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The Broken Betrothal



By Mary Grace Halpine

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THE BROKEN BETROTHAL.

BY MARY GRACE HALPINE.

CHAPTER I.

A MAN'S HEART AND A WOMAN'S SOUL.

"He is not coming!"

The dark eyes of the speaker were lifted impatiently to the clock upon the mantel, the minute-hand of which was traveling remorselessly past the hour to which she had been looking forward with such glad anticipations all the long day.

She could not have been much over twenty, her round, full form displaying the graceful contour of early womanhood.

The features were regular, though the lips were fuller and the brows too heavy to make the general effect of the face pleasing, especially in her present mood.

Ten, fifteen, twenty minutes passed. The straight, black brows nearly met, while the gloom that overspread the face deepened to positive anger.

"He has broken his word again; he will not come to-night!"

These words had scarcely passed her lips when the sudden clang of a gate broke the stillness outside, followed by a leisurely though firm footfall upon the graveled walk that led to the door.

The transformation that it wrought in that lowering face was something wonderful to behold; the light, bloom and sparkle that came to it made it hardly recognizable.

She was at the door before it opened, throwing herself into the arms of the man who stood on the threshold with an abandonment of joy in strong contrast with the languid, distrait air of her visitor, who received her caresses and murmured words of endearment as something that was his due, and which called for no particular demonstration on his part.

He was about the medium height, elegantly formed, with a face that would

have been called handsome by those who like the type of beauty it embodies. It was strongly sensuous, despite a certain air of refinement, the result of his education and surroundings.

He looked like a man who would be good or bad as the impulse seized him, who lived for present enjoyment, with scarcely a thought beyond.

With his fair companion still clinging to his hands, he threw himself upon the lounge.

"I was beginning to fear that you were not coming."

"Will and Steve Marsden were down this afternoon. I came as soon as I could get away."

The bright face clouded. It was not his business, then, that had detained him, as she had hoped, but these gay young fellows, who had not one tithe the love for, the claim on him, which was hers.

It was easy to perceive, in glancing from one to the other, that they both possessed the same impulsive, undisciplined nature, and that what, at first, was a mutual attraction, might, in the end, be a source of discord and variance.

"It is three days since you were here last."

"Is it?"

This, together with the tone in which it was spoken, completed the measure of Josie's discontent. The clouds deepened on the brow; all the tormenting doubts, the jealous fears, that had vanished in her joy at her lover's return, came back with redoubled force.

"They have seemed very long to me; the time has been when they would have seemed long to you, also."

"And the time has been when you received me with something else besides reproaches."

Josie was silent; the hard-drawn breath and heaving bosom alone bearing witness to the struggle it cost her

to repress the words, burning and fierce as her own fiery, untamed nature, which arose to her lips, but to which she dared not give utterance.

This man held her heart in his hand; she knew it, and so did he.

"I cannot help it. Oh, John! you seem so changed, so different from what you were when you first came to see me. Do you really love me as well now as then?"

There was something in this passionate outburst that touched John Remmington's heart—a heart more selfish and thoughtless than hard and unfeeling.

He pressed his lips caressingly upon the forehead that was resting against his shoulder.

"Of course I love you, Josie; the change you complain of is in you, not me. I wish I could see you once more the merry, cheerful girl you were when I first knew you. Now you are jealous without any cause, and miserable at the least disappointment."

Josie lifted her head from the shoulder where it rested.

"You don't understand me, John; it is not these things in themselves which torture me. Your presence is the very life and joy of my soul, but I could endure to be parted from you long and weary months if I were only sure that you love me. It is the loss of your love that I fear. I can bear anything but that—anything but that!"

There was an uneasy look in the eyes that rested on that dark, impassioned face; the adoring love that this beautiful girl lavished so freely upon him had been very grateful to his vanity, and was so still. But there was something in the fierce vehemence of the passion he had inspired that not only startled him, but oppressed him with a vague sense of fear.

To him it was but an episode, a pleasant variation to the monotony of his dull life in that out-of-the-way place. It pleased his self-love to see how she hung upon his words, how a frown or smile could bring the clouds or sunshine to her face; and he had gone on from day to day and from week to week, thinking only of the present enjoyment, with not a thought beyond.

But she—she was terribly in earnest. The large black eyes were full of tears, the cheeks pale, while the hand he took was cold and quivering like an aspen.

"Why, Josie, what has come over you, that you look and speak so strangely?"

"I will tell you. Cousin Jenny was here yesterday. She told me that people were talking about your coming here so much; that they said you were trifling with me; that you would never think of marrying a poor, nameless girl like me."

The man shrank visibly from the questioning look that accompanied these words.

"My dear girl, I have been very frank with you from the first. I am entirely dependent upon my father, a proud, stern man, who would certainly object very strongly to my marrying a poor girl. My marriage is something necessarily so remote that it is hardly worth while to dwell upon it now; but when I do marry it will be the woman that I love, you may be sure of that."

A soft, bright color came into her cheeks at the caress which followed these words, and which she had evidently interpreted as he intended she should. Vague as was all they implied, they satisfied her.

Josie lifted her head from the embrace in which she was folded.

"I can wait years, darling, if I am only sure of your love. Say that you love no one else as you love me!"

"I love no one else as I love you!"

But even as these words passed John Remmington's lips, there glided up before his mental vision a fair, girlish face; he felt the soft touch of the hand that was laid in his five years before; heard the faint, tremulous voice from the lips of the dying blessing his betrothal.

Half an hour later, Josie stood by the window in the bright moonlight, watching the retreating form of her lover until it disappeared in a curve of the road. Now that he was gone, who exercised over her such a strange and subtle fascination, a feeling of uneasiness and dissatisfaction crept over her. She had not said to him what she meant to have said, nor had he said to her what she had hoped to hear from him.

Fatherless and motherless, there had been no one to question him as to the meaning of the attentions he had paid her all the summer long, and the modesty that was inherent in her nature, in spite of all her faults, made her reluctant to suggest what the unerring in-

stincts of her sex taught her should come alone from him.

He had been profuse in his professions of love and admiration, but she taxed her memory vainly to discover anything that could be tortured into a promise of marriage. Indeed, he seemed to avoid the subject, even in a general sense, turning it off with a jest whenever she led the way to it, as she sometimes had, of late, in order to sound him.

She had made up her mind that she would have a definite understanding that evening, and it had passed like every other; reproaches on her part, followed by protestations on his—protestations which, taken out into the sunlight, meant little or nothing.

In the meantime, John Remmington took his way to his bachelor apartments at the "Eagle," where he found a letter waiting for him.

Breaking the seal, he made himself master of its contents, and looking over his shoulder, reader, we will do the same:

"SON JOHN:—If you do not want to lose your betrothed wife and the rich dowry she will bring her husband, come home immediately. Walter Remmington is here, of whom Irene always entertained a high opinion. A Quixotic act of his—an account of which I presume you have seen, as it was in all the papers—has deepened this favorable impression. It is my opinion that she is more than interested in him. Poor as Walter is, and hard as he has had to toil and drudge to get his education, it can't be denied but what he is a handsome, fine-looking fellow, with a manly, agreeable way with him that is very taking, especially with women; and unless you come on, urging upon her the solemn claim that her father gave you, there is no knowing what will happen.

"There is one thing you may be sure of—your cousin is not a woman to fall, like a ripe peach, into any man's mouth. She is a girl to be wooed; and if you don't win her, some one else will.

"Another thing, I have lost heavily during the past year. I have now only my estate at Broughton, the income of which will hardly support me. So, if you let this rich prize slip through your fingers, you have only two alternatives—go to work or starve. The latter you will not find to be a very pleasant occupation, nor the former, with your habits, an easy thing to do.

"I enclose Irene's picture, by which you will see that she has blossomed into a very beautiful woman.

"Your father,

"CHARLES REMMINGTON."

John gazed with delighted surprise upon the pure, sweet face, which certainly was not of the Josie Harmon style of beauty. Perhaps its very contrast to the dark-eyed, dark-browed beauty he had just left, and of which his fickle heart was beginning to tire, was its chief attraction.

He could hardly bring himself to believe that it was the pale, shy girl who stood with him at the bedside of her dying father, and whose big blue eyes gazed out upon him with a look he never forgot.

"By Jove!" he cried, "it is the sweetest, loveliest face I ever looked upon! Surrender beauty like this and half a million to my cousin Walter? Not if I know myself!"

The early dawn of the following day found John packing his "traps," as he called them, preparatory to taking the first train East.

According to his usual habit, he delayed the most unpleasant part of his preparations as long as possible.

When everything else was done, he went to his desk, and unlocking a small drawer, poured its contents out upon it.

It consisted only of some perfumed notes, an embroidered watch-case, a few withered flowers.

John glanced at them with a half-frown of impatience and annoyance, and then, as if anxious to get them out of his sight, thrust them into a large envelope.

As he did so, a long, jetty curl fell from out a folded paper, coiling itself around his wrist.

He shook it off as if it had been a viper.

How well he remembered the evening he severed it from its sister locks, and all the passionate protestations he uttered.

The fire had burned to ashes: a new fancy had taken possession of his fickle heart. And with a feeling of contempt at his folly, that extended to the unhappy girl he had so cruelly wronged, he thrust it among the other mementoes, and seizing a pen, began to write.

He wrote half a page, and then, with a muttered "Pshaw!" tore it up. Commenced another, and tore that up also.

Glancing at his watch, he saw that he had barely time to catch the train.

Taking another sheet, he scrawled upon it the simple word: "Farewell!"

Placing it in the envelope, he directed it to Josie Harmon.

Then, seizing a small valise, he went downstairs, leaving a package at the clerk's office as he passed through.

Though thoroughly selfish, preferring his own ease and comfort to any one else's, John Remington was not a cruel man, in the ordinary acceptation of the word. He would sooner give pleasure than pain, if it did not require too much personal exertion and sacrifice on his part.

So some compunction mingled with the relief he experienced at having finally disposed of a matter that had perplexed him not a little of late, though the sense of relief predominated.

"I have not really harmed the girl," he said to himself, as he took a seat in the cars, that were bearing him swiftly away. "I've only flirted with her, as I have done with scores of others. If she is so simple-minded as to think me in earnest, it isn't my fault. She'll marry a better man, who will make her happier than ever I could. If I had taken dishonorable advantage of her love, as some men would, the case would be different."

And consoling himself with the thought that he was not an irredeemable villain, that there was "a lower deep" to which he might have sunk, John took from his vest-pocket his cousin's picture, alternately feasting his eyes upon its rare beauty, and indulging in gay visions of all he would do when he got possession of the wealth she would bring him.

"I'll have a yacht, and the fastest horses I can find."

Then, as his thoughts reverted to his father's letter, his face darkened.

"I wonder what he meant by Walter's 'Quixotic act,' and which was in all the papers. I haven't looked at a paper for the last fortnight. Walter was my rival—my successful rival—at school and at college, winning golden opinions from every one, but let him not cross my path in this! If he does, he'll be sorry for it to the latest day of his life!"

CHAPTER II.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

As Irene Carlton heard the clatter of horses' feet back of her, she drew the rein upon her docile, well-trained pony.

Perhaps it was the postman, going to

Tower Hill. The visits of the postman were quite an event to the occupants of that lonely, out-of-the-way place. But her first glance at the stalwart form of the rider showed her mistake.

"Cousin Walter!" she cried, in a tone of delighted surprise.

"Miss Carlton!"

"Miss Carlton?" repeated Irene, reproachfully.

The smile that touched the lips had a transforming effect upon the face, almost too grave for his years.

He held warmly for a moment the gloved hand extended to him.

"Cousin Irene, then."

As the two rode along side by side in the broad country road, Irene glanced up at the bronzed and bearded face, wondering at the change three years had wrought in her companion.

"How greatly he has improved!" she thought.

She blushed slightly as she met the eyes fixed so intently upon her face.

"I was thinking how you had altered."

"I was having the same thought of you."

"Time works wonders."

"It does, indeed!"

The tone in which this was spoken, that honest look of admiration, made the roses bloom still more brightly in Irene's cheeks.

If the young man had put all that he felt into words, it would not have been any more clear, or half so eloquent.

His was one of those quiet though strong natures which find it difficult to express their feelings in words. And it is doubtful as to whether he would have done so, in this instance, had it been otherwise.

But the warmth, the joy that gave to that lovely spring day such added bloom and fragrance found utterance in the tones of his voice as he said:

"It almost seems as if you came down from the clouds. I certainly never expected to see you in this dull, out-of-the-way place."

"It is dull," confessed Irene, with a half-sigh; "I should never have chosen it for myself. We—Aunt Remington and myself—are stopping at Tower Hill."

"Tower Hill!" echoed Walter; "how did you come to choose that place? It is nearly a mile from the village, and with no advantage that I know of except its isolation and loneliness."

"It was Uncle Remmington's choice, not mine. He thought it would be better for my aunt, in her present state of health, to be where there was no company or excitement. I did not know you were located at Crawford. Do you not find it dull?"

"I have been here only a few months. No, I can't say that I find it dull. I am very busy. There is nothing like having plenty to do to keep away the blues."

As Irene looked at the strong, self-reliant face, she thought he was not one who would be likely to be troubled with the blues.

"So you are practicing your profession?"

The head, with its rings of chestnut hair, was again bared to the sunshine. With a low bow, he said:

"I am a country doctor; very much at Miss Carlton's service."

"You don't look a bit like one!" laughed Irene. "However, I am glad to find that you meet with so much success as to be in great demand."

The young doctor smiled.

"That is according as to how you look at it. I have a good many patients, but they are not very remunerative. In fact, some of them detract from, rather than add to, my income. Here comes one of them now."

A turn in the road brought a quaint, rustic figure into view, clad in a cotton gown and gingham apron, not over-clean, and much the worse for wear.

Partly hidden by a faded shawl that was wrapped around it, a baby lay sleeping on her arm.

As soon as she saw Walter, she pushed back the sun-bonnet from her head, revealing a face young, and yet so old—young in years, but old with the cares and sorrows of maternity, sharpened by poverty and grinding toil.

"Good morning, Mrs. Brown. How is baby?"

"A deal better, thank you, doctor."

As if in corroboration of this statement, baby opened his round, bright, wondering eyes.

"Let me see."

Taking the child from its mother's arms, Walter held it up where he could get a clearer view of the little wan face.

"He is doing famously."

"He has spells of worryin'," said the anxious mother.

"It's his teeth, together with what you gave him. Let him have no more sooth-

ing syrup, Mrs. Brown, but plenty of bread and milk, and air and sunshine, and he'll come out all right. He's a fine little fellow, and will live to be a famous man—one of our future Presidents. Who knows?"

There was actually a smile upon the mother's pinched, careworn face as Walter laid the child back in her arms.

"Thank'ee, doctor. I'm sure it's all your dewin's that he's alive to-day. He was a dretful sick child when we sent fur ye. I dun know how in the world I'm going tew pay ye for't. I've got some proper nice yarn that I spun myself, an' if so it be that you'd like some woolen socks fur next winter"—

"We'll wait till next winter comes," interrupted Walter. "Where are you taking the little man?"

"To mother's. I'm going to the village, and calk'late to leave him there till I come back. His grandma's 'mazin' fond of him."

"That's right. Take him out every day, if possible."

Walter cast a half-apologetic, half-comical look at Irene as they moved on.

"This is dull music for you, cousin. But if you will claim relationship with a country doctor on his daily rounds, you must take the consequences."

"Indeed, I was much interested in the poor woman," returned Irene, inwardly resenting the implication that she was only a fashionable butterfly, which she fancied her cousin considered her. "I am glad we met her. What a different look she had when she went on. It almost seemed like another face."

"Well, yes; a cheering word or a smile has a wonderful effect upon these poor, discouraged souls, into whose life there falls such little sunshine, often doing them more good than medicine."

"I see so much wretchedness and poverty that I am unable to relieve," resumed Walter, after a pause, "that I often think what a blessed thing it must be to be rich."

Irene colored as she thought how little she had realized her blessedness in this respect.

"I am afraid that I have thought very little of this—as yet."

Walter smiled as he looked upon the frank, ingenuous face.

"You have plenty of time before you, and plenty of ways and opportunities by which you can make up for all deficiencies in the past."

"Ah, but I shall expect your help in regard to the latter."

"I shall only be too glad to render it. I know of so many cases where a little money, judiciously expended, would do so much good."

Dr. Remmington made a few brief calls at some houses scattered along the road, and then turned up the steep, narrow one that led to Tower Hill.

"I hope I am not taking you out of your way, cousin?"

"No; I have finished my route in this direction. All the rest of my patients are beyond."

Irene looked at the speaker.

How profuse most men of her acquaintance would have been in the protestations of the pleasure it gave them to accompany her! He said nothing, but there was something in his look and manner which made it quite sure that it was a pleasure to him.

"When were you in Concord last?"

"I attended some medical lectures there last winter."

"Perhaps you did not know I was in town?"

Walter was too honest to dissimulate.

"Yes, I knew it."

"And never came to me?"

Not caring to give the real reason—the rudeness and discourtesy of her guardian—Walter was silent.

Perhaps Irene had some suspicions as to how it was, for she hastened to say:

"Never mind, now; I will forgive you this time. Only see that you don't repeat it!"

Irene shook her finger laughingly at her cousin as she said this.

They were now in front of the building known for miles around as Tower Hill, so named from the tower that ran up to quite a height from the main part of it.

It was quite pretentious in its design, only a part of it being completed. The owner dying while it was in the course of erection, and his estate being somewhat involved, his heirs never finished it.

Springing from his horse, Walter assisted his cousin from the carriage, just as a serving-man came around from the stables.

"You will come in to lunch?"

Walter looked down into the bright, wistful face of the speaker.

"You must not tempt me," he said, shaking his head. "I have a score more

calls to make before I can lunch. But I shall come—you may be sure of my coming. I shall surely claim a cousin's right to enliven your solitude."

Attracted by the gay voices outside, a lady had come to the window, and stood looking upon them.

If Walter saw her, he did not seem to do so. As for Irene, she was too uncertain as to what reception he would meet with to make any movement that would require a recognition.

"In the name of goodness who was that?" she inquired, as Irene entered the room.

"Who do you think?" was the laughing response.

"Some one you was glad to see, I should say," returned Mrs. Remmington, as she looked upon the glowing face of the speaker. "His face looked familiar. It wasn't one of the St. Legers, was it?"

"It was Walter Remmington."

The elder lady's face underwent a very sensible elongation.

"Walter Remmington! I didn't know that he was in this part of the country."

"Neither did I. But it seems that he is practicing in this vicinity, and boarding at the village hotel."

"Why didn't you ask him in?" inquired Mrs. Remmington, in the querulous tone of self-indulgent, habitual invalidism. "We don't have any too much company in this dull place, goodness knows!"

"I did; I asked him in to lunch. But he had several more calls to make, so he said. He seems to be very faithful and attentive to his business."

"He has to be," said Mrs. Remmington, her nose taking a decided upward turn. "I don't suppose he has a cent to his name, except what he earns. I remember him when he was a tow-headed boy, living with his mother in a miserable tenement-house on Pigeon's Lane. His mother took in sewing. They were wretchedly poor. I don't suppose they had enough to eat half of the time."

Irene's eyes fairly shone with indignation.

"And where was uncle all this time and my father—God forgive him!—when their brother's widow and child were in such extremity as this? And you—could not you have parted with some of your superfluities to have shielded them from hunger and cold?"

Mrs. Remmington drew herself up stiffly.

"It was a matter of principle with me, niece—Indeed, I may say with all of us—not to interfere. Walter's father married beneath him, and as people make their bed, so they have to lie on it. Mary Evans has no one but herself to thank for all her misfortunes. If she had married a man in her own walk of life, instead of seeking to entrap with her pretty face and sly, artful ways one so far above her, she would have been spared any such experience. I, for one, hadn't a particle of sympathy for her."

"I know from the best authority that Aunt Mary was far too sensible and self-respecting to seek to entrap any man; her husband loved and honored her to the day of his death, and her son speaks of her with the utmost reverence and affection. And even if she were all you say, it does not justify her husband's relations, wealthy as they were, in refusing to provide for her."

"She had only her own obstinacy to thank for it. Your grandpa Remmington offered to give her so much a week, and to take Walter entirely off her hands, educate and provide for him, and she positively refused to let him go. After that, of course, none of us would have anything to do with her."

"And I honor her for it! What mother, with a mother's feelings, would give up her child, at such a tender age, promising never to see or claim him? It was shameful to exact such a condition!"

Here the lunch bell sounded, and without waiting for a reply, Irene picked up her hat and gloves, which had fallen to the floor, and ran up to her own room.

CHAPTER III.

MANAGING AN AUNT.

The next day was Sunday.

The weather was delightfully clear and pleasant; and as this was the only opportunity Mrs. Remmington had for airing her fine attire, she decided to accompany Irene to church.

Walter was there, as Irene had hoped, and when service was over came forward to speak to her.

The two, Irene and her aunt, were just going down the steps. The former paused, but the latter continued on, her eyes looking straight before her, until

she reached the carriage, which was drawn up as close to the entrance as possible.

Here, in spite of her resolution to entirely ignore Walter, her curiosity got the better of her, and she glanced back to where the two were standing, and upon whom the loftiness with which she swept down the steps was evidently quite thrown away.

Walter's height and position made him very conspicuous.

"He certainly is very fine-looking," thought she, "and has quite an air; almost distinguished—or would be if he was fashionably dressed," she added, surveying critically the cut of the coat, which was not of the latest style; and she expressed it, "ages behind the times."

They seemed to have quite forgotten her—a state of things she was not given to encouraging in those around her. So there was an additional sharpness to her voice as she cried out:

"Are you not coming, Irene?"

Thus admonished, Irene came down the steps, Walter moving along by her side with such an assured and confident bearing that made it difficult for Mrs. Remmington to carry out the programme she had laid down for herself.

Walter met serenely that cold, well-bred stare, bowing with an air of mingled deference and self-respect which showed that he was not a man easily put down.

"Dr. Remmington, aunt," said Irene, purposely ignoring the relationship between the two.

Then, as if to show that she did not lose sight of it in reference to herself, she went on to say:

"I have invited Cousin Walter to dine with us."

Now, though the establishment was nominally in her guardian's name, and though Irene accorded to her uncle and aunt the deference due to their position as her nearest living relatives, the money that supported it was drawn from the well-filled coffers of the young heiress, who, however generous she might be in their interpretation, had no thought of yielding up her reserved rights.

Mrs. Remmington was well aware of this. She saw that she was outgeneraled, and yielded with all the grace she could muster.

"Dr. Remmington is very welcome,

niece," she said, with some assumption of dignity, but on the whole more graciously than Irene had expected.

"I'm afraid my neuralgia won't be much improved by standing so long in this draught," she added, with a reproachful glance at her niece.

"Allow me, madame."

And before Mrs. Remmington had time or occasion for any further complaint, she found herself comfortably seated in one corner of the carriage, Irene beside her, and the object of her unreasoning aversion sitting opposite, and the whole three on their way to Tower Hill.

Few could be brought into such close proximity to Walter and be unaffected by the healthful influence of his genial smile and manner; gradually the ice began to melt around Mrs. Remmington's heart.

Irene listened in amused silence to her aunt's minute description of the various symptoms of all her real and fancied ailments, the rehearsal of which always seemed to afford her more pleasure than anything else; noting and admiring the tact with which Walter gradually led her away from this morbid introspection, and which was half the secret of her habitual ill-health.

Walter was too honest to feign what he did not feel; he really felt sorry for the pale, nervous-looking woman, whose fancied ailments were so real to her, and he exerted himself to amuse and interest her, succeeding beyond what Irene had supposed it possible.

She had gone to church with the intention of asking Walter to go home with them, if she had an opportunity; still, she had looked forward to his meeting with her aunt with no little trepidation.

But Walter's apparent unconsciousness that this lady had not the most friendly feelings for him, and ready adaptation to the circumstances around him, soon put her quite at ease.

The dinner hour passed very pleasantly. Irene had seldom seen her aunt in such good spirits.

After dinner, the three went into the garden, just bursting into bloom and fragrance. Then they adjourned to the drawing-room, where coffee was served, a favorite beverage with Mrs. Remmington.

After this there was music.

Irene never played other than sacred

music on that day—as Mrs. Remmington informed her guest in a very dissatisfied tone—and as Walter listened to that soft, clear voice, he thought that he had never heard those sweet and solemn tones so beautifully rendered.

His voice was a rich baritone, and as the two blended so harmoniously, even Mrs. Remmington, who was reclining upon a sofa, and who was not partial to that kind of music, could but acknowledge that "it sounded very nicely, very nicely indeed."

Walter then arose to take leave, pleading his professional duties, from which even Sunday did not exempt him.

Mrs. Remmington was courteous enough to express the regrets that she really felt at this announcement, saying very graciously:

"We are necessarily very much by ourselves in this remote place, and I trust that Dr. Remmington will drop in upon us as often as his duties will permit."

Irene followed Walter out upon the porch.

"Of course you will come, Cousin Walter. I want to hear more about the poor people you told me about yesterday, and how I can best help them."

Walter smiled as he looked upon that bright, eager face.

"You would do them the most good, I fancy, by going among them and finding out their wants for yourself."

"That is the very thing I want to do, the very thing I mean to do, if you will tell me how and where to find them."

"If you are really in earnest, I will come and take you around to some of them myself. You go out every pleasant morning, you say. I will come to-morrow morning, if you think you will be at leisure. But I give you fair warning that you will not find some of the places very pleasant to enter. It is only the ideal poor, in novels, that are immaculately clean, however wretched their surroundings. So, if you think better of it to-morrow morning, when I call, you have only to tell me so."

