LIKE AND UNLIKE

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," "VIXEN,"
"MOHAWKS," ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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LIKE AND UNLIKE

CHAPTER I.

MADGE WILDFIRE

THE mother neither repulsed nor encouraged her daughter's embrace. She let the girl's arms rest upon her neck for a few minutes, while she stood silent, with clouded brow.

"What do you want?" she asked at last.

"Nothing—in this house."

"Why have you come here?"

"For two reasons; first I wanted you, and next I thought you wanted me."

"You thought I wanted you," cried Mrs. Mandeville, with a scornful laugh—that discordant laugh which tells of an habitual assumption of mirthfulness. "Don't you think if I had wanted

you I should have gone to fetch you? I knew where you were to be found."

"You might want a daughter's love without knowing your need of her," answered the girl firmly, unabashed by the disorderly splendour of the room, or by her mother's mocking laughter.

She stood before the sinner as calmly as if she had been her guardian angel, sent to her from the Eternal Throne.

"I saw that you had been in great misery and despair," she continued; "I read of your unhappiness in a newspaper, and I felt it was time for me to go to you. The newspaper told me where you lived. It was my first chance of finding you."

"Poor child! And pray what use did you think your coming could be to me?"

"I might help you to make up your mind."

"To make up my mind! About what?"

"About leaving this house, mother dearest; about leaving a home in which you have been so miserable that you would have killed yourself to escape from it. Indeed, indeed, dear mother, there was no need to take that last desperate step. The

world is wide enough for every one. Let us go out into it together. You can never be more unhappy than you were when you tried to end your life. You may be happier, guarded by your daughter's love."

"Guarded by you!" exclaimed the other mockingly, yet with a touch of gentleness. "Oh, my poor, loving, forgiving child, what do you suppose you can do for me—you? No: it is all over with me, Madge. You should have kept clear of me—as I have kept clear of you. I might have come after you—might have brought you here—might have shown you London life and its pleasures and finery as I know them; but I was wiser for you than I had been for myself. Any kindness I can try to show her will be poison, I said to myself—better let her starve in the old man's hovel than feast with me. I kept clear of you for your own sake, Madge, though I dare say I seemed a cruel mother. Yes, for your own sake—and a little, perhaps, because I am hard by nature, and have never felt the want of a child's love. No, I may as well be candid. I didn't want you in the years

gone by, and I don't want you now. You have done a foolish thing in coming to this house, and the best thing you can do is to get out of it the first thing to-morrow morning, and go back to Devonshire by an early train—go back, and never tell the old father you have seen me."

"I am not going back. I have come to London for good. I am going to share my life with you. I am strong, and I can work for you—if I can get work to do. If I can't, we can starve together. It will be better than what you were going to do."

"Oh, don't harp upon it like that, girl. Don't ram that odious police report down my throat, or remind me of the devil that brought me to such a pass. I was out of my senses that night. You don't suppose I am always in the same humour, do you?"

"I think your life must have been very unhappy before it came to that."

"Yes; I have been miserable enough by fits and starts; but it has not been all misery. I have been the slave of a bad man—yes, his slave, though before the world he pretended to make me his queen. I have felt the bond wearing thin on both

sides—his and mine—have felt that the tie must soon snap; but I have held on, like grim death, rather than let him go. I think as our love has lessened I have grown more determined to hold him, and to prevent his going after any one else. I have made him pay pretty dearly for every insult he has put upon me. It has been pull devil, pull baker; but the baker—meaning me—has sometimes got the upper hand."

She broke into a vindictive laugh as she turned away from Madge, seeming almost to forget her presence. She stood with her elbow on the mantelboard, looking moodily down at the expiring fire.

"No, he has not had things all his own way," she muttered. "I have been a match for him—sometimes."

After an interval of brooding, she turned upon Madge sharply.

"Tell me the truth, child," she said. "I am a woman of the world, not easily humbugged. What brought you here?"

"I have told you my reasons, mother."

"Oh, that's all flummery. I've treated you very

badly. I was in low water when I took you back to the hovel where I was reared, or I don't suppose I should have done such a thing. And then afterwards—it was wiser to leave you there. What love can there be between us then? Mother and child! The words are a mere empty sound to you and me."

"Not to me, mother. I have nothing in the world to love—but you. You can have my whole heart if you will. I will be your slave, if you will leave this house and go out into the world with me, trusting in Providence for the rest."

"Have you any money?"

"A few shillings."

"Any home in London?"

"Not yet. We can look for a lodging together."

"The girl is mad."

"Not madder than you were, mother, when you tried to poison yourself," said Madge resolutely. "You confessed that it was not the first time you had tried. And you meant to die, you said. There can be nothing that you and I may have to face together worse than death: and you will at least escape from—shame."

Her voice sank almost to a whisper as she spoke that final word.

"You talk like a book," said the mother, still cynical.

"I talk to you from the depths of my heart," answered the girl. "I had been thinking and wondering about you for a long time before I saw that newspaper. I had yearned for you in the loneliness of my life, and when I saw that, I thought my time had come. I had more than one motive. I hated my life down yonder—hated myself. I wanted some one to work for—some purpose to strive for. I come to you penniless, but not helpless. I am young and strong, and know how to work. Mother, you will trust your life to me, won't you? You were not afraid of death; why should you be afraid of poverty."

"Because it's a great deal worse than death. One means the blowing out of a light; a puff, and all is over. No more pain, no more rage and bitterness. No growing old and ugly, when one has been an acknowledged beauty. Poverty is the smouldering of the candle, burning slowly down in

the socket, guttering, flaring, stinking itself out into darkness. Poverty for a woman who has lived as I have lived is worse than a hundred sudden deaths, if one could die a hundred times over by pulling a trigger or tying a noose."

"But, mother, to escape from a bad life—from all that has ever been evil in your life—to feel yourself honest and brave and true. Who would not eat dry bread for the sake of that?"

Mrs. Mandeville did not answer immediately. She began to pace the room, with her hands clasped above her head, her hair streaming over her shoulders, the white round arms bare to the elbows—arms that a girl might have been proud of, arms which had been the admiration of a whole theatre sometimes, when this woman sat *perdue* in her box, one white arm lying on the dark velvet cushion, spanned with diamonds.

She paced the room silently for three or four minutes: and then stopped abruptly, facing her daughter.

"Madge, had you come to me three years ago with such a proposition, I suppose I should have

laughed in your face. I was in luck then—this house was just furnished. I had two of the best saddle-horses in London, and a victoria that took the shine out of half the titled ladies—those strait-laced ones, I mean, who hold their heads high because they have *not* been through the Divorce Court. I had it all my own way just then—yes, I was better off than when I was your age. But things are changed. We have gone too fast, both of us. It's all up, money gone—and love gone with it, girl. You know what they say—when poverty comes in at the door, love flies out of the window. We never took to quarrelling desperately till he began to lose his money. There is very little choice for me, Madge—death or the workhouse—that's about what it means—unless—unless——"

"Unless what, mother?"

"Unless there should be a pigeon so well worth plucking that the crow can feather his nest again."

"I don't understand you, mother."

"I don't want you to understand me. You ought never to have come here," answered Mrs. Mandeville impatiently.

She was a creature of impulse and whim, having hot fits and cold fits, now all sentiment, anon vulgar almost to brutality, a brilliant uneducated woman, who had seen the world in many phases, and always on its worst side.

She rang a bell violently, and the maid who had admitted Madge appeared so much more quickly than is the manner of her kind, that it might be guessed she had been listening on the landing.

"Has Colonel Mandeville come in?"

"No, ma'am, and cook says the dinner won't be fit to throw in a pig trough."

"She had better serve it decently for all that, if the Colonel should bring the two gentlemen I expect."

"I don't think there's much use in expecting anybody now, ma'am. It's past nine o'clock," the maid answered, with an off-handed air.

"They may come any time before midnight. Let the dinner be kept back somehow, and not burnt to a cinder, as the quails were the last time the Colonel dined at home, tell cook."

The girl went out, slamming the door behind her.

"Madge," said her mother, "if the man I expect is not here before midnight, I will go where you like to-morrow morning."

"Dear mother," cried the girl, trying to caress her.

"Don't touch me! I feel like a tigress. It is not for love of you I shall go, but for hatred of him. Oh, the scoundrel, the relentless scoundrel, to leave me like this in my old age. He told me the other night that I was an old woman, and that was why nobody cared to come to my house. He said that, when it was his shameless cheating at cards that had frightened away all but the greenest young fools; and there were not fools enough to serve his turn; and he rounded on me—his decoy. And he deserts me now, with an execution in the house, and a man in possession, and every jewel and every rag I own stripped from me. And yet there are women who are not half so handsome as I have been, who have saved fortunes and bought landed estates. It is an infamous shame. I will go with

you to-morrow morning if things are not set straight to-night. You shall have some supper, and there is a room over this where you can sleep." She put her hand upon the bell, but Madge stopped her.

"Don't, mother," she said resolutely, yet not ungently. "I can't stop in this house."

"You can't! Why not, pray?"

"There's no need to say why. I have to get a lodging in the north of London, near the Gray's Inn Road."

"To-night! Nearly ten o'clock, and you a stranger in London. You must be mad."

"No, I am not, mother. I know where to go, and I don't care how far it is. I shall be here to-morrow morning; if you won't come with me to-night—at once."

"Go with you to the East End; to hunt for a room to shelter us—to spend the night in a casual ward, perhaps. A tempting invitation, upon my soul."

"We shall not have to hunt. I have the address of a respectable lodging-house. It was given

me by a housemaid at Lady Belfield's, a girl who had been in a factory before she went into service."

"How do you know that there will be room for you in your respectable lodging-house, or that the housemaid told you the truth about its respectability?"

"She was a good, honest girl, and I can trust her. Mother, why not come with me now?" urged the girl pleadingly.

No woman's voice had ever addressed Margaret Mandeville with so much tenderness, never till to-night had a woman's arms entwined themselves about her neck. And this girl was her own flesh and blood, her only child, looking at her with appealing eyes, trying to lure her away from the brimstone path. And of late the brimstone path had not been a way of pleasantness.

"No, I must see to-night out," said Mrs. Mandeville, between her set teeth. "I must see if he can be villain enough to abandon me."

"Mother, were you ever fond of this cruel man, who treats you so shamefully?" asked Madge earnestly.

Her own hopeless love made her sympathetic. She could pity this older woman who had sacrificed all for the man from whom she now had only neglect for her guerdon.

"Was I ever fond of him? Yes," muttered Mrs. Mandeville. "Don't I tell you that I was his slave. I have had my admirers by the dozen—I have had my victims, too, and have wasted three or four fortunes in my time. I was not called Madge Wildfire for nothing. But this one was the only man I ever cared for—the only one who was the same to me in riches or poverty—the only one for whom I made sacrifices. You would think I was lying, perhaps, if I were to tell you the chances I have had, and thrown away for his sake. You think, perhaps, that such as we don't have our chances. But we do, girl, and better chances than the women who are brought up in cotton-wool, and looked after by affectionate mothers and high-minded fathers. I might have married a man with half a million of money. I might have married a man with a handle to his name, and might have been called my lady, and your ladyship—I, Madge

Wildfire. But I flung away my chances, because I loved Jack Mandeville—loved him and stuck to him till he got tired of me, and only valued me as a handsome decoy, to sit at the head of his dinner table, and look sweet at his rich young dupes when they dropped in for a night's play. This house has cost Colonel Mandeville very little, Madge; but he is tired of it, and of me. He let me give a bill of sale on the furniture to my milliner, and there is an execution in for nine hundred pounds odd, and if that's not paid out every stick will be sold, and I shall be turned into the street. I owe my landlord three quarters' rent, and he's furious about the bill of sale. There'll be no mercy from him, even if I could live in a house without furniture. That's how the land lies. That was what drove me to poison myself. I saw ruin staring me in the face, and I saw that Mandeville did not care what became of me."

"Why stay here then? Why not come with me at once?"

"Because he may change his mind—he may bring me the money to-night. He has not been

here since that business with the poison. But I wrote to him this morning at his club, a letter that might melt a stone. He may help me after all. He may be here to-night."

"Very well, mother. I will come again to-morrow morning," said Madge, kissing her mother's burning forehead, and then moving towards the door.

"You had better stay upon the premises if you want to save me from myself."

"Anything but that. No, mother, I *must* go. But I promise to be here early."

"But to-morrow I don't promise to see you," answered Mrs. Mandeville angrily. "You are a proud, cold-hearted, insolent slut. I never want to see your face again."

"I shall be here to-morrow morning," said Madge, unmoved by this burst of temper; and she was gone.

CHAPTER II.

IN THE WILDERNESS.

THIS journey to a strange city was not so wild an act upon Madge's part as it might seem on the surface of things. She had thought long and seriously before launching her frail bark upon that tempestuous sea. She was a girl of strong character, a resolute, energetic nature, which could scarce go on existing without an object to live for. The mere sluggish, monotonous eating and drinking and sleeping and waking, the empty mechanism of life, was not enough for her. She must have some one to love: she must have something to do.

Her fellow-servants at the Abbey had wondered at the impetus with which this novice in the art of house-cleaning had set about her work, the vehement industry with which she had cleaned brasses and polished looking-glasses, and swept

and dusted. That strong frame needed movement; that tumultuous heart could only be calmed by constant occupation.

She had loved Valentine Belfield with all her might. She had been tempted many a time to fling herself into his arms, to throw herself in the dust at his feet, to surrender to him as a beaten foe surrenders, slavishly, knowing not what her future was to be, what the cost of that self-abandonment. But she had battled with that weaker half of her nature—the woman's passionate heart; and the strong brain, which had something masculine in its power, had come to her rescue. She had sworn to herself with clenched hands and set teeth that she would not go that easy, fatal road by which so many girls have travelled; girls whose stories she knew, girls who had been shining lights in the parish school, model students in the Scripture classes, white-veiled saints at confirmation. She would not do as they had done, yield to the first tempter.

If her mother had gone wrong, there was so much the more reason that she should cleave to the right.

She fought that hard fight between love and honour, but the agony of the strife was bitter, and it aged and hardened her. She hardened still more when she saw her lover transferring his liking to another woman. She was keen to note the progress of that treacherous love. Helen had found her the handiest and cleverest of the housemaids, and had preferred her services to those of any one else. And while she assisted at Beauty's toilet, Madge had ample opportunity to note the phases of Beauty's mind, and to discover the kind of intellect that worked behind that classic forehead, and the quality of the heart which beat under that delicately moulded bust.

She found Colonel Deverill's daughter shallow and fickle and false. She discovered her treason—had seen her with Valentine just often enough to be sure of their treachery against Adrian. And by this time she had discovered Adrian's infinite superiority to his brother in all the higher attributes of manhood. She knew this, yet she had not wavered. Her nature was too intense for the possibility of fickleness or inconstancy. She

loved with purpose and sincerity, as well as with passion. There was no wavering in her affection, yet she admired Adrian with a power of appreciation which was far in advance of her education. Passing to and fro in the corridor near the library, she had stopped from time to time to listen to the organ or the piano, under those sympathetic fingers. Music was a passion with her, and till this time she had heard scarcely any music except the church organ, indifferently played by a feeble old organist. This music of Adrian's was a revelation in its infinite variety, its lightness, its solemnity, its unspeakable depths of feeling.

Once in the winter twilight she heard him playing Gounod's "Faust," gliding from number to number, improvising in the darkness of the old sombre room, where there was no light but the glow of the fire. The lamp had not yet been lighted in the corridor; the other servants were all at their tea; Madge crouched in the embrasure of the door, and drank in those sounds to her heart's content.

When he played the "Dies Irae" she fell on

her knees, and had to wrestle with herself lest she should burst into sobs.

In another of those solitary twilight hours, while Helen and Valentine were out with the hounds, he played "Don Giovanni," and again Madge crouched in his doorway and drank in the sweet sounds. The lighter music moved her differently, yet in this there were airs that thrilled her. There was an awfulness sometimes in the midst of the lightness. When the spring came and the afternoons were light she could no longer lurk in the corridor; but her attic was in a gable above the library, and when Sir Adrian's windows were open she could hear every note in the still April air.

The sound of that music seemed a kind of link between them, for apart as they were in all other things, and over and above her jealousy on her own account, she was angry and jealous for Adrian's sake. She could have wept over him as the victim of a woman's feebleness, a man's treachery.

And now she told herself that she had nothing

to love or care for upon this earth. He who had wooed her with such passionate persistence a few months ago had transferred his love to another. She stood alone in the world; and in her loneliness her heart yearned for that erring mother, of whose face she had no memory.

She tried to penetrate the mists of vanished years, to grope back to that infantine existence before her grandfather had found her squatting beside his hearth in the autumn twilight. He had told her that she was old enough to talk a little, and to toddle about at his heels. Surely she ought to be able to remember.

Yes, she had a kind of memory, so faint and dim, that she could scarcely distinguish realities from dreams in that remote past.

Yes, she remembered movement, constant movement, rolling wheels, summer boughs, summer dust, clouds of dust, white dust that choked her as she lay asleep in that rolling home, amidst odours of hay and straw. She remembered rain, endless days of rain and greyness, dull, dreary days, when she squatted on the loose straw at the bottom

of a gipsy's van, staring out at a dull, dim world.

There was a dog, which she was fond of. The sensation of a dog's warm, friendly tongue licking her face always recalled those long, slow hours of dull grey rain or sunlit dust; that strange vague time in which the days rolled into the nights, without difference or distinction, and in which faces mixed themselves somehow, no one face being more vivid than another. There was no memory of a mother's face, bending over her in day-time and night-time, nearer and more familiar than all the rest.

Despite this void in her memory, she had yearned after the mere idea of motherly love. She had seen other girls with their mothers, scolded and petted, kissed and slapped by turns: and in spite of the slaps and hard words, she had seen that a mother's love was a good thing —strong and tender, and inexhaustible. And then, as she progressed from the knowledge of good to the knowledge of evil, she brooded over the mystery of that life which she had been told

was full of shame, and began to meditate how she was to help and save her erring mother. She had heard her grandfather prophesy evil for his ungrateful daughter; the evil days that were to come with faded beauty and broken health, the natural end of a wicked life.

At the Abbey, Madge's knowledge of the world grew daily. Her fellow-servants were older than herself, quick witted, experienced in that seamy side of life which is seen from the butler's pantry and the servants' hall. The old Abbey servants were rural and narrow enough; but there were those who had served in many households before they came to the Abbey, and these knew the world in many phases.

One to whom Madge took most kindly was a woman of thirty, who had taken to domestic service only five years before, after losing a widowed mother, with whom and for whom she had toiled in a factory from fifteen to five-and-twenty.

It was a cartridge factory in the Gray's Inn Road, at which Jane White and her mother had

worked, the mother off and on as her health permitted, the daughter from year's end to year's end, without respite. They had occupied a couple of attics in a side street not far from the factory; they had their own poor sticks of furniture, and had lived in their two little rooms under the tiles, happy enough, till death came to part them; and then Jane White sickened of her loneliness and her independence, and she, who had once sworn that she would never eat the bread of servitude, never call any one master or mistress, changed her mind all at once and went into service for company's sake.

She was an energetic, hard-working girl, and made a good servant, so good that, after emigrating to Devonshire with a middle-class family, whose service she left after a year or so in a huff, the rumour of her good qualities reached Mrs. Marrable through the butcher's foreman, and she was engaged as second housemaid at the Abbey.

Here Madge took to her, as the kindliest of all her fellow-servants, and from her Madge learned all she knew of London, and the possibility of an

industrious girl maintaining herself by the labour of her hands.

Was cartridge making hard to learn, Madge asked.

No, it was learned by easy stages. There were hands taken on that knew nothing about it before they went there. Jane White gave Madge a little pencil note addressed to a man who was an authority in the factory, who engaged the hands and dismissed them at his pleasure.

"We used to walk out together on Sunday evenings," said Jane, "and I think he'd do a good turn to any friend of mine. He might want to walk out with you, perhaps, if you took his fancy, but it would be for you to settle that. He's a well-conducted young man."

Madge smiled a smile of exceeding bitterness, but was mute.

And now in the mild spring night she tramped from Mayfair to Gray's Inn Road, inquiring her way very often, and plodding resolutely onward with her face to the east, caring nothing for the strangeness of those everlasting streets, or the

lateness of the hour. She had such a dogged air, seemed so absorbed in the business she was bent upon, that no one addressed her, or tried to hinder her progress. But fast as she walked it was nearly eleven o'clock when she arrived in the dingy, little street at the back of Gray's Inn Road, so far behind the road as to be in the rear of the prison, which she passed shudderingly, for the idea of captive criminals was new and thrilling to her.

Jane had told her that the woman with whom she had lodged was a sempstress, and always at her sewing machine till after midnight; so, though the clocks were striking eleven as she passed the prison, Madge had no fear of finding the door shut in her face. The only question was as to whether the landlady would have an unoccupied room to give her. She found the number. The street was squalid, but the house looked tidier than its neighbours, and the door step was clean. There was a paraffin lamp burning brightly in the little parlour, and the lean elderly female who answered the door had an air of decent poverty. She looked at Madge suspiciously, but on hearing Jane White's

name, she softened, and at once became friendly, and acknowledged that she had room for a lodger.

"It's the bedroom where Jane and her mother used to sleep," she said. "I furnished it after they left. It's a clean, airy room, with a nice look out towards King's Cross. It'll be half-a-crown a week, and you'll have to pay for washing the linen, and beyond boiling your kettle for you in summer time, you musn't expect any attendance from me. I'm too busy to wait upon lodgers, and I only charge the bare rent of the room."

"That will suit me very well," answered Madge. "It will be for my mother and me."

"Oh," said the woman, "you've got a mother, have you? What does she do for a living?"

Madge reddened at the question.

"Nothing, just at present," she said; "she's out of health."

"But I suppose you are working at something," asked the woman, waxing suspicious. "You're not living on your fortune," with a sneer.

Madge explained her views about the cartridge factory, and, reassured by this, Mrs. Midgery took

her up the steep, uncarpeted stairs to the attic, with its one dormer window, looking over a forest of chimney-pots towards the glories of King's Cross and its triple stations. At this hour there was nothing to be seen from the window but the distant whiteness of the electric light, shining between the smoke and the clouds.

It was a small, shabby room, with an ancient iron bedstead, two rush-bottomed chairs, a rickety chest of drawers, and a still more rickety table. Everything in the room was one-sided and uneven, beginning with the floor, which was obviously uphill from the door towards the window. However, the room looked clean, and had a wholesome odour of yellow soap, as of boards that had been lately scrubbed.

"It's an old house," said Mrs. Midgery, with a deprecating air, "and an old house never pays anybody for their work; but there's no one can say I don't slave over it."

Madge took out her shabby little purse, a cast-off purse of Mrs. Marrable's, which that good soul had bestowed upon her one morning with other uncon-

sidered trifles that had been eliminated in the process of tidying a bureau. She gave Mrs. Midgery one of her last half-crowns, a week's rent in advance; and at this unasked-for payment she rose considerably in her landlady's estimation.

"I believe we shall get on very well together," she said. "I hope your mother is like you."

Madge was silent, looking round the little room in a reverie, comparing it with the luxurious litter, the velvet and lace curtains, and heaped-up cushions and easy chairs of the room in Mayfair. Could she hope that any woman with her mother's experience would endure life in such a garret as this?

But what if there were only the choice between the garret and suicide, and if the garret meant rescue from a bad man's alternate tyranny and neglect?

CHAPTER III.

BREAKING THE SPELL

For Valentine and Helen the summer and autumn of that eventful year drifted away unawares in one long honeymoon. They lived for each other, in a fond and foolish dream of love that was to be endless, contentment that was to know no change. They scarcely knew the days of the week, never the days of the month, in that blissful dream-time. They wrote no letters, they scarcely looked at a newspaper, they held no intercourse with the outside world. For a time love was enough—love and the luxurious idleness of the lake or the mountain side, the languid bliss of long moonlight evenings in the balcony or verandah, or on terraced walks, looking down upon a lake. The mountains and lakes were with them everywhere—an everlasting background to the mutability of honeymoon lovers.

They were happy in being at least six weeks in advance of the common herd. They had the great, white hotels almost to themselves. There was a reposeful silence in the empty corridors and broad staircases. They could lounge in gardens and summer-houses without fear of interruption from cockney or colonial, Yankee misses or German professors. In this happy summer time, Valentine gave full scope to the counterbalancing characteristic of his nature. He, who as a sportsman or an athlete was indefatigable—a creature of inexhaustible energies and perpetual motion—now showed a fine capacity for laziness. No languid æsthete, fanning himself with a penny palm-leaf, and sniffing at a sunflower, ever sprawled and dawdled with more entire self-abandonment than this thrower of hammers and jumper of long jumps.

He would lie on his back in the sun, and let Helen read to him from breakfast to luncheon. He would lie in the stern of a boat all the afternoon. He would find it too great a burden to dress for dinner, and would take the meal *tête-à-*

tête in an arbour, sprawling in a velvet shooting-jacket. He would allow his honeymoon bride to run upstairs for his handkerchief, his cigar-case, his favourite pipe or tobacco-pouch, twenty times a day.

"I like running your errands, love," the fair slave declared. "It does me good."

"I really think it does, sweet; for you always look prettier after one of those scampers. But you needn't rush all the way, pet. I am not in such a desperate hurry," added the Sultan graciously.

"But I am, Val. I want to be back with you. I count every moment wasted that parts us."

They stayed at Interlaken till the first week in July, and then went up to Murren for a week. It seemed further away from the herd, which was now beginning to pour into Switzerland. And then they wandered on to the Riffel, and anon into Italy, and dawdled away another six weeks beside the Italian lakes, always in the same placid idleness, reading only the very whipped cream of the book world, the lightest syllabubs and trifles in

the shape of literature; knowing no more of the progress of the great busy, bustling world than they could learn from *Punch* or the Society papers, Helen reading the sporting articles aloud to her Sultan, and poring over the fashion articles afterwards for her own gratification.

She would clap her hands in a rapture over one of those enthralling essays.

"Isn't this too lovely, Val? Madge says that there is to be *nothing* but olive green to be worn next winter; and I have three olive-green gowns in my trousseau."

"What a pity," said Valentine. "I like you in nothing so well as in white, like that gown you have on to-day, for example, soft white muslin rippling over with lace."

"But one can't walk about in white muslin in January, Val. I think you'll manage to like me a little in my olive-green tailor gown, with Astrachan collar and cuffs."

"I've no doubt you look adorable in it; but my taste inclines me to all that is most feminine in woman's dress. The stern simplicity of a tailor

gown always suggests a strong-minded young woman with stand-offish manners—the kind of person who talks politics and calls young men puppies."

"You need not be afraid of my talking politics," said Helen, proud of her ignorance.

"No, love; that pretty little head has no room in it for big questions."

The longest honeymoon must come to an end at last. Long as it was, Valentine knew no satiety in that solitude of two, that unbroken dualogue in which the subject was always love's young dream. Helen was pretty enough and sweet enough in her fondness and subjection to keep this self-willed and selfish nature in a paradise of content. Still, the dream-life among lakes and mountains must come to an end somehow. Valentine gave up otter-hunting without a sigh; he let the Twelfth slip by, though he had an invitation for Scotland and another for Yorkshire—moors that were to cost his friends three or four hundred pounds for the season, and which were well worth shooting over. He gave up the beginning of the partridge

season, and disappointed a particular chum whose estate in Norfolk was famous for its partridges. But he told Helen one day that he must be back at the Abbey in time for the pheasants.

"We can be in London for the last week in September," he said, "and we can inspect the flat which my mother has furnished for us in the wilds of South Kensington. I should have preferred Mayfair or St. James's; but I am told our income would not stretch to Mayfair."

"Our income," sighed Helen. "How good of you to say 'ours,' when I did not bring you a sixpence."

"What did Helen bring to Paris? Not much, I fancy, dearest; and yet even the old fogies of Troy thought she was worth fighting for. You brought me beauty and youth and love. What more could the heart of man desire?"

He kissed the fair face bending over him, as he lay on a sofa by an open window, with the moths droning in and out from the dewy garden, and with the mists of night rising slowly between lawn and lake.

"Yes, dear, we had better go back about the twentieth, I take it."

"And this is the fourth! So soon! And then our honeymoon will be over," said Helen sorrowfully. "Shall we ever be as happy again as we have been among the mountains and lakes?"

"Why not? We shall be just as happy next summer, I hope—somewhere else. We would not come here again, of course."

"Oh, Val, does that mean you are tired of Maggiore—tired of our honeymoon?"

"No, love, but I think we have had quite enough of Switzerland, and the Italian lakes—at any rate for the next ten years."

"Oh, Val, there is a tone in your voice as if you had been bored."

He yawned before he answered.

"I have been intensely happy, child—but, well, I think we have been idle long enough, don't you?"

"No, no, no—not half long enough. I should like this delicious life to go on for ever."

"And you are not longing to see your sister, and the shops?"

"Not a bit."

"Well, I confess to a hankering after my tailor, and an inclination for my favourite club."

"Oh, Val, do you belong to a club?" she exclaimed ruefully.

"Not being a naked savage I certainly do belong to more than one club, my pet; or rather I have three or four clubs belonging to me by right of election."

"And your favourite club, which is that?"

"It is rather a—well—a rapid club. It is a temple whose name is rarely spoken in the broad light of day. It only begins to have any positive existence towards midnight, and its pulse beats strongest on the brink of dawn."

"Is it one of those dreadful clubs where they play cards?"

"Yes, it shares that privilege in common with a good many other clubs, from the Carlton downwards."

"But now you are married, Val, you will give up most of your clubs, I hope."

"My dearest child, that shows how little you

know of the London world. London to a man in my position means club-land. It is nothing else. A man lives in London because his clubs are there; not because his house is there. The club in modern life is the Forum, the Agora, the rendezvous of all that is best and wisest in the town."

"But a club that only begins to exist at night——"

"Is the necessary finish to a man's day. I shall not go there so often as I used to go, of course, now I am married; but you will have your evening engagements, and while you are listening to classical music, which I abhor, or dancing, which I was always a duffer at, I can slip round to the Pentheus for an hour or so, and be back in time to hand you to your carriage."

"The Pentheus. Is that the name of your favourite club?"

"Yes; that is the name."

Helen had an unhappy feeling from the moment the date of their return was fixed. She had revelled with a childish joy in her honeymoon.

She had been proud of its length. "So long, and we are not the least little bit tired of each other, are we, Val?" she had said twenty times, in her enthusiasm, and had been assured with kisses that there was no shadow of weariness on her adoring husband's part.

"Leo declared we should be sick of each other before the end of June," she said, "and we shall have been away three months. But I can't help feeling somehow as if going back to England will be like the breaking of a spell."

