resemble her purchase in size or shape, and she began to examine the address, thinking the shop-people might have committed some blunder. As she caught sight of the firm, clear writing, she gave a start and a little cry of pleased surprise.

The parcel was so carefully sealed and the paper so thick, that opening it proved a work of some seconds. While Mary's eager fingers tore at the envelope, her smile growing sweeter and her eyes softer, her rapid reflections ran in this wise:

"From Gil—from Mr. Warner. The Vaughtons call him Gilbert so often before me that I forget. I can't imagine what he has sent me! He hasn't been in the studio since we nearly quarreled yesterday. All my fault, I dare say. I am so bad-tempered. He went away vexed. Oh! I thought he did not care, but if so, he wouldn't take the trouble to send. Ah, who knows?—perhaps this may be to tell the whole. Violet said no girl need feel ashamed of a liking for an honest man. I am not ashamed. I am proud of being able to appreciate him!"

As she reached this point in her meditations she succeeded in pulling off the wrapper. Two or three notes

and a withered flower fell upon the table—in her hand she held a couple of crayon sketches and a letter. A moment's hesitation, in which a terrible fear shot across her soul as abruptly as a storm rushes over a tropical sky, then she unfolded the sheet and stared at the opening line :

"DEAR MISS DANVERS,
"The suddenness of my departure——"

This first clause turned her so dizzy that she sank back in her chair ; her eyes fastened on the phrase and refused to go further. Presently she heard herself repeating in a bewildered tone :

"'The suddenness of my departure——'"

The sound of her own voice nerved her as if some stranger watching had made his presence known, thereby reminding her of the necessity for composure. She began the page again :

"The suddenness of my departure prevents my having the honor of making my adieux in person. I leave Florence in an hour. When this reaches you, I shall have started on my journey.

"These little mementoes I return. I could not destroy them ; yet, under the changed circumstances of your life, they ought either to be destroyed or placed in your own hands, unimportant though they may be, save from the value I attached to them. That they are of value to me, is only a reason the more why I should not guard them longer.

"They are all here—only three notes and a withered rose.

"I am going away. Long before we meet again, you——"

But here a pen had been dashed heavily across the page, blotting out the line. This was what followed :

"However extended the period of my absence may prove—however far my wanderings may lead me—I beg you to believe (if you care to accept the assurance) that sincerest wishes for your happiness will go with me, and the belief that such is your portion will always cast a ray

of sunlight across my life, however colorless and dull from the lack of personal joys and interests.

"I have finished the two drawings which you were good enough to prefer among the sketches I made during our pleasant voyage, and I beg you to accept them from

"Your friend,

"GILBERT WARNER."

Gone! Mary read the letter twice before she could believe that she was reading aright. Gone with no other farewell than these brief cold lines! When her mind took in the truth, it brought a swift, overpowering sense of shame. The hypothetical case she had proposed to Violet became a personal question: Was it not disgraceful for a girl to give her heart unasked? And she had done this: he had never cared for her—never; she had deceived herself from first to last! Even the dictates of ordinary friendship would have prevented a departure so cruelly abrupt—without so much as taking the trouble to traverse the corridor which led to her studio, where, during the whole of that long day, each time she heard a sound, her heart had leaped up with an eager hope that it was his step—the moment of reconciliation over their foolish quarrel arrived at length—each time the disappointment bringing a sharper pang and dread.

It seemed to Mary this dreadful feeling of humiliation must kill her; she could not live beneath its crushing weight. After a while the relief of tears was granted; then followed a long hour of stormy meditation, at the close of which her lacerated pride struggled for some means of defense against its burden. Could she throw the whole blame upon her own vanity and weakness? A thousand incidents connected with the past months came up—each recollection a fresh torture, but offering a firmer conviction which at least possessed a gleam of comfort for her wounded self-respect.

He had helped her own heart to deceive her: no man could have given plainer assurances of interest—nay, affection—than he had done. If he had never cared for her, he was a trifler—that meanest of God's creatures, a male coquette—to grieve for whom would be degradation indeed! The very harshness of her thoughts brought a reaction in his favor—made her as eager to find excuses for him as she

had been to seek them in behalf of her own dignity. He vain, false, capable of playing at devotion, of trying to win a woman's heart to amuse an idle hour, and flinging the gift aside as carelessly as he might a broken ornament when his pleasure in the game ended?

No—a thousand times, no! If he were false, neither earth nor heaven held aught of truth in all their round. He was noble and good, a king among men. She flung the assertion at her soul with passionate defiance; it seemed to her almost as if she were taking his part against some enemy who had basely slandered him.

She caught up the letter and read it anew, slowly, weighing each sentence, each word. She would be calm; she would exercise her reason; behave as she might if some suffering girl had come to her for counsel. What did that letter mean? It was the farewell of a man who went away because he deemed himself unappreciated, uncared for. That was what it meant: she should feel and say it, had the epistle been addressed to another; she would say it now.

She studied the page again and again; pored over the blotted lines with eyes so eager that they seemed to acquire a kind of microscopic power, which gradually made out a word here and there till at last the entire sentence became legible. What did it read? At first she hardly dared to credit the evidence of her own sight, but each new examination rendered the phrases and their significance clearer, more decisive, waking joy and thankfulness in her soul.

She whispered the sentence to herself; she gained courage to repeat it aloud:

"You will have become so serenely content in your new happiness that my heart will not even dare to beat too quickly in your presence."

What did that mean? Why, he loved her—he loved her—and had believed her heart given to another. The joy of this assurance was succeeded by fears as terrible in their way as her humiliation had been. He had gone, and she could send no warning of his error after him. Years might elapse ere they met, and she must sit passive, helpless, amid the long night of separation; her hands bound; her will fettered. She was a woman, and could not speak; a woman, and so must let her heart and his moan on in the dark, and leave unuttered the single word which would

end their pain—be the wand-touch of the fairy that should break the spell of the cruel magician Fate.

The thought was insupportable. Who could tell how long before destiny would permit him to come again within her reach? He might die and never learn the truth. Oh, she would think no more; she should certainly lose her senses under the horror of those possibilities. She started up; she must get away from herself; she could endure solitude no longer. There were to be guests at the house that night; Violet had told her so. She would for once break her rule of seclusion, and beg her cousin's permission to join the party. Oh, no matter what anybody thought! The need of human companionship, distraction for her mind, was so strong that it completely conquered the overstrained ideas of decorum and propriety wherewith she hedged in her girlish impulsiveness at ordinary seasons.

She ran into her bedroom, carefully bathed her eyes, rearranged her hair, stood before the glass, studying to give her features an expression of composure, with an earnestness which would have been ludicrous, except for the motive that influenced her—the necessity of guarding her trouble even from Violet's lovingly watchful regard. Presently a knock sounded on the door of her boudoir; she had known that her cousin would come to say good-night before going to receive her guests. She hurried back into the adjoining chamber, and saw Violet standing on the threshold. What comparison would serve for her loveliness? Well as Mary knew the face, its beauty struck her so forcibly that, even amid her preoccupation, she began to search for similitudes.

"Ah, mouse, I felt sure you would be up still! Naughty mouse, do you know it is almost midnight?" called Violet, gayly.

"And yet here comes the sunrise—that is it!" exclaimed Mary, moving forward with wide-open eyes of admiration.

"She is daft, this mouse," returned Violet; pushed her laughingly back, and entered. "What sort of ridiculous dream did I rouse you out of that you begin talking in Eastern metaphors?"

"I meant you; I was trying for a comparison," said Mary. "Oh, good gracious! do you know how beautiful you are?"

Violet gave her an odd glance, went up to a mirror, and regarded her own reflection for a few seconds in silence.

I have tried vainly to give you an idea of the woman's beauty, to make you feel it; so any attempt to describe her as she looked to-night, with her ordinary loveliness heightened tenfold, is worse than useless.

Violet had suffered agonies during the entire evening from that struggle which now seemed so familiar, so old, between her troublesome heart and her relentless will, and the poor tired heart had cried out bitterly against the cruelty of its tyrant.

Her box had been crowded; never perhaps in the whole course of those ten years had men in every look and word rendered her power over them so evident. And among the troop of admirers Aylmer came, and Violet said to herself: "I could make the dream of those brief weeks a reality; I could make him love me."

"Make!" oh, that word! it brought back a realization of what would inevitably happen if she stooped to such baseness. These graces which were so potent must fade, oh, so soon! and then? No; let her at least preserve her feminine dignity. And Mary, Mary! Ah, there stood his destiny; this pure, gentle-eyed maiden, with the promise of beauty in her face. An honest woman might have the right to sacrifice herself, but she must not allow the man she loved to throw away his future; nay, must prove that she was a woman, not a fiend, by preventing her factitious charms from casting a single shadow across the happiness of this girl who had a whole life before her—a whole life—while she, Violet, was at the end of hers, since at the end of her youth.

On reaching home she had hurried to Mary's room, to strengthen her resolve by the sight of that sweet countenance—the sound of that loving voice—for a score of devils seemed trying to rouse her hatred against the child who had unwittingly helped to render her humiliation complete.

Mary stood at the other end of the chamber and watched her, wondering why all precious gifts should have been lavished upon this one woman; then in her turn felt hopelessly wicked because she could for an instant grudge aught to this radiant creature, whose noble qualities of mind and heart exceeded even her beauty.

She suddenly recollected the open letter. Ah, if she

had left it where it lay, allowed Violet to see it, to question, discover the truth, how different might have been the result of later events! But it was not to be.

"Have your belongings got the thousandth part of a fraction out of place, Miss Prim?" Violet asked, as she turned away from the mirror.

"I'll burn them all if they don't keep in order!" cried Mary, burying the note under a mausoleum of heavy books.

"It is time for me to go," sighed Violet; "the people must have begun to arrive. I wish they would not be foolish enough to accept one's foolish invitations. I want to stop here. It is a comfort to have a glimpse of such an image of peace—Hypatia in early girlhood; Lady Jane Grey at her studies; whatever grave sweet heroine you like best. You see I can manage compliments as well as yourself. Any way, you are a darling, and I love you."

"I am nothing of the sort!" exclaimed Mary. "I'm a nasty discontented silly thing—but oh, do love me all the same!"

"Useless, I suppose, to beg you to go down stairs?"

"I was about to ask you if I might."

"Ask me if you might! Don't be an exasperating mouse! Haven't I exhausted my powers of rhetoric, time and again, in trying to persuade you not to stay shut up here? I would not, of course, urge you to go out; but it is nonsense to hide yourself when we have guests. People will begin to think I keep you a prisoner from jealousy of your pretty face."

"Oh, that is highly probable!"

"Anything monstrous is always probable in this ridiculous old town. But come into the *salon* to-night, just for once."

"My dress——"

"Won't answer, my little recluse. Put on that white gown you scolded me for sending home the other day. Quick! no need to call Clarice; I'll help you. If I leave you to reflect, you'll not follow. I know your tricks and ways, you artful pigeon, you!"

"But you will be late——"

"Suppose I am? The women won't notice my absence, and the men will be the more pleased to see me because they have been kept waiting."

"Miss Bronson would scold you well for instilling such sentiments into my youthful mind," cried Mary.

"Heavens, yes! she would declare that my conscience had become ossified, my heart petrified, my better feelings acidulated, my modesty carbonized, and my soul—oh, that she gave up long ago, and could not find a new anathema to heap upon it! But hurry, hurry—we are wasting precious time!"

In a few minutes Mary had exchanged her somber black attire for a gossamer robe of some Indian fabric, cunningly wrought with wreaths of white flowers; here and there a scarlet poppy, emblem of mourning, interspersed among the leaves.

"I want a ribbon for your hair; oh, here is one. We'll leave it down your back. What a mass of waves! Oh, you pretty creature, just look at yourself. Would you recognize Miss Mouse?" cried Violet.

All girls who will one day be beautiful have instants when a forecast of womanhood's perfection brightens them immaturely. Such a moment had come to Mary; she was positively lovely. Laurence Aylmer would see her. Violet remembered that—remembered it with a spasm of pain which did not hinder her feeling glad. Yes, glad! He would be more thoroughly convinced than ever, now, whither his heart and his happiness really pointed; no further possibility of doubt; no added hesitations to help her own silly heart to plead against the truth.

"Come," she said, in a feverish haste which Mary was too excited to notice; "come!"

"May I talk? may I be gay? You won't think it wrong?" the girl demanded, her cheeks like roses, her eyes sparkling with an unaccustomed brilliancy.

Violet stopped short, pushed her back, and stared at her.

"Good heavens, the child looks like me!" she fairly groaned; then laughed aloud. "Envy, my dear. I was afraid of your making me seem old."

"Old!" repeated Mary, and echoed her cousin's laugh in a tremulous way, with an expression in her face which made Violet think:

"She has been jealous. That was what ailed her. Oh, my poor child, don't be afraid! I'll not put my shadow between you and the light—between him and the future."

Then aloud :

"Don't you let my dangerous foreigners get possession of you. I'd as soon permit some black insect to touch one of my white rosebuds. I shall tell Mr. Aylmer to take charge of you."

And the hand she held quivered. Mary was thinking that all the promise of her girlhood could not give her what Violet had in her prime—the positive certainty of being loved.

"I wish Warner was here. He should make a sketch of you," continued Violet, her vagrant fancy calling up the young man's countenance as she had that morning seen it—worn and weary with pain.

The opportunity Mary wanted.

"Oh, didn't you know ?" she cried. "He has gone to Greece—set off so suddenly he had no time for farewell visits. He sent me two such lovely sketches as a good-by present !"

And Violet thought :

"Sent his broken heart, and she could not even find a spare corner to hide the fragments !"

"It is too bad he has gone ; but I suppose he has work to do," continued Mary.

"Work enough !" said Violet. "Well, come along. *Les absents ont toujours tort*—he must share the ordinary fate."

And now they were at the salon-doors, and Eliza Bronson hurried forward, saying :

"There is no order in this house—none ! Violet, crowds—troops of people are here, and what excuse could I make for you ? Why, Mary Danvers, I thought you were in bed ! Oh, very well ! You both know what you mean, I suppose. For my own part, I do not in the least."

And she stood aside with a resigned air to let them pass, suddenly remembering that in her desire to overwhelm the pair she had terribly exaggerated the number of guests ; but, after all, that was the fault, too, of those misguided creatures !

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CHRISTENED CIRCE.

AT least a score of guests were gathered in the salons when Violet and her cousin entered—quite a throng, it seemed to Mary, and so few persons known to her that she began to feel a little shy and almost wish she had remained in her own room, until the recollection of what reason she had for the first time to fear solitude brought back her courage.

Engrossed as the hostess was from the moment of her appearance, she did not forget to introduce several agreeable people to her charge, and established her under the wing of an elderly lady, certain that if confided to Miss Bronson's chaperonage, the spinster in her present mood would, with the best possible intentions, torment the girl nearly to death in a very brief space of time.

Madame Magnoletti came in, leaning on Laurence Aylmer's arm. That gentleman paid his respects to Violet, stood for a few instants among the little group which surrounded her, then hurried away to where Mary sat. Violet watched him go, and told herself it was well. The pretty child would have her happiness. This seeking her the instant his duty to his hostess permitted, showed very clearly his state of mind. At the same moment the Duchess da Rimini was announced, but Violet failed to observe that Aylmer hastened towards her cousin like a man in search of some haven of refuge as Giulia appeared, resplendent in a costume of amber satin and black, which set off her dark beauty to the greatest advantage.

"My dearest Violet," she said, as Miss Cameron advanced to meet her, "nobody except you could have persuaded me out to-night; but I could not refuse your entreaties."

And Violet was in her own house—could neither resent the familiarity nor refute the possibility of having entreated Giulia da Rimini to grace her rooms! She had to endure the enthusiastic greetings, the utterance of her Christian name (hearing which for the first time from those lips made her feel she would hate the sound of it henceforth), the

pretense of an intimacy which had never existed ; for Giulia was too astute to lose this opportunity of assuring all beholders that she and the courted heiress were as affectionately frank in their mutual attachment as two sisters could have been.

"O Mercury, god of craft !" Lady Harcourt whispered in Nina Magnoletti's ear. "Giulia is tremendous ! We have never appreciated that woman ; she is more than a match for us all."

"Don't insult the sex by giving her the title !" returned Nina. "Some Frenchman said the wife Cain found in the land of Nod was a wild animal with a woman's face. My dear, Giulia is her lineal descendant."

"Or the original article, who has escaped the Deluge, and has lived down to our days," said her ladyship. "But we need not be severe upon her ; it is amusing to watch her maneuvers, since, as you said the other day, she cannot interfere with any of us."

Could she not ? Nina's own boast struck her like an evil omen. And there was Carlo now, greeting the creature in his indolent, graceful fashion, and Giulia holding him fast, while she kept her place beside Miss Cameron, and continued those amical demonstrations which caused their recipient's blood to boil.

There had been signs this season in the social atmosphere which warned the duchess (keen as other savage creatures to scent danger) that her position was less secure than of old. She could no longer venture, in spite of her audacity, to despise the verdict of a person so important as Miss Cameron ; and Violet should give her the support she needed. She should, even if it were necessary to come to some open bargain, tell the American that Carlo and Nina should suffer if she did not consent. Still the duchess hoped to avoid this extreme measure, which, though it were to prove a temporary triumph, would be a burning of her vessels that Violet might turn to her disadvantage later, for Giulia's acuteness prevented her committing the blunder ordinary humanity makes, of underrating an enemy's abilities. Too wise to push her victory beyond safe limits, the signora moved away before Miss Cameron's powers of endurance were entirely exhausted, but that they had been tried to the furthest point Nina's knowledge of her friend enabled her to see, well as that lady disguised her emotions.

"I know what you are thinking," she whispered, going up to Violet and making a pretense of adjusting the ornaments in her hair. "Oh, don't lose patience; you are behaving like an angel."

"I confess that if I could have the satisfaction of boxing Carlo's ears it would be a great relief," returned Miss Cameron, unable to resist laughing, exasperated as she was.

"You will have a little respite," said Nina; "he has to go to Perugia for a couple of days. I am going with him —we start in the morning. His agent is dead, and he must attend to matters on the estate."

"Perhaps you can find some means of restoring his reason when you get him to yourself for awhile," rejoined Violet.

"I—I hope so; I am not sure. Oh, I think I have a little secret," Nina whispered. "Don't ask me any questions yet."

Violet was clasping one of her bracelets, and did not notice the vivid blush which accompanied the words.

"If you have," said she, "I really think you might have tried its efficacy instead of forcing me to endure that woman's unparalleled insolence to-night. Oh, Nina, I cannot do it again!"

"I couldn't—I'm not certain—I——"

Violet did look at her now as she uttered these broken ejaculations.

"What ails you?" she asked. "You told me to-day you were humbled, and here you look as blooming and happy as if neither cards nor Giulia da Rimini even existed."

"I'll tell you when we come back, if there is anything to tell. Oh, Violet, I should be the happiest woman alive!"

Miss Cameron gazed at her in wonder.

"Whatever can you mean?" she began, but Nina interrupted her.

"Hush! here comes Carlo. Oh, if everything else fails, you might turn his head if you would only take the trouble," she said, beginning to laugh, just to hide the pleasurable agitation that reference to her new, blissful mystery had occasioned.

"What a charming proposal!" returned Violet.

"I don't care; he couldn't resist if you really tried.

Oh, I do not exaggerate; that woman means to have revenge. Carlo has told me everything at last—he has lost fearfully since they got up that club. You will not desert me?"

"Of course I will not. Why, Nina, there is nothing I would not do for your sake; surely you know it!"

"Of course I do, bless you! Only—only—don't be hard on Carlo: he is so good—indeed he is."

"I can forgive him a great deal while you say that, Nina; but indeed this growing insanity for gaming must be stopped."

"Yes; we must find some means! Ah, Giulia has captured him again; she'll carry him off to the card-table."

"But they both know that high play will not be tolerated in my house: I have so often openly declared that the person who tried it would not be invited a second time."

"Oh, it is so easy to arrange that; each hundred francs in reality stands for thousands. Do watch him to-night! It seems to me that if we can only tide over these next few weeks we can save him. I have a dread of something terrible; it has haunted me for days. What a fool I am to get excited! Only call him away from her—do! Oh, tease him, coax him, flirt with him—anything, but don't let him suspect I have told you of his losses."

Miss Cameron made a little sign with her fan to Carlo; he took advantage of some person's addressing the duchess to escape.

"He would as soon think of flirting with his sister," continued Violet.

"Well, he would and he wouldn't. He admires you so immensely, that you could turn his head if you chose."

"Nina, we should both regret it if we were to employ any unworthy means, even for the end we have in view."

"As if any other would answer with men!" groaned the marchesa. "Oh, if he should lose all that legacy, we must go and stop—heaven knows where—perhaps in Russia! I looked to that money to get us out of all difficulties. I did not think he would be mad enough to risk it. It was to have been invested weeks ago."

"What are you two plotting?" asked Carlo, as he sauntered up to them.

"Nina has just been telling me you propose eloping with her," said Violet. "I think it very shabby of you."

"It is rather *infra dig.* to run off with one's own wife," returned he, smiling at that lady. "But, upon my word, the small fairy looks so pretty to-night, I may think myself an enviable fellow."