Irene, laughingly assured him "that she should not think better of it, and that he ought to think better of her than to suppose it."

When Irene returned to her aunt, she found that she had undergone that reaction of feeling to which she was subject.

"What could you have been talking about so long on the porch?"

"So long!" laughed Irene, "why I wasn't there ten minutes. I was asking Cousin Walter about some poor people he wanted me to visit."

"And you'll go, I suppose, and get all manner of diseases?"

Here Mrs. Remmington raised herself to a sitting posture, regarding her niece with a look of horror that made her smile.

"Yes, I shall go, but there is no danger of that. Cousin Walter would not be likely to take me where there is any infectious disease."

"Are you going with him?"

"If he comes for me. He said he would do so."

Mrs. Remmington's mind was too shallow to entertain readily two sets of ideas, but it now began to be oppressed with a vague sense of uneasiness, especially as she remembered the parting injunctions of her husband.

"I don't know what your uncle will say."

"I don't know why he should consider it necessary to say anything."

"But he is your guardian, you know, and might consider it his duty. Grandpa Remmington was never reconciled to your Uncle Arthur, and the foolish course taken by his widow only served to widen the breach. And now"—

"My dear aunt," interrupted Irene, "do let grandpa and Uncle Arthur rest in their graves, together with all the unhappy differences that estranged them. All this happened before I was born; and I don't see what it has to do with my riding out with Walter, or giving him the cousinly regard to which he is entitled."

"And then there is John—there is John, you know."

Irene's eyes flashed with unconcealed scorn.

"I know there is. But so long as I don't interfere with his movements, I don't know why he should interfere with mine. If you please, aunt, we won't talk about John."

Mrs. Remmington was not over and above pleased with this rather cavalier treatment of her only son.

"I don't know why. I should think the man your father selected for your husband a person to be talked about."

Irene made no reply, and Mrs. Remmington continued:

"Not that I have anything to say against your cousin, who seems to be a nice young man—very gentlemanly, indeed, considering."

"Considering what?"

"Why, considering his advantages—and—circumstances."

"I conceive Cousin Walter to be a man who would get a gentleman under any and all circumstances. You and uncle may ignore your relationship to him, but I am proud of it, and think you will be some day."

CHAPTER IV.

A BRAVE, TRUE MAN.

Three weeks later, at the close of a pleasant day in June, Walter stood upon the veranda of the hotel where he was boarding.

He had just returned from Tower Hill, which, from its elevated position and peculiar form, could be seen from the place where he stood.

The three last weeks had been the pleasantest in his whole life, yet they recalled no very pleasant thoughts, as could be seen by his face as he reviewed them.

His last interview with Irene had given him a sudden revelation of his feelings for the fair and lovely girl, with whom he had been thrown into such daily and intimate companionship as to startle and alarm him.

When, how and where his heart had slipped away from his keeping, he could not tell; but gone it had.

He stood amazed at his own folly. "He might as well love some bright, particular star, and hope to win it," as to think to lure to his arms this beautiful girl, the heiress of half a million, and the betrothed wife of another.

It was the last consideration that troubled him most. He knew of the agreement entered into by Irene's uncle and father, and which the latter had solemnly ratified on his dying bed, for it had been the subject of much comment. What he was in doubt about was whether Irene had ratified it herself, prompted by sincere affection for the husband that had been chosen for her when she was a mere child.

She seemed to avoid speaking of John, and when she did, it was with little of the manner with which maidens usually speak of an accepted lover; but this might be maiden timidity.

He had fancied—and a delightful fancy it was—that she regarded him with more than a cousin's love. It was not so much what she said, but her way of saying it; her look, her smile, thrilling him with such sweet and happy emotions. But, after a moment's thought, he rejected the idea as vain and presumptuous.

"I will not let another day pass," was his inward resolve, "without ascertaining how matters are between her and John; and if she loves him, or has given him reason to suppose so, I will see her no more. I will sell my honor for no woman's love, however dear she may be!"

Leaning over the railing, Walter fixed his eyes with yearning tenderness upon the tower in the distance, which was so clearly defined against the soft, gray sky.

He knew that Irene's room was there, for she had told him so—the one that looked out toward the east.

He had often watched it, especially at that hour, his heart stirred with tender and loving thoughts of its sweet and gentle occupant.

As he looked at it now, he noticed a flickering, crimson light at one of the windows below, which struck him oddly, as the sunset glow had all faded from the west.

Just then a horseman dashed hurriedly down the street, crying:

"Fire! fire! Help! oh! help! fire! Tower Hill is all in flames, and not a soul to help!"

That terrible cry was echoed by a hundred throats, the alarm bells pealed out upon the air, mingled with the clang and rumble of engines and the hoarse cries of the firemen and citizens hurrying to the scene of disaster.

With but one feeling in his heart, one thought in his brain, Walter flung himself on the horse that was waiting for him below, and, urging the animal to its full speed, soon reached the spot.

The light from the burning building made everything as clear as day for miles around.

Upon the lawn in front the terrified servants had gathered around their half-fainting mistress, but the form for which he was searching was not there.

He laid his hand upon the shoulder of a girl, who stood wringing her hands and sobbing with terror.

"Where is Irene? Where is your young mistress?"

At this Mrs. Remington roused herself. Springing to her feet, she pointed upward.

"Oh, God have mercy!" she wailed; "she is there—there!"

Following the motion of that hand, Walter saw Irene standing on the balcony far above him.

She evidently saw and recognized him, for, stretching out her arms, she uttered a cry that pierced him to the soul.

For a moment the young man stood transfixed with horror. Then his eyes took in swiftly all the possibilities that were left. There was no hope of reaching her from within; the flames were now issuing from every door and window beneath.

Fortunately the tower was built of rough, uneven stone, one side of which was entirely covered with ivy, the branches of which, hardened and toughened by age and weather, were so woven and interwoven that they were not easily dislodged from the hold they had taken.

Giving a few hurried directions to the men around him, Walter tied a rope around his waist, and commenced the steep and difficult ascent.

Slowly and steadily, his hands torn and bleeding, he made his way upward, watched with breathless interest by the crowd below, and who uttered a shout of triumph as he reached the balcony.

The tower was fast becoming a huge furnace, and as Walter felt the hot breath of the crackling flames beneath, he saw that there was no time to lose.

Drawing up the rope-ladder, he attached it firmly to the iron railing around the balcony. Then taking a strong silken sash worn by Irene, and whose ends touched the hem of her dress, he passed it under her arms, and from thence under one of his, tying it so that the knot rested on his shoulder.

Then, bidding her to cling to his neck, so as to leave his hands free, he commenced a descent almost as perilous, considering the weight of his precious burden, and his own failing strength.

In looking back, Walter scarcely knew how he reached the ground, but reach it he did, consigning the half-fainting girl to the many arms stretched out to receive her.

Then the strong pressure upon brain

and muscle gave way, and, staggering backward, he fell insensible to the ground.

CHAPTER V.

THE UNCLE'S DIPLOMACY.

Three days later, Walter lay on the sofa to which he had been confined ever since the fire, though none of the injuries he had received was serious, a dislocated ankle being the worst.

He held a beautiful bouquet in his hand, whose fragrance was not sweeter than the thoughts it called forth of her who sent it.

Every day he had lain there a messenger had come from Irene to inquire about him, and bearing such a bouquet, accompanied by a note, in which she poured out all her grateful heart, in words which sounded very pleasant, dangerously so, considering the feelings he entertained for her, and all he feared.

Irene had been obliged to keep her room also, but was gaining daily, as her last note informed him.

He knew every word by heart, but still his eyes lingered lovingly over it, reading and re-reading it, and succeeding every time he did so in finding some new meaning.

"If she were only as poor as I am, and free," he sighed, "I would woo, and win her, too. And even now—who knows?"

Here the young man's mind wandered off in one of those day-dreams, very delightful, indeed, if one could judge from the tender and dreamy light in his eyes.

He was aroused by the entrance of the porter with a card.

He had scarcely time to see that it bore the name of "Charles Remmington," when the individual in question entered.

"My dear sir, how can I thank you sufficiently for the great sorrow from which you have spared me, us all?"

Walter winced a little at the energetic shake of the hand that had seized his. He disengaged it, saying:

"I beg pardon, sir, but my shoulder"—

"I beg yours," interrupted the other. "Very thoughtless of me; but I know you will pardon it, in view of the emotions that—that overpower me."

Here the speaker raised his handker-

chief to his eyes, apparently overcome by the emotions to which he alluded.

Walter looked at him in silence. There was something so overstrained and far-fetched in this that he felt instinctively that his visitor was acting a part, though why he should take the trouble to do so he could not even guess.

Removing the handkerchief from his eyes, in which there was not the slightest vestige of moisture, as Walter did not fail to note, Mr. Remmington continued:

"I had a telegram from my wife last evening, and started immediately. I arrived only an hour since, and after hearing an account of your rescue of my dear niece from such imminent peril, felt that I could no longer delay in expressing my sense of the obligations under which you have laid me."

As Walter looked at the speaker he thought of the haughty manner in which he had passed him by when they last met, and a faint smile came to his lip.

"You are under no personal obligation to me whatever. You seem to forget that Irene is my cousin as well as your niece. I could not possibly see her in such mortal peril and make no effort to rescue her."

"I do not, at least, forget that I am a father."

Not perceiving any connection between what he had said and this rather unnecessary assertion, Walter received it in wondering silence.

Perceiving the effect he had produced, Mr. Remmington continued:

"My heart is bound up in my only son, and I tremble when I think what the effect on him would have been had his betrothed wife perished, and in so terrible a manner."

The change in Walter's face was not unnoticed by the keen eyes that were watching him.

"Of course you knew that Irene and my son were betrothed?"

Walter did not speak for some moments, and then it was with a visible effort.

"I knew that some such arrangement had been made for them, when they were children, but was not aware that there had been any voluntary and formal betrothal by them."

"Oh, yes, it's all settled, very much to the satisfaction of her aunt; and I assure you Irene is as dear to us as any daughter could be, and we should not

fancy giving her up. As it is, we shall not lose her. But I am forgetting half my errand," he added, as if suddenly recollecting himself. "Irene made me promise to bring you back with me, and she will be greatly disappointed if I fail to do so. The dear girl has one of the most grateful hearts in the world. The carriage is at the door, and I trust you will come, if you are able."

"I am not able."

The curtness of this reply was in strong contrast to the smooth, softly modulated words that preceded it.

Walter was painfully conscious of this, saying, in a softer voice:

"I thank you and her, but it is quite impossible for me to go to-day."

Mr. Remmington looked at the face that was now lying back upon the cushions of the sofa.

"You are indeed looking ill. I sincerely trust that you were not seriously injured?"

Disdain at his own weakness brought back the color to that pale face.

"I have only a sprained shoulder and ankle, and these are nearly well. In a day or two I shall be as well as ever."

Mr. Remmington had scarcely gone when Walter gave the bell an energetic puff.

"Didn't you tell me," he said to the man who answered it, "that Mrs. Stone sent for me in great haste this morning?"

"Troth, an' I did, sur. An' 'tain't to be wonderher at, alither. Three of her fourteen childher is down with the measles, another on 'em has the mumps, an' as if that wa'n't enough throuble for a poor lone widdy, wid no one but herself to do a hand's turn, the babby pulls the tay-kettle over on to him."

"Put the horse into the buggy, Dennis, and bring it to the door."

The honest-hearted fellow looked at the speaker for a moment.

"Sure, sur, an' ye don't look fit to stir yer fut out of dures."

Walter smiled.

"No matter, Dennis. Hard work is the best medicine for some diseases, and I am convinced that it is the best thing for mine. If you can go with me, so as to help me in and out, I shall do very well."

As he waited for Dennis to harness, his eye fell upon the flowers which had fallen from his hand as his visitor en-

tered, and upon which he had set his foot.

He held the crushed petals tenderly and reverently to his lips.

"Poor flowers!" he thought. "Fit emblems of hopes that bloomed just as bright and beautiful, but which will bloom no more for me!"

In the meantime, Mr. Remmington took his way back to the clergyman's at whose house his wife and Irene had found refuge, evidently very well satisfied with the result of his visit.

He found Irene standing on the steps.

Her bright face clouded as she saw him descend from the carriage alone.

"Wasn't Cousin Walter well enough to come, uncle?"

"I fear not, my dear, inasmuch as he declined coming. He begged me to give you his thanks and excuses."

Irene was silent, looking not a little nonplused, and Mr. Remmington continued:

"I told him, as we were going to leave on the evening train, you would be especially disappointed."

"Of course I can't go without seeing him; that is out of the question. If he is not able to come here I shall call on him. Tom, don't put up the carriage; I shall want it."

Mr. Remmington looked, as he felt, perfectly aghast at this proposition.

"My dear Irene, what are you thinking of? You forget that Dr. Remmington is a bachelor, living alone at a hotel."

"I don't forget that he saved my life at the peril of his own!" cried Irene, her eyes and cheeks very bright. "I should have gone to him before but for aunt's ridiculous talk about its not being proper."

"Your aunt was quite right," was the grave response. "If you insist upon going, I must insist on accompanying you."

"I shall be glad of your escort," smiled Irene, "though it is not necessary, as you have just called on him, and I know very well how to take care of myself."

Mr. Remmington knew very well that Irene, however yielding on minor points, was not so in regard to what she considered a matter of right and duty. So he made no further remonstrance, but, assisting her into the carriage, took a seat by her side, anxiously revolving in his own mind how he was to explain

to her his slight embellishment of the report he had given her.

"Perhaps Dr. Remmington did not understand that we were to leave town so soon?"

The eyes that were looking out of the window were turned quickly upon the speaker's face.

"He understood if you told him, of course."

"I should not be likely to forget what formed a part of your message to him. Nor do I say that he did not understand it. I simply inferred so by his response to it, which was to 'give you his thanks and excuses.'"

Here the carriage stopped in front of the hotel.

Without leaving it, Irene sent her card up to Walter's room.

The messenger returned, saying that the doctor had ridden away half an hour before.

Mr. Remmington evidently enjoyed his niece's manifest astonishment and discomfort. In fact, nothing could have suited him better than the turn affairs had taken.

"You see, my dear," he said, as Tom turned the horses' heads homeward, "how unnecessary it was for you to take so much trouble. Your cousin could have come to see you had it suited his convenience to do so."

It would have been better for Mr. Remmington's plans had he left these words unspoken, as he saw a little later.

Irene studied his face attentively for a moment.

"There is some mistake, some misunderstanding. I shall send my adieux to Walter by letter, together with the hope that I shall see him at my house whenever he is in town."

Mr. Remmington understood the word "my," as Irene intended he should do.

His term of guardianship had expired. The position he still retained was simply his by courtesy, as he well knew. If he gained anything, as he hoped to gain much, it would not be by open warfare.

So he simply said:

"A very good idea. He is not in a position to have much time at his own disposal, but I hope you will add how very glad we shall all be to see him."

In spite of Irene's brave words and bearing, there was an uncomfortable feeling in her heart as she took the pen in her hand to write to Walter.

She was beginning to be disturbed by the consciousness that she entertained for him a more than cousinly regard.

Had she not expressed more in her previous notes than she had intended, or was it maidenly?

These doubts and fears imposed a constraint upon her that was visible in every line, making her note very different from any of the others. Still it was very kindly worded.

She mentioned her call, and how very sorry she was to leave without seeing him. Hoped that he would not forget his promise to call on her, adding: "You must remember that when I ask my friends to call on me I ask them to my house."

Half an hour later Mr. Remmington tapped at the door, saying:

"I am going out, and if your letter is ready, will take it to the office."

Irene did not know why she felt averse to trusting her uncle with it. Had she been questioned she could have given no satisfactory reason. It was probably owing to the instinct that is said to be the sixth sense with woman.

"I won't trouble you, uncle. We go past the post-office on the way to the depot, and I can mail it then."

Carrying out this programme, Irene saw personally to the mailing of her letter, which we are sorry to be forced to believe is the reason why Walter received it the next morning, a few minutes after he had heard of her departure.

Walter was very glad to get it, as it explained what had seemed abrupt, almost discourteous.

He noticed the visible constraint in it, so different from anything she had formerly written, putting on it his own interpretation.

"She fears that I will get too much interested in her," he thought, as he read it over for the twentieth time. "And there was danger of it. But now that I know how matters are I shall be on my guard. Call on her? Of course I shall. She is my cousin, though she can never be more to me. The lectures at the hospital begin in September. By that time I hope to be able to think of her as the promised bride of another."

CHAPTER VI.

"AT HOME."

Mr. Remmington was not sorry to turn his back upon Crawford.

He had sent Irene to that dull, secluded town to get her out of the way of danger, said danger consisting of attractive young men, who might lay siege to her affections.

But things don't always turn out as we expect—"the plans of men and mice gang aft aglee"—as that gentleman had ample time and occasion to reflect upon on his journey back.

He had the mortifying reflection that he could hardly have made a worse move in the game he was playing.

Had these two, so formed to interest and attract each other, met in town, where there was so much to occupy the time and divert the attention, it would have been bad enough; but they had been thrown together for weeks in a place where they had no other society, and where everything around them was calculated to call forth and foster the sentiment he feared. And then his rescue of her from the fire—women were so prone to admire heroism—could anything have happened so unfortunate?

But though Mr. Remmington inwardly chafed under these reflections, his countenance was as serene and tranquil as a summer's day. Only by a muttered word or an angry glance, when Irene was not looking, did he give tokens of the storm that was ready to descend, at the first opportunity that offered, upon his wife's devoted head.

"Well, madam," he said, as soon as they were in the privacy of their own room, "a pretty kettle of fish you have made of it! What is the reason that I wasn't informed of all this billing and cooing?"

"I don't know what you mean?" said Mrs. Remmington, sinking down helplessly into a chair. "I know that my head is nearly splitting with the pain that's in it, and I wish, if you have anything to say, you wouldn't bellow so."

"I shall bellow if I think proper, ma'am," returned Mr. Remmington, in a still louder voice, secure in the consciousness that Irene's room was at the further end of the house; "and I'd like to see you or any other woman hinder me! After all that you knew, how dared you keep me in ignorance of all this love-making?"

Mrs. Remmington, who was really almost ill from fatigue and excitement, now arose to her feet.

"Really, Charles, if you will act and

talk so outrageously, I shall have to leave the room. I cannot stand it."

"We'll see about that," said her husband, turning the key in the door and dropping it in his pocket. "Now you just resume your seat and answer my questions. Didn't I send you out to Crawford with Irene to keep her from any entanglement? And here I find that she has been walking and riding all around with Walter Remmington, whom I didn't suppose was within a hundred miles of her."

"I told Irene, the first day he called, that I was afraid you wouldn't approve of it. What else could I do?"

"Couldn't you have written me?"

"You know very well that I hate to write, Charles. Besides, I was expecting you every week. You might have come when you promised."

There is one thing sure, it's likely to break up the match between her and John."

Mrs. Remmington's temper was a very uncertain one. She generally stood in considerable fear of her husband, only weakly protesting against his frequent exactions and badgerings, if she protested at all. But occasionally she would turn on her oppressor.

"I don't care if it does."

Mr. Remmington glanced at his wife for some moments without speaking.

"You don't care if it does?"

"No. It's John's fault, every bit of it. Why doesn't he come and make love to her himself, instead of careering over the country for nobody knows what? If he won't, he must expect that some other man will. Does he think that Irene is going to be shut up, like a nun, until he thinks proper to claim her?"

There was more common sense in this than Mrs. Remmington usually gave utterance to, and it had the good effect, so far as she was concerned, of diverting her husband's thoughts and anger into another channel.

"I'll attend to him in short meter! I'd write to him to-morrow morning if I knew where to direct. Do you know where the young scamp is?"

"All I know is that he went away with Henry Warner. He's back again. I saw him at the depot when we got out. He ought to be able to tell you."

Mr. Remmington saw young Warner the next day, who told him that John was in an obscure village in Connecticut, as he expressed it, "getting up a

first-class flirtation with some rustic beauty."

Warner could not remember his post-office address, but promised to get it for him.

It is not easy for the elastic heart of youth to suddenly relinquish all hope, especially in regard to what takes such a strong and deep hold on it.

Walter here assured himself over and over again that from henceforth he should regard Irene only as a cousin, that for him to cherish any thought of ever being more to her was foolish and vain. Yet deep down in his heart a faint hope still lingered, which, silence as he might and did, was far too precious to be entirely banished.

So it was with no little satisfaction that he found that business would take him to Concord some weeks earlier than he expected.

"I shall call on Irene, as a matter of course," Walter said to himself on the morning of his arrival. "She is my cousin, and not to do so would be unkind and discourteous. And then I promised to do so."

With a self-denial that cost him quite an effort, he waited until the second day after his arrival.

The house was on the outskirts of the town—a large, square, stately-looking building, standing in the midst of grounds laid out with unusual skill and elegance.

It belonged to Irene, being a portion of the large fortune she held in her own right, and as Walter ascended the broad steps that led to the main entrance, he realized as he never had before the wide difference that lay between them in a worldly point of view.

"I wonder if she will be glad to see me," he thought, as the servant, taking his name, ushered him into a room whose elegant and costly appointments were beyond anything he had ever seen.

This question had scarcely arisen in his mind when Irene stood upon the threshold, the glad look in her eyes answering it even before her lips spoke.

As she looked at Walter she thought of what his heart, as generous as it was brave, had forgotten, and the grateful emotions it called forth swept away the barriers of maidenly reserve.

They had not met since that terrible night, and as Walter looked into her eyes, made still brighter by the tears that filled them, and listened to those

faltering thanks, he seemed to feel the pressure of the arm that clung so closely to his neck, and it gave a tender inflection to his voice, as he said:

"What you say sounds very pleasantly, dear cousin—too pleasantly, I fear. That I was so fortunate as to be of such essential service to you will always be a happy thing for me to remember."

Here Irene opened the door of a small room, more plainly furnished, and wearing a most cozy and homelike air.

A canary was singing in a cage that hung in the open window that looked out into the garden, on the broad seat of which Irene's pet kitten was purring in the sunshine.

"This is my favorite room," said Irene, wheeling a deep easy-chair up to the open window. "I never stay in these dark, never-ending parlors longer than I can help. Now just make yourself as comfortable as possible in this, and then tell me all about yourself, the good people of Crawford, and all the poor folks we used to visit."

Thus adjured, Walter proceeded to disburden himself of all the items of news he could remember, his memory aided and refreshed by the many questions that poured in upon him from Irene.

Walter could hardly have called at a better time. Mr. Remington was not in the house, and his wife was out shopping, so there was no interruption to the pleasant and confidential conversation that followed.

The sunshine crept slowly out of the room, until it lay slantingly upon the greensward outside, and still Walter lingered.

It was not until he heard Mr. Remington's voice in the hall that he arose to go.

"The time has sped so swiftly and pleasantly that I did not dream of its being so late."

"Then I hope to see you often. I shall always be at home—to you."

Walter's heart beat fast as he met the glance, shyly lifted to his, and then as shyly averted. Should he tell her why he feared to do this?

"If I followed my own inclinations, I should come often, but—"

The wondering eyes that were turned upon him did not tend to lessen the young man's embarrassment.

"You forget that I am a poor, strug-

gling doctor, and you are the heiress of half a million."

Irene raised her hand with a gesture of impatience.

"I wish I could forget it! Do you know, I sometimes wish that I was born poor."

"I am selfish enough to wish so, too."

It was not the words, but the tone in which they were spoken, that gave them so much power and meaning.

For some moments the two stood there, silent, their hearts beating so fast that they seemed almost inaudible.

Walter felt that he was treading on forbidden ground, and after a momentary struggle with himself, he said, in tones that not all his efforts could render quite steady:

"Irene, many times during our pleasant intimacy at Crawford a question arose to my lips, but to which I never had the courage to give utterance. It may seem strange, almost impertinent, but I feel impelled to ask it, leaving you to answer it or not, as you think best. Are you engaged to John Remmington?"

Before Irene could reply, the door opened, and in walked Mrs. Remmington.

"Irene"—

Then, as her eyes fell upon Walter:

"Dr. Remmington!—this is an unexpected pleasure."

It was very well and naturally done; so well that neither of those so inopportunistly interrupted suspected that she had been sent in by her husband, who had just discovered that Walter was in the house.

Walter gave the conventional shake to the two forefingers extended to him, and then turned to the door.

"Going?" said the intruder, with a laugh. "Hope I have not frightened you away?"

Walter had now thoroughly recovered his self-possession.

"Oh, no; I have greatly overstayed my time already."

Adding, with a bow to both ladies and parting glance at Irene:

"I will call again at an early day."

CHAPTER VII.

THE QUESTION ANSWERED.

"Are you engaged to John Remmington?"

This question had plunged Irene into a sea of doubts and conjectures which

banished for some hours sleep from her pillow.

She felt like one suddenly aroused from a pleasant dream to the cold, harsh realities of life.

Was she bound to him?

She cast a swift glance backward; recalling the handsome boy of eighteen—for he was scarcely more—who kissed her lips, calling her "his little wife." Three days before, she had followed her father to the grave, whose death left her an orphan, brotherless and sisterless. That title sounded pleasantly to her then—she even remembered some foolish pledges on her part—but she was such a mere child, they surely would not hold her to them?