Her prophecy seemed to her to realize itself rather painfully on the homeward journey. It was a long journey, and Valentine was in a hurry to be in London. They travelled by considerable stages, and the heat was intolerable, such heat and such dust as Helen had never experienced before. The stuffiness of the carriage, the slowness of the train, the frequent stoppages, the crowded buffets, the selfish crowd, were all trying to a man of difficult and imperious temper. Valentine's temper, after the first three hours of that ordeal, became diabolical. He ignored Helen; he thought of nothing

but his own discomfort. He angrily rejected all her little attentions, her fannings and dabbings of eau-de-cologne, her offers of grapes and peaches her careful adjustment of blind or window.

"I wish you'd stop that d——d worrying," he exclaimed. "The heat is bad enough without your abominable fidgeting to make it worse."

Yes, the spell was broken. The honeymoon was over. They stopped in Paris for a couple of days at the Hotel du Louvre, and here life was pleasant again, and Helen was happy with her Sultan, sitting about under the great glass roof, reading the newspapers and sipping cool drinks. But on the second evening of their stay, Valentine went off directly after dinner to hunt up a bachelor friend in the Faubourg St. Honoré, promising to be back early.

He kept his word in one sense, for it was early next morning when he returned. Helen had been lying awake in the spacious bed-room with its three long windows facing the Rue de Rivoli. The night was very warm, and all the windows were open. She had heard every stroke of the bells of

Notre Dame, and she knew that it was nearly three o'clock when her husband came in.

"Oh, Val," she exclaimed, reproachfully. "You promised to be home early. It has been such a long dismal night."

"Why the deuce couldn't you go to sleep and make it shorter," retorted Mr. Belfield, in accents that were somewhat thicker than his ordinary speech. "I couldn't get back any sooner. De Mauprat had some fellows to supper, and I wasn't master of my time."

CHAPTER IV.

NOT A DOMESTIC MAN

THE nest for the love-birds from honeymoon-land was as pretty a nest as one could find after the new fashion of many homes under one roof. It was a third floor flat in a newly erected range of mansions near the Victoria Road, Kensington, a range which had been called Wilkie Mansions, because the great painter had once lived somewhere thereabouts, in the long-forgotten days when the villages of Kensington and Brompton were separated by rustic lanes and market gardens. The houses were red brick, flamboyant-Flemish in style, miscalled Queen Anne. Oriel windows jutted out at every available point, and wherever a niche and a flower-pot could be introduced, the niche and the pot were there. Impossible balconies of artistic ironwork projected from every story, sunflower

minarets glittered along the roof, and no two windows were of the same shape.

The flat had been ostensibly chosen and ostensibly furnished by Lady Belfield; but she had in her graciousness invited Mrs. Baddeley to be her counsellor, and Mrs. Baddeley had been the prevailing spirit in all things. When it was found impossible to get a small house in a good neighbourhood at a reasonable rent, it was Mrs. Baddeley who suggested a flat, and dwelt upon the privilege of paying no taxes.

"But I think one is hardly a gainer by having one's taxes included in one's rent," said Lady Belfield, "and the rents of these flats seem to be extortionate."

"The rents are high, no doubt, but then it is so nice to pay rent and taxes with one cheque, and not to be obliged to puzzle one's poor uncommercial brain about highway rates or Queen's taxes," said Leo pleasantly. "I have taken a delicious little flat in Wilkie Mansions. It is on the third floor; but there is a lift, so distance is no consequence. There are four rooms, and a dear little squeezy

room, lighted by a skylight opening on the stairs, which will just accommodate two servants. The decorations are lovely; pure Queen Anne, and the rent is only a hundred and fifty. Why should not Mr. Belfield and Helen take the corresponding flat on the other side of the stairs? It would be so nice for Helen and me to be living in the same house, always at hand to help each other in any way, and yet thoroughly independent of each other."

Lady Belfield received the suggestion favourably. No doubt it would be good for the sisters to be near each other. Helen was very young to begin life alone; and Valentine was too restless a spirit to settle down into the stay-at-home domestic husband, who lectures the maidservants, finds out cobwebs in the corners of the cornice, and twaddles through existence at his wife's apron-string. The mother's experience of her son had warned her that he might prove a neglectful husband.

She took kindly to the idea of those rooms opposite Mrs. Baddeley's apartments. They were bright and airy, and the topmost boughs of the

good old elms in Kensington Gardens could just be descried from the oriel window.

"A charming view," said Mrs. Baddeley, who was always in love with a new abode.

Her husband was to go back to the East in November, and was likely to be away two or three years. Colonel Deverill, having safely established his second daughter, had become a nomad. His year's tenancy of Morcomb would expire before the end of the year; and he had told his elder child frankly that he should only have Kilrush for a *pied-à-terre* henceforward.

"*There,* my love, you will always be welcome," he said kindly.

"Poor papa forgets that I loathe the place," Leo told her husband. "I must have my own *pied-à-terre,* and it must be in London; and then there will be a home ready for you, Frank, when you leave the army and look about you for something to do."

It was understood that Major Baddeley was to retire from active service in a few years, and that he was to eke out his income somehow. His ideas

upon the subject were shadowy. He had floating visions of turning wine-merchant, guinea-pig, or going on the stage. He had a notion that a man of his appearance, and with the true cavalry-mess manner, ought to do well at a West End theatre.

He gave a long whistle at the idea of his wife setting up an establishment of her own.

"Won't it go into money, Leo?" he said.

"Not much, and it can't be helped if it does," she answered coolly. "I must live somewhere, and there will be no home for me with papa after he gives up Morcomb. I shall be very economical, and I mean to earn a hatful of money by literature. I am sure I could write better than lots of people whose books sell, if I put my shoulder to the wheel."

"I am sure you could, Leo. You're out and away the cleverest woman I know, and I think there's nothing you could not do," said Frank, with enthusiasm.

So the rooms were taken, and furnished in the Japanese style, Mrs. Baddeley having obtained an introduction to a wholesale Oriental firm in the

City, one of whose members had a son in Major Baddeley's regiment.

It was to this Oriental warehouse that Mrs. Baddeley conducted Lady Belfield when the matter of furniture was first discussed. The Japanese style was her passion, and Lady Belfield allowed herself to be influenced by the sight of gold-embroidered screens and bamboo blinds, enamelled vases, and curiously carved ebony cabinets; and almost before she knew what she was doing, she had allowed her son's new home to become a kind of temple, where josses nodded in every corner and beaded bamboo curtains rustled at every door, and where the floors were covered with a parti-coloured rush matting, which looked delightful in summer, but which might have a chilly effect in winter. Here, however, the remedy was easy, and Mrs. Baddeley selected half a dozen costly Indian rugs, which were to lie about the rooms in your true artistic style and trip visitors up unexpectedly.

To this Japanese bower Mr. Belfield and his wife came on a sultry September afternoon about tea-time, and were warmly welcomed by Mrs.

Baddeley, whose dexterous hands had filled the vases with poppies, cornflowers, and nasturtiums, in clusters of vivid colour, and had made picturesque arrangements of bulrushes and palm leaves in the fireplaces and lobby. Everything was very small, very elegant, and harmonious.

The master of the dainty little house was the only object that looked out of place. He seemed ever so much too big for his surroundings.

"What a fine toyshop you have got for a drawing-room, Leo," he said, looking round him in scornful amusement. "I hope our sticks are a little more substantial."

"My dear Valentine, these *are* your sticks. This is your apartment, don't you know. Mine is almost exactly like it, over the way."

Valentine's brow darkened.

"Do you mean to tell me that my mother chose all this trumpery?" he asked rudely.

"Lady Belfield certainly chose the furniture, with a little assistance from me; but I beg to assure you that there is not a bit of trumpery in your rooms. Everything is substantial, solid——

Good heavens, Valentine, how clumsy you are!" exclaimed Mrs. Baddeley, interrupting herself hastily, as a lacquer table, gold and vermilion, twelve-legged, beautiful, was whisked over by the owner's coat tails.

"And you expect me to live in a room of this kind, like a stall at a charity bazaar," ejaculated Valentine. "I thought my mother had more sense. I thought she knew me better than to waste her money on such accursed rubbish."

"But, dearest Val, everything is positively lovely," pleaded Helen, looking as if she were just going to cry, "and it is all the height of fashion."

"Fashion!" cried her husband. "Does a man sit upon fashion, or eat his dinner off fashion, or keep himself warm with fashion? There is not a chair in this room I should like to sit in, and in cold weather it will be a place to shiver in rather than to live in. Egad, I shall have to sit in my Astrachan coat if I sit here at all."

"A drawing-room is usually considered the wife's province. Her taste is supposed to be para-

mount there," observed Mrs. Baddeley, with dignity.

"I suppose that's the reason so many men live at their clubs," said Valentine.

"Oh, Val, we can change all the furniture if you don't like it," exclaimed Helen piteously; "don't say that you'll desert me for those horrid clubs."

"Is the dining-room—Japanese—too?" Valentine asked Mrs. Baddeley, with ineffable disgust, completely ignoring Helen.

"You had better look at it and judge for yourself," replied Leo, with her stateliest air. "Good-bye, Helen. I thought I might have poured out your tea on your first afternoon, as you must be rather tired. But I'll come and see you another time, when your husband is in a better temper."

She sailed out of the room with her head in the air, and Mr. Belfield made not the faintest attempt to prevent her departure, nor did he take any more notice of her exit than if a fly had flown out of the window.

Helen had learnt her lesson of submission already.

"Let us look at the dining-room, Val," she said sweetly. "I'm sure that will be nice," and her husband followed her in dogged silence.

Drawing-room and dining-room were divided only by an archway and an Oriental curtain. Very picturesque, very inconvenient, draughty in winter, stuffy in summer, letting the smell of the dinner into the drawing-room at all seasons.

"How convenient for throwing the two rooms into one when we have an evening party," said Helen, waxing hopeful at the idea.

"And when you have thrown your two rooms into one, where are you to feed your people?" asked Valentine.

"Oh, one doesn't feed people of an evening. We could give tea and coffee and ices in the lobby."

The drawing-room was light and aerial; the dining-room was dark and ponderous. Here, too, all was Oriental, but it was the Orientalism of India; mysterious, uncanny, suggestive of Jugger-

naut and Bowanie. The sideboard was Bombay black-wood, richly carved, and flourished all over with dragons and demons, surmounted with a sacred bull, in bronze, copied from the antique. The curtains were tawny, splashed with red, and might have been symbolical of fire and gore. The square centre carpet was rich, yet sombre, with a surrounding of slippery floor, stained dark as ebony. Three Titanic armchairs, covered in different tones of olive and tawny plush, nearly filled the room, and a small oval table, heavily carved, indicated that only the most select dinner parties would be given in that Oriental temple. The fireplace glowed and glittered with brass and blood-red tiles; the over-mantel was black-wood, carved and fretted, and the niches of the woodwork were relieved by brazen and copper vessels of classic form, bought in Naples for a few francs, and sold in Regent Street for a few pounds. Heavy Indian curtains darkened the latticed windows, and obscured the view of housetops and intersecting railways, tall chimneys and signal posts.

"Not quite so bad as the drawing-room," said

Valentine, flinging himself into the most luxurious of the three chairs, and taking out his cigar-case. "If we have only these two rooms, this will have to be my den, I suppose. Luckily you don't mind smoke."

"As if I should mind smoke, when you are a smoker," protested Helen, with her worshipping look. "I am so glad you like our dining-room."

"I didn't say I liked it; only it's a little better than your jimcrack drawing-room. The whole establishment is too much like a doll's house for my taste. I would rather have had a first floor in Russell Square. It would have been nearer the clubs than this, and we should have had room to breathe in."

"Dearest Valentine, you know nobody lives in Russell Square. I should have been alone in a desert."

The bed-room and dressing-rooms were unobjectionable. Here Lady Belfield's good sense had prevailed over Mrs. Baddeley's Oriental yearnings. All was neat, simple, and convenient. Helen's dressing-room, intended by the builder for a double

bed-room, was large enough to do duty for a boudoir. Valentine's was of respectable dimensions, and afforded plenty of accommodation for bath and wardrobe.

"Then we have only one bed-room," said Mr. Belfield, when he had completed his survey. "I'm very glad of that."

"Why, dear?"

"Because we can't have any girl-friend of yours to stay with us."

"You would rather we should be quite alone," said Helen, nestling up to him with one of her honeymoon gushes of tenderness.

"Of course I would. Girls are always a bore—want to be taken out every night—expect a man to dress for dinner — can't stand smoke — regular nuisance!"

"You wouldn't be troubled by any friends of mine, Val, even if we had a spare room. We led such a roving life with father that I never had time to get attached to any girl I met. Leo and I were always good friends and very fond of each other. Of course after she married I felt a little lonely—

but I never took to any one else. I always felt at a disadvantage with other girls. I was not so well off, or so well educated as they were—and they seemed to look down upon me. And now what can I want with girls, when I have you? My world begins and ends in my husband," she concluded, perching herself on the arm of the big chair in which he was reposing.

"I hope you have a servant who can cook decently," said Valentine.

"Your dear mother has attended to that. We have two Devonshire girls, sisters, the daughters of a tenant farmer in reduced circumstances, who have been obliged to go out into service. Very superior to the common run of servants."

"I hope that doesn't mean that they are arrant duffers," grumbled Valentine, with his cigar between his lips. "It sounds like it."

"You may be sure Lady Belfield would not have engaged them unless they were capable and clever."

"Perhaps you'll ring and let me see if one of

these treasures is capable of giving me a brandy-and-soda."

"With the utmost pleasure, dearest," and Helen flew first to the electric bell, and then to a silver Tantalus on the sideboard, which had been one of her wedding presents.

A fresh-coloured girl answered the summons. She was prettily dressed in a dark-red gown, a large muslin apron, and a mobcap, with a coquettish red bow at the top. The dress had an artistic air, and had been specially designed by Mrs. Baddeley. The girl, who answered to the name of Phœbe, seemed perfectly at home in her duties.

Valentine drank his brandy-and-soda, and looked at his watch.

"You don't dine till eight, of course," he said, "I think there'll be time for me to go to the club before dinner."

"On our first day, Val! And it's nearly seven now."

"Yes, it is rather late. I'd better go after dinner."

"What, in the evening! And leave me alone—

as you did in Paris," exclaimed Helen, almost crying.

"Paris was an exceptional affair—an unexpected party which I was let in for. To-night I shall only go to look about me, and see who's in town. Besides, you need not be alone here. You have your sister."

Helen's only answer was a heart-broken sigh. Yes, the spell was broken. The honeymoon was over.

CHAPTER V.

THE RETURN OF PROSERPINE

Those veteran elms in Kensington Gardens, whose wind-blown crests were just visible from Helen's windows, were older by more than a year and a half since that first inspection of the flat in Wilkie Mansions, and Helen had grown accustomed to married life as understood by Valentine Belfield. She had learnt to recognize the fact that although he was fond of her, and proud of her beauty, he had no idea of making any alteration in his own manner of living, or sacrificing any one of his pleasures or amusements on account of his wife. If his amusements were such as she could share, he was willing that she should share them. He took her to race meetings, and cricket grounds, and regattas, when she was well enough to go with him; but when her delicate health kept her at home, that fact made no difference in his arrangements. There came a time

when she was nervous and low-spirited, unable to go out of an evening, yet feeling the burden of her loneliness almost intolerable; but her husband frankly told her that she could not expect him to sacrifice his evening amusements—his whist club or his theatres—because she was moping at home.

"What the deuce would be the good if I were to sit upon the other side of the fire and mope with you?" he said. "Besides you have your sister."

"You talk as if Leo were laid on like the water and the gas," Helen said irritably; "she has her evening engagements as well as you."

"Uncommonly selfish of her to be gadding about just when you want her most," said Valentine. "It is a woman's place to look after her sister at such a time."

Helen sighed and was silent. Those sighs and silences irritated Valentine. It was a relief to him to run downstairs and get out into the mild mugginess of a London autumn, to hail a cab, and be off to his daily haunts at the West End; it was a still greater relief to sally forth with gun-case or hunting gear, on his way to a railway which was to

take him to some pleasant country-house or snug bachelor den, where there were sport and good fellowship, pretty women, or congenial men.

The fond hopes which had soothed Helen in her solitary evenings were doomed to bitterest disappointment. Her baby-son died before he was a week old; and the shock of the infant's death, which came upon her suddenly, brought on a nervous fever.

For more than six weeks Helen was seriously ill; and during some parts of that time her life was in danger. Trained nurses took possession of that small domicile in Wilkie Mansions. Lady Belfield came up to London to watch over her daughter-in-law; and Mrs. Baddeley showed a great deal of solicitude, though she did not forego her evening engagements or desert Sandown Park. For the first two or three weeks Valentine was anxious and attentive; but after the illness had lasted a month his attentions relaxed, and he began to regard his wife's condition as chronic. There was a dreary monotony about the sick room which bored him beyond endurance. The nurses in their uniform;

the recurrent visits of the doctor; the reports of the invalid's condition—for ever fluctuating between good and evil—the whole business hung upon Mr. Belfield's spirits like a nightmare. He was gladder than ever to get away from his home, keener than ever to accept invitations from his bachelor friends.

All this had happened six months ago. Helen had escaped from doctors and nurses soon after Christmas, but she seemed only the shadow of her former self when she first came out of the sick room, and went for an hour's drive with Mrs. Baddeley, in the pretty little victoria which that lady had found necessary to her existence. It was only a jobbed victoria, as she told her friends piteously; but it was a very smart little carriage, with a smart coachman. Mrs. Baddeley's page sat beside him on the box, and the turn-out was altogether respectable.

The necessity for a victoria, exchangeable in the evening for a brougham, was indisputable, seeing that within the last twelve months Leonora Baddeley had become in somewise a public character.

She had taken to literature. She wrote for the Society papers. Stories, essays, hunting articles, racing articles, fashion articles—nothing came amiss to her facile and somewhat reckless pen. She wrote with the air of a woman who lived among duchesses, and who dined every night with Cabinet Ministers. Upon politics, morals, art, sport, finance, she wrote with equal authority, and a self-assertive audacity that convinced the average reader.

Nor was literature the grass widow's only occupation. She had burst upon the fashionable world as an amateur actress of distinction and capacity. She gave recitations at charity concerts, she acted in open-air plays. She reminded elderly gentlemen indifferently of Mrs. Honey, Madame Vestris, and Mrs. Nesbitt. It was not to be supposed that she earned any money by these charity performances, and her gowns must have cost her a good deal; but as she was reported to be making a handsome income by literature, this did not matter; and nobody, except Helen, wondered at the elegant way in which Mrs. Baddeley contrived to live, or at the open-handed and thoroughly Irish hospitality of those

pretty rooms on the right hand of the third floor landing.

"I can't think how it is that money goes so much further with you than it does with me," Helen said, with a faint sigh, as she looked round her sister's luxurious drawing-room, with its profusion of tulips and narcissi in the window sills and the fireplace, and its vases of tuberoses and lilies of the valley.

"My dear, you forget that I am a bread-winner, while you and Valentine are like the lilies of the field, neither toiling nor spinning."

"I wish *I* could write for the papers, Leo."

"Everybody can't write for the papers, child," Mrs. Baddeley answered, rather sharply; "there is something in the way of talent wanted, or at least knack. Besides, the papers are not big enough to hold everybody's contributions. I happen to please them; and I have got into a groove that suits me exactly."

Helen sighed again. Valentine's way of life was expensive; and there were a good many accounts that ought to have been paid at Christmas, and

which were still unpaid in April. Helen's walking gowns were shabby, and her evening gowns bore the stamp of last season; yet she dared not go to her milliner's lest she should be reminded of an account of some standing. First-class fares, tips to gamekeepers, and club subscriptions—to say nothing of that far deadlier item, losses at cards—had absorbed the cash that should have kept the little household in Wilkie Mansions free from debt.

And now Helen came out of that little world of the sick room into the bright big world outside. She came out of darkness and weariness and constraint, like Proserpine returning from her six months' sojourn in the under-world. She was pale and thin and shadowy looking after her long illness; but the lovely Irish eyes were as brilliant as ever, and the mobile lips had all their old charm and sweetness. Never had she looked fairer to the eyes of that connoisseur in beauty, Lord St. Austell, than she looked this April afternoon, when Mrs. Baddeley's carriage drew up against the railings by the Row, in order to give that lady time to talk to her friends. The pensive light in those large violet

eyes, the delicate transparency of the wild rose complexion, had a poetical charm which touched the sybarite's fancy; and St. Austell looked from the elder sister to the younger, wondering how he could ever have thought Leonora Baddeley beautiful.

He had heard of Helen's serious illness and of Valentine's neglect, and this alone would have given her an interest in his eyes. Neglected wives had been his specialty from the year he left Cambridge.

He told her how rejoiced he was to see her out again after her long imprisonment.

"It is like the awakening of the year," he said. "I really think this is the first perfect spring day. You and Chaucer's old English April visit us together. I hope we are going to see you everywhere now."

"She is hardly strong enough yet to go *everywhere*," answered Mrs. Baddeley, "but I mean to take her about with me more than I have done hitherto. I shall not let her play Joan to a husband who never plays Darby. My brother-in-law is a delightful young man; but he is just one of

those delightful young men who should always remain bachelors. He has no vocation for domestic life."

"You have no right to say such a thing, Leo," said Helen, flushing indignantly. "You know how happy Val and I are together."

"When you are together no doubt, dear. The rarity of the occurrence must give it a factitious interest."

"Oh, please keep your smart sentences for the *Macrocosm* or the *Bon Ton*, Leo, and let me manage my husband my own way."

Those bright spring days, which were full of gladness and animation for a good many people at the West End of London, brought only dejection and apathy for Helen Belfield. She looked out of the window and saw the carriages driving by to the Park, or a hansom cab bowling gaily along the street with that rakish, devil-may-care air which seems inseparable from a hansom. She listened to the hawker's dreary cry, borne from some invisible shabby-genteel street round the corner. She lay on her sofa by the open window yawning over a

new novel, until she threw the book aside in sheer weariness of fictitious woes which touched no chord in her heart, and sat brooding over her own troubles, which seemed so very real.

Valentine was at Sandown or Epsom, or at Newmarket, and not expected home for a day or two. Last night she had waited dinner till nine o'clock —to-night it might be ten. He was not unkind to her. He professed to be as devoted to her as in the days of their honeymoon; and yet his indifference wounded her to the quick. He told her that a man must live his life—that marriage would be an insufferable institution if it obliged a husband to abandon his favourite club and to be home at eight o'clock every evening.

"If you don't like waiting dinner, I had better dine at my club," he said. "I would rather do that than have to dine opposite a dismal face."

"No, indeed, Val, I don't mind waiting. I have never complained of having to wait, so long as you do come home. But sometimes you have disappointed me altogether; you have gone to a theatre or to one of your late clubs, and have left

me to wonder and worry all the evening—such a long melancholy evening without you."

"You had no need to wonder and worry. You must know that a man who has a lot of friends is not always master of his actions."

"But a woman's mind is not always to be governed by needs. I could not help wondering. Sometimes I have wondered if I had married your brother Adrian whether I should have had quite so many solitary evenings."

"It's a great pity you did not marry Adrian, if you are beginning to repent your preference for me," said Valentine, with a darkening countenance.

"Dearest Val, how can you say such things? You know I have never repented. I never could repent my choice. My heart went out to you from the first, and I knew all at once that I had never really loved Adrian. He had been to me as a kind and dear friend, never as a lover. But I can't help sometimes wishing that you were like him in just one respect—that you were as fond of home as he is."

"In other words, you loved me because I was a man; and now you have got me you would like me to be a milksop. No, Helen, I am as unlike Adrian in my tastes and pursuits as I am like him in my person. I don't care for music, or books, or fireside musings. I am a man of action, cannot live without movement and variety. If you are wise you'll follow my example, and, instead of moping at home, go into society with your sister. I could often look you up of an evening if I knew where you were going."

"You promised that last year, Val, and you never came to any of my parties. I have sat for a whole evening watching the door, and refusing every dance, for fear I should miss you when you came—and you never appeared."

"It wasn't my fault, I assure you. There was always something to prevent my turning up."

"I think it was my disappointment about you that made me detest parties. I made a vow to myself that I would never go out again without you."

"Ah, that was last year when you were out of

health. Now you are blooming again, and it will do you good to see a little of life. If I were a jealous husband I should be very glad for you to shut yourself up in these rooms; but I'm not jealous, and I know I can trust you."

"Indeed, dearest, you can," she said fondly, with her hands clasped upon his shoulder; "you know that for me you are the only man on earth."

"Well, I believe as much, Helen. You are one of those foolish loveable young women who are not ashamed to admire their own husbands. But really and truly, my pet, it grieves me to see you mope in the pleasantest time of the year. Leo says you would be included in all her evening invitations if her friends only knew you were willing. You have but to show yourself to be admired and sought after."

"There is one objection, Val," murmured Helen, blushing as she spoke.

"What is that?"

"I have not had a new gown since last summer, and people dress so much nowadays. I should feel myself an old-fashioned dowdy."

"In last year's gown—although it cost five-and-thirty guineas, and was declared by you and Leo to be perfection—quite the gown of the season," cried Valentine mockingly, and then he took out a bloated pocket-book, and from a confusion of tissue paper, Holt's lists, and bank notes intermingled, he selected a note which he handed to his wife. "There, Helen, I was rather luckier than usual at Chester the other day. There's a fifty to sweeten Madame Bouillon. You might order two gowns, I should think, on the strength of it."

"I will," cried Helen gaily, overcome by her husband's generosity. "How good you are, Val."

"I like to see my little wife happy," he said blandly, not deeming it necessary to inform her that he had over a thousand pounds in that bloated pocket-book.

He never worried her about his losses, so why should he tell her of his winnings. He left her with a kiss, and was off to his afternoon lounge at Tattersall's. He left her happier than she had been since her convalescence.

"Dear fellow," she said to herself, "I know he loves me, although he may sometimes seem neglectful."

It was a lovely afternoon at the beginning of May. The sky was bluer than London skies generally are, the balmy west wind blowing the smoke eastward to darken the dwelling-places of the poor. Aristocratic London was dressed in smiles; suburban Kensington had a verdant and almost rustic air in the bright glad weather; and Helen's drawing-room was odorous with hothouse flowers.

Lord St. Austell had been sending her flowers two or three times a week since their chance meeting by the railing of the Row. He sent flowers and plovers' eggs and premature strawberries, as to an invalid. Mrs. Baddeley heard of these attentions, and lifted her finely pencilled eyebrows with a somewhat scornful air.

"He is more foolishly generous than any one I know," she said. "He is always sending hothouse fruit and flowers to sick chorus girls."

"I hope he does not rank you and me with

chorus girls," protested Helen. "I suppose it is he who supplies you with all those lovely gardenias and lilies of the valley?"

"He and other people, my dear. I have more than one string to my bow."

Helen ran across to her sister's rooms soon after Valentine left her, and exhibited her fifty-pound note.

"If you like to take me out with you this afternoon, Leo, I can order a new gown; and then I can go with you to some of your parties."

"Certainly, dear, but one gown won't go very far."

"Oh, I can have some of the old ones touched up—if I have just one new one in the very latest style, with the season's cachet. Even one gown is an effort when one has a limited income. I can never understand how you manage to have so many, and from Mrs. Ponsonby, who is ever so much dearer than Madame Bouillon."

"Oh, Mrs. Ponsonby does not charge me as she does other people. I know how to manage her," Leonora answered carelessly.

The new gown was a triumph of art. Helen's was a style of beauty which needs no embellishment from colour. She always looked loveliest in white, and this last achievement was simplicity itself. A white satin gown, plainly cut, with a long train, and with no other trimming than a cascade of ostrich feathers, soft and pure as snowflakes. A cluster of these snow-white plumes adorned the bodice, and accentuated the whiteness of the wearer's bust and shoulders.

Mrs. Belfield had been admired last season, but she had not been talked about. This year it suddenly dawned upon that particular section of Society—neither the best nor the worst—in which Mrs. Baddeley moved, that Mrs. Belfield was the new beauty. Perhaps she would hardly have been so promptly elevated to this social pinnacle if it had not been at the same period discovered that St. Austell was over head and ears in love with her. Nobody had a word to say against the lady as yet; but it was obvious that wherever Mrs. Belfield appeared Lord St. Austell was to be seen hovering near her, obvious to every one except to

the lady herself, who saw nothing extraordinary in the fact of his lordship's presence.

She accepted his attentions at first with supreme indifference. He was her sister's admirer. He had been devoted to her sister at Morcomb two years ago, and she had no idea of any change in his sentiments. Leo's flirtations and Leo's admirers were taken for granted by Leo's sister. There was no harm in any such deviations from the beaten track. It was only Leo's way. Perhaps St. Austell was tired of worshipping a divinity who had so many other votaries; Mr. Beeching for instance, among the most devoted. He certainly began to neglect the elder sister, and to concentrate his attentions upon the younger. He would spend five or ten minutes with Mrs. Baddeley, and then come across to Mrs. Belfield's drawing-room with a book or a piece of music, or tickets for opera or theatre—tickets which had been sent him by importunate managers, according to his own account.

"I was told last night that people had to wait six weeks to get stalls," Helen said incredulously,

on one occasion, when St. Austell brought her three places for a fashionable theatre, "and yet the manager gives you tickets."

"Strange, isn't it? The fellows will send me tickets. They like to see me in the stalls. By-the-by, that is just the objection to those tickets. You will have me as an incubus. It would be bad form to accept the places and not show myself. If you and Mrs. Baddeley go, will you much mind taking me; or perhaps Mr. Belfield might go with you and would let me make a third."

"He would be delighted, but I'm afraid there's no chance of his going. He has so many evening engagements."

"Of course. I know his set. Men who always spend their evenings together. And will you and Mrs. Baddeley really not mind having me?"

"How could we be so ungrateful?"

"Oh, but I won't come if I am to be asked out of gratitude. That would make me actually an incubus. May I come, Mrs. Belfield? Just tell me my society won't spoil your evening."

"How can it, when we meet almost every

evening," Helen answered naively. "If I didn't wish to see you I should never go anywhere, for somehow or other we are always meeting."

"Society is like the last figure of the Lancers," said St. Austell. "You must needs meet the same people over and over again. Meeting and passing on, always passing on; and the last chord separates one even from one's partner."

When was the time that Helen began to watch the door for the appearance of Lord St. Austell, as she had once watched for the coming of her husband, only that in this latter case there was no disappointment? When was it that the assembly first began to brighten at his coming; when was it that his voice first began to move her like music? When was it that the day only began in that lazy afternoon hour when etiquette allowed his lordship's visits to the Japanese drawing-room, which daily looked more and more like a tropical bower, beautified by the flowers which he sent every morning, musical with the rare and costly birds which he had chosen for its adornment?

Helen could never remember how and when her

sin began: how and when it was that she passed from the liberty of perfect innocence to the constraint of conscious guilt; but she awakened one day to the discovery that the husband she had once adored had become indifferent and was growing odious to her, and that the man who pursued her with unspoken love was the sole master of her heart and of her fate.