Nina's perfect serenity under the avowal of his losses had roused his gratitude, and disposed him to be admiring and tender; and she was so bewitching with the bright flush still on her cheeks, and the half-startled expression still in her eyes, that he inwardly vowed no man ever possessed a treasure of equal worth.

"I cannot ruin my reputation by talking in public to my legal tyrant, even if he does soothe my vanity by such very complimentary fibs!" cried Nina, and went laughing away.

"She really is adorable," said Carlo, looking after her.

"If only she belonged to somebody else! But be good enough not to irritate me by praising another woman—even her. I am in an exacting mood, and can allow nothing to interfere with your entire devotion to me," said Violet, playfully.

"Ah, you want to make use of me for some purpose! Well, I am always at your service—only you might tell me the motive of such sudden amiability."

"You rudest of creatures! Is this my reward for showing that your fascinations move me?"

"I am a huge goose, no doubt; but not a big enough one to believe that. Who is the man you want to punish?"

"Oh, you infidel!"

"Tell me, and I'll help in any way: make love to you, if you like."

"Thanks, you are too good."

"Well, appear to do so, to any extent—only confess."

"I confess nothing; but you are my captive for this evening."

"The most willing one woman ever found," said he.

But this style of badinage with a married man—the husband of her friend—this slight show of following Nina's counsels—was too distasteful to Violet; she could not continue it. Nothing but unpleasantness could come from any disturbing of the brotherly and sisterly terms on which they had always been, by any approach to coquetry

on her part, even though Carlo perfectly understood that it was a pretense.

"There is no reason why I should not tell you my real motive," she said more gravely. "I do not like gaming in my house. I know, if you refuse to play, the others will refrain too, in spite of the Duchess da Rimini, who is never happy without cards in her hand. Nina told me only a few days ago you had been very wise this winter, so you will not mind leaving baccarat alone this evening to gratify me."

"Of course I will," Carlo replied, laughing consciously —a little ashamed to recollect what proofs of wisdom he had given, but relieved from a momentary fear that Nina had betrayed his folly to their friend. "By the way, it is the first time this winter I have met the fascinating duchess here."

"Oh, we never did more than exchange civilities at rare intervals," Violet replied carelessly, afraid that he might suspect something in regard to her reason for inviting the woman. "I do not like her, and she returns the compliment with interest."

"She adores you, she says."

"It is kind of her even to say it. Adore her and save me the trouble if you will, only don't let her make my rooms a gaming salon, please."

"Oh, she is better employed," said Carlo. "I notice she rather avoids cards before Aylmer—he has a prejudice against women's gambling."

The marchese was sorry as soon as he had uttered the heedless speech; although irritated with Laurence for his apparent intimacy with the duchess, he felt most anxious to keep Miss Cameron from sharing his suspicions, and upbraided his own stupidity for speaking.

Violet followed the direction of his glance, and saw Aylmer standing beside Giulia da Rimini. She was talking eagerly, and he listening with every appearance of interest. The words in the duchess's note flashed across Violet's mind, and the displeasure, the sensation of doubt in regard to him which they had caused her, came back with redoubled force as she noted his deferential attitude.

She changed the conversation, and Carlo followed her lead, yet he felt certain that she was annoyed by the very

apparent state of matters, and now he reviled Aylmer's stupidity more heavily than he had done his own.

But gallant as Aylmer's behavior appeared to lookers-on, it proved far from satisfactory to the duchess. She had come hither exulting in the hopes which his words and conduct had roused, and to her astonishment he showed no disposition to follow up the advantage offered by her concession of the morning. This return to his old obduracy roused her to wrath so hot that she comprehended it would not be difficult for him to change her love to virulent hatred, although, paradoxical as it sounds, the consciousness only deepened the spell he had unwittingly cast over her fancy. She saw how difficult he found it to confine his attention to the recital of some fresh wrongs she had begun pouring into his ear; saw how his eyes involuntarily wandered towards Violet Cameron, eloquent with a tenderness which shallow observers might deem the effect of her own presence. But the duchess was not to be deceived, and she set her teeth hard together behind the smile which softened her lips, mentally vowing in some way to bring matters to a crisis before the evening ended.

"What a convenience friendship is!" she exclaimed—a little vent for her anger she must have. "Oh, you need not try to look inquiringly; you know what I mean! *La belle* Cameron may be intimate with Carlo to any extent—only another form of showing her affection for Nina!"

The duchess had never before spoken a slighting word against Violet in Aylmer's hearing. He was furious at her suggestion, yet in a mood to be troubled: only this very day some vague hint of the rumors so artfully spread by Giulia and the Greek had reached his ears. Though he would not have insulted Miss Cameron by admitting it to his own thoughts, his loathing for this woman by his side gave him, when in her society, harsh opinions of her whole sex. Could Violet stoop even to the most distant appearance of a flirtation with a married man?

He stopped short in the question—shocked with himself—so angered against the duchess that he could not resist saying:

"I beg your pardon. I know you are jesting; but they are both old friends. One never can tell what harm an idle speech like that might do."

The man lived who dared to read a lesson to her—Giu-

lia! Her fingers positively quivered with eagerness to smite him full in the mouth with the fan they held. She could not speak for an instant; he stood silent, unable to regret his words. She had tormented him so much of late that he wished she might take sufficient offense at his audacity to end their acquaintance on the spot.

But the duchess restrained her rage, put up her fan to hide any tell-tale revelations in her face, and said:

"Thanks for reproving me! Ah, you are a real friend!"

"Pray do not suppose I could be guilty of the impertinence," returned he, forced into offering excuses by the way she received his speech.

"It was a favor—intentional or not," she said. "It is not like me to say such things. I am nervous, irritable to-night. Ah, I suffer—try to pity instead of blaming me."

"Certainly I should not take that liberty," he exclaimed.

"It is a privilege of friendship," she replied, in her softest tones, "and you promised to be my friend. You do not regret that promise—you do not mean to recall it?"

What could he answer except to give such polite assurance as his unwilling lips were able to frame?

"Oh, I know you did not," she continued. "You are too good and kind to leave me utterly alone in the dark. How should I have lived during these past weeks but for your sympathy? My whole heart goes out in gratitude—oh, believe that; tell me you believe it!"

He felt the situation as absurd as it was unpleasant; but he could not escape—could only try to turn the matter off with a jesting compliment.

"Gratitude for so little; oh, duchess, what a huge word to apply!"

"Do not laugh," she said, "do not seek to stifle your real feelings or mine under an attempt at persiflage. I cannot bear it to-night; I am too excited, too suffering."

Their real feelings! great heavens, what did she mean? Nothing, of course; merely an exaggerated Southern figure of speech.

"This room is oppressive, I can't breathe," she added. "Take me out in search of a little air. Let me have a moment to recover myself; talking of these fresh troubles has unnerved me."

Nothing remained for him but to offer his arm, and lead her away. Lady Harcourt and her great ally Sabakine

watched them go, as they had been for some moments watching their *tête-à-tête.*

When the pair disappeared, the Russian said: "The spell works—works bravely. Surely you cannot deny it any longer."

"*Mon cher*, I gave up denying anything when I ceased believing anything—ages ago," her ladyship replied.

"It is so great a satisfaction to find myself right," he said, laughing out of the recklessness which was so strong an element in his character, that the most solemn or the most tragic events of human life struck him from their ludicrous aspect, even when matters which really affected his feelings. "I am as proud of having christened her Circe as if my choice of the title had bestowed her sorceress's gifts upon her."

"Oh, they might be very slight, and still serve to turn the men of this generation into swine. Giulia must work harder and stranger transformations than that to prove her right to the name," retorted Lady Harcourt, more bitterly than she often spoke; or, to be correct, with an earnestness which she seldom put into her calmly-cynical remarks upon humanity.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

IN THE SORCERESS'S TOILS.

THE duchess showed no inclination to cease her wanderings; they passed through several salons, and reached the great ball-room, which was not thrown open to-night. Here Aylmer had to obey the motion of her hand upon his arm; they traversed the corridor, and entered a suite of rooms scarcely likely to be used on the occasion of so small a party, though lights were burning therein.

In the second of these chambers the duchess sat down upon a sofa, and motioned Aylmer to place himself beside her.

"Now make me your explanation," she said, abruptly.

"My explanation?" he repeated.

"Yes; I had no time to ask for it this morning. Admit that I was very good-natured to grant your request without your giving any real reason for one so extraordinary."

"Did I give none?" he asked, wondering what possible motive he could assign, since of course he could not tell the facts.

"Those were not reasons," she replied. "You declared in the most rebellious fashion that you would not come if Signor Dimetri did; so I sacrificed the unfortunate fellow, who is dying to present his homage to the fascinating heiress. Come, was it jealousy where she was concerned which made you so determined I should not bring him?"

He must say something; he could not appear an ass; but oh, how he hated the woman at this juncture, and anathematized his own soft-heartedness for ever having felt a moment's sympathy with her troubles!

"You are well aware that no man is likely to remember any other woman when in your society," he said.

"Am I to believe that?" she asked, in a low voice, in which a sudden tremulousness became perceptible.

There are positions which absolutely force a man to talk nonsense, else get up and run away—a virtuous proceeding which, it must be confessed, even the authority of patriarchal example does not render easy, so Aylmer now could do no less than murmur:

"Can you doubt it?"

For once, too, his manner, which women found so charming, proved a downright misfortune. He really could not, with his pale face and mournful eyes, bend towards a lady to ask her if she would have a cup of tea, without unconsciously looking so that any bystander, not hearing his words, would have sworn he must be whispering a speech that went at least to the very verge of a declaration.

So now, though in his secret soul wishing the duchess in Jericho, his "Can you doubt it?" was accompanied by a glance which, while he feared it would express his boredom, seemed only sad; and the duchess, believing that the time of her triumph had arrived, was not the woman to let it pass unemployed from any foolish feminine delicacy or shame.

"Yes," she said, "I do believe it; at least, you see, I am not offended."

"Would to God you were!" thought Aylmer.

The duchess held out her hand. There was nothing possible on his part except to take it—to bow over the fingers, too—all the while with a secret shiver of dread, a premonition that an ill-natured destiny would lead Violet Cameron within sight; and I fear that he cursed the Italian in his heart as his moustache brushed her hand, instead of his lips fastening on its whiteness with the feverish energy which would have been (at least, according to the lady's ideas) befitting the occasion.

But he did not speak, therefore she must.

"Aylmer," she said, "I thought we were friends."

"I trust we are," he replied.

"You would be more frank if you considered me your friend," she said. "You are reserved—mysterious!"

"Mysterious—I?"

A sudden perception of the absurd side of the predicament made him long to laugh again.

"Yes! You have some weight on your mind—some trouble. I have seen it for weeks."

Her witch's eyes had penetrated his secret: she was going to speak of Violet. He could not bear that—he really could not. His reticence and delicacy went far beyond that of ordinary men, who seem ready to pour out their love-stories to the first comer with a frankness as incompatible with deep feeling as it is with manly dignity. Except in the case of the professor, to whom he was bound by ties which rendered their relations like those of father and son rather than of common friendship, Aylmer had never bestowed a word of confidence upon the people with whom he was most intimate—Nina and Carlo; and they displaying a tact which one could wish less rare, had refrained from any allusion to his secret, whether gravely or with the misplaced jests one's allies are apt to indulge under such circumstances.

"You will not speak—you will not trust me?" she asked, bending on him the softest luster of her eyes, to whose very open revelations the hurry of his thoughts left him still utterly blind.

He could not let her go further; in his present irritated

mood it would have seemed a positive profanation to allow her to take that dear name upon her lips.

"There are things of which a man cannot speak," he said quickly, his voice tremulous with emotion.

The duchess caught the tremor, but naturally misinterpreted its cause.

He had forgotten wisdom and Miss Cameron's wealth: brain and fancy were so dizzied by her spells that he could no longer restrain his feelings; it needed now but a word of encouragement from her, and he would pour out the tale of his passion and its struggles.

"There is nothing he need keep back from a real friend," she answered, "if that friend be a woman. Have I not said? Even though it be a secret which she knows ought not to reach her ears, her sympathy—her—her tenderness will prevent displeasure. Tell me your trouble, Aylmer."

She positively would not comprehend even so plain a refusal as that which he had given. Then he would tell her outright that he had a secret, but it was too precious to name; she could only do him one favor—never to allude to it again.

"Silent?" she continued. "Ah, but when a knight wears a lady's favor he must obey her behests! See—this compels obedience."

She took a flower from her hair, and, with quivering fingers, adjusted it in the button-hole of his coat; her other hand dropped upon his; her head bent so low that to any person standing near it would have seemed actually resting on his shoulder.

On the instant, before Aylmer had even leisure to take in the new thought which the woman's utter *abandon* roused in his mind, there was a sound at the end of the room behind a mass of plants, like the flutter of a covey of birds suddenly disturbed, and Mary Danvers appeared, white with an excitement made up of indignation and horror.

"I couldn't help seeing you!" she cried, her French sounding broken and difficult in her passion. "I didn't hear what you said—oh, I am sure I didn't want to watch! I—I——"

She broke down, gasping for breath, regarding Aylmer with eyes of fiery contempt. The duchess drew back the

hand that lay on his, lifted her head, and hid her face behind her handkerchief in pretended trouble, but there was triumph in her heart: at least she had robbed her hated rival! If he had never told his love to Violet he could not explain this scene; if he had, she would not believe his attempts at exculpation. For the moment, in the savage joy of the thought, she forgot the risk of exposure she ran in case this girl and Miss Cameron did not guard her secret between them.

Aylmer sat quite still. He comprehended what meaning this scene must have, even to those inexperienced eyes. He was positively stunned by the swift-rushing consciousness that every hope was over. The duchess had wrecked his life.

And Mary had got her breath back, and was exclaiming:

"It's—it's no good for me to make excuses. I didn't stop there to listen. I—I thought every moment you would leave the room; and—and, I didn't want you to know—to know——"

"Go away!" the duchess interrupted in a low tone to Aylmer. "Let me speak to this foolish child. Go!"

He rose mechanically; but Mary cried out, transfixing him with another glance of wrath and horror, which came like a fresh warning of his doom:

"I understand Italian enough to know what she said! You needn't go, Mr. Aylmer, I am going myself. Oh, I wish I had been anywhere else! and I think—oh, I think you ought to be ashamed to look me in the face," she added, unconsciously bursting into English.

She turned, and was running away. The duchess started up, and caught her arm.

"Let me alone!" cried Mary, so nearly out of her senses now that she did not know what she said or did; as she spoke, struggling wildly to free herself, but the duchess's lithe fingers clasped her wrist like a ring of iron.

"Go, Aylmer, go!" she commanded.

A dramatic scene was more than the wretched man could endure. He hurried out of the room, regardless of Mary's frantic appeal:

"Make her let me loose, Mr. Aylmer! Oh, I won't be held like this—I won't, I say!"

"Child, child!" the duchess exclaimed in French, assuming a tragic mien of mingled pain and fright,

"stand still! Listen! Do you want to be my ruin? Oh, let me explain!"

"I don't want any explanations," cried Mary. "It's none of my business, I suppose—only—only—oh, let me go!"

The duchess held her fast, put her disengaged hand before her face and pretended to weep.

"Have pity," she moaned, "have pity! I was wrong to let him move me as he did. I—I— Ah, I wish I might trust you, dear child! you look so good—so kind!"

"I don't wish to be trusted," retorted Mary, bluntly. "I only want to get away."

"I have suffered so," the duchess hurried on. "Ah, you are too young yet to know how women can suffer! Do not be hard on me! Child, child! somewhere in your own life a recollection of this hour may rise to haunt you like a ghost, if you do not show me mercy. Remember, 'Such measure as ye mete shall be meted to you again.'"

To hear this woman dare to quote Scripture at this moment sounded a horrible blasphemy in Mary's ears. It destroyed her last shred of self-possession. She cried out in horror, making an insane effort to stop both ears at once with the fingers that were free.

"You will not be hard on me—I know you will not," pursued the duchess, in artistically broken tones. "Think what my life has been! Married to a man I loathe—a man whose fiendish cruelty——"

"I've nothing to do with your secrets," broke in Mary.

"I admit that Mr. Aylmer was wrong," pursued the duchess, regardless alike of the girl's disclaimers and her efforts to escape. "It was only a moment of madness. His heart overpowered his reason."

"Oh, if you *don't* let me go!"

"I cannot—oh, my God, girl, I cannot!" the duchess moaned, with an accent as full of despair as a shriek could have been, though careful to keep her voice scarcely above a whisper. "You must hear in order to pity—in order to comprehend that I merit sympathy more than blame! Oh, he is wrong to love me, but human hearts are stronger than human reason. You will learn that one day!"

Each word increased Mary's disgust, forced her to harsher judgment; for indeed, when she rushed out from her post of unwilling observation, her interpretation of the

scene was not founded upon such evil grounds as Giulia supposed. It centered almost wholly upon the fact that Aylmer was disloyal to Violet. But every syllable which fell from the woman's lips opened her listener's mind more and more to the signification which would have been patent to an older person at a glance.

"I should think a married woman would be ashamed to talk in that way!" exclaimed Mary, as the duchess paused to execute a sob of the most pathetic description. "At least I am ashamed of you. Let me go!"

"So young, yet so hard," sighed the signora.

"A flint couldn't be harder!" Mary almost shouted, and shocked the duchess, not by her assertions as to her hardness, but her allowing nature to subdue conventionality far enough to speak so loud, even when half-crazed by emotion. "No, it couldn't!" added Mary, with fiercer energy, because she felt herself on the verge of tears.

"So, so!" returned the duchess, in an altered tone—and she looked full in the girl's face with an undisguised sneer. "After all, what does the matter amount to? It speaks ill for your rearing—for your habits of mind, mademoiselle, that you are so ready to think evil!"

"Oh, I can endure you better when you talk like that than when you sob—I am sure it is more your real self speaks!" retorted Mary, anger mastering her desire to weep.

The duchess perceived that even in her distress the girl was too resolute to be brow-beaten; she hastily took refuge in a compromise between indignation and terror.

"Do you mean to betray me?" she exclaimed. "Do you mean to tell your garbled story to the world?"

"I never garble anything," said Mary. "What have I to do with telling the facts except to my cousin——"

"Oh, I am lost!" broke in the duchess. "Violet Cameron hates me—she will never rest till everything is known."

Mary ceased her struggles.

"Violet Cameron would not take so much trouble on your account," said she. "My cousin will no more betray your secrets than I shall!"

"You promise—you swear?"

"I'll promise nothing," answered Mary, and finding her quiet had caused the duchess's grasp to relax, she snatched

her wrist loose and was starting off, but the woman caught her gown, moaning :

"Promise, promise !"

"If you don't let me go I'll scream till I bring all the people in—I will !" cried Mary, lifting her voice till Giulia, perceiving she meant to carry out her threat, let her hand drop to her side.

Mary fled with the rapidity of a lapwing, the signora sending after her one long, low, harrowing groan, which might have touched the girl except for the momentary throwing off her disguise in which the lady had indulged. Mary's keen wits told her in that instant she had had a glimpse of the real woman—the sentiment, the despair, did not go below the surface.

Hurrying through one of the smaller salons, Mary met Laurence Aylmer ; he had stopped there automatically—stood dull and stupefied under his misery. The girl uttered a little cry, half of terror, half of disgust, and would have continued her flight, but he moved directly in front of her.

He hardly knew what he meant to say, since he could offer no explanation without putting the blame where it belonged, and the fact that the culprit was a woman forbade this ; yet a wild idea crossed his mind of trying by some means to soften Mary's indignation, and prevent her telling Miss Cameron what she had seen.

"Miss Danvers," he said, "just one moment !"

"Let me pass !" cried she. "How dare you stop me ! I wonder even your assurance can go so far !"

"If you would take time to reflect—if I might at least ask you to be silent——"

"And now you want promises," Mary broke in. "I have none to make you, any more than I had to her."

"Only listen an instant," he said in a slow, choked voice. "You might grant me so much. Remember, it is not long since you promised that we should be friends."

But his very attempts to subdue his agitation seemed acting to Mary—a copying of the duchess's *role*—an additional insult.

"I'll not hear a word !" she said. "I should think, if you have any decency, you would leave this house, and never attempt to set foot in it again. Shame on you—shame !"

Expostulations, entreaties, were useless ; he stepped

aside in silence. Mary rushed on with a fresh sob. Laurence Aylmer heard the rustle of female garments near the door; before he looked, he knew who stood there. The duchess had ruined his life, and his tongue must remain tied, because she was a woman.

"Mary, Mary!" Miss Cameron called, stopping short in astonishment and alarm; then as the girl darted forward, saw Giulia da Rimini peer in from the adjoining room, and quickly vanish.

Believing that she understood everything—her vague doubts of the past hours made certainties by the unmistakable significance of this scene—Violet turned with swift wrath upon Laurence Aylmer, standing aloof, pale and dumb.

His eyes met her fiery glance unfalteringly; the face of a marble statue could not have been more immovable than his.