She remembered the sad hour, when, kneeling by her father's dying bed, she listened to his last words, his solemn charge, she could not say him nay. She shuddered as she remembered her promise—under such circumstances so sacred.

He had not claimed its fulfillment; would he do so?

The very idea was repugnant to her.

Walter's question had done more than remind her of what she would so gladly forget; it had revealed to her, too clearly to be mistaken, not only her feelings for him, but his for her.

Though no words had passed her lips, or his, Irene knew that she loved and was beloved; and not all that she so dreaded could rob her of the sweet and blissful emotions that this consciousness gave her.

The bright sunshine of the following morning drove away many of the fears that weighed so heavily upon Irene's heart during the dark hours. The elastic nature of youth asserted itself.

It was six months since she had returned from Europe, and John had not been near her. It was clear that he had no idea of claiming the fulfillment of that childish compact, even if he remembered it at all. Very likely he had formed some other attachment, which would make it as repugnant to him as to her.

Walter was as good as his word. He called on Irene; in fact, he made several calls, but in none of them was he so fortunate as to find her alone.

It was a little curious to observe how fond Mrs. Remmington was, all at once, of her niece's society. There were times when it seemed impossible for her to keep away from Irene.

Until at last, unsuspecting as her nature was, Irene began to see that there was some "method" in the peculiar mania that seized her aunt whenever Walter called on her.

This was a source of great annoyance to Walter, who was anxious to continue the conversation that was broken off so suddenly on his first call there.

One morning he called with the intention of asking Irene to take a walk with him.

He had no sooner delivered his errand than Mrs. Remington appeared upon the scene.

"I'm so glad to see you, doctor," she cried; "I want you to tell me if you think this is a cancer."

Walter examined the finger she extended, which had on it a small induration, about as large as the head of a pin, gravely assuring her that there was no danger of the calamity she seemed to dread.

"I'm so glad! I told Mr. Remington last night I felt such a darting pain through it, that I was afraid it was a malignant cancer or something. "Where are you going, Irene?"

"To put on my things. Cousin Walter and I are going out for a walk."

"It's a lovely morning for a walk. I believe it will do me good to go out. So if Dr. Remington doesn't mind"—

"But Dr. Remington does mind," interrupted Walter. "I am going to take Irene to the top of Chestnut Hill; and, as a physician, I strongly object to one in your delicate state of health attempting any such feat as that."

Irene with difficulty repressed a smile at her aunt's evident discomfiture at this effectual checkmate.

"Charles will be mad enough to take my head off!" was that lady's inward reflection, as she watched the two as they passed down the winding path that led to the road. "He told me not to let them be alone together a minute. But I don't see how I was to hinder it. As I told him, it's John's fault, every bit of it!"

Walter and Irene walked silently along the highway, turning from thence into the narrow, wooded path that led to Chestnut Hill.

Irene was the first to speak.

"I have had no opportunity to answer the question you asked me, if I was engaged to John Remington."

Suddenly pausing, Walter dropped the

arm within his, taking a position where he could look well in the face of the speaker.

"Is it true?"

"It is true that there was an understanding between my father and John's that he should have my hand if he claimed it. It is also true that my father exacted a pledge from me. But I don't believe that John has any idea of doing so."

Walter's face grew very bright.

"Then I may not only tell you of the love that has taken such full and strong possession of my heart, but of the hope that is there that I do not love vainly. Is my love vain? Answer me, Irene!"

Irene blushed rosily at these impetuous words.

"If I should say that I did not love you, Walter, I should speak falsely. And, indeed, I know of no reason why I should not deal frankly with you. But do not say anything, just now, to Uncle and Aunt Remington, or to any one. Wait until I have had a talk with John, whom they are expecting now every day. It is my belief that he has found some other attachment, and that is why he keeps away so."

"God grant it! What shall you say to him, Irene?"

"I shall say that I don't love him, and that I do love—somebody else."

"My darling! But supposing he will not release you?"

"I'm not going to suppose anything of the kind," smiled Irene. "I should be sorry to think so ill of Cousin John as to suppose that he would care to marry me after I had told him this. And I do not mean to do so if I can help it."

As Irene said this she took Walter's arm, and the two retraced their way back.

As they came in sight of the house Irene, whose face had grown very thoughtful, paused.

"In some respects my position will not be a very pleasant one, and I shall want you to stand by me. I don't believe John cares for it—at least, it don't look as though he did—but his father and mother have set their hearts on this marriage, and will be sorely disappointed. Of course they will not feel very cordially toward you, but they will not dare to treat you rudely, and you must not keep away on that account. It is my house, you know, and you have a

right to come, even if you were only my cousin."

"My dear Irene, I shall come, as a matter of course; and you need have no fears of my having trouble with any one. I shall consider it my sacred duty to stand by you under every and all circumstances."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TWO RIVALS.

Our next chapter opens at the breakfast-table, around which Irene and Mr. and Mrs. Remmington are seated.

"A telegram from John, my dear. He is coming on the next train."

Mr. Remmington looked across the table at his niece, as he said this, but her aunt being present, she did not take it as anything especially directed to her, or, indeed, that particularly concerned her.

Though inwardly disturbed, Irene had learned the difficult art of concealing her real feelings, and her face gave no token of it.

She knew that John's coming would inaugurate the conflict upon which the happiness of her whole life depended, and that she would need, not only to be brave and strong, but all her woman's wit to meet successfully the issue.

"I'm sure I shall be glad to see the poor fellow," said Mrs. Remmington, perceiving that Irene was not intending to reply.

John was always a "poor fellow" with his mother, though as he weighed all of a hundred and forty, her reasons for so styling him were not very apparent.

"You do not say anything, Irene?"

Mr. Remmington's secret anxiety was not entirely hidden by the playful smile that accompanied these words.

Irene raised her eyes from her plate.

"I beg pardon, uncle. You were saying something about John's coming? I trust that he will consider himself as my guest during his stay in town."

Mr. Remmington was evidently not a little taken aback by this.

"Well, as he is coming expressly to see you, that would follow, as a matter of course."

Irene elevated her eyebrows.

"To see me?"

"Certainly. I hope you don't think that he has forgotten your claim upon him?"

"My dear uncle, I hope you will not give John the impression that I consider that I have any claim upon him."

Mr. Remmington was too wary to meet the issue thus squarely presented.

"My dear Irene, I don't wonder that you feel hurt at what seems like intentional neglect. I own that appearances are against John. But I am convinced that he can explain matters to your entire satisfaction, and I think that I can safely leave him to plead his cause."

Just here the housekeeper entered.

"My son will be here to-day, Williams," said Mrs. Remmington. "You can get the room ready across the hall from mine."

Williams looked at Irene, who nodded.

"You can give Mr. John that room, Williams."

Adding, as she met her aunt's surprised look:

"Thinking it high time that I should relieve you of cares and duties that are rightfully mine, I have instructed Williams to come to me for all orders in future."

This was evidently as unexpected as it was unwelcome. Mrs. Remmington straightened herself up, speaking in a tone of unusual energy and sharpness:

"I didn't suppose a girl of your age would care to tie herself down. And I must say, after all the trouble I have taken"—

"Clara!"

Checked by her husband's warning frown, Mrs. Remmington stopped, and Mr. Remmington continued:

"Irene is of age, and has a right to manage her own affairs her own way. Still, I trust that she will not forget the claims of her best and oldest friends, nor that years bring the judgment and experience that youth cannot expect to have."

Irene knew that years did not always bring wisdom; but she did not care to prolong the conversation.

"You may be sure that I shall forget neither, uncle."

The door closed after Irene, leaving the husband and wife alone, who looked for some moments at each other without speaking.

It was evident that Irene had more character than they had given her credit for, and would not be very easily hoodwinked or controlled.

It was not pleasant, either, to see

the power passing out of their hands that they had held so long that it seemed to be theirs of right, but there was no help for it.

"It is only when John is master that you will be mistress here again," said Mr. Remmington. "But we shall have to go to work very cautiously to secure that end; if Irene suspects that we are seeking to control matters, all is lost."

In anticipation of coming events, and anxious to avoid any awkward tete-a-tetes or exclusive attentions from the newcomer, Irene had invited two school-mates of hers, Ida Gray and Jennie Hargraves, to spend a few weeks with her. Also Harry and Charles Vernon, particular friends of John.

So when John arrived, fancying, in the arrogance of his heart, that he had only to see and conquer, he found Irene the center of a gay group, of which, after the first greetings were over, he was only one, apparently of no more importance in the estimation of the young hostess than any of them.

Not that Irene was wanting in cordiality or kindly feeling toward her young kinsman, but in her words of greeting, gracious as they were, there was a gentle dignity that did not set ill upon her, and which effectually prevented any demonstration on his part not strictly in accordance with the cousinly role she had assigned him.

Without giving him time for any of the pretty speeches he had been conning over, Irene presented him to her young lady friends.

The two gentlemen he already knew. Then the conversation became general.

In a few minutes dinner was announced.

After dinner the whole party went riding, Irene quietly managing that John should be Miss Gray's escort, while she went with one of the Vernons.

In the evening Irene had a general reception.

In the latter part of the evening Walter came in, as he promised her he would do.

John was standing near Irene when he came up to speak to her, but inwardly determined to "cut the fellow," as he called it, he pretended not to see him.

But this was a programme more easily planned than carried out.

"John, don't you see Cousin Walter?" Soft and sweet as the voice was, there

was a ring in it that arrested the attention of all who heard it.

The young men shook hands. John, sulkily and with an ill grace; Walter, with a certain reserve, though with the evident desire that the affair should pass off as smoothly as possible.

Irene then presented Walter to the rest of those standing by, and the conversation again became general.

John retreated to the further end of the room, talking with this and that one, but still furtively watching Walter and Irene.

There was nothing of the lover with either, they having too much good sense to make any public exhibition of their feelings, had they felt privileged to do so. Still there was something in Walter's look and manner as he spoke to Irene, that aroused a fierce jealousy in his bosom.

How dared he look that way at the woman that he had been taught to consider as his exclusive property? And how dared she allow it?

As he stood in the inclosure of the bay window, his angry and resentful feelings plainly visible upon his brow, his father approached him.

The father and son were widely different in temperament, as could be easily seen by looking into the cool, calm face of the former.

"Have you abandoned the field so early?"

The faint sneer in these words sent a hotter flush to the young man's brow and a fiercer gleam to his eye.

"I will never relinquish it—not to him! What is the impudent puppy doing here? He ought to be kicked out of the house!"

"Take care that you don't get kicked out," said his father, significantly. "Remember that you are not owner here—as yet!"

"I always disliked the fellow, and now I hate him!"

"Hate him as much as you like—only don't show it; at least, not until you get matters into your own hands. Every time you do you weaken your own cause. It won't do for you to despise your antagonist, either. He's a smart fellow, and has, what you haven't—self-control and a good head. You stayed away and let another man get a foothold, and now you have committed another blunder, and made an unfavorable impression at the outset. Seek an in-

terview with Irene after the rest have gone, and see if you can't remove it. In the meantime, drive that sullen look from your face, and keep cool."

"Everybody don't happen to be an iceberg, like yourself," muttered John, as he watched his father quietly making his way up the room to where Walter and Irene were standing. "How the dickens is a man going to keep cool, I'd like to know, when a fellow is making love to his lady right under his eyes—or what looks marvelously like it?"

The young man took his father's advice, however. Emerging from his corner, he joined the rest of the company, and for the rest of the evening was as merry and talkative as he had been sullen and silent.

Determined to see Irene a few minutes alone, John lingered until the last. But that young lady was contrariwise-minded.

As soon as the last outside guest had gone, Irene, preceded by her young lady friends, turned to the door.

John followed.

"I have been waiting impatiently to have a little talk with you. Can you not spare me a few minutes?"

Irene turned upon the speaker a look of surprise.

"It is late, cousin; and I am very tired. Unless what you have to say is of importance—as I presume it is not—I beg that you will defer it. I told Williams to give you your old room; I hope you will find everything comfortable. Good-night."

John took his way to his room in no very amiable frame of mind.

Things were different from what they were when his father and mother held undisputed sway there, and he used to pay them flying visits during Irene's absence. He remembered how he had planned alterations in it, for, though it was a fine, stately mansion, some parts of it were too old-fashioned to suit his modern tastes.

It did not look, now, as though he was to have any voice or control in anything.

From all he could see and learn the young heiress had taken matters entirely into her own hands, and apparently without any more reference to him than if he hadn't been in existence.

His vanity was sorely wounded at his reception by Irene. Not that she gave him any cause for complaint; her man-

ner could scarcely be more courteous and kind, but then it was so cool and calm; so entirely different from what he had expected.

She had not even paid him the compliment of being offended at his neglect, or even considered that he had neglected her.

Had she forgotten her father's dying injunctions, or had she decided to disobey them?

Perhaps she thought that he wished to have them disregarded? If so, he would soon set her right on that point.

CHAPTER IX.

LOVE-MAKING AND LOVE-ACHING.

The next morning, Irene arose earlier than usual; passing through the breakfast-room and into the garden to gather some flowers for the table.

Her bright face was clouded.

John's rudeness to Walter, the preceding evening, not only displeased, but made her uneasy, especially when she reflected on the hot, impatient temper of the offender.

If she would avoid trouble she must prevent its recurrence.

True, Walter had shown admirable self-command, but this might not always be possible.

As she stood upon the piazza, arranging her flowers, she heard a step back of her.

"Good-morning, sweet cousin."

Taking no notice of the extended hand, Irene looked gravely at the speaker.

"You treated me very rudely last evening, cousin."

The mock sorrow that clouded John's face could not entirely conceal the exultation at his heart. She had noticed the flirtation he had tried to get up with Miss Gray and been offended by it.

"Dear Irene, only tell me in what way, and you may be sure of its not being repeated."

Irene raised her eyes from the flowers she was arranging.

"I consider any rudeness or uncivility to my guests as a personal discourtesy to me."

There was a pause, the sudden revulsion in John's feelings choking his utterance.

Irene turned her eyes from that flushed, angry face to the flowers, whose fragrance filled the air.

"I allude to your rudeness, last evening, to Dr. Remington. Under this roof, at least, it must not be repeated."

As usual, anger and disappointment made John lose sight of all prudence.

"You seem to take a vast deal of interest in him!" he sneered.

The disturbed night that Irene had passed had banished the roses from her cheek; they now came back, brighter than he had ever seen them there before.

"I certainly do take a strong interest in the man who risked his life to save mine!"

John saw the blunder he had committed, and hastened to repair it.

"It is natural that you should be grateful, though no man could do less that was not a brute or a coward. I should be grateful, at least, for the life saved is very precious to me. But, oh! I am so madly jealous! I should have been there! Oh, Irene, why was I not?"

The gleam of mirth in the eyes that momentarily met his made John feel very hot and uncomfortable.

"I really couldn't tell you. All I know is that you were not there; and that I consider it very fortunate that Cousin Walter was. There is the breakfast-bell."

John followed Irene in, feeling, as he expressed it, "that he had made an egregious donkey of himself!"

He seemed fated to make himself ridiculous in the eyes of his cousin, especially when he attempted sentiment, which he had always supposed to be a strong point with him in gaining the good graces of her sex, priding himself not a little on his seductive ways and effective speeches.

It really seemed to him—he chafed at the very thought—that whenever he attempted anything of the kind with Irene, she was inwardly laughing at him.

The truth was, Irene was not only quick to discern between real and mock sentiment, but had little faith in her cousin's professions. Neither did she care to encourage anything of the sort in him.

John saw that so long as Walter was a privileged visitor to the house, and in so much favor with its mistress, he would have to treat him, at least, with outward civility.

So he decided to change his tactics.

"I'll speak to the fellow," he thought;

"giving him a hint how matters are between me and Irene, and see what he says."

So Walter was surprised by a call from him, at the office he had opened in the upper part of the town, especially so at the cordiality of his manner.

In the conversation that ensued—and which was mostly carried on by him—John waxed very communicative and confidential.

He referred to the fire, thanking Walter for the service he had rendered him.

"I hardly dare think," he said, with emotion, "how I should have felt had she perished in the flames!"

Walter winced a little at all that this implied, but he made no comments on it, being strictly non-committal.

Nothing daunted by this, and determined to draw him out, John went so far as to speak of some improvement he meant to make in the house and grounds.

"With Irene's approval, of course," he added, with a laugh; "for I mean to be a model husband."

John glanced at his companion's grave, impenetrable face.

"I beg pardon, but of course you know that we are to marry—Irene and I?"

"I heard your father say so."

Then, feeling that he dared not trust himself further, Walter changed the subject by alluding to a curious case of surgery in the hospital where he was practicing, going into all the details, and from thence branching out into a minute description of the cases in the surgical ward where he was in daily attendance, and which he knew would be particularly distasteful to his visitor.

Determined to revenge himself for all he had suffered, Walter took a malicious pleasure in interlarding his discourse with various Latin phrases, together with all the technical terms he could remember, to John's manifest disgust and impatience, who soon excused himself on the plea of an engagement.

"He's a detestable prig!" he muttered, as he gained the street. The disgust he felt was greatly increased by the thought of the utter failure he had made.

With this, was the uncomfortable consciousness that he had said what Irene might take exception at, if she heard of it.

John entered his own room in a more thoroughly dissatisfied frame of mind

than he had ever been in before in his life.

"I wonder what is the matter with me, all at once," he muttered. "I seem to make a worse muddle of it every movement I make. Either I'm confoundedly unlucky, or I'm not the wondrously smart fellow that I've always fancied myself."

Going up to the mirror, he took a critical survey of the handsome face it reflected.

"I'm better looking than Walter ever was or will be, and I have twice the grace and polish, and yet I can't win one such smile as she gives him. Confound it! how prettily she blushes when he speaks to her! And how her face lights up as she talks to him! With me, she's as cool and matter-of-fact as if I was her grandfather. And yet I never cared for any woman half so much before. Half a million and this fine estate are no small addition to her charms, but I believe I should be fool enough to marry her if she hadn't a penny."

When Walter related to Irene John's conversation with him—or rather his talk to him—she smiled, and then looked sober.

"I must say that John has disappointed me. I thought he would have the good sense to see that hearts cannot be allotted to this or that one, like merchandise. I hoped to be able to avoid any talk or unpleasant feeling, but he is taking so much for granted that I think I shall have to give him that little talk in private that he's been asking for nearly every day since he came."

Irene smiled softly up into those grave, searching eyes.

"Are you afraid to trust me, Walter?"

"Not afraid to trust you, darling, but afraid to trust to the hope that my life will ever be made so happy as your love could make it. To lose you now! Oh, Irene, I could not bear it!"

There was a depth of feeling in this that affected Irene as no words had ever affected her before.

"My own beloved! you are not going to lose me."

"But you have not promised yourself to me, Irene."

"Not in so many words, perhaps. But I have said that I loved you, and with that you ought to be content."

"But I am not."

"How unreasonable! What more do you want?"

"I want you!"

"You have me pretty securely just at present, I should say!" laughed Irene, as she looked down upon her imprisoned hands.

"I want your positive promise."

"I don't like to give that to you, as matters stand just now."

"Why?"

Walter had released her hands, and Irene moved a little from him, so that she could look full in his face.

"I will tell you, Walter. It may seem superstitious, but this is the way I feel. I can't think that it was right for father to exact such a promise from me at such a tender age, when I could not know my own mind or what I was saying. Nor can I believe, feeling as I do, that I ought to consider it binding. Still, it was my father's dying injunction, uttered under circumstances so solemn as to make an impression on my mind that nothing can efface; and if John can be induced to relinquish his claim, as I hope he may, it will lift a heavy weight from my heart. I can see by your face that you think me very foolish."

"I don't think you at all foolish. And though I must consider your conscience unduly sensitive on this point, I can enter very fully into your feelings. I join you heartily in your wish that John could be induced to forego a claim in which there is neither reason nor justice, but, to speak plainly, I don't believe he will."

"I am sorry to say that I think John is mercenary."

Walter smiled.

"Have you just found that out?"

"If everything else fails I can buy him off. As he has been brought up with the expectation of sharing my estate, perhaps I ought to make some provision for him."

"If I had only myself to think of I should say give him the whole. But that would be a wrong to you, whose rightful inheritance it is, and who are accustomed to a way of living that I could not afford, at least for some years to come. Do what you will, my dear Irene, with what is altogether your own. It is you, you only, that I seek. John has taken pains to spread the story of your positive engagement to him. I have heard it from various quarters. It is not a pleasant story for me to hear, and I trust that I shall not be kept in

so false and painful a position a great while longer."

"You shall not be. It is not right. I am determined to bring matters to a crisis. But I want you to promise me one thing, Walter. You know how quick-tempered John is, and I am sorry to notice, often rude and overbearing. On no account have any quarrel with him."

"You need have no fear on that score. I am not given to quarreling, and even if I was, I would not bring your name into anything of the sort for the world."

As the door closed after Walter, Irene raised her eyes to the portrait of her father, which hung opposite.

"Oh, father!" she thought, "surely, could you have known what the future would bring forth, you would not have laid upon your daughter such a heavy cross as this! Had you lived to see this day, you could not have wished her whole life to be so wretched as this hateful marriage you planned would make it!"

CHAPTER X.

A WOMAN'S SCORN AND A MAN'S HATE.

The passion that John had conceived for Irene had grown stronger and stronger every succeeding day. As is often the case, the coldness and indifference of its object, the very means she took to check and discourage it, added fuel to the flames.

John had had various attacks of what he called love, but this was the first genuine feeling of the kind that he had ever experienced, and it had its usual effect upon a temperament so warm and ardent as his.

Irene saw with dismay that he either was, or affected to be, desperately in love with her. She had also heard of various remarks of his tending to create the impression that their marriage was a thing decided upon.

Perceiving that it was impossible to repress him much longer, she determined to take the dilemma by both horns and open the subject herself.

The two were alone in the library.

It was an opportunity that John had long sought, and he stood inwardly debating how he could best open the attack upon the heart he was so desirous of winning, when Irene turned upon him thus:

"I was greatly surprised to hear the story you have started."

This was so unexpected that John was taken entirely by surprise. He had the grace to blush, stammering:

"What story?"

"In reference to our marriage. Speaking of it as a matter of course."

John remembered what he had said to Walter, and it brought an angry gleam to his eye.

"I can guess the name of your informant."

"Who was it, pray?"

The cool, calm countenance of the speaker was in strong contrast to the flushed, excited face of her companion.

"Walter Remington."

"So you have told him so, as well as Ida Gray and a score of others? I have given you no authority, Cousin John, for any such statement."

John had now recovered from the suddenness of Irene's attack upon him.

"No authority, Irene? Have you forgotten your father's dying commands—your own promise?"

"My father could not have meant to have his daughter marry where she could not love, and the promise of a child—for I was scarcely more—is of little worth."

The young man drew his breath hardly between the shut teeth, while the veins swelled across his forehead.

"Then you repudiate that promise? What your dying father so solemnly enjoined upon you you refuse to do?"

Irene was silent, a disturbed, pained look in the soft, clear eyes.

"There was a condition."

"That I claimed your hand, and I do claim it," was the response.

John had taken a step forward, Irene retreating, so as to leave the same distance between them. Her face was paler, but more firm and resolute.

"I paid my cousin the compliment—and so did my father, I am sure—of supposing that he would not wish to marry a woman unless she loved him."

"But you will—you must! Oh, Irene! I love you with a strong, overmastering passion that has taken possession of my whole being, sweeping everything before it. Surely love so ardent and devoted must meet with a return. Only trust yourself to me and you will learn to love me. I will be so true, so tender, that you cannot help it!"

There was no mock sentiment in this.

Pierce, vehement and ungovernable as this passion was, it was genuine, and the surprise in Irene's eyes softened into a look of pity.

"Love is not a thing to be learned. It would be wrong, it would be cruel to deceive you, John. I can never love you."

"But you are cruel and most unjust. You have given me no time, no opportunity. Ever since I came here—and I came expressly to see you, as you know—you have studiously kept me at a distance; you have treated me as if I was a stranger. And now you coolly say, 'I can never love you.' How do you know that?"

"No matter how. I do know it."

"You speak very confidently."

Irene had decided to avow her love for Walter, but her knowledge of John's hasty and violent temper, and her fears of bringing the two cousins into violent collision, deterred her. She would wait until he had recovered, in a measure, from the disappointment and mortification under which he was now smarting.

After revolving the matter over in her mind, Irene broke the silence by saying:

"We are so diverse in temperament and feeling, John, that our marriage would not be a happy one. I feel that it would be doing you as great a wrong as myself, should I consent to it. Some day you will see, and be glad that I saw it in time to prevent that saddest of all mistakes—a loveless marriage. I would you could see it now. I frankly confess that I wish you had not, by putting forth this claim—if claim it can be called—forced me into a course so repugnant to me. As it is, I am compelled to say that I cannot ratify the compact entered into by your father and mine, for the simple and sufficient reason that I do not love you as I feel that I ought to love my husband."

John looked darkly at the speaker.

"Only one thing could make you so sure of this—your love for some one else."

The swift, bright color that surged up to the temples was followed by a sudden flash to the eye that would have warned John that he was going too far, had he not been so enraged by defeat and all that it involved as to have no thought for anything else.

"You need not tell me his name who has so basely undermined me. It is

Walter Remington! the smooth-faced, sanctimonious hypocrite! It is not the first time that his lying tongue has defamed and injured me, curse him! He will find that he crossed my path once too often! If I live to be a day older!"

"Stop!"

As John looked at Irene he hardly knew her, such a transforming influence had those crimsoned cheeks and blazing eyes.