CHAPTER VI.

DRIFTING

Sir Adrian Belfield had been a traveller over the face of the earth for nearly two years before he turned his face homewards. He had seen most of the fairest spots in the Old World. He had spent half a year in Greece, and had seen Algiers and Tangiers, Egypt and the Holy Land. He had devoted the best part of a year to a leisurely saunter through Spain and Italy, taking his own time, and living the life of the country, roughing it a little now and then, so far as his health would allow, and seeing much more of people and of places than it is given to the average traveller to see. He had gone abroad to cure himself of a wound which he had at first thought incurable; and he did not turn his face homeward till he felt that he was heart-whole once more, and could meet

his brother's wife without one pang of regret, one thrill of passionate feeling.

Yes, he was cured. A love which has its origin in the fancy or the senses is not difficult to eradicate. A love that has no more solid foundation than a beautiful face does not take a very strong hold of an intellectual character. Adrian was too clever a man not to discover, when the glamour of that first love had faded a little, that the woman he had adored was too shallow and light-minded to be worthy of broken hearts. She who could so easily transfer her allegiance from one brother to the other, who could break faith at the first temptation, was not a woman for whom to die. And even that potent charm of beauty began to lose its power over his memory after a year's absence. Greece showed him women as beautiful; Italy showed him a more picturesque loveliness in the faces of peasant girls by the wayside; while in Society he met women who, with a little less than Helen's beauty, possessed the charm of intellectual power and brilliant accomplishments.

He learnt his lesson in those years of exile, and thanked God that he was able to learn it.

"I have been away from you an unconscionable time, dear mother," he wrote, knowing how keenly Lady Belfield had felt his absence; "but the purpose of my banishment is fulfilled. I am going home to you cured. No hidden feelings of mine will ever make a difficulty between Valentine and me, or put Valentine's wife to the blush. I can be to her henceforward as a brother."

This letter relieved Constance Belfield's mind of the fear of bad blood between those two sons who were her all upon this earth. She loved them both too well to have been happy while there was any shadow of ill-feeling between them. However she might lean to Valentine, she knew that Adrian was in all things the finer character and the better son; and the sorrow that had fallen upon him through his brother's rivalry had been a source of deepest pain to her.

It was not till he had gone from the Abbey that she knew how dear that elder son had been to her, or how essential to the happiness of her life. His

wayward brother had occupied more of her thoughts, and had been a constant source of anxiety; but Adrian had been the companion of her days, had sympathized with her in all her pursuits, entered into all her plans for the good of others, joined in every elevating thought. He had been her second self; and she only knew it when he was gone.

The letter announcing his return made her feel ten years younger. It was so delightful to her that he should write in good spirits.

"I should like to see what the world is doing before I bury myself at the dear old Abbey," he wrote; "so I have engaged rooms at the Alexandra for the second and third week in June, with the notion that you would not mind joining me there. We can do the round of operas and theatres, and see all the picture galleries in a fortnight, leaving a margin for your dressmaker and my tailor."

Lady Belfield had not been in London since she went up to see her invalid daughter-in-law. Valentine and his wife had visited her at the Abbey twice since their marriage, and Valentine had been

there for the hunting and shooting without his wife; running down to hunt or shoot for a few days, and going back to London at the first unfavourable change in the weather. He treated the house as if it were his own, telegraphing to announce his arrival, leaving at half an hour's notice, and standing upon no kind of ceremony. Lady Belfield had been pleased that it should be so. She was glad that her son should use her house as his second home.

She came to London a day before Adrian was expected, so that she might be at the hotel to receive him, or meet him at the terminus. She had brought books and scent-bottles, paper-cutters, and work-baskets enough to give a home-like aspect even to an hotel sitting-room. She had brought a great basket of flowers from the Abbey gardens and hot-houses, and she and her maid were at work nearly all the morning after her arrival filling vases and building up a bank of bloom in the fireplace.

Adrian was not expected till six in the evening, when his train was to arrive at Charing Cross.

Lady Belfield ordered a carriage and drove to Wilkie Mansions after luncheon. Mrs. Belfield was not at home.

"I think you will find my mistress over the way, my lady," said the maid, when she saw Lady Belfield's look of disappointment. "Or I can fetch her if you like."

"She is at Mrs. Baddeley's, you mean?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Thanks. I'll go there at once."

A silvery ripple of laughter greeted Constance Belfield's ear as the door was opened by the very smallest individual of the page genus—the smallest and the smartest. His livery was in perfect style, his innocent flaxen hair was brushed as carefully as if he had been a subaltern in a crack regiment.

The lobby into which this infant admitted Lady Belfield was picturesque in its arrangement of Oriental drapery and tropical palms; but it was very small, and only divided from the drawing-room by a curtain, through which the visitor heard masculine voices and laughter before the page could announce her.

On the curtain being lifted she saw the sisters lounging gracefully in low bamboo chairs, dressed almost alike in limp white muslin morning gowns, diaphanous, ethereal. Helen's heavy plaits of auburn hair had fallen down, and were hanging on her shoulders. Her dress had altogether an air of deshabille which Lady Belfield did not approve in a lady who was receiving masculine visitors.

The visitors were two, Lord St. Austell and Mr. Beeching.

Helen started up from her chair and ran to welcome her mother-in-law.

"Dearest Lady Belfield, I am electrified!" she exclaimed. "You did not say a word in your last letter about coming to London."

"I had no intention of coming when I wrote," replied Constance, shaking hands with Mrs. Baddeley, and then with the two gentlemen.

She told her daughter-in-law of Adrian's return, and of their residence at the Alexandra. Helen blushed faintly at the mention of her jilted lover, and a flood of memories swept across her mind at the sound of his name.

Oh, how long it seemed ago, that old time when she and Adrian were engaged, when her heart was light and glad with a childish pleasure in her conquest, and her lover's devotion, and the sunny future that lay before their feet. All was altered now; she had loved and suffered; her pride had been crushed, her spirit broken: and then, all at once, like the awakening of Spring, life had begun again, as if all the world were newly made.

Mrs. Baddeley brought forward her most luxurious chair, and established Lady Belfield in a shady nook by the oriel window, while Helen stood dreaming.

"You find us in rather a dishevelled condition," said Mrs. Baddeley; "we were late home from our ride this morning. Our horses were very fresh, and we were obliged to give them a little extra work. I think we were the very last people in the Row, weren't we, St. Austell?"

She called him St. Austell *tout court;* a freedom which was very objectionable to Lady Belfield.

"I am glad you are riding, Helen," the mother-in-law said gently.

"Yes, it is very nice to ride in the Row when there is no better riding possible. Valentine was so kind as to buy me a horse."

"He only did what was right," said Lady Belfield, wondering why the young wife blushed crimson as she mentioned her husband's gift. "Does he ride with you?"

"Oh, no; his hunters are in Devonshire, you know. He says he hates the Row. Leo and I ride together."

"You have a good groom, I hope."

"No, we have no groom. The man comes round from the livery stables to mount us, and we generally have an escort of some kind," explained Mrs. Baddeley. "We are perfectly safe, I assure you."

Lady Belfield was not to be assured upon this point.

"I think my son is wrong in allowing his wife to ride without a servant," she said gravely.

St. Austell turned the conversation into a pleasanter channel. How long did Lady Belfield contemplate remaining in town, and what was she going to see? He ran over the names of the

theatres—he talked of Hurlingham and Ranelagh, the picture galleries, the latest conjuring trick, the newest thought-reader.

"I am not very eager about amusements," said Lady Belfield. "I want to see as much as I can of my daughter."

Helen's eyes filled at that word "daughter," spoken with extreme tenderness.

"You are too good to me," she faltered. "I wish Valentine were in London to help me make much of you; but he has gone over to Paris for the Longchamps races. You know how devoted he is to racing. I suppose he will be back in two or three days."

"You don't know when he is to be back?"

"I seldom know till within an hour or two of his return. He is so erratic. He says he never likes to forecast his life, to forfeit the privilege of changing his mind. He comes back from Newmarket, or York, or Paris, just as unexpectedly as he comes from his club."

"He is the best of fellows, but I really think he was made for a bachelor," said St. Austell

airily. "He has such a thorough appreciation of manly liberty. You must have exacted very little from him in his boyhood, Lady Belfield."

"I hope I never exacted anything from either of my sons," answered Constance gravely.

That light tone of St. Austell's jarred upon her. The man's presence in that room, and his easy familiarity with both sisters, gave her an uncomfortable feeling. She found herself wondering whether he was often there; and whether he was chief among the "escort" of whom Mrs. Baddeley had spoken so confidently.

"Can you go to the opera with me to-morrow evening, Helen?" she asked.

Helen looked at her sister.

"I'm afraid not," said Mrs. Baddeley, "we are booked for a dinner in Park Lane, and a dance in Grosvenor Gardens."

"The next night, then?"

"There is another dance—two dances, on opposite sides of Grosvenor Square," replied Helen; "but I can go with you to the opera before my dances."

"No, I will not allow that. You look fragile enough as it is. I won't cause you any extra fatigue. But do you really go out *every* evening?"

"My dear Lady Belfield, remember it is the very height of the season!" said Mrs. Baddeley. "If we had not a good many engagements now we should be indeed very little in request. When I cease to be wanted at three or four different houses every night in June I shall know that I am on the shelf."

"It is a wretchedly exhausting life, for any young woman," said Lady Belfield.

"It *is* a wretchedly exhausting life: but one must endure it for a month or six weeks in the year, unless one wants to fall out of the ranks altogether. Helen moped horribly till Valentine and I took her in hand, and shook her despondency out of her; and now she is as happy as a bird?"

Lady Belfield contemplated her son's wife thoughtfully for a few moments; and it did not seem to her that the expression of the lovely face

was one of perfect serenity. There was a troubled look in the large dark eyes, a nervous restlessness about the mouth.

Mr. Beeching sat in a low chair, teasing Mrs. Baddeley's poodle all this time, and did not commit himself by speech. He had acquired almost a reputation for stupid speechlessness.

The poodle was an artificial personage, spoiled by London hours and high living, *blasé*, cynical. He wore three tufts on his shaven back, and three tufts on his aspiring tail; he wore a silver collar and silver bracelets, and would bite his dearest friend. He had been over-educated, and was supposed at these times to suffer from pressure on the brain. He played the piano, walked upstairs on his hind legs, shut the door, and insulted Mr. Gladstone in dumb show whenever a piece of sugar was offered to him coupled with that statesman's name. It may be supposed, as the performance must have been irksome, that he really detested Mr. Gladstone.

No doubt there are Liberal poodles in London to whom the name of Lord Salisbury is equally

odious; but the Tory poodle is the more general ornament of a lady's boudoir.

"Come to breakfast with me to-morrow morning, Helen," said Lady Belfield, when she was going away, after half-an-hour of the shallowest kind of talk, in which Mrs. Baddeley and Lord St. Austell were the chief performers. "You can hardly be engaged at breakfast-time."

"If I were I would give up my engagement for you," replied Helen, with her caressing smile. "I will give up my dance to-morrow night, if you like."

"No, no. You shall make no sacrifices. Come at ten o'clock to-morrow. That will not be too early, will it?"

"No. I always wake early. I never sleep more than four or five hours."

"Very different from me," said Mrs. Baddeley. "I sleep like a dormouse till it is time to put on my habit for the Row."

She gave a great yawn and a sigh of relief presently when the outer door closed upon Lady Belfield.

"That dear soul is quite too charming in Devonshire," she said; "but she rather palls upon one in London. She requires the background of a mediæval abbey."

"She is the most unselfish woman in this world," protested Helen warmly, and then she turned her back upon the trio—Mr. Beeching, St. Austell, and Leonora—and walked to an open window at the end of the room, and stood looking out, watching Lady Belfield's hired victoria as it turned the corner of the street, with her eyes almost blinded by tears.

St. Austell followed her to the window.

"What a sensitive nature it is which every chance touch can move to pain," he said. "You ought not to expose yourself to this kind of thing, Helen. You ought to be far away from these jarring influences."

Mr. Beeching had found speech by this time, and was exchanging muffled remarks with Mrs. Baddeley, as they shared the attentions and casual snaps of the Tory poodle.

When had Lord St. Austell begun to call Mrs. Belfield by her Christian name?

Helen could not remember the exact moment of that marked change from conventional respect to privileged familiarity. It was in a waltz, perhaps, when, lured by exquisite music, she had held on too long, and had been almost fainting on his shoulder, with the world all melting round her, as if there were no more reality in life, only a sweet vague dimness, the perfume of golden lilies, golden lights glimmering in a pale haze, and his voice murmuring tenderly, "Helen, my Helen."

Was it thus, or in some other way, the change came about? She hardly knew. Nothing in her life seemed to have had a beginning. She had floated along she knew not whither, lulled in balmy zephyrs, lapped in warm sunshine; she had drifted down a tropical river in an atmosphere of dreamland. He called her Helen now as a matter of course; and he told her every day and many times a day that there was something amiss in her life. That which was wrong was her feeble hold upon propriety, her last tenacious clinging to her duty as a wife. Her footsteps were faltering just upon the hither side of the line that severs innocence from

guilt. She could still hold up her head and say to herself, "I may be passionately in love with St. Austell, as he is with me; but I am true to my husband all the same, and nothing could ever tempt me to betray him." Telling herself this, she lived in daily commune with the tempter, the man whose name was a synonym for seduction; and who was so much the more dangerous in her case because this time he was profoundly in love.

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. PONSONBY'S ULTIMATUM

HELEN was ushered into Lady Belfield's sitting-room next morning as the clock struck ten, and found her mother-in-law and Sir Adrian ready to receive her. The breakfast-table had been placed near the open window looking out upon the park, with its brilliant flower-beds, palms, and tree-ferns, and its early riders cantering up and down the Row.

Adrian came forward to meet his sister-in-law with frankest greeting; but Helen grew paler as their hands met, and it seemed to him that her beauty had a wan look in the morning light. The freshness had vanished from the young face, and that bright and joyous outlook, the careless happiness of girlhood, which had charmed him at their first meeting, had given place to weariness and

languor. It was not the face of a happy wife in the early years of marriage.

Helen grew more at ease presently as they sat at breakfast, reassured by Adrian's fraternal manner. It was a relief to her to find such perfect friendliness in the man she had jilted; and yet her vanity was wounded by the idea that he *could* forgive her so freely, could meet her with frank goodwill.

"He could never have cared very much for me," she thought.

His presence recalled bitterest memories. She had been false to him, and for whom? For a man who neglected and abandoned her, left her to Fate and to the chances of evil; left her to run the gauntlet of London society without a husband's protection.

Adrian was eager to see his brother. He had written to Valentine in a friendly spirit twice during the last year, first on New Year's Eve, and again on their mutual birthday, and his brother had answered both letters in a free and easy tone, taking their reconciliation as it were for granted, ignoring the past and the wrong that had been

done. And now Adrian yearned after that other half of himself, from which he had so long been separated. He was vexed at Valentine's absence, and still more vexed at Helen's vagueness about her husband's return.

"I'll telegraph to him," he said, "if you'll give me his Paris address."

"I don't know where he is staying."

"You don't know! But surely he has written to you?"

"Yes, but he wrote to me from his club, or from a club that he uses when he is there. I'm not sure that he is a member. I suppose if you telegraph to him at the club he will get your telegram."

"Sooner or later, no doubt; but there may be a considerable delay," answered Adrian. "I want to hasten his return if I can. Our time is short in London."

Helen gave him the address of the Parisian club, and he went downstairs to send his telegram. Lady Belfield carried off her daughter-in-law for a morning in the picture galleries. She took posses-

sion of her son's wife, as if in the exercise of a natural right. Helen had promised to be in the Row between twelve and one. St. Austell would be there, no doubt, expecting her. She had parted with him at four o'clock that morning, after a ball, and he had stopped at the carriage door to ascertain her plans for the day. He knew all about her engagement with Lady Belfield.

"Less than a couple of hours will polish off your mother-in-law," he said, "and you can be in the Row by twelve. You mustn't lose your ride. It's the one thing that keeps us all alive."

She had promised not to lose her ride; but now that she was asked to go to the Academy she had not the courage to refuse.

"I want to have you with me as much as I can while I am in town," said Lady Belfield. "We have seen so little of each other since you have been my daughter. Adrian is full of business this morning, so he cannot come with us."

Helen was glad to escape from Adrian's thoughtful gaze. It seemed to her that he must be able to read all her secrets, that he must know how false

and wicked she was, she who had begun her downward course by falsehood to him.

That morning with Lady Belfield was slow torture. The wife's remorseful sense of her own unworthiness changed every tender word into a scorpion. She tried to appear happy and light-hearted, but she felt that her gaiety was a miserable assumption which could hardly deceive anybody. It certainly did not deceive Lady Belfield.

"My dear child, let us sit down," she said. "You are looking so pale and weary. I am afraid you are not well, Helen; that they did not take enough care of you after your long illness."

"Oh, no, it is not that. I am very well; but I was dancing till nearly four o'clock this morning."

"And you are going out again to-night. Do you think it is worth any one's while to lead such a life?"

"I don't know. I suppose it is natural to like dancing and gaiety while one is young. And there is no other kind of life for me to lead. If I were to stay at home, as I did last year, I should only have leisure to be unhappy, and to fancy myself a

deserted wife. When I am out in the world, among a lot of thoughtless people, I too am thoughtless. It is better than thinking bitter thoughts."

"My poor girl, I wish Valentine were fonder of home, and that you two spent more of your lives together. There is something amiss in your present life. I am grieved to see it, I am grieved to speak of it; yet I feel that I ought to speak."

"Oh, please don't say any more," said Helen fretfully. "It can do no good. Valentine has always had his own way, and I have left off thwarting him. I used to beg him to stay at home. I fancied we might be so happy together; and I was so ridiculously fond of him."

"Was fond of him! Why you speak as if your love were a thing of the past."

"No, no, Lady Belfield, you misunderstand. I mean that in those days I had a foolish way of pestering him with my affection. I was too demonstrative, and I thought I could keep him at home of an evening. A fatal mistake. We get on ever so much better now that we each go our own way."

"My love, it is all wrong. It cannot mean happiness for either of you."

"Indeed, you are mistaken; Valentine is perfectly happy."

"And are you perfectly happy?"

"Well, yes, I suppose I am. We are having a brilliant season. Leo and I are invited almost everywhere. It is very pleasant, and——" with a faint sigh, "one has no time to think."

They were sitting in the inner sculpture gallery, where there were very few people, though the other rooms were full. Lady Belfield left at one o'clock, thinking that Helen was tired.

"Shall we drive through the Park before you go in?" Helen asked, as they came to Hyde Park Corner.

"Yes, dear, if you like," and Lady Belfield gave the order.

"Go slowly up and down the drive," Helen said to the coachman, and then added to Lady Belfield: "If there are any people we know we may as well see them."

"By all means; we have half-an-hour to waste before lunch."

Helen was thinking of St. Austell. Would he be there waiting for her? Would he be angry with her for having broken faith with him? She had given him a kind of right over her life from the moment in which she had listened to his unhallowed love. He had the right to be miserable when he was away from her; the right to accuse her of cruelty if she avoided his company.

She had allowed him to tell her of his love; but she had affected to make light of his declaration.

"This means nothing from you," she said; "I should be angry if it were any one else who talked such nonsense."

Under that lightness her lover had seen indications of the deepest feeling, and knew that she was to be won; not so easily won as other victims had been, and so much the more worth winning.

The Row was almost deserted, but a little way past the barracks they met Mrs. Baddeley and Lord St. Austell riding side by side, while Mr. Beeching skulked in the rear on a thick-set, bull-necked, black cob, very smooth and sleek and

stoutly built, and having a kind of fanciful resemblance to his rider.

"Everything belonging to Beeching is like him," said one of his particular friends; "his horses are like him, his dogs are like him, his guns are like him, and his furniture is like him. The fellow has his own image and superscription upon everything. When he bothered me about the lines of his new tandem cart I told him not to worry. 'However you have it built, it's sure to come out like you,' I told him: and, by Jove, it did."

Lord St. Austell was one of the few men who look well on horseback, and yet do not disappoint people when they dismount. He was tall and slim, dressed to perfection in so quiet and subdued a style that nobody had ever succeeded in imitating him. There was an indescribable *cachet,* a subtle neutrality of tint, which the copyist never could attain. To-day he had a languid air as he sauntered slowly along, talking with Mrs. Baddeley, who looked fresh as a June rose, and seemed in high spirits. She was to act for a charity that evening, at one of the most fashionable places in London—

half picture-gallery, half ball-room. She was to play Peg Woffington in "Masks and Faces," for the benefit of the Convalescent Chimney Sweepers' Institute, and she was telling St. Austell about her conception of the part and her gowns.

The character was important, but the gowns were the pivot upon which success depended.

"They are my own idea, worked out from Sir Peter Lely," she said; "but that wretched Mrs. Ponsonby had not sent them when I came out this morning. I am in a state of suspense till I see them. They may be failures after all."

"You employ Ponsonby, do you?" asked St. Austell, who was learned in all the ways of women; "I've been told she's dear."

"Dear! She is exorbitant, a perfect harpy! But she is the only woman in London who can make a gown."

"She must be as rich as Crœsus. Lord Pevensey told me the other day that he nearly lost an estate he was negotiating for in Yorkshire, because Mrs. Ponsonby was hankering after it. He was not told who had been bidding against him till

after he had secured the property. 'By Jove, St. Austell, I felt humiliated,' he said, 'to think that I had just missed being outbidden by my wife's dressmaker.' "

"I have no doubt she is richer than Lord Pevensey," replied Leo, laughing. "I am longing to see how she has carried out my ideas. I am like a child that is going to have a new frock for her birthday."

They saw Helen and pulled up their horses, and the victoria drew up by the rails. They talked for a few minutes, Helen explaining how Lady Belfield had been so kind as to take her to the Academy.

"You might have sent me a message," said Mrs. Baddeley. "Your horse and I both waited half-an-hour for you."

"Yes, I ought to have sent a message. It was very forgetful of me. Poor Ravioli!"

Ravioli was the horse.

"I am glad you find it in your heart to pity Ravioli," said St. Austell, with one of those looks which speak volumes at the initial stage of an intrigue.

Language and looks become much less subtle in later stages.

He timed that pathetic glance at a safe moment when Lady Belfield was talking to Mrs. Baddeley.

Leo was begging her to go to the performance at the Victoria Hall.

"I dare say the acting will be very bad, though we most of us think ourselves geniuses," she said; "but we shall have all the best people in London to see us, and it is for a good cause; so if you and Sir Adrian are disengaged——"

"I believe we are disengaged. It is only as a favour that we are to get stalls for the Lyceum next Saturday, and we are not to go to the Haymarket till to-morrow. It is not so easy to do a round of the theatres as we fancied it would be."

"Then as a *pis aller* come and see 'Masks and Faces' by the Kentish Ramblers and your humble servant. If we don't succeed in making you cry, we are sure to make you laugh."

"Don't be too sure of that," said St. Austell; "there is a dismal state between laughing and

crying, which I have seen produced by the performance of your real painstaking amateur. He is just too good to be laughed at, and he is not good enough to draw tears. His performance produces a dreary vacuity of mind, a sense of the intolerable length of time. I think the feeling is most acute during such a piece as 'Plot and Passion,' which, being tedious and long-winded, is a favourite with amateurs."

"You talk like a disappointed man," said Leo. "I have no doubt you tried to act in early youth, and are embittered by the memory of failure."

"No, I was one of those few sensible people who are aware of their incapability beforehand."

"Are you coming home presently, Helen?" asked Mrs. Baddeley.

"She is coming to lunch with me first," answered Lady Belfield; "I'll drive her home in time for tea."

"Please don't keep her late. She has the Victoria Hall and two parties after. To-night is one of our field nights," said Mrs. Baddeley, and then with a smile and a wave of her whip hand,

she yielded to the impatience of her horse, and trotted away, her two cavaliers accompanying her.

St. Austell left her at the Piccadilly end of the Row, but Beeching rode back to Wilkie Mansions and lingered at the door when he had helped her to dismount, and had delivered her horse to a hireling from the livery yard.

"Come in and see my gowns," said Leo; "they must have arrived by this time, or I am in for a fiasco. Come and tell me what you think of my gowns, and then I will give you some lunch."

Mrs. Baddeley was eminently hospitable; her little luncheons were delightful in a small and studiously simple way. She gave herself no airs of epicureanism, but her roast chicken or her cutlets à la Maintenon, and her mayonnaise of salmon or lobster were always perfection. Even a shoulder of lamb and a custard pudding had a grace on her table, and satisfied her admiring guest. She rarely dined at home, and so her cook was able to concentrate her energies on that wholesome two-o'clock meal which everybody eats with a better appetite than the evening's elaborate banquet.

She ran gaily upstairs, Mr. Beeching following, ashamed to confess that his less agile legs would have preferred the lift. She opened the door with her latchkey, and pounced upon the page, who was discovered in the lobby reading the adventures of "Sixteen String Jack," reclining in a luxurious bamboo chair, with his heels on the card table.

"Get up, you horrid little monkey," cried his mistress indignantly. "Has the dressmaker sent my gowns?"

"No, ma'am. There ain't no basket come, but there was a young lady brought this;" and the boy snatched up a brass salver, took a letter out of his pocket, put it on the salver, and handed it with due ceremony.

"A letter," exclaimed Leo angrily, as she tore open the envelope. "What can the woman mean by writing?"

Mrs. Ponsonby's meaning was clear enough.

With profound respect she reminded Mrs. Baddeley that her account had been running a long time, and that she had not received a cheque from her honoured customer for over a twelvemonth.

The costumes were finished and ready for delivery; but on referring to her ledger she had discovered that Mrs. Baddeley was much deeper in debt than she had supposed, and she must therefore regretfully decline to send the costumes unless Mrs. Baddeley favoured her with at least a hundred pounds on account.

Leo read the letter as she passed into her drawing-room, followed by Mr. Beeching, who felt that the atmosphere was tempestuous.

"You are too good to ask me to stay," he muttered, "but I have just remembered a particular appointment at the Junior Carlton."

He was going, but she stopped him with her hand on his coat sleeve.

"You are not such a poltroon as to run away because I'm in trouble, are you, Beeching?" she asked contemptuously.

She called him Beeching, or Joe, indifferently, with a familiarity which seemed half scornful, but which he liked, nevertheless, in his dull way.

"I'll stop if you like," he said. What's the row?"

He had seen her in trouble before to-day, and had been ordered to help her, and the result had been duly recorded on the debit side of his bank-book. He could see the figures on the clean white page now, as he stood there, helpless and half reluctant. Nothing had come of that former chivalry on his part; nothing except that he was called Joe, or Beeching, and was occasionally bitten by Tory, the poodle.

Tory was under a sofa now, represented by a pair of fiery yellow eyes gleaming in the darkness. Tory had taken it into his over-educated head to detest Mr. Beeching.

"What's the row?" he asked again, as Leo pored over the letter.

"The row is, that I shall be ruined, humiliated, disgraced, unless I can produce a hundred pounds in the next hour or two. Does the creature think I keep hundred-pound notes under my pillow?"

"I don't suppose she cares where you keep 'em as long as she gets 'em," replied Beeching broodingly, bending down to poke his whip-handle at Tory under the sofa, and receiving a growl and a

glare from that celebrity for his pains. "You'll have to pacify her somehow, I suppose," he went on, still intent upon Tory. "If you can't give her money you must give her money's worth. You've got your diamonds."

He seated himself on the carpet at this juncture, in order to be nearer Tory, who was waxing furious.

"Of course I have my diamonds, and I must wear them to-night. Everybody knows about them——"

"Well, not *all* about them," muttered Beeching, under his breath.

"Everybody knows I have them, and will expect me to wear them. What sweet things would be said about me if I *didn't* wear them. My diamonds, indeed! I am to take my diamonds to Mrs. Ponsonby. Upon my word, Beeching, I feel grateful to you for the generous suggestion."

"Yah!" cried Beeching sharply; not at this stab, but at a very tangible bite from the aggravated poodle.

"Luncheon is on the table. Are you going to

sit there teasing Tory all the afternoon, or are you coming to lunch with me?" asked Mrs. Baddeley, suddenly changing the conversation.

Mr. Beeching got up, and followed her to the dining-room, looking the very image of sheepishness. It was only on the other side of an Oriental curtain, the quaintest, snuggest little room, fenced off from all rough winds that blow by perforated sandal-wood screens and clusters of tall palms. On the small round table, among quaint old silver and hothouse flowers, there appeared a dainty little luncheon of salmon cutlets, a duckling, with all accompaniments in perfection, and a bottle of G. H. Mumm, delicately wrapped in an embroidered d'oyley. The glass was Venetian, the plates and dishes were Wedgewood.

Mr. Beeching ate his luncheon, and fed Tory, and while the salmon and duckling were being discussed there was not another word spoken about Mrs. Ponsonby, or that hundred pounds which had to be found for her; only Mr. Beeching observed that his hostess, although she ministered delicately to his wants, ate hardly anything her-

self, and pushed away her plate with a heart-broken air which made him feel very uncomfortable.

"Don't mind me," she said, when she caught him looking at her. "The difficulty must be faced somehow. As you say, I have my diamonds. I may have to humiliate myself so far as to offer that odious woman one of my bracelets as a security for her debt."

This was a concession to the stringency of Fate, and Mr. Beeching felt that the lady was becoming more reasonable.

"Was Peg Woffington the sort of person who would wear diamonds?" he asked, presently.

"She was a famous actress, and she was very beautiful. I leave you to judge."

"Yes, I suppose she would have diamonds. They always do. But are there not stage jewels that you could hire?"

"Stage jewels! *I* wear stage jewels! When every chorus girl in London wears diamonds of the first water. I wonder that you don't know me better."

She leant across the table to fill his glass for him. She had filled it so often with that friendly, almost motherly air, that he had finished the bottle unawares, not knowing that his hostess had only sipped half a glass to keep him in countenance. He began to be more sympathetic than he had been before luncheon, and to be really concerned about Mrs. Baddeley's dilemma.

A hundred pounds. Such a sum was a mere bagatelle to a man who counted his thousands by the hundred, and felt a little uncomfortable when he began upon a fresh hundred thousand, just as humble poverty does when it changes a sovereign. A hundred pounds more or less could not make any difference to him; and yet he did not like lending that beggarly sum to Mrs. Baddeley, intensely as he admired her. He had lent her a good many hundreds before, sometimes for Mrs. Ponsonby, sometimes for the Oriental warehouse, sometimes for the livery stable. She had not paid him, and he had not expected or even wished to be paid; but he had expected that she would be grateful. He expected to be favoured exclusively as one who had

helped her in the hour of need; and he had not been so favoured. She had allowed him to haunt her drawing-room, and to go about with her as a kind of unofficial purse-bearer, paying for carriages, and opera boxes, and picnic luncheons, and gloves, and frivolities of all kinds, and scarcely getting thanked for his pains. He was so inordinately rich that such outlays were not supposed to count.