Mary flung herself into her cousin's arms; her strength was exhausted; she burst into a passion of tears, sobbing, "Tell him to go. I—I am acting like a fool, but I can't help it. Oh, I shall die if he stays a moment longer; make him go!"

"May I ask you to leave me with my cousin?" Violet said, in a cold, ceremonious tone, which only deepened the effect of her anger. At the instant she again caught sight of the duchess peering in at the door, and Violet's wrath rose to such a height that she could not keep back the words which sprang to her lips—they uttered themselves before she knew she was speaking: "I will bid you good-night, Mr. Aylmer."

He gave one start, then stood motionless; his eyes on her face still; a wondering incredulity in his countenance, such as a man might wear when receiving an insult so deadly that at first his mind refused to accept its reality.

Violet comprehended what she had done—absolutely turned him out of her house; but a half-born, frightened penitence died beneath the convulsive clasp of Mary's arms—the agony of Mary's voice as it moaned in her ear: "Make him go—make him go!"

Laurence Aylmer straightened himself like a person struggling against the effect of a powerful physical blow; he stepped forward; his eyes burned into Violet's with a fire which surpassed that in hers; as he passed her, he

bowed his head, saying, "Good-night, Miss Cameron," and was gone. He walked through the corridor as if treading the deck of a ship in a storm; the floor seemed to heave beneath his feet, the walls to waver to and fro; a roar like the surge of billows deafened his ears; an icy perspiration, like the spray from wintry waves, bedewed his forehead. He reached the antechamber, a servant handed him his coat and hat.

"Please give me your arm down stairs; I can scarcely stand," said the duchess's voice, close behind him.

He looked at her, and a dreadful wrath shook his soul; a mad impulse to throttle her, as any wild animal with cruel instincts ought to be slain, to prevent its working further harm.

"Laurence, Laurence, give me your arm!" she repeated, grasping it as she spoke, as if unable to support herself.

At the instant, several men came out together from the salons, joined them, talked gayly, and, to Aylmer's relief, hovered about the duchess as they went down stairs, even stood beside the carriage after she had entered it.

But she found an opportunity to whisper: "To-morrow, Laurence, to-morrow!"

He stepped back without the slightest sign of having caught her words.

CHAPTER XXXV.

EACH BLUNDERS.

VIOLET had no time to spend in consoling Mary, or to reflect upon her dismissal of Aylmer—she must return to her guests.

"You had better go to your room, dear," she said kindly; "I will come to you as soon as these tiresome people are gone."

"Oh, I wish I had stayed there!" said Mary. "I know you must be vexed with me! If I hadn't been tired and upset I should not have behaved so like an idiot—but—but——"

A sob checked her utterance in spite of all her efforts to restrain her emotion.

"Vexed with you?" said Violet, kissing her. "Don't think me capable of it! Now go, dear; somebody might come in."

Mary hurried away, and Violet went back to her duties.

Miss Bronson met her with a mien of sorrowful severity.

"Some of your visitors are gone without being able to bid you adieu," she said. "This may be in keeping with continental customs, but I own such negligence on your part surprises me beyond expression."

"Perhaps the rest will kindly follow suit very soon," Violet answered, trying to laugh. "Who has been considerate enough to set the example?"

"Mr. Aylmer has just given Madame da Rimini his arm down stairs—several gentlemen——"

Violet did not pause to hear the close of the sentence; Miss Bronson looked after her with saintly, pitying indignation, and shivered in dread under a prophetic conviction that unless she could persuade her friend to exchange that heathen land for the refuge of Protestant climes, the misguided creature's soul would be lost beyond a peradventure.

It seemed an almost endless period to Violet before she regained her liberty, but the latest loiterers departed at length—she said good-night to Eliza, and hastened towards her own rooms. Suddenly the impatience with which she had awaited the breaking up of the party was succeeded by a regret that the people had not remained and so deferred a little longer the explanation she must listen to from Mary. The scene she had interrupted left little chance of doubt that the suspicions in regard to Aylmer and the duchess for which she had so bitterly reproached herself as a gross injustice to him, were to be verified, and worse than all the rest was the thought of Mary's trouble. The poor girl had not only to endure the ache of her wounded heart, but the way in which her dream had been dispelled must make the pain still harder to bear.

After Clarice had ended her ministrations and disappeared, Violet sat still, hoping that Mary might have fallen asleep, which would afford a respite until the morrow, and give them both an opportunity to reach at least an appearance of composure. But as she was thinking this

the door of the adjoining room opened, and her cousin called, in an appealing tone :

"Do come, Violet—do !"

Miss Cameron obeyed the summons without an instant's hesitation, rendered desperate rather than courageous by a sudden intolerable pain away down in her soul—a pain separate from her sympathy for Mary, her hot indignation towards Aylmer—so purely personal that it roused her to rage and scorn against herself.

"I thought perhaps you were asleep, and so would not disturb you," she said, as she entered the chamber.

"Oh, I feel as if I should never sleep again," cried Mary, pushing her hair back from her forehead with quick, impatient hands. She had turned the lamp low, but the shadows falling on her face only deepened the traces left by excitement and tears. "Sit down, Violet, please. I've been thinking—thinking. I almost made up my mind not to tell you—but I ought—it would be wicked not to."

"Tell me," said Violet, seating herself with her back to the light.

"I feel—oh, I don't know to express it !" exclaimed Mary. "I feel *soiled*—to discover that such wickedness really exists ! I have read in books, of course—I am not a baby—but actually to know that a married woman can let a man make love to her——"

She broke off with a shudder ; Violet shuddered too, with the same overpowering sense of abasement which any pure woman must endure when brought face to face with sins whose existence has hitherto belonged to the record of personally unproven facts.

"And—and," continued Mary, "when one has respected the man—thought him so good—oh, it is dreadful !"

Dreadful indeed ! True, the discovery that the hero to whom her young heart had gone out was unworthy the gift, might help the sooner to bring a cure of her sufferings, but at first it would make the sharpest sting in their pangs. Mary's words showed, however, that she did not mean to behave like a weak, ordinary girl ; she had no mind to pour out love-sick confessions and appeals for sympathy. Violet felt an increased respect for a nature which, even in this earliest, supreme agitation, retained pride and dignity enough to hold fast to its secrets, and reflected that on her

own part great care must be taken to avoid any sign of suspecting that other emotions than outraged modesty and grief at discovering the worthlessness of a valued friend had a share in Mary's agitation.

"I am sorry—oh, so sorry!" she faltered, forced to speak lest her silence should appear strange, but able as yet to find no fitter speech than these commonplace ejaculations of regret.

"Oh, I am sorry too; but that doesn't mend matters—it only makes them worse!" cried Mary, almost sharply. "If one didn't care, it would be easy enough to put it all by; just let them both alone for always, and never think of them."

"And is that what must be done in any case?" Violet asked, with a certain maidenly hesitation which Mary appreciated.

"Oh, I know what your voice means!" she said. "You feel that you ought to hear, and you can't bear to listen. Indeed, indeed, I wouldn't tell if I could help it. If it was only what I saw, I'd try to think I was coarse—suspicious—wicked—only, only how could I? Oh, Violet, she had her head on his shoulder!"

Mary put her hand before her eyes for a moment; Violet turned sick and cold, and sat trembling from head to foot.

"After that," she said presently, "there could be no possibility of your accusing yourself of unjust suspicions."

The firm ring of her voice gave Mary courage; she had told the whole story in one abrupt speech, after trying gradually to break her news; she had told, and Violet had been able to listen with perfect composure. But the blow had gone home, Mary could not doubt; her shrewd perception had weeks before taught her that this man was more to her beautiful cousin than any other of his sex, and in her quiet, reasoning fashion she had followed the line of Violet's scruples and arguments against the folly of affection (of course never dreaming she herself counted in Miss Cameron's determined abnegation) with a perspicuity which many women of double her age and experience would not have shown.

The strongest tide of sympathy which Mary's eminently just but somewhat circumscribed mind and heart had ever felt, rushed over her in this moment. She was the most undemonstrative of creatures—partly from shyness,

partly from an idea that protestations were silly and girlish—but the impulse which made her pause when she had half risen with outstretched arms, eager to enfold and shelter Violet, did not spring from either motive. She recollected that such behavior might cause Violet the humiliation of dreading that any human being could suppose she required comfort ; and Mary knew the proud woman would bear her pain unflinchingly if only she might believe it unsuspected by others. So the girl dropped back into her seat, and Violet thought she had been upon the point of breaking down completely, but had checked herself in season to restrain a confession which, however much its utterance might relieve her for the moment, would always afterwards remain the bitterest memory of this bitter woe.

Mary's emotions of horror and sympathetic grief suddenly changed to a burst of anger against the woman through whose assistance such pain had come to Violet.

"She ought to be burned alive ! Oh, at least you will never let her enter your house again !"

"I cannot exclude her and receive him," Miss Cameron replied slowly, wondering a little if the girl, like so many of her sex, was ready to seek excuses for the man by throwing the onus of blame upon the sharer of his evil conduct. "I know, Mary, that many people—even good people—act as if there was one law for men and another for women, but I cannot do this—I will not !"

"No !" cried Mary. "Oh, I hope I shall never see his face again ! And he was a coward, too—he skulked off ! And to think of her daring to hold me fast and begging for sympathy ! She actually did ! She was so wretched, and his tenderness had gone straight to her heart, and—and—oh, I tell you, Violet, I feel soiled, degraded !"

And Mary burst into tears again.

"No wonder, dear child, no wonder !"

"When I got away from her and her dreadful confessions, he met me ! I suppose he had had time to think what to say. He was less reckless than she, and wanted me to believe it all meant nothing—but she had made that impossible," Mary hurried on, eager to finish the revolting details, though urged by a sense of duty to render everything clear. "He said—oh, never mind his words—I don't remember them !"

Her abrupt pause, her horrified face, were proofs to

Violet that the man had chosen that moment of all others to declare his love, believing in his arrogant vanity that he could by such avowal effectually blind the girl.

"What he said is of no consequence," Violet answered.

"No, no! But he wanted me to keep it from you—then I flamed out—then you came—that is all!"

"That is all!" Violet involuntarily repeated, with such bitter significance in her tone that Mary's sobs increased.

"Oh, if I had not seen it!" she exclaimed. "Not that he might have gone on deceiving us, but if somebody else had gone there instead of me!"

"My dear, perhaps we should have been inclined to doubt—we cannot now. It is hard to have one's eyes opened, but in such a case the sooner the better—you feel this?"

"Yes, if you do—I mean, of course!" returned Mary tacking on the last clause with great energy while she dried her eyes.

"Then there is no more to be said just now," observed Violet.

"Oh, it is no good to talk and talk—nothing ever comes of it!" cried Mary, comprehending that Violet longed to be alone. "I am sure we ought both to be in bed—it is fearfully late."

Violet thought the girl afraid of prolonging the conversation lest she should yet betray herself, and rose at once. The two cousins kissed each other quietly and separated. Mary crept to her pillow, and lay there with head and heart in a whirl of misery which made all past trouble look small as childish griefs. It seemed actually as if an earthquake had desolated the world, leaving utter chaos in its wake. Warner gone; Aylmer treacherous; Violet wretched—the whole combination of horrors so complete, so unexpected, it appeared like a dreadful dream—all except the pain—that was real enough; but it spoke volumes for Mary's unselfishness that even in these first hours, sympathy for her cousin was so strong that it claimed an equal place with the personal grief which had smitten her so recently.

No tumult disturbed Violet's mind; no feverish agitation quickened her pulses; a deathly coldness enveloped her soul, amid which her thoughts fluttered like birds gone astray into the depths of an Arctic winter, and freezing slowly amid its awful chill.

It would have been very different to relinquish Aylmer to Mary, believing such renunciation for their mutual happiness, from losing him through the conviction of his worthlessness. In the former case she would at least have kept him a place in memory as her ideal of manly perfection; but now—now! And worst of all, her weak heart lifted its voice and moaned bitterly over its fallen idol. It had been comparatively easy to stifle its rebellious complaints while she deemed him worthy of Mary—considered it plainly a duty, for his sake, to cure that passing fancy towards herself, and foster, by every means in her power, his affection for this good, pure girl—but it was different now. Her ideal did not exist. The man to whom she had given its likeness ranked among the false and vicious of his sex! And she had loved him!—yes, loved him still! She could not deny this truth; and so stood abased in her own sight.

Violet did not fall asleep until after daylight; but though her dull, heavy slumber lasted for hours, it brought no repose: she woke oppressed by the same sense of intense physical and mental fatigue which had been her last conscious sensation.

She rang for Clarice, who speedily appeared with the tea-tray, and the information that the clock had struck eleven. Violet saw a note lying on her plate. Her first thought was that Aylmer had ventured to write with some audacious hope of redeeming himself, even yet, in her estimation. But Clarice said:

"Miss Mary bade me bring that letter to mademoiselle; she could not wait any longer."

"Has she gone out?" Violet asked, marveling at the girl's energy.

"Two hours ago; in such haste to get to her work! Truly, truly, I never saw so active a demoiselle; she is always busy," said Clarice, shaking her head, perhaps to express doubt whether such great industry was exactly decorous in a young lady.

Violet motioned the woman to leave her, and hastily opened the billet.

"I shall not speak of what has happened unless you do," Mary wrote. "I am sorry I let myself betray so much excitement; but I know I did right in telling you. Please forgive me, and be sure I love you dearly, and am very

grateful to you, though I have so little ability to express what I feel, that if you were not the best and most generous woman in the world, you would very often doubt both my affection and my gratitude."

Brief as the note was, its composition cost Mary a great deal of trouble. She wanted to make Violet feel at ease in her society; certain of not being irritated and hurt by open speech or galling allusions; yet to leave her undisturbed by any suspicion of the motive which caused such reticence.

Violet read, and thought: "The brave girl; she goes the right way to work to cure herself, and she will do it. Ah, she is young! They can live past everything, those young people."

The proud woman shed a few tears in her solitude, but they were an additional pang instead of a relief; it was disgraceful for her to sit and cry like some miss in her teens. She felt harder towards Laurence Aylmer with each burning drop that fell from her eyes. This should be the end; she would receive neither him nor the woman again; if necessary, in order to avoid comments and questions, she would leave Florence very soon. After all, perhaps this might be her best course. A change would benefit Mary; she could pursue her art studies in Rome or Paris, and might find life easier when set free from the associations which haunt a spot where one has known bitter grief, becoming daily and hourly reminders which help sorrow to retain its tyrannical sway.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HER LAST EFFORT.

WHEN Laurence Aylmer hurried away from Miss Cameron's house, the uppermost sensation in the chaotic whirl of his mind was a fierce indignation against her; a wondering horror mingled therewith, if it could be really true that so dire an insult had been heaped upon him. Absolutely turned

out of doors; dismissed with cold sternness, like an impertinent lackey! It was so incredible, so unlike any slight or injury which a gentleman could imagine ever befalling him, that it appeared fairly a delusion. Aylmer almost expected to wake suddenly, find himself in his own rooms, and discover that the events of the evening existed only in his troubled fancy.

He wandered about the streets for hours, not returning to his lodgings until chill gleams of light warned him that day was at hand. He slept for awhile, and dreamed of sitting beside Violet, and telling the story of his love. Not the faintest shadow separated their souls —not a recollection of the past month's unrest, or the night's bitter trouble, disturbed the course of that beatific vision. Of course, when the mocking dream faded, its contrast to the truth rendered reality more odious; but his first excitement had died, his anger was gone. No wonder Miss Cameron had dealt him that verbal blow. She must have caught Mary Danvers's passionate outbreak—must have seen the duchess peer in at the door. He had, even amid the confusion of his faculties, likened her to some devil incarnate, pausing to exult over its evil work.

The ruin was irremediable. Mary would describe the whole scene to her cousin; the incoherent appeal he had attempted must only appear an additional proof of his guilt. Yes, the duchess had ruined his every hope. To tell the truth would only cover him with deeper infamy; Miss Cameron's verdict, and every other person's, would be that a man capable of intimating a woman had made love to him, was so mean, that even though he could prove his assertion, he deserved a greater measure of contempt than if he bore in silence the most sweeping circumstantial evidence against himself.

The day passed; he could not bear to go out—to meet people—to be fretted by idle talk. He began several letters to Miss Cameron, and tore them up in turn; each seemed more insane than its predecessor in its vague demands for her merciful judgment upon an occurrence concerning which he had no explanation to offer. Sometimes he passionately upbraided her in his thoughts, and anathematized his own folly for supposing that she could ever be brought to care for him. Had she felt the slightest tenderness she must have been less hasty and absolute in her con-

demnation. Then his mood would change, and he admitted that she was right to behave as she had; no pure-minded woman could have acted otherwise. Had he been her betrothed husband, her affection might well have stopped short of the possibility of faith in his blamelessness.

Late in the afternoon he rode out; made a pretense of dining at a little osteria miles away from Florence, and returned late in the evening, having had at least the comfort of escaping the sight of a familiar face.

A note lay on his writing-table. It was from the Signora da Rimini. He felt inclined to tear the billet up unread; but that would be silly; so he opened it, sickened by its perfume, angry at the illegibility of the chirography, which rendered much close attention necessary in order to decipher the page.

"Have you forgotten that I told you I should expect to see you to-day, dear friend? I have waited in vain, and your failure to keep your promise seems unkind—although I will not wrong you by so harsh a word, even in my thoughts, since you must know how great need I have of your advice.

"Heaven only can imagine the tales that idiotic girl may invent! I trust to your friendship, whatever happens, since it was through my friendship for *you* that the trouble arose. I need not say that I forgive you: this note is of itself a proof."

Go near her! Not he! Let her say and do what she pleased: she was powerless to harm him further. She had ruined his life; let her rest content with her work, and leave him alone!

The next day, a commission which he had received from the professor took him into the street where the odious woman lived. He was hurrying past the gloomy old palace without even a glance, but, as he reached the entrance, a carriage drove up. He raised his eyes, and saw the duchess. She leaned forward, and said: "I am back just in time to receive your visit. Thanks for coming. I thought I should find you on my return."

She gave him one of her sweetest smiles, but a quick fancy crossed his mind that the great black eyes held a certain menace in their slumberous depths. He stood for a second irresolute whether he should go in or walk on, re-

gardless of her speech ; saw her look back ; took a sudden resolution and followed the landau into the courtyard. So much the better if she were angry, and showed it by bitter or upbraiding words ; in that case her conduct might afford him the relief of frank, honest avowals.

By the time he traversed the quadrangle the footman had opened the carriage-door ; the duchess was waiting. He could do no less than offer his arm for her to descend, and she kept her hand upon it as they mounted the stairs, talking pleasantly the while about indifferent matters, but with an audible tremor in her voice, intended to impress upon him the fact that her idle remarks were only for the benefit of the servant who followed with her wraps.

They reached her favorite salon ; the instant the door closed behind the domestic, the duchess flung herself into a seat, and put both hands before her face, exclaiming :

"Oh, Aylmer, Aylmer, how could you leave me all this dreary time without a word of consolation or advice!"

She had made up her mind what to do ; if any encouragement on her part would lead him into an exhibition of tenderness, such encouragement should not be wanting ; whatever his real feelings, she would take him away from Violet Cameron if it were possible.

"Without a word," she repeated. "Oh, it was cruel, cruel!"

Each syllable she uttered only added to his exasperation ; the very grace of her attitude only made him think of a snake, and increased his loathing.

"I could not suppose that my coming was of the slightest importance, or my advice either, if I had any to offer upon any subject," he answered, in a voice elaborately courteous, but hard as iron.

The duchess peeped at him through her fingers ; the face she saw was hard as the voice which had warned her that so far her burst of emotion produced no visible effect.

"Both were of vital consequence," she said. "Think of the position in which I am placed ; my reputation at the mercy of that girl and her cousin ; a garbled story likely to reach my husband's ears—and I am afraid of him ; yes, afraid!"

She still kept her hands raised, and sobbed and choked in the most artistic manner ; but Laurence would have

appeared deaf and utterly indifferent, had it not been for the obstinate expression which showed in every feature.

"Aylmer, Aylmer!" she exclaimed, piteously, as he remained silent under her appeals.

"I can assure you of one thing," he said, slowly, "you have no need to disquiet yourself where those ladies are concerned."

She let her hands drop; her eyes flashed as she asked:

"They talked with you; what did they say? I insist upon knowing; I have the right——"

"Oh, it is very easy to tell," he interrupted, with a bitter little laugh. "Miss Cameron asked me to leave her house; our interview began and ended with that request."

"*Dio mio!*" groaned the duchess, and hid her face again, but this time to conceal the exultation she knew it must betray. "Was that all? what did you do?"

"I found it quite enough," he replied; "I obeyed, of course! I think I met you and gave you my arm down stairs."

The duchess had found leisure to school her countenance anew. She rose suddenly, hesitated for a second, then hurried towards him, holding out both hands.

"Don't mind," she said, her voice trembling with an eagerness which was unfeigned. "If my friendship can be of the slightest comfort, be sure you have it! Oh, I was selfish; see, I don't care! No matter what comes, I am your friend; no matter at what cost, I am ready to prove it."