"John Remington, how dare you use such language under this roof, and to me? Go!"

"Forgive me, Irene," he stammered. "The thought of losing you nearly drove me wild. Only give me a little hope!"

Without vouchsafing a word or look in reply, Irene passed through the door to which she had pointed, never looking so lovely and desirable as now, when she seemed further off from him than ever.

"On my honor, I don't know whether I hate or love her most!" muttered the discomfited man, as he looked after her. "She angers and attracts me as no woman ever did before. But whether it be love or hate, whether I win or lose her, she shall never be Walter Remington's wife—never! never!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE QUARREL.

"I tell you, father, she has refused me, and in words that leave no room for any mistake."

Mr. Remington looked at his son's flushed, excited face.

"And then, as a matter of course, you flew into a passion, as you generally do if you can't have what you want the minute you ask for it?"

"It don't matter about that," said the young man, sullenly; "the fact remains the same."

"It does matter; as any such course closes the door to any further effort. Supposing she did refuse? I've known girls to refuse men a dozen times, and then marry them. A woman's 'No' often means 'Yes,' as you ought to know by this time."

"Irene is no such woman as that; she knows her own mind, and means what she says. You'd think so, at all events, if you'd heard what she said to me. She means to marry Walter Remington, as I have told you all along."

"Did she say so?"

"She as much as said so. She didn't deny it. If you don't interpose your authority, she'll do it, too."

"My authority, John? You talk very foolishly! I have no authority over her. She is legally of age; mistress of herself, and all that she has."

"Your influence, then. You surely ought to have some. You are her nearest living relative, and she will listen to you, as a matter of course."

"I shall use all the influence I have, of course; having almost as much at stake as you. But if you cannot get her to listen favorably to your suit, I don't know how I am to do it. You have played your cards very ill. After boasting of your success with women, you fail where success is most important. I must say that I can't understand it."

"It is all Walter Remmington's doings! He's been lying about me to Irene; I know it as well as if I heard it."

At this moment, a servant tapped at the door.

It was a message from Irene to her uncle, requesting to see him in the library.

"Now is your chance," said John, following his father to the door. "Plead for me. Speak of my great love for her; remind her of her father's commands, her own promise. I will wait here until you come back."

John's patience was sorely taxed; his father was closeted with Irene over an hour.

Twice he went out into the hall, pausing by the corridor that led to the library; but though he could hear voices, he could distinguish nothing of what was passing within.

When his father at last came out, John had worked himself up into a fever of impatience and irritation which was clearly visible in the flushed face and gleaming eyes.

"Well, what is it, father? What did she say? Why don't you speak? You were in there long enough to find out something, I should say!"

Mr. Remmington's face was a curious compound of disappointment and regret, in which were mingled no little satisfaction and triumph.

"Can't you speak? What success did you have?" demanded John, still more impatiently, as his father still continued silent.

Mr. Remmington took a seat; John stood leaning against the mantel.

"In some respects worse, in others better than I expected. On the whole, Irene spoke fair, very fair. She understands that her father intended that you should share in the estate, and is willing to make a liberal arrangement"—

"I don't want to hear anything about that!" interrupted John, whose blood was now at a fever's heat. "That wasn't what I wanted you to find out. Did she say she would marry me? That is what I want to know!"

"She did not," replied Mr. Remmington, speaking with great deliberation. "On the contrary, I have any knowledge of the English language, she said she would not marry you. But she promised to make provision for you; though only on condition that you fully and freely relinquish all claim."

"Which I won't do!" cried John, enforcing his declaration by expletives that we don't care to repeat.

Without noticing this, Mr. Remmington continued:

"Of course, John, it is a disappointment to me, and it must be to you, also. But as we have no power to compel Irene's compliance, it would be the height of folly for you to refuse the terms she offers. Remember that half a loaf is better than no bread."

"I will be party to no such scheme as that! I'm not to be bought over in that way. I will not relinquish my claim. Irene Carlton shall never be Walter Remmington's wife! The scoundrel has laid his plans very cunningly, but he left me out of his calculation. I have an account with him, and it will be settled, in short order, the first time I see him."

Mr. Remmington made no reply to this; he was accustomed to his son's extravagant way of expressing himself, and knew that his wrath, violent as it was, was generally short-lived.

When the tempest burst, which desolated his whole after life, he remembered these words, but now he paid no heed to them.

John found himself in the open air. Driven by his angry and resentful feelings rather than any fixed purpose, he took his way uptown.

He had gone but a short distance when he met Harry and Charles Vernon.

"Hello! old fellow!" cried Harry. "so you were coming? The last of the

boys sent us after you! We had strict orders to bring you, whether or no!"

"Bring me where?"

"Why, to the club-room, to be sure! Didn't you agree to meet the boys there at three this afternoon, to arrange about the excursion?"

"So I did. Upon my honor! I forgot all about it. I've had some business of my own that drove everything else out of my mind."

"Never mind! come along now. You are our right-hand man in such matters, you know, and we can't get along without you. We haven't decided a thing yet, not even where we shall go."

"Who are there?" inquired John, as they walked along.

"Ed. Wheeler, Will Taylor, George Merrill, Charlie and myself. I asked Dr. Remington to join us, but he declined."

"It is well he did!" retorted John, his brow darkening. "That is, if you want me to have anything to do with it. He's a contemptible scoundrel, if he is my cousin; and I'll have no friendly or social relations with him whatever."

The young men exchanged glances; they knew that there was some rivalry and jealousy between the parties, but did not dream of any such feeling as this.

John continued:

"You know I've told you about my engagement to my cousin Irene. It has been considered as a settled thing for five years, or more, that we were to be married when she reached her majority. Well, this fellow has been secretly trying, for months, to undermine and supplant me, and so break up the match. Supposing a man should try that game with you, Harry, in regard to your betrothed?"

"I'm afraid one of us would get hurt. I'd either give him a sound drubbing, or he'd give me one. Eh, Charlie?"

Charlie smiled. He was older than his brother, and a more careful observer. He had seen enough of his young hostess to doubt whether she had ever cared anything for John.

"I should want to be very sure that he was guilty before proceeding to such extremities as that."

"He'll never fight," sneered John; "he's too cowardly. I've tried to insult him half a dozen times."

After the business matter was con-

cluded, John sent for wine and refreshments.

He was generous and free-hearted; fond of such things himself, and willing to distribute them to those around him, which made him a general favorite.

He often indulged in wine, but never to excess, so that it could be discovered in his words or manner, but now, to drown his disappointment and mortification, he drank freely; so much so that its effect was visible in his flushed face and unsteady step, as, followed by his companions, he took his way downstairs.

The club-room was in the upper part of the Clarendon House, where Walter boarded. He was then standing in the doorway of the main entrance, waiting for the hostler to bring up his horse.

The entrance was amply wide enough for him to pass, but with a design that was evident to all who saw it, John brushed past him so rudely as to nearly throw him from his balance.

"Was that intentional?" demanded Walter, angrily.

"That was!" cried John, dealing him a quick blow in the face.

Walter turned pale. Had it not been for his promise to Irene, and the evident intoxication of his assailant, he would have given him a lesson that he sorely needed, for he was physically the strongest.

"You will be sorry for this."

"Who's going to make me sorry?" sneered John.

"I will. I think that you will be both ashamed and sorry when you are sober," added Walter, as he went down the steps, around which quite a crowd had gathered.

"You whining hypocrite!" roared John, making an effort to break away from Harry and Charles Vernon, who now interposed, "How dare you insinuate that I'm drunk?"

Walter stepped into his carriage and drove off, while John's companions coaxed him inside, taking him upstairs again.

He was quite beside himself with rage.

"You heard what he said about being revenged on me. And he'll do it, too; though it will be in some way as low and sly as he is! He won't stand up and meet me openly like a man. He's a coward, as I told you."

The young men persuaded him to lie

down upon the lounge, and he soon fell asleep.

They then left him, believing that he would sleep away his excitement with the wine he had taken, and which they considered to be the main cause.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER.

Two or three days later, Walter was riding along the dusty road that led to town.

The sun was sinking behind the hills; he had been riding all the afternoon, and was beginning to be conscious of being both tired and hungry.

His thirsty horse pricked up his ears at the tinkle of the wayside brook, where he had so often quenched his thirst, and, encouraged by the suddenly slackened rein, took his way thither.

A lad—for he could scarcely be more—was resting himself upon one of the smooth, flat stones; his dust-laden garments showing that he had traveled some distance.

Walter scarcely heeded him; his mind being occupied by his cousin's quarrel with him, which had been noised about town with various additions and exaggerations; the most unpleasant part of which was, to him, the mention of Irene's name, as the cause of the trouble.

"If you please, sir, is this Concord?"

There was something so peculiar in the voice that Walter turned his eyes curiously upon the speaker who, now that he had risen, looked taller and older.

He seemed annoyed, almost displeased, at the intentness of that gaze, which he showed by the sudden knitting of the brows, and the lowering to the ground of the dark, glittering eyes.

"I beg pardon," said Walter, on perceiving this; "what was it that you said?"

"I asked you if I was in Concord?"

"You are within the limits of Concord. The town itself is straight on, about a mile and a half beyond."

"Do you know if a lady lives there by the name of Carlton?"

"A lady lives there by that name. yes."

"Can you direct me to her house?"

"Very easily. You will find it straight on. It is a large brick house, standing

back from the road; the first one of any note that you come to."

Walter glanced at the stranger's slender form and pale, wearied face.

"You can go along with me; I am going right past the house."

The stranger retreated a step.

"I prefer to walk, thank you," he said, in a cold, reserved tone that forbade anything further.

Walter rode along.

On reaching the top of a hill, he looked back.

The young fellow had resumed his seat beside the brook, whose waters were bubbling over the stones, that formed a partial inclosure around it.

Who could he be? He was a stranger, evidently, not only unacquainted with the country round about him, but the person he was seeking.

Most likely it was some one seeking help, for Irene's wealth and liberality were well known; she was especially noted for assisting students, in straitened circumstances, in their efforts to obtain an education.

With this thought he dismissed the matter from his mind.

The young traveler watched Walter until he disappeared over the brow of the hill. Then loosening a small knapsack from his shoulder, he took from it some bread and cheese, and a tin cup; eating and drinking with an avidity which indicated that it was the breaking of a long fast.

He seemed especially thirsty; dipping the cup into the brook, he drained it twice with a long sigh of satisfaction.

Then removing his cap and loosening his collar, he bathed his head and face in the cool water; the application of which made the short, jetty rings of hair curl still more closely around the head.

He then took a position further back from the road under a tree.

The moon arose, and the solemn stars looked down; but still he sat there, his head leaning against the tree, so motionless that he would have seemed to be sleeping were it not for the wide-open, glittering eyes, which looked straight forward, as though they saw something else besides the tranquil scene before them.

At last he arose, and strapping the knapsack to his back, went on in the direction Walter had indicated. He walked very rapidly, and without pause.

ing, until he came to a house, the lights of which could be seen back of the trees that surrounded it.

The grounds were inclosed by a high wall, the gate of which stood wide open, disclosing a broad, winding path, lined with trees.

The young man stood irresolute; it looked as though it might be the place, but he was not sure.

A tow-headed, bare-footed boy was perched upon a post opposite, whistling "Yankee Doodle."

"Can you tell me where Miss Irene Carlton lives?"

"I reckon I kin," responded the lad; "she lives in that house over yander."

"I live there, too," he added, with a consequential air; "ma'am is Miss Carlton's cook."

"Is she at home?"

"I guess she is. That's her room, on the east piazza, where that light is. There ain't never no light there when she ain't tew hum."

"Air you looking fur work?" added the boy, glancing at the knapsack, which, small as it was, looked too heavy for the slender shoulders. "Because if you be"—

"I'm not looking for work," interrupted the stranger; "I have as much on my hands now as I can well attend to."

"Short as pie-crust," muttered the urchin, as he looked after the stranger, who, walking swiftly past the gate, disappeared in a curve of the road beyond.

In the course of half an hour, he returned; passing through the gate, up the avenue to the house.

After looking carefully about, he took his way toward the room on the east piazza, spoken of by the boy.

It was a warm night, and the light streamed brightly through the lace folds of the curtain that draped the open window, and which descended to the floor.

Within was Margie, Miss Carlton's maid, a pretty, vain, shallow-hearted girl, who was amusing herself during her mistress' absence by trying on the contents of her wardrobe.

She had arrayed herself in a rich purple silk, trimmed with costly lace, and was standing before the mirror admiring its effect, when she heard a step back of her.

She suppressed a shriek as she saw the youthfulness of the intruder.

"Goodness me! boy, what do you want?"

"Pardon this seeming intrusion, lady," said the stranger, in a low, sweet voice, in strong contrast to that sharp, wiry tone; "my business is urgent."

Margie looked at the intruder from top to toe.

Making no doubt but what he was one of the many recipients of Miss Carlton's bounty, she said, with a toss of the head:

"Intrusion, indeed! I should think it was an intrusion! If you want food or lodging, why don't you go round to the kitchen door?"

The stranger lifted his head proudly, while a dark flush crossed his cheek.

"I am no beggar, Miss Carlton. If I were I would starve before I would touch a morsel beneath this roof!"

The girl smiled.

That she should be taken for her mistress gratified the vanity that was the ruling passion of her nature; she perceived that her visitor had never seen Miss Carlton, and she determined to keep up the illusion.

"What do you want then? Make known your errand, and then go," she said, in a tone that was intended to be very stately, but which was, really, nothing but a compound of pertness and insolence.

The stranger took a rapid, comprehensive survey of the speaker, his eyes dwelling the longest on her face; with the curiosity and interest there was mingled a deeper feeling, though of what nature it was not easy to tell.

While he did not, in the least, doubt her identity, it was evident that she was not at all such a person as he had expected to see.

"I have come to give you a message of warning, that you would do well to heed. Are you engaged to John Remington?"

"Supposing I am? How dare you have the impudence to come here and ask such a question as that?" cried Margie, who began to enter into the spirit of her role, and, indeed, to quite overact her part.

"I mean no impertinence, lady. I have come to prevent the committal of a great wrong. I am Joseph Harmon, the brother of the woman he should marry, if he marries any one—if there is any honor and justice in the world, which I sometimes doubt! If you will read

these letters, you will see that I speak truly."

Hair frightened at the turn affairs were taking, Margie took the letters that were held out to her.

She could not read writing very well, but by making out a word here and there, she saw that they contained declarations of the most ardent love and devotion.

"Mr. Remmington was only amusing himself," she said, thrusting them back into his hand; "as gentlemen will, when girls are so silly as to believe 'em. Your sister ought to know that they never mean no good to girls in her condition."

The young man shut his teeth tightly; the heaving breast and the swollen veins across the forehead alone gave token of the fierce battle that was going on within.

"And this is your answer to the broken-hearted, desperate, maddened woman that this man has so terribly wronged?"

"You may tell your sister, from me, that it serves her right for being so silly, and that I hope 'twill be a lesson to her!" said Margie, sharply, who was beginning to tire of the part she was acting, and to fear that she would not find it an easy thing to rid herself of her strange visitor. "Now that you have got your answer, go away!"

"In spite of all I have told you, you will marry him?"

"Of course I shall! Who and what's to hinder me?"

It was now nearly time for her mistress to return; and the girl was fearful that her little masquerade would be discovered, and which she knew would most likely result in ousting her from her present snug and comfortable berth.

"Why don't you go away, as I told you? If you don't go instantly, I'll send for a constable, and have you arrested!"

The stranger approached the open window through which he had entered, and then, turning round, confronted the speaker.

"John Remmington seeks you for the wealth you will bring your husband; it can be for nothing else. If my blood and brain were made of cooler stuff, I would let the slow years bring him the punishment he merits. As it is, I wish you joy of your husband!"

There was something in these words, and the dark look that accompanied them, that sent a sudden shiver through

the girl's veins, and it was with a feeling of relief that she listened to his retreating footsteps.

"I think the fellow must be crazy," she muttered, as she hurriedly divested herself of her borrowed plumes. "Goodness me! how his eyes did glitter, and how wildly he talked. There wasn't the least bit of sense in what he said, but somehow it made me feel sort of all-overish. I'm glad he's gone. I hope to goodness that he won't come back again. Miss Irene would be mad enough if she knew what I had done. Nobody saw him but me, and I won't let on to her that he's been here."

So when Irene returned, half an hour later, she found Margie clad in her own proper habiliments, sitting demurely by the window.

"Did you get tired waiting for me?" she said, with a smile

"Oh, no, mem."

Margie stood back of her young lady's chair, uncoiling the heavy braid of hair, when Irene suddenly said:

"Margie, do you know of any one calling to see me, this evening; a young man, or lad, rather—a stranger?"

"No, mem. Was you expecting any one?"

"Dr. Remmington told me that he met a lad on the road about sundown, who looked as if he had traveled a long distance, and who inquired of him the way to the house."

"I hain't seen nobody, mem. Praps the housekeeper would know."

CHAPTER XIII.

A STRANGE SUMMONS, AND STRANGER INTERVIEW.

The next evening, as Walter entered his office, after a hard day's ride among the rocks and hills, where most of his patients lived, he found a note on his desk.

It was a hasty scrawl, so blotted as to be almost illegible, but after considerable study, he made it out to run thus:

"DR. REMMINGTON: Come to the house known as the 'old Stone place.' Don't fail, or delay: it is a matter of life and death."

There was neither date nor signature. On inquiry he found that it had been left by a boy about two hours before.

Walter was very tired, and then it was the evening that Irene held her

weekly receptions, and he was counting on being there; so the impulse was strong upon him to defer answering the summons until morning.

But on recurring to the note again he decided to go.

"It is evidently some one in pressing need of my professional services," he thought, as he thrust the note into his vest pocket; "and if it is a matter of life and death, to-morrow may be too late. I shall have time to run into Irene's for a few minutes after I get back."

What was called the "old Stone place" was a dilapidated story and a half house, situated on a lonely road, nearly a mile from any other dwelling.

It was very old, one of the very oldest in that part of the country, and had not been inhabited for many a day.

"One must be wretchedly poor to seek shelter in such a place as this," thought Walter, as he tied his horse to the broken fence.

Not a ray of light gleamed from the windows, in which scarcely a whole pane remained.

A curious feeling came over Walter as he walked up to the door, which was partly ajar, and hanging only by one hinge.

"If I was a rich man I should be afraid that this was a plot to rob and murder me," he said to himself, with a half-smile. "Blessed be nothing!"

Pushing open the door, he found himself in a low room, whose bare desolation was clearly revealed by the bright moonlight that fell through the curtainless windows.

Seeing a glimmer of light beneath a door opposite, he opened it.

As he did so he was confronted by a figure which emerged from an obscure corner, while a voice said, in a tone of deep, concentrated feeling:

"So we meet at last!"

Then, as the speaker's eyes fell upon Walter, he started back, adding:

"Who are you? and what do you want?"

To say that Walter was surprised at his strange greeting is to say little.

On looking more closely he saw that it was the stranger he met on the road, whose countenance and singular appearance were indelibly stamped on his memory.

As soon as he could collect his thoughts, he said:

"I am Dr. Remmington. I was led to suppose that there was some one here in need of my professional services."

The stranger turned a sharp, inquiring look upon the speaker.

"Are you Dr. John Remmington?"

"No; I am Dr. Walter Remmington. I have a cousin by that name. He studied medicine, but never practiced it. So he was never called doctor—at least, around here."

"It was John Remmington that I wanted to see."

The stranger retreated to the window, and stood leaning against it with a wearied air. The unnatural flush had faded from the face, and its pale, dejected aspect aroused a feeling of sympathy in the kind heart, which never failed to respond to the appeal of suffering humanity, in whatever form it might come.

"You are looking ill. I am a physician; it will afford me a real pleasure to be of service to you."

"I am not ill; and you can be of no service to me, whatever!"

Then, as the speaker's eyes fell upon Walter, he added, in a softer tone:

"I thank you, sir, but my malady is of the mind—a sick and wounded heart. Have you any medicine for such?"

"Only the Great Physician can heal that," was the grave response.

The stranger folded his arms tightly over the heaving breast.

"Is there any such Being? If so, why does He allow wrong to triumph, and the innocent and helpless to be trodden under foot?"

"In the language of one far wiser than I, 'what we know not now, we shall know hereafter.'"

The stranger looked at Walter; there was something in his face that inspired confidence, and which had a calming effect upon the nervous excitement evinced by every look and gesture.

"There is one thing that I must know: and knowing—but no matter now! You say that this man—John Remmington—is your cousin. Is he going to marry Irene Carlton?"

Walter was so astonished at this unexpected question that he remained silent for some moments.

"I should not like to express any opinion on that point," was the cautious response. "It is so reported."

The effect of these words upon the

stranger was still more startling. Raising one clenched hand upward, he cried: "If he does, he will be perjured, perjured, perjured!"

A feeling of intense sympathy touched Walter's heart as he looked upon that pale face, on which there was such an expression of anguish and despair.

"Be calm. If this man has wronged you or any one belonging to you"—

"If this man has wronged me!" interrupted the stranger, rising from the knees upon which he had flung himself. "Why wait I for further proof? It is enough! enough!"

After waiting a moment, Walter resumed:

"The information you seek cannot properly come from me. Is there no other way by which I can serve you?"

By what was evidently a hard struggle, the stranger had regained at least the appearance of calmness.

"There is. I want to send a message to John Remington. In what way can it most safely reach him, and with the least possible delay?"

"I expect to see him this evening. If you think you can trust me, I will take it to him—or, at least, see that he gets it."

"I think that I can trust you. Well would it be for John Remington if he were as honorable as I believe you to be. I want you to tell him!"

"Stay!" interrupted Walter. "I cannot give your message verbally. You must write it."

The stranger turned to the table, which was the only piece of furniture in the room, with the exception of a broken stool.

On this table was a candle, whose rays were flickering in the draught of the broken pane, near which it stood.

He took a pencil and envelope from his knapsack, but searched it vainly for paper; not the least scrap was to be found.

Observing his perplexity, Walter took a note-book from his breast pocket, and tearing a leaf from it, gave it to him.

Then walking to the window, he stood there, musing on his strange adventure, and the dark mystery that surrounded his new acquaintance.

Who was he? and what was the nature of the wrong whose very memory seemed to goad him to desperation?

That John was passionate, selfish and self-willed, he well knew, but deliber-

ately and basely evil he had never believed him to be.

"The letter is ready for you, sir."

As Walter's eye fell upon its superscription, he started and then smiled.

"If I did not know to the contrary, I should think it my own handwriting."

Then, as he caught a side view of the face of his companion, a sudden thought flashed upon him.

"Were you ever at Deering, Connecticut?"

The stranger turned his head sharply.

"Why do you ask me that?"

"I taught school there once, and—your face looked familiar."

"I was never there."

Walter was turning away, when the stranger's voice again arrested his attention.

"One moment. Have you a sister?"

Walter shook his head.

"I am not so fortunate."

"That is as it may be. If you had, and she was wronged, her heart won, and then trampled under foot, would not every drop of blood in your veins cry out for vengeance against him who had so cruelly wronged her?"

Walter raised his hand upward.

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, and I will repay." Whatever may be your wrongs, put far from you such thoughts as these; they will only bring upon you fresh trouble and suffering. Mind, I do not say that you may not seek their redressal; that is another thing. I will see that your letter reaches the person to whom it is addressed. In the meantime, if I can serve you in any way, I will do so. You know where I am to be found."

When Walter reached Irene's, it was late.

After paying his respects to his hostess, who was the center of a gay group, he looked around for John. He was at the other end of the room, talking to Miss Gray.

The cousins had not spoken since their unfortunate encounter on the steps of the hotel. John was inwardly ashamed of his violence, though he was too proud to own it; trying to justify himself in his own eyes, and in the eyes of those who witnessed it, by seeking to make it appear that he was the injured party, in which he was, to a great degree, successful.

Walter did not believe that John would have made so unprovoked an as-

sault upon him, had he not been drinking, still he did not care to present the letter himself, so he asked Harry Gray, who was passing, to take it to him.

Desiring to note its effect upon him, he then placed himself in a position where he could watch him, unobserved.

When Harry gave it to John, he was crossing the room.

Walter could not see his face, as he read it, but he noticed that he did so twice. Then, putting the letter into his breast pocket, he said something to Harry, who immediately looked toward the place where he had stood when he gave him the letter.

On perceiving this, and feeling that if John wanted any information as to how the letter happened to pass through his hands, he ought to have it, Walter emerged from the corner, where he stood, to where he knew he could be readily seen by him.

As soon as John's eyes fell on him, his face flushed hotly, and he walked toward him, with a step and manner betraying strong excitement.

When he reached the middle of the room, as if suddenly changing his resolution, he paused, going to another part of it.

John remained only a few minutes later.

The two Grays were standing near the door as he passed out.

"Going?" cried Charlie. "Don't forget our excursion to-morrow. We shall have to be up bright and early!"

"Oh! I sha'n't forget that," was the gay retort; "I wouldn't miss it on any account! If the sunset we had to-night is any sign, we shall have a beautiful day."

How little did the speaker think what that day would bring to him!

Harry Gray noticed something peculiar in John's look and manner, and his mind instantly adverted to the letter.

He mentioned the incident to his brother, adding:

"Something's up. Did you notice what a queer look John had? If Dr. Remmington was that sort of a fellow, I should say it was a challenge."

"It would be sheer nonsense to suppose that," said Charlie, whose temperament was less excitable and imaginative. "Besides, it don't follow because the letter came through him, that he was the writer of it."