That which hit him hardest was the idea that St. Austell was preferred to him; that, adore as faithfully as he might, Lord St. Austell had but to smile his all-conquering smile and Joe Beeching's devotion was forgotten.

"I believe that all I am good for in your life is to play propriety when you go about with St. Austell," he said one day, in a savage humour.

"My dearest Beeching, how can you talk so wildly. Do you suppose I am in love—I, Leonora Baddeley—with Lord St. Austell. Do you forget that I have a dear, good husband toiling for me in India?"

"I think some of us forget him occasionally," growled Beeching.

And now to-day, ruminating on that question of the cheque, to write or not to write, Mr. Beeching thought also of Lord St. Austell. He had seen that gentleman wavering in his allegiance to the elder sister, had seen him transfer his devotion to the younger sister; and he told himself that as a rival St. Austell was out of the running.

He felt more kindly disposed after the duckling and champagne, which were both excellent after their kind. He trifled with some olives and helped himself to a glass of claret, a wine he had himself chosen for Mrs. Baddeley—and paid for. She took all such contributions in the lightest way, as a flower absorbs dew, taking no heed of the giver. He looked askant at her as he sipped his wine. How handsome she was, and how well she looked in her habit; and there were tears in her eyes, yes, absolutely tears. She was not crying about her gowns. It was the sense of humiliation which crushed her.

"Don't be unhappy," he said; "I'll go and see

this woman, and see what can be done. Do you owe her much?"

"I'm afraid I do owe her a good deal."

"Tell me the worst. Give me her last account."

"You'll be shocked, I'm afraid," said Leo, taking a paper out of her davenport. "Her prices are extortionate, and I have been so unlucky at all the races this year. Last year I paid her a heap of money after Ascot, and another heap—well, over a hundred each time—after Doncaster."

"I'll see what I can do," said Beeching, making a wry face as he looked at the total.

It was just under nine hundred pounds.

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. BEECHING'S ULTIMATUM

Mr. Beeching took a hansom and drove to a street off Cavendish Square—a street well known to the best-dressed women in London. As he drove along he debated what he should do for Mrs. Baddeley. He was so inherently a man of business—albeit he had never inked his fingers in a City office—that it irked him to fling a hundred pounds into this harpy's maw, as a sop is flung to Cerberus. It would please him better to make some kind of bargain with the harpy, even if the transaction should cost him more than a hundred pounds. He wanted to get some advantage for his money.

He sent his card to Mrs. Ponsonby, and was at once admitted into the very sanctuary of the house near Cavendish Square—the lady's private room, study, office, or boudoir, whichever she might

choose to call it; and here he was received with gracious smiles by Mrs. Ponsonby herself.

She needed no explanation of his errand, for she had seen him in attendance upon the handsome Mrs. Baddeley at race-meetings and other places of public resort, whither Mrs. Ponsonby went occasionally to see how the world was using her customers. It was there that she made up her mind about all her doubtful patronesses, as to how far they might be worthy of her confidence. That which she saw at Hurlingham or at Sandown served as the chart by which she steered in dangerous seas. In the dressmaker's estimation of Mrs. Baddeley—whose account was a bagatelle compared with some other accounts—Mr. Beeching was an important factor. He had never crossed her threshold until to-day, and she felt pleased with herself for having written the letter that had brought him there.

She was not so pleased, however, after a quarter of an hour's conversation with Mr. Beeching.

Of money on account he would not give her a sixpence. If she were prepared to settle her account

upon equitable terms, say thirty-three per cent., he would give her his cheque and take Mrs. Baddeley a receipt in full of all demands. If she were not disposed to accept this offer, she must look to Mrs. Baddeley alone for her money. He would have nothing to do with it. He knew what dressmakers' bills were, and the usurious profits they exacted. He was assured that thirty-three per cent. would pay for all that she had supplied, and leave a margin of profit. At any rate that was his ultimatum. Mrs. Baddeley had given him plenary powers. As for the gowns for this evening, Mrs. Baddeley could do very well without them. It was by her acting, not by her costume, she was to please her audience. It was not to be supposed that he was to be frightened into paying an exorbitant account.

Mrs. Ponsonby held out for a long time. She was not in the habit of compromising an account. She was in no immediate want of money. She meant to have her due. Mrs. Baddeley would be obliged to pay her.

"My good soul, it is all very well to talk,"

replied Mr. Beeching, who was more at his ease in a business interview than in society; "but can you get blood out of a stone? Can you get nine hundred pounds out of an officer's wife—a lady whose husband is being roasted alive at Candahar or somewhere, in order to keep body and soul together. *You* have made your mistake in trusting a lady in Mrs. Baddeley's sad position, and you ought to think yourself uncommonly lucky if you get a clear third of your account without law expenses or bother of any kind."

"Mrs. Baddeley may not have money, but she has friends," argued the dressmaker doggedly.

"No doubt she has friends—hosts of friends—but I take it I am the only one among 'em who would pay six-and-eightpence in the pound to get her out of a difficulty. One thing I can assure you, Mrs. Ponsonby, I won't pay seven shillings. I have made my final offer."

He had his cheque-book in the breast-pocket of his summer overcoat, the end showing distinctly against the silk lining. He touched the book

lightly as he spoke, and that touch decided Mrs. Ponsonby.

She had felt some uneasiness about Mrs. Baddeley's account, and it was something to get the cost price of her materials, with the advantage of having dressed a lady who was known and admired in a particular set, and who had brought Mrs. Ponsonby a good deal of custom.

"I should be sorry to disoblige a lady for whom I have a great liking," she said, with a patronizing air; "and rather than do that I will accept your cheque."

"And give me a receipt in full of all demands?"

"Yes, so far as the account you have there. The gowns that are to be delivered this afternoon are not in that account."

"What are they to cost?"

Mrs. Ponsonby looked at a document on her davenport.

"One hundred and seventy-seven pounds eighteen shillings and ninepence."

"I'll add sixty-five pounds to your cheque, and

you can cross Mrs. Baddeley out of your books altogether."

"What! I am to take a third of my account and to lose my customer."

"Not at all. She says there is no one in London but you who can make her a gown. She will go on dealing with you, I have no doubt; but if she takes my advice she will always pay ready money, and always know what she is going to pay when she gives the order. You'll both of you find that system ever so much pleasanter."

"Not if my prices are to be cut down in this absurd way," replied Mrs. Ponsonby.

There was a further discussion; but Mr. Beeching's logic and his cheque-book prevailed. He wrote his cheque, got the two receipted accounts, saw the milliner's basket deposited on the top of a cab, with a young woman in charge of it, and then drove back to Wilkie Mansions. He passed the four-wheeler and the big basket before he reached the Park.

Mrs. Baddeley was in her drawing-room, pale, anxious, but lovely, in a Japanese tea-gown, lime-

blossom green, under a cloud of coffee-coloured lace.

"Dearest Beeching, have you got me my gowns?" she gasped, with clasped hands, as he stood just within the doorway.

Tory, always eager to distinguish himself, rushed at the half-open door and banged it, and then came back to his mistress on his hind legs to demand his accustomed reward of biscuit or sugar, but Leo was too agitated to think of Tory.

"Your gowns will be here in ten minutes. I passed them on the road. Could you think I would allow you to be unhappy for the sake of a paltry hundred?" said Beeching tenderly. "Oh, Leonora, how little you know me!"

This was a plunge. He had never called her Leonora before.

Tory gave a short indignant bark, either at Mr. Beeching's familiarity or at his mistress's neglect.

"I have done something more than you asked," continued Beeching, growing boastful. "I have got you out of debt. You don't owe Mrs. Pon-

sonby a shilling. There is the old account, and there is the account for your new gowns, both receipted."

"You darling! How can I ever be grateful enough? How can I ever repay you?"

"You might repay me easily if you liked, Leonora. Show me a little of that favour which you lavish so freely upon your sister's lover. Give me some of those smiles you give to St. Austell. Let me be something more to you than a stop-gap and a convenience. Leo, you know that I adore you."

He drew nearer to her, regardless of Tory, whose yellow eyes were shining ominously.

"You won't refuse me one kiss, Leo?"

"One! Half-a-dozen if you like."

He sprang to clasp her waist, to press those exquisite lips, and was met by a cold black muzzle, which touched him for an instant, and was withdrawn just as it widened into a growl, preliminary to a snap. Mrs. Baddeley had snatched up Tory. He was to her as Medusa's head was to Minerva, and made her almost as invincible.

"My dear Beeching, I hope your kindness in helping me out of a difficulty does not make you forget that I have a husband in India," she said, with dignity; and Beeching stood before her, crestfallen and angry, but unable to reply.

He began to understand that he was to write cheques whenever they were urgently wanted; but that he was to get nothing but afternoon tea and Tory's attentions for his money.

"You are very cruel," he said sulkily. "Good day."

"You'll come to see the play, dear Beeching," she said, as he was departing.

"I'll be —— if I do!"

"Oh, I hope you won't be *that;* but I know you'll come to see Peg Woffington."

He met the milliner's basket and the young woman just emerging from the lift. He had none of that generous glow which is said to follow the doing of a good action. He felt savage at being foiled.

"The next time she's in a difficulty she may whistle for me," he said to himself; but when

eight o'clock came he could no more keep away from the Victoria Hall than a moth can keep away from a candle. The hall was so near his chambers in the Albany. He had not even to order his brougham. He just slipped on his overcoat, took one from half-a-dozen guinea tickets on his chimney-piece, and walked to the place of entertainment. Carriages were setting down at the entrance. Lady Belfield, Helen, and Sir Adrian were going in just in front of him, amongst a fashionable crowd. His stall was next but one to Helen's, and St. Austell occupied the seat between them.

"How odd that we should be side by side," said his lordship, loud enough for Lady Belfield to hear.

Helen made no answer. She was not yet mistress of those arts of hypocrisy which enable a woman to glide from flirtation to flirtation, and from intrigue to intrigue, with a bold front and a lofty crest. She had not passed the border line of guilt, and yet her head was bent by the burden of conscious shame. That slight droop of the head

and pensive air enhanced her beauty, in an age when brazen mirthfulness is the commonest attribute of woman. She had a fragile look, like a tall white lily, bent almost to breaking. Some of her friends said she looked consumptive, and would not last many seasons.

She knew that St. Austell had taken infinite trouble to get that stall next hers. He had been with her at tea-time to find out the number of her seat; had been with her, they two alone, in the Japanese drawing-room—with not even Tory to make a diversion from perilous sentimentality—and then had driven off to the hall in a hansom to get his own number changed; and now he expected her to act surprise.

"Masks and Faces" was listened to with polite approval by people who remembered Fanny Stirling in the heyday of her charms as Peg Woffington; by people who could hardly dissociate the character from Mrs. Bancroft; and by other people who had seen Mrs. Bernard Beere. As for Mrs. Baddeley, her diamonds and her gowns were lovely. Her acting was easy and refined, and utterly undramatic;

but she was above the level of her fellow-performers, and was supposed by them and by herself to be taking the town by storm. Applause is given so freely to amateurs, since approval means nothing and compromises nobody. People who have been coaxed into buying guinea stalls for an old familiar play must at least pretend to enjoy themselves; and the audience was decidedly smart, and could console itself with the idea that it was the right thing to be there.

Lady Belfield and her daughter-in-law parted in the vestibule. Helen was going on to a party in Regent Terrace with her sister. She had to go to Mrs. Baddeley's dressing-room and wait there while that lady changed her dress, which would be rather a long business, no doubt. St. Austell offered to take her to her sister's room; but Adrian gave her his arm, as if by a superior right.

"If you'll take care of my mother, I'll be back in a few minutes," he said to St. Austell, as he walked off with Helen.

It was the first time she had touched his arm since they were affianced lovers, and her fingers

trembled faintly as they rested on his sleeve. She had so many causes for agitation. St. Austell's pursuit—unobtrusive, but fatal; her fear of her husband's return, which might occur at any moment: and now her dread of this grave, earnest brother-in-law, whom she had wronged in the past, and from whom she shrank in the present as from one who had an occult power to read her heart.

"You are looking pale and tired, Helen," said Adrian, as they went along a passage leading to the back of the hall. "Must you really go to a party to-night?"

"I am due at two. There is Lady Glandore's musical evening, which I would not miss for worlds, and a dance afterwards—a late dance—which means coffee and carriages at six o'clock to-morrow morning."

"I believe you are killing yourself with this kind of life."

"Oh, but it is only a spurt: it lasts so short a time. 'A rose's brief bright life of joy,' as somebody has said."

"And you go from party to party—from crowd to crowd—alone?"

"What do you mean by alone? I am under my elder sister's wing, always."

"I don't think that wing is quite enough to shelter you, Helen. I don't like to think of you in society without your husband."

"I should see very little of society if I waited for Valentine to take me about. Do you know that I should have gone melancholy mad a few months ago if Leo had not come to my rescue?"

"That is very sad, Helen. I must talk to my brother——"

"Don't! It would only make bad blood between us. It is all over with us as a devoted couple; it was all over directly after our honeymoon. I was so fond of him, and I thought we were going to be so happy together—not commonplace married people, leading commonplace semi-detached lives, but wedded lovers. I soon found out my mistake."

"But you have only been married two years

You cannot be tired of each other yet. Valentine is too much accustomed to have his own way, and to seek his own amusement; but I have no doubt he loves you as fondly as ever."

"You have not seen us together, or you would know better."

"I cannot believe that there is any change in his feelings," persisted Adrian; "but I think the kind of life you are leading is calculated to estrange him. The knowledge that you are going about in society without him will make him more and more careless of his home, more intent upon his own pleasures."

They were at the door of the dressing-room by this time.

"Good-night," said Helen, offering Adrian her hand.

He pressed it gently, with a brother's kindly grasp.

"We may meet again, perhaps, before morning. I saw Glandore at the Carlton, and he asked me to look in at her ladyship's party, and hear Patti."

"*Au revoir,* then," said Helen, with an unde-

finable feeling that Adrian's presence would spoil her evening.

He had told her that he did not approve of her butterfly life; and she could not shake off the idea that he could read her thoughts and knew the downward road on which she was travelling.

CHAPTER IX.

ON THE TERRACE

It took Mrs. Baddeley a considerable time to transform herself from Peg Woffington to a lady of the period. The concert was over in Regent Terrace when the sisters arrived. Patti had sung and departed, and a stream of smart people were flowing out of the lofty hall on their way to dances; but the pleasantest feature of Lady Glandore's parties was the lamplit terrace, where her ladyship's guests sauntered up and down, or sat about in friendly groups among groves of palms and pyramids of exotics, and listened to a band stationed at the end of the terrace. Whatever band was best and most fashionable was to be heard at Lady Glandore's; and the change from the brilliant rooms and operatic music, the crowd, and the dazzle of the house, to this cool region of palms and flowers and multitudinous lamps clustering

among the greenery, and Japanese umbrella canopies, and little tables provided with strawberries and cream, and talk, and flirtation, and iced drinks, and stirring national melodies, was a change that delighted everybody. And there, across the shadowy Park, in darkly solemn grandeur, showed the dense bulk of Abbey and Senate House; the place where the dead, who seem so great, are lying; and the place where the living, who seem so small, are trying to talk themselves into fame and immortality.

There were many people in London who preferred Lady Glandore's terrace to the smartest dance of the season, and who lingered and loitered there between lamplight and shadow, strolling up and down, or leaning on the balustrade, dreamily contemplative of that dark bulk of towers and roofs, touched here and there with points of vivid light.

Mrs. Baddeley was neither dreamy nor contemplative, and the only ideas the Abbey or the Senate House awakened in her mind were that death in any form, even when glorified in marble, was an inevitable nuisance, and that politics were perhaps

a still greater bore. She was of the earth earthy, and always made the most of the present moment. She speedily took possession of one of the strawberry-and-cream tables, and had a cluster of admirers about her, whom she sent on errands to the supper-room.

"I am going to frighten you all by eating a most prodigious supper," she cried. "Remember, I have been acting comedy and tragedy, laughing and crying, and loving and suffering, for three hours, and have had nothing but one poor little split and a tea-spoonful of brandy. I am on the verge of exhaustion. What, is that you, Beeching?" she cried, as a dark figure and an expanse of shirt-front rose up in the shadow of a neighbouring palm, like the ghost in the "Corsican Brothers." "I did not think I should see you here to-night. How did you like my Peg?"

She was lifting a champagne tumbler to her rosy lips as she spoke, and Beeching thought she was alluding to some particular order of drink.

"How did you like Peg Woffington—and—my gowns?" she said impatiently.

"I suppose it was all very fine, but I ain't much of a judge of anything but a burlesque."

"Oh, but I hope I made you cry," said Mrs. Baddeley, attacking a plateful of delicacies, which a practical admirer had collected for her: foie-gras, chicken, lobster salad, all on the same plate.

"It saves time," he said; "and one don't seem to be eating so much," to which Leo laughingly agreed.

"When I have finished my supper I mean to wallow in strawberries and cream for the rest of the evening," she said, with frank vulgarity; "and you will all have to amuse me. I am much too exhausted to do any talking myself."

"Then I'm afraid you must be at death's door," retorted Beeching.

"Good gracious!" cried Leo, starting up suddenly and looking about her.

"Have you dropped anything?" cried a chorus of admirers. "Your fan—your handkerchief?"

"No, it's my sister. I'm chaperoning her, don't you know, poor young thing, and I haven't seen her since we left the cloak-room."

"Oh, she's quite safe," said Beeching, in his slow sullen voice. "I saw her at the other end of the terrace—the dark end—looking at the view, with St. Austell."

"I'm afraid I ought to go and hunt them up presently," said Mrs. Baddeley, pushing away her plate with a sigh of satisfaction; "and now, you dear good Colonel, you may go and get me some cream and things—whatever looks nicest. You are an admirable caterer. St. Austell is a dear fellow, but it's unlucky he has made himself such a bad reputation."

"I don't think he took much trouble about it," answered Beeching. "I fancy it came naturally."

"Such a pity," sighed Leo. "He is so handsome, and distinguished, and clever—so altogether *nice*"—as if the last word expressed supreme merit; "and yet people will talk about him, and it's almost dangerous for a young married woman to be civil to him."

"*You* are not afraid, though," said Mr. Mountnessing, a man about town, who was very devoted to Mrs. Baddeley, but who had never imperilled

his peace of mind or depleted his purse for any woman living. "You are uncommonly civil to him."

"Oh, I don't count. I am a Bohemian of the Bohemians. I make no distinctions. I know so thoroughly well how to take care of myself," said Leo, devouring an iced soufflé.

"Upon my word I believe you do," said Mr. Beeching, to which the chorus agreed.

"But my sister is younger than I am, and knows very little of the world, and ought to be looked after," said Leo, attacking a pine-apple cream. "Not nearly so good as the soufflé, Colonel; you should have brought me more of the soufflé."

"And Mrs. Belfield has not the advantage of a husband in India," said Colonel Cotterell.

"No, indeed, poor thing!" agreed Leo. "A neglectful husband at home is not nearly so great a protection for a wife as a dear kind fellow in India, toiling for one under a tropical sun."

"So touching!" said the Colonel.

There were fewer lamps and less people at that end of the terrace where Helen leaned against the

stone balustrade, looking across the low level Park, with its parallel rows of lamps, like strings of jewels hanging across the darkness, and its distant boundary of Gothic pinnacles and dark walls, pierced with spots of light.

St. Austell was by her side. They had been in the same spot for nearly an hour. They had talked of many things, beginning in the lightest strain, Helen intending that there should be only the lightest talk between them that night, such talk as all the world might hear. Yet they had drifted somehow from gaiety to seriousness, from airiest talk of their neighbours to tenderest talk of themselves—and from seriousness they had lapsed into silence.

She leaned her chin upon her hand, gazing at the distant Abbey, with eyes dimmed by tears; but it was not the associations of that solemn pile which moved her. It was no thought of the dead lying there, or of all that the living had lost by the death of greatness. It was of herself and of her own sorrows she thought, and of the lover who stood by her side, and whose lips had been pleading to her

as never mortal lips had pleaded before, with a silvery eloquence that thrilled and subjugated her senses and her soul.

What was that rough power, the mere force of a vigorous nature and a dominant will, by which Valentine had conquered her allegiance and won her to himself, compared with this tender and spiritual charm, the fascination of a man who seemed all intellect and emotion, a creature compounded of fire and light, rather than of gross earthy substances. She had never known what love meant until this magical voice whispered in her ear, until this light hand touched her own, and conquered at a touch.

"There are tears in your eyes, Helen," he said, trying gently to draw her face towards his own. "I know it, though I cannot see them. Love, why are you crying? I tell you again the gulf is not impassable. All good things are on the other side. If your life were happy—if your fate were what it ought to be—I would not ask you what I have asked to-night. But I have seen how you are

ignored and neglected—I know how little there is to lose—while for me there is all to gain, and for you—at least this much—to be loved and cherished and honoured as you deserve to be."

"Honoured! Oh, how can you use that word?" she said, with a sob.

"Why should I not use it? Do you think, dearest, if you were to make this sacrifice for me, I should not honour you so much the more for that sacrifice than for all else that is lovely in your nature?"

And then he went on with arguments that have been worn threadbare in the cause of illicit love, but which always seem original to the yielding ear of the woman who listens. He went on in that low melodious voice which had charmed honour and conscience to fatal oblivion many a time before to-night; the voice of the accomplished seducer, who has just heart enough to fancy himself eternally in love once a year, and who pleads to his mistress in all the glow and fervour of a passion which seems as true as a boy's first love, and which is

foredoomed to change and forgetfulness even in its golden dawn. He talked as a man who had never loved before, and could never cease to love. He believed in himself, and the reality of his own transient emotions gave him all the force of sincerity. He was sincere, only it was the sincerity of a single season, and would be gone and forgotten before next year's roses bloomed on Lady Glandore's terrace.

Helen heard, and seemed on the point of yielding. He had been imploring her to leave a husband who neglected her, who was obviously unworthy of her fidelity, and to trust her lot to him. They would leave England together—for ever, if she chose. She should not be made unhappy by the vicinity of people she knew, or who knew anything about her. He cared not where his lot was cast so long as he was by her side. He had been told that if he wanted to escape early death he ought to winter in the East—Egypt, Algiers, or Ceylon. Would she not go with him? They could spend the early autumn in Northern Italy, and then in October they could start for Ceylon—a land where

all things would be new, where life would be as fresh and full of wonder as if they were children again. They would live for each other, apart from society, under an assumed name. No one need ever know their history.

"We would have no history except the story of our love," he said.

She listened with drooping eyelids, listened with one hand locked in his, listened almost in silence. Yes, she could imagine that life which he described, a life in the liberty of strange lands, in perpetual sunshine, among picturesque people; a life for ever changing, for ever new, and brimming over with love; such a life as she had fancied possible in that long honeymoon among Swiss mountains and lakes, when she had waited as a slave upon her Sultan, made happy by a smile or a careless caress. She had fancied herself happy in those days, and had been a willing slave; but he who now pleaded to her was to be her slave, and she was to be Sultana. His love was devoted, reverential, even; she felt, for the first time, what it was to be young, and beautiful, and adored.

St. Austell looked his best in that dim light. The delicate features, the pale complexion, somewhat wan and haggard, after many seasons of reckless dissipation; the dreamy blue-grey eyes, the refined mouth and chin, and the high intellectual brow, on which the hair grew thinly, were all characteristic of a type that women call "interesting." Helen felt the charm of that emotional countenance as deeply as she felt the magic of that musical voice. She stood by his side in silence, letting him plead, letting him clasp her hand, letting him assure himself of victory.

The band was at the other end of the terrace, and it was near that end that Lady Glandore and her friends clustered in little groups, which were rapidly thinning. The sound of a waltz came brokenly, from the distance, to those two in their solitude. They heard nothing but that fitful ebb and flow of melody, no sound of voices; till a voice close to them startled them like a peal of thunder.

"I have been looking for you everywhere,

Helen," said Mr. Belfield, "and I began to think Adrian had made a fool of me when he told me you were to be here."

The two brothers were standing side by side in the uncertain light of the little gold-coloured lamps dotted among the palms, and twinkling among the flower beds. They stood side by side, clad exactly alike in their evening dress, like and yet unlike. Valentine, broad-shouldered, vigorous-looking, taller than his brother by an inch or two; Adrian, slender, fragile, with features delicate to attenuation. It was as if spirit and flesh were embodied in two different forms.

Helen's voice faltered as she greeted her husband, but a little agitation was only natural at so unexpected a meeting.

"When did you come back, Val?" she asked. "It isn't like you to look me up at a party."

"Of course it isn't like me," he answered, with a carelessness which reassured that guilty heart. "I should not be here if it was not for Adrian. I went to find him at his hotel before going to my club, and he made me come here with him instead

of going to the club with me, as I wanted him to do. How white you are looking, Helen."

"It is the light of the lamps," she faltered.

"Then they must be dooced unbecoming lamps. How-d'ye-do, St. Austell?"

The two men nodded to each other; but St. Austell kept in the background, leaning against the balustrade. It was just possible for him to avoid shaking hands with Mr. Belfield without appearing constrained or particular in his conduct. It would seem almost that he held himself aloof from delicate feeling, loth to interrupt the meeting between husband and wife.

Mrs. Baddeley came sweeping along with her satin train trailing on the gravel, and with Mr. Beeching, Colonel Cotterell, and Mr. Mountnessing in attendance upon her.

"Do you know that we are outstaying everybody?" she exclaimed, "and I have no doubt Lady Glandore is dying to get rid of us all and go to the Duchess's ball. What, Valentine, is that you? I am glad you are back again. Helen, do you feel fit for going on to Grosvenor Gardens?"

"No; I shall go nowhere else to-night. I am tired to death."

Not a word of satisfaction at having her husband back again; no reference to him in her reply. Adrian marked the omission, and wondered at it. Was love dead between those two? The fire that had burned so strongly that night by the river; the flame to which he had sacrificed his own rights—was it quite extinct? He looked at Helen thoughtfully. She was no less lovely than in that old time when he had loved her; but he saw the beautiful face with a clearer, calmer eye now, and he saw weakness of character in every line—a sweet, lovable, yielding nature, perhaps, but not a woman for any man to build his hopes upon, not a woman for whom to venture all things.

Adrian had a good many opportunities for observing his sister-in-law after that evening at Lady Glandore's, and every new meeting only convinced him the more that all was not well with her. St. Austell's shadow followed her like a blight; and yet Adrian had never seen anything in her conduct

which would justify him in remonstrating with her, or even in warning her against Lord St. Austell. She could hardly refuse to know her sister's friends while she was chaperoned by her sister; and St. Austell was an old friend of Major and Mrs. Baddeley's.

He took the opportunity of a *tête-à-tête* lunch with Valentine at the Junior Carlton, to speak of his married life.

"You are quite happy, Val?" he asked. "Your marriage has realized all your hopes?"

"Well, yes, I suppose it has. I don't know very precisely what my hopes were. I only know that I was desperately in love, and that you were a good fellow to give me the field, and are a still better fellow for forgiving me as you have done."

He stretched across the table to shake hands with his brother, with more feeling than he was wont to exhibit.

"Time has been very good to me, Val. I am heart-whole again, and I can think of Helen as my sister, and love her as a sister should be loved. I

can never forget that she is the first woman I ever cared for."

"How about the second, Adrian?"

"There is no second yet. I will not say of myself that I shall never love again. Life means mutability, and so long as a man lives he may change. I can't help wishing, Val, that you and Helen were a little less fashionable. I don't like your semi-detached way of living."

"My dear soul, we live as most of our fellow creatures live," answered Valentine lightly. "I am not the kind of man to be tied to any woman's apron-string, wife or mistress; to stand in doorways while my wife dances; to sit out plays I am sick of while my wife looks on; or to jog up and down the Row at her side while she nods good morning to all the silly people in London, and shows off the last fashion in riding habits. If Helen and I are to hang together for the rest of our lives we must be free to enjoy ourselves after our own ideas. She has an excellent chaperon, and I am letting her sow her wild oats. She will be tired of gadding about in a season or two."

"And when she is tired of gadding about, is she to sit by the fire—alone?"

"My dear Adrian, don't lecture. Who knows? By that time I may be tired of knocking about London, and may sit by the fire and smoke—or take to books, like you. In the meantime, Helen and I get on capitally."

"Yes, and she gets on capitally with men who are ever so much more attentive to her than you are—men who don't mind looking on when she dances, and don't mind jogging up and down the Row. St. Austell, for instance."

Valentine frowned, and then shrugged his shoulders.

"You don't suppose you can make me jealous?" he said. "I am not that kind of person. My wife may accept as much admiration as she likes from other men. I know her heart is mine."

He smiled, recalling his slave's devotion; her delight at a kind word, her blushing pleasure at a casual kiss. He forgot that those things belonged to his experiences of last year. He had not even noticed the growing change in his wife's manner,

so completely was he absorbed in himself and his own pleasures.

"Indeed, Valentine, I have never doubted Helen's affection for you; but I think she deserves a little more of your company—a little more of your care. She is too young and too beautiful to stand alone in London society."

"Bosh! A good woman always knows how to take care of herself. It is only the bad ones that want looking after."

Adrian was silent. He felt that he had said as much as he could safely say to Valentine; but there was something which he meant to say to Helen before he went back to Devonshire.

He rode in the Row the day before he left London, to try a saddle-horse which he had bought at Tattersall's on the previous afternoon. He rode early, and was surprised to meet his sister-in-law coming in at the Kensington Gate, quite alone, as the clocks were striking nine.

"I heard you were to be at two dances last night, Helen, so I hardly expected to see you out so early," he said.

"I could'nt sleep," she answered; "so it was just as well to have my ride before the herd came out."

She had flushed suddenly as he rode up to her, but the colour faded the next minute and left her very pale.

"You look as if you wanted sleep, more than an early ride," he said gravely, shocked at her waxen pallor, but still more at the startled look with which she had recognized him.

"I dare say I do," she answered carelessly. "We were dancing the cotillon at five o'clock. I had no idea you rode in the Park."

"I am only here because of my purchase yesterday. How do you like him?"

Helen looked critically at the handsome upstanding bay.

"Very much. He looks every inch a hunter."

"Isn't it a pity that I only want him for a hack?" said Adrian, with a touch of bitterness, remembering those days when his betrothed had lamented his deficiencies as a sportsman. "Never mind, Helen, you can hunt him in the autumn

when you come to the Abbey. You will come, of course?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, but you must come, Helen. You must come and stay with my mother, and take your fill of rest, and dulness, and country air, after the whirl and wear of London life. There is nothing in the world so good as perfect rest in a quiet old country-house. Valentine will have the shooting in September and October, and you can have plenty of cub-hunting. I will get one of the Miss Treduceys to look after you. They never miss a morning."

