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A PLAYWRIGHT'S DAUGHTER & BERTIE GRIFFITHS.

BY

MRS. ANNIE EDWARDES.

IN ONE VOLUME.



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PLAYWRIGHT'S DAUGHTER
AND
BERTIE GRIFFITHS.

BY

MRS. ANNIE EDWARDES,

AUTHOR OF

"ARCHIE LOVELL," "OUGHT WE TO VISIT HER?"
ETC. ETC.

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A PLAYWRIGHT'S DAUGHTER.

“One of those souls which must have light though it
scathe, and air though it be storm.”

A PLAYWRIGHT'S DAUGHTER.

CHAPTER I.

DION MEREDITH'S BEHEST.

DIONYSIUS MEREDITH, playwright, lay dying.

He was a man possessed of many friends; of some enemies. His door was beset with inquiries representing both factions. When a successful writer dies at the age of poets the event must have interest, even to those who love him least. Is he not leaving a gap?—in days of fierce competition one of the most arousing actions open to any of us.

Dion Meredith was dying. Elizabeth's pretty drawing-room wore the pathetic look of neglect that takes hold even of chairs and tables when the last grim Visitor has set permanent foot within a house. The blinds were half-drawn in Meredith's study,

littered still with copy, with papers—the poor fellow's pen lying, as he threw it down, beside his inkstand. In the dining-room a pair of comfortable-looking doctors held consultation, presumably about the amount of lung still left to Dion Meredith. A pair of comfortable-looking doctors' broughams waited in the street. And upstairs, the friend of his heart, the wife of his bosom, beside him, lay Dion, his life's blood staining his lips, but clear of head as in the best days of his strength, awaiting the end right manfully.

Elizabeth was on her knees beside her husband's bed, her golden head bowed to meet his cold and nerveless touch. All the carnations of her face were faded. Meredith had now been three days *in extremis*, and she had called in no hired nurse to lighten her duties. Her laces of throat and wrist, daintily fresh at the moment of his seizure, were disordered; a gout or two of blood stained the bosom of her summer dress.

Dion's failing sight took in these details. His heart, stoutly prepared for its own dread summons, sank at the prospect of his wife's anguish.

"It has been long—unconscionably long." The apology came from him in husky whispers. "We might almost have sent for little Tania. But you shall have rest to-night. I may be here another forty-eight hours. You will be wanted, darling, at the last. George Keene will see me through the night."

"I will never leave you, Dion—never!" sobbed Mrs. Meredith brokenly. "I am strong; I could watch for a week longer and not feel it. Oh! Dion—Dion, stay with me! I can't lose you. What have I done for God to be so cruel to me?"

Now Dion was, in truth, a condemned man when Elizabeth Orme—a beauty and heiress of twenty-two—elected to marry him. Could he have learnt the meaning of intellectual economy, wise passiveness, he might, by husbanding his strength, have lived, said the doctors, to middle life. But men of his temperament can no more practise thrift in brain expenditure than in money. Dion used himself up, without ceasing. His work was exhaustingly intense, even when it seemed most facile. He could never lay his head contentedly on the pillow

of imperfection, could never acknowledge as fact that his physical endowments were not equal to his mental ones.

So, in speaking of God as "cruel" to her, Elizabeth was just a little unreasonable. She had, in choosing a consumptive, feverishly ambitious husband, been cruel to herself. But when we have gone for thirty-six hours without regular meals or sleep, and when the human creature nearest to us is passing away before our eyes, out of our embrace, cleverer heads than Elizabeth's may well be illogical!