Aylmer did not offer to take the extended hands; he looked full at her, and said with a cold smile:

"Madame da Rimini does me too much honor. Our brief acquaintance could afford me no claim to accept a sacrifice of any sort from her goodness."

"It would be none!" she exclaimed, laying her clasped hands on his shoulder. "Oh, Aylmer, don't you understand?"

He did not stir—not a line of his face changed.

"I ought perhaps to be able to thank you for your offered friendship," he said, in the same chill, monotonous tone, "but I am a dull man; at present I can only think of the one thing which is of any moment in my life."

"What do you mean?" she asked, removing her hands

from his shoulder and retreating a few steps, the better to look at him with her angry eyes.

"I mean that I have lost the last hope of winning the one woman I ever loved, or ever shall love," he answered.

Certainly, when he entered the room he had no thought of making the confession, but her words and manner goaded him into such wrath that it was a relief to fling the avowal at her, for the meekest man alive could not have helped admitting to himself that the lady meant him to be tender and adoring.

"You love Violet Cameron?" the duchess fairly gasped.

"With all my heart and soul!" he replied steadily.

The woman turned livid through her rouge; her eyes blazed; her hands involuntarily clenched themselves, as she hissed out:

"You tell me that to my face—you dare!"

"I thought such frankness the best proof I could give of how thoroughly I appreciate the offer of friendship you just made," returned he; and now a faint tone of mockery was audible in his slow, passionless speech.

The duchess retreated still farther; one hand caught at the ruff which encircled her throat—her eyes were positively terrible as they glanced towards a dagger lying upon the table by her side—and the fingers of the other hand worked convulsively, as if ready to seize it. Her Sicilian blood was roused to its hottest fury; the animal instinct to kill—destroy—seized her with its fullest might.

In another instant she dropped into a chair, and pointed to the door.

"Go out!" she said, in a voice so choked that, except for the gesture, her words would have been unintelligible. "Go this instant!"

"Good-morning, madame," Aylmer said, as calmly as if ending the most commonplace interview.

He bowed as he spoke, and walked away. Before he had taken a dozen steps he heard her call imperiously:

"Stop!"

He turned slowly; the duchess moved forward till she stood within a few paces of him; her face was actually distorted with rage, and her eyes glared like a panther's.

"You have insulted me," she said, in a breathless way, "In my country we avenge insults, do you know?"

"In what manner have I erred, madame?" he asked, composedly.

"So you wanted to marry Violet Cameron!" she hurried on. "Well, you shall never do it—remember that!"

"I had just informed you, madame, that any such hope had been killed in my heart," he answered.

"Your heart!" she repeated. "You have none. You wanted her money—everybody knows that—don't try to deceive me!"

Aylmer started as if she had struck him; checked the words which sprang to his lips; bowed again, and walked on. The duchess rushed past, and stood between him and the door.

"Wait till I have finished!" she ordered; "even a barbarian from America should have knowledge enough of civilized usages to show as much decency as that!"

"I am listening, madame."

It was well the duchess had not the dagger within reach at this instant; she certainly would have stabbed him before getting her senses back sufficiently to reflect. She shut her eyes for a little; her head reeled, and she saw every object through a sort of red haze, from the force with which the blood mounted to her brain.

"You lie when you say you have given up hope!" she cried. "You think to make your peace by sacrificing me! You will say that I made love to you; why, you are such a dolt that perhaps you thought I meant to—thought I cared for you! Come, I'll tell you the truth—that shall be the beginning of my revenge!"

Her breath failed her again—she was obliged to pause. He stood waiting till she should be pleased to continue.

"I hated Violet Cameron," she went on presently. "I knew it would fret her to see any man devoted to me—not that she cared for you, or ever would have done. And I had another reason for wanting your attentions; because, if I seemed to tolerate them, it would tease another man—a man I love. Do you hear?"

"Shall I leave you now, madame?" asked Aylmer.

"And if she had been fool enough to love you," pursued the duchess, "you should not have her! If there were a hope of your making your peace, I'd ruin it, if I had to swear that you had been my lover—yes, I would! Let me tell you the persor she loves as much as she is capable of lov-

ing—Carlo Magnoletti; and he wanted her to marry you because that would make matters easier for him—he told me so——"

Before she could end her sentence, Aylmer was gone. He hurried out of the house. A fiacre was passiug as he reached the street; he hailed it, jumped in, and bade the coachman drive to the Porta Romana, and then take the Straka dei Colli—the pictureesque road which winds up the hill of San Miniato, on whose summit frowns the old convent that Michel Angelo once fortified. Near by stands the cypress-guarded little church which the great sculptor called his "country maid;" and just below stretches the piazza bearing his name, with a bronze statue of the David lifting his inspired front to the blue sky.

Aylmer dismissed the carriage at the top of the ascent, and wandered about; saw the sun set over the beautiful city nestled in the valley beneath; saw the twilight shadows gather over Monte Morello and the long range of purple hills; watched the moon rise and glorify every object with its radiance; and felt, as we all do in moments of keen suffering, that every sight and sound of beauty and peace became an additional pang.

At last he descended the zigzag paths and flights of steps which lead directly down to the Porta San Niccolo, crossed the Ponte alle Grazie (or rather, the modern structure which the mania for improving and destroying has given us in place of the old bridge, with its storied dwellings where sanctified nuns dwelt in other days), and returned to his lodgings.

The porter told him that his German friend had called during his absence—"the fierce signore with the beard." So the professor had come back sooner than he intended; but Aylmer could not feel sorry at having missed him. The keen-eyed savant would quickly have discovered that something was amiss, and been troubled by Laurence's inability to explain, though no doubt he would have taken great pains to hide his disquietude under an affectation of extreme crustiness.

Aylmer found several letters lying on his table, and he opened them one after another, more to occupy his thoughts for a few minutes than because he cared to learn their contents.

Among them was an epistle from America, bringing

news of the death of the relative after whom he inherited the large fortune which had been hers for life—a distant cousin of his father's whom he had seen but twice, so that no regret for her loss could mingle with his reflections.

There was also unlooked-for tidings in regard to those speculations he had been drawn into by George Danvers. One of the mines had resumed work, a new drift having been discovered, so valuable that stockholders might soon expect to receive dividends; and the prosperous state of affairs was considered so certain by competent judges, that the shares had already gone up enough in the market to render their sale a profitable affair to any person who wished to be rid of his portion.

And the good tidings came, as it so often does to mortals, at the very moment when it seemed an added mockery on the part of fate, after snatching away the only gift which could bring happiness.

Aylmer flung the letters upon the table, and buried his face in his hands. For the time even his courage, his power of endurance, had deserted him; his burden seemed harder than he could bear.

And the duchess?

A few seconds after Aylmer's departure, the door of an inner salon opened. Madame da Rimini looked up, and saw Giorgio Dimetri standing upon the threshold, intently regarding her, with a smile upon his handsome, evil face.

"What are you doing there?" she called.

"The servant informed me that you had a visitor. Like a well-bred creature I waited in the next room till he took his departure," replied the Greek. "Of course I was bound to wait, because you had appointed this time for another little trial, to be certain that you are perfect in the art of dealing cards at baccarat."

The duchess looked at him fixedly.

"You could hear every word," she said. "That door does not latch. How long were you in the other room?"

"Only a few minutes," he answered. "I heard you tell the American your reasons for wanting his attentions."

"Dimetri!" cried the duchess, "you say you love me—you say you are jealous of that man—yet you let him live—you, the best swordsman in Italy—you, that are one of the few men living who know the secret of Lachasse's thrust!"

She spoke very quietly—an awful smile on her lips.

"I love you," he replied ; and though his voice was as low as hers, it held a ring of repressed passion, accentuated by the eager light in his eyes. "He lives because you told me that if I quarreled with him I should never see your face again. I have been very patient, and I am not a patient man——"

"You have the proof that I told you the truth when I said I was playing a game where he was concerned," she interrupted.

"I have proof, at least, that you hate him now—and after?"

"Ah," exclaimed the duchess, with an indescribable emphasis of ferocity, "the rest is in your hands! Go away—I am in no mood for baccarat--go!"

"And when shall I come back?"

"When you have done your work," she answered.

For a moment they stood gazing full into each other's eyes with glances of terrible significance. Then the duchess waved her hand in dismissal, and he went silently out of the room.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

STILL HER WORK.

MARY DANVERS stood in one of the library-windows, looking out through the twilight across the shadowy garden. During these two days no allusion had been made by Violet or herself to that evening whose events gave so much occupation to the minds of both. Mary knew that her cousin suffered terribly, little sign as she gave. Violet marveled at the courage with which the girl supported the blow that had befallen her, but, fearful of inflicting fresh wounds, abstained from sympathy either in look or word ; and Mary, animated by similar feelings, was equally careful in her turn.

Could Violet have known the truth in regard to her young relative, she might have admired her courage even

more, for Mary was bearing that heaviest of human burdens—suspense ; bearing it too with the consciousness that these were only the birth-throes of a pain which might last an indefinite time—months—years—oh, perhaps never to be stilled in this world.

But her dread of exaggeration—her method of rigidly inspecting all matters to be certain what was real, what fancy (a habit not growing out of any lack of imagination, only the result of guarding against the encroachments of that faculty upon the judgment), stood her in good stead now, and prevented the unmeasured grief which most persons of her age would have indulged.

Gilbert Warner had gone away loving her—common-sense assured her there was every evidence of this, and therefore she could not think their separation lasting, dolorous as the circumstances rendered it.

Impossible for her to make any sign so long as he remained silent—the bare chance that her first fears might have held some truth must hinder her—but she could wait ! And there were things in her favor ; he would communicate with his friends, learn at length that his suspicions of her caring for another were unfounded, and the knowledge might of itself open his eyes.

The proofs which brought her so great comfort grew in number and strength as she reviewed the course of their acquaintance. Why, the very keeping the portrait he had painted for Violet was enough to show that he had not been indifferent. And he had kept it, she knew—it was to follow him on his journey—Miss Vaughton had told her so the morning after his departure. When Mary reached the studio, she found the venerable lady in a state of great wonderment and regret, declaring over and over, according to the habit of women of her type when surprised by unexpected tidings, that anybody might have knocked her down with a feather on the reception of the news.

"Why, you had been gone but a little while when he came bustling in—so hurried he had hardly time to say good-by—and no wonder, with his trunks to pack yet, and forty other things to do. I'm sure he must have forgotten half he wanted to take—not an under-shirt with him, I'll warrant—young men are so careless !"

Mary, busy with her own reflections, lost the thread of

the old lady's discourse, and the benefit of a harrowing tale of what had once befallen a youthful relative of Miss Vaughton's, from forgetfulness of those useful garments.

When she could listen again, the prophetess was chanting slowly:

"But, as he said, if he had got here too late he could go to the house and see you. Yes, indeed; of course you were surprised—I don't need to be told that," she added, as defiantly as if Mary had cast a slight upon her by protestations of astonishment. "And one box to be sent after him—James offered to attend to it—the pictures couldn't be packed in time. Oh, I was not to mention about that——"

"Mention what?" Mary asked, as the old lady paused and stared in a helpless way.

"Yes, to be sure! Or was it the studio man's trying to cheat I was not to speak of?" pursued Miss Vaughton. "Really, with so much put on one's mind all at once, no wonder one gets confused—now is it?"

"Certainly not! But there can be no secret connected with his—Mr. Warner's pictures," said Mary.

"Ah, one never knows what there may be secrets about in a young man's life!" cried Miss Vaughton, with an air of profound wisdom. "Not but what Gilbert is a model —no danger of *his* secrets being wrong—no, no—don't tell me that—*no*body—no*body* need tell me that!"

"So the pictures are to be packed and sent after him," continued Mary, regardless of this energetic outburst, in her desire to learn if the thought which sprang up in her mind was well founded.

"Oh yes—now if that was the secret, or whether it was about Miss Lane—oh no, it was Leonard Gowan who was engaged to her! Dear me, so many young men and their affairs—and always the same—though Gilbert's worry was over his pictures too; but worry as he might, they couldn't be packed in time—and he put yours in because he said he wanted to work on it more. Oh, I wasn't to mention it; but no matter, it is your cousin he wants to surprise with it, and you are not her, though, Mary, as good a girl as ever lived, I know; and what is beauty—skin deep—not to say you are plain and may equal her yet, though James says she really is a marvel, and enough to drive a sculptor or painter mad; though, as I told him, good gracious, that's not the

sort of thing to say of any lady, married or not; and, Mary, it really is odd, with all her admirers——"

But luckily her old tyrant of a servant summoned her at the instant, and left Mary free to reflect on that one clause in her rambling account so pregnant with meaning.

News she had this day received from America helped to render hopefulness easier. If matters went on as they had begun, her father's debts could be paid, and his memory freed from any aspersion. Ah! in the presence of such probability she would be utterly wicked to sit down and moan over her own private woes; then, too, the fact that a change so unexpected, so cheering, could come in regard to things which had seemed irrevocably settled, was a good omen for Fate's kindness in other particulars, however dark the present might look.

Mary's meditations were interrupted by her cousin's entrance.

"Have we kept you waiting for dinner until you are famished?" Violet asked, as she approached the window.

"Oh no, I had pleasant company," Mary answered, holding up her book; then her troublesome conscience smote her, as it always did at the slightest approach to prevarication; but Miss Bronson appeared at the instant and made herself involuntarily the aid of conscience, as it was natural so virtuous a woman always should.

"My dear, I hope you were not trying to read by this dim light," she said; "there is nothing so bad for the eyes."

"No; I shut my book some time since," returned Mary.

"I was glad you did not go with us," continued Miss Cameron; "the tramontana is blowing, and it would have been bad for your throat."

"I think you ought to tie something round your neck, Mary," added Miss Bronson.

"It is so warm here!" pleaded she.

"And one is so hideous muffled up; I'd rather have a sore throat, I am sure," cried Miss Cameron.

"What a sentiment! what an example to set Mary if she were to believe you in earnest!" ejaculated Eliza.

But her expostulations were checked by a servant's announcing Professor Schmidt.

"He wanted to make sure you were visible," called the savant, "but I would not wait; I came on purpose to get

my dinner, and I must have it! How do you all do? You look like the three Fates in this gloom," he continued, for the professor had a horror of sitting in the twilight.

"I think you might find a more poetical comparison to greet us with, after your cruel absence," said Violet, hurrying forward to meet him with outstretched hands. "I am delighted to see you back! We did not venture to hope for that pleasure before to-morrow; and how nice of you to think of coming to dine with us."

"I always like to gratify my worthy friend Adolf Schmidt when I can," replied the professor. "Besides, when I got home I found the tailor had sent me a new dress-coat, and I wanted you all to admire it."

Even Miss Bronson laughed heartily at the recollections aroused by his words, and the old savant released Violet's hands from his sturdy grasp, and passed on to seize the spinster's with the energy which he put into every action.

"My dear Miss Bronson, I am glad to find that you have survived my absence! I have been greatly troubled—was on the point of turning back before I reached Bologna. I had such terrible fears that my departure really might be more than your sensitive nature could endure; but you seem to have borne it better than I dared to hope."

"I consoled myself by looking forward to your return," replied the spinster, with an appreciation she seldom vouchsafed his humorously-teasing speeches.

"And how is my American sweetbriar?" continued the prefessor, addressing Mary. "It is so dark, I can't see any of your faces. Of all unaccountable fancies, this sitting in Cimmerian blackness is the most outrageous."

"Luckily, here comes Antonio to announce dinner," said Violet; "so give me your arm, professor, and you shall be taken in search of a little light."

They were scarcely seated at table before the savant asked:

"And how is Laurence Aylmer? I drove to his rooms on my way from the station, but the wretched fellow was out."

It chanced that Violet and Mary were glancing towards each other as the professor spoke, and both averted their eyes with a sort of guilty consciousness.

"Quite well, I fancy," Miss Cameron said indifferently.

"Why, Violet," exclaimed Miss Bronson, "he has not

been here for two days—not since your reception—and he went away so suddenly that I thought it odd!"

"Two days—what an immense period!" said Violet, laughing. "You see, professor, that Miss Bronson is as accurate as ever."

"Yes, yes, I see," returned the professor, his quick ear struck by an undefinable something in Violet's tone, carelessly as she spoke; but she began asking questions about his little excursion to Verona, and he followed the lead she gave the conversation.

In a few minutes, however, he again made mention of Aylmer. He noticed that it was Miss Bronson who replied; and this time Mary began talking of something else as soon as the spinster gave her an opportunity.

Before the dinner had half ended, the professor felt confident that something had happened to offend Miss Cameron, and that Mary Danvers shared in the secret; but what his beloved Laurence could have done to annoy her was more than he could conceive, and he could not at present relieve his mind by any inquiries.

The professor's spectacled eyes could see very clearly if he had special motives therefor; and when Violet avoided hearing some mention he made of Madame da Rimini, he could have sworn that the woman was at the bottom of whatever disturbance or misconception had arisen. He had many times warned his two favorites, and the Magnoletti also, that if they continued to tolerate the duchess she would work mischief in some fashion, though he had expected Carlo's gambling propensities to cause the trouble rather than any ability on her part to aleniate Miss Cameron and Aylmer.

However, the dinner passed off gayly enough, and Violet seemed in her usual spirits. While they were taking coffee, she said:

"Professor, you must do me a favor. I am going to Lady Harcourt's. You have never been, in spite of all her invitations. Now, be amiable, and accompany me. There will only be a few people—people you know, too."

"Ugh!" said the professor, with a grimace.

"You must!" persisted Violet. "Miss Bronson has another engagement, and you cannot possibly leave a timid, tender young creature like myself to enter a salon

chaperonless and unprotected; besides, you want an opportunity to display your new coat."

"That is an irresistible inducement—I'll go," said the professor.

He knew that in all probability Aylmer would be there, and the prospect of a speedy explanation of the mystery he had discovered—if Laurence could give any—was enough to dispose the savant to compliance with Violet's request.

Mary remained with the professor while the other two ladies went to Miss Bronson's room, the spinster at the last moment being undecided between the merits of a couple of head-dresses, and pathetically begging Violet's judgment thereupon.

"So you are working hard, my little girl," said the professor, when they were left alone. "Too hard, I am afraid. You look somewhat tired."

"I? Oh no——"

"None of that!" interrupted the savant, savagely. "I'll send you a dose of the bitterest medicine ever concocted if you attempt to fib."

"I never do, and you know it," said Mary, who was warmly attached to the gruff old man.

"There's something wrong with both of you!" cried the professor. "I ask no questions; I shall find out; you can't deceive me with your little feminine artifices."

"We don't want to," said Mary.

"H'm!" quoth the professor. "Well, you are impossible creatures, you women. Why in the deuce did you send Gilbert Warner away with a sore heart, I should like to know? I saw him at Verona—a pretty state of mind he was in! Not a word would he say—but I knew! Potztausend! The idea of nature arranging matters so that an absurd young insect like you has the power to sting the heart of a big, strong, noble fellow like that!"

Before Mary had time to answer, even had she possessed the power, Antonio entered in search of the coffee-tray, and directly after Miss Cameron and Eliza returned.

"Miss Bronson will drop us at Lady Harcourt's on her way to Mrs. Mainwaring's," said Violet, and destroyed a hope the professor had indulged that he might have an opportunity of asking her a few inquisitorial questions during the drive.

As the carriage rolled out of the court, Laurence Ayl-

mer passed along the street and caught sight of Miss Cameron. He knew where she was going; he had received a note from Lady Harcourt, telling him that if he failed to come to her that night he need never expect forgiveness: promising that, as a reward for good behavior, he should have the happiness of hearing Miss Cameron sing—a favor she sometimes vouchsafed her intimate friends when they were *en petit comité.*

Having no mind to expose himself to unnecessary torture, Aylmer had decided not to go. He dined in his own rooms—or made a pretense of doing so—and until towards ten o'clock remained there alone, the prey of his bitter reflections. His solitude became unsupportable; he dressed hurriedly and left the house with the intention of going to Mrs. Mainwaring's. Why, to reach her residence, he took a route so roundabout as to pass through the piazza where the Amaldi Palace stood, was a question he refrained from asking until the sight of Miss Cameron's carriage suddenly roused him to fierce invectives against his own folly.

He could not get quickly enough away from the spot: he jumped into a cab and drove to the club, forgetting until he reached it that he had started from home meaning more hopelessly to addle his brains by spending an hour at his literary countrywoman's æsthetic conversazione. But it was no matter—the society he should find at the club would answer his purpose just as well. Anything, anybody to take his thoughts away for a little from the persistent meditations of the last two days, was all he wanted.

As he got out of the cab, Alexis Sabakine came down the club-house steps and seized upon him at once.

"Where, in heaven's name, have you been hiding?" he asked. "I have called on you twice—never in—Carlo away at Perugia—Landini ill. I was getting disgusted, and half inclined to cut Florence without delay. But you can't escape now. I promised to look in at Stanhope's rooms: after that will go to La Harcourt's, or anywhere you please."

His *coupé* was waiting, and he fairly dragged Aylmer into it, talking so fast in his satisfaction at having found congenial companionship that Laurence had little to do but listen and reply in monosyllables.