And then, bending over her horse's neck, he said, with gentle earnestness:

"Remember, Helen, the Abbey is your natural home, and my mother your natural protector, second only to your husband. In the hour of doubt or trouble that home ought to be your haven of refuge. Never fear to go there for shelter: never fear to confide in my mother's love."

"You are very good. Lady Belfield is the dearest woman in the world. Of course I shall be

charmed to go to the Abbey if Valentine will take me, and I dare say he will like to go there for the shooting," replied Helen hurriedly, with a troubled manner, Adrian thought; not as one whose mind was at ease.

"Your horse has more breed than mine," he said, by way of changing the conversation. "He is a very beautiful creature. Where did Valentine pick him up?"

"He was bought at Tattersall's. It was not Valentine who chose him. It was Mr. Beeching —or Lord St. Austell—I am not sure which of them really bought him. They are both considered good judges.

"No doubt. But Val paid for the horse, of course?"

"Of course," answered Helen, reddening at the question. "Who else should pay for him?"

"He must have given a high figure, I take it?"

"No; the horse was a bargain. When I begged him to buy me a horse, Valentine said he would only give sixty guineas—that was all he

could afford—and I believe Ravioli was bought for about that money."

"Then there is something wrong with him, I suppose. I hope he is not a dangerous horse."

"Dangerous? Not the least. He has perfect manners."

"And he is not a whistler, or a roarer?"

"Certainly not."

"Then I congratulate you on having secured a wonderful bargain. Any one would give you credit for riding a three hundred guinea horse. I gave very nearly two hundred for this fellow, and he is not half so handsome as yours. Ah, here comes St. Austell. Was he in your cotillon last night?"

"Yes; he is devoted to the cotillon."

Lord St. Austell met them both with the easiest air. He, too, complained of sleeplessness. "These late parties are killing us," he said. "One loses the capacity for sleep. I shall have to go to a Hydropathic in the wilds of Scotland or Ireland for a month or two, just to pull myself together before I go to the East for the winter."

"I should hardly have given you credit for being out so early," said Adrian.

"Wouldn't you? Oh, I am better than my reputation, I assure you. I hate the Row when the mob are out, and the band, and the talk, and the nonsense. Good day." He saluted Helen, and cantered away, as if he had no other purpose in his ride than healthful exercise, and Adrian and his companion saw no more of him.

They rode up and down for an hour, Adrian trying the paces of his new horse, which behaved in the "new broom" manner of horses that have been nourished in a dealer's yard for a space, to the temporary subjugation of their original sin. After that quiet hour's ride and quiet talk, Adrian escorted his sister-in-law back to her door, where the man from the livery-yard was chewing his customary straw; and here they parted.

"My mother and I go back to Devonshire to-morrow morning, Helen. You'll not forget?"

"A thousand thanks, no. Good-bye."

And so they parted. She said not a word about going to see Lady Belfield that afternoon,

and Adrian did not ask her. He heard afterwards that she and Mrs. Baddeley were at the Ranelagh, dined there, and drove home late in the evening to dress for a ball. The beautiful Mrs. Belfield was invited everywhere this season, and her fresh young beauty had opened many doors which had hitherto been closed against Mrs. Baddeley.

There was an awkward story about that lady's diamonds, the particulars of which had been only correctly known to a select few, but which the select few had not forgotten, while even the vulgar herd knew there was a story of some kind, not altogether creditable to the wearer of the gems.

CHAPTER X.

"IT CANNOT BE"

LADY BELFIELD went back to Devonshire dispirited at having seen very little of her younger son during her stay in London, and not altogether satisfied with the aspect of his domestic affairs. That marriage which was no union, that laborious pursuit of pleasure which husband and wife were carrying on in opposite directions, filled her with anxiety.

Those darker clouds which Adrian had perceived on the horizon had not revealed themselves to the matron's innocent eyes. Her experience of life had not familiarized her with the idea of false wives and deceived husbands. These two had married for love, casting all other considerations to the winds, and it never occurred to her that such lovers could weary of each other. She saw that they were leading frivolous lives, and living very much

apart; she saw many tokens of folly and extravagance on both sides; and she left London full of vague fears for the future. But there was no forecast of sin or ignominy in her mind when she bade Helen good-bye in the little Japanese drawing-room, just before she drove to Paddington.

It was within an hour of noon, and Helen came out of her bedroom, pale and wan, in her white muslin wrapper.

"You have had a very short night, I fear," said Lady Belfield.

"Oh, I wouldn't mind how short it was if I could only sleep," answered Helen impatiently. "My nights are always too long. The birds were singing when we came home, and I thought if I could only sleep for a couple of hours I should be as fresh as they were; but I lay awake till the birds changed to the milkman, and the milkman to the postman, and then came the tradesmen's carts."

"You must come to the Abbey, Helen; there will be silence and rest for you in your old rooms."

"Oh, I love those old rooms, though I have had some sad thoughts in them. Yes, Val says he will be delighted to go to you for the pheasant-shooting."

"But that is a long time for me to wait. I want you very soon, Helen. A quarter-past eleven. I must go, love. The express starts at a quarter to twelve. Good-bye."

And so they parted, with kisses, and not without tears on Helen's part.

The door had scarcely closed when she flung herself on the sofa and buried her face in the cushions to stifle her sobs. Valentine was sleeping soundly after a late night at his club.

Adrian met his mother at Paddington, and they went down to Devonshire together in the seclusion of a reserved coupé, with books and newspapers, fruit and flowers, and all the things that can make a long journey endurable on a sultry summer day.

"I'm afraid Mrs. Baddeley is not quite the best companion Helen could have, although she is her sister," said Lady Belfield, after a long reverie.

"I only hope she is not quite the worst," replied Adrian, laying down the new *Quarterly*. "I wonder that Valentine does not see the danger of such an association."

"Danger is an alarming word, Adrian."

"I can use no other. The beautiful Mrs. Belfield, the latest fashion in beauty, ought not to be met everywhere in London without her husband, and with such a woman as Mrs. Baddeley for her chaperon; a woman who prides herself in going everywhere with three or four men in her train."

"It is all very sad, Adrian."

It was all very sad; and it was sadder that Lady Belfield and her son could do nothing to stop this headlong progress of reckless husband and frivolous wife drifting towards ruin. Constance Belfield felt that it was worse than useless to dwell upon the subject in her conversation with her elder son. She wished, on his return home, that all things should be made bright and pleasant to him; and yet her own uneasy fears about that other son made happiness impossible.

She was surprised one morning, within a week

of her return, at receiving a letter from Helen, hurriedly written, and with unmistakeable signs of agitation.

"You told me there were silence and rest for me at the Abbey, and that you wanted me soon," Helen wrote. "May I go to you at once? I am tired to death of London and the season, and I think sleeplessness would kill me if I were to hold out much longer. Valentine has Goodwood and half-a-dozen other race meetings coming on, so he really does not want me here, since he can hardly ever be here himself. May I go to you to-morrow, dear mother? I shall not wait for a letter, but shall start by the 11.45 train, unless I receive a telegram to forbid me."

The telegram sent in response to this letter was one of loving welcome. "Ask Valentine to come with you, if only for a few days," was the last sentence in the message.

Lady Belfield drove to the station to meet her daughter-in-law. She stood on the platform as the train came slowly in, and the first glimpse of Helen's face shocked her. That pale wan look

which she had noticed on the morning after the ball had intensified to an almost ghastly pallor. Helen looked wretchedly ill, and there was an expression of misery in that pallid countenance which was more alarming than any physical decay.

Constance Belfield had too much tact to notice the change as she and Helen clasped hands on the platform, or during the drive to the Abbey.

"I am very glad to have you here, my dearest," she said, and that was all.

Helen was curiously silent, and offered no explanation of her sudden visit. She nestled affectionately against Lady Belfield's shoulder, resting her weary head there, smiling faintly, with a smile that was sadder than tears.

"I feel so much happier here than in London," she said. "I feel so *safe* with you, mother."

She had hitherto refrained shyly from that familiar name; but in her yesterday's letter and in her talk to-day the word "mother" seemed to come naturally from her yearning heart.

"Yes, dear, you are safe with Adrian and me.

He has forgotten and forgiven the past, and you are to him as a very dear sister."

"That is so good of him. But how poorly he must think of me. Yes, I know he must despise me for my conduct in the past, and for the foolish frivolous life I have been leading this last season."

"The season is over now, Helen, with all its frivolities. It is not even worth thinking about."

"Yes, it is all over now," sighed Helen. "I don't suppose I have been much worse than other people. I know I have not been half so bad as some women—and yet I hate myself for my folly."

"As long as it has left no sting behind it, dearest, the folly may so easily be forgotten."

"Oh, but there is always a sting, the sting of self-contempt."

"I will not hear you talk of self-contempt. You are coming to the Abbey to be happy, and to get back your roses. Adrian has a horse that he says will suit you admirably. You will enjoy riding on the moor in the early mornings."

"Adrian is too kind; but I don't care much for riding now."

"Don't you think some moorland rides would brace you up after your long spell of late hours and hot rooms? At any rate there will be cub-hunting for you in a month or six weeks, and *that* you are sure to enjoy."

Helen only answered with a sigh, which sounded like an expression of doubt, and was silent for the rest of the drive, as if too weary for speech.

Adrian was in the porch ready to receive his sister-in-law; and he too was startled at the change for the worse which the last week had made in Helen's appearance.

Helen's rooms were in the southern wing, immediately over the library. There was a large bed-room with a wide Tudor window, and an oriel at the south-western corner; and there was a spacious dressing-room adjoining, which served also as a boudoir, and was provided with all luxurious appliances for reading and writing, or repose. There was a secondary dressing-room on the other side of the bed-room, which Valentine had used on former visits, and where there were still some of his canes and riding-whips in

the rack and some of his hunting gear in the drawers.

The casements were open, and the scent of tea roses and honeysuckle came in with the soft breath of summer winds. The view from that wide old window was of the loveliest, a wooded valley through which the broad full river ran sparkling in the western sun, and beyond the vale the bold dark outline of the moor, like a wall that shut off the outer world.

Helen sat on the broad window-seat after Lady Belfield left her, looking out at the oaks and beeches, the thickets of hawthorn and holly, and the river flowing below them at the foot of the hill; looking and not seeing any of those things which showed themselves with such exceeding loveliness in the golden haze of afternoon. She was seeing another scene, far less fair, yet not unbeautiful. A lawn sloping to the Thames, with fine old trees here and there, and in the background a white lamp-lit house, with classic portico and long French windows. Across the river are other lamps, shining in many windows, and chimneys and dark roofs,

and a black barge sailing by upon the moonlit stream; and on the rustic bench beside her, in the shadow of a veteran elm, sits a man whose voice thrills her like music, a man who pleads to her, who dwells with ever-increasing urgency upon his own misery if he is to be doomed to live apart from her, who implores her to pity and to bless his despairing love, to let him be the sharer of her life, the guardian of her happiness. He pleads as poor humanity might plead to the angels. He reveres, he honours her in tenderest phrases, in sweetly flattering speech, while he exercises every art he knows to bring her down to the level of the lost among her sex. He dazzles her with the glitter of artful phrases, with the fancy picture of the future they two would live together, once having broken the bondage of conventionality. "Conventionality!" That is the word by which Lord St. Austell defines duty to her husband, respect for the world's laws, and fear of God. Conventionality alone is to be sacrificed.

So he pleads to her, half in moonlight, half in shadow, in that quiet corner of Hurlingham lawn,

far away from the racket of the club-house and the terrace, where frivolity chatters and saunters in the moonshine.

Here there is no frivolity. Here is deepest purpose. He pleads, and she answers weakly, falteringly. No, a thousand times no—it cannot be.

She is utterly miserable, her heart is broken—but it cannot be. She returns again and again to the same point—it can never be. And he, as he hears her half-sobbing speech, as he sees her bent head and clasped hands, tells himself that it will be. The woman who can resist a tempter does not answer thus—does not listen as she has listened.

But for that night at least he can win no other answer than that despairing refusal. They part after the drive home, on her sister's threshold, where they have driven in a party of four, the inevitable Beeching in attendance upon his liege lady, albeit resentful of ill-treatment. They part in silence, but even the clasp of St. Austell's hand at parting is a prayer, scarcely less insistant

than those spoken prayers in the Hurlingham garden.

This had all happened the night before last, and she has not seen him since, and she has sworn to herself that she will never see him again.

What shall she do with her life without him? That is the question which she asks herself despairingly now, in the golden light of afternoon, sitting, statue-like, with her hands clasped above her head, leaning against the deep embrasure of the massive old window. What is to become of her without love, or mirth, or hope, or expectancy? All things that gave colour to her life have vanished with that fatal lover, who came as suddenly into her existence as a rainbow comes into the sky, and glorified her life as the rainbow glorifies the horizon.

CHAPTER XI.

PAST CURE

Lady Belfield was content to cherish and make much of her daughter-in-law without asking any awkward questions. There was no letter of remonstrance from Valentine, therefore it might be supposed that he took no objection to his wife's absence; and so far all was well. Early hours, fresh air, pleasant society would no doubt soon exercise a good influence upon Helen's health and spirits. Brightness would return to the fair young face, and reviving health would bring a happier frame of mind.

Helen went to her room soon after ten o'clock every night, except when there were visitors; but she rarely came downstairs until after the family breakfast. This privilege was accorded to her indifferent health. She walked and drove with Lady Belfield, and took afternoon tea with Lady

Belfield's friends. She did not care to ride or to play tennis, and those amusements were not pressed upon her either by Adrian or his mother. It might be that all she wanted was rest. Adrian watched her attentively, without seeming to watch. He knew now but too well how weak a reed this was upon which he had once hazarded the happiness of his own life.

Mr. Rockstone and the Freemantles were the most frequent visitors in the long summer days, dropping in at all hours, sitting about the lawn with Lady Belfield and her son, bringing all the news of the parish, and discussing the more stirring though less interesting news of the outer world.

Sometimes the Miss Treduceys came in, an hour before afternoon tea, just in time for a double set at tennis, with Adrian and Lucy Freemantle, who was less sheep-faced and a good deal prettier at twenty than she was at eighteen.

She was a tall, fair girl, with light brown hair and clear blue eyes—eyes in which the very spirit of candid and innocent girlhood seemed to smile

and sparkle. She was a happy-tempered, bright, industrious girl, helping her father and mother in all their hobbies and all their plans, and ruling her very inferior brother with affectionate tyranny. There could have been no more striking contrast than that between Lucy Freemantle, in the vigour and freshness of her girlhood, and Helen Belfield, in her broken health and spirits.

"What a very sad change in your pretty daughter-in-law," said Mrs. Freemantle to Lady Belfield. "She looks as if she were going into a decline."

"Oh, we won't allow her to do that. She is here to be cured," Constance replied cheerfully.

She did not want to have Helen pitied and despaired about by half the county.

"People told me she was quite the rage in London when I was there in June," said Matilda Treducey. "I met her at two or three parties, but she was always so surrounded that I couldn't get a word with her; and I hope, dear Lady Belfield, you won't feel offended if I own that I

don't like Mrs. Baddeley, and that I rather avoided any encounter with *her*."

Lady Belfield was silent. She too had her doubts about Mrs. Baddeley, and was not inclined to take up the cudgels in that lady's behalf, albeit she inwardly resented Miss Treducey's impertinence.

The days went by peacefully and pleasantly enough, but there was no revival of Helen's spirits. Country air and country hours were doing her some good, perhaps. She was a little less wan and pale than she had been on her arrival; but Adrian's calm watchfulness perceived no improvement in her moral being. If she smiled, the smile was evidently an effort. When she talked there was the same air of constraint. If he came upon her suddenly in the drawing-room or the garden, it was generally to find her sitting in listless idleness, with the air of one for whom life had neither pleasures nor occupations.

This state of things went on for more than a month. It was the middle of August, and the weather was sultrier than it had been in July.

Mrs. Baddeley was astonishing the quieter visitors at a Scarborough hotel, and delighting her train of attendants, who had rallied to that point from various shooting-boxes on the Yorkshire moors. Valentine was going to and fro over the earth like the Evil One, in his journeying from one race meeting to another. He occasionally favoured his wife with a few hurried lines from a provincial hotel, telling her his whereabouts.

He appeared thoroughly to approve of her residence at the Abbey, and promised to join her there before the first of October.

This, so far as it went, seemed well, or at least it so seemed to Lady Belfield. Adrian was not altogether satisfied.

"I don't like Valentine's passion for the turf," he said one day, when he and Helen were sitting on the lawn after luncheon, she making believe to work, he with a volume of Herbert Spencer on his knee, and his thoughts very far from the pages of that philosopher. "I hope, Helen, there is no truth in a rumour that I heard at my club when I was in London the other day."

"What rumour?"

"A man assured me that Valentine has a share in Lord St. Austell's racing stables."

She crimsoned at that sudden utterance of St. Austell's name, and could scarcely answer him.

"I—I—have never heard of such a thing," she said.

"But you know that St. Austell and your husband are close friends, although they only met a little while before your marriage, when St. Austell was at Morcomb. If there is any truth in the report, Valentine is in the right way to ignominious bankruptcy. He has only your settlement, and the allowance my mother makes him. Neither of those would be available for his creditors. Practically he is a man of straw, and has no right to speculate in a racing stud."

"I don't believe he does speculate. He likes to go to races, and he bets a little sometimes. He has given me money that he has won on the turf. I know that there is a stable belonging to—to—Mr. Beeching—and Lord St. Austell; but I don't

think Valentine has anything to do with it, beyond going to look at the horses now and then."

"I hope you are right, Helen. The turf is a dangerous distraction for any man; it would be deadly for my brother. I hope he will have had enough of race meetings by the end of this year, and that he will sober down to a more domestic life. That pretty Japanese drawing-room of yours ought not to be always empty."

Helen did not reply. Her head bent lower over the group of poppies in crewel-stitch which she carried about with her in a basket all day long, and which seemed to make no more progress than Penelope's web.

Two or three days after this little conversation, Sir Adrian was surprised by a subtle change in his sister-in-law's spirits.

It was not that she seemed happier than before; but she was certainly less listless, less despondent. She had an air of suppressed excitement, which showed itself in a forced gaiety. She talked a great deal more, laughed at the smallest jokes, and she suddenly took it into her head to play

tennis violently with Jack Freemantle. To Adrian it seemed as if she was impelled by some hidden agitation which found relief in movement and occupation of any kind.

Looking back at the events of the previous day, he remembered that she had been wandering about the park alone in the afternoon for two or three hours. She had, for the first time, avoided driving out with Lady Belfield, on the ground that the afternoon was oppressively warm; and then soon after luncheon she had taken a book and strolled out into the garden. He had missed her later on, and had met her three hours afterwards returning from the Italian terrace by the river, that cypress walk where he had received the proof of her inconstancy.

He felt that there was an evil influence at work, and he feared that the evil influence was St. Austell.

He had seen enough while he was in London to inspire him with grave doubts as to the relations between his brother's wife and that nobleman. St. Austell's position and St. Austell's reputation were

alike dangerous, and that light nature of Helen's was not formed for resistance in the hour of temptation. Adrian remembered the scene on Lady Glandore's terrace and the morning ride in the Park; and his heart was ill at ease for the woman who was to have been his wife.

CHAPTER XII.

OPENING HIS EYES

WHILE Helen was pacing the cypress walk in the long August afternoon, Valentine was at York, where the summer meeting was in full swing. Interest as well as pleasure had led him to the northern city. He was not, as his brother had been told, a partner in the St. Austell and Beeching stable, but his interests were deeply involved in their successes, and he had mixed himself up in their turf speculations in a manner which might result in a great *coup* or a great disaster. One of their horses was entered for the Great Ebor, and stood pretty high in the betting; another ran in a smaller race, and there were three of the stud entered for selling stakes.

Valentine had backed Postcard rather heavily for the Great Ebor, and he knew that Beeching and St. Austell had both laid their money pretty

freely, and that both believed in the horse. To Beeching losing or winning was a matter of slight consequence; but, like most millionnaires, he was very intent upon making his stable pay, and was very savage when the luck went against him. St. Austell was by no means rich, and to him Postcard's success must be a matter of importance. The value of the horse would be quadrupled if he won this great race, to say nothing of his owner's bets.

Under these circumstances, Mr. Belfield was surprised at not finding St. Austell at King's Cross when he arrived on the platform just in time for the special. It had been arranged a week before that he, Beeching, and St. Austell were to travel together by this train, which left London at eight in the morning on the first day of the races, and were to occupy a suite of rooms together at the hotel till the meeting was over. Mr. Beeching had charged himself—or had been charged—with the duty of engaging the rooms, and of securing a *coupé* for the journey.

Mr. Beeching was on the platform, with his

valet in attendance upon him. The *coupé* was engaged, and a pic-nic basket, containing a Strasbourg pie, a chicken, and a couple of bottles of extra dry champagne, was in the rack; but there was no St. Austell.

"What does that fellow mean by being behind time?" asked Valentine, when he and Beeching had taken their seats, and the doors were being shut.

"St. Austell? He's not coming."

"Not coming! Not coming to see Postcard win the Great Ebor!"

"No. He's chucked up the stable," answered Beeching coolly. "You see he owed me a hatful of money one way and another, and the other night he and I had a general square-up, which resulted in my taking about seven shillings in the pound all round. He surrendered his interest in Postcard and the rest of the stud, and I gave him back his I O U's. He is going to India next week."

"Why India?"

"Lungs. Can't stand a European winter. His doctors advise him to try Ceylon or India. He is

keen upon an Oriental tour, and he's off to Venice next week on his way eastward. He'll potter about in Northern Italy, perhaps, for a month or so, and then put himself on board a P. & O."

"Queer," said Valentine. "He never told me anything was wrong with his lungs, though he looks a poor creature at the best of times."

"We can't all be gladiators like you. I don't think St. Austell knew there was anything radically wrong till he went to Sir William Jenner a little while ago and had himself overhauled. But he has been laid up more or less every winter for the last three or four years, and he has lived pretty fast as you know. I should think India would be a capital move for him."

"Perhaps," assented Valentine, pondering deeply, with bent brows.

On the Knavesmire all their acquaintances were surprised at St. Austell's absence, and Mr. Beeching had to give the same explanation to a good many people. Valentine was irritated by this iteration.

"Deuce take the fellow, what a lot of trouble

he has given us," he said angrily. "He ought to have come to see the horse's performance, although he had parted with his interest in him. He has got a good deal of money on the race, anyhow."

The great day and the great race came. The Knavesmire was a scene of life and movement, of vivid colour and ceaseless animation—a scene of universal gladness, one would suppose, taking the picture as a whole. But in detail there was a good deal of disappointment. It is only the disinterested lookers-on, the frivolous people who go to race meetings to eat and drink and stare about them in the sunshine, the clodhoppers and bumpkins who loll upon the rails and gaze at the scene as at the figures in a kaleidoscope—it is only for these that there is no bitter in the cup of pleasure, no fly in the ointment.

Postcard, after a magnificent lead, which elated all his backers, shut up—in Mr. Belfield's parlance—like a telescope. He was a powerful horse, and would have pulled splendidly through heavy ground; but the weather had been peerless, and the course was as hard as macadam, so the lighter

horses had the advantage. Beeching and Belfield ate their lunch in moody silence, and drank twice as deeply as they would have done to signalize a triumph.

"I'll be hanged if I spend another night in this cursed hole," said Valentine, when the day's racing was over.

"Oh, you'd better see it out. I've got the rooms for the week, don't you know, and I shall have to pay pretty stiffly for them, and I've ordered dinner. You may just as well stay."

"Make it Yorkshire if you're afraid of the expense, and when you come back to town I'll square up," retorted Valentine sulkily. "I'm tired of the whole business. Your stable has never brought me luck. Good-night!"

It was only half-past five; the sun was high still, but sloping westward, and carriages and foot people were moving out of the green valley in masses of shifting lights and colours. A pretty scene; but far from pleasant to the jaundiced eye of Valentine Belfield.

He got into a cab, drove to the hotel, bundled

his things into a bag and a portmanteau, and had them carried to the adjacent station just in time for one of the special trains which were taking the racing men back to London. He got into a saloon carriage, coiled himself up in a corner away from the dust and the glare, and presently, when the express was flying across the country, past those broad fields where the corn was still standing, low hills where lights and shadows came and went in the softening atmosphere of evening, he fell fast asleep, and slept for nearly three hours, sleeping off that extra bottle of champagne which he had drunk almost unawares in his exasperation.

It was dark when he awoke, black night outside the carriage windows—and within there was only the dim light of the lamp, almost obscured by tobacco smoke.

There were very few passengers in the spacious carriage, and of those few, three were asleep, sprawling in unrestrained repose upon the morocco cushions, worn out with open air, sun, dust, and drink. Two men sat in the angle of the carriage, in a line with Mr. Belfield's corner,

and those two were talking confidentially as they lazily consumed their cigarettes, talking in those undertones which are sometimes more distinctly audible than the brawl and rattle of loud voices.

"I tell you, my dear fellow, everybody knew all about it except the gentleman most concerned," said one; "and whether he didn't know, or whether he was wilfully blind, is an open question. I don't like the man, and I should be willing to think anything bad of him, but he's a good bred 'un, anyhow, and I suppose we ought to give him the benefit of the doubt."

"He was never about with her," returned the other man, "she went everywhere with her sister, and we all know the sister."

"A very charming woman," said his friend, with a laugh, "and a very dangerous one. She's about the cleverest woman out, I think; for, without compromising herself seriously, she has contrived to make more out of her admirers than any woman in London. She must have bled Beeching to a pretty considerable tune, I fancy."

"Oh, Beeching is fair game," said the other

man. "Nobody minds Beeching. That kind of pigeon was only fledged in order to be plucked; besides, Beeching is uncommonly careful. Nobody will ever do him any harm. He has the commercial intellect fully developed. You may depend he keeps a close account of his *menus plaisirs,* his grass-widows and such like, and knows to a shilling what they cost him, and will never exceed the limits of strict prudence."

Mr. Belfield's attention was fully awakened by this time. He had turned himself round in his shadowy corner, and was listening with all his might. He knew one of the men, a member of the Badminton and the Argus, slightly; the other not at all.

"The worst story against her is the story of the diamonds," said the man whom he did not know.

"Ah, you were in India when it happened, and knew all about it, I suppose," replied the other. "It was a rather ugly story, I believe, but I never heard the details."

"I was in Baddeley's regiment when she came

to India with him," said the other. "She had not been married six months, and was about the loveliest woman I ever saw in my life. As handsome as Mrs. Belfield is now—that splendid Irish beauty, which is unsurpassable while it lasts, great grey eyes with black lashes, a complexion of lilies and carnations, form and colour alike lovely and luxuriant, a woman who makes every cad in the streets stop all agape to look at her. She startled us at our hill station, I can tell you, and the Baddeley madness raged there all that season like hydrophobia. One of our men, a poor little lieutenant, a mere lad, Lord Brompton's son, took the disease very badly. What was sport for us was death for him. He fell madly in love with his Major's wife, and hung about her and followed her about in a distracted way that would have been laughable had it not verged upon the tragic."

"Did she encourage him?"

"Of course she did. He was a swell, and ridiculously generous. She nicknamed him Baby, talked of him as 'a nice boy,' and before long he

was known everywhere as Mrs. Baddeley's Baby. He didn't seem to mind people laughing at him. We went to Calcutta later on, and there were balls and all sorts of high jinks going on, and Mrs. Baddeley was the belle of the place, and everybody, from the Governor-General downwards, was avowedly in love with her. Poor young Stroud hung on to her, and was savage with every man she noticed. One night, at the Governor-General's ball, she came out in a blaze of diamonds. One of us chaffed the Major about his wife's magnificence; but he took it as easily as possible. She had hired the gems from Facet, the great Calcutta jeweller, he told us. 'I suppose I shall have to pay pretty stiffly for the use of them,' he said, 'but if she likes to cut a dash in borrowed plumes, I can't complain. It'll be a deuced long time I'm afraid before she'll be able to show a diamond necklace of her own.'"

The speaker stopped to light a fresh cigarette, and then went on lazily dropping out his sentences between puffs of tobacco.

"Baddeley is a big, good-natured, self-indulgent

ass, but I don't know that he's anything worse than that. We all laughed at his story of the hired diamonds, and six months afterwards, when young Stroud broke for six-and-twenty thousand, most of it money borrowed from Calcutta Jews, we all knew that Mrs. Baddeley's diamonds counted for something, and Mrs. Baddeley's little caprices for something more, in the lad's entanglements. We were all very sorry for him. Brompton was said to be a martinet, and the young man went about Calcutta looking as white as a ghost for a week or two, while he was trying to make terms with his creditors. Then one morning in barracks there was a great scare. Young Stroud had shot himself half-an-hour after morning parade. He had left two letters on his table, one addressed to his father, the other to Mrs. Baddeley."

"How did the lady take it?"

"I suppose she was rather sorry. She never showed herself in Calcutta after the catastrophe. The regimental doctor went to see her every day, and the Major told every one that she was laid up with low fever, and that the climate was killing

her. She went back to England a month or so after Stroud's death, and she carried the spoils of war with her, and has worn them ever since."

"And you think the younger sister is as bad?" said the other man thoughtfully.

There was no malevolence in either of them. They were only discussing one of the problems of modern society.

"I don't know about that. I believe she has more heart than Mrs. Baddeley; and that she is over head and ears in love with St. Austell. They have been carrying on all the season, and I wonder they haven't bolted before now."

"My dear fellow, nobody bolts nowadays. Elopements are out of fashion. There is nothing further from the thoughts of a modern seducer than a *ménage*. The days of post-chaises and Italian villas are over. We love and we ride away. St. Austell is a man of the world and a man of the time. Here we are, old chap. My trap is to meet us here."

They took up their sticks, hats, and overcoats, and left the carriage before Valentine Belfield's

brain had recovered from the shock of a sudden revelation.

He started to his feet as they went out, called out to the man he knew, followed to the door just as the porter slammed it, and the train moved on. He hardly knew what he meant to do: whether he would have called the slanderer to account, caned him, challenged him. He stood by the door as the train rushed on, rocking him as it went—stood there dazed, bewildered, recalling that idle talk he had overheard from the darkness of his corner yonder, wondering how much truth there was in it all.

About Mrs. Baddeley, his wife's sister? Well, there might be some ground for scandal there perhaps. He had long known that she was a coquette, and a clever coquette, who knew how to lead her admirers on, and how to keep them off. He knew that Beeching had ministered freely to the lady's caprices; and he had always looked upon St. Austell as the lady's favoured admirer, and the man for whom she was in some danger of compromising herself.

The story of young Stroud's futile passion for his Major's wife, and of costly jewellery given at a time when Lord Brompton's heir was already deeply in debt, was not altogether new to him. He had heard some vague hints in the past; but men had been shy of alluding to that old scandal in his presence.