"The superscription was in his handwriting, I'm positive! I never saw such a change in any one's face as there was in John's when he read it."

"Most likely it was something relative to their rival claims to the hand of our fair hostess. John is desperately in love with her. And so is Dr. Remmington; though he has a different way of showing it. She is a charming woman; and the man will be very fortunate who wins her."

"That she is! And John is a downright good fellow, as generous and open as the day! He deserves to win; and I hope he will!"

"I don't know about that," said the elder brother, after a thoughtful pause. "I like John; he has a great many good points about him. And some others that are—well, not so good. I tell you what it is, Harry, what we men call good fellows, and who are, in a certain way, don't always make the best husbands. I can't say, if Miss Carlton was my sister, that I'd want him to win."

"I like him the best, at all events," persisted the other. "And I think it very mean in Dr. Remmington to try to undermine him in the way John says he has."

"I don't imagine that there is any danger of that on either side. Miss Carlton is not a woman so easily blinded. She will take which of them she likes best—and perhaps neither. It is none of our business."

CHAPTER XIV.

A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY.

An unaccountable feeling of depression weighed upon Walter's heart, which made the mirth and music of that gay assemblage jar harshly on his nerves, and he left very soon after John did.

He had gone but a few rods when he missed a bunch of keys that he always carried with him.

It contained not only his room and office key, but the one that unlocked a desk containing valuable papers.

He remembered hearing something drop from his pocket when he was in the old deserted house. He had looked, but the light being dim, had discovered nothing, and thought he was mistaken.

It must have been the missing keys.

There was no help for it; tired as he was, he would have to go back for them.

Fortunately his way home was past

the road where this house stood, so it would not take him much out of the way.

With these thoughts, Walter turned down the rough and narrow road that led to the "old Stone place."

When near, though not within sight of it, he was startled by the loud report of a pistol.

Walter's horse was young and spirited; giving a snort of terror, it began to rear and plunge in a manner not a little dangerous in the steep and rocky place where he was.

After he had succeeded in calming him, he listened.

Not a sound broke the solemn stillness that reigned around.

Looking cautiously about him, he strained his eyes vainly to discover any movement in the road beyond.

Then, with a reassuring word to his horse, Walter went on.

The moon was partially obscured by a cloud, but the outlines of the house were plainly visible, amid the blackness that surrounded it.

As Walter looked he saw a figure emerge from the house and run down the walk to the road.

Whoever it was must have heard the sound of his horse's feet on the stony road, and which sounded very distinctly in the silence.

As it reached the road, it paused as if irresolute which way to go; then suddenly turning, ran swiftly down the hill in an opposite direction.

Walter's horse now demanded all his time and attention.

As though it scented some mysterious horror in the air, it began to back; plunging from side to side; not even the application of the whip could make it go forward.

At last Walter dismounted, and taking him by the bridle, tried to lead him up to the house, but he could not induce the animal to move one step in that direction. At every fresh effort he reared upon his hind legs, trembling in every limb, his flashing eyes and dilated nostrils showing the terror that had seized him.

Pitying what he could see no adequate cause for, Walter finally turned the horse round, securing him to a tree at the side of the road.

He then went into the house, the door of which stood wide open.

On entering the first room, he saw a

dark pool of something oozing from beneath the door of the one opening out of it.

On taking a step forward, his feet slipped, and in trying to save himself, both hands came in contact with a warm, slimy liquid, and which had the sickening odor of fresh blood!

Springing to his feet, Walter turned to the window.

Horror of horrors — his crimsoned hands were dripping with gore!

Struck dumb and motionless with terror, he stood for some moments trying to collect his scattered thoughts.

Some dark, horrible deed had been committed. Murder or suicide? — which?

Shaking off the benumbing horror that oppressed him, Walter pushed back the door of the adjoining room, which was ajar.

Upon the floor lay the body of a man. Walter approached nearer.

At this moment the moon burst out from behind a cloud, revealing to his horror-struck vision the white, rigid face of John Remington!

Tearing open the vest he placed his hand upon the heart.

Though the body was still warm, there was not the faintest motion there; he could have been dead only a short time, but dead he was!

What was to be done now? Go to the family of the murdered man with the terrible tidings? apprise the magistrates of the foul murder that had been committed in their midst?

This was what he ought to do. And yet —

Supposing his story was not believed? Supposing —

His heart grew sick as he thought of John's fatal quarrel with him, and the terrible position in which he might find himself.

The murderer, whoever he was, had fled, and might never be found. Unless he was, suspicion would surely fall on him.

Why should he tell of his discovery of the body? What good would it do? Would it not be better to leave the discovery of it to some one else, rather than put himself in such mortal peril?

Picking up the missing keys, which he found under the table, Walter left the house, his mind a confused medley of doubts, fears and conjectures.

He finally came to the conclusion that he would say nothing about it.

Fatal mistake!—and still more fatal consequences that sprung from it!

The gray dawn was breaking before Walter fell asleep, and then he slept very heavily.

The bright sunlight was streaming into the room when he woke.

He would have thought his strange experience of the past night to have been some horrible dream, were it not for what he saw around him.

The cuffs of the linen duster, that was lying across a chair, were dabbled with blood, while spots were on various other parts of it. And when he went to draw on his boots, he found that the soles were crimsoned with the same horrible stains.

With a sick feeling at his heart that no words can describe, Walter covered his face with his hands.

He shuddered as his thoughts reverted to the ghastly thing that was lying in the old deserted house.

Had they found it? If not, when would they? Oh! that he had had the courage to have told all! But now it was too late.

After doing the best he could to remove the tell-tale marks from his clothing, Walter went down to the deserted dining-room.

Eben, the waiter, was noted for his news-gathering proclivities, and his willingness to disburse the same to whoever would give him a hearing.

Walter saw, with a feeling of relief, that his face wore its usual inane expression, when nothing was going on, to use his own words, "worth mentioning."

Walter, never encouraged his propensity to talk, not considering that he needed any. Now he said:

"Any news, Eben?"

"Nothing worth speaking of, sir," replied Eben, with a doleful shake of the head. "Dretful dull times these."

Hastily swallowing a cup of coffee Walter ordered his horse.

He had partly promised Irene, the night before, that he would join an excursion up the river that had been the subject of much talk and anticipation for the last fortnight. Now he felt that he dared not risk the ordeal to which it would subject him.

As Walter stood by his horse, adjusting some portion of the harness, he saw Charlie Gray crossing the road toward him.

"Good-morning, doctor. So you are

not going to our excursion? But, good heavens! how pale you are looking. Are you ill?"

For the first time, Walter was conscious how pale and haggard his face must look, and it did not tend to calm his uneasiness at Charlie's unexpected appearance.

"I am not feeling very well; I have had a good deal of riding to do of late."

Charlie stared at him for a moment, and then said:

"I'm looking for John. He promised to be on hand the first one this morning, and hasn't put in an appearance yet. I thought that perhaps he had come down to the hotel for something."

"I haven't seen him," said Walter, replying more to the look and tone than to the words. "He may be about the building somewhere."

Young Gray passed into the hotel, and Walter rode away; scarcely daring to allow himself to think until he found himself in the open country, with the town far behind him.

John had been missed. The next thing would be a search. And then!—

How vividly did his imagination portray the widespread horror and consternation, the grief and anguish that would follow!

CHAPTER XV.

FOUND DEAD.

Partly to put as many miles as possible between him and the scene of that dark tragedy, and partly to drive away the gloomy thoughts that oppressed him, Walter visited some patients in a rough and mountainous district, several miles from town.

On his way back he stopped at a farmer's for a bowl of bread and milk.

The farmer's wife bustled about, placing upon the table a brown loaf and brimming pitcher of milk, of which he partook more heartily than he had believed it possible.

As he sat there one of the farmer's sons drove into the yard.

By the parcels of groceries in his wagon it was evident that he had been to town, and Walter looked curiously at him as he entered.

"Here's the 'Herald,' mother," he said, tossing a paper into the old lady's lap.

"Anything stirring in town, Jake?" inquired Walter, as he rose from the table.

"They're making a tarnation rumpus 'bout a young chap that's missin'," said Jake. "His mother is in highstricks. an' nigh about the hull town out lookin' fur him. There wouldn't be no such fuss if I should turn up missin', hey, mother?"

"Who is it?" inquired the old lady.

"John Remmington. You 'member him, dad?—that wild, harum-scarum fellow that we saw at the tavern down to the 'Corners.'"

"I remember him," responded the farmer, who was sitting in the doorway, mending a harness.

Walter turned to Jake, who was making a vigorous onslaught upon the substantial lunch that his mother had set out for him, and asked:

"Had they succeeded in finding no trace of him?"

"They hadn't when I come away, 'bout two hours ago."

"He has not been found," thought Walter, as he rode on.

In spite of all the excitement, comments, and even suspicion it might arouse, he wished it over with.

He could not endure the thought of the body laying there another night, and the impulse was strong upon him to go to the nearest magistrate and tell him all he knew.

He had to go past Irene's.

As he came in sight of the house, he saw a crowd of people approaching it.

Four stalwart men walked in front, bearing a stretcher.

Well did Walter know what it was that was lying so still beneath that white covering!

Then, as he thought of Irene, and how cowardly it was to leave her alone at such a time, he urged his horse forward.

By the time he reached the gate, which was wide open, the crowd had passed through it, and out of sight, and, flinging himself from his horse, Walter followed.

The house stood back from the road, on an eminence, and as he reached the top, he saw Irene and several others standing on the steps, trying to prevent Mrs. Remmington from going down to the crowd below.

As soon as Irene saw Walter, she ran down the steps, her face pale and her eyes dilated with horror.

"Oh, Walter, this is dreadful—dread-

ful! My poor aunt, it will kill her! Don't, oh, don't let her go down there!"

With pale face and disordered attire, Mrs. Remmington stood upon the steps, struggling against the detaining arms that were thrown around her.

"Let me go!" she shrieked. "John is hurt! Something has happened to my boy! I will know the meaning of this!"

And, breaking away, she rushed down the steps, pushing through the crowd that surrounded the murdered man, just as Mr. Remmington drew away the sheet that covered him.

For a moment she stared wildly at the rigid face.

Then she threw herself down beside it with a shriek that curdled the blood of all who heard it.

"Who has done this? Dead! dead! Oh! my boy! my boy! it cannot, cannot be!"

Here shriek after shriek came from the lips of the frenzied mother, until unconsciousness came mercifully to her relief.

Pressing through the horror-struck crowd, Walter raised the head of the fainting woman, until it rested against his knee.

The wretched father stood looking at the son he so idolized, like one benumbed and speechless by the magnitude of his woe.

He now sprang forward.

"Murderer!" he cried, hoarsely, seizing Walter firmly by the collar, "how dare you come here?"

"Friends and neighbors," added the speaker, turning round and stretching out his hand toward the hushed and wondering crowd, "I call God and you to witness that I denounce this man as the murderer of my poor boy!"

With her face almost as white as the dress over which her fair hair floated like a veil, Irene now approached, laying her hand on his arm.

"This terrible thing has turned your brain, uncle; you don't know what you are saying."

Mr. Remmington turned his eyes upon his niece with a look that she never forgot.

"I know what I am saying but too well, as you will find. And I know, too, that it was to win you he did it! But he shall not go unpunished! My poor boy shall be avenged! I will have vengeance—vengeance on his murderer!"

These were terrible words for a man

to listen to, however innocent he might be.

Walter's face was very pale, but there was neither fear nor anger there.

"God pity and comfort you, sir," he said. "If those dumb lips could speak, they would tell you how innocent I am of bringing upon you this great calamity."

Walter turned away as he said this. Irene was just back of him, and he paused as he saw the mute appeal in the fearful eyes that met his.

"It will be better for me to go now," he whispered: "I can do no good, but rather harm by staying. In the meantime, if you have anything to communicate, write me."

As Walter passed through the crowd he could not be unmindful of the suspicious glances that followed him.

Harry Gray was standing near. As Walter met that searching, questioning look, there instantly flashed upon his mind the letter he had sent by him to John the night previous.

His heart almost stood still with terror as he thought of all that might be inferred by it.

Could there be anything more unfortunate than the network of circumstances that surrounded him?

CHAPTER XVI.

A WOMAN'S FAITH.

With all the pomp and circumstance of woe that wealth gives, John Remington was laid away "in the house appointed for all the living."

The funeral was in church, and very largely attended.

Irene came in, leaning on the arm of her uncle.

She was in deep mourning, which heightened, by contrast, the pallor of her face.

The change that the last few days had wrought in the bereaved father touched with pity the heart of every beholder. His face looked as if they had been years instead of days; his head was bowed and his step weak and tottering.

Mrs. Remington was not present; she was lying in a darkened chamber upon the bed from which she never rose again.

Contrary to the general expectation, Walter was there. He sat in his own pew.

Two ladies were in the pew when he

entered, who immediately arose and took another seat.

Walter took no apparent notice of this, taking a seat in the farther corner, so that the rest of it could be at the disposal of any who wanted to occupy it.

After the services, opportunity was given to all who desired it, to pass up one aisle, past the altar, where the coffin lay, and down the other, so as to obtain a parting look of the deceased.

After the larger part of the crowd had surged past him, and out the other door, Walter walked up to where the coffin stood, looking sadly upon its occupant, unmindful of the curious eyes that were watching him.

Never, in all the glow of health and life, had John Remington looked so handsome as when he lay in his coffin. The face wore that peaceful and serene expression, observed in all those who die suddenly from gunshot wounds. Every trace of passion and excess had faded; the refining hand of death had spiritualized it, as nothing else could.

The dark cloud that was lowering above Walter's head, in whose shadow he walked, whichever way he turned, soon burst in all its fury.

On the evening of the day of the funeral, as he was reading an article in the local paper, commencing with the cheerful inquiry:

"Why is the murderer of John Remington still permitted to walk our streets?"—two men tapped at his door.

Perhaps Walter surmised their errand, for he looked from one to the other without speaking.

The elder of the two stepped forward and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"You are my prisoner; I arrest you in the name of the State, for the murder of John Remington!"

If the officers had anticipated any excitement or resistance, they were disappointed.

Walter turned a little pale, but his countenance and bearing were as composed and steady as though it was simply a professional summons.

"Pray be seated; I will be ready in a few moments."

The officers remained standing by the door, while Walter made a few additions to his attire.

"Now I am ready."

"Then come with us. We have a carriage down at the door."

In spite of the precautions used, quite a crowd had gathered around the hotel steps, and a storm of hootings and hisses greeted Walter when he came out.

Pat Mahoney sat upon the box. He was a fast friend of Walter's, and his warm Irish heart was up in arms at the demonstration.

"Ye ought to be ashamed of yourselves, so ye had, to be arther condemnin' a man before he's tried, even! It's not I that belave it of him, at all, at all! Sure, an' didn't he attend the ould woman an' me sister's three children, an' nivr a cint would he take? He's a jintleman, an' ye're a set of dirty blackguards! If it wasn't for Pavin' me hosses, I'd git down an' give ye somethin' worth howlin' fur!"

And, shaking his whip in the face of the nearest of the crowd, Pat drove away.

Walter heard the heavy clang of the door of his narrow cell close upon him with a feeling of desolation that no one can realize except those who have passed through a similar experience.

But after the first shock was passed, he experienced almost a feeling of relief that the worst had come, and that there was now no more necessity for concealment; he could tell all he knew in regard to what was almost as much a mystery to him as any one.

The most painful thought in connection with his trouble was Irene, and the sorrow that it would bring upon her.

That she loved him, he knew; the consciousness of her love had made him very happy; but would it stand the test of such a terrible ordeal as this? Would she believe him innocent, in the face of so many dark and suspicious circumstances?

Questioning his own heart, it responded yes; she would have the same faith in him that he would have in her under like circumstances.

His heart whispered that she would come to him or send him some cheering word.

At last a note reached the prisoner in his lone cell, and Walter's heart told him whence it came; it was so blurred and blotted as to be almost illegible.

It ran as follows:

"DEAR LOVE:—I have been ill, but am better now. Keep up good courage. I shall see you soon, very soon.

"IRENE."

This note had been a good while on the way, considering the short distance it had to come, and bore marks of having been tampered with; but Walter was too overjoyed at the sweet assurance that it conveyed to think of aught else.

He had not had time to read this precious missive more than a dozen times when the door opened, admitting a lady, whom he recognized even before she threw back her veil.

Rising, he advanced eagerly toward her, his face all aglow.

"Oh, my darling! how very good in you to come!"

Irene had hitherto been very shy in the expression of her love; but now the sorrow and compassion that filled her soul swept every barrier before them.

Throwing her arms around him, she burst into tears.

"Did you think I would stay away from you? that I could do so? Oh, my love! never were you half so dear to me as now!"

Walter was strongly moved; holding the sobbing girl closely to his heart, he said:

"Let Fate do her worst now. Scorn, imprisonment, the prospect of a shameful death, these I could bear; but not the loss of your love. The bare thought that perhaps you believed me guilty of the terrible charge preferred against me, at times nearly drove me wild. But now I am repaid for all—can be a man. But tell me, darling, with all this terrible array of evidence, has your love in me never once wavered?"

Irene was as truthful as the day.

"To be quite frank with you, Walter, there was a time when I thought, when I feared, that you had quarreled with John, shooting him in anger or self-defense!"

"As God lives, I never saw my poor cousin alive after I parted with him at your house on the evening of the night he was murdered. I have only to reproach myself for the concealment of all that I discovered a couple of hours after leaving you, and which no one can regret now more than I. But I meant it for the best. At that time, indeed, it seemed dangerous to do otherwise."

Walter now proceeded to give Irene a full account of what the reader already knows, to which she listened very attentively, asking, on its conclusion, a minute description of the mysterious stranger.

"It is very singular," she said, breaking the thoughtful silence that followed. "If this young fellow is not the real criminal, that he had something to do with the murder is very clear."

Then Irene told Walter of a singular letter she had received a day or two before its occurrence, warning her, if she married John Remmington, that she would repent it to the day of her death.

Unfortunately, this letter was destroyed, though she remembered that the name signed to it was Joseph Harmon.

Having no knowledge of the writer, and no idea, at that time, of marrying her cousin, she had not mentioned the circumstance to any one until now, though the singularity of its tone and purport made a strong impression on her mind.

One thing struck her forcibly; that was the strong similarity of the handwriting to Walter Remmington's.

The reader will remember that Walter had noticed the same resemblance between the handwriting of the mysterious stranger and his own, and which had seemed like the similarity often seen in the hand of pupil and teacher.

On comparing notes, it was evident to Walter that the writer of this letter and the stranger that had crossed his path were one and the same person.

But this did not tend to clear up the dense mystery that surrounded the whole affair, and which baffled all attempts to unravel it. It elicited nothing of importance but the name, and even this might be an assumed one.

But the elasticity of youth is wonderful; under the charms of Irene's presence, the influence of her cheering and hopeful words, especially the love that spoke so clearly in every look and tone, Walter's spirits rebounded against the weight that had borne him to the earth.

And, though after Irene's departure, something of the old depression returned, especially when he thought of the fearful array of evidence against him, the recollection of all her love for, all her faith in him, gave him courage to look his troubles steadily in the face, seeking some way of escape, not for his sake only, but for hers.

CHAPTER XVII.

A MAD MOTHER.

Irene was met, on her return, by a message from her uncle, who had pre-

ceded her a few minutes, and who was impatiently waiting to see her.

He arose excitedly at her entrance.

"Can it be possible that what they tell me is true—had I not seen your carriage in front of the jail I could not have believed it—that you have been to see the guilty wretch whose hands are stained with the blood of my poor boy?"

Drawing herself up to her full height, Irene looked steadily into the angry face of the speaker.

"No, uncle, it is not true. I have been to see Walter Remmington, my betrothed husband, accused of a crime of which he is as innocent as you or I!"

"Girl! your betrothed husband is lying in the untimely grave to which this man sent him! It was to win you that he committed the deed which has left me childless and desolate! But he shall not gain his purpose. I live but for one object—to bring my son's murderer to the gallows. The day that I see him hung will be the happiest of the few remaining days that are left to me!"

The shocked, indignant feelings at Irene's heart were plainly visible in her face, but her eyes softened as she looked upon the bowed head of the speaker, grown so white in the last two weeks.

"Uncle, you have suffered so terribly that I cannot bear to add to your sorrow by reproaches, however harsh and unjust I may feel your language to be. I would stake my life on Walter's innocence, though I own, and so does he, that there are circumstances that tend to fix suspicion on him. Of one thing you may be sure, uncle, that dear as Walter is to me, if I believed he had done so cruel a deed, no matter how great the provocation, I would give him up at once and forever."

"Who else could have done it? Who else would? With this one exception, my poor boy had not an enemy in the world. Why he hated him, why he killed him, is clear to every one but you, who will not see it. I repeat it, it was because he stood in the way of his winning you, and with it the wealth he coveted, that John was thus foully dealt with."

"Uncle, you are laboring under a great mistake. Walter had nothing to gain by John's death, had he been so wicked as to wish or seek it. My heart was always his, as he well knew. I have called him my promised husband; he was as much so before John's death as

he is now. In pledging Walter my hand, I exacted from him not only the promise that our engagement should be kept secret for a time, but that he should claim, in public, only such privileges as I could accord to a friend. It was out of respect to your feelings that I did this. I knew how strongly you had set your mind upon my marrying John, and I wanted to give you time to be reconciled to it. What a great mistake this was I now feel."

"The mistake you made was in disregarding the solemn promise made to your dying father. Had you kept this pledge this dreadful thing would never have happened. But it is too late to think of this now. My only son has been foully murdered, and I only live to avenge him! I give you fair warning that I shall leave no stone unturned to have meted out to his murderer the punishment he merits."

"God grant you may be successful! You will not labor more earnestly to that end than I. I have a double incentive; to mete out justice to the real criminal, and to clear the innocent. I think that I have a clue that will lead to both."

Mr. Remmington lifted the pale, haggard face that was bowed upon his hands.

"What do you mean? What have you discovered?"

"I do not like to say more now, uncle; at this juncture it would not be prudent. But this I will say, that I have the name and description of the real criminal, and believe he will yet be found."

Mr. Remmington regarded his niece attentively for a moment, and then turned his eyes gloomily away.

"It is some lie, I suppose, concocted for the occasion. Walter Remmington is the real criminal, and nothing you can say will make me believe to the contrary."

Irene made no reply, feeling how worse than useless any further words would be; only the discovery of the actual murderer would convince him of his error, and to this end she determined to direct all her energies.

With this resolution in her heart, she went upstairs to her aunt's room, who had been carried there insensible on the evening of the discovery of the body, and had not left it since.

She met her own maid coming out.

"How is my aunt, Margie? Is she asleep?"

"No, ma'am. She is very restless, and sort o' flighty like. She's been asking for you 'bout every five minutes since you've been gone."

Irene passed into the room where her aunt was tossing restlessly upon her pillow, a strange and anxious look in her eyes, as they wandered around the room.

"Are you feeling any better, aunt?" she said, touching her lips to the hand that was lying on the counterpane.

Mrs. Remmington looked attentively at the speaker.

"I don't know. I feel strange. You look strange. Your uncle came in a few minutes ago; he looked strange; so does everything and everybody."

"I would not mind it," said Irene, in very much the tone one would use to a sick child.

"But I do mind it," was the impatient response. "I feel as if you were all hiding something away from me. Why did John go out of town without letting me know, or telling me where he was going? He never did such a thing before."

Irene was silent. It was evident that the terrible tragedy, beneath whose accumulated horrors the brain had given way, had been mercifully permitted to pass from her mind. It would be a useless cruelty to recall it.

Mrs. Remmington regarded her niece suspiciously for a moment.

"Why don't you answer me? You hadn't anything to do with it, I hope? If you have driven the poor boy away I will never, never forgive you! Was it your uncle that was telling me that you objected to marrying him? Of course that's all nonsense, Irene. You can't break with him now, at this late day. Besides, why should you want to do so? Where will you find a finer looking young man, or one better hearted? I know he is a little bit fast; but a good, sensible wife will cure him of all that; after he's married he'll settle down and make one of the best husbands in the world. I don't see what you can have against John. There's many a girl that would be glad enough to get him."

It was terrible to Irene, knowing all that she knew, to listen to this.

"I wouldn't talk any more about it now, aunt; wait until you are better."

"But I must talk," said the sick woman, sharply. "And how do you know that I ever shall be any better? I don't

know what has come over me. I never felt as I feel now. Something tells me that this is my last sickness; that I shall never leave this room until I am taken out in my coffin. And that is what makes me so anxious about your marrying John. I don't see why you can't be married now as well as any time."

"Will nothing stop her?" thought Irene, rising from her seat, who began to feel that she could not endure this a great while longer.

The nurse now approached, with a spoon and a vial.

"It is time for her to take this. Dr. Miller said I was to give it to her once every two hours."

"It is something to quiet her nerves and make her sleep," added the woman, as Irene took the medicine from her hand.

Irene was alarmed at the wild glare in her aunt's eyes, and her strange, rambling talk, and, knowing what the medicine was, and its effect, poured out a double dose.

Mrs. Remmington took it, exclaiming in the same breath:

"I don't want to sleep! I wouldn't sleep for the world, lest I should dream again that horrible dream. Did I tell it to you, Irene? I dreamed that I saw John lying dead upon the lawn, cold and white, his eyes staring out upon me from the partly closed lids, and his garments all dabbled with blood. A crowd of solemn looking people were around him, and voices kept booming into my ears, 'John is shot! he is murdered!' Then I awoke and found myself here."