As Meredith's eager, old-young face grew greyer and greyer, Elizabeth felt the universe to be pitiless. It had been so easy, she thought, have cost so little to Omnipotence to spare Dion. With a world full of dull mediocrities, men without homes to become desolate, or wives with hearts to break, why should the lot have fallen on him? Her views of life had been all legitimate, all modest. Success, as he coveted success, for Dion's plays; for herself, the pleasant Regent's Park villa; the informal receptions, at which every one was delighted with the

hostess, and the hostess with every one; the autumn tours when she and Dion became lovers again! And then, in time, the good things of this world increasing, a westward move (Prince's Gate was, I think, the goal of Elizabeth's desires), a less professional set of friends, and a position—such a position as would give Dion's daughter a chance of marrying brilliantly. Yes, her ambitions had been right ones, lying in the straight path of a wife's duty. And thus did Heaven reward her. It was cruel—cruel!

The word broke aloud from her lips. She flung her arms, almost with anger, round Dion's wasted form. The eyelids of the dying man drooped, his emaciated hands relaxed. In every relation with Elizabeth, hitherto, Dion Meredith had been finely unselfish, the woman's charmed slave, laying down his heart, his genius, for her to tread upon, and holding the contact of her light feet a more than adequate payment. But when it comes to the last—Well, Reader, a man, then, has work to do, which those who stay behind had best not meddle with. Dion had got to die. It was torture that Elizabeth

would not allow him to leave the world his own way.

"We must make you think of yourself, Mrs. Meredith," said a man's low voice, "Dion is right. I shall take my share of nursing, now, while you rest. Later on, you can relieve me."

It was George Keene, poor Meredith's dearest friend, who whispered this. Elizabeth lifted her face to him with a blush—I had almost written, despite her tiredness, her misery, with a smile. She was a rose-tinted, dimpled little creature, with eyes blue as forget-me-nots, with floss silk hair like a baby's, with the du Maurier eye-lash and upper lip; one of those typically womanly women who impose upon the whole masculine world, living or dying—possibly, who impose upon themselves. The lips parted enough for Keene to discern Mrs. Meredith's row of pearly teeth, the soft eyes filled.

"If Dion can wish it," she was beginning, a note or two above her natural key.

Keene helped her to rise from her knees. He drew her away from the bed and out of Meredith's hearing.

"It will be better for Dion not to see you," he whispered, very low. "Do not misunderstand me. The poor fellow is too weak to bear the thought of all he loses. My dear Mrs. Meredith, be strong. It is your duty to take rest. If I see the slightest change in Dion's state, you shall be called instantly."

The June day was at its close. Even here, in the heart of London, there seemed to be a coolness, a lull, a refreshing forerunner of the midsummer night. Every window throughout the Merediths' well-tended house had its weight of flowers. The air which entered the dying chamber was touched to delicate sweetness. Long afterwards the sensations of the moment abode with Keene, side by side with his recollection of Dion's corpse like face, his vision of Elizabeth—lovely, unreasonable, disconsolate, and with the black gouts of blood staining the bosom of her dress.

"I can never hold it my duty to leave Dion. It is cruel to talk of duty. But everything in this world is cruel. Ah! I wish I had died when I was so ill last year."

Elizabeth freed her hands from Keene's; returning to her husband's side, she looked down upon him, long. There lay her youth, her happiness, her fair hopes for the future—all turning into clay! Another twenty-four hours, she thought, and the undertakers would begin their ghastly work. The house would have its blinds drawn, a coffin would lie here—here, in one's own pretty lightsome room! And then there would be a funeral day, a first going to church. She would have to face business, to talk to lawyers, without Dion; live on without him, never hear his gay laugh, his praises of her beauty or her dress, never pack with him (those merry Autumn packings) and have strange delightful adventures in foreign hotels, or joyful home-comings. It was over, all of it. She stooped, and rested her cheek upon his forehead—the cold damp forehead, whose contact made her heart sicken. Then she moved shudderingly away.

George Keene was before her. He held the door open for her to pass.

"It is hard," she murmured, "to be made to feel one's uselessness. But then I *am* so use-

less! And I can see you want to be alone with Dion."