He had known that his sister-in-law had been talked about; but no man had ever dared to insinuate that she was anything worse than a clever woman, perfectly capable of taking care of herself.

"I back Mrs. Baddeley and her poodle against Lucretia and her dagger," he had heard a stranger say one night in the club smoking-room; and it had seemed to his somewhat cynical temper that his wife could not be safer than with a thoroughly worldly woman, a woman who knew every knot and ravelled end in the "seamy side" of society.

But St. Austell his wife's admirer! They two head over ears in love with each other! Never for one instant had such a possibility dawned upon him; and yet those two men had talked as if

that mutual passion were an established fact, known to all the world, except to him, the deluded husband.

Helen, his Helen! The wife who had satiated him with sweetness, whose devotion had cloyed, whose fondness had been almost a burden. That she should play him false, that she should care for any other man on earth! No, he could not believe it. Because two idiots in a railway carriage chose to tell lies, was he to think that the woman who had counted the world well lost for love of him had turned traitress and was carrying on with another man?

St. Austell, a notorious rake! a man who had the reputation of being fatal in his influence over women.

The man had seemed safe enough so long as he had thought of him only as Mrs. Baddeley's lover; but, with his suspicions newly aroused, Valentine Belfield looked back at the history of the last few months, and saw all things in a new light. He remembered how in Mrs. Baddeley's festivities at Hurlingham, Ranelagh, or Sandown, water picnics

at Henley or Marlow, Sunday dinners at Richmond or at Greenwich, St. Austell had always been one of the party. Beeching and St. Austell had always been at hand. Whoever else was included, those two were inevitable. He had reckoned them both as Leonora's devotees; they were the pair which she drove in her car of triumph, like Venus's doves or Juno's peacocks. One possessed her heart, and ruled her life; the other was her purse-bearer. Knowing all this, or believing this, he had yet been content that his wife should go everywhere under her sister's wing. The arrangement relieved him of all trouble, and Helen seemed happy. People complimented him upon his wife's beauty, and he accepted their praises as a kind of tribute to himself; pleased to show the world how careless he could afford to be about a wife whom everybody adored, secure in his unbounded dominion over her, free to neglect her and yet to defy all rivalry.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN UNFINISHED LETTER

Mr. Belfield sat brooding during the rest of the journey to King's Cross, and his thoughts grew darker with the darkening night. Yes, St. Austell had haunted his wife's footsteps all through the season that was past. He had heard of them riding in the Row; it was St. Austell who had chosen Helen's horse at Tattersall's, and who had been officiously obliging in attending the sale and getting the animal for a price that seemed almost ridiculously at variance with its quality.

He could recall the whole transaction: how in St. Austell's presence one evening, after a little dinner in Mrs. Baddeley's rooms, Helen had entreated him to buy her a horse, urging that it was odious to ride hired animals, smelling of the livery stables and suggestive of a riding-master in butcher boots; how he had declared he couldn't afford to

buy; and how St. Austell had told him that it would be a more economical arrangement than hiring, and had suggested that a good horse might be got for a very little money now that the hunting was all over.

"What do you call a little money?" Valentine asked, annoyed at his wife's persistence, and at St. Austell's interference.

"Well, I suppose you might pick up a good Park hack for ninety or a hundred."

"Nearly twice as much as I should like to give," answered Valentine curtly.

"How much would you give if there were an opportunity? I am at Tattersall's nearly every day, and I would be on the look-out if I knew what you wanted."

"I don't want anything. There are plenty of horses in Devonshire that my wife and I can ride when we're there."

"But Devonshire isn't the Park, Val," pleaded Helen. "I want a horse for the Park, awfully." Whereupon Mr. Belfield shrugged his shoulders, and said he would give fifty or sixty guineas for a

hack, rather than be bothered; and with this ungracious permission his wife was fain to be content.

Three days after this conversation, Valentine found Lord St. Austell's groom waiting in front of Wilkie Mansions with a thoroughbred bay horse, which he was gently leading up and down the road.

"His Lordship's compliments, and this is the horse he has bought for you, sir," said the man. "Ravioli, grandson to Macaroni."

Valentine looked the animal over critically.

"Is he sound?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. His Lordship's vet looked at him before the sale."

"Well, he is very handsome; and, if his manners are as good as his looks, his Lordship has made a capital purchase."

Valentine met St. Austell at his club next day, and gave him a cheque for fifty-seven guineas, at which sum the horse had been knocked down to him at Tattersall's. At such a price, the animal, if sound, was an unquestionable bargain. Valentine

had ridden him round the Row, and had found his paces admirable, although he was obviously overweighted by anything above eleven stone. For a light weight like Helen the horse was perfection.

"The yard must have been asleep when you bought him," said Valentine.

"Oh, I knew how to bide my time and watch my opportunity," answered St. Austell lightly. "I am very glad you're satisfied with my choice."

"More than satisfied, my dear fellow."

So the matter had ended. Mr. Belfield, full of his own schemes, pleasures, and excitements, had thought no more of the horse, except to remember that he had made a sacrifice to his wife in buying him, and that she ought to be very grateful.

To-night, looking back at the past in the new light of awakened doubts, he shrewdly suspected that St. Austell had fooled him, and that, under the pretence of getting a bargain at Tattersall's, he had presented the woman he admired with a horse that had cost three times as much as her husband was willing to pay. And she had known the secret of the transaction, no doubt, and they had laughed

together at the husband's meanness, and at the ease with which he had been hoodwinked. Valentine Belfield almost choked with rage at the idea of his own blindness.

"To think that I should be deceived by any woman—above all by my wife—the wife I won as easily as a pair of gloves—and by Heaven, I thought she was as much my own as my gloves or my hat—as faithful to me as my favourite dog."

Yet remembering how easily she had been won, how soon she had wavered in her fidelity to Adrian, he could scarcely wonder that she had faltered in her truth to him. St. Austell was fascinating, a man of eminently seductive manners, deeply read in that modern literature which women appreciate, distinctly a man to please women—while he, Valentine, was a sportsman, caring little for women's society, and making no sacrifices to please them, looking upon them as a lower order of beings whose nature it was to be suppliants and adorers of the master spirit, man. He had never thought of his wife's love for him as a measurable quantity, which he might exhaust.

"She has been a fool, and she has been a coquette," he said to himself, as the train steamed past the shabby streets and gaslit windows of northern London; "but I don't believe she has been anything worse. It will be my business to drive her with a tighter rein in future. You have been allowed to go too free, my sweet. It must be curb instead of snaffle, henceforward."

He had business in London which must needs be done before he could look after his wife. Postcard's defeat meant losses which amounted almost to financial ruin. Money would have to be raised, and at a sacrifice. He could not bring himself to appeal to his mother for help in a turf difficulty: first, because she had been very generous to him already; and secondly, because there were other difficulties, other debts imminent, for which he would be obliged to ask her assistance.

Under these circumstances he went to a Jew money-lender, and involved himself deeply in order to raise money against settling day. From the money-lender's office he went to Tattersall's, where he was almost as well known as Lord St. Austell.

He saw one of the chief clerks, a man with whom he had been on familiar terms ever since he had been a frequenter of the famous auction-yard.

"There was a horse sold here last May," he said, "a thoroughbred bay, grandson of Macaroni. I want very much to know at what figure that horse was knocked down. I've got a bet upon it."

"What's your bet, Mr. Belfield, if it's not an impertinent question?" asked the man easily.

"If it was I wouldn't mind it from you, Jones," answered Valentine. "I've laid two to one that Ravioli fetched over two hundred."

"I think you're pretty safe, sir. I remember the horse. He was one of Captain Poppingay's lot, and they were all good 'uns. I'll turn up the catalogue in a minute. May 7th, 10th, 14th; yes, here they are—hunters, park hacks, team of coach horses."

He ran his finger down the pages of a catalogue, his practised eye following the figures with amazing rapidity. The prices realized by the horses were

written in the margin beside the lot numbers, and the names of the purchasers on the other side of the page.

"Ravioli, five years old, thoroughbred, has been hunted with the Pytchley, carries a lady," he read. "Your money's safe, Mr. Belfield. Two hundred and seventy-eight guineas. Lord St. Austell bought him."

"That's your ticket," answered Valentine lightly. "I thought I was pretty safe. Good-night; a thousand thanks."

He had just time to catch an afternoon train for the West of England, a train which left Waterloo late in the afternoon, and which was due at Chadford Road Station a little before midnight. It was a slow train, and one by which he would only have travelled in an emergency.

He had telegraphed no announcement of his coming, either to his mother or his wife. It was a part of his plan to take Helen by surprise, and he was willing to hazard the difficulty of getting into a house in which all the servants might have gone to bed before he could arrive. The chances

were that Adrian would be in the library, where it was his usual habit to sit reading long after midnight.

Chadford Road Station was nearly five miles from the Abbey, and Mr. Belfield was in no humour for a long walk. The Station Hotel, a decent inn, which could provide a one-horse fly upon occasions, and which called itself a posting-house, was open, so he went in, ordered a brandy-and-soda and a trap to take him to the Abbey.

The ostler and the flyman were lazy and slow, and Mr. Belfield had to wait a quarter of an hour while the fly was being got ready. He stood in the bar, drinking his brandy-and-soda, and talking to the landlady, a large and blooming matron of the Devonshire dumpling order of beauty, whom he had known from his childhood.

"I never thought to have the pleasure of waiting upon you to-night, Mr. Belfield," she said. "But I always stop up for this train and send the girls to bed. And yet I'm generally the first up of a morning. I've been expecting you down at the Abbey, too, for I saw Mrs. Belfield driving

with her ladyship the other day, as pretty as ever, but looking rather pale and out of sorts, I thought."

"Yes, she is not over well. She is down here for her health."

"To be sure, sir. The London season does take a deal out of a lady," replied the innkeeper's wife, shaking her head, and with an air of knowing town dissipations by heart. "There's been one of your friends stopping at Chadford for the last few days, Mr. Belfield; but he hasn't brought any horses this time, and not even so much as a body servant. He came into the place as quiet as any commercial."

"Indeed! Who is that?"

"Lord St. Austell. My good man saw him yesterday evening sauntering by the river, just outside the Lamb gardens, and he heard afterwards that his lordship had been stopping at the Lamb for the last three days, which, considering that there's no sport except salmon fishing at this time of year, and that the cooking at the Lamb is about as bad as it can be, puzzled me and my husband as

to what attraction a gentleman like Lord St. Austell could find here."

"Oh, there is always sport for a true sportsman," answered Valentine lightly.

"Well, as you say, sir, it may be the salmon, and that would account for his not bringing any horses."

"Ah, there's the fly; good-night, Mrs. Crump," and Valentine jumped into the lumbering old landau, and was jolted along the road to Chadford.

He looked up at the Lamb as he passed. Yes, there were lights in the windows of the sitting-room facing the bridge, the room that St. Austell and Beeching had occupied three years ago. His wife's lover was there. Her lover! He had no doubt as to their guilty love now. That revelation about the horse was damning proof of St. Austell's perfidy, even if it left Helen's conduct still doubtful. To Valentine, it seemed that they were leagued against him, and that they had laughed at his blindness—at him, the man who prided himself upon his knowledge of horse-flesh, and who had been duped so easily. Nor was this all.

He looked back and remembered many incidents, looks, words, arrivals and departures, meetings that had seemed accidental, circumstances of all kinds, trifling enough in themselves, yet signs and tokens of secret guilt. He had been so certain of his wife's allegiance, so secure, as to have been the last to observe these indications, which had been obvious to all the rest of the world.

"If I had known that all women are ——. But no, there is one good woman in the world, my mother; and I have grown up in the belief that all well-bred women must be like her. I thought that it was in the nature of a well-born girl to be chaste and true. I ought to have known differently. God knows I have heard stories enough—but I thought there was a line of demarcation, a gulf between the sheep and the goats."

He ground his teeth in an agony of rage, not more infuriated at the idea of his wife's falsehood than at the thought of his own blind confidence. The hard-worked old horse was rattling along the road at a good pace, eager to get his business done and go back to his stable; but to Valentine's

impatience it seemed as if he were crawling. At last the fly stopped short, and the driver got down to open the gates leading into the avenue.

The gates were rarely locked at night. The lodge windows were dark. Before they were half-way down the avenue, Valentine called to the man to stop, and got out while he was pulling up his horse.

"I'll walk the rest of the way," he said, giving the man a shilling out of the loose silver in his pocket. "Good-night."

"Good-night, sir, and thank 'ee," and the horse-of-all-work turned and cantered gaily homeward, while the driver thought what a pleasant man Mr. Belfield was, and what a cheery voice and manner he had.

Mr. Belfield was hurrying down the avenue at almost a run. He wanted to be face to face with his false wife—to surprise her by the suddenness of his coming, to stand before her without a moment's warning, strong in his knowledge of her guilt. That was the one passionate craving of his mind, the one hope for which he existed at this

moment. After *that*, there would be another meeting—between him and St. Austell; a meeting which must end in blood. Yes, straight before him in the near distance he saw inevitable bloodshed. No modern vengeance, beaten out inch by inch, thin as gold leaf under the goldbeater's hammer; no thirty days' scandal in the law courts, with all its pettiness of foul details and lying and counter-lying of hirelings; not for *him* the modern husband's mode of retribution; but swift sharp vengeance, such as one reads of in old Italian chronicles. Vengeance as speedy and sudden, if not as secret, as those dealings between man and man which made the glory of Venice in the good old days of the Council of Ten, when every seducer went with his life in his hand, and knew not whether the sun that rose upon his guilty pleasures might not set upon his untimely grave in the Canal yonder, and when every false wife had a daily expectation of poison in the domestic wine-cup or a dagger under the matrimonial pillow.

Valentine Belfield had no uncertainty of mind as to his manner of dealing with St. Austell.

They two would have to stand face to face upon some quiet spot in France or Belgium, where a brace of pistols would settle all scores. How he was to deal with his wife was a more complex question; but for the moment his desire was only to confront her, and to wring the confession of her guilt from those false lips.

The house was dark for the most part, as he had expected to find it; but there were lights in the library windows, and in the windows of his wife's rooms above the library. She was not at rest then, late as it was. Her guilty conscience would not let her rest perhaps.

He knocked at the glass door in the lobby next the library, a door which stood open all day in fine weather, and by which his brother went in and out of the garden twenty times a day, loving the old-world garden almost as he loved his books. He heard the library door open, and Adrian's footsteps approaching; and then the shutter was taken down and the door opened cautiously a little way.

"Who is there?"

"Valentine."

"Valentine!" cried Adrian, throwing open the door, and holding out both his hands to his brother, "Why didn't you telegraph? Helen went to bed nearly three hours ago."

"Her candles are still burning, anyhow," answered Valentine gloomily. "I take it I shall find her awake, late as it is. Good-night. We'll reserve all talk till the morning."

"Won't you come into the library for ten minutes? All the servants are in bed, no doubt, but I might get you something, perhaps—wine, or brandy-and-soda."

"Not a thing. Good-night."

His manner mystified Adrian, and impressed him with a foreboding of trouble. Never had he seen so dreadful an expression in his brother's face—the contracted brows, the rigid, bloodless lips, the fixed look of the haggard eyes, staring straight forward, as if intent upon some hideous vision.

Adrian watched him as he went up the little private staircase which led only to that one suite of rooms in the library wing; watched, and felt

inclined to follow him, and yet held back, not liking to pry into his brother's secrets. What could that trouble be which had wrought such an evil influence upon Valentine? Money troubles, perhaps—turf losses. Adrian had heard enough while he was in London to know that his brother was the associate of racing men; and it was easy enough to guess that he had involved himself in turf transactions.

Yet there was that in his face which indicated stronger passions than money troubles should cause in any reasonable being. But then, Valentine was apt to give way to unreasonable wrath against anything that came between him and his wishes.

"It is nothing of any moment, perhaps," thought Adrian. "He will be in a better temper to-morrow morning."

He told himself this; yet so intense was his sympathy with his brother, that he went back to the library troubled at heart. He tried to go on with the book he had been reading when Valentine knocked at the door; but his thoughts were with his brother and his brother's wife in the rooms

above him. He found himself listening for their footsteps, for the sound of their voices, which reached him now and then, faintly audible in the stillness of the night.

The casement was open in the mullioned window yonder, and there may have been an open window in the room above.

Valentine opened the door of his wife's bed-room suddenly, and stood on the threshold looking at her.

She was writing at a table in the middle of the room, in a loose white dressing-gown, her hair falling upon her shoulders. The room was in supreme disorder—drawers pulled out to their fullest extent, wardrobe doors open, a litter of discarded odds and ends upon the floor, and trunks packed as if for a journey.

She heard the door open, looked up, and saw her husband standing in the doorway, with that blanched and angry countenance which had so impressed Adrian. She started to her feet, staring at him with dilating eyes, and with her hands stretched

out tremulously above the paper on which she had been writing.

"Yes, it is I, your husband," he said. "You expected some one else perhaps. You thought it was your lover."

His quick eye caught the action of her hands, the fingers spread wide as if to conceal the writing on the table, while she stood motionless, paralyzed with fear. He was at her side before she had recovered from the shock of his appearance, and had snatched that half-written letter from the table.

The ink was wet in the last lines, and there was a long tremulous stroke where her hand had faltered as she looked up and saw him in the doorway.

"Don't read it; don't read it, for God's sake, Valentine," she cried piteously.

"Not read a letter which is addressed to myself," he said. "You are a very curious woman, Mrs. Belfield, and that is a very curious request. Stay where you are," he cried, seizing her wrist fiercely, as she made a terror-stricken movement

towards the door; "when I have read your letter I shall know how to answer it."

He held her there pinioned while he read the following lines:—

"As you have long ceased to care for me, Valentine, it can hardly be any great loss to you to lose me for ever. You have lived your own life, and have left me to live mine. You have done nothing to make my life happy, or to prove your regard for me. For a long time I went on loving you, patiently, devotedly, blind to your selfishness and neglect, waiting and hoping for a day that never came. But at last my eyes were opened, and I began to understand your character and my own folly in caring for you. And then another love was offered me, generous, devoted, self-sacrificing, and for the first time I knew what the passion of a lifetime means. When you read these lines I shall be far away from this house—far away from England, I hope—with the man who loves me well enough to sacrifice his social position for my sake, and for whose love I am willing to forfeit my good name. I have but one regret in taking this step,

dreadful as its consequences may be; and that is my sorrow in proving myself unworthy of your mother's affection. To forfeit her esteem is very bitter. From you I have nothing to lose, for you have given me nothing——"

He stood with this letter in his right hand, and his left holding her wrist—stood looking in her face, after he had read the last word, she looking back at him, terror changed to defiance. She had been shocked and startled at his sudden entrance, but it was not in her nature to turn craven.

"Do you mean this?" he asked.

"Every word of it—yes, every word. You have neglected me, trampled upon me—treated me as if you had bought me in a market for your slave. Yes, while all the best men in London were treating me like a queen, while I had followers and flatterers enough to turn any woman's head, you did not see that there was danger—you did not care. But there was one who cared—one whom I love as I never loved you."

"And you loved me as you never loved my brother, and you will change again, and tire of St.

Austell as you tired first of Adrian and then of me. You are a wanton by nature; but you have reckoned without your host, you fair, false devil. You shall not live to dishonour me."

He had his Malacca cane in his hand, a cane with a loaded handle. Did he forget that the gold knob was weighted with lead, as he raised the cane and struck her, in blind, ungovernable rage—struck the fair, pale brow with all the force of a practised athlete.

She reeled under the blow, and then fell backwards with a dull thud, fell without a cry, and lay on the Persian carpet, looking up at him with wide open eyes, and a red gash upon her forehead.

It was done. He stood looking down at her an instant, and then his brain reeled, and he staggered back against a sofa, and sank upon it, half-unconscious, with a noise like the surging of the sea in his ears, and a great light in his eyes. Then came darkness, through which he heard hurrying footsteps and an opening door, and then nothing.

He re-opened his eyes after what seemed a long

interval, and saw Adrian kneeling beside that prostrate figure, holding a hand-mirror above the white lips.

"Adrian!" he faltered hoarsely, as his brother rose slowly to his feet and faced him.

They stood looking at each other, both faces rigid with horror; so like, and yet unlike, even when the same over-mastering emotion possessed each in the same degree. They might have been the principle of good and of evil encountering each other, love and hate, right and wrong, compassion and cruelty—any two qualities of human nature that are most antagonistic.

"You have killed her," said Adrian, almost in a whisper.

"Are you sure?" gasped the other. "Is there no hope? Is she really dead?"

"Yes. Not a breath upon the glass," laying down the mirror as he spoke. "Not the faintest throb of the heart. Look at those glassy eyes—Murderer!"

"It was not murder! I struck her down in my fury—struck at her as at an infamous woman who

had betrayed me—who defied me in her shamelessness. Yes, she defied me, Adrian; blazoned her guilt; told me she loved him as she had never loved me. I surprised her as she was writing that letter"—pointing to the open letter on the table—"coolly announcing her intention to dishonour me.

"She stood there, looking at me, repeating this; and I had that devilish cane in my hand, and I lifted it and struck her—struck at her blindly, as I would have struck at a strong man. I struck her on the forehead, and she fell. I knew no more, till I looked up out of thick darkness and saw her lying there, and you beside her."

"Well, you have killed her. That is how neglect and cruelty have ended," said Adrian. "If she sinned against you—if she would have left you for another man—it is you must bear the burden of her sin. You are the greater sinner. But now you have to consider how you are to answer for what you have done. The straightest course will be the best. I will go and awaken

Mrs. Marrable, and then send for the doctor. He can do nothing; but it is our duty to have him here as soon as possible."

Valentine flung himself between his brother and the door.

"Wake old Marrable! Send for the doctor!" he echoed. "Are you mad, Adrian? Do you want to put a rope round my neck?"

"I want to save your neck, and your conscience, too, as far as I can," answered Adrian, with the calmness of an intellectual nature which rises with the importance of a crisis. "You must face the situation honestly, awful as it is. There is no other way. There must be an inquest, and you will have to answer for what you have done. You will be sure of sympathy in your character of an outraged husband, when that letter has been read. There will be a verdict of manslaughter, perhaps—impossible, I fear, to avoid that; and you may have to go to prison for a short time."

"Was there ever such a fool?" cried Valentine. "Do you think I am going to offer my neck to the noose, like that? 'I am very sorry, gentlemen

of the jury, that I have had the misfortune to kill my wife. I hope you will be civil enough to call the matter manslaughter, and to let me off easily; but if you choose to call it murder, here I am, ready for the hangman.' No, my good brother; we must manage things better than that. We won't call up old Marrable, or send for the family doctor. We have the best part of the night before us yet. We must dispose of ——— that!"

He pointed with quivering finger to the pallid form lying on the carpet. It was a small Persian carpet of delicate colouring on a white ground, and the blood from that deep cut upon the temple had made a crimson patch on the whiteness. How harshly that crude red showed against the half tints of the Oriental pattern!

"I will have nothing to do with you unless you take the straight course," said Adrian.

"Oh yes, you will. You are my brother, the other half of myself, bound to me by the most mysterious tie that humanity knows. You must help me. You must go with me, hand and foot, heart and brain! What, would you have my

mother wake to-morrow to be told that her son had given himself up to answer for the murder of his wife? Do you think such a blow as that would not kill her, as surely as that fatal blow killed yonder wanton," pointing scornfully to his victim.

"Valentine, are you a man or a devil?"

"There is a touch of the latter in my nature, perhaps. When you were made all of milk and honey, I took the gall and wormwood for my share. I say you must help me, and without the loss of a minute; or if you won't help me you may look on. At least I suppose you will hold your tongue."

"I tell you again, Valentine, your only safety is in facing your danger, and answering for what you have done."

"And I tell you again that I am not such a fool as to take a fool's advice."

He knelt beside his dead wife, and rolled the carpet round those lifeless limbs. Calmly, with a diabolical decision and promptness, he arranged his ghastly burden.

"Open the door," he said, "and bring a candle."

Adrian obeyed, instinctively, mechanically. His

conscience and his intellect alike revolted against his brother's actions, yet he submitted and went with him. Perhaps he may have argued that when a man's life is at stake he has the right to follow his own judgment rather than any other man's counsel. The awfulness of the stake may give exceptional rights.

For the trained athlete, that slender form was no oppressive weight. Valentine carried his burden with the head lying across his shoulder, the long loose hair falling like a veil over those marble features, the waxen hand and arm hanging on his breast. His own face was of almost as deathlike a hue as that pallid arm. His brows were bent, his lips sternly set, his eyes dark with desperate resolves. He would put that ghastly evidence of his crime away anywhere, anyhow, to save himself, his own full-blooded fiercely throbbing life, this vigorous all-enjoying entity which death would reduce to nothingness and everlasting oblivion. Brave as a Roman to endure pain, to face danger, to live down disgrace, Valentine turned craven at the thought of life's inexorable end. He would

ward off that to the uttermost hour. He would fight for that as the fox fights, with dauntless courage and inexhaustible cunning.

What was this burden that he carried, cold and still, upon his passionately-throbbing heart? What was this that he should think of it, or care for it, or be sorry for its sake? A weak, false woman, slain upon the threshold of her sin—caught like a bird in the net, just at the moment when she was going to inflict upon him the deepest wrong that woman can do to man.

No. He gave not one thought to his victim. He carried her as the butcher carries the lamb to the slaughter-house. Slowly, deliberately, with steady footsteps in the corridor and on the stairs, he carried his burden through the silent house, motioning to Adrian to precede him with the candle, to open doors for him, to withdraw bolts—and so the brothers went in silence out into the silent night.

There were stars shining above the wooded hills—the night was not all silence. They could hear the ripple of the river in the valley; a tender lullaby, music for lovers and happy people. The

summer wind came over the moor like a Titan's sigh, soft and slow, and full of melancholy.

Adrian left the candle burning on a table in the hall, and followed his brother across the threshold. He closed the door behind him, lest the creaking of the hinges should awaken any member of the household. The door would open easily from the outside; there would be no difficulty in returning to their rooms by-and-by, when that ghastly load had been put away.

He found himself considering all the consequences, calmly and deliberately, as if it were no new experience for him to be concerned in the concealment of a murder. Involuntarily he recalled the history of famous murders, which his imagination had dwelt upon, fascinated by their morbid interest.

He remembered Thurtell's crime, and the body hidden in the pond in the garden, and then taken out of that pond and carried off to a safer hiding place. He remembered that still more ghastly murder done by the two Mannings, husband and wife; the grave dug beforehand for the victim;

the snare of sensual pleasures; the bushel of lime.

And now his brother, the other half of his own being, the creature he had loved and clung to and admired for the strength of his manhood, and envied for Nature's bounteous gifts—this being so near to himself had sunk to the level of those heroes of the Newgate Calendar, and had to bend his mind, as they had bent theirs, to the concealment of an irreparable crime.

They had walked a long way in silence, half way down the avenue and then across the grass to a lower level, descending that wooded gorge through which the river ran, darkened with the shadow of the foliage. They had reached the path beside the stream without a word spoken by either. But here Adrian broke that gloomy silence.

"For God's sake, Valentine, consider what you are doing, and the consequences that may come of it. Do you know that you are branding yourself for ever with the crime of murder. There can be no question of manslaughter—justifiable homicide—after this."

"If you will hold your tongue, there will be no question of anything—in relation to my wife—except that she ran away from me. There will be her own handwriting to show how she eloped with her lover. Yes, that will be there to answer for her, in black and white, in her own hand, when she lies rotting among the water-rats."

"Valentine, be brave, be honest! Go back. Take her back. Tell the world what you have done. It will be better, wiser, safer!"

"It would be the act of an idiot. Go and scrape the rust off some of that old armour in the hall, Adrian; and mount Cinderella, and go clattering along the high roads in quest of adventures. You are of the temper that makes lunatics of Don Quixote's breed. I am not."

For not one instant had he slackened his pace or faltered in his purpose, as he argued with his brother. He knew every yard of water in that swift deep stream, bearing down with ceaseless impetus from the quiet hills yonder, from solitudes that seemed like holy places in the stillness of night. He knew every bend and every pool.

His experience as an angler had made him familiar with all.

There was one deep pool where he had had many a tussle with a gigantic pike, a shining scaly monster, that sulked among the rushes and set him at defiance. He had landed such an one many a time in that shadowy corner, where the water-weeds grew thick and tall.

It was there she should lie.

That should be her grave, deep and secret, deep in the slimy bottom of the river, entangled among snaky roots, wedged in with pebbles—hidden for ever from the light and the world.

He laid his burden upon the grassy slope beside the pool, and then began to collect a score or two of pebbles, the largest he could find along the path, taking them at longish intervals, lest some prying eye should observe that the stones had been removed from the coarse gravel.

Then, when he had got together as many as he wanted, he tied them in his handkerchief and fastened them to the dead girl's girdle. Then he wrapped the carpet more securely round her, tied

it with the large silk kerchief from his neck, and, so secured, he dragged the corpse to the brink of the water and gently pushed it into that shadowy depth. It sank like a plummet. The water rippled and bubbled about it for a minute or so, and there was a noise of rushing creatures or a rustle of reeds and water-weeds, and then all was silent.

Adrian stood with his back against a willow trunk, watching his brother's movements with wide-open awe-stricken eyes, the incarnation of speechless horror.

When the water had ceased to ripple round the spot where that ghastly load had gone down, Valentine turned his back upon the rushy bank, and walked quickly up and down the path, looking right and left, peering into the shadowy recesses between the great brown branches of oak and elm, the faintly shining silver of the beech trees, looking lest by some diabolical chance they should have been followed and watched. He waited here and there for a minute or so, listening intently, as he had listened many a time for the hounds, in

the woodland or on the moor; but he could hear neither breath nor motion of any living creature, nothing but the whisper of the wind among the leaves.

Suddenly came a far off sound, gradually louder, steady, persistent, inevitable. It was the sound of an express train travelling along the line that ran at the bottom of the valley, on the other side of the stream, and on a level with the water.

"The mail from Exeter," said Valentine. "Half-past one."

They walked back by the way they had come in silence, till they came to a point, midway between the river and the Abbey, where the path divided, one way leading to the park gates, the other to the house. Here Valentine stopped abruptly.

"Good-night and good-bye," he said.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know. You needn't be afraid. If there should be awkward questions asked, or suspicions aroused, I will come back to answer them. I won't leave you in the lurch."

"I am not afraid of that; but you had better come back to the house with me. It will be no worse for you to bear than for me."

"That's your idea," answered Valentine shortly, as he vanished in the darkness of the shrubbery.

CHAPTER XIV.

LEAVES FROM LORD ST. AUSTELL'S JOURNAL.