Mrs. Remmington turned her wild, glittering eyes upon the pale, agitated face of her companion.

"Why do you look so at me, Irene? It was only a dream. It was not true—who could shoot John? Why don't you speak? Why don't you answer me?"

Irene burst into tears.

Mrs. Remmington sprang to her feet.

"I remember it all now!" she cried, in tones of deep, concentrated horror. "It was true! I did see my boy lying out there upon the grass! Is he there still? Let me go! I will see!"

It took the united strength of Irene and the nurse to keep the frenzied woman from flinging herself from the window.

Shriek after shriek now resounded through the house, bringing Mr. Rem-

mington and the doctor to the scene, who were together in the library.

The paroxysm was too fierce and terrible to last long. Though pale and trembling in every limb, Irene remained until the poor sufferer was lying upon the pillow in the deep stupor of the strong reaction that followed.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A STRANGE BRIDAL.

Rev. Mr. Goodspeed sat in his study by the open window, alternately revolving in his mind the subject of his next sermon and watching his two little grandchildren, who were sporting in the garden.

He was a white-haired, venerable looking man, whose countenance bespoke a goodness and benignity which made it very pleasant to behold.

He was aroused from his pleasant train of reflections by a gentle tap at the door.

"Come in."

The door immediately opened, admitting Irene.

"I hope I am not intruding. The hall door was open, and, finding no one in the sitting-room, I came directly up."

Taking Irene's hand in both of his, the good old man led her to a seat.

"You did quite right, my dear. I am very glad to see you. Mrs. Goodspeed is in the garden, I think."

As Mr. Goodspeed looked more attentively at his visitor, a serious expression took the place of that pleased and friendly smile.

"You are looking pale and thin. No wonder, no wonder, my poor child! Yours is indeed a dark and heavy sorrow!"

That compassionate look and tone were too much for Irene's self-control: she struggled silently but unsuccessfully with the emotions that overpowered her, then bursting into tears, she sank down upon the hassock at Mr. Goodspeed's feet, and, laying her head against the knee on which she had so often sat in her happy childhood, sobbed forth:

"It is heavy, indeed; far heavier than you think!"

The kind-hearted old man was greatly moved. He laid his hand tenderly on the head of the sobbing girl.

"The Lord comfort thee, as He alone can. 'He loves whom He chastens,' and 'does not willingly afflict or grieve the

children of men.' You surely have not forgotten where to look for aid and comfort?"

Irene had sobbed herself into comparative quietness; raising her head, she smiled faintly into those mild, compassionate eyes.

"I should have profited very little by all your instructions if I forgot that."

"You have been much in my mind of late. I called yesterday, but you were out. How is your aunt to-day?"

"She is more quiet. But Dr. Miller gives us no hope of her recovery."

"Poor woman! What a warning it is to us of the danger of disregarding the divine injunction, 'Make not unto yourselves idols.'"

Irene assented to this, but it was evident, by the far-away look in her eyes, that her thoughts were elsewhere.

"Papa Goodspeed, I have come to ask a strange thing of you."

That is what Irene always called him when a child. The old man smiled.

"It will be a far stranger thing, my daughter, if I fail to serve you to the extent of my power."

"You know that it has been a settled thing between us two that, when I married, you should perform the ceremony. I have come to ask you to redeem that promise."

Mr. Goodspeed was so shocked and startled by these words that he could not speak. Had the loss of the man he had always considered as her future husband turned her brain?

"I know what you think, what every one else thinks—but you are wrong. John would never have been my husband had he lived. I could not do him nor myself so great a wrong as to marry him when my heart was another's. My hand was pledged to Dr. Remington three weeks before John's death. And now that he is suffering this most undeserved shame and sorrow, and seemingly every heart is closed against him, I wish to redeem that pledge."

"You astonish me beyond all measure!"

"And shock you as well. I see that plainly. Do you remember the high terms in which you spoke to me of Dr. Remington scarcely a month ago?"

"I remember not only that, but my astonishment and sorrow when I learned the suspicious circumstances that connect him with his cousin's murder. Even now, I can hardly believe it possible."

"It is not possible. He is innocent. I will prove to the world my conviction of it before the setting of another sun! And you must help me to do this!"

"My child, don't be hasty in the matter. Consider, what will the world say—the world that believes him guilty—if you take such a step as this?"

Irene arose to her feet, confronting the speaker with flushed cheeks and kindling eyes.

"What care I for the world? My world is in the narrow cell where lies the husband of my choice. I promised to be true to him through good and evil report, and I must keep my vow."

"No man can honor and appreciate the noble sentiments you utter more than I, but can you not be true to him without becoming his wife, at least until this dark cloud has passed—if it ever does?"

"In no other way can I be to him all that he needs at this trying, this terrible hour. In no other way can I prove to the world how truly I love and honor him. I will be his wife before the day closes, even if I have to get a stranger to perform the marriage ceremony. You baptized me when an infant; you have been my spiritual guide and teacher from that day to this, and it seems most fitting that you should officiate when I assume one of the most sacred of all human obligations, and I did not think you would refuse me."

Irene's voice faltered at the concluding words, and her eyes filled with tears.

The kind-hearted old man was evidently greatly disturbed and troubled.

"I have not refused you. But your request is so strange, so unexpected. This is a serious matter, dear child, and I must have a little time to think it over. I will have a talk with the young man, and then, if I can bring myself to believe it right for me to do so, I will comply with your request."

Irene's carriage was at the door, and in a few minutes the two were on their way to the jail.

The good old man was a frequent visitor to the jail, and Mr. Brown, the jailer, to whom he was well known, experienced no surprise at seeing him.

On his making known his errand, he took him to Walter's cell, while Irene passed through the general reception room to the back part of the building, where the jailer's family lived, with whom she was on the most friendly terms.

Mr. Goodspeed was with Walter over an hour.

When he returned he found Irene with the youngest of the jailer's children on her knee.

Putting the child down, she arose.

Mr. Goodspeed's countenance indicated strong emotion.

"Strange and inscrutable are the dealings of God with the children of men! I have had a long and confidential talk with Mr. Remington; he has told me all the particulars of this mysterious and unfortunate affair, and I must believe him to be the innocent victim of a combination of circumstances the strangest that ever came to my knowledge. I feel it my duty to tell you, however, that the evidence against him is strong, and if you take the step you contemplate, the consequences may be more painful than you imagine."

Irene's cheek paled slightly, but her voice did not falter, as she said:

"I have thought of the dread alternative to which you allude, but it does not deter me. His widow I may be; his wife I must be."

"If you feel thus, my daughter, God forbid that I, or any one, should stand between you and him."

It was a strange bridal, and that dark and narrow cell a stranger place in which to solemnize it. But never did more true and loving hearts take upon themselves its solemn obligations.

As Mr Goodspeed pronounced the benediction, the rays of the setting sun streamed through the high, narrow window, falling brightly upon the bowed heads and clasped hands of the newly wedded pair.

Irene looked up smilingly into her husband's eyes.

"See! my beloved, the sun blesses our union! Let us accept it as a happy augury of the joys that are in store for us, when these dark and troublous days are ended."

CHAPTER XIX.

AN UNEXPECTED WITNESS, AND HOW IT ENDED.

The morning sun arose brightly and clear that was to give to our hero life and liberty, or a cruel and shameful death.

During all the weary weeks that intervened, Irene had worked untiringly

in her husband's behalf, scarcely allowing herself time to eat or sleep.

She had retained for him the ablest counsel that money could procure.

Mr. Cameron, the chief and ablest of these, three in number, was strongly impressed with the conviction of his client's innocence, though there were strange and suspicious circumstances that it puzzled him as much as any one to reconcile with that belief.

He was not slow to perceive that everything depended on finding the mysterious stranger who had vanished as suddenly as he appeared, and who had kept himself so secluded from observation.

But the most patient and thorough inquiry elicited little that could be of any practical use.

A man answering to his description had called at a farmhouse on the outskirts of the town for a drink of milk; another had seen him sitting by the roadside. Another, having occasion to go by the old, deserted house where John was murdered, a few nights before it occurred, had noticed a light at one of the windows.

As it had the reputation of being haunted, he hurried past with all possible speed, and had forgotten the circumstances altogether until reminded of it by the tragedy that followed.

The strong, and indeed fatal, resemblance between Walter's handwriting and that of the letter the stranger had intrusted to his care, together with the indefinable feeling which he had, at the time, that he had seen him somewhere, induced Mr. Cameron to make inquiries in various directions.

At first, in common with many others, he believed that the prisoner had committed the deed in the heat of passion, and under strong provocation, advising him to plead guilty to manslaughter as the wisest course he could take.

Young and full of life, all that this implied sent a shiver through Walter's veins; for a moment his courage faltered, but it was only for a moment.

"I honor you for your frankness, and were I in your place, I should, no doubt, take the same view of the case that you do. But I cannot plead guilty to a lie. If I live, it must be with no such stigma upon my name as this. If I die upon the scaffold, as die I may, I shall die protesting with my last breath my innocence."

It was not these words only, but the look and tone in which they were spoken, that carried with them such strong conviction to Mr. Cameron's heart.

"You may be certain that I shall make every effort to save you from so terrible a fate, and hope I shall succeed."

Mr. Cameron had felt, all along, that nothing could clear his client but the discovery of the real criminal, but all the efforts he had put forth had failed to lead to the discovery of the slightest clue.

In addition to all his other discouragements, he had to breast the tide of public opinion, which, from the first, had set strongly against his client.

This, together with the deep interest taken in the case by all classes, was very apparent the first day of the trial, it taking the greater part of it to impanel a jury.

The murder and all the strange, mysterious circumstances that surrounded it had been the one absorbing topic of conversation for weeks previously, and the courthouse was crowded, people coming for miles around to witness the trial.

There was a profound hush when the prisoner entered.

Though somewhat paler and thinner, those familiar with his face did not see in it the change they had anticipated.

Irene accompanied her husband, taking a seat beside him.

Her romantic marriage, which had been blazoned by the papers from one end of the Union to the other, together with the surpassing beauty, that was supposed to be the powerful incentive to the crime, made her almost as much an object of interest as the prisoner.

Irene was hardly conscious of the full weight of the evidence against her husband until she heard it solemnly rehearsed in all its details from the witness-stand.

The encounter between the prisoner and the deceased on the steps of the hotel had been witnessed by several, and though John was clearly proven to be the aggressor, the unfortunate language used by Walter bore very hard against him.

Young Vernon testified to receiving the letter from the prisoner and giving it to the deceased. This letter was produced in court, being found on the body of the murdered man, the crimson stains upon it causing a thrill of horror

to run through the veins of the dense crowd.

The signature and concluding part of it were torn off, but it was evidently a stern and imperative demand that he should meet the writer at the old deserted house where the murder occurred.

As we have before stated, the handwriting was startlingly similar, and when the notebook was produced from which, as the reader will remember, Walter had torn a leaf, and it was found to fit exactly, a murmur ran through the court, and not a person in it, with the exception of the devoted wife, whose confidence in her husband's innocence never once faltered, had any doubt of the prisoner's guilt.

To counterbalance all this, Mr. Cameron had little to bring forward except abundant proof of the prisoner's strict integrity. Indeed, the many instances that were related of the tenderness and goodness of his heart, especially to the poor, among whom he had a large practice, constrained people to feel that his love for his beautiful young wife, combined with his fear of losing her, had, for the time being, submerged his whole nature. In no other way could they account for the act so entirely at variance with his whole previous life.

The accused was allowed to testify and speak in his own behalf.

Very carefully did he go over the whole mass of the overwhelming evidence against him. He went back to the time when he first saw the mysterious stranger on the road; he related minutely his first and second visit to the deserted house, his reasons for going thither, and all that he saw and heard.

"It is my sincere and solemn conviction," he said, in conclusion, "that the stranger, whoever he may be, committed the crime of which I am accused, and for which I have to suffer the awful penalty. I blame none of you for believing me guilty. I can but acknowledge that the evidence, though purely circumstantial, is strongly against me. But the Searcher of all hearts knows that I am innocent, and to Him"—here he raised his hand upward—"I commit my cause!"

Mr. Cameron's plea on behalf of his client was a masterpiece of oratory. Wisely ignoring facts, he confined himself to a strong and earnest appeal to the feelings, with the hope, as he after-

ward acknowledged, of modifying the result that he felt was inevitable.

With the summing up of the judge and instructions to the jury the case rested.

The jury were out only half an hour, and the grave look upon their faces, as they filed slowly in, showed what their verdict was, even if it had not been a foregone conclusion.

The foreman's voice faltered, and his eyes were wet with tears, as he said:

"Guilty, with a strong recommendation to mercy."

Through all these terrible hours of suspense, of alternate hope and fear, Irene had sat beside her husband, her left hand clasped in his right.

As these words fell like a heavy knell upon her ears, she struggled silently for some moments against the deadly sickness that overpowered her.

Then bending her head, she whispered:

"Courage, beloved! We shall not long be parted."

A scornful and derisive laugh broke the solemn hush of that crowded room, falling like an electric shock upon the nerves of the excited throng.

It proceeded from a woman, who, pressing through the crowd of officers and lawyers, now stood within the bar.

Mounting the witness-stand, she threw back her veil, revealing a face so young, and yet so old, so fair, and yet with a wretched, despairing expression stamped upon every feature that made it terrible to look upon.

Those black, glittering eyes flashed around a look that was at once scornful and defiant.

Another laugh, and still another, burst from the lips. Then stretching forth her hand, she cried:

"It is time that this wretched farce was ended. Oh! just judge! oh! wise jury! you have condemned an innocent man to death! It was I that shot John Remington!"

The prisoner, whose manner had betrayed strong agitation, now sprang to his feet.

"It is the mysterious stranger! Saved! Thank God—thank God!"

The woman's eyes softened as she looked upon the face of the speaker.

"You are right; I am the stranger whom you met in that old, deserted house, and twice before that. You were

kind to me, and hard and cruel as my heart has grown, I could not see you perish. Besides, life is nothing to me now—nothing!"

The witness now turned her eyes upon the judge, and from thence to the jury.

"I have been here every day since the trial commenced. All that the prisoner has testified to is true, of which I can furnish ample proof. I wrote the letter about which there has been so much dispute and question—wrote it, as he has told you, on a leaf torn from his notebook. It is not strange that our handwriting should be similar, for he taught me the first characters that I ever attempted to form.

"The disguise I wore you will find among some bushes back of that old house.

"With this"—here she drew a pistol from beneath her cloak—"I took the life, a thousand times dearer to me than my own. God knows I meant not to do this; but his refusal to do me justice, the taunts and reproaches that he heaped upon my head, maddened me. A moment later I would have given worlds, had they been mine, to recall the rash act."

After a moment's pause, the witness continued:

"I have come forward to clear the innocent, to deliver up the life that is forfeit. But it must be in my own way. I will die as he died. Thus I cheat the gallows!"

A sharp report rang through the courthouse, and with the blood gushing from a wound in the chest, Josie Harmon fell forward upon the floor.

There is now little more to tell.

Walter was honorably acquitted; the truth of this late confession being proved beyond the shadow of a doubt.

The tide of public opinion now turned so strongly as to almost take the form of an ovation; but Walter turned from all the testimonials of renewed confidence and regard that were lavished upon him to the one faithful heart that had believed him innocent when every one else deemed him guilty.

"Said I not," cried Irene, in reply to Mr. Goodspeed's heartfelt congratulations, "that the God, in whom you taught me to trust, would not let me trust in Him vainly?"

The good old man's eyes filled with tears.

"According to thy faith has the Lord dealt with thee, daughter. To Him be all the praise."

Mrs. Remmington died a few days later—happily oblivious, to the last, of the bereavement whose shock occasioned it. Her husband survived her only a short time. He did not go, however, until he had seen and acknowledged the injustice he had done his nephew.

Josie Harmon's self-inflicted wounds did not prove fatal.

She was tried for the crime she con-

fessed to committing, being acquitted on the ground of insanity.

She was removed to a private asylum, where she is maintained at Irene's charge, who often visits her.

And what of Walter and Irene?

They are living in their beautiful home, surrounded by loved and loving children; happy in each other, and happy in the happiness they are able to impart to all around them; remembering their dark days only to enhance their gratitude to the Giver of all good for all His mercies.

[THE END.]

ISABEL LORNE'S PUNISHMENT.

BY MARY GRACE HALPINE.

OSCAR HOWARD stood before Isabel Lorne, pleading with her for a word of hope, as the condemned might plead for life at the foot of the gallows.

Accustomed as she was to such things, even she was startled by the fierce eloquence of the impassioned words that fell from his lips.

"I cannot give you what I do not possess," she said, coldly withdrawing her hand from his too ardent clasp. "I have no heart. Don't mistake me," she added, as she noted the fierce jealousy aroused by these words. "It is not that I have bestowed it on anyone. I have no heart to give. I don't think I ever had any. Men have come to me, asking of me what you ask, and telling me the same story. They spoke, as you have spoken, of feelings and emotions which are utterly incomprehensible to me, and in which I could not share if I would."

Young Howard turned his eyes steadily upon the face of the speaker, so rarely beautiful in outline and coloring, but as calm and passionless as a summer lake. He raised his hand to Heaven, as if invoking upon her head a voiceless curse.

"Your time will come!"

The door closed upon the speaker, but there was something in that haggard face, in those despairing eyes, that haunted Isabel for some moments after.

"I wonder if I shall ever love?" she murmured, as drawing down the sofa cushion under her head, she settled herself for the afternoon nap with which she usually refreshed herself for the evening. "I hope not, if it is going to affect me as it does most people."

"How very shocking!"

The sun had disappeared behind the western hills, and refreshed by the quiet sleep she had, Isabel stepped out upon the veranda when this exclamation fell upon her ear, uttered by one of the excited group that had gathered in one corner of it.

"What is it?"

"Young Howard has shot himself!"

Fortunately, the gathering shades of twilight concealed the face that suddenly blanched at these words, and those present were too much absorbed in their own feelings of astonishment and horror to notice the unsteadiness in Isabel's voice, as she said:

"What could have induced him to do that?"

"He was, without question, insane," said a grave, pompous-looking man among the group.

"Insanity is hereditary in his family; his mother died insane."

Isabel drew a long sigh of relief.

"Oh, that accounts for it, then."

"Who is he?"

And again Isabel's eyes wandered across the room to where a plainly-dressed man was standing, rather distinguished-looking, and yet not sufficiently so to warrant the attention and interest he seemed to excite.

There was an unmistakable air of triumph in Mrs. Fane's manner, as she replied:

"La! my dear, don't you know? It's Maurice Dudley, the new arrival. So charming and yet such an oddity! Half the women are crazy after him, though it's easy seen that he don't care for them. And he don't mind their knowing it, either. What do you think he said to Mrs. Hinds, the other evening, when she offered to introduce him to you—'the reigning belle,' as she called you?"

Isabel saw and felt the malice that lurked beneath those smooth, dulcet words.

"How should I know?" she said, with an air of indifference that was feigned, as Mrs. Fane well knew.

"I've no especial liking for reigning belles," he said, as grand as the Grand Mogul himself. Wasn't it an odd speech, my dear?"

"I suppose he meant it to be odd," retorted Isabel, unable wholly to conceal the wound her vanity had received from the malicious eyes that were watching her. "It's the height of some people's ambition to be odd. I don't see anything very alarming about him. I can point you to half a dozen men in our own set better looking than he."

"Ah! but you should hear him talk! He's been everywhere, I should say. And then he has such a musical voice and such expressive eyes! Take him altogether, he is the most fascinating man I ever met, though you might find a score that are handsomer."

With these words, Mrs. Fane walked away, taking with her the pleasant assurance that she had left her "dear friend" as uncomfortable as she could desire. Not that she had any especial cause for ill-will, except Isabel's superior personal attractions, though perhaps our feminine readers will consider that to be cause enough.

After this, Isabel met Mr. Dudley often—or, rather, saw him; for, much to her chagrin and mortification, he still continued to decline, at least tacitly, her acquaintance, which most men

who were thrown within the sphere of her influence were so eager to obtain.

Stimulated by this unwanted opposition, Isabel determined to bring about an introduction, not doubting but that then the way would be clear to her for avenging the slight that had been offered her.

Thus being effected, she lost no time in calling into play the seductive charms with which nature had so lavishly endowed her, never doubting that they would prove irresistible.

But her success was far from flattering. After the first few words, dictated by common courtesy, Mr. Dudley seemed hardly aware of her presence.

So accustomed was Isabel to homage and adulation that she inwardly resented this as a personal wrong, and she redoubled the arts and attentions that had never been exercised vainly until now. Not that their object seemed altogether inensible to them; there were times when she sought her society, causing her heart to acknowledge the wondrous fascination, not only in his conversation, but in every look and tone. But she noticed—with a fierce jealousy at her heart of which she had not supposed herself capable—how easily he could turn from her to any other, forgetting, apparently, her very existence.

She could not but know that he took a strong interest in her, but of what nature this interest was she tortured herself vainly to determine. She often caught his eyes fixed intently upon her, a strange, inscrutable look in them, which made her heart flutter with the vague and dangerous hopes to which it gave rise.

Mr. Dudley's moods were very unequal, to say the least. Sometimes he saw her almost daily, and then absented himself for days at a time; sometimes he came into the room where she was, without speaking to or even looking at her, and then he was almost lover-like in his looks and manner.

In this way Isabel was kept for some weeks in a state of alternate hope and fear, thus experiencing the torments she had herself inflicted so often and so remorselessly.

"I thought that you did not believe in love?"

The two—Isabel and Mr. Dudley—were alone together, which seldom occurred.

Isabel's heart beat fast; there was something in the look and tone of the speaker that strengthened her hopes almost to certainty. She determined to bring matters to a crisis.

"That was before—" the eyes lifted to those that were regarding her so intently, were wondrously bright—"before I met you, Maurice."

"And so you do love me, Isabel?"

A swift, burning flush swept up over her cheeks, even to the temples.

"More than life—better than my own soul!"

The silence that followed fell coldly on the heart that gave utterance to this passionate out-

burst, and the look which met the questioning glance that Isabel lifted to that dark, stern face, struck more colder still.

But she had gone too far to retreat now.

"Even as I believe—as I *must* believe, you love me."

"Did I ever say that I loved you?"

Isabel was silent for some moments. He never had, as she was humbled and sick at heart to remember.

"Not in words, perhaps, but there are ways, there are looks, far more eloquent."

"True. But did *you* never look a love that you did not feel?—filling the cup of hope and joy to the very brim, and dashing it to earth as it was raised to the eager lip!"

She *had* done this, many, many times, as she well knew. But she had no thought for this now.

"You do love me, Maurice?"

Not many men could have resisted that appealing look.

Taking a locket from his breast, Maurice Dudley touched the spring, revealing a fair young face, almost infantine in its innocence and beauty.

"This is all that remains to me of the only woman I have ever loved—that I ever shall love. If there are such things as angels, she is one now."

The fierce jealousy that had taken possession of Isabel's heart was followed by a sense of relief at the concluding sentence. She made no effort to disguise the joy that flashed from the suddenly lifted eyes.

"Dead?"

"Murdered! And by hands as soft, and white, and beautiful as yours, lady."

Isabel shrank, she scarcely knew why, from that burning gaze.

"How—how terrible!" she faltered.

"Ay, it *was* terrible, as you will find. Woman, it was *you* that murdered her!"

"I?"

"You! Do you remember Oscar Howard, he whom your vile arts drove to despair, to madness, to death? He was her brother, her only brother, and when the terrible tidings reached her, her gentle heart broke. Now, farewell. Tomorrow, at this time, I shall be many miles from here."

The despair, the agony in Isabel Lorne's face, was something terrible to look upon.

"But you will return? Oh, Maurice, I repent—I repent! Do not utterly forsake me!"

"I shall never return! My work here is done.

In your victim's letter to his sister he related your words to him the last time he saw you. I came to revenge his death and hers, who fell by your hand as well; to teach you that you have a heart that can feel, and love, and suffer as other hearts do. May this knowledge make you a better, if not a happier woman. Farewell forever!"

What a Jealous Man Saw on Christmas Eve.

By MARION HARLAND,

Author of "Alone," "The Hidden Path," "Moss-Side," "Sunnybank," "Phemie's Temptation," Etc., Etc

CHAPTER I.

Pleasant parlors, comfortably and handsomely furnished, cheerily bright with the radiance of lamps on mantel and table, and a heaping grate of coals all aglow, as was meet on a December night—an illumination that seemed to prefigure something of the hilarity of the approaching Christmas. Scattered all through the apartments, standing, sitting, or strolling at will from etagere to picture, from music stand to cabinets of minerals and curious varieties, collected to instruct and entertain, groups of young people of both sexes in couples, trios and quartets, chatted and laughed and listened with the ease and familiarity of a family party.