As they entered Stanhope's salon, that gentleman appeared from an inner room, and before he dropped the

curtain which hung over the doorway, the new-comers caught a glimpse of three men seated at a table playing cards.

"Hallo, Sabakine, I thought you'd forgotten your promise!" cried the Englishman, in his loud, ringing voice. "Why, Aylmer, is that you or your ghost? Delighted to see you, old man! Sabakine, you hardened sinner——"

"I have received the papers; don't say I'm not punctual," interrupted the Russian, taking an envelope from his pocket and laying it on the table.

"That's a good fellow!" returned the other. "Just let me run my eye over them, and then I shall be ready to do the civil. You must both stop—we shall be just enough for a rubber, and leave Gherardi and you, Sabakine, to your favorite écarté."

"Who else is in there?" asked the Russian, pointing towards the door of the second room.

"Pandolfini and Dimetri——"

"That fellow!" interrupted Sabakine, in a low tone, with a gesture of disgust. "I wonder why we tolerate him."

"Oh, I dare say he is no worse than the rest of us," replied the easy-going Stanhope; and added in a louder tone: "Aylmer, amuse yourself for a few minutes—there are weeds and bottles—while Sabakine explains these documents. Goodness knows when I may catch him again."

Aylmer went to the farthest end of the salon, to be beyond earshot of their conversation. He was standing near the curtain, partially drawn back so that he could see into the other chamber—be seen perfectly also by the Greek; for, though Dimetri had his back that way, a large mirror hung opposite his chair, and, as Aylmer looked, he saw their two images reflected therein. Dimetri had evidently just finished speaking; his companions held their cards in their hands and stared at him, but his fierce black eyes were fixed on the mirror.

"Pr-r-r, Dimetri, that is rather strong gossip, even for Florence!" exclaimed Gherardi.

"I'll wager what you please it will be more than gossip in less than a month," returned the Greek, looking at Laurence Aylmer's reflection with an insulting smile.

"Come, come!" added Pandolfini. "La belle Americaine is too wise-headed a woman for such nonsense; it's too bad to talk of her in that way."

"You are wonderfully scrupulous!" sneered Dimetri. "I see no reason for being more chary of her reputation than of any other woman's! Since Violet Cameron has a married man for a lover ——"

Before he could finish his sentence, Laurence Aylmer flung the curtain back and dashed into the room. The Greek saw him coming, sprang out of his chair, and confronted him; but Aylmer was too quick. As Dimetri raised his hand, Laurence dealt him a blow full in the face, so sudden, so heavy, that he barely saved himself from falling by seizing hold of the table.

The other men started up with broken exclamations, and rushed between the two. The noise roused the pair in the outer salon, and they hurried in.

Aylmer stood still. The Greek wiped the blood from his mouth with his handkerchief, such triumphant satisfaction in the regard he fastened upon Laurence, that Sabakine, noticing it, decided at once that the insult, whatever it might be, which Aylmer had so promptly punished, had been premeditated, and the results exactly what Dimetri desired.

"Stanhope," the Greek said composedly, "with your permission I'll go into your bedroom and wash my face. Please come with me, Gherardi. I shall expect you to act for me. I suppose you will do me the favor?"

As Gherardi owed the fellow a large sum of money, he could not easily refuse. Indeed, whatever reports might be in circulation against the Greek, his hold on respectability was strong enough to give him a right to demand from any acquaintance the service which the present exigency required.

The two passed out; the others gathered about Aylmer. There was very little to be said. Pandolfini gave a rapid explanation: Sabakine took Aylmer's hand, saying:

"I am your oldest friend here. You will not refuse me a friend's privilege?"

"I thank you," Aylmer answered; then turned towards the host. "I am very sorry any trouble should have happened here, Stanhope. I'll bid you good-night."

"You need not be in the least sorry," returned the other, bluntly. "I hope you broke the rascal's jaw! As for going away, what's the use? Just stop till matters are arranged."

They shook hands; then Sabakine drew Aylmer aside.

"The fellow will not eat his lie," he said. "To do him justice, he is no coward; you must meet him."

"The sooner the better," returned Laurence; "to-morrow, if possible."

Gherardi appeared in the doorway; Sabakine stepped forward, and said with grave courtesy:

"Mr. Aylmer has empowered me to act for him; I am quite at your service, monsieur."

As the door closed behind them, Laurence began speaking of some indifferent matter, and the two gentlemen seconded him, though they were much less calm than he.

The conference in the adjoining room only lasted a short time; Gherardi came back, and Sabakine beckoned Aylmer out.

"It is all settled," he said, "to-morrow morning at sunrise in the Cascine. As I expected, the rascal would not hear of making an apology. Now let us bid these fellows good-night; you will be glad to get away, and so shall I."

Hurried words had been exchanged between the trio, and the result of them was this speech from Stanhope when the two gentlemen returned.

"Aylmer," he said, "we wish to assure you that from neither of us will the cause of this difficulty be known."

"Let me add," said Gherardi, "that before Signor Dimetri went away, it was distinctly understood that I only agreed to act for him on condition that he gave me his word to be equally reticent."

"I owe you all my best thanks," returned Aylmer, made his adieus, and departed, accompanied by the Russian.

"I suppose it won't be long first——" began Pandolfini, but Stanhope checked him.

"Gherardi would not tell, and we do not want to know," he said. "Aylmer is a capital swordsman; I only hope he will kill the fellow."

"H'm!" said Pandolfini, recalling various stories he had heard of the Greek's dueling prowess; every one of the histories credited him with having killed his man.

The Russian and Aylmer drove to the latter's lodgings; and Sabakine went in with him, and remained for half an hour.

"I'd stop longer if you wanted me," he said, "but I

can see you would rather be alone." He was pale and agitated, in spite of his attempt to appear composed. Aylmer had a singular faculty of winning the warm regard of those with whom he came much in contact, and he and the Russian had grown quite intimate. "It is of no use to tell you how sorry I am," continued Sabakine, rapidly; "but it will all end well: not only are you a skillful fencer, but if there is any justice, a cause like yours must be successful."

When Aylmer was left alone he sat down at his writing-table: up to this moment he had literally felt nothing after the spasm of wrath which passed with the blow he had dealt the Greek upon his lying mouth.

Something told him now that for him the end of earthly things was at hand. No man could be less inclined to superstitious fancies, but this presentiment fastened itself upon his soul as firmly as if some supernatural power had taken visible shape and uttered it. Yet the certainty caused him no excitement; he wondered a little at his own dull calmness, as he might have done at that of a stranger. An uncontrollable longing to see Violet Cameron arose in his mind. Who could tell if the whole sweep of eternity would ever bring her within his reach after this night! He must see her; then he needed only to write the letters he desired to leave behind him, and all he had to do would be accomplished. He looked at his watch; it was still early enough to go to Lady Harcourt's. He should find her there; he could not die till he had gazed once more in the face of the woman whom he loved with an affection so deep that he knew even in the life beyond this it must remain the ruling power of his soul.

He paused before the glass, and adjusted his hair and dress; through the wild impatience which fired his veins, came the thought, how strange it seemed that he should never stand there again! He wondered anew at his own inability to care; then recollected that he was losing precious instants; she might be gone before he reached the house. He caught up his hat and outer coat, and rushed down the stairs, startling himself by the audible repetition of her name.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

FOR WHOM HE WAS TO DIE.

THE old professor's appearance with Miss Cameron created quite a sensation among the group seated in Lady Harcourt's salon.

"I am so glad to see you, Violet," cried the hostess. "Ursa Major, as I live! There is nobody who can bore us. I was determined to have a pleasant evening for once in my life. And how nice of you to have persuaded the Great Bear to come! Professor, I am delighted—overpowered—don't know how to express my gratitude!"

"I suppose a new species of beast is always a welcome addition to a menagerie," retorted the professor, and kissed her hand as gallantly as if he had been an old beau.

"This really is too much!" laughed she. "I shall expect a tender declaration presently."

"The megalosaurus subjugated," said the professor.

Violet left them to talk nonsense, and passed on to greet her friends—Nina and Carlo among them.

"We only got back just in time for dinner, else I should have gone to your house," said the former.

"What has happened to you?" asked Violet. "You look as radiant as if you had just returned from a honeymoon trip!"

"I'll tell you presently," whispered Nina, and as soon as she could get her friend to herself for a few minutes, she unfolded her good news. "Carlo has promised to play cards only once more for six months—so he will go to Giulia da Rimini's next evening, but that will be the last time."

"I am so very, very glad!" returned Violet.

"And fancy Giulia's rage when she hears——"

"Madame la Duchesse da Rimini," announced the French major-domo before Nina could finish, and she felt Violet's fingers close over her arm with a pressure which fairly hurt. She looked up in surprise. Miss Cameron had turned very pale, and her eyes were black with excitement. They were standing near enough to hear what the new-

comer said, as the hostess moved forward to greet her, with a surprise in her face which she took no pains to hide.

"My dear Lady Harcourt, I expected to find you alone—had no idea you meant to receive to-night—and I have just had news from Paris that I knew you would be glad to hear," the duchess was saying, her usual slow grace not in the slightest degree disturbed.

"You are certain of always being *la bien venue* in my house," returned her ladyship, "and you shall tell me the news later."

The duchess spoke to the people close by—caught sight of Violet and Nina, and approached them with stately ease.

"My darling Nina, what an unexpected pleasure!" she said, holding out her hand. "Miss Cameron, I am delighted!"

She was about to extend the same greeting she had bestowed upon the marchesa, but, apparently unconscious of her intention, Violet bowed, and said:

"Madame la duchesse!"

She said only that; and though her lips wore a smile, there was an undisguised expression of scorn and menace in her eyes which sent a thrill through the Sicilian's nerves, strong as they were.

At this instant Lady Harcourt hastened up.

"My dear Violet, you promised me a song," she said; "I shall not let you off. I mean to accompany you myself—if you are not grateful you are less than human."

"I am quite at your service," returned Violet.

As they walked away, Lady Harcourt whispered: "It is too bad! I did not think even her assurance was equal to coming here to-night."

"We have no one but ourselves to blame for the manner in which she ventures to treat us all," Violet answered.

"Oh, I am ready to follow suit if anybody will take the initiative," said Lady Harcourt.

"Only wait!" responded Violet, thinking of Carlo's promise to his wife—if he broke it, so much the worse. Even for Nina's sake she would keep no further terms with the duchess. Since the woman had forced herself on Lady Harcourt to-night, Carlo would have his opportunity, then he could find no excuse for going near Giulia.

"I am sorry, because I can't keep her and Carlo from high play, as you manage to do in your house," continued Lady Harcourt, "and I know how it distresses you and Nina."

"This evening, you need not be troubled on her account or mine," said Violet; "let them both alone."

"You will tell me your reason sometime? I am sure you mean mischief, and I am glad! If anybody can prove more than a match for Giulia, it will be you—but take care!"

A knot of men came up; Violet could only respond to the warning by a smile, but it was so bitter that Lady Harcourt fell to wondering what it meant.

"I have done more than my duty," Miss Cameron said, as she finished her second song and was besieged for another. "Lady Harcourt, you must play the harp for us—it was only on that condition I agreed to sing."

"And I am ready to show myself a woman of my word," replied her ladyship, gayly.

The last air Violet sang had been a favorite melody of Laurence Aylmer's. When Nina chose it, her first impulse was to refuse; then she felt indignant to find that anything associated with the man could move her.

After Lady Harcourt had played, two people seated themselves at the piano to perform a duet. Violet left the music-room; a suffocating sensation had oppressed her ever since she ended her song; she wanted a breath of air, a few moments of solitude.

Lady Harcourt inhabited a villa in one of the modern quarters of the town. The ground-floor was occupied by a library, dining-room, a snuggery in which she usually spent her mornings, and attached thereto a large studio, for among her numerous talents and accomplishments she possessed no mean artistic ability.

As Miss Cameron reached the entrance-hall, the outer bell rang—the servant ushered some person in. She hurried on to escape companionship, crossed the library and gained the snuggery beyond, lighted only by candles placed so as to display a new painting to advantage; the rest of the chamber lay in a soft gloom, very grateful to her tired eyes.

She sat down in an arm-chair, forgetting already the purpose which had brought her thither.

The heavy Persian curtains of the door rustled softly

and were flung back. Violet glanced in that direction, and saw Laurence Aylmer.

She had believed that he would not come to-night; of course they must unavoidably meet, but she persuaded herself that a little time would elapse before he gained audacity enough to accept invitations to houses where he ran the risk of encountering her.

As soon as she perceived the intruder, she turned away and appeared absorbed in contemplation of the picture. She heard him cross the room—knew that he was standing beside her—but she did not stir or take the slightest notice.

"Miss Cameron!" he said, after a brief silence. "Miss Cameron!"

She looked round now, regarding him with icy surprise, as she might have done a stranger who ventured to address her under circumstances which rendered the act an impertinence.

"I saw you come in—I followed you," he continued, in a slow, difficult voice.

The surprise in her face deepened, her lips moved—seemed to repeat his words in wonder at his presumption—but emitted no sound.

"An hour ago I did not think anything would induce me to enter your presence," he said, "but I—I——"

He paused, and rested his hand heavily on a table which stood near her chair. He was deathly pale, she could see; his eyes were hollow and ringed by dark circles which made them appear unnaturally large. But the recollection of the man's utter falsity checked Violet's quick impulse of sympathy, and the thought that he hoped still to deceive her increased the anger roused by her own weakness.

"I could not keep away," he went on; "it was stronger than my will—that impulse—so I came."

She would waste neither resentment nor scorn; he deserved nothing but utter indifference, and should receive his lesson.

"Mr. Aylmer," she said, "when we meet in the society of mutual acquaintances I may recognize you in order to avoid remark; under other circumstances we remain strangers. You will, of course, be courteous enough never to force me to repeat this declaration."

"You will have no necessity," he answered, his lips quivering with a troubled smile.

She slightly bowed her head; the movement was not only an acquiescence but a gesture of dismissal, and again her eyes went back to the picture.

After a pause he spoke again:

"Since I promise you that——"

"Promises are uncalled-for between strangers," she interrupted; and now she waved her hand towards the door.

He did not move.

She waited for a few seconds—her hand still extended—but he kept his position. Then she rose without deigning him a second glance.

"Don't go!" he exclaimed.

She walked on—he stepped quickly before her, repeating:

"Don't go!"

"I will not, if your leaving me prevents the necessity," she answered.

"In a few moments. Give me a little time," he said.

Again she attempted to pass; he put out his arm; he was so close that he would have touched her if she had not retreated a step. Such disdainful haughtiness suddenly steeled her face, that a person seeing it for the first time would not have believed the countenance could ever wear a gentle expression.

"Not even the outward courtesy of a conventional gentleman," she said slowly; "ah, well! I need not be surprised."

"You must let me speak," he hurried on, regardless of her contempt. "Yes, I think I am desperate enough to stop you, if you refuse."

Violet returned to her chair and sat down.

"Since to call for assistance would be absurd, I must admit myself a prisoner," she said.

"It is only this! I have not come to ask your pardon—to explain. The friendship which will not stand any and every test is not worth possessing."

A painful constriction in his throat made him pause; Violet sat stone-deaf to his voice, blind to his presence—her eyes fixed on the picture, her features as unchangeable as if they had frozen with that intolerable scorn upon them.

"You are too proud!" he cried, with an indescribable

peevish pathos in his tone. "Take care—God punishes pride! Remember what I say, for we shall never meet again!"

Never again—and he must go into the next world and take with him the recollection of her face as it looked now! Oh, if he could only find means to soften it for an instant—just one!

"Violet! Violet!" he called, in an uncontrollable paroxysm of agony that thrilled her very soul.

"What do you want?" she asked, forced to look at him, forced to speak, in spite of her will.

She could hear her voice tremble, knew that her face had lost its mask, but for a moment she could not resist his sway.

"Ah!" he cried, in a tone of wild exultation, "at least I shall carry this memory with me—at least this! Only a minute more, then you may go—it is forever, forever! Remember always that in thought, word, and deed, I have been true to the deity I set up in my soul—remember! I loved you—I shall love you still—death itself could not alter that!"

Violet uttered a little gasping cry—put out her hands as if a positive physical insult had been offered her—tried to rise, but sank back so sick and faint with anger and disgust that she was powerless.

"You know it," he continued. "However much you loathe me now, you know it—you will remember—remember it more and more!"

"Is the play ended?" she asked, finding voice at length. "Oh, I thank you after all—I did not dream when you stopped me here in that ruffianly fashion that I should have cause—but I thank you. I might have grieved somewhat for the man I had believed you—for the friend I had lost. I might have tried perhaps to make for you the excuses that many women hold good where men are concerned; you have destroyed the possibility—you have shown me you are so vile, there is no room for regret. I thank you."

"I love you," he repeated.

The repetition of the words which seemed so terrible an outrage, roused her to wrath such as she had never felt in her whole life.

"Oh, now I understand everything!" she exclaimed. "And you really fancied me weak enough even yet to be

deceived by your arts? Trust me, sir, you have failed in every way. Do not flatter yourself that the girlish heart you tried, two nights ago, to fill with the story of your affection, hoping thus to close her lips, was touched: my cousin despises you as heartily as a pure creature can a man like you."

"Your cousin!" he echoed.

"Oh, if you needed money so sorely, I'd have given you half my fortune, if you had only invented some reason for wanting it, rather than bear the shame of remembering that I ever called so base a pretender my friend!"

He stood perfectly impassive under her fiery tirade, his eyes, so full of yearning anguish, fastened upon her.

"I never thought of that," he said slowly. "Surely I might have supposed other people would recollect your money; I did not; I wouldn't have believed you could even now. No, no; I had no need of it—less than ever now. I am rich again; but it is all no matter."

"None," she said, "none! Is my imprisonment ended—can I go without risk of new insolence?"

"I said the whole in saying I love you," he answered, moving aside. "God bless you, Violet! remember they were my last words. God bless you—farewell!"

She was gone. He stood still for a few seconds, trying to catch the echo of her tread; then he turned towards the chair in which she had sat—stooped and kissed the carved arms over which her hands had clenched themselves, warm still from that nervous pressure.

"The woman I am going to die for," he said half aloud; "surely I have a right to love her. If she should ever learn the truth and be sorry, I wonder if they would let me come back and tell her not to grieve—I wonder."

Once more he kissed the polished wood, and left the room in his turn. The servants had deserted the entrance-hall. He found his hat and coat, opened the door, and passed out into the night.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

ONCE TOO OFTEN.

VIOLET dared not immediately return to the company; she must have a few moments to subdue the excitement which shook her, body and mind, caused by so many varying emotions that she could not have told what feeling was uppermost.

She ascended the stairs and passed through the antechamber where the ladies had left their wraps—empty now, luckily. She walked to and fro—paused before a vase of flowers, and began counting the roses—the silk balls that decorated the table-fringe—trying to concentrate her faculties upon some trivial employment, till the pulses which beat like tiny hammers in either temple should relax their force enough to let her see and hear clearly, for the physical sensation was as if a sudden blow had first stunned, and then fevered her brain.

At length she heard a step. The thought of being seen nerved her. She turned to the door—met Lady Harcourt's maid—stopped to ask the woman kindly if she were entirely recovered from an illness she had had—glanced at herself in a mirror, and went on, satisfied that beyond an unusual pallor and an odd, strained look in her eyes, there was nothing peculiar in her appearance, and the people would all be too full of themselves to notice such slight signs of agitation.

From the farther salon still came the sounds of the piano. Violet wanted no more music, and walked in the opposite direction—found herself surrounded by a knot of gentlemen—talked—was talked to—all the while feeling as if she were in a dream—a dream which held vague horrors that chilled her blood. Somebody said something about play going on in the card-room; she heard herself saying she wanted to watch the game. Somebody offered his arm—she took it, and was led away.

A party of whist-players occupied one of the tables; farther on, she saw the duchess and Carlo absorbed in *écarté;* near them, Lady Harcourt and Nina, with a knot

of men hovering about. The hostess called Violet, and made her sit on the sofa between the marchesa and herself.

That mercurial personage was in her most brilliant mood, pouring out *bon mots*, relating amusing anecdotes, and generally riveting attention upon herself, so that Nina had an opportunity to whisper to Violet :

"Do you see Giulia ? I never saw her look so utterly fiendish as she does to-night, and she has been so sweet and insolent to me—oh, I wish the game was over !"

"Patience !" returned Violet. "It is the last time."

She had a sudden odd sensation as she spoke that her words meant more than she herself comprehended—knew that she must have uttered them oddly too, for Nina was quite staring at her with wide-open eyes.

"What do you mean ?" the marchesa asked.

"Since Carlo promised you not to play after this evening for six whole months," said Violet.

"Oh !" exclaimed Nina, in a disappointed tone. "You said it in such a strange way—I hoped I don't know what —goose that I am !"

And now Violet found a plan which rendered the words she had spoken significant enough. This should be the last time that the duchess tempted Carlo through his peculiar weakness. If there was no other way to prevent it, she would tell the woman in plain language that the secret shared by herself and cousin would only remain a secret on those conditions. She could frighten the creature. She, Violet Cameron, was a power in the social world which even Giulia would not venture to defy. What an idiot not to have thought of this before ! At least some good might come out of that miserable man's treachery—good to her friend, whoever else suffered.