JULY 19TH.—Had a row with Beeching, who declared that I had undermined his influence with Leo, whom he adores, and that I have spoiled his chances without caring a rush for the lady myself. There was a time when I cared a good many rushes for the lovely Leo, and would have gone a very long way for her sake; but a lovelier than Leo appeared —a fairer star rose above my horizon; and *Adieu paniers, vendanges sont faites.*

I did not tell Beeching this, but rather enjoyed his jealousy, and let him fume as he liked. After he had stormed like a Stock Exchange Othello, he began to talk about money matters, and to "throw out," as my valet calls it, about my obligations to him in regard to the stable. He had found most of the cash, and I had swaggered and made money at his expense. This was intolerable, so I told him

that I was heartily sick of the stud, and still more so of him. "There's not a thoroughbred one among the whole lot," said I. He flared up at this, and we became exceedingly bitter.

The matter ended in a way that was eminently agreeable to me. We agreed to part company as joint-proprietors of a racing stud, including Postcard; and I surrendered all interest in that distinguished animal and his stable companions for a consideration—said consideration being total release from all liabilities on behalf of the stud. A very good bargain for me. The gentle savage was in a rage. His hereditary instincts, as the son and grandson of stockjobbers, should have warned him against transacting business while he was in a passion.

"Blessed are those whose blood and judgment are so well co-mingled," &c. My blood and judgment *are;* for I have never yet allowed temper to make me blind to my own interest. I really made an excellent bargain with Beeching.

I hate quarrels, and it is always painful to me to cut a man with whom I have been very familiar,

so when I met poor old Joe at Hurlingham on the following day—Saturday, and a capital Saturday—I clapped him on the shoulder, and suggested that we ought to be the best possible friends now that our business relations were at an end.

I told him that I was out of health, lungs altogether unsatisfactory, and that my doctor warned me against wintering in Europe. The Riviera might do for most people, but it was not good enough for me. I must go to Algiers, Egypt, or Ceylon.

This, by-the-way, is unvarnished truth. I seldom get through a winter in England without a bad attack, and I have been strongly advised to try the East.

Egypt I have done, to its last cataract and its last mummy. I have seen the first rays of the morning sun shining upon Memnon's head, and have learned and forgotten a monstrous number of lies about Cleopatra. Algiers I know as well as South Kensington. Ceylon remains—the land of spices and tea. To Ceylon I will go if——

If she will go with me.

Will she? That is the question.

I think she will. She has owned that she loves me; and when a woman once makes that confession all the rest is a question of patience and time. She is too feminine a creature to be false to the destiny of womanly loveliness, which is to reward a devoted lover. She is more to me than ever woman was before her—more to me, dearer to me—utterly beautiful, and utterly beloved. I would make any sacrifice to win her, would accept lifelong exile, and, what is much worse, lifelong poverty for her sake. My affairs are in low water, and she has not a sixpence; but I think I have enough to rub along upon in Ceylon, where life is easier and society less exacting than in England. Stables and baccarat have absorbed more than two-thirds of my income; and away from the turf and the clubs I shall be comparatively rich. With her for my companion, I shall be infinitely happy.

July 22nd.—She has bolted. When I called at Wilkie Mansions this afternoon, the door was

opened by a maid without a cap, who smelt of rank tobacco—Life Guardsman in the dining-room, I dare say—and who told me her mistress had gone to Devonshire. She left by the 11.45 from Paddington on a visit to Lady Belfield.

"Will she be away long?"

The maid had no idea; no date had been mentioned for her mistress's return. Mrs. Baddeley was out. No information on the other side of the staircase. My Helen has run away from her Paris instead of running away with him. We sat for two hours together at Hurlingham last night, and she gave me no hint of this departure. She was very melancholy. I saw tears in her eyes more than once, and thought them a good sign. They were a bad sign, it seems; for to-day she bolts.

Does she think Devonshire and the ægis of a mother-in-law can protect her from the pursuit of a lover? No more than the temple and the shrine could save Cassandra from Ajax. I shall not follow her immediately. I have a good many engagements and some business transactions to

detain me in town. I will give her time enough to be miserable without me, to discover the emptiness of life without love, to pine and mope in rustic monotony. My chances will be ever so much better for a judicious delay.

August 17th.—Here I am, without a servant, keeping dark at the inn where Beeching and I put up nearly three years ago. I thought of bringing my man, as he is a shrewd fellow, and would be useful to me in the event of success—looking after a carriage to take us to the station, getting off luggage, and so on—if I could rely upon his discretion. But one can never rely upon that class of man. The sharper he is the more certain to talk. A well-trained fool would be an invaluable servant, if one could have such a combination. Your smart fellow inevitably gives away his master. So I decided on coming alone, and here I am, ostensibly intent on salmon fishing in the Chad. I went so far as to bring some of my old Norwegian tackle, which is now adorning my sitting-room. This is a deadly dull neighbourhood out of the hunting season, and the hours I cannot pass with *her* will

be ghastly. To approach her will be difficult, as I don't want her mother-in-law to know I am here. They drove past the inn this afternoon in a big barouche, she looking the image of sadness.

She is martyrising herself—and for what? Is it conscience, duty, honour, chastity, fear of the world's opinion, or doubt of me that weighs heaviest with her?

Her heart is mine; and she must know that she would be happier as my mistress than as the wife of a clown, who leaves her in a state of semi-desertion, and has so little knowledge of her value that he exposes her to the pursuit of every profligate in London. With me she would be safe, guarded by an infinite love, sheltered from every harm.

August 19th.—I have seen her. We met this afternoon in a lonely path beside the river. I had been paddling easily for an hour, when I saw her white gown gleaming between the tall dark trees, and in five minutes I had moored my boat to a great weeping willow, and I was by her side.

We were together for two hours, walking up and down by the river, or sitting on a bench under the willow. Not a creature passed that way to my knowledge, except some men in a boat who had been netting salmon further down the stream. For two hours we had the world, and the sunlight, and the summer air all to ourselves; and during all that time I was pleading my cause, and she listening and agreeing and disagreeing, and contradicting herself, divinely inconsistent and illogical, after the manner of her sex.

But I know that she is won all the same.

She went so far as to talk of our life in Ceylon, even the kind of clothes she would have to wear there. There is no situation in life, be it ever so solemn, in which a woman does not think of her clothes. "I do not believe I have a gown fit for the place," she said. How like a woman!

"Bring three or four white muslin dressing-gowns," I said, "and leave all your smart frocks behind. You shall have a toilet of banyan leaves and orchids. You shall have cobweb muslins and silks, that you can pull through a wedding-ring,

and Indian embroideries dazzling with jewels. You shall have a gown of peacock's feathers over a cloth of gold petticoat."

"Would not that be too warm for the tropics?" she said, smiling at me through her tears. She is alternate sun and shower like an April day. "But you know I am only joking. You know I am not going with you."

"I know that you are going with me, that you could not be so cruel as to break my heart. You know that for me the East means life, but that life without you would be death. So if you refuse to go, I shall stay in England, and let the winter do its worst for me."

"You will stay and die?" she said, with a scared look.

That little chronic cough of mine has always an effect upon women, and it attacked me just at this moment. I shouldn't be surprised if I really am consumptive; I know I detest winter and bad weather.

After this, we shed a few sympathetic tears, her head upon my shoulder, under the willow. The

westering sun steeped us in golden light; the air breathed rustic perfume, mingled odours of pine woods and wild flowers; the ripple of the river was like music. If life could have gone on for ever thus, flowing on like the river in sinless ecstasy, I should have been content. Heaven knows I am not a profligate. I have never loved a woman who was not a lady. Love without sentiment or poetry has always been hateful to me. It is the union of soul with soul that I have sought; and in Helen I have found my ideal.

I told her my plan. She is to receive a telegram to-morrow morning between seven and eight, ostensibly from her husband, summoning her to London. She is to leave hurriedly by an early train, carrying her luggage with her.

She listened and promised to obey, and I believe she will keep her word. I have been down the line to Barnstaple, and have telegraphed to my servant in London, instructing him how to telegraph to Mrs. Belfield, and in Mr. Belfield's name, from South Kensington. She will be able to show her mother-in-law the message, and, short of Lady

Belfield offering to go to London with her, I see no chance of failure.

She will get away quietly by the 10.40 train, and I shall start by an earlier one, so as to escape notice and to be ready to meet her at Exeter. Thence we shall go on together to London, dine in a private room at the Grand, and leave Charing Cross by the Continental mail. There will be no time lost, and very little fear of pursuit, for I know that Belfield was at York the day before yesterday, and is likely to be there till the end of this week.

CHAPTER XV.

AFTERWARDS

It was summer still, yet Adrian shivered as he sat and watched the slow dawn, the dawn that was rising with such an air of gladness for eager hunting men round about Chadford, starting up from their pillows briskly, with thoughts of trying new horses and young hounds across the dewy moorland, or the heavy grass. Adrian felt as if his limbs were lead, and his forehead iron. He sat by the empty hearth in the library, with his book lying open on the carpet just where he had flung it last night in his agony of fear. He sat while the sun rose gloriously, shining with parti-coloured light through the emblazoned windows, steeping the sombre old room in splendour. He heard the cocks crowing triumphantly in the poultry yard, the horses neighing as they were brought out of their stables for early exercise.

The world was awake again, earth and sky were bright and blithe; and she was lying face downward in that dreadful pool where the great ravenous pike mustered. She was lying there, murdered on the threshold of sin, unshriven and impenitent, the victim of a miserable marriage.

He thought of her lying there—pictured her under the water-weeds, the lovely hair, dark with threads of gold in it, surging loosely to and fro with the slow movement of the tide. He thought of water-rats and all the foul creatures that haunt the margin of a river; but worst of all was the thought of those shining monsters which he had so often watched, flashing silvery under the dull green water.

And then he remembered her as he had first beheld her in her girlish beauty, light-minded and gay, gentle, pliable, a creature to entwine herself about a man's heart, to grow dearer to him by every folly, and more sacred to him by every weakness.

So would she have been to him had she become his wife. It would have been the delight of his

days to cherish and protect her, to strengthen that which was feeble in her character, to develop all that was good. Oh, if he could have recalled the past, and that fatal evening by the river, when he surrendered her to his brother. It was a base act so lightly to have renounced her, he thought, to-night, in his anguish. He ought to have saved her from herself. He ought to have claimed and held her against the world, any thing rather than to have given her over to a scoundrel.

"My brother," he said to himself. "My own flesh and blood, so near and dear to me that I could not think him wholly bad, though I knew that he was selfish and self-willed. But I ought to have held her to her promise—she was mine, my very own, to protect and foster; and I let her go to another. I should have understood better what was best for her happiness. I should have known that she was not to be trusted with her own guidance."

His mind, completely unhinged by the horror of the night, wandered from the dreadful circumstances which he had to consider, dallied with the

memory of the past—lost itself in futilities. What he had to think of was his brother, and his brother's position.

A murderer! He, Valentine Belfield, the beloved son of that tender-hearted mother—he was guilty of murder. He had committed that tremendous crime which stands alone among all other wrong-doing, and by which in one moment of madness a man may forfeit his life to the law. He may forge, steal, swindle, break hearts, betray friends, beggar the widow and the orphan, work ruin on the widest scale, and he may still possess that dastard life which to him means the universe. But for the shedder of blood the law has no mercy; for him society has nothing but abhorrence.

Adrian looked up at those old armorial bearings, through which the sun was shining. How proud he had been of those historical quarterings—every one of which had its meaning. Had crime ever stained yonder shields before last night? Those oldest arms, yonder, had been borne by his Norman ancestor, the Chevalier de Belchamp, crusader and hero. The family had divided after-

wards into Beauchamps and Belfields. Yonder was the shield of the Champernonnes, with whom Belfields had intermarried; and there, on a scutcheon of pretence, appeared the badge of the Prideaux-Brunes, marking a marriage with an heiress of that family.

Had any son of those good old families ever stained his crest with the red brand of murder? Those men of the older time had lived in a violent age—when the sword was ready to the hand, and anger, hate, revenge, jealousy, were wont to recognise no higher law than impulse. Yes; doubtless there had been crimes committed, blood shed by men who bore those honoured names; and the Church had heard the murderer's confession, and had absolved the sinner. Had not the Church thriven and grown rich by stories of crime? The very stones of old abbeys and minsters might show dark stains of blood, could they but tell of the motives which prompted the benefactions of their founders—of the craven spirits whose gold had been poured out like water to win forgetfulness on earth and pardon beyond the grave.

But murder to-day—in this civilized, well-regulated world, bears a more hideous aspect. Murder to-day means the newspapers and the hangman; and perhaps the newspapers are the more appalling ordeal.

"What will he do?" thought Adrian. "Kill himself!"

There was a new horror. To Adrian it seemed only a natural consequence of last night's work that Valentine should put a pistol to his mouth and blow out his brains. It seemed the only obvious issue. He knew that religious scruples would not stop his brother's hand. After what he had done, his life must needs be hateful to him, and the most natural thing for him to do was to destroy that life.

It was of his mother he had thought much more than he had thought of Valentine, during those long hours in which he had been sitting there, waiting helplessly for the morning; having no plan or thought as to what he should do, no capacity to think out the future, for himself or for his guilty brother. It was of her agony—her ruined

life, her broken heart—that he thought; and he would have given his own life gladly to save her.

Would it be better for her peace of mind if her son were to destroy himself, and thus end the horror of last night by a double tragedy?

However terrible the catastrophe, it might offer the only possible escape from a deeper horror—the agony of seeing her son in a criminal dock.

What was to be done with him if he lived, if he clung to the burden of existence with all its possibilities of infamy? He had chosen the secret path, which to Adrian's mind stamped him for ever as a deliberate assassin, he who had sinned almost unawares in a moment of passion, and who might have confessed his crime and held himself erect before his fellow-men, guilty, but not dishonoured. He had chosen the darker path; the way of lies and concealments. He had made his choice, and would have to abide by it. That murdered corpse lying in the quiet grave yonder might rise up to bear witness against him, as other hidden forms had arisen out of unlikely places, to testify against other murderers.

After sunrise it seemed to Adrian as if the moments hurried past with inexorable speed. He so intensely dreaded the awakening of the household, the resumption of the ordinary course of events, and then the inevitable shock of Helen's disappearance, the fear, the wonder, the confusion, his mother's distress and perplexity. It was of her he thought always; to save her pain he would do anything, sacrifice even conscience and honour. He, who was the soul of truth, would stoop to lie, and would lend himself to the concealment of his brother's crime.

The first sound of a housemaid's footfall on the stairs fell heavy on his heart. Then came the opening of a shutter on the ground floor. The day had begun. The hour chimed from the stable clock —six! All the house would be astir before half-past.

Adrian went slowly up to his room to steady his nerves by a cold bath, and to prepare himself to meet his mother. He shuddered as he caught sight of his haggard face in the glass.

"It is I who look like a murderer," he said to himself.

He remembered having passed a footman on the stairs, and how curiously the man had looked at him. He had been scarcely conscious of the fact at the moment, but he recalled it now at sight of his own face. No wonder the man had stared at him.

He made his toilet slowly, deeply thoughtful, and with a strange incertitude as to the duration of time—thinking he had spent hours in his dressing room when he had been there less than an hour.

His valet knocked at the door presently.

"Your shaving water, Sir Adrian. Is there anything wrong, sir?"

How the question startled him. Was every interrogatory, every sound of a human voice to have the same power to scare him henceforward, until the dreaded discovery was made, and all was over.

"Anything wrong," he answered quietly, opening his door as he spoke. "No. What should be wrong?"

"Nothing, sir. I beg your pardon, sir; only when I went into your room just now I saw your

bed had not been slept in, and it startled me a bit, sir."

"Oh, was that all? Yes I dare say you were surprised. I was reading very late in the library last night, and I fell asleep over my book. And after I had slept in my chair till daylight, I did not feel inclined for bed."

The man assisted his master with the final details of his toilet, brushed invisible specks of dust off the neat grey lounge coat, handed Sir Adrian his watch and handkerchief, and glanced at him furtively now and then.

Nine o'clock. The prayer bell rang, and Sir Adrian went down to the breakfast-room, where the servants were quietly slipping into their accustomed places in front of the sideboard. It was Lady Belfield's habit to read prayers at this hour, no matter who among her visitors came or stayed away. She exacted no subjection from her guests in this matter; but she deemed it her duty to her servants that she should be one with them in their devotions.

The prayers were not too long, nor the portion

of Scripture too abstruse; and when they had all risen from their knees, Lady Belfield would inquire after the health of any one among them who was ailing, or would ask the last news of a sick parent, or would detain Mrs. Marrable for a few minutes' chat between prayers and breakfast, or take her into the garden to look at some small improvement, or at a newly marked geranium, which the gardener had evolved from his inner consciousness, as it were, by scientific treatment of the parent plant.

The bond of love and duty was very strong between mistress and servants at Belfield Abbey.

Helen had rarely appeared before noon during this last visit. Lady Belfield made no remark, therefore, when prayers were finished, and when breakfast began without her daughter-in-law.

"You are looking very pale this morning, Adrian," she said, as she began to pour out the tea, with her son sitting opposite her in the morning light; "I hope there is nothing wrong."

Nothing wrong! It was just what his valet had said outside his door an hour ago.

"Nothing. Only I sat up later than usual last night—absorbed in a curious book. In fact I was so foolish as to read on till I exhausted myself and fell asleep in my chair."

"That does not seem as if the book were very interesting."

"Oh, but it was interesting—a most engrossing book."

"What was it about, Adrian? I am always glad to hear of your new books."

"This wasn't new," he said hastily, fearing further interrogation. "It is a book of Müller's, and I was interested in tracing some of Darwin's ideas to their source in the earlier thinker."

"And you fell asleep in the library, and you were very late going to bed I suppose," interrogated the mother anxiously.

"Very late. In point of fact, I—— What is it, Andrew?"

"Can I speak with you, if you please, Sir Adrian?" said the footman, with a look that foreboded evil.

Adrian arose hastily, and went towards the door.

"Yes, of course."

"Stop, Andrew," exclaimed Lady Belfield. "What can you have to say to your master that you can't say before me? Has anything happened?"

The man looked from his master to his mistress, and back again to his master, with a troubled aspect.

"It is about Mrs. Belfield, my lady. Mrs. Marrable felt a little uneasy at what Jane told her just now."

"What do you mean by all this mystery? Jane told her—what? Is my daughter ill?" asked Lady Belfield, hurrying to the door.

"No, my lady—it's not that, my lady; only Mrs. Belfield is missing, and her bed has not been slept in, and her boxes are packed and strapped, my lady, as if she had prepared to go away, and Jane, whose room is on the floor above Mrs. Belfield's rooms, not exactly overhead, but very near—heard her moving about very late last night, and wondered she should be up so late."

"What can it mean, Adrian?" exclaimed Lady

Belfield. "She had no idea of leaving us for months to come. Why should she have packed her trunks? Where can she be? In the grounds, perhaps, wandering about somewhere after having been up all night. Let us go and look for her, Adrian. There is nothing really amiss, perhaps;" and then, in a lower tone she added: "Servants are such alarmists."

"A telegram, my lady," said the butler, appearing with the well-known orange envelope on a salver.

"For Mrs. Belfield," said his mistress, looking at the address. "Shall I open it, Adrian?"

"Yes, I think you had better," answered Adrian, trying to school himself to the falsehood which must needs govern his conduct henceforward, in all things bearing upon the horrors of last night.

The message was from Valentine Belfield to Mrs. Belfield, handed in at Kensington at thirty-five minutes past seven, received at Chadford at three minutes before eight.

"You are urgently wanted at home for reasons to be explained when we meet. Start by first train possible from Chadford Road."

"He must be ill," exclaimed Lady Belfield. "He would hardly summon her for any other reason. What could she be wanted at home for except her husband's illness—an accident, perhaps—thrown from his horse, or something dreadful. And he telegraphs cautiously, to prevent our being frightened. I shall go at once, Adrian. I won't wait till this silly girl is found. I'll go to my son as fast as the rail can carry me."

She rang the bell hastily, white with a new terror.

"Dear mother, don't agitate yourself so dreadfully—indeed there may be no cause for fear—about Valentine's health. I can't understand the telegram."

He stood with the message in his hand, perplexed beyond measure. How should Valentine have been able to telegraph from Kensington at half-past seven that morning? He could not possibly have reached London by that hour, even if he were travelling in that direction. There had been no train that could convey him. Or even had it been possible, why should he have sent such

a message? What end could he hope to gain by the hideous mockery of telegraphing to the dead? There was some mystery underlying the message.

"Tell Sanderson to pack my dressing bag and portmanteau for the 10.40 train!" said Lady Belfield, when Andrew appeared, "and order the carriage at once. Adrian, I must leave you to look after Helen. There can be nothing really wrong with her—some foolish freak—an early ramble—and she has lost herself on the moor, perhaps. I cannot stop to think about her. She can follow me by a later train."

The mother's heart and mind were full of her son, and of him alone. She thought of him stricken by sudden illness—a consuming fever—congestion of the lungs—paralysis—or a fatal accident, his back broken, life ebbing fast away, life measured by moments; and she so far from him, with so many weary miles between them, seeming slow even when travelled by the fastest express that ever rushed along the iron road.

"Dear mother, you must do whatever you think best," said Adrian quietly; "but I am assured

you are torturing yourself without reason. Why should this telegram mean illness? There are a hundred possibilities. It tells us nothing except that Valentine wants his wife at home. It may have been sent in a fit of temper."

The door opened, and Mrs. Marrable came in, clean and fat and homely, in her fresh pink and white print gown and lace cap, but much paler and less self-possessed than was her wont. Her broad good-natured countenance had a distressed look as she approached her mistress with an open letter in her hand.

"If you please, my lady, *this* was found in Mrs. Belfield's room just now, lying on the floor, my lady, among bits of lace and scraps of paper, and such like; and I thought it was my duty to bring it to you with my own hands."

It was Helen's letter: that unfinished letter which so broadly confessed her wicked purpose.

"When you read this I shall be far away from this house—far away from England, I hope—with the man who loves me well enough to sacrifice

social position for my sake, and for whose love I am willing to forfeit my good name."

Lady Belfield sank into her chair, crushed by this unexpected stroke. Her son's wife—the girl she had loved and trusted, and treated in all things as a daughter—this girl-wife, so young and fair and seemingly innocent, had declared her guilt in those shameless lines. The mystery of Helen Belfield's disappearance was solved. She and her good name were gone for ever.

"What news for me to take to my son," she exclaimed, thinking more of him than of his guilty wife.

"Take my advice, mother. Do not go to him. There is something wrong about that telegram. It is a hoax, perhaps."

"No, no, Adrian. Who should invent such a hoax—to what end? I must go, I tell you—there is no alternative. He telegraphs for his wife. He has no longer a wife; but his mother can go to him in his trouble. That tie is not so easily broken."

"Let me go with you, then."

"No. You will have plenty to do here. You must find out all about that miserable girl: how and when she went, and with whom. Have you any idea? Do you suspect any one?"

Adrian was silent. How could he answer? how malign the dead? She had been on the brink of sin, and yet perhaps had died spotless, save in the intention to abandon her husband. And had Valentine been a different man—able to confront a crisis in both their lives, and to bring an erring wife back to duty—she might have repented on the very threshold of that awful guilt. The intention announced in that letter might never have been carried out. She might have lived a pure wife to the end. And was he to betray her now in her unconsecrated grave, and say, "Yes, I know all about her. Lord St. Austell was her lover"?

"You don't know?" questioned his mother. "You have no suspicion about anybody, among her admirers. My God, this is what comes of being talked about as the beautiful Mrs. Belfield! You must telegraph to her father, Adrian: not to Mrs. Baddeley. I shall see her. And you will

find out all you can about her flight. Poor, wretched, sinful creature! I was so fond of her," with streaming eyes.

Sanderson came in with her mistress's bonnet and mantle; travelling bag and portmanteau were in the carriage already.

"Am I to go with you, my lady?" asked the maid.

"Yes, mother, pray don't go alone," urged Adrian.

"Can you be ready this instant?"

"I've only to put on my bonnet, my lady. We shall have plenty of time."

It was within a few minutes of ten, and the train was to leave Chadford Road Station at 10.40. Lady Belfield put on her mantle; Sanderson ran off to get herself ready for the journey. Adrian handed his mother into the carriage, and stayed beside her, comforting and cheering her, till her maid reappeared, and all was ready for departure.

"Where will you stay, mother? At the Alexandra, I suppose. And if—if you find Valen-

tine is not ill, that the telegram means nothing, you will come back to-morrow, will you not? Or you will telegraph to me to go to you."

"Yes, I'll telegraph when I know what is wrong. I shall stay at Wilkie Mansions, perhaps. God grant I may find Helen there," added Lady Belfield, in a lower voice. "She may have wavered at the last moment and gone to her husband. That wretched letter may mean less than we think. It is not even finished, you see, Adrian. She may have written it in some sudden fit of resentment. Valentine has sadly neglected her. God only knows. Good-bye."

Mother and son clasped hands, and Adrian gave the coachman the signal for departure. He stood watching the carriage drive away, motionless, as if turned to stone, paralyzed by despair. Under no other circumstances would he have allowed his mother to go to London upon such an errand alone. Under no other circumstances would he have failed to see her off at the station; but to-day he dared not do even as much as that. He dared not leave the house, that dear home of his child-

hood and youth, which to him was henceforward only the scene of murder, a place of hideous memories.

He went back to the breakfast-room slowly, wondering what next he was to hear. Mrs. Marrable was pretending to arrange the roses and golden lilies in the great chrysanthemum bowl which filled the breakfast table with bloom and perfume.

"I do declare my lady has gone away without so much as a cup of tea," she said. "It's a sad, sad day for us all, Sir Adrian."

"It is indeed a sad day, Mrs. Marrable."

"And to think that sweet young lady—oh, sir, I know it was very wrong—but human nature is human nature, and we were all so upset in my room, and Jane she came rushing in with that letter, half out of her wits, poor girl; and oh, Sir Adrian, she'd read the letter on the stairs, not knowing what she was doing, and she just gave it into my hand, tried to speak, and couldn't; caught her breath, and went off into strong hysterics, and I make no doubt she's in them at this very moment."

"Then you all know——" He was going to say "everything," but stopped himself and said: "You all know that my sister-in-law began to write a very foolish letter which she never finished, and which may mean nothing. She has some reason to complain of my brother's neglect, and she may have written that letter as a kind of warning to him."

"Yes, Sir Adrian, she may. Only—only—" faltered Mrs. Marrable, who loved "the family" with a reverential affection, and would have cut her tongue out rather than speak disrespectfully of any one bearing the name of Belfield—"only, what can have become of Mrs. Belfield if she has—not—gone away with some one?"

That question seemed unanswerable, for Sir Adrian remained silent.

"I'll go up to Mrs. Belfield's room," he said presently, after walking up and down for a few minutes, while Mrs. Marrable still lingered, and still found occupation in the arrangement of the breakfast table, where the silver kettle was boiling desperately over a spirit lamp, and the eggs were

cooking themselves as hard as stone in a patent egg-boiler.

"I may find some—some other letter," added Adrian. "You can come with me if you like."

Mrs. Marrable waited for no second invitation. She followed Sir Adrian to the rooms over the library, by the private staircase which Valentine had ascended and descended in the dead of the night.

The bed-room remained exactly as Adrian had seen it last night, except that the windows were open and the sunshine was streaming in and lighting up every corner. There was the spot where he had seen that prostrate form, with upturned face, and blood-stained forehead; there stood the table with its litter of writing materials, scattered books, and vases of summer flowers, candles burnt low in the sockets of the massive old silver candlesticks, an arm-chair in front of the table, the chair in which she had been seated when she penned that fatal letter.

Two large oil-skin covered dress-baskets stood near the door, strapped and locked ready for

departure. Doors of wardrobes were open, drawers and shelves were empty. Everything indicated preparations for departure. A travelling-bag upon the dressing-table was filled with ivory-backed brushes and perfume bottles, and all the necessities of a woman's toilet, leaving the table itself almost bare.

There could be no doubt that she had prepared for her departure; that she had deliberately planned her flight.

As he stood looking at these preparations, the meaning of the telegram flashed upon him. It was from St. Austell: a message invented to afford Helen an excuse for leaving the Abbey.

He looked round the room, moving slowly to and fro, while Mrs. Marrable's clear, honest eyes inspected everything, and while Mrs. Marrable's shrewd mind made its own conclusions. That letter—unfinished as it was—taken in conjunction with the packed boxes and dressing-bag, must mean a runaway wife; but how was it that the fugitive had left without taking her luggage, or making some arrangement for having it sent after her?

"I dare say she was afraid at the last, and dared not go off to the station with her boxes, as some have done, bolder than brass," thought Mrs. Marrable. "She'll write to *me*, perhaps, asking me to send her luggage somewhere. She'd never dare write to her ladyship."

There were no letters upon the writing-table—not a scrap of Helen's writing anywhere, except that one fatal letter in Sir Adrian's breast-pocket. There was no stain of blood upon the oak floor, yonder where she had fallen, or on the delicate chintz cover of the chair near which she fell.

"Gracious!" exclaimed Mrs. Marrable, suddenly, "what's gone with the white Persian rug?"

Adrian affected ignorance.

"The beautiful white rug that used to lie in front of the writing-table. It was one of my lady's favourite rugs. She brought it down from London two years ago when she had been furnishing Mr. Belfield's house. It was in her own dressing-room till the other day, and then she says, 'Marrable, Mrs. Belfield is out of health, and coming to us to get strong. We must make

her rooms as pretty as ever we can;' and this rug was brought here with a good many other things—that chair, and the Indian screen, for instance—at Lady Belfield's orders. And what can have become of the rug. It was here the day before yesterday when I brought in the clean linen."

"The housemaid must have moved it," said Adrian, looking out of the window. "You don't suppose Mrs. Belfield has packed it in one of her boxes, do you, Marrable?"

"No, sir, of course not. But that rug must be somewhere." And the housekeeper bustled off to investigate the matter.

Adrian turned away from the window, sick at heart.

Was life always to go on like this, for evermore, in alternate horror and shame: was he to feel always the murderer's terror of discovery, he who was guiltless of the murderer's crime? Where was Valentine, while the hours were going on, and the chances of inquiry becoming more hazardous? Had he gone back to London, to resume his old

life, to brazen out his guilt by the careless ease of his manner as he trod the beaten track among his usual set? Would he try to prove an alibi were he ever called to question upon the business of last night? Had anybody seen him at the station or in the town? Had anybody heard him moving about the house?

At the Abbey there was no suspicion of anything worse than an elopement; but upon that question the Abbey servants had all made up their minds. Mrs. Belfield had carried out the intention announced in that letter which Jane had read upon her way downstairs. And, like a young and foolish thing as she was, she had gone off without her luggage, trusting to the chapter of accidents for getting her property sent after her. They were all rather sorry for her, and they were also all agreed that this elopement had been inevitable from the very beginning—ay, that it had been foreseen by them, even while the sound of her wedding bells was still in the air.

"If she had wanted to be happy in her married life, she ought to have had Sir Adrian," said Mrs.