There was a marked preponderance of the masculine element in the little gathering, a disparity which would have appeared singular to the spectator had he chanced to be a stranger to the town of Kingsville and this his debut in the social assemblies that convened in its classic precincts; one who did not know that as the seat of two old and eminently respectable institutions of learning—institutions which had furnished statesmen and divines for the country at large during three-quarters of a century—its society could boast not only of the large number, but the superior quality, of the gentlemen who helped compose it. Mrs. Fay, the mistress of the hospitable mansion whose state rooms we have thrown open for the reader's accommodation, was the widow of a deceased professor, who had held a distinguished rank in the college while living, and, dying, had bequeathed to his family an honorable name, no mean position in the community where he had labored and ruled; and, withal, an ample estate. It was no matter of marvel, then, that the well-appointed residence aforesaid should be

the chosen resort of ambitious seniors, unmarried professors, and the better class of citizen beaux, and when the still comely and winning hostess and her two fair daughters were taken into consideration, this sequence became a palpable necessity—as clear a case of facts and laws given, and conclusions deduced therefrom, as could have been proposed and argued by the good-looking Professor of Natural, Moral and Mental Philosophy, who was, at the moment we have selected as the starting point of our story, busily and happily engaged in looking over a folio of loose music, mostly sentimental ballads, with "sweet, pretty" vignettes, with Miss Kate Fay, the elder of the sisters, and his eyes said to others, as perhaps also his lips did to her, the more beautiful.

Twice had the professor and his companion examined each sheet of the collection very deliberately, and, it is to be supposed, with a corresponding degree of care, talking all the while in a low, skilfully modulated tone, doubtless with regard to the object sought, when Ellie Victor, a tricky mischief-lover, paused in her wanderings through the rooms and her innocent flirtation with a smitten senior, to ask, "Can I help you, Katie? What have you lost? or don't you know what you are looking for, Mr. Martyn?"

"A piece of manuscript music," returned Kate, a slight flush rising to her cheek, but evincing no other token of having heard the significant last clause of this speech. "Mary!" she called to her sister, "you had it this morning. What have you done with it?"

"What do you want?"

Mary glanced up smilingly from her low seat by the fire. She was about twenty years of age, with a sunshiny face, sweet, womanly, brown eyes, soft

and lustrous, and a profusion of dark hair slightly curling away from a finely shaped forehead. If Kate was handsome, her sister was as bewitching in her way. Just now her lap was full of bonbons, pink, white and gilt, with all manner of fanciful devices upon the envelopes and embodied in the crystallized sweets. These were a present bestowed by the latest comer, a merry rattle of a fellow, an artist from the nearest city. He had, as he chose to phrase it, "run over with the evening train, for a draught of domestic delight, to be imbibed in haste and thankfulness;" had flashed into the room, like a meteor or a rocket, about ten minutes before, shaken hands all around with an air of boyish and gleeful abandon; asked twenty questions and paid twenty compliments in a score of breaths, and settled himself satisfiedly, it seemed triumphantly, to the enjoyment of the proposed refreshment, by drawing up a brioche close to Mary Fay's ottoman; throwing himself down upon it and pouring into her lap the contents of a little French basket, or box, which he had brought in his hand.

"How pretty!" exclaimed Mary, taking up the bonbonniere, a gay, graceful trifle of ribbon and straw. "Where did you get it, Bertie?"

"A fair friend of mine, late from Paris, was the donor. Do you see the inscription on the card attached to the handle, 'Sweets to the sweet'? She sent it to me!" intensely complacent. "What are you all laughing at? She did! There was nothing ridiculous in her doing so that I can see, nor anything absurd in my transferring the gift—without her knowledge, of course—to Miss Molly, here."

"No one intimates that there is anything absurd or strained in the latter application of the motto," answered a gentleman near. "As to the original address of the card"—he finished the sentence by a shrug and a laugh.

"Never mind him!" said Mary, in reply to the pretended discomfiture and speechless indignation of her admirer. "You and I know better than—what did you say, Kate?" interrupting herself as her sister's appeal reached her.

"The song you were copying this morning for Cornelia Blythe—Signor Rossi's new composition. Did you finish it?"

"Nearly—so nearly that you can play

it without difficulty. You will find it upon my desk, in the library."

Professor Martyn accompanied Miss Fay from the room to assist in the search, which did not occupy more time than might have been expected, probably less than it would have done had it taken place prior to Ellie Victor's attack. He it was who retained possession of the manuscript when the two returned to the company. As he arranged it upon the piano rack with something of a flourish, another paper slipped from within the opened sheet and fluttered to the floor. Ellie Victor swooped down upon it like a swallow upon a fly.

"Here is a coincidence!" she cried, in her high, merry tones that pealed through the parlors like silvery bells. "This is the identical document I was telling you about, Mr. Beekman. I'll read it aloud. Silence—good people—please! The attention of this intelligent and discriminating audience is solicited to the following original, graphic and slightly satirical stanzas. They are, we may be permitted to remark, the joint production of a pair of damsels at present unknown to fame, but who do not intend to pine in unmerited obscurity much longer. The poem is entitled 'A Christmas Invitation,' and was designed as a bait to allure into our charmed and charming circle a fair city belle!"

"Ellie!" ejaculated Mary Fay, darting forward with a suddenness that sent sugar plums, comfits and candied kisses flying in all directions, a carnival shower of confectionery, "are you crazy? Give that to me! Who gave you permission to exhibit it?"

Ellie whirled away lightly as a feather dances on a summer breeze, holding the paper tightly behind her back.

"Keep quiet, can't you, Molly? Nobody would have suspected your share in the authorship if you had not betrayed it yourself. Isn't the gem mine as well as yours, and do you think that I will consent to have it hidden from sight and knowledge forever? Stop her there, some of you, or you will miss the rarest treat you ever had in your lives!"

And the flushed and eager pursuer found herself encompassed by a barrier of outstretched arms and locked hands, hastily formed about her; in the center of which magic ring she stood, foiled and pouting, yet laughing still.

"The poem! the poem!" was the general acclamation.

There was one exception in the person of Walter Blythe, a young lawyer of Kingsville, tall and rather stately in figure, with a grave, intellectual countenance that had scarcely relaxed with amusement amidst all the uproar going on about him. Quietly undoing two of the links in the living chain, he approached the prisoner, and said in a suppressed voice: "If you have any reason for disliking to have that read, I think I can prevent it."

"Oh, it is not worth a scene!" said Mary, in the same subdued key. "It is ridiculous farrago—a pack of nonsense, that is all! I meant to send it to Cornelia—your cousin. There is no great harm in it, silly doggerel though it is."

"Silence!" reiterated the self-elected reader, stepping upon the ottoman Mary had quitted. "I must preface the delivery of the 'poem,' as you are pleased to style it, by the remark that it is an *impromptu*!"

"Written for the occasion! Good! Go on!" cried the auditory, and she desisted from further preamble.

"Your Christmas will be dull, of course, I hear you say in gentle pity—
'I promise you that ought could force
Me, at that season, from the city.'

Spare your regrets—by us, I fear,
Your kindly sighs will be unheeded.
'Though to our hearts your love is dear,
And sympathy is sweet—when needed!
But oh! what charming times we'll have!
Old friends, new friends, and dear ones
meeting,

With merry hearts, and raiment brave,
And frank, unfeigned, and joyous
greeting.

"We are a merry group of girls;
And first I place upon the list her
Of placid mien and glossy curls—
Kate—our darling elder sister."

There was a pleasant, affectionate murmur of applause, and every eye turned to where stood gentle Kate—a sweet lily that was fast being transformed into a rose, as she bowed with involuntary grace at the unexpected allusion to herself. Professor Martyn looked radiant—a beam of satisfaction that was well-nigh quenched in sheepishness, or what would have been sheepishness in a less handsome and more bashful man—when his turn came.

"And Laura next—over whose brow
No cloud of grief or care is glooming;
'Twould glad your heart to see her now,
Her step so light, her cheek so bloom-
ing!"

Laura Elbertson—an amiable, sensible girl, to whom nature's only gift of beauty was her frank, agreeable expression—smiled, not dissatisfiedly, at the adroitly truthful compliment.

"My blush comes in next!" the reader interrupted herself to say. "The audience will please give me due credit for strict adherence to the text, and a lofty disregard of personal feelings—mock modesty, and the like."

"Ellie—our bright and sparkling one—
Whose sunny face so beams with glad-
ness,
That e'en the pearly drops that run
O'er it, can leave no trace of sadness."

"The English prose of which is"—explained Mary Fay—"that when she cries, it does not make her eyes and face red."

"Thank you!" rejoined Ellie. "And now comes the cream of the epistle!"

"You know I hate the so-called beau,
A being born but to provoke us,
Who thinks, to escape the apes below,
We'll gladly here to monkeys yoke us!
Our beaux are of a different sort;
There's Martyn, rich in manly graces;
Who by his whiskers is not caught,
Won't fall in love with handsome faces.
And 'Bertie,' with his ready wit,
From a fount of spirits overflowing,
Railing at those who sullen sit,
Nor enjoy the world while it is going."

The artist executed a profound salaam, laying his hand upon his heart with an overstrained affectation of conceit and deprecation that was irresistibly mirth-provoking.

"And Morris, too, always the same
True nobleman that Nature made him;
Your coz, who honor does the name,
The highest praise that could be paid
him!"

Mr. Morris bowed, in response to the bright glance dealt him by the reader, a courteous and grateful obeisance. Mr. Blythe had retained his position by Mary's side, still dignified, still unsmiling; his whole appearance indicative of a species of contempt, if not of displeasure, at the frolic which the others relished.

"I ought to feel flattered, I suppose," he said aside to his neighbor, as the reading was resumed—four or five stanzas yet remaining before the conclusion of the "poem." "I should render very thankful acknowledgments for the notice bestowed upon so humble an indi-

vidual as myself, although I am only designated as your correspondent's cousin, and the highest praise given me is that I am unworthy to bear the same name as herself. Some people are born to shine by reflected light alone."

The girl looked up quickly into his clouded face. "You surely will not take offence at such a trifle! I can assure you that a compliment was intended, however awkwardly it may have been expressed."

"Undoubtedly! The writer is explicit in the declaration that all is said in my favor that could be adduced. I do not complain, nor do I claim for myself the possession of any one characteristic virtue or attraction, such as ready wit or exuberance of spirits, for example."

"I understand. That sarcasm, at any rate, is unworthy of you!" And Mary walked with raised head and kindling eye to the other side of the room.

The doggerel rhymes were all delivered during the little by-play, and Miss Victor descended from her rostrum, attended by the applause of her companions.

"But it was truly a joint composition!" Blythe heard her say in reply to an inquiry from some one. "That is, Molly wrote it, I, meanwhile, suggesting and criticising. It does us credit, does it not?"

"Aha!" said Bertie Gwynne, meaningly. "That accounts for the otherwise unpardonable omission of Miss Mary Fay's name in the 'merry group of girls!'" He scribbled something upon the back of a letter. "In default of a more worthy mention of one who deserves the best that can be said of her, how will this do to supply the deficiency?"

Ellie read it with an exclamation of delight. "Here, dear friends, is a genuine, bona-fide impromptu!"

"In turn, her of the glancing eye.

Neither of smiles nor blushes chary;
With trusting heart and fancies high—
Our well-beloved, poetic Mary!"

"Confound the fellow's impertinence!" muttered Walter Blythe between his teeth, turning away in ill-concealed disgust from the chattering throng, who greeted the reading of the interpolated stanza with the liveliest satisfaction, evidencing either extreme willingness to be pleased, or that the subject treated of

by the "impromptu" was popular with all. "A forward, presuming puppy! What can she see to admire in him? To me he is simply unbearable!"

In this opinion he stood alone, if one was to judge from the smiles and gay sayings that followed Gwynne's progress through the rooms.

"You know he is a privileged character," said Katie Fay, in mild defence of the saucy favorite, when Walter "wondered" to her, more pettishly than was consistent with politeness or amiability, "that she could listen patiently, much less admiringly, to the flippant nonsense that passed current as witticisms!"

"Privileges how earned, or by whom bestowed?" he asked, curtly, and Kate only returned:

"Oh, nobody minds what Bertie says! He is such a madcap, and, as we all know, has one of the best hearts in the world."

Clearly Mr. Walter Blythe was in an ill humor, and, like the malcontent prophet of old, he considered that he had a right to be angry. He was not naturally or habitually an unreasonable man, and, in extenuation of his present ungenial mood, it may as well be stated, at once, that he was very much in love, and had begun of late to conceive that he had grounds for jealousy. He had been betrothed to Mary Fay for six or seven months, and, while he may have failed to do justice to some of her finest traits, he certainly esteemed himself, and was esteemed by many others, a most happy and fortunate man in having won her for his own. General observers declared them to be a well-matched couple, and those who knew them more intimately did not demur at this verdict, although some hinted sagely at his stubborn prejudices, easily awakened and difficult to overcome; at his somewhat hasty temper and ultra-fastidiousness upon divers subjects, and others shook doubting heads over the flow of native gayety that rendered Mary thoughtless at times, and the touch of pride which gave strength and impulse to a character otherwise facile to docility—childlike in its trustfulness and simplicity. As for the betrothed maiden, she had often said to herself that she loved Walter the better for the trifling differences in their temperaments and tastes. She was essentially social in feeling and practice, and loved fun as dearly as did the vivacious Ellie Victor, who was her own best-be-

loved comrade and confidante. Nevertheless, she confessed to a thrill of pleasure in the consciousness that she and she alone could beguile the grave scholar from his books and briefs, to become a pleased spectator, if not an active participant in the innocent amusements and hilarious converse of "the set," in which she was a leader and prime favorite. She was secretly very proud of her conquest; exultation she had the womanly wisdom to conceal from him.

For four months the course of their love was ominously smooth and clear, and neither had a doubt as to the continued tranquility of its flow. Then came the trouble in the person of Mr. Herbert Gwynne, an early playfellow of Mary's, and, as she laughingly owned, one of her girlhood's lovers; artist, poet and musician, who, returning from a three years' residence abroad, pitched his moving tent for a few weeks, or months, or years, as his fickle fancy might dictate, in the neighboring city of P—, and straightway fell, or, as it seemed to Mr. Blythe's startled perceptions, rushed, into the very reprehensible habit of running over to Mrs. Fay's two, three and four times per week. From his first call he was adopted into the family circle, for the sake of former days—said Mrs. Fay and her daughters—by virtue of consummate assurance, as Mr. Blythe decided inwardly. For a while Walter was able to disguise, with very tolerable success, his irritation at the frequent and often most unwelcome intrusions of the "traveled monkey," as he pettishly dubbed him, upon the seasons hitherto consecrated to tete-a-tete interviews between the affianced pair. It was comparatively easy to endure these vexations, while he believed that they were as obnoxious to Mary as to himself. At length he grew impatient of her smiling reception of the unceremonious guest, when a polite show of indifference, or the faintest tinge of annoyance in her demeanor would have sufficed to discourage a repetition of the offence. There was a point at which civility ceased to be expedient, and the beaming smile, the outstretched hand and cordial word of greeting, which the young lady had ever in readiness for her old playmate, verged upon insincerity as viewed from her lover's standpoint.

One evening, after an unusually aggravating trial of this kind, Walter felt

himself called upon to expostulate with his betrothed upon the unnecessary exhibition of gratification that had, beyond doubt, deluded the young painter into the persuasion that his coming was most opportune, and his society the most congenial that she could have enjoyed.

"Your kind heart leads you a little too far at times, my dearest," he said, tenderly. "It is very beautiful and amiable in you to exercise such self-denial, but, surely, in this case extreme warmth of hospitality is uncalled for, and attended with inconvenient results."

"But, Walter"—was the ingenious response, uttered in evident surprise and perplexity—"I was not hypocritical! I was really as glad to see Bertie as I seemed to be. His visits always bring me pleasure."

"Indeed! Then I beg your pardon for my mistaken officiousness," retorted the lover, in a hurt, icy tone.

"How have I displeased you? Is there any harm in my liking to see and talk with an old friend?" urged Mary, yet more puzzled.

"None, whatever. I do not presume to regulate your conduct, still less your feelings, in regard to this or any other matter. Only"—softening into the pathetic—"I was so vain as to imagine that there were times when my companionship was preferable to that of transient visitors, however entertaining they might chance to be."

"Such a supposition argues a moderate degree of penetration on your part, but no vanity," replied Mary, and her smile of arch affection banished the cloud from Walter's brow, and hushed his complainings for the time.

The calm was of short duration. The next evening, upon presenting himself in Mrs. Fay's parlor at the early hour that generally insured him a brief period for uninterrupted chat with his lady-love before the entrance of other visitors, he was disagreeably surprised at finding the ground preoccupied. The room was lighted only by the fire—the ruddy, uncertain illumination which they, as is the taste of most other courting couples, preferred to more powerful and steadier gleams, and in the center of the dusky glow cast by the blazing coals sat Mary and Bertie Gwynne! Blythe knew him at a glance; the well-formed head and sweeping beard were seen in profile, bent toward his companion, in an attitude strongly and unpleasantly suggestive of

confidential interchange of thoughts and feelings; or, as Walter's jealous fancy would have it, of love-making. Gwynne was talking in a low, earnest tone, and two words reached Walter's ear as the door opened: "Mr. Blythe." The entrance of the person named prevented further speech.

He could not be mistaken, for they were uttered distinctly; nor could he fail to detect the momentary consternation betrayed by both at his appearance. Mary's voice shook perceptibly in wishing him "good-evening" and Mr. Gwynne's observation upon the chilly night was infelicitous, and rather too glibly enunciated for his rapid tongue.

"She will tell me all about it by and by, unless the fellow has been talking downright love to her." Walter tried to ease the pain at his heart by saying, "and I don't believe she would let him go so far as that."

Nevertheless, he watched, with uneasy curiosity, her shaking fingers and crimson cheeks as she lighted the lamp, a task slowly and clumsily performed. He was doomed to wait in vain for the elucidation of the little mystery. Mary never afterward referred to the matter, nor did he.

This was the inconsiderable nucleus of the gathering mass of doubt and fearing that gradually overshadowed the heaven of his trust in her; made his spirits variable; his language oftentimes abrupt and petulant; his perceptions untrue, and his conclusions unjust. Without guessing at the real cause of this altered behavior, Mary could not but notice and be grieved by it. She surmised correctly, from many unmistakable signs, that her lover had conceived a prejudice against her old friend, but that he was, in point of fact, jealous of the position occupied by Bertie in her regard, and daily grew more uncertain as to his own standing in her affections, never occurred to her. Nor did she consider herself bound to avoid an innocent acquaintance, because, forsooth, Mr. Blythe happened not to admire him. She said to herself that if Walter's dislike were not overcome by the time of their marriage, her pleasant intercourse with Bertie must, as a matter of course, cease, or at least be greatly restricted and different in its character; until that date she assumed to herself the right to select her own associates, and to mingle freely with her mother's guests. At heart, she was a little sore,

and not a little annoyed sometimes, at Walter's coldness and brusquerie to her favorite. "He might be civil to him, if only because he knows I like him!" she argued, in her simple-hearted ignorance.

To-night she had let a sign of this feeling escape her; had spoken for the first time in anger to her betrothed husband; for the first time admitted and cherished an unkind thought of him. "Will he make me despise him in the end?" she said bitterly to herself, when she left him after her retort upon his sneer at Bertie.

Walter, on his part, was amazed, wounded and indignant at the unlooked-for rejoinder; less displeased with her, however, than with the cause of this, their initiatory quarrel. The more he pondered over his grievances the more savage was his mood toward the unlucky rhymester. "Trusting heart and fancies high," indeed! What right had the jackanapes to know anything about her feelings and fancies? Was not the fact of his undertaking the delineation of her character an arrogation of his ability and the privilege to represent her properly before the less fortunate many who had not had his opportunities of studying her, this rare misall which he, Walter Blythe, would have had clasped closely from all touch and sight except his own! "Our well-beloved, poetic Mary!" Blythe's wrath waxed to its height as he rehearsed and dwelt upon this line. No other man should, with impunity, call his affianced wife "well-beloved!"

"Have you any message for Cornelia?" he asked, coldly, when he prepared to leave with the rest at the close of the evening. "I shall be in the city to-morrow, I think."

Mary looked troubled. Never before since their betrothal had he neglected to avail himself of his prerogative to linger a few minutes, oftener a few hours, after the departure of other company, to say over the "good-nights" so sweet to lovers' lips and lovers' ears.

"No, thank you," she said, trying to speak cheerfully, "or nothing but my love, if you see her, and mention that we cannot give up the hope of having her with us on Christmas day."

"Mary! Mary Fay!" called out Ellie Victor's ringing tones. "Is your letter to Cornelia ready? Mr. Gwynne is waiting for it. He wants to catch the twelve-o'clock train, so you must hurry!"

With the memory of a stern, reproachful face burning in upon brain and heart, Mary hastened to inclose the luckless doggerel in an envelope, and direct it to "Miss Cornelia Blythe, No. 70 — Place, P——. By Mr. Gwynne."

"I could have told him that Bertie had asked me to allow him to be the bearer, and I promised that he should, before I knew that he was going to the city," she thought, resentfully, as she put the packet with a smile no one could guess was forced, into her postman's hand. "But if he chooses thus wilfully to misinterpret my motives and to sit in judgment upon every action, I will not stoop to set him right!"

Walter's hat and overcoat were so overheaped by others that he was obliged to wait some minutes in the hall after making his adieux in the parlor before the missing articles could be found and identified. He was still stooping over the commingled mass of wraps and tugging at a sleeve, the lining of which seemed familiar, when he overheard a colloquy in the doorway behind him.

"On Wednesday, then, at the usual place!" said young Gwynne, softly, imploringly. "Do not fail me! You do not know how much my heart!"

Walter lost the rest of the sentence, but the answer was audible.

"Never fear! have not I as much at stake as yourself?"

He recognized the agitated murmur with wildly throbbing pulses. Careless as to whether they saw him or not, he seized his cloak and strode out, without waiting to put it on; his soul a seething chaos of suspicion, incredulity, and grieved love. What was the clue to this thickening mystery? What was he to believe? What to fear? His noble nature made one mighty effort to assert its supremacy in his last waking thought as the dawn penetrated his chamber after a sleepless night. "Whatever else I may question, I must not doubt her goodness and purity, or her constancy to me!"

CHAPTER II.

Another evening found Walter early at Mrs. Fay's. He was expected, as he perceived at a glance upon entering the parlor. The lamp was turned down to a dim spark, like a drowsy eye indulgently winking at all tender scenes; the fire

was merry and busy, a hundred tongues of variously tinted flames leaping and quivering over the red-hot bed of anthracite; his favorite chair was drawn into its corner, and beside it was the cushion, whereon it was always Mary's choice to sit during their heart talks. Mary herself met him midway in the room; gave him both hands, and lifted to his offered caress a face so expressive of deep, true affection and joyous welcome that the legion of doubts that had beset him all the day—fight and reason with them as he would—fled away like mists before the glad light of morning.

"You do care for me, then, darling!"

"Have you ever dared to believe the contrary?" was the retort, saucily loving; then, more seriously, she added: "If you are not secure in the possession of my love now, dear Walter, I am afraid that you will always remain an incorrigible infidel."

Then, if ever, was the time for him to speak, to avow, without reserve, what had been his temptations, his misgivings and tortures, but his courage deserted him. He could not mar the pure happiness of this hour by these details.

For a wonder they were left to themselves all the early part of the evening. A drizzling rain was falling that froze by the time it touched the earth, and other visitors kept away. Mrs. Fay was slightly indisposed, and had already retired to her chamber, and Kate's sympathetic heart warned her not to appear downstairs. They talked long, freely and earnestly—the two who hoped, at no distant day, to share one united and indivisible life; talked with a fulness of confidence, an out-gushing of feeling in word, look and action, that neither had ever displayed before. Bertie Gwynne's name was not once mentioned. This might have been an accidental omission on Mary's part; with Walter it was, in the outset, a studied avoidance of an offensive topic, a dread of touching the sore spot; afterwards, he forgot the very existence of his audacious rival.

Eleven o'clock struck as Blythe arose to depart.

"I had almost forgotten that I have papers to prepare which must go to the city to-morrow," he said. "Work for which I shall not have time in the morning."

Was it imagination, or did she start slightly as he said this? He could not

determine, although his arm enclasped her.

"Did you not go to-day, as you intended?"

"No, I was unavoidably detained in my office."

Then ensued a silence of some length, and an awkward constraint that was not many removes from coldness. Whatever was its cause, neither appeared disposed to recognize its existence, but Walter remarked the assumed carelessness with which Mary ended it by asking:

"What train will you probably take?"

"The 8.20, I think; but my mind is not quite made up as to that. I must be early in town."

Another pause, and he put a question in his turn.

"Why do you inquire? Have you any thought of going yourself?"

"I! Why, you know I went over twice last week, and I am too busy to run about much more before Christmas. To-morrow is Wednesday, remember, and Friday will be the 25th."

Instinctively, Walter's arm fell away from her waist. He did not need to be reminded that to-morrow was Wednesday. He had striven for twenty-four hours to forget that she had an appointment with Bertie Gwynne on that day. He believed now—and the thought gave him exquisite pain—that she was going to the city to keep this engagement, and that she was chagrined at finding that he would also be there. If Mary remarked his change of position, she did not attribute it to any altered feeling, for her next words were full of hope.

"I never before anticipated so delightful a Christmas. I was not happy last year. Do you recollect that we disagreed seriously about some trifling matter on Christmas eve?"

"Yes." He was looking moodily into the fire, and spoke abstractedly.

"And how we met at Mrs. Victor's. Christmas night, and behaved like a couple of foolish children, affecting not to be aware of one another's presence except when we met face to face? You were all devotion to Laura Elbertson—only devoted swains do not usually look so savage and gloomy as you did while trying to be agreeable: and I pretended. I dare say, with like success, to be interested and charmed by Will Beekman's syllabub chat. But my heart was aching all the while for one kind look or

word from you. Oh, dear, what hard work gayety was that night! And I had no right to ask or offer an explanation, for you had not then told me the pretty story you rehearsed in my willing ears some months later. I wonder if we shall ever behave so ridiculously again!" She laughed lightly in saying this, and clasping her hands over his arm, as she leaned upon it, gazed up in his face with a certain wistful tenderness.