Keene was silent. It had never been his habit to varnish his speech with Elizabeth; differing, perhaps, in this, from some of Elizabeth's male friends. He did wish, strongly, to be alone with the man he loved, wished to keep from all needless pain the brave soul gasping its way into the great darkness on the pillow, yonder. A change came over Meredith's face when the door shut upon his wife. His eyes closed, peacefully. Very early in Dion Meredith's life his fortune, as a theatrical correspondent, had led him to Moscow. There he married—the mother of his little Tania; a beautiful Russian girl, with whom he knew one year's unclouded happiness. He desired a respite, perhaps, a withdrawal even from Elizabeth, before Remembrance—the road by which his spirit travelled to a distant Russian grave—should become dark for ever.

By and bye he looked up. A movement of the nerveless hand resting on the bed-clothes signed to his friend to come to him.

"Closer—put your ear closer, Keene. There is
A Playwright's Daughter, etc.

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no time to lose. I want to speak to you of her—my poor little love, who will soon have no one——”

There came a strained look upon the dying face, an uneasy far-away expression, a piteous yearning that Keene understood not.

“Mrs. Meredith has a world full of friends,” he began, with the stiffness even Death’s presence cannot lift from an Englishman forced to put feeling into speech. “Mrs. Meredith’s gentleness, her fidelity——”

“Elizabeth is an angel—but too soft, too yielding. A strong will—a strong love—a man’s protection will be wanted when I am in my grave.”

The situation was no common one. George Keene felt that the behest of dying lips was about to be laid on him. He listened for what should follow with an ominous suspension of the breath.

“I have thought of this long—as far back as our Mentone days. I used to say, half in earnest, she liked you best. You have not forgotten?”

George Keene had forgotten nothing. Five years ago he was himself an invalid, on sick leave. Sorely

to his distaste he had been forced by the doctors into a winter of inaction on the Riviera, and at Mentone ran across his old friend, Dion Meredith. Dion—lazily falling in love with Elizabeth Orme, deprecating second marriages, while he was hourly drifting into one, and with his little Muscovite daughter (enlightened, by a child's prophetic jealousy, as to what was imminent) keeping desperate, tenacious guard over his actions.

"You liked her?" repeated the dying man, his pleading eyes still fixed upon the other's face.

"For your sake, yes," Keene assented with slow emphasis.

He had rubbed shoulders too long and too familiarly with death to lose self-possession at the nearness of death's approach.

"Let the truth be spoken, Meredith. Such feeling as I had in the matter was for you."

"Of course. I look for no pledge—time changes all things," murmured poor Dion faintly. "I don't ask for an assurance. But if I thought, in the years to come, it might be your choice, I should die easier."

There was another weak movement of the arm. George Keene took Meredith's clammy dying hand in his own.

"You are not bound—the world is wide. A man chooses as he will. But I have a hope—a hope——"

They were Dion's last audible words. Even as he uttered them the great change came—quietly, as the doctors had foretold, and with no special suffering, but under conditions which forbade his friend's quitting his side for a moment. Dion Meredith was conscious to the last, and before he died a whispered word from Keene made his eyes brighten.

When Elizabeth kissed her husband's lips, stiff in death, it seemed to her that a trustful smile still lingered there.

CHAPTER II.

A MODEL WIDOW.

SHE had been a most admirable wife. The world, with scarce a dissentient voice, soon began to call Mrs. Meredith a model widow.

To have chosen Dion Meredith at all, a man out of one's set, an invalid, a playwright, argued her capacity for self-sacrifice.

To have converted this semi-Bohemian to domesticity bespoke her tact. By the time Elizabeth, her second year of widowhood over, wore colours, her friends were warmly descanting upon her certain virtues as a stepmother.

For Dion's daughter was now seventeen. Tania Meredith's early childhood had been spent in Russia, and among her mother's people. After this came an interval, a happy interval, too brief for Tania, when she was the companion of her father's Italian health-wanderings. Then, Dion Meredith's

marriage occurring, the girl changed hands again, her protector this time being a certain old Countess Roscow, well known in Paris, an ex-lady in waiting at the court of Nicholas, an ex-beauty, an ex-coquette. At seventeen Tania was to be formally introduced in London, make her first step across society's threshold, under the auspices of her father's widow.