"Aren't you well ? I think you are pale, or is it this light ?" Nina was saying.

"It is your fancy," returned Violet.

"I am tired—I wish I was at home !" continued Nina. "I wonder why Laurence Aylmer is not here. You have seen him, of course, since I went away ?"

Lady Harcourt relieved Violet from the necessity of replying.

"Nina, stop whispering in Violet Cameron's pretty ear and listen to my story !" she cried. "It is a new tale,

and I want to rehearse it to a small and discriminating audience."

They were all still laughing at the absurd history, when the duchess flung down her cards, and said aloud :

"What amuses you so much over yonder? If you held such hands as mine, you would not laugh so heartily."

"Not in vein to-night, Giulia?" asked Lady Harcourt.

"No," replied the duchess, rising as she spoke. "The marchese and I want to play *baccarat: écarté* is too stupid —too—what is that expressive English word, Miss Cameron?—ah, *slow.*"

"The very word," replied Violet..

"What wonderful progress you are making in our harsh tongue!" laughed Lady Harcourt.

"Ah, when one has a good teacher!" said Carlo.

"Go you, marchese, and bring some Christian souls who appreciate *baccarat*, and leave me and my teachers alone," retorted the duchess, with a sneer.

"Wouldn't disturb you for the world—not even when you put them in the plural," said Carlo. "*Baccarat*, eh? Well, since this is my last chance for six months, I may as well take advantage of it."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I am not to touch a card for six whole months," said Carlo.

Everybody laughed except Nina and Violet, but Magnoletti persisted, till all perceived that he was in earnest.

"Whom did you promise?" asked the duchess, as the chorus of wondering ejaculations ceased.

"I swore it on my guardian angel's crucifix," replied Carlo, gayly.

"Upon my word, Miss Cameron, we may well call you the all-powerful!" cried the duchess.

Violet did not heed the speech, so no one would have ventured to notice it, only Carlo knew that it would enrage the duchess more to discover he had yielded to his own wife's influence than to that of Miss Cameron.

"The crucifix happened to be Russian," said he, and as he spoke he playfully raised Nina's hand to his lips.

The duchess laughed in reply, and turned to take her fan from the table, but Violet caught sight of her face—its expression of malignity was positively startling—and Miss Cameron exulted anew over the power which she possessed

to counteract the plots she felt assured the woman already meditated.

The duchess looked round with her sweetest smile, and said:

"It would be a pity to endanger your wise resolves, Carlo—there shall be no *baccarat!* Let us rest a little, and go back to *écarté:* I believe I shall follow your good example so far as to abjure all other games."

"To think of my brightening into a shining light to guide people into safe paths!" cried Carlo.

"This is a world of surprises," returned the duchess, glancing at Miss Cameron with an expression lost upon that lady, though the marchese perfectly understood its meaning, and he inwardly vowed to tell Nina, before he slept, of the malicious hints Giulia had several times thrown out in regard to himself and their friend.

Her last chance—this had been the duchess's thought when Carlo announced his determination to give up cards—she would make good use of it! Oh, if Dimetri were only there! There might be danger for her in attempting to cheat at *baccarat* unaided, but at *écarté* she could do it with impunity in case fortune favored Magnoletti: before they rose from the table the thousands which remained from Carlo's late inheritance should change hands!

Giulia and Carlo stood watching the whist-players; the others joined the people in the outer salons—Violet pausing to whisper some hopeful assurance in Nina's ear as they went.

"Am I expected to wait for you, Fräulein?" asked the professor, stalking up to Miss Cameron.

"Of course you are," said Lady Harcourt, who overheard the question, "and she is not going for these two hours! You dreadful man, you drove us out of the music-room by persuading Madame de Hatsfeldt to play that terrible Wagner music! But you cannot escape; come and tell me all sorts of wise things, so that I can repeat them later as original, and get a reputation for learning on easy terms."

Violet would gladly have gone home, but she knew that her hostess would not permit her to leave, and besides, weary as she was, something impelled her to remain, and she could not resist the conviction that before the evening ended she should learn the reason—find it a potent one too.

Presently, other men were announced—Sabakine and Gherardi amongst them. Nearly another hour passed, then the supper-room was thrown open.

"Sabakine," said Lady Harcourt, "play *maître d'hôtel*, and go warn those people in the other room that eatables and champagne are to be had if they choose to leave their cards."

When he came back, Lady Harcourt and Violet were still in the salon, detained by a diatribe of the professor's against the madness of human creatures exasperating their interiors by eating trash at that hour of the night.

"None of them can think of their stomachs," said Sabakine. "Gherardi has persuaded the whist-players to change to poker! The duchess wants a lemonade." Then he added in Violet's ear: "Carlo is losing fearfully! Dear Miss Cameron—perhaps I ought not to say it—but try to stop his playing so much with the duchess. If she were a man I would tell you the reason."

Violet knew that he shared her suspicions, but nothing could be done at present; she took his arm and followed Lady Harcourt, who was not only forcing the professor into the supper-room, but threatening to make him devour both game and sweets as a punishment for his lecture.

Violet could not eat; her throat felt parched and burning, and she took an ice in order to obtain momentary relief.

"I will have no standing about—no nibbling," Lady Harcourt announced; "you are all to sit down at a table like Christians, and not only eat, but be as witty as if we were back in the days of the gay, delightful Philippe, instead of this dull nineteenth century."

It seemed to Violet that the party would never break up; she could endure it no longer; she must go back to the card-room—she must!

"Do come," she whispered at last to the professor, who was seated beside her.

"Where are you going?' called Lady Harcourt. "I'll not have you ruin a pleasant hour, Violet."

"I'll come back," she replied; "my head aches. The professor is too devoted to you—I am jealous, and must have him to myself for a few minutes."

The savant gave her his arm, and they strayed into the empty salon beyond.

"What ails you, Fräulein?" he asked. "I knew at dinner that something was wrong."

"I am anxious about the marchese," she answered. "Professor, that woman's look haunts me;" and she told rapidly of Carlo's promise to abstain from cards. "If she could ruin him she would—she is desperate."

"You can't do any good," returned the professor; "the marchese is crazy when he gets those devil's pictures in his hands."

"I believe she cheats; I believe the whispers are true——"

"Never take the trouble to believe anything which you cannot prove," interrupted the professor calmly. "My dear, it is distracting to think of the variety of reptiles and wild beasts the life-principle in that woman must have passed through before it entered her present shape."

"Come with me," pleaded Violet. "Perhaps I can give him a warning; sometimes he will pay attention to what I say."

The professor shrugged his broad shoulders. "If this is Carlo's last chance for six months, warnings will be thrown away," said he; "but come, Fräulein, and don't look so miserable."

"And watch her—do!" urged Violet. "Your eyes are as quick as those of a lynx; who knows——"

In her impatience she hurried him forward without waiting to finish her sentence. The professor paused in the doorway, and let her pass.

The table at which the four men sat was at the farther end of the room; the players too deeply engrossed to notice anything that went on about them. Carlo and the duchess were seated so that the professor could look directly into the lady's hand; her back towards him. She was shuffling the cards—relating some anecdote while thus employed; Carlo laughing at her words. He was pale, but scarcely more so than usual; a few tiny beads of perspiration which broke out on his forehead afresh each time that he wiped them away, alone betrayed his keen excitement.

Violet passed round the table and leaned over him. "What luck?" she whispered.

"Not precisely brilliant," he replied carelessly, "but perhaps it will change."

The duchess looked up; Miss Cameron was regarding

her fixedly, but though the woman perfectly understood the meaning in her glance, she returned it with a scornfully indifferent smile.

"So!" said Violet, half aloud, and made a rapid sign with her fan, first towards her own head, then towards Carlo's shoulder. Giulia attempted to look defiant, but her gaze wavered; she shut her mouth hard to hide a sudden quiver of the lips.

"Did you speak, belle Violette?" asked Carlo.

"The other night at my house," began Violet softly, her eyes still fastened on the woman, "the other night——"

"Marchese, suppose we stop," broke in the duchess, quickly. "Ah, pardon, I interrupted Miss Cameron!"

"Well, the other night?" questioned Carlo.

"You were less unlucky," said Violet.

"No high play permitted," rejoined he, laughing. "Did you say stop, duchess? Heavens, what an idea! This is my last dissipation for six months, remember!"

The duchess gave Violet a quick glance, which said as plainly as words could have done: "I am not to blame," and began dealing the cards. "You would go on playing if I retired, Carlo, so I may as well take my chances," she observed presently.

Violet turned away; as she did so she saw the duchess's eyes follow her—that awful glare was in their depths again; her lips wreathed with the malignant smile which had startled Violet once before. For the moment, Miss Cameron could do no more—the woman had won the right to a truce. Violet sat down at some distance from the table; the professor kept his stand. The game continued; Carlo's losses were terrible. The duchess was dealing again; her brain working busily. If she could put Magnoletti so much in her debt that, added to his previous losses at her house, the present disaster would cramp him in a desperate manner, she could buy Violet's silence by proposing easy terms of payment to Carlo. Not only a hold gained on Miss Cameron, but the money—the money which she loved in the very depths of her soul, where the instincts of a usurer and a spendthrift fought incessantly for supremacy.

"I am tired, marchese," she said. "What say you—double or quits?"

Carlo snatched at the chance with the recklessness of the true gambler.

"As you like," he answered.

Whatever else he might know her capable of, Magnoletti had never suspected her of cheating; while she dealt, he turned his head and addressed some trivial remark to Miss Cameron.

With an expertness worthy a conjurer, the duchess slipped a king from the bottom of the pack instead of throwing down the top card. Victory in every way; not only Carlo's money won, but Violet Cameron conquered a second time—victory!

Quick as her movement was, before she could play the king, a grip of iron seized her two hands just across the knuckles, and shut them so tight that she could not drop the evidence of her guilt—could not stir a finger.

Discovered—ruined!

The terrible consequences flashed upon the woman and paralyzed body and mind. She groaned aloud. Carlo looked back and uttered an exclamation of horror. The men at the other table started from their seats and hurried forward. The professor cried:

"Look for yourselves, gentlemen. The trick has been neatly done."

He lifted the duchess's hands so that the spectators could see all the cards—the position of the tell-tale thumb and finger. Nobody spoke—the whole group was absolutely struck dumb. Then the professor's guttural voice broke the silence:

"Perhaps you do not punish lady sharpers publicly, but at least I suppose you decline to play with them."

Violet sat motionless—her first thought one of rejoicing that Carlo was saved; then she caught sight of the criminal's white face, and a shudder of pity mingled with her fright and disgust.

The professor held the woman fast; she did not attempt to struggle; her black eyes wandered slowly about the circle, then settled on Violet Cameron, and a fierce, impotent wrath mingled with the terror that glazed their fires.

At the instant, Lady Harcourt and Nina appeared on the threshold. Nina was looking back over her shoulder at Sabakine: her merry laugh rang out, sending a cold

thrill through the listeners—died abruptly on her lips as a low ejaculation from her companion caused her to turn her head.

Lady Harcourt mechanically stepped forward, drawing the marchesa with her. Sabakine followed, closing the door behind him. He had taken in the full significance of the scene at a glance.

"At last," he said calmly.

"At last," echoed the professor. "She cheated you out of ten thousand francs about a month since, Sabakine."

"I thought no one knew it, so I held my peace," returned the Russian; "but I was sure this must happen sooner or later."

"I saw the trick the night she tried it with you," rejoined the professor. "I was not quick enough then to catch her; we have been more successful this time—everybody has seen."

He dropped the woman's hands — the cards rustled slowly to the floor. She cowered down in her chair, sat quiet for a moment, then struggled to her feet. They could hear her panting breath; her lips were drawn back spasmodically, showing the white teeth; her eyes again wandered about the group.

"What do you mean to do?" she hissed; and her gaze once more settled on Violet. "That Cameron woman is satisfied now. Well, what do you mean to do?"

"I am sure that I can speak for everybody here—no one will tell!" cried Carlo.

"Provided the duchess promises to leave Florence for two years," added Sabakine, in his most indifferent tones.

The other men did not speak. They were all Italians, and had often suffered from what they had considered Giulia's wonderful luck; to know that their losses had no doubt been caused by trickery, filled them with anger too hot for any merciful recollection of her sex to soften their judgment.

The duchess uttered an inarticulate cry of rage—started forward—made a step towards Violet. Her arms were stretched out; her face so perfectly demoniac that Nina shrieked. Sabakine moved in front of the woman; the professor's hand fell heavily upon her shoulder.

The duchess's frenzied eyes roved from Violet to Carlo;

she laughed aloud. At least she could deal one final blow, defeated, disgraced as she was.

She began to utter the vile slander which the Greek had spoken, but the professor stopped her at the first words, which reached no ears save his and Sabakine's.

"If you finish, madame," he exclaimed, "I will expose you myself in the morning papers."

"Good God, professor!" cried Carlo.

"Hush!" said Sabakine, sternly. "If the professor did not, I would; mercy is wasted here."

The duchess's fingers tore like claws at the lace upon her dress, but she remained silent.

Lady Harcourt had by this time recovered her presence of mind. She crossed the salon and opened a door hidden in the oak wainscoting.

"That passage leads directly to the dressing-room," she said. "Madame da Rimini can leave my house without encountering those guests who have not witnessed this scene."

The woman turned, shook her clenched hand at Violet Cameron, uttered another inarticulate cry like the snarl of a wild animal, and fled, closing the door behind her.

She gained the dressing-room, found her wraps, and hurried down stairs. Her carriage drove up, and as she was entering it a hand touched hers.

"Permit me, duchess!" said Dimetri, softly. "I was waiting till you came out; I had something to tell you!"

"What?" she demanded, turning fiercely on him.

"Do you remember what you said to-day? Well, to-morrow morning at daylight!"

She grasped his arm with both hands, and began to laugh.

"Get into the carriage," she whispered, as soon as she could check that terrible paroxysm of laughter. "Tell me about it! You are sure to kill him—sure?"

"I was Lachasse's favorite pupil," he answered, with a smile.

CHAPTER XL.

THE STORY TOLD.

FOR a few instants after the door closed behind the woman, nobody among the group stirred or spoke. Nina had caught her husband's hand and held it fast; Lady Harcourt leaned on Violet's shoulder to support herself; the men stood like statues of astonishment, with the exception of Sabakine and the professor; the Russian was calmly adjusting a flower in his button-hole, and the savant regarding the party with a smile worthy a Sphinx.

"Professor," said Sabakine, breaking the silence with his cold, polished voice, "they all seem turned to stone; can't you perform some sort of incantation that will restore their vitality?"

The professor pointed a long, bony figure at the table strewn with cards, and replied sententiously:

"They have banished the devil, but they'll not give up his works."

Everybody started, and a chorus of ejaculations rose.

Violet sat down on the sofa near, and Nina hurried up, drawing Carlo with her.

"And only last week she took a cool three thousand out of my pocket at piquet!" exclaimed Gherardi. "Carlo mio, set up a statue of Fortune at once in your oratory, and let it wear the professor's face."

"I should make a beautiful goddess, but it would be a pity to leave out my legs," quoth the savant.

Lady Harcourt laughed hysterically.

"I could forgive Giulia her dishonesty," said she, "but I can't pardon her bad taste in choosing my house to display it."

"And we always talked about her wonderful luck," cried Gherardi. "By heavens, we ought to publish her in every newspaper in Italy!" and all his compatriots, with the exception of Magnoletti, echoed his angry threat.

"Oh no, no!" exclaimed Violet. "Keep her secret—she will go away at once! Nina—Lady Harcourt—make them promise not to tell."

"Of course they'll not tell—we shan't, any of us ; yet it will leak out somehow," returned her ladyship philosophically, rather annoyed with herself for having been betrayed into either surprise or horror even by an incident so startling. "In the meantime, Sabakine, open the doors ; what will the other people think to find us shut up like so many conspirators ?"

"In an *opéra bouffe*," added Carlo, speaking for the first time since the duchess's departure.

Nina laughed, then put up her fan to hide the tears which rushed to her eyes.

"Happy tears," she whispered, as Violet pressed her hand in silent sympathy. "There never was but one real cloud on my horizon—it is gone forever."

"A great deal to be thankful for," Violet thought ; then that mournful line of the great master's flashed through her mind : "It is hard to look at happiness through other men's eyes !" There came another reflection : If she had wronged Laurence Aylmer after all ! But no ; even though she could believe that the duchess had put him in an equivocal position without fault on his part, his words this night damned him with deeper treachery ! Only two evenings before he had poured forth tender declarations to Mary Danvers, in the hope of securing her silence—to-night he had dared to tell her, Violet, that she alone reigned in his heart.

"I must go home," she said, rising quickly.

"Oh, not yet !" urged Lady Harcourt, overhearing the words.

"And I too," added Nina ; "come, Carlo, I am so tired."

"Civil to your hostess," retorted her ladyship. "I believe I am tired too—there's a return compliment."

As Nina passed the professor, she stopped short.

"I should like to kiss you !" cried she, laughing, yet ready to cry.

"You may," said he.

"I will," she replied, and stood on tiptoe to do it, as he bent his grizzly head towards her with comic gravity.

Now, do you know it really is not unpleasant," said the professor, looking about in a meditative fashion, whereat they all laughed immoderately.

"Impossible to decide, except by a personal trial," said Sabakine.

"Come home, small woman," cried Carlo. "I can't fight a duel with every man in the room on your account."

The word duel carried Sabakine's thoughts back to the subject he had tried to forget. He was ready now also to take his leave.

The other guests came trooping out of the supper-room, and met the party on their way through the salons.

"Going already?" cried somebody.

"I provide board, but no beds," said Lady Harcourt. "Go home, everybody. I am a lone widow, with only my reputation as a shield against a sinful world. You need not look wicked, Sabakine. I don't want to lose my character, bad as it is: you might discover my real one, and then I should be worse off than I am now."

"You would always be the pearl of women, whatever *role* you assumed," said the Russian, bowing over her extended fingers.

"My dear, I am forty years past compliments," returned she, tapping his cheek with a hand white and shapely as in the days when she reigned supreme by her beauty; nor had she lost her sovereignty even at sixty-five—her cleverness and wit took the place of youthful charms.

"I shall come and see you to-morrow, Violet," said Nina, as they descended the stairs.

"Who has seen Laurence Aylmer to-day?" demanded Carlo.

"Yes, Nina, come to-morrow," said Violet.

"To-morrow!" mentally repeated Sabakine, on whose arm Miss Cameron was leaning. "God knows what that may bring her," for the reticent, secretive Russian had obtained a clearer insight to Violet's feelings than most of her acquaintances.

Her carriage had come for her after taking Miss Bronson home, and the professor declared that, as he brought her, he ought to return with her, meaning to take this opportunity of discovering if his fears that trouble had arisen between her and his favorite possessed any foundation. But Violet did not want to be alone with him—she was afraid he might speak of the man, so she jestingly quoted Lady Harcourt's speech:

"And I am not even anybody's widow, poor lone spinster that I am!" she added.

"Would you like to be mine?" asked Sabakine.

"Alas, crape is not becoming to me," she replied; and as their glances met, each perceived that for some reason the other found jesting difficult, so Sabakine naturally hurried Violet on, and put her in the carriage.

"At least, always remember that you can rank me among the truest of your friends," he said, with sudden gravity. "Good-night, Miss Cameron—sleep well."

"*Sans adieu*," she answered; "we are certain to meet to-morrow."

Ah, what that morrow might bring her! was his thought, as he got into his *coupé* and drove away.

Clarice had been suffering from neuralgia in her face during the last two days, and Miss Cameron had bidden her go to bed early and get a thorough rest. Violet, determined not to be beguiled into reverie, began to undress as soon as she entered her room, and had nearly finished the operation when she fancied that she heard a sound from Mary's chamber.

Very possibly the poor child, unable to sleep, was sitting in solitary communion with her troubled heart; and in spite of her own sufferings, of the fact that the peculiar circumstances rendered it very hard that the task of consoling Mary should fall upon her, she was too unselfish to think of seeking her pillow without having at least tried by affectionate caresses, to remind the girl that she was not deserted and uncared-for in her pain.

Miss Cameron opened the door softly, so as not to disturb her cousin in case she slept, and looked into the chamber. Her fancy had not deceived her; Mary sat by the window, from which she had pushed back the shutter, and was gazing out at the starlit sky, so absorbed in her reverie that she did not notice Violet's entrance.

Miss Cameron would have marveled could she have known how quickly these solitary hours had passed with the young watcher. The words which the professor spoke to her after dinner sent Mary away to her room with every pulse beating high in relief and hope.

The professor was not a man to have said so much as he had without a warrant beyond his own fancies or intuitions

—nothing but assurances from Warner's own lips would have induced him to speak.

The last cloud was gone; even the fear that a long dreary period of waiting, of misapprehension, might spread between them, and imbitter this separation, faded in its turn.

She was no longer bound by the scruples which had rendered it impossible for her to make any sign—all the circumstances of the case were changed. She could answer his letter now without fear of appearing forward or unmaidenly; nay, to pass it by unnoticed would be unfriendly—uncourteous even, since she owed him her thanks for the beautiful sketches he had so kindly remembered amid the hurry of preparations for his journey.