"I hope we shall never again have cause to do so," was the quiet reply.

"There was no cause then, except in our disordered fancies. After all, clouds and storms have their mission, no less than sunshine. I never knew, until we had that apparently unfortunate misunderstanding, how much I prized your society—what I then chose to call your friendship."

None but an obstinate, or thoroughly soured nature could have resisted this strain of artless reminiscences. Blythe was not proof against the sweet fascination of language and look. With a sudden, passionate impulse, he drew her to his bosom, and pressed his lips again and again to hers.

"My precious one! I wish you could never forget the lesson thus learned! It is the only thing in which I excel you, dearest—in the strength and fervor of my love!"

"You have no right to say that. Walter! You should trust me!"

Here the door bell rang with a startling peal, and they had barely time to withdraw to a respectful and decorous distance apart from each other when Ellie Victor flashed into the room in all the glory of a full toilette.

"I stopped the carriage, as we were driving home, Molly, dear, seeing the light in here. We have had a stupid evening at Mrs. Hoyt's; you may thank your stars that you stayed at home! and I thought it wise to leave early, that I might be fresh for our expedition. Oh, Mr. Blythe! I declare I did not see that it was you until this instant—coming, as I did, from the darkness into a lighted room! I called, as I was about to say, Mary, to ask if you had any orders for town. I am going over in the morning, at a barbarously early hour. Think of it, Mr. Blythe, in the 8.20 train! Why, I am seldom up at that time on other days!"

"Mr. Blythe will be a fellow passen-

ger," said Mary. "You see that others can be as industrious as yourself."

"You don't say so!"

Why should the lively sprite look suddenly nonplussed, and cast a quick questioning glance at her friend? Was this fancy, also?

"I make no rash promises as to my movements, should this dull weather continue," she said, recovering herself. "Ten to one I shall oversleep myself, after all. I must not keep the horses and my gallant escort out there in the cold. Mary, my love, take pencil and paper and write down for me the address—name and all—of that French woman who does up laces and muslins in such heavenly style. I can't trust my memory with such things."

The address was a long one, and taxed the memory of the writer, for she paused twice or thrice, reflectively, before it was completed. Walter, by the purest accident, caught sight of the slip of paper as it was transferred to Ellie. There were four closely written lines upon it.

"All right! I shall not lose it!" Ellie tucked it into her belt. "Good-night, dearie! Good-night, Mr. Blythe! If you don't see me in the morning, you may conclude that the soporific draughts of small talk with which I have been pilled this evening have proved too much for my resolution of early rising!" And she skipped out.

Mr. Blythe made it his business to walk twice through the train on the following morning, which, by the by, was clear and frosty, and ascertained, beyond the possibility of a doubt, that Miss Victor was not one of his traveling companions. He could hardly have told why he was dissatisfied at the result of his search, or why he associated her non-appearance with Mary's secret errand to P—. Acute lawyer as he was, he had an uncomfortable impression that he was being outwitted by some one—he was not exactly certain whom; did not credit the theory of the effect of the drowsy draughts upon Miss Ellie's senses. He felt half-assured, indeed, that she was quite too wide awake for him.

Business claimed his exclusive attention after he reached the city; banished from his mind all thought of personal vexations or wrongs. It was past two o'clock when he parted from his client and took his way down the fashionable thoroughfare of the place in quest of a luncheon that might atone, in some

measure, for his hurried breakfast. He was in a sunny mood, and regaled himself, as he strolled along, by the pleasing reflection that he had performed an arduous and delicate piece of business in a masterly manner, and gained, besides the praise of his employer, a handsome fee by the transaction. Supplied with this flavorful sauce for a dinner, he reached a restaurant and walked in. The plate-glass windows of the establishment were crowded with Christmas emblems and every imaginable dainty befitting that season. The central ornament was a pyramid of hot-bouse fruit, and Blythe stopped just inside the entrance to inspect it. Standing thus, his attention was diverted to a carriage stopping before the next building—an eminent jeweler's. A gentleman sprang from it to the pavement, shut the door behind him, looked intently up, down and across the street, into the store itself, then unclosed the vehicle, and assisted two veiled ladies to descend.

The cavalier was Bertie Gwynne; his companions, in spite of the concealment of their features and their unremarkable attire, were as easily recognizable by the looker-on. Mary Fay and Ellie Victor!

A muttered exclamation burst from Walter's lips. Yet, why should he be surprised? Had he not heard the appointment for Wednesday? Was it not plain as daylight that Ellie's unseasonable visit of the preceding evening referred to this very scheme, whatever it was, and that Mary's penciled note designated the later train by which they were to leave Kingsville, in order to avoid an inopportune meeting with himself?

"Tricked! duped! why not betrayed and forsaken as well?" was his comment, as he drew himself into a seat beside a table, a position commanding a view of the carriage. "It is high time that I examined into the meaning of this wretched plotting! Why am I selected as its victim?"

He was in no condition to consider the matter dispassionately; to arrive at any rational solution of the enigma; yet a less prejudiced or less hasty man would, even if moved to an equal degree of anger, have suspended judgment until a further investigation of the case had proved the existence of evil in the mystery. There was nothing ignoble in Walter Blythe's character; still, he was hardly capable of exercising a lofty can-

dor of opinion, or a generous charity, where his personal dignity was wounded, his private feelings outraged. He had grown to dislike young Gwynne; therefore, his complicity in these underhand dealings was peculiarly distasteful. He was almost convinced that Mary regarded the artist with undue favor; ergo, their partnership in a plan for circumventing himself, and securing each other's company, must mean mischief, and mischief only. One thing was sure—and to this he reverted again and yet again, in his angry musings—whatever design was in process of incubation, his betrothed had trifled with him unwarrantably; deceived him grossly and deliberately; equivocated unpardonably! Moreover, was she not running directly counter to his known wishes in keeping up this clandestine intercourse with a man whom he could not abide? Did not this persistency of communication and association with him, carried on in partial secrecy, through fear, doubtless, of her lover's strictures, argue an infatuated fondness for the concealed puppy, an unconquerable relish for his society? And Ellie Victor—the pert minx! He ground his teeth at thought of her malicious enjoyment in the manoeuvres for thwarting and outgeneraling him. She was just the girl to delight in the office of confidant in any intrigue, the more complicated the better.

There were few more discontented and unhappy men in the length and breadth of that goodly city, on that 23d day of December, than was the promising young lawyer, who sat gnawing his lip and pulling savagely at his whiskers while with knit brows he affected to read the bill of fare presented by an obsequious waiter. Choosing sundry comestibles at random, to rid himself of the man's presence, he dismissed him with the order and resumed his watch of the carriage in front of the jeweler's. He had to wait a long time—so long that his oysters were stone cold when he finally recollected that he ought to make a feint of swallowing them. At last, when impatience was almost desperation, and his indignant broodings were hardening into resolves as indignant, he saw Gwynne emerge from the store, and after going through the same ceremony of inspecting the streets, as had attended his arrival, he beckoned to his fair charges, and they joined him. He assisted them

into the carriage, and as he did so, Mary's veil was blown or brushed aside, revealing a countenance, animated and happy, smiling upon her escort. Bertie placed himself upon the front seat, opposite her, looking supremely contented—the picture of delight, in fact, and the coachman drove on.

Well?

He had seen all that was to be gathered for the present; an "all" that may seem trivial and unimportant to the sensible, impartial reader, but which meant much, and weighed heavily with a proud, suffering, implacable man. Blythe looked and felt more like a judge prepared to try and, if need there was, to sentence a criminal, than a grieved lover, as he paid for the dinner he had not eaten and turned his back upon the restaurant.

He did not return until late that night, and it was eight o'clock on Christmas eve when he presented himself at Mrs. Fay's door. In the parlors all was light, and mirth, and bustle. A tall tree stood in the arch between the rooms, and a bevy of girls were fluttering about it, like humming birds, busy with streamers, gilt balls and colored candles. He caught but a glimpse of the lively tableau, through the half open door, as he passed on to the library where visitors were to be received on this evening. Here he was left in solitude for several minutes, a circumstance he would not have cared for at another time, but which now aggravated the sense of injury under which he labored. Mary came in, by-and-by, smiling and rosy with exercise and pleasure.

"Excuse my tardiness!" she began, too excited to note her suitor's lowering brow, "but we are all busy with the Christmas tree. We had to get it ready to-night, in order to judge of the effect by lamp-light, and so much of the design was mine that the girls would not let me leave them until I had instructed them how to carry on the work. I wish I could give you a peep at it, but gentlemen visitors are rigorously excluded for the present."

At this juncture the door unclosed and Mr. Gwynne appeared, his hands full of streamers.

"I beg pardon!" He halted in undissembled embarrassment. "I did not know that you were here, Mr. Blythe. I came to ask you, Mary, if you knew

where the red candles were put. We cannot find them, high or low."

Mary colored brightly, as was natural, at his entrance, inasmuch as she was standing by Walter's chair, her hand upon his shoulder, and Bertie must see that he had interrupted a love scene. Walter was not blind to their mutual confusion, nor backward in drawing his own inference from it. Having obtained the desired information, the intruder retired, without loss of time, inwardly execrating his luck for having forced upon him this awkward encounter. Mary drew a footstool to Walter's side and sat down, leaning lightly against his knee.

"I thought gentlemen visitors were rigorously excluded," he said, with a sardonic smile.

"I was about to add that Bertie was an exception," said Mary, innocently. "He met Ellie in the city, and volunteered his services for this evening. Having passed a winter in Germany, to which climate Christmas trees are indigenous, he is supposed to be more au fait to them than are we, to whom they are only known as exotics."

"Met Ellie in the city!" Further equivocation! Why not own that she had herself been one of the party?

"Mr. Gwynne is a fortunate individual," he remarked, sneeringly. "It seems only necessary for him to volunteer to act in any capacity, and he is accepted."

"He is popular, and is always willing to serve those whom he loves," joined Mary, firm in her friend's defence.

"Willingness which those who are so unhappy as not to belong to that class are apt to construe into meddling—disagreeable officiousness!" Walter pursued, losing control of his temper with each instant.

"The best of us are liable to be misunderstood," was Mary's answer, the rising glow upon her cheek contradicted by the calm dignity of her manner. "We had better not talk of Bertie, Walter, until you know and like him better. I am persuaded that you will, some day."

"You are oversanguine as to an event which I am far from considering desirable; but let that pass for the present. It would be folly for me to attempt to disguise from you, Mary, the truth that my faith in you is no longer so firm as it once was; that the occurrences of the last few weeks have done much towards changing my opinion of your character."

He plunged into the midst of the subject with savage abruptness, exasperated by the conversation that preceded it. "I believed you ingenuous, upright in thought and action, and faithful in your professed attachment for myself. I have been irresistibly driven to doubt all these things."

"By what circumstances, may I ask?"

Mary had turned very pale, and her clear tone was less steady than she would have had it, but there was a dangerous sparkle in her eye.

To his astonishment, Blythe's proofs were not directly producible. He thought he had them at his fingers' ends; but, "irresistibly driven" though he was, when he turned to summon the impelling forces, he found but trifles light as air. Mary's simple directness had put them all to flight. He could not, without a sacrifice, and an ignominious one, of his manliness, retail to her the petty occurrences that had been seized upon by his jealous imagination as evidence against her. A word here; a look there; now a whisper, accidentally overheard; then the unseen pencillings, which he chose to guess were treasonable to him; the recital would debase him in his own eyes and in hers. Yet the impression made by the aggregate of these was not removed; indeed, it appeared to grow more powerful under the irritation he experienced at this unforeseen balk in his proceedings. But one thing remained to him of sufficient importance to be handled with effect, and he hastily dragged this forward, leaving the rest to follow as they would.

"Why could you not tell me that you meant to go to the city, yesterday?" he demanded, more roughly than he was aware of. "Why, when I inquired if this were your intention, did you virtually deny that you had any such step in view? Why change your hour for starting, upon learning that I designed taking the same train? Why signify this alteration in your plans to your accomplice Miss Victor, under the pretence of writing the address of a laundress? What was the meaning of your secret appointment with your favored swain, Mr. Gwynne—an engagement which I heard him entreat you not to forget, and which you acknowledged was as momentous to yourself as to him? Why did you dread to walk the streets unveiled, yesterday, as is your custom, unless because of the consciousness that

your conduct was blamable, and that your companions would be objectionable to some person? Was that one myself—your betrothed husband?"

And having reached this climax in his examination of the prisoner at the bar, he paused for a reply with magisterial sternness.

"I am willing to believe that you do not insult me wantonly," said Mary, rising and speaking proudly. "But, if you desire an answer to any or all of your questions, your requisition must be made in a different tone and spirit. I deny the right of any one—much less a gentleman—to interrogate me in the strain you have seen fit to employ. It is unkind and rude. I could not respect myself if I submitted to it. Tell me what you wish to know, what you believe to have been my sin, and I will reply."

If Walter's self-command were in peril before, it was wrecked now.

"An ingenious subterfuge!" he said, scornfully. "For heaven's sake, let us make an end of clever evasions and double-dealing! They are foreign to my taste, congenial as they may be to yours. I have asked plain questions, and none that I did not conceive I had a perfect right to put to you—none that you need hesitate to answer, if your conscience is clear of the knowledge that you have practiced deception upon me, if you are guiltless of premeditated perfidy."

"Premeditated perfidy!" repeated Mary, meeting his accusing eye with a lofty disdain. "Dare you suspect me of that, Walter Blythe? Do you really mean that you doubt my fidelity to you? Do you accuse me of perfidy?"

"How can I do otherwise?"—and, his evil genius urging him on, he added, insanely—"she who can be false in one respect, will be in another. The woman who can connive with others to deceive her lover, deliberately and utterly, even in so trivial a matter as the least of the instances I have enumerated, will not shrink from sacrificing her plighted troth, if the temptation offers."

"There! you have said enough! If such is your judgment of my character and conduct; such the suspicions you have let outweigh my solemn vows of affection and constancy, we are better apart. Our union would only insure the lifelong misery of both. I thought you knew me better, that you would believe me incapable of such sins as those you charge me with. I see now that you

would never have understood me. We have made a great mistake—both of us—one that is best remedied by forgetfulness."

Before he could reply—before he fully divined her meaning, so misled was he by her seeming calmness, her unimpassioned tone and tearless eye—she had dropped her betrothal ring in his hand and was gone.

She went straight back to the parlor; replied with a smile and pleasant word to Katie's whispered exclamation of surprise at her speedy return, and Ellie's scoldings for having absented herself so long; picked up an unfinished wreath from the carpet, and, too sick and tremulous to stand, sank upon the ottoman in the corner while she went on with her task. Bertie Gwynne came over to her directly, with evergreen branches and cord; knelt before her, and took up the other end of the garland. He worked silently and gravely, a novelty for him, but his quick sight detected her changing color, and the hard, bright look in her eye; he heard her irregular breathing; felt the shudder that shook the wreath as the front door clanged to after the retiring visitor, and, as her fingers moved among the stiff twigs, he saw that the pledge ring was missing.

Walter, in shutting the door behind him, glanced unconsciously in at the lighted parlor windows. The shutters were fast, but the movable slats of one were turned at such an angle that he could see plainly the interior, the little crowd of busy workers, and withdrawn some distance from them, Mary, apparently as happy as the merriest there, with Bertie Gwynne, as co-laborer, on his knees beside her!

CHAPTER III.

Little by little the truth with regard to the present relation of the two who were lately betrothed leaked out, as the lapse of weeks found Mr. Blythe still an absentee from the house where he had formerly enjoyed such distinguished privileges. As to the causes of the estrangement tongues were busy and opinions were various. Mary's mother and sister only knew that there had been a quarrel; that Walter had made demands which Mary deemed unreasonable, and that upon this issue they had parted. No one else was informed of

even that much. Bertie Gwynne may have had his conjectures; Ellie Victor assuredly had hers, but neither dared approach the subject with Mary. If she suffered, she made no moan in mortal hearing, asked no help from human sympathy. The world saw in her the same cheerful readiness to contribute her share towards the general entertainment of her acquaintances; missed no gleeful cadence in her laugh or speech. Her friends recognized the purifying effect of sorrow only in her increased thoughtfulness for others' weal, her deeper pity and tenderness for others' sorrows.

Walter Blythe had never been eminent for his social qualities, but since the dissolution of his engagement they were in danger of falling into total disuse. Too proud to betray his hurt by immediate seclusion from the scenes that had become irksome to him, he yet gradually allowed the claims of business to encroach upon the time he had once given to society. He worked diligently and successfully in his profession, and with added cares and honors came graver looks and more rigid lines in features and brow. All respected, some feared, few loved the lonely ascetic, who never complained of isolation, and had not an intimate friend upon the broad earth.

Some such bitter confession as this he was making to himself upon what was now a dreary anniversary with him—Christmas Eve—two years after his parting with Mary Fay. The early tea of his bachelor boarding-house was over, and he had returned to his office; shut out the view of the illuminated street; the happy, important-looking faces that thronged it with the sounds of merriment and congratulation that arose, in an inspiriting hum, upon the night, and set himself down to work upon a dry and tedious law-case. What was Christmas to him more than any other winter night? Anniversaries and holidays were humbugs, frivolities fit for babies only!

"I have never before anticipated so delightful a Christmas!"

How well he recollected her cheery accent! her look of lively pleasure! how vividly came back to him the picture of that girlish figure, her attitude of confident fondness as her head drooped against his arm; the very touch of her hand upon his—even the fragrance of the tea-rose in her hair! What spell was there in this season to invoke this apparition—to force him to face it while

he struggled vainly against the tide of memories flowing in upon his soul?

"I wonder if we shall ever behave so ridiculously again!"

He had not forgotten a word that she said on the last happy evening he had ever known. How happily she laughed in saying it! how frankly and fearlessly she gazed into his eyes! Had he behaved ridiculously? Was he not rather doing this now in questioning the wisdom of a step so often reviewed—so often pronounced wise and necessary!

"Pooh! it is late in the day to talk of that!" His lips curled and his hand moved towards his pen.

"After all, clouds and showers have their mission no less than sunshine!"

Still that phantom on the hearthstone—still that voice of remembered music, plaintive now, borne as it was from the never-to-return Long Ago!

"Perhaps so!" he said, this time aloud and desperately, "and so has the tornado, but its mission is death, not mercy!"

His head dropped upon his breast; deeper gloom overspread his features. He was looking back upon the ruins of his heart's temple, the darkening, and storm, and destruction that had overtaken him in life's fresh morning.

"You have no right to say that, Walter! You should trust me!"

The sweet, persuasive accents seemed actually ringing in his ears. How different would have been their relative positions, how altered his present surroundings on this evening, if he had continued firm in that trust—if she had proved worthy of its continuance!

He absolutely groaned aloud. The sound aroused him to a sense of his own weakness.

"Fool!" he muttered, angrily. "Dreaming, droning idiot! no more of this! What folly to regret the loss of one whose unworthiness was so plainly proved—of whose infidelity there remained not the shadow of a doubt!"

His hand sought the pen again—now, with a resolute grasp. It encountered the smooth, satiny surface of an envelope across which the pen had fallen—a sealed packet, which had been left there during his absence at tea-time.

"How heavy it is! an invitation to some Christmas fooleries, I suppose!" he said, opening it.

There dropped out two cards, tied together with white ribbon, and a third,

single and larger. "Mrs. Victor. At Home, Monday, January 2d, 8 o'clock P. M." One of the be-ribboned bits of pasteboard bore the name of "Eleanor Victor;" the other, "Herbert A. Gwynne."

Walter leaped from his chair in the excess of his astonishment.

"Impossible!" then he sat gazing at the two names in blank incredulity.

Into this stupor presently crept a faint, but delicious sense of relief. Mary could never be his, but she was not to marry Bertie Gwynne! He had not known until now how he lived in perpetual dread of this event, how useless had been his attempts to school himself to the contemplation of it as a not remote certainty. After turning the cards over and over, and re-reading the title upon each, for perhaps five minutes, he espied a folded paper upon his knee, which he had drawn with them from their envelope.

Mr. Blythe will oblige me by calling here for half an hour this evening. I have something of interest to communicate to him. ELEANOR VICTOR.

Saturday, Dec. 24th.

At almost any other time he might have hesitated to obey this peremptory summons: would assuredly have sneered at its tone of quiet authority, wondering "if that rattlegate flirt imagined that he had nothing better to do than to dance attendance upon her whims!" Now he looked at his watch, saw that it was already eight o'clock, huddled his papers into a heap, extinguished the lamp and went forth into the brilliant outer scene. Miss Victor was at home and alone in a private parlor. She received him with a grave cordiality, such as he had never observed in her before.

"It has been a long time since we last met, Mr. Blythe," she said, inviting him to a seat.

He murmured something, not very audibly, about "the pressure of business."

"A long time," pursued Ellie, reflectively, "and to both of us have come some changes in that period."

Walter regained his self-possession.

"Permit me to offer my congratulations upon the very happy change to which you are now looking forward: I was ignorant that such an event was in prospect until to-night."

"Thank you!" responded the belle,

composedly. "I fancied that you knew nothing of it. It is an attachment of long standing—an engagement formed more than two years ago, although not publicly acknowledged until within a few months."

"Is that really so?" Walter faced her quickly. "I thought—I believed—I was led to imagine!"

"That Bertie was attached to Mary Fay?" finished Ellie, coolly. "This misapprehension was the cause of your separation. Am I right?"

"Your informant was, without doubt, acquainted with the facts of that unhappy affair," returned he, haughtily. "You need no confirmation from me, Miss Victor."

"I beg your pardon. If you allude to Mary Fay, I can only declare that she has never uttered a syllable to me with regard to the matter. I have been led to the conclusion I have stated to you by a variety of circumstances—chiefly by my woman's wit." She smiled here—the old gleam of irrepressible playfulness. "But if you will give me your attention for a few minutes I have a little Christmas tale to relate which may interest you. Two years ago—early in December, my friend, Mary Fay, made application through me to Mr. Gwynne to paint her miniature, he having acquired some celebrity in that branch of his profession. This picture was designed as a surprise-gift to you on Christmas Day."

"Miss Victor!"

"Listen until you hear all! No one knew of the plan excepting ourselves, her mother and sister, and we were all bound to secrecy. In order to give Mr. Gwynne frequent sittings at his studio, we were continually contriving visits to the city. I always accompanied Mary. Our final excursion was upon the 23d, when we went together to the jeweler's to select the gold frame for the miniature and to get a chain woven of her hair which she had ordered to accompany it. We knew that you were going to the city that day, and were in mortal terror of meeting you at this the eleventh hour. I never saw Mary so intent upon any other project as upon this. She was so joyous—so elate, when we were coming back that night—poor child!"

Walter's face was turned away, but she saw his hand steal up to his forehead, as if he would have smote it.

"It so chanced that I learned, a week

later, that you dined that day in the restaurant next door to our jeweler's. A friend of mine saw you there at the very hour we had chosen for our errand. I should never have thought of the circumstance again but for a remark made to me yesterday by Kate Martyn. She called here on her way home from her mother's, where she had passed the day. She said that Mary was not well, and quite out of spirits; that she had said to her sister, more unguardedly than she is apt to speak now-a-days, that it was a painful anniversary with her; that she had once, on this day of the month, made herself very unhappy while prosecuting what she thought was a harmless scheme for another's pleasure. And then Kate further opened my eyes by asking me if I had never noticed how jealous you used to be of Bertie—Mr. Gwynne. So, Mr. Blythe, I collected these hints into a theory, which was, that Mr. Gwynne and I had been innocently the instruments of bringing sorrow to the heart of our dearest friend. It may seem like a betrayal of confidence on my part to tell you all this, but I could not feel content to enter upon a new, and—and—what I hope will be a happy life, without making an effort to repair the mischief. If I have erred in judgment, I hope you will appreciate my motive."

Before she had finished this sentence, Walter was upon his feet.

"Mrs. Gwynne—Miss Victor, I would say—you are an angel, and I am a fool—a besotted, miserable wretch! Heaven bless you! Good-night!"

While she was still rubbing the little hand, upon which his parting grip had left four red streaks, he stood at Mrs.

Fay's door. It was opened by a servant to whom he was a stranger.

Yes—Miss Fay was at home. Would the gentleman step into the library, where she was sitting?

Mary arose with gentle, ladylike grace to receive the visitor. Every vestige of color forsook her face at seeing who it was. Walter advanced, with bowed head and averted eyes.

"Mary! I am not worthy of your love, but can you forgive me?" The prodigal's prayer was not uttered with more profound self-abasement, more lowly reverence.

Twelve o'clock rang out in solemn sweetness from a neighboring belfry before they parted. They ceased speaking to count the strokes, then Mary's uplifted eyes glittered with happy tears, and Walter's were full of moved tenderness in looking down into them.

"Peace and good-will, once more, darling! May it be forever!"

"Amen!" she echoed, fervently. An instant later smiles chased away the tears. "Wait here a moment!" and she flitted away.

Soon returning, she brought a small velvet case and laid it in his hand. "It has never been opened since that terrible night. Will you prize it the less because it caused us grief?"

Within was the long-delayed Christmas gift, the frame of chased gold surmounting and protecting a just and beautiful picture of herself, and attached to it was the chain of dark, silky hair.

"I do not deserve it!" Walter tried to say, but there came instead only a great sob, as he caught both portrait and original to his heart.