Poor Elizabeth—hardest fated of women! Smart people who had passed her over in her girlish days, who had been stiff to her as a wife, chilly as a widow, began to warm a little under her immediate prospects of step-maternity. For smart people like dramatic entertainment. The prospect of pretty Mrs. Meredith doing bear leader to an unattractive Cossack step-daughter was really dramatic in no common degree. It must end, said her more intimate friends, in Elizabeth's making another of these regrettable marriages. A woman gets let in for the sort of thing out of desperation. What were the odds in favour of her marrying poorly, before a twelvemonth had passed? And who—the question arose when the London season was some weeks old

—who was this Major Keene, the dark, sombre-looking man just back from Egypt, who went nowhere, and who was invariably to be found haunting dear Elizabeth's house at odd hours?

During the six months succeeding Dion Meredith's death, George Keene and Elizabeth never met. Business communications passed between them perforce, Dion having left his friend and widow joint guardians of Tania. These, the lawyers managed. Then there came a day when Keene, under orders for Egypt, found himself bound, in coldest courtesy, to seek a personal interview. He sought it—with a sense of repugnance! Years before, in Mentone, he had been struck with Elizabeth's girlish prettiness—during a couple of weeks, perhaps—just until her preference for brilliant Dion Meredith had developed into certainty. Such vanity as was in him may have smarted at his friend's success. His peace of mind then, as now, was untroubled.

A brave and modest soldier, standing well aloof from fashionable sentimentalism, Keene's youth had passed in that vague nomadic skirmishing, that

conquer-and-run warfare which, under modern administrations, forms the occupation of Her British Majesty's troops. There had been neither time nor occasion for him to include matrimony among the outlooks of the future. If he married it would be from the finest unalloyed love, of freest choice. In the black-coated professions a man must take a wife in the same spirit as he must take a house or select his window-blinds—if he be wise, electing for good solid qualities in all things. A soldier, as long as he continues soldiering, is best free. And it was Keene's desire to face his country's foes for as many years as the regulations of the British army would give him a place there.

But fate had an unexpected little practical joke in store for him. The very fact that Dion's behest had set his widow in a strained, a false position, finished by awakening every chivalrous instinct of George Keene's nature! Elizabeth's decent repose of manner, her blush-rose face, pale amidst surrounding crapes and sables, her generous regard for Tania, her emotion when she recurred to Dion, her simple and dignified attitude towards himself—all

moved Keene, before ten minutes were over, to dangerously genuine pity.

Marriage? Why 'twas sacrilege to think of this little tearful unselfish creature finding consolation in a second union. Dion, in the supreme agony of parting, had underrated the strength of Elizabeth's heart. Doubtful if Dion, his genius notwithstanding, had ever recognised—ever distinguished—the nobler capabilities of his wife's nature! Before George Keene himself, the path lay very plain. He would be Mrs. Meredith's friend and protector always. Towards matrimony he had known no temptations. He had long cherished a dream of allegiance to one good and fair and tender woman, allegiance unsuspected of the world, pure from all warmer feelings, prompt at self-surrender, proof against misconception. Here was occasion to his hand. He had met Elizabeth with coldness almost amounting to repugnance. They parted, not, of course, as lovers part, yet feeling that the charge of Tania united them by a common, a sacred trust—that in a brief hour each had entered upon the first phase of a friendship likely to endure.