She read over and over his farewell note—read too, divers little billets which on one pretext or another he had managed to write her. They all told the same story—she could decipher it clearly enough now. Of course it was natural and fitting that without delay she should forward a few kind, frank lines, telling him how sorry all his acquaintances were at his unexpected departure—how warmly they hoped soon to welcome him back—and he might believe that no one would be more glad to do so than his sincere friend Mary Danvers.

She must have spent two good hours meditating that epistle, brief as she proposed to make it, but she had it clearly arranged in her mind at last. She heard Violet return, and meant to go to bed so quietly that her cousin would not suspect her late watch, but some new fancy carried her off on its sunny wings, and she forgot her resolve.

"You bad child, to be up at this hour!" called Violet.

Mary started, and said rather confusedly:

"You—you have got back! Is it so very late?"

"Past two o'clock," returned Miss Cameron.

"It is you who ought to be in bed—how tired your voice sounds!" said Mary.

"Does it? I believe I am tired," replied Violet. "What have you been doing all the evening?"

"Oh, reading, a part of the time," Mary explained, and felt her cheeks grow hot.

"What?" asked Violet, at once fulfilling Mary's fear that the confession would place her in the difficulty of having to answer this question; but, as usual, that over-

scrupulous conscience of hers would never permit her to indulge in the slightest prevarication.

"Only letters," she said, and the slight quiver in her voice roused a new suspicion in Violet's mind. Aylmer had been in the habit of secretly writing to her; it was his letters the poor child had been torturing her wounded heart by perusing; each tender word now becoming only a fresh confirmation of his falsity.

Better that Mary should have every additional proof possible without delay of the man's utter worthlessness. She was too sensible, too proud, to mourn long for so mean a deceiver, and so young, Violet again reflected with a bitter pang, that the loss of this affection need not make an arid desert of her life, encumbered by the ruined altars of a shattered faith.

"Mary," she said quickly, "you asked me the other night what I meant to do—you know what I mean—that night when——"

"Yes, yes!" Mary interrupted, her heart giving a great throb of sympathy for her cousin. "And—and you have decided?"

"I have decided," Violet answered; "I have acted on my resolution."

"Oh!' Mary gasped. For the moment she could not add a syllable, afraid of betraying some consciousness which would lacerate Violet's pride beyond the power of healing.

"I must tell you," Violet went on, sitting wearily down in a chair. "It is better you should know the whole."

She paused, and her listener wondered if it were possible that she was so utterly beaten down and conquered that she must have sympathy in her woe. Mary rose suddenly; her first impulse was to fling her arms about Violet, and assure her that at least one heart would never fail her. But even yet she did not dare go so far; she must wait till her cousin proved by absolute words that she was humbled enough, so that such protestations could comfort instead of wounding her.

Mary crossed the room, seated herself on a stool, resting her head on Violet's knee, after a habit she had taken when they talked confidentially.

"Tell me," she said softly; "you know you can!"

"Yes," Violet replied, smoothing her hair; "you are

such a brave girl; such a heart of gold! Mary, I can't soften the blow; I must tell it all out. I have seen him to-night——"

"Oh!" Mary gasped again. "And it was of no use? He had nothing to say! How could he! Yet I had hoped —yes, I had——"

She could not finish. Violet put out her arm and drew her closer—sorrow for the girl's suffering—a strange bitterness against fate that the task of reporting Aylmer's despicable conduct should fall upon her of all people in the world, that consolation for the youthful heart he had injured should be her portion—hers, whose hurt was so much deeper, so much more fatal—making confusion in her mind, above which presently another thought dominated; to pause now would be as cruel as for a surgeon to hesitate after his knife had probed his patient's wound.

"There is no hope," she said, "none! Mary, we must make up our minds to that. See, he could think of no other way of adding to the fullness of his infamy, so to-night he actually told me that he—he loved me!"

"Violet!" Mary exclaimed.

"Yes, I know," Miss Cameron hurried on; "it seems incredible that his audacity could go so far, but it did! There, you have heard the worst now! He wanted my money, perhaps; else believed that my vanity was so inordinate he could actually by a declaration of his love—his love!—make me believe him blameless where that woman was concerned; his treachery to you a mere amusement on his part, which he had not dreamed you would take seriously——"

Mary interrupted by pushing away her arm and sitting upright, staring into her cousin's face with wide-opened eyes.

"Treachery to me?" she repeated. "To me?"

"Don't be hurt at my knowing; trust me, dear!" cried Violet, putting out her arms again, and folding the girl to her bosom, adding with a sudden burst of impatience against fate, life, all things: "Oh, Mary, Mary, why couldn't you have cared for the good man who loved you—at least have set one matter straight in this wicked world!"

Mary struggled to free herself, exclaiming passionately: "Let me go, let me go!" As Violet released her, she rose and stood looking at her in wonder. "What do you mean?" she cried. "Laurence Aylmer treacherous to me? Why,

Violet, you are mad, or I am! In heaven's name, what do you mean?"

Did the child hope even yet to deny the secret which her broken words and agitation would have revealed without the other proofs which Violet possessed? If so, she must humor her; but how to go on and not betray her knowledge was a task so difficult that for a little she sat speechless.

"You think I care for Mr. Aylmer?" demanded Mary, with that passionate wonder growing stronger in her voice. "You believe that—that——"

"I am thankful that at least his arts did not succeed," Violet said hurriedly, as she paused. "I could not tell. You are very young. Many girls would have been touched—he could seem so earnest, so true!"

"Violet, stop!" cried Mary. "You certainly will drive me out of my senses! Answer my question—I insist! You think Laurence Aylmer flirted with me?"

"Yes. Ah, don't be vexed, Mary; don't think I am curious, intrusive. I love you, dear! See, I will believe what you tell me about your own feelings——"

"Oh, if you don't stop I shall become a gibbering idiot!" burst in Mary, so excited by the sudden light thrown upon matters that she scarcely knew what she said, in her eagerness to enlighten her cousin. "He was like a brother to me—never a word or look that was not kindness itself—that, and nothing more!"

"Mary! Mary!"

"I swear it, Violet! Oh, do believe me!"

"I think one of us must be mad!" Violet exclaimed, so worn out that for the instant a kind of fretful exasperation was uppermost in her bewildered faculties.

"Oh, we must make everything clear now," returned Mary. "I tell you I never thought of him except as a friend. He never dreamed of flirting with me."

"Mary, when you told me of his conduct after that woman went away——"

"Because he did not want me to tell you," interrupted Mary. "Great heavens, Violet, did you think I meant he made love to me?"

"Yes. What else could I think?"

"What else? I must speak—even if you are angry, I must. I was furious on your account. I thought you

cared for him. There, it is all said now! I thought you cared, and it may me so happy—and to find him dishonorable! Oh, Violet, Violet—mayn't all the rest be some dreadful mistake too?"

Violet pressed her hands hard against her throbbing temples, and stared at her cousin. She could not credit her own ears. The girl must be trying to screen her secret at any cost, whether of truth or care for her listener's delicacy and pride.

"Before you went down stairs that night when we were talking here, you were unhappy. You had seen him during the day. You cannot deny that you were unhappy——"

"I was, but not about him," Mary desperately broke in upon the hesitating sentences. "What did you mean when you wondered I couldn't have cared for the good man who—who—loved me? Nobody has made love to me, Violet."

"But you knew Gilbert Warner loved you—you must have known that!" cried Violet, still in the depths of bewilderment.

"He never told me so," faltered Mary, turning away her head.

"But he told me!"

Mary shrank a little farther off and put up one hand. The movement was a revelation to Violet. She sprang to her feet and seized her cousin's shoulder.

"What have I done!" she cried. "He thought you cared for Aylmer. He talked with me, and—and I——"

"You told him I did!" groaned Mary. "Oh, you might have ruined my whole life! No, no, I did not mean that! Oh, Violet, Violet!" and she flung her arms about her cousin, so overpowered between joy at this fresh confirmation of her own happiness and sympathy for Violet, that she burst into tears and sobbed uncontrollably for a few moments, which was probably the best thing she could have done on both their accounts.

"He loves you! He loves you!" repeated Violet, straining her close to her heart. "Oh, at least you will be happy; I thank God for it, my darling—heartily. Oh, the thought of your suffering was more than I could bear!"

"How could you be so blind—but never mind me!" returned Mary, wiping away her tears. "Sit down, Violet," and she forced her cousin gently back into her chair,

resuming her own place on the footstool. "Don't let us judge Mr. Aylmer! Oh! the more I reflected, the more certain I felt that he was not to blame. I don't try to put it all on her just because she is a woman—but she is such a dreadful creature! I have so often seen him avoid her. Oh, I behaved like a fool that night! And he couldn't have told—he is a man—he couldn't betray her! But I believe him when he said he loved you. Yes—I do! The professor knew it; he thought—oh, you won't be vexed?"

Violet only answered by a pressure of her hand.

"He thought you were unwilling to let yourself care about anybody—but that it would all end well—and oh, he is so fond of Aylmer; and he is a man, and must know him as we cannot! Violet, I tell you that woman did the whole! Maybe she saw me, and thought at least she could ruin him in your esteem!"

Violet rose again, and began to pace the room in terrible agitation, while her cousin hurried on with every argument she could think of in Laurence's favor.

"I'll tell you what she did to-night. Of course, the story is safe with you," Violet said at length, and she related the exposure which had befallen the duchess at the card-table.

"Isn't a woman like that capable of anything?" shuddered Mary. "Oh, Violet, don't let us believe anything against Mr. Aylmer on her account—at least give him an opportunity to explain. No, perhaps he could not—but believe him! I shall," she added, careful in her delicacy not to put her pleadings in a fashion which could render her sympathy troublesome. "See, one does not renounce a friend without good reason! We have always found him honorable and true; we are bound to credit his word. Why, what is friendship worth that cannot stand any and every test!"

"His very words," answered Violet, pausing in her march. "Oh, Mary, if I have wronged him, I think he never can forgive me! I was so hard—I must have said horrible things to him."

"One pardons everything to a friend—to the person one loves," amended Mary. "Yes, I may speak out. I don't pretend to know anything about your feelings, but I am certain he loves you! Oh, if I had not been such an

idiot, you need have heard nothing—at least I could have waited to be sure!"

"I was ready for a moment to exonerate him, after what happened about her cheating at cards," said Violet. "Then I remembered——"

"That you thought him treacherous to me. I understand. My dearest dear, he liked to talk to me because I talked about you! Oh, Violet, it would be wicked to condemn him unheard! I shall tell the professor what happened: you can't stop me, I warn you! Mr. Aylmer shall have every chance possible—and I for one will believe his word! Oh, the more I have thought, the more I felt sure I was wrong! He didn't stir—it was she put her head—oh, I can't go over it!"

"No, no!" cried Violet, beginning to pace the room again.

"I was quite beside myself any way, that night," pursued Mary. "I—I——"

"Ah, you were wondering why poor Gilbert had gone," interrupted Violet, hurrying up to her, and embracing her again. "That was my fault too, blind simpleton! Well, that is all clear enough now! Be happy—he loves you—he told me so—do you hear?"

"I don't want to hear till he is sensible enough to come and tell me himself," said Mary, with a laugh and a sob. "I am not thinking of myself! Oh, Violet, try to believe in poor Laurence!"

"My dear," said Violet, with more composure, "I shall not lose my friend if I can help it. Since I wronged him in one respect, I may easily have done so in another. The only question is, if I have, whether he can pardon me."

"When he loves you!"

"Hush! Laurence Aylmer was my friend, and he would never have been more," said Violet.

"Oh, he is the only man I ever saw that seemed worthy of you!" cried Mary, impatiently. "How could you help liking him?"

"To marry him would have been very different from that," replied Violet. "A woman may have for friend a man six years younger than herself—not a husband! At my age——"

"Your age! When you look like a girl—anybody

would give him five years more than you! In ordinary cases I don't say you are not right—but for *you!*"

"My dear, there is no question of marriage—if I may keep my friend I shall be glad! Go you to bed—good-night!" and with a kiss upon Mary's cheek she went quickly out of the room.

CHAPTER XLI.

WHEN DAWN BROKE.

THE gray dawn broke over Florence—deepened and broadened—smote the casements of Laurence Aylmer's chamber, and roused him from sleep.

He had passed the greater portion of the night writing such letters as would be necessary in case he never returned from that expedition upon which he was to go forth in the early morning; then he lay down and speedily fell into a deep slumber, some pleasant memory of Violet brightening his dreams.

The premonition, so strong it became a certainty in his mind, that the encounter would end fatally for him, remained unshaken; it had been his last conscious reflection before he slept—it was his first thought when he woke—solemn, awe-inspiring, but free from fear.

He rose in obedience to the summons which the light brought as it quivered like some spirit-touch across his eyelids, remembering that it was the last time it would ever arouse his soul while clothed in those habiliments of clay. He performed his toilet slowly, leisurely—he had never in his life felt more calm. Even his agonized heart had ceased its struggles against the cruelty of fate; the time for such weakness had passed; it belonged to men who still had a part in this world and this world's miseries—he had done with them.

As he finished dressing, some one knocked at the door. He knew who it was—the man that took charge of his apartment, bringing the coffee he had ordered for this hour.

"Come in, Giacomo," he said, and the old servant en-

tered with profuse Italian greetings, which not only comprehended wishes that his padrone's sleep had been pleasant, but that all the other nights of his life should bring rest as sweet, and this day and all coming days—and might they be many—filled with the choicest blessings that ever descended upon mortal.

Often as he had heard the same utterances, they struck Aylmer oddly now. He smiled, spoke pleasantly to the old man, who was quite devoted to him, not more from the numerous acts of kindness he had received than from submission to the powerful sovereignty which youth and handsome looks possess over most minds.

"The signore starts early on his expedition," Giacomo said, as he placed the tray upon the table.

"Rather early," Aylmer answered, and again he smiled.

When the old man had gone, he drank his coffee, and looked about to see that he had forgotten nothing. He took the letters he had written and laid them in his desk, where they would easily be found when wanted. He stood for a moment looking at the envelope which bore Violet Cameron's name.

"She will believe me when she reads this," he thought. "Men do not lie with death staring them in the face. She will believe me—ah, if only she never learns why I fought this man! I think she never will. Sabakine promised for himself and Gherardi; the Greek cannot remain here, so there is little danger."

He laid the letter beside the others, and closed the desk. The clock struck—the hour for his rendezvous with Sabakine had arrived, it having been decided that it would be better for the latter not to come in search of him.

He took up his hat and walked to the door—paused to take one parting glance about the familiar room. Then he drew a photograph from his breast-pocket, and stood gazing at it with his whole soul in his eyes, till a sudden rush of memories momentarily shook his composure, and he cried aloud in anguish—"Violet, Violet!"

In that portion of the gloomy old palace which she had chosen for her private apartments, Giulia da Rimini was already astir, arraying herself hurriedly—pale and stern enough to have represented Nemesis, save for the lurid gleam in her eyes and the triumphant smile on her mouth,

which deprived the face of the passionless calm it should have worn to suit the comparison.

Exposed—ruined—forced to go forth from Florence, where life suited her so well; the duchess was furious at this necessity, not overcome by shame. And the entire catastrophe had been caused by Violet Cameron: she brought the old man—she set him to watch.

Oh, amid all her disappointments—her cruel misfortunes, for which, during the long hours of the night, the duchess had so often cursed the saints whom perhaps a moment before she had begged to help her—at least one consolation awaited her—revenge—revenge upon that haughty, insolent woman.

Laurence Aylmer was to die this morning; had Fate appeared in person to announce his doom, it could not be more certain. If Dimetri essayed the foul, underhand thrust, failure was impossible; and he had sworn not to spare—he would keep his oath. Ay, she could trust him—he would have sacrificed a hecatomb of human creatures in his cruel remorselessness to win his guerdon! Oh, if the wretch who had scorned her were only possessed of a score of lives, that she might have them all!

Revenge—revenge! She was ahungered and athirst for the sight of blood. She meant to witness the duel; Dimetri had no idea of her intention, but see it she would; her vengeance would be deprived of half its savor if she could not watch her enemy's last gasp.

After that, she would by some means force her way into Violet Cameron's presence, be the one to tell her that Aylmer was dead—dead for her whom he had loved. Since the knowledge could increase her misery, the creature should learn the full might of his devotion, extending even unto death—to death—the very repetition of the word was music!

Easy enough for the duchess to carry out her plan without fear; no one would come to her rooms until she rang—for that matter, she was past caring even if her absence were discovered—and indeed, her personal attendants had been too long in her service to indulge surprise at any vagary on the part of their mistress. Her apartments communicated with a private staircase which led directly down into the neglected stretch of shrubberies, more like a wood than a garden, having a door that gave on a narrow street

at the back of the palace, and the keys were always in her own possession.

To see the man die—watch his blood flow—gloat from her place of concealment over his latest groans—that was what she wanted.

I know how exaggerated this description sounds; but there are no words, however wild, which would be strong enough to picture the state of her mind—her demoniac hatred of Violet Cameron—her murderous wrath against the man who had disdained her charms after months of crafty patience and unwearied pursuit on her part.

Ah, the world was not wide enough for him and her, so he must die—die! She uttered the word aloud with the ferocity wherewith very possibly one of her own ancestresses had cried it out when the fallen gladiator lay stretched on the arena sands, and his victor waited to hear the verdict, and the voices of vestals and noble matrons checked with fierce imprecations the sign which some emperor seized with sudden pity would have made.

And amid the luxurious gloom of her chamber, Violet Cameron slept on after the break of day—after the man going forth to death for her sake, and the woman eager for his murder, were both astir.

On leaving Mary she had sat down in her own room and lost herself in dreary meditation; then some recollection of the girl warned her that at least she could aid where the future of two human beings was concerned, whatever befell her and the man who had given her his love—the man she had so deeply wronged.

She wrote a long letter to Gilbert Warner—careful to give no hint which could compromise Mary—only telling him that she had discovered his and her own mistake, advising him frankly if his happiness were so vitally concerned as he had told her, to postpone his departure for Greece until he had taken time to return to Florence and learn his fate from Mary's own lips.

"He will understand," she thought; "he will come back at once—ah, they shall be happy!"

She inclosed the letter to the professor, requesting him to forward it without delay, as she did not know Mr. Warner's address, and placed the missive where Clarice would find it when she entered in the morning.

She went to bed then, and at length fell asleep. She

dreamed that she was wandering through a beautiful garden with Laurence Aylmer. Every cloud had been swept aside—he knew that she loved him—no doubt or scruple left in her own mind—and this haunt where they roved as far removed from the common world as if some enchanted sphere had opened to admit them and their happiness.

He left her side to pluck a flower she asked for—he did not return. She looked about—he had disappeared. By the tree where he had been standing she saw a serpent coiled upright, and as she stared in fascinated horror, she perceived that the monster wore a woman's face—Giulia da Rimini's—and was regarding her with that wicked smile she knew so well.

She tried to fly, but could not—to call Aylmer's name, but her lips refused to utter a sound. The serpent glided upright down the flowery paths, still looking back at her with Giulia's smile, and she was forced to follow its lead.

The way no longer led through a garden, but a dark morass filled with slimy water, where hideous creeping things clogged her feet, and human skulls grinned at her, and ghost-like figures circled about in a spectral dance; and she had to go on—on—in the serpent's wake—till suddenly she heard a rush and whiz, and through the din, Aylmer's voice calling her name in desperate agony:

"Violet, Violet!"

She woke—the vision so real that she could still hear those accents of mortal anguish.

Whether by some strange chance, whether in obedience to some mysterious power held by our souls, I do not pretend to judge, but at the instant she woke, Laurence Aylmer, ready to leave his rooms, paused to look once more at her portrait, and as he regarded it a sudden spasm of despair at the thought that perhaps neither here nor hereafter throughout the sweep of eternity should he ever look upon her face again, wrung from his lips a cry of which the tones that roused her from sleep were like an echo:

"Violet, Violet!"

She sprang out of bed before she knew what she was doing, crossed the room to Mary's door, in the blind, instinctive search for human companionship in her terrible fear. Then she got her senses back—retraced her steps—reached the bed—lay down—for a little so faint and weak that she could not stir.

Gradually her strength returned. She tried to argue with herself. It was perfectly useless. She could not compose her mind. Could not lie there alone—she was afraid.

She rose again, opened the shutters, and let the day stream into the chamber. She seated herself, holding her head between her hands. That voice echoed in her ears still; when she shut her eyes, she beheld anew the hideous shape which had haunted her dream—the serpent wearing Giulia's smile.

She should certainly go mad if she did not get away from that close room—out into the free air. She sought hastily for garments to put on—so blind with pain that she groped about like a person trying to find his way through a heavy mist. Her fingers seemed turned to lead, and refused to do her bidding. Every movement she made caused a noise which she fancied might waken Mary, and now she shrank from companionship, ardently as she had longed for it a few moments since.

Oh, she should never be ready—she almost thought she had wasted hours in the task—and each moment was precious. She must go—go—something was awaiting her—some duty to be performed—what—where? She knew not—but she must go!