Marrable; and everybody else agreed, as in duty bound.

There was a good deal of discussion as to how and when Mrs. Belfield had left the Abbey, and by what train she had gone; but this was finally settled to everybody's satisfaction. She had slipped out of the house a little before midnight; and she had walked quietly to the station and had taken her seat in the last train from Barnstaple, which would reach Exeter in time for the mail from Penzance. She would be at Paddington early in the morning. Her lover would meet her somewhere on the road, most likely.

There was very little question as to the name of the lover. Sanderson had been at the Alexandra with Lady Belfield, and had gone to and fro between the hotel and Wilkie Mansions with messages, and had seen Lord St. Austell at Mrs. Belfield's and at Mrs. Baddeley's, and had heard things. Even the little page had his opinions, and had expressed himself freely as to Mr. Belfield's short-sightedness. Sanderson was too good a servant to talk much upon such delicate subjects;

but she had talked a little to Mrs. Marrable in the confidential half-hour after supper. Nobody in the housekeeper's room or the servants' hall doubted that Mrs. Belfield had gone off with Lord St. Austell.

CHAPTER XVI.

UNDER THE RUSHES

Sir Adrian sat in the library, or sauntered about the lawn and shrubberies near the house, all that long, heavy day. He dared not leave the premises just yet—so intense was his dread of some new catastrophe. He wanted to be there to face the worst that could happen; to be at hand to answer questions, or to meet calamity with a bold front.

Once he went down to the river, and looked at that rushy pool where his brother's victim was lying. The water scarcely rippled in the still summer air: the lights and shadows played upon the surface of the pool; the sunbeams glinted among the reeds, tremulous, uncertain, as the leafy branches moved softly overhead. It was a lovely afternoon. He had come there to fish upon many such afternoons in years that were gone. That little creek under the willows, and its

sheltered bank, had been a favourite spot with him. To-day he lingered there, listening to the faint plashing of the water, and watching the bright-winged insects as they dipped and fluttered on the dark surface of the pool, and then skimmed away, azure, transparent, beautiful, like spots of living light.

How calm the place was, and how hard it was for Adrian's over-wrought brain to realize the horror lying there. He stood staring blankly at the dark water, and almost wondering whether there were any reality in last night's experiences—whether the whole tragedy from first to last were not an hallucination of his own.

He went back to the Abbey, dreading to find that something had happened during his absence, brief as it had been. A constable from Chadford, or a detective from Scotland Yard, would be waiting for him perhaps; or there would be some frightful news of his brother: a suicide found in some sequestered spot upon the moor, a mutilated corpse borne home upon a shutter. No; there was nothing changed on his return. The house had

an air of death-like stillness. The venetians were closed outside those windows above the library. He could picture his brother's wife lying there on her white bed, with folded hands, and limbs decently composed, under the lavender-scented sheet.

That would have been horrible—untimely death in one so fair and light-minded would have seemed a reversal of Nature's common law; but, oh, how light a calamity compared with that which had happened!

He went into the library. His open piano, his books upon the reading-table, his desk and papers, the grave old organ yonder in the deep recess by the high oak chimney-piece, the organ he had so loved—all those things which made up the occupation, interest, and pleasure of his daily life—all were there as they had been yesterday; but they could yield him neither delight nor comfort—no, not one minute's respite or distraction.

He sat at his book-table with folded arms, and his forehead resting upon them, shutting out the light of day, trying to think out the situation, with all its sickening perplexities. His mother had told

him to communicate with Helen's father, but he shrank with abhorrence from the task. What could he say, which would not be a lie? To say that she had fled would be to malign the dead; to say anything else would be to endanger his brother. He had to shield the wrongdoer at any cost—for his mother's sake.

When last heard of, Colonel Deverill had been yachting in the Hebrides with a wealthy shipbuilder of Glasgow. He had given his address at a club in that city. "Wherever I am in August and September any letters sent to the Imperial will find me," he had told his daughters. "I am sure to get them sooner or later."

As the Colonel rarely answered anybody's letters it did not seem of much consequence where they were sent in the first instance. People who were bent upon writing to him might as well address him at a Glasgow club as anywhere else.

Adrian told himself that to let the day pass without making any attempt at communicating with the Colonel, would be to create evidence against his brother, a point upon which some

future investigator might put his finger, saying, here is one small fact incompatible with innocence. He remembered how in most of the great criminal trials he had read the balance of proof hung upon infinitesimals; trifling circumstances, which at the moment of their occurrence seemed to the criminal of hardly any consequence, and which yet were strong enough to hang him.

He seated himself at his writing-table, and slowly, after much irresolution, wrote his message—

"From Adrian Belfield, Chadford, to Colonel Deverill, Imperial Club, Glasgow.

"Mrs. Belfield has left the Abbey suddenly, leaving a letter which involves trouble for us all. Her husband is in London. Kindly communicate with him."

There was not much in this. It committed the sender to very little. It would in all probability be long in reaching the Colonel; and in the meantime Valentine might have got away from England, beyond the reach of pursuit, should suspicion be directed towards him.

CHAPTER XVII.

"EXCEPT AN ERRING SISTER'S SHAME"

LADY BELFIELD and her maid arrived in London while the sun was still bright, and the town had its afternoon aspect. All the Royal Oak omnibuses were faring eastward or westward, and the scanty carriage population were rolling in at the Marble Arch, to circulate drearily in a deserted Park. Constance Belfield saw the whole scene dimly, like figures in a dream; the flaunting flower beds with their overgrown geraniums in riotous bloom, the palms and tree ferns, and second-rate landaus and doubtful victorias, the country cousins and the shabby liveries, all the genteel squalor of West End London when rank and fashion and wealth have fled. She was driving across the Park in one of the little hired broughams from the station, hurrying to her son in an agony of morbid anticipation, conjuring up visions of horror as she

went. She could hardly speak when she alighted at Wilkie Mansions, leaving Sanderson in the carriage. She seated herself in the lift dumbly, and let the porter take her up to the third floor.

The maid who opened the door stared in blank astonishment, expecting to see no one less than Lady Belfield, and having a guilty consciousness of the military hovering near, if not actually on the premises.

"Is your master here—and very ill?" gasped Lady Belfield, passing the girl hurriedly, and going straight to her son's bed-room.

"No, my lady, master hasn't come back from York. He went at the beginning of the week, and he wasn't to be back till to-day, or perhaps Monday."

Not back from York, and the telegram was from South Kensington! Lady Belfield's brain began to swim. York! There might have been an accident at York perhaps—on the railway—on the racecourse. He might have been riding in a steeplechase. Her notion of York Summer

Meeting was very vague: she could hardly draw distinctions between the Knavesmire and Sandown Park. Her vivid fancy conjured up the vision of a broken fence, a fallen horse and rider lying in one heap of death under the summer sun.

"Do you know if anything has happened to your master?" she asked. "Have you heard of anything?" And then, seeing the girl's ignorance depicted in her face, she asked suddenly:

"Is Mrs. Baddeley at home?"

"Yes, my lady. She came home last Tuesday, and is to be at home till the middle of next week, *ong parsong*, the page says."

Lady Belfield waited for no more. She crossed the landing and sounded the electric bell at Mrs. Baddeley's door. The page admitted her immediately, having been made to understand that he held his place on the condition of never keeping a visitor over two seconds at the door. He might read as many novels as he liked, and might be as lazy as he liked; but the ordeal by patience which middle-aged and portly butlers inflict upon visitors was not to be inflicted by him. He flung open the

drawing-room door with an air, and announced "Lady Belfield."

Mrs. Baddeley was en déshabille, muffled in some loose garment of white cashmere and peacock plush, half à la Watteau, half à la Grecque, handsome and indolent, with a novel lying on the sofa —all three volumes open, as if she had been dipping here and there in the story for interesting bits—a silver-gilt chocolate pot and Dresden cup and saucer on the spindle-legged table at her side, and Tory reposing at the end of the sofa.

She started up to receive Lady Belfield without knocking over the table, or disturbing the dog, who opened his yellow eyes and blinked at the visitor in sleepy indifference. All her movements were graceful and sinuous, and she circulated among her archipelago of dainty tables as easily as a snake glides in and out of the bracken.

"Dearest Lady Belfield, I am delighted!" she exclaimed. "Is Helen with you?"

"No, she is not with me. God knows where she is, poor, wretched, lost creature. But I want

to know about my son. He telegraphed for his wife. He must be ill."

"He is not much given to worrying about his wife when he is well, I admit," said Leo, "but what do you mean by talking about my sister as a lost creature, Lady Belfield. Are you out of your mind?"

"I shall be if I don't find my son. For God's sake tell me the truth, whatever it is. Where is Valentine—what ails him? Why did he telegraph for his wife this morning?"

"I know nothing about your son, Lady Belfield. He has lived at his clubs mostly since Helen went to you. I scarcely ever see him in this house. He is always going off to some race-meeting. This week he is at York; two or three weeks hence he will be at Doncaster. I have long ceased to trouble myself about his movements."

"He telegraphed this morning—at half-past seven—from South Kensington!"

"Then I suppose he is in South Kensington—and alive, or he could not have telegraphed. And now, Lady Belfield, tell me about my sister, if you

please. By what right do you talk of her as a lost creature? What has she done?"

"She has left my house—she has dishonoured her husband."

"How dare you say that? By what right?"

Leonora Baddeley had placed herself between the visitor and the drawing-room door, as if to keep Lady Belfield there by force, were it necessary. She stood there drawn to her fullest height, with an angry spot of crimson flaming in the centre of each cheek, her eyes flashing, her lips quivering, and yet with a rigid look, as if the whole face were turning into stone.

"She has gone off, then!" she cried. "Oh, what art, what hypocrisy, what finished acting! She fled to you for shelter in the hour of temptation. She buried herself in the country; she hid herself from the world; and she has gone off after all. *That* is what it all meant—the tears—the doleful looks—the flying from the seducer. She has gone off with him! Oh, what villainy—what villainy!"

Tears came into her flashing eyes—tears of

agony, or of rage. She dashed them fiercely away, whichever they were.

"How do you know that she has gone off with any one?" she asked suddenly.

"I have a letter in which she confesses her guilty determination, a letter in which she tells my son, deliberately, that she has ceased to love him, and is going away with another man whom she loves as passionately as he loves her."

"As he loves her," echoed Leo, with a mocking laugh. "God help her if she builds her hopes on his love. God help her if she counts upon that for future happiness—or for bread-and-cheese. God help her next year when he is tired of her, and leaves her to die in a ditch like any other drab."

"Mrs. Baddeley, is it womanly to talk of any woman as you are talking, most of all to talk thus of a sister—a sister you once loved?"

"Yes, I know, I loved her well enough once. But am I to love the woman who—God help us all, Lady Belfield. I am mad when I think of my sister—and that man."

"You suspect some one, then? You know who has tempted her away?"

"Do you mean to say *you* don't know?"

"Indeed I do not."

"Did you ever see her with St. Austell? Did you ever see those two together, Lady Belfield, for ten minutes—for five—for one? One minute would have been enough, if you had eyes."

"Yes, I have seen them together. I feared it must be he."

"You feared!" cried Leo contemptuously. "Why you must have known that it was so. It was not possible to doubt her folly, or his infatuation. Do you know how long Lord St. Austell's infatuations usually last, Lady Belfield?"

"Indeed I do not. I know nothing about him, except that he has a bad name."

"His lordship's grand passions—his eternal irrepressible self-sacrificing amours—last about as long as his dress suits. I believe he has a new one every season. To say that my sister has gone off with him is to say that she has gone to unmitigated ruin."

"It would be unmitigated ruin in any case," said Lady Belfield.

"Oh, no, it wouldn't. There are mitigations. There are men who will marry a woman when she is divorced, they being the cause of that divorce. Lord St. Austell won't. *Pas si bête.* There are men who will move heaven and earth to protect the woman they have ruined from the risk of becoming a pauper. Lord St. Austell would think any tolerably clean workhouse good enough for his victim, when he had grown tired of her. God help my sister when her brief day of bliss is over. It will be a dream," said Mrs. Baddeley, clasping her hands before her eyes, and speaking in a softened voice, as if she were dreaming that dream, "a golden dream in a golden land, with a man whose voice is like music, whose talk has a magical power, who can make life worth living. Yes, if it were in an attic in a back street in the shabbiest quarter of Paris, or in a third-rate hotel in the dullest town along the Riviera. It will be a blissful dream; but it won't last long. It will be gone like other dreams—and she will wake to misery."

"Help me to save her, if you can," said Lady Belfield. "Her honour and good name are lost beyond redemption, I fear: but let us save her from the misery of her position—from the dreadful chances of the future. Let us find her, and get her away from that villain, and put her somewhere in safe and gentle care. I have loved her as my daughter, Leonora. I would do anything in this world to help her—and I think Adrian would, too, even in her degradation—even in spite of the disgrace she has brought upon us. She has broken for ever with her husband—she can never be anything to him again; but she is your sister—and," added Lady Belfield with streaming eyes, "in the day of her sorrow and remorse she shall be once again my daughter."

"You are a noble woman," said Mrs. Baddeley, with a touch of softer feeling than she had shown hitherto, "and I wish I were like you. I wish my sister had been worthier of your affection. Her day of sorrow will come soon enough. Have no doubt of that—with *him*."

Her passion, that white hot rage which had transformed her from a woman into a fury, was

calmed all at once. She burst into sudden tears, and, after a fit of sobbing, became womanlike again.

"Poor Helen," she sighed, "poor deluded girl. May I see the letter?"

"No, it was meant for her husband's eyes only. I will show it to no one else."

"When did she leave the Abbey?"

"Early this morning, before any of the servants were astir. No one saw or heard her go. She must have gone some distance on foot."

"Not far, you may be sure. St. Austell would be somewhere near with a carriage. He has plenty of experience, and he would do things handsomely *at first*. Did she take any luggage?"

"Nothing. All was packed ready to go. She had not even taken her dressing-bag, Sanderson told me. Sanderson was in her room with the housemaid this morning."

"Yes, I can fancy them prying and exploring. How like Helen to pack her boxes and leave them all behind her, trusting to the chapter of accidents for getting them again. How like Helen to elope

without so much as a brush and comb. St. Austell will have to buy her a trousseau. I wonder how he will like that?"

"You don't suppose that I shall detain her property. Her trunks will be sent to her as soon as it is known where she is."

"Will not that be to encourage her in sin? Better starve her into swift repentance by the loss of her jewels and gowns. I don't think St. Austell will cover her with diamonds. He will give her sweet words."

"Pray do not talk of them like that, as if sorrow and sin were a theme for laughter."

"Oh, there is a ridiculous side to every subject," said Leo hysterically. "Do you suppose I am not sorry for her because my sorrow is mixed with scorn?"

"I would rather see you more serious, more sisterly. Are you convinced that it is Lord St. Austell who has tempted her away?"

"As certain as if I had seen them driving away from your park gate this morning. I tell you their attachment was notorious. They were in-

vited out together like man and wife—only on different cards. If it had been in Italy their names would have been on the same card. People are fond of St. Austell for his cleverness and pleasant ways, and every one is indulgent to him and his fancy of the moment. I might have told you they would run away; only even I was duped by Helen's flight to the Abbey, and fancied her safe under your wing. He gave out a few weeks ago that he was ordered to the East—something wrong with his lungs. His lungs are always out of order when he wants an excuse for leaving England. He talked everywhere of wintering in Egypt or in Ceylon. I thought that meant mischief—but I did not think my sister would disgrace herself, infatuated as she was."

And then, on being shown the telegram, Mrs. Baddeley at once denounced St. Austell as the sender. The message was intended to serve Helen as an excuse for getting away: a hasty summons from her husband, an order she could not disobey.

"Some creature of his sent it, while he was

in Devonshire, close at hand, ready to join her directly she was clear of the Abbey."

"But she started before the telegram arrived," argued Lady Belfield.

"A *malentendu* of some kind, and again very like my sister. She is the spirit of disorder—loses her head on the slightest occasion. Everything was deliberately planned by him, no doubt. *He* is coolness personified. She forgot all his instructions at the last, and ran out of your house like a mad thing."

After this came a silence of some duration. Lady Belfield sat in a dejected attitude, trying to realize the situation and all its hopelessness. Leo paced the room with hurried steps, stopping every now and then, as if panting for air. The windows were all open, and the rolling wheels, light and heavy, sounded in the high road, muffled by distance, monotonous as the roaring of the sea; while that inevitable street cry from some invisible slum rose shrill upon the nearer silence now and again like the shriek of the Banshee.

"I shall have to tell my son," said Lady

Belfield at last. "Where am I to find him?"

"He is at York, I believe—at the Station Hotel, with Beeching. He was to be Beeching's guest for the race week."

"And the races are not over yet?"

"To-day is the last day."

"I must go to York. I must break this trouble to him."

"You had better telegraph to him to come to you. He will know his trouble soon enough. I don't think it will break his heart, Lady Belfield. If he had cared very much for my sister he would not have neglected her as he has done ever since their honeymoon."

"He has been to blame, I know; but for all that I believe he was deeply attached to his wife, and that the blow will be heavy. Good-bye, Mrs. Baddeley; I must go and write my telegrams. I shall stay in your sister's rooms all to-day, in the hope of Valentine's return; but I shall sleep at the Alexandra."

Leo followed Lady Belfield to the door, subdued, and even affectionate.

"Let me give you some tea at once, and some dinner by-and-by," she pleaded. "You are looking so white and worn after your journey."

"You are very good, but I would rather be alone. Phœbe will get me some tea."

Phœbe was the Devonshire parlourmaid, a protegée of Lady Belfield's, delighted to be useful to her.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ONCE IS A WIDE WORD

Mrs. Baddeley stood watching till the opposite door closed upon Valentine's mother. Then she went hurriedly back to her drawing-room and looked at the clock.

"A quarter to six. More than two hours before the start of the Continental mail," she calculated. "If they left Chadford early this morning they must be in London now—at his house perhaps. The safest place he would think."

She kept her finger on the electric bell till the page was in the room.

"Get me a hansom directly, and send Perker to me," she said.

Perker was her maid, with whose assistance she changed her flowing Grecian robe for a trim tailor gown and a little cloth toque to match, in less than ten minutes. She was sitting in the cab before

she had finished putting on her gloves, sitting with resolute brows and clenched teeth, driving to Park-Lane.

"If I can save her, I will," she thought. "I am about the only person who can do it."

There are only a few small houses in Park Lane, and those few are distinctly precious, and rented far above their value; for it is an inestimable privilege to live in that exalted situation without having to maintain a palace. Lord St. Austell was one of the privileged householders. He had secured the short remainder of a lease of a small house at a corner, a house which to the casual eye seemed all balcony and flower-pot, but which contained three or four comfortable rooms, with old-fashioned panelling and low ceilings.

It was not the first time Mrs. Baddeley had visited the corner house in Park Lane; but she had never been there alone until to-day. She had gone with one or two chosen friends to take afternoon tea in the low countrified drawing-room, with its lively outlook upon the flower beds and the carriages and the crowd. She had been there on

Wednesdays to see the coaches go by, and to eat strawberries and cream and ices from Grange's, and to look at Lord St. Austell's books. He was an amateur in books of the lighter sort, and in bindings, and was proud of showing his latest acquisitions. He used laughingly to declare that he had only half-a-dozen tea-spoons, but, so far as they went, they and his tea were at the service of his friends. Mrs. Baddeley might take whom she pleased to Number 333 Park Lane, provided she kept within the limit of the six tea-spoons. "They are all that remain of the famous St. Austell plate," he said.

"What, was all the rest melted down for King Charles?" asked Leo.

"No, a good deal of it was sold off to oblige Colonel Montressor, *alias* Ikey Moses, the West End money-lender," replied St. Austell.

His lordship's butler knew Mrs. Baddeley, and offered no hindrance to her entrance, as she brushed past him and went into the room at the back of the dining-room; library, *tabagie*, or den —the room in which St. Austell wrote his letters

in the morning, and read Zola or Guy de Maupassant after midnight: a long, irregular-shaped room, lined with book-shelves, and furnished with miscellaneous souvenirs of Italy and the East.

St. Austell was in his usual seat before the writing-table, looking through a pile of letters and papers which had accumulated in a four days' absence. A hat-box, a travelling desk, and a case of umbrellas and canes lay on the ground near him. His luggage had been sent on to Charing Cross.

He looked up at Leonora with angry surprise.

"I told Morgan I was not at home," he said.

"Did you really? But you see I didn't ask Morgan's opinion upon that subject. Instinct told me I should find you here."

"You are such a clever woman. I am only sorry that I am too busy to enjoy your conversation just now," said St. Austell, going on with his letters, "but you may as well sit down all the same. I have only a couple of hours to settle my affairs, dine, and start for Dover."

"You are going to Paris, I suppose?"

"I am going to Ceylon—but one has always to begin with Paris. It is the turnstile in the gate that leads everywhere."

"You are not going alone," said Mrs. Baddeley, very pale and very resolute.

"Of course not. I take my servant. If I could afford it I would take my doctor. I am going abroad for my health."

"That is a lie. You are going with my sister. It is on Helen's account that you are going to Ceylon. You think you can hide yourself there with your latest mistress, escape from her infuriated husband. I doubt if Mr. Belfield is the kind of husband to take things altogether quietly. There is a good deal of the original savage in him. A kind of man to settle matters with a revolver, as they used to do in America a few years ago, when New York was further from London and Paris than it is now."

"I am glad to say that I am not afraid of Mr. Belfield, and I am sorry to say that I am not running away with his wife," said St. Austell, without looking up from the letter he was reading.

"You would like me to believe you, I suppose," muttered Mrs. Baddeley, beating the devil's tatoo upon the faded Indian prayer-rug.

"I am much too busy to care whether you believe or disbelieve me. Haven't I told you that I have to settle my affairs, financial and otherwise, and dine before eight o'clock. If you have any idea that I am hiding your sister in this house, *par exemple,* you had better go through all the rooms and look in all the closets while I finish my work here. When you have set your mind at ease by doing that, perhaps you will honour me by sharing my sole and my chicken."

"You mocking devil, I'll take you at your word," said Leo, starting up and moving towards the door. "I know she left Chadford with you this morning. I know that, I tell you. She must be in this house —or waiting for you at the station. Where else could she be? And you could hardly leave her at the station."

"Try this house," said St. Austell, still without looking up. "The investigation will occupy you

till dinner time, and enable me to finish my business here."

"I will," she said, lingering near the door, and looking doubtingly at his imperturbable face.

His coolness puzzled her, and she hesitated. She knew him well enough to know that he was capable of being as coolly defiant, although Helen were in the next room. So, after all, imperturbability counted for very little.

She went into the hall, and looked into the dining-room. The table, shrunk to a circle, was laid for one. The room was empty. She ran up to the drawing-rooms, and pulled aside portières, and looked into corners, and behind the piano, and shook a week's dust out of the fresh, pure-looking chintz curtains. She was not satisfied even with this, and hastily explored the upper floor—bedroom, dressing-room, boot-room, bath-room, servants' rooms—ashamed of herself, and giving only a hurried glance in at each door. It was but the work of ten minutes in all.

"Have you looked in the kitchens and the cellars?" asked St. Austell, when she returned

to his den, crimson with shame, and out of breath.

"She will meet you at the station, or she is waiting for you there," said Leo.

"I hope I may find her there. It would be a pleasant surprise. May I tell them to lay a knife and fork for you?" he asked, rising and going towards the bell.

"Certainly not. I shall not detain you much longer."

"So sorry that I should be obliged to count the moments in such charming society," murmured St. Austell, putting away his papers, and locking his despatch-box. "I have finished my work for the moment; I am quite at your service," he said, leaning his back against the mantel-piece, in his favourite attitude, his slender, languid figure and pale oval face accentuated by the background of old Italian oak, and the vivid colouring of brass and copper, vermillion and orange pottery, and precious goblets of pale green jade.

"You think that you can deceive me, St.

Austell," Leo began passionately, standing with one knee upon the seat of a prie-Dieu chair, and with her hands clasped tightly on the carved cherry-wood back; "you think I have been blind all this time—that I have not understood what was going on between you and my sister."

"Upon my honour, my dear Leo, I have thought nothing about you, either one way or the other. When a man is desperately in love with one woman, he has very little leisure for abstruse speculations upon the sentiments of another woman."

"Not even when he once made passionate love to that other woman?"

"Once, Leo? Once is a wide word. The butterflies were once grubs. This world was once a misty nucleus floating in unimaginable space. I know that I was once in love with you—passionately, as you say—and that I once pursued you—and that you encouraged my pursuit until it reached just that one definite point at which it became inconvenient and dangerous, and then you threw me over, as you have thrown over so many

better men—poor young Stroud, for instance, who lost his head and consoled himself with a bullet. There are men who do not relish being fooled and flung up, you see, Leo. The foolish ones shoot themselves. The wiser go away and forget you, as I did. We are not all patient beasts of burden after the manner of Beeching."

"Yes, you forgot me—forgot—forgot!" repeated Leonora, in a choking voice. "I suppose you thought I did not care for you?"

"That was precisely my idea."

"You did not know. You shall never know. I would cut my tongue out sooner than tell you. And you upbraid me with those sweet days when I could think of you as my friend—when I saw you every day without reproach of conscience—when——"

"When you fooled me to the top of my bent."

"I was so happy—until you threw off the mask; and then I could but remember that I had a good kind fellow in India working for his country and me."

"And that you had a character to lose, and that it is not a pleasant thing to be cut by other women—even the rather easy-going women in your set. They have their standard. So far and no further is the motto of the clan. Oh, my dear Mrs. Baddeley, sentimentality won't answer between you and me. You are one of the cleverest women I know. You know the age you live in, and you are able to live up to its requirements. You manage to get everything in this world that you want—without any sacrifice, even of character. But you must not expect more than that."

"I expect nothing from you," she answered moodily. "But I mean to know the truth. Why are you going to Ceylon?"

"For my lungs."

"Oh, I have heard that before. That is an old story."

"A true one, all the same. The right lung is decidedly affected, and my doctor insists upon a warm climate. Perhaps were that the only motive, I might have wintered at Bournemouth or

Ventnor, but I had another motive, which so far has been thwarted."

Mrs. Baddeley sank into a chair, and there was a silence of some minutes, while the gentleman lighted a cigarette, and while the lady gave herself up to reflection.

He was lying to her, this arch deceiver, this consummate hypocrite, whose countenance defied her scrutiny. There could be no doubt that Helen had run away with him. The fact that she had eloped was indisputable; and this was the only man who had exercised any influence over her. There had never been any confidences on this subject between the sisters; but Leonora knew of her sister's infatuation all the same.

She looked at St. Austell curiously, as he lounged in front of the mantel-piece smoking his cigarette. He was very pale, and there was a drawn look about his mouth which indicated worry and trouble of some kind. It was not the face of a successful lover. There was no sparkle of triumph or of hope in his eyes. The man who runs off with his friend's wife ought to look as if

the gates of Paradise were opening before him: but this man looked as if he was on the threshold of Orcus.

"How's Tory?" he asked, when the silence began to grow oppressive.

"Tory is in excellent health, thanks. And you are really going to Paris by the mail?"

"Really."

"And you still protest that you are going there alone?"

"I have never protested. I simply stated a fact. I go to Paris with my servant, that is all. If you want particulars, I shall put up at the Hotel de Bade. I shall amuse myself in Paris for a week or so; and then I shall go quietly on to Brindisi, stopping wherever I feel disposed. I shall go by the Rapide as far as Macon, and then in all probability I shall make a détour, and cool myself on the Riffel before I dawdle down into Italy. It will be time enough if I sail in October."

"A charming programme, with a sympathetic companion," sneered Mrs. Baddeley; "but as a solitary promenade I should consider it rather

dreary. One knows all those places beforehand, and at our age"—with a deprecating shrug—"they are only storehouses for memories and regrets. The world is hardly large enough nowadays for people who have the capacity to live and to remember."

"I am not afraid of solitude. I am egotist enough to find myself tolerable company."

"I have a good mind to share your chicken and your cab to Charing Cross," said Mrs. Baddeley, after a few moments' reflection. "There are some friends of mine at Dover who have been plaguing me to go and see them. I might run down for a day or two—take them by surprise as they are yawning in their lodging-house lamplight, after having exhausted the newspapers and their own conversation."

"Do," cried St. Austell; "you would burst upon them with as revivifying a power as if you were Aurora. And how nice for me to have you for a travelling companion. One generally gets from London to Dover in an after-dinner nap, but of course that is only a *pis-aller*."

"I won't rob you of your sleep," said Leo, starting up to go, with an air of having come to a sudden decision. "I won't go to Dover to-night. And I have just remembered that Tory will be waiting for his chop. He always dines an hour before I do, so that he may behave prettily and be society for me while I dine."

"Happy Tory. Good-bye."

"Good-bye. It means for a long time, doesn't it?" she said as she shook hands, his fingers detaining the neatly gloved hand just a shade longer than they need have done, with a faint reminiscence of a worn-out sentiment.

"Who knows?"

"Ceylon is so far."

"There is no such thing as distance nowadays. Australia means five weeks—no other place need count. I'll see you to your carriage."

He put her into the hansom, which had waited for her, and which rattled her back to Wilkie Mansions in a quarter of an hour. She kept her word so far as the poodle was concerned, and looked on while he ate his chop, daintily, on a

plate set upon a table-napkin. She saw him safely through his meal, and then changed her smart tailor gown for the dowdiest thing she possessed in the way of gowns—a black silk and cashmere of two years ago. In this and a black bonnet and rather thick veil, she might easily escape recognition in the lamplight at a crowded station.

She drove to Charing Cross, and was in the station just a quarter of an hour before the departure of the Continental mail. She saw St. Austell's valet getting the luggage registered—a good deal of luggage, but all distinctly masculine. She saw St. Austell himself buying newspapers at the stall. She saw him pass through the gate on his way to the train—alone; and she saw no feminine figure that bore the faintest resemblance to her sister.

"She is to meet him in Paris," thought Leo. "It has been all planned beforehand; she will go by another route perhaps. From Exeter to Southampton and thence to Havre and Paris. By that way she would escape observation. Yes, she will

join him in Paris. That is the reason he took things so quietly. God help her—and me."

She gave a long sigh—regretful, passionate, despairing even—and stood near the gate while the whistle shrieked and the Continental express moved slowly out of the great vaulted station into the summer twilight. The last rays of the setting sun gleamed on the brazen engine as it steamed away, taking St. Austell to warmer skies and faint sweet odours and spice-bearing trees and tropical flowers. How long might it be before they two would meet again. In any case he was lost to her. He had been dead to her ever since he began to fall in love with her sister—dead by the worst of deaths, the death of indifference verging upon scorn. Once he had been at her feet, the chosen companion in a round of fashionable dissipations, bound by no tie but mutual tastes and mutual pleasures, and she had fancied those flowery chains of hers were strong enough to keep him for ever.

END OF VOL. II.