George Keene was ordered to Egypt at the beginning of the campaign, and did not return to England until after Baker Pacha's defeat. He had many experiences of fighting, still more of fever, in the interval. Acts of bravery were recorded of him—even in the dispatches! At El Teb he was one of the handful of officers who, cut off from the main body by the rush of Arabs, defended themselves against a host with swords and revolvers, the handful of whom it was written: "These men's quiet demeanour was as a ray of light and of divine hope in that hell of fierce triumph and clinging despair." In the flight to Trinkitat he saved a wounded private by mounting him on his own horse, he himself, though sorely exhausted, running along on foot by the lad's side. But he came home, like most other fine soldiers at that disastrous time, low in health, jaded in spirit. His hair and moustache had become grizzled, repeated touches of fever had added half-a-dozen years to his looks.

When Elizabeth saw him again she started back with an exclamation of horror, then she took his thin, blackened right hand, holding it remorsefully,

tenderly between her soft fingers—and then she burst into tears.

And before a week had passed friendship was in its grave; romantic allegiance had come to the usual trite end. Before a week had passed George Keene knew that Mrs. Meredith was willing to become his wife.

CHAPTER III.

IN ROTTEN ROW.

"It will not be for ages—not until this season, at least, is over. Still, George, it will be," said Elizabeth, perplexedly turning over a couple of newly-opened telegrams and speaking with mystic emphasis. "And I can see no impropriety whatever in your taking charge of Tania for a couple of days. Troubles never come single—not that one looks upon Tania's arrival as a trouble, only it *is* so extraordinary Uncle Joseph having a seizure on the very same day. These things make one superstitious."

I have hinted that Elizabeth, her second year of widowhood over, wore colours. They were tender and trembling ones, evanescent shades for which malice itself could find no startling name, and which suited the peach-blossom delicacy of the youthful widow's face to admiration. On this particular June

morning she wore a pale, dove-hued cambric, trimmed with Valenciennes lace, a Valenciennes cap half hiding her blonde locks, a little bunch of stephanotis that George Keene had brought her at her breast.

She was fair, exquisitely fair to see. And as she stood before her lover appealing, perplexed, unreasonable, he felt duly sensible of her perfections, and would not, I am sure, have exchanged her childlike feminine intelligence for the brain of the cleverest woman in England.

It had been Dion's fault to credit her with overmuch mind. In her efforts at becoming what Dion wished, the transparent sincerity of Elizabeth's character had, perhaps, suffered. This would not be an error of George Keene's. He saw his betrothed as she was (sign, unerring, that he saw her not with eyes of passion), seemly, tender, a little narrow, a little prejudiced, and was content with her.

"If 'it' is not to be for ages, Mrs. Meredith;" he found a difficulty sometimes, in bringing his lips to the familiar "Elizabeth," "don't ask me to chaperon Tania. Bear the conventionalities in mind.

If you will fix a date within the next few weeks—months—then, when Tania will be my daughter officially——”

“Fix! Would you expect me to fix anything, George, and my nerves in this state? Poor dear Uncle Joseph smitten down with such awful suddenness! The news has thoroughly upset me—and I intend to wear crape, whatever the milliners may say, for at least four weeks. Oh, George,” she rested a little hand on her sweetheart’s arm, “decide for me! How am I——”

“To be in two places at once,” suggested Keene, as she hesitated. “Your duties are conflicting and grave. General Orme, aged eighty, and whom you have seen about three times in your life, is seized with apoplexy in Cheltenham. Tania, fully equipped for conquest, expectant of the London season, will arrive before the day is out.”

“And your advice is?”

“My very sincere advice is—Wait for Tania.”

“And give a certain gentleman his liberty,” cried Elizabeth, watching his face. “Wait for Tania, and leave my papa’s brother to die among servants; for

we know what a poor creature Aunt Jane is in sickness. I think I quite decide to start for Cheltenham. It is one o'clock." So the world was right, Major Keene did haunt Elizabeth's house at strange hours. "Now do you say it is impossible to arrange everything, write an explanatory note for Tania, get some lunch and start by the half-past three express?"

"I would not say that anything a woman chooses to do is impossible, only remember my advice." (In after days, there can be no reasonable doubt poor Elizabeth did remember it.) "I have it on my conscience to advise strongly—Wait for Tania."