She was dressed at length—had found a hat and cloak—stared at herself in the mirror, fretted by a dreadful idea that she was crazy, that if she were not very cautious some disorder in attire or manner would attract attention from the people she might meet, and she be seized, held fast, hindered from achieving her task—what task? Oh, this fancy was more insane than all the rest, but she could not subdue it—she must go forth and learn what errand fate had for her to do.

As she opened the door and stepped out into the corridor, a certain composure came over her: she could reflect—argue. She had been in a frenzy, but it had passed—only the effect of her terrible dream. At least she would keep on her way—the air would do her good. She should find Antonio stirring somewhere—he was always the first up in the house.

She met him on the stairs: he stared in wonder at her appearance at such an hour—alarmed too by her pallor.

"Antonio," she said, "I am nearly frantic with nervous headache—I must go out."

"Into the garden, mademoiselle?"

"No, no—it is too close! Come with me—can we find a carriage? I will drive to the Cascine, and walk there."

She had no thought of giving the direction till she heard the words on her lips. This utterance without conscious volition brought back that awful dread—some duty awaited her. Oh, she was mad, mad!

Antonio only bowed in response, and followed her down to the entrance-hall. The sleepy porter, in his shirt-sleeves, was just opening the outer doors: he caught sight of his mistress, and fled in search of a jacket, too much occupied with the fact of having been surprised by his lady in a garb so unorthodox, even to marvel what could have roused her at this unholy hour. But Antonio, always prudent, would leave no loophole for astonishment or possible gossip.

"The signora has a headache," he said softly, as the porter returned and began fumbling at the locks. "The doctor orders early walks when she suffers so—she is going out."

The doors swing back—Violet drew her vail over her face, and passed into the street. The cabs were just taking their station on the stand at the corner: Antonio helped her into a covered hack, mounted the box, and they drove away.

The guardian seated at the carriage entrance of the Cascine had already seen two vehicles go by. Had the early hour roused any suspicion in his mind that it was his duty to inquire into the matter, or give information to the mounted patrol when those officials should make their tardy appearance, the doubt would have been dispelled by the fact that in this carriage, as well as the second of the former ones, a lady sat. The guardian might have his own ideas that a fancy for such early driving on the part of two gentlemen and a brace of ladies was, to say the least, a singular coincidence, but of course no business of his.

To avoid all possibility of attracting undue attention from this personage, it had been arranged that Sabakine and Aylmer, carrying the necessary weapons with them, should enter the Cascine by this route, while Gherardi and his principal, accompanied by the surgeon, made their way into the wood across the suspension bridge higher up, and beyond the view of the guard at the gates.

When the cab reached the open space where the great

café stands, Violet could no longer bear the restraint of inaction. She pulled down the glass, and ordered the coachman to stop.

"Wait for me here," she said to Antonio, as he assisted her to alight; "I will walk through the meadow. I shall not meet a creature so early as this."

Again Antonio bowed in acquiescence. He saw that she was suffering terribly from some cause. It might be physical, as she had declared, though of that the shrewd Swiss had his doubts, and out of the profundity of his unerring tact forbore to annoy her even by the sound of his voice.

Violet crossed the square, and entered the pretty green field which stretches for a considerable distance along the middle of the Cascine. To the right, the shining sweep of blue hills was visible above the trees; at the left spread a wide, dense thicket, beyond which wound the road and the river, whereof she caught occasional glimpses as she passed paths cut through the dense shrubberies.

She hurried on, consumed by the same wild impatience —the feeling that something called her, that she must attain some goal: each moment more important than hours, days of ordinary life—delay fraught with peril, though to whom she knew not—and utterly unable to combat the sensation by any argument.

She reached the end of the meadow, and gained a narrow alley so shut in among the trees and bushes that she seemed in the heart of a great forest. It was gloomy and dark here. Not a sound broke the stillness, not even the singing of an early bird. The hush became oppressive. She would make her way through the thicket, and come out on the bank of the Arno; at least she should have broad daylight there, and the voice of the water to break this terrible silence.

She turned aside into the bosquet, too impatient to wait till she arrived at one of the paths which crossed it. The bushes and long vines trailing down from the trees caught at her dress, reminding her of the horror of her dream. The ground grew damp and sodden, like the morass she had journeyed over in that fearful vision. Once a tiny snake started up just at her feet, and glided away with a sharp hiss into its covert.

The horror of her nightmare came back with such force that she groaned aloud, for an instant frightened by her

own voice, thinking it another's. She plunged recklessly on. The brambles tore her hands and her garments. They seemed trying to hold her back. With every step the likeness to her journey in her dream grew stronger. Oh, if it lasted only a few minutes longer she should go wholly mad!

She was coming out. She caught glimpses of a little cleared space through the branches. At the same moment a sound struck her ear. O God, what was it? The click of steel striking against steel!

She halted. It must be a delusion. She was mad—mad! Some living creature was near. She heard a quick, gasping breath. Before she could turn her head, she felt two arms close round her like an iron band. Then a hand forced both her hands behind her back, furious fingers clutched at her throat, dragged her head upward. Giulia da Rimini's eyes were blazing into hers, that awful smile—oh, the exact smile the serpent had worn!—parting her bloodless lips.

For a few seconds Violet struggled wildly in her captor's hold, almost suffocated by the pressure upon her throat.

"Do you mean to murder me?" she gasped in a hoarse whisper, articulating with great difficulty even in that strangled tone.

The duchess stooped to bring her mouth close to Violet's ear, and hissed slowly out—oh, the very hiss of the serpent in her dream!—

"Better than that. I mean you to see him killed! Do you hear?—to see him killed!"

Completely unnerved before in mind and body, Violet grew so sick and faint that she was utterly powerless in the woman's hold. At no time would she have been a match for her tormentor, but now she could not even struggle in that boa-like grasp; and the relentless fingers clutched still tighter at her throat, rendering speech impossible.

The woman dragged her on a few paces, pushed her head forward, and hissed again:

"Look! look!"

Through a red haze Violet saw two men standing at the farther end of the cleared space, a sword in the hand of each—flashing, waving, thrusting, like tongues of flame before her eyes, the click and ring of the metal smiting her

ears like a bell. She beheld the faces of the pair; she was watching Laurence Aylmer and the Greek in their deadly contest.

She could not have cried out now even if the pressure on her throat had relaxed sufficiently to permit; her head sank back against the woman's shoulder; again she felt that burning breath fan her cheek; again she heard that dreadful voice—oh, always the serpent's hiss, though endowed with human speech!—

"He loved you; you shall see him die! Wait only a little; it will come. Dimetri has a secret that never fails! This is my revenge; he dies, you must live; and you love him—you love him!"

The purgatorial agony of her soul roused a spasm of physical vitality in Violet; she fought fiercely to free herself, to cry out—in vain. She was helpless as if the present torture of body and mind had been a part of that terrible dream.

Always the flash of the swords blinding her eyes; their scrape and rattle cutting her ears, and the duchess's voice muttering maledictions to that accompaniment.

"Accursed! I know what will hurt you most!" the woman chanted, staring eagerly out at the combat while she spoke. "He loved you! he told me so—do you hear, devil? he loved you! I'd let another woman think he loved me, but the truth will hurt you most: he loved you, he loved you!"

Clash—scrape—rattle: the lightning-like thrusts given and parried before her eyes, and that voice in her ear.

"I tried to win him; no use! I got to hate him; then he told me of his love for you—you; that was his death-warrant! You hear, you see, you suffer, and I am glad—glad! Ah, at last; no, not yet! Oh, Dimetri, quick, quick! I am tired of waiting!"

And, as if in obedience to her whispered words, the Greek stepped back; Aylmer advanced a pace, parried a feigned thrust, and on the instant his antagonist's blade entered his chest, high up to the right.

Aylmer wavered back and forth thrice, tottered slowly forward, and remained motionless for the briefest possible space of a second. Then rapidly body and limbs huddled together, and he lay in a heap on the ground, his left arm

falling slightly outward, so that his head rested upon it, his face turned towards Violet as she stood.

"Dead!" she heard a voice exclaim; it was Sabakine's.

"Dead!" the duchess echoed in her ear. "You killed him, remember! He fought on your account; he died believing you Carlo's mistress! I have my revenge every way; he is dead, and you are his murderess!"

She released her hold with such suddenness that Violet fell backward, and rushed away through the wood. In another instant, almost as soon as Sabakine and the surgeon could reach the prostrate form, they were startled by a rush like the wings of a great bird, and Violet Cameron swept between them, sank upon the earth, and lifted Aylmer's head to her knees, muttering: "He is dead, and I killed him!"

Not a word was spoken by the by-standers; Sabakine made a warning sign to the surgeon, then knelt behind Violet, and put his arm about her waist to support her as she crouched holding that ghastly head.

Even in his haste, the Greek, while putting on coat and hat, could not resist glancing at Violet's face; its rigid horror struck a chill even through his veins. He whispered a few syllables to Gherardi, who replied by a nod, and hurried off in accordance with the programme laid down in advance for the survivor, because seconds as well as principals had understood when they set out upon their morning's work, that both men would not leave the place alive.

The surgeon opened the shirt, through which a small stream of blood oozed, staining Violet's hands and garments as it fell. He performed his task in silence, waited a little, and said: "He breathes still."

Nobody answered.

Sabakine drew a dog-whistle from his pocket, and handed it to Gherardi, motioning him to blow it; he obeyed, and in answer to the shrill summons, Sabakine's carriage drove up; two Russian servants whom he could trust seated upon the box.

Only when they were lifting the body did Violet speak.

"To my house," she said; "to my house."

Sabakine was about to attempt some expostulation; she raised herself and turned towards him; the words died on his lips when he looked in her face. She followed as the men carried their burden to the carriage.

"Let me go with him; I will go!" she said.

They helped her in; the surgeon got in too. They laid the body down as best they could. Once more Laurence's head rested on Violet's shoulder, as it had done during that first drive, when he had dared death for her sake. Even in this moment the recollection shot through her mind. Ah, this journey would have a different ending—the grave was its goal.

"The swords!" whispered Gherardi.

Sabakine picked them up, and hid them under a seat of the carriage. The vehicle drove off; for a few seconds the two men left behind stood staring at each other with horrified eyes, then silently began the work which remained: covered the blood with sand—carefully removed every trace of footsteps—scattered twigs and leaves about—then hurried away, silent still.

As they passed through the meadow, they met Antonio, who, disquieted by his mistress's long absence, had sent the carriage up the road, and come in search of her.

"Miss Cameron has gone home in my carriage," Sabakine explained. "There has been an accident. Mr. Aylmer is hurt. Not a word to anybody at present—you know how to hold your tongue. Where is the hack?"

Antonio pointed to the road.

"I saw the Duchess da Rimini and the Greek drive off together," was all he said.

"My God!" the two men muttered simultaneously.

Once the surgeon saw Violet's lips move; he thought she was trying to ask some question, and bent his head to listen, but she was only whispering:

"He is dead! and I killed him!"

CHAPTER XLII.

AFTER ALL.

FOR three days Laurence Aylmer lay speechless, almost motionless, on his bed in the very room where so few months previous he had fought his way back to life: now, as then, Violet Cameron told herself over and over, brought face to face with death through her agency.

No matter that, nearly frantic as she was, reason refused to admit the possibility of considering her share in either catastrophe other than her misfortune; the fact remained that she had been the cause of both.

This time there was no hope; even when the professor himself told her that life still lingered, that perhaps for several days no human power could predict as to the final results, her faculties stayed shut against the contemplation of any possible chance as completely as in that first moment of horror when she knelt by what she believed his dead body.

No one—not Miss Bronson herself—dreamed of questioning or expostulating, whatever Violet might do. Everybody about, beginning with the professor, obeyed her slightest wish unhesitatingly. He had warned the household that he could not answer for the consequences if she were thwarted in any way.

She looked like a dead woman, save for the maddened misery of her eyes, where life showed its strength in the unutterable agony they revealed. She scarcely left the bedside either day or night. Whenever she moved, Aylmer's glance would follow her, while across the haze that dulled it crept an expression of trouble; and though deaf to every other sound, her voice never failed to reach his ear; beyond this, for hours and hours, he evinced scarcely any sign of vitality, save in the labored, irregular breathing—even that grew so faint sometimes they had to listen attentively to catch it.

The professor explained that the wound had occasioned pneumonia—of course, much more perilous than if the inflammation of the lung had been produced by the ordinary cause, a cold or sudden chill.

He said this, and he said no more; but the other physician deemed it his duty to reply frankly to Violet's questions: he could hold out no hope—humanly speaking, there was none. The professor did not chide his colleague, and this tacit concurrence in his verdict crushed the little group of attendant friends so utterly that they were powerless to try by word or look to comfort or encourage Violet.

Carlo and Nina were there; Sabakine scarcely quitted the house, though there was little for anybody to do except watch—watch—count the hours, remembering that

each brought the end nearer. Sometimes there was one duty to perform; when the sufferer's pillows had to be raised a little and supported by some person seated on the bed. Violet was obliged to relinquish this task to the others. Aylmer lay always with his eyes fastened on her face; usually they betrayed no sign of recognition, but if she stirred they wandered in troubled search of her presence.

On the afternoon of the third day, Carlo and Sabakine went to Aylmer's lodgings to pack up and bring away his possessions; it would be easier now than later, when—when it was all over.

They knew that the wildest rumors were afloat in Florence, but the facts concerning the duel were not known. It was declared by many that Giulia da Rimini had tried to murder Aylmer—that he had shot himself in despair caused by losses at cards and his failure to secure Miss Cameron's fortune—that the Greek had assassinated him and eloped with the duchess. Of course each tale was contradicted in turn, and some new one invented to take its place.

Fortunately for Madame da Rimini, it became certain that the duke was very ill in Paris, so the letters she had written to several friends before her departure, announcing that she had been called to his bedside, received a share of credence; though that something very dreadful had happened at Lady Harcourt's house was already established, and so many tales in regard to borrowed moneys, defrauded tradesmen, and the like, speedily followed, that the duchess's ostracism was almost as complete as if the truth had been openly declared.

While Sabakine and the marchese were performing their mournful duty, with the aid of poor old Giacomo, they opened a writing-desk to lay in some papers, and found the letters Aylmer had written on the night before the duel. Among these epistles was one for the professor, and another which bore Miss Cameron's name.

There was no opportunity to place these letters in the professor's hands until evening. A change had taken place in Aylmer's condition—he was conscious—able to speak a little. The doctors said that by the next day he would be perfectly clear in his mind—able, indeed, to answer questions concerning his affairs, and transact any business, such as the making of a will, which might seem necessary. Sab-

akine had demanded if this would be the case, as he knew from his last conversation with Aylmer that he regretted not having leisure to alter the testament which he had executed before leaving America.

During the night, while Aylmer slept and Violet sat by his side, the professor, who shared her vigil, read the letter addressed to himself, and at length, after a good deal of reflection, he handed Violet hers, telling her in a few words where it had been found.

"It was better to give it to you now, my dear," he said, laying his hand softly on her head as he might have caressed a child, while his rugged features worked with emotion. "He may make some allusion to its contents, whatever they are, and it would fret him if you failed to understand. I will sit by the bed while you read it. You need not be afraid—he is sound asleep, and will not wake for some time yet."

Violet moved to the other end of the room, and sat down close to the shaded lamp which cast a faint glow through the chamber. She opened the letter; it was like reading a message from the dead. Once she glanced at the face upon the pillows—its death-like stillness only increased the feeling.

"You will believe me when you read this—in thought, word and deed I have been true. I loved you from the first moment of our meeting; I shall go into eternity with that love in my soul, eternal as the soul itself.

"Never grieve for me! If you love me I shall know it. Think of me as near you always. My darling, my one love, farewell!"

Presently, looking across the dimness of the chamber, the professor saw Violet sink slowly upon her knees; he bowed his head reverently, and turned his eyes away.

Perhaps half an hour afterwards, Violet was roused from her wordless prayer by the professor's whispering:

"He is waking, my child."

She started up and hastened towards the bed. Aylmer opened his eyes, looked eagerly about, and cried:

"Violet, Violet!"

"I am here," she answered; "Laurence, I am here."

The professor rose and placed her gently in the chair, saying in her ear:

"Soothe him—quiet him—whatever he asks or says. He will be perfectly clear in his mind now."

Then he stole softly away into the adjoining room, and left the pair together.

"Violet, Violet!" Aylmer repeated.

"Yes, Laurence," she said, steadily.

He opened his eyes and looked at her with a beautiful smile.

"I knew you were here," he murmured; "even when I seemed quite unconscious, I always knew it."

"Yes, Laurence," she said again.

"My head is quite clear now," he continued; "oh, I wanted so much to tell you awhile ago, but I could not. I thought I should have to go out of the world without even being able to speak your name again—Violet, my Violet! Ah, I know you must understand—you must believe me now! I wrote—I remember writing—they will give you my letter later."

"I have read it," she said. "Do you hear—can you listen?"

He put out his hand feebly: she bent her forehead upon it as it rested on the edge of the bed.

"I love you," she said, in a slow, clear voice; "I have loved you all the time—can you believe me?"

He gazed up into her face with eyes fairly superhuman in their tenderness.

"Say it once more," he whispered.

"I love you, Laurence—I love you!"

He drew a long, deep breath, and his head, which he had partially lifted, sank back on the pillow—his eyes closed.

"Kiss me," he murmured.

She pressed her lips on his in a long, fervent caress. Then there was silence between them for a few moments; when she saw that he was looking at her again, that transcendent peace and happiness glorifying his eyes still, she said softly:

"I only thought of you, Laurence—try to believe that. I was older than you—I feared to yield to the dictates of my heart—afraid it would be a wrong to you! That was the only reason why I hesitated. For myself, I should have been prouder to hear you call me wife than to have been crowned queen of the whole world!"

"Is it too late?" he asked. "Ah, yes—too late for this world—and yet—and yet! Oh, my darling, if you could!"

He stretched out his hands feebly—clasped them about her neck, and her cheek rested on his bosom.

"Is it wrong to ask it?" he questioned. "Would it make it all harder for you? Ah, love, I could go away not venturing to murmur, if only I might call you my wife once here. I could wait for you then—I could be patient."

"Ask me anything," she answered, in a voice that was like a strain of heavenly music, so free from agitation did it sound. In this moment her soul was lifted too far above earth for any human weakness to disturb it. "Ask me anything—I will not refuse."

He uttered a low, inarticulate cry, so full of joy that it sounded like the utterance of some seraphic tongue already grown his own.

"My wife," he said presently; "you will be my wife?"

"I thank you for the wish," she murmured; "your wife, Laurence—your wife!"

And again their lips met—again that eloquent silence followed. Then she said suddenly: "You have forgiven——"

"Hush!" he interrupted; "between you and me, love, there could be nothing to forgive."

A wave from the sea of her mortal trouble which had been for a moment swept back, cast its bitter stretch across her soul.

"Oh, my heart, that I could doubt you!" she moaned.

"Under all you never did!" he answered. "Forget that—it was only a painful dream—we are awake now! Oh, my darling, happiness has nothing to do with time! Give me heaven here on my death-bed—my wife—my wife!"

"Your wife!" she echoed.

"To-morrow? Oh, remember, every hour is precious!"

"To-morrow," she whispered; "if the doctor consents, to-morrow."

"Where is he?" Aylmer asked.

Violet called his name. The professor appeared at the summons, came up to the bed, and stood over them.

"This is my wife," Aylmer said, drawing Violet's head closer to his breast. "You will not oppose a dying man—to-morrow, dear old friend?"

"To-morrow," the professor responded, and would have added other words, but his voice broke. He hurried back into the adjoining chamber, and cried like a child amid its solitude.

"This is worth years and years of ordinary life, love," Aylmer said. "Hold my hand—lay your dear face on the pillow—let me sleep now."

He slept again. After a time the professor looked into the room; worn out with fatigue, Violet slept too, her head resting close to her lover's—even in slumber their faces turned towards one another.

The next day came. Aylmer's strength held out; his mind remained as clear as at the most healthful moment of his life.

When the little group of friends were collected that morning, waiting till the professor or Violet should appear to give them news of the past night, the door opened, and Violet entered.

There was something so solemn, so holy in her face, that not one of those eager watchers could speak. The same thought struck each simultaneously—she had come to tell them there was no Laurence Aylmer any longer in the world. But as she drew near, she paused and said calmly:

"We are to be married at noon—I came to tell you."

The reaction in their minds was so sudden that nobody was able to answer. They kissed her one after another, and let her go away in silence. When the door closed, the three women began to weep softly. Sabakine sat with his face hidden in his hands—Carlo was sobbing without any effort to hide his tears.

Noon came. They gathered in the room where the wounded man lay: a temporary altar and odorous flowers made it like a chapel. Then the professor led Violet in: she was dressed in white from head to foot; so pale, so composed, so beautiful, that she looked rather like a spirit sent to summon the sufferer than an earthly bride.

The ceremony was performed; after a little they all stole out and left the husband and wife together.

"I can bear even the parting now," Laurence whispered; "God has been so good to me that I dare not murmur."

The day passed—evening drew on.

A change came over Aylmer; his temporary strength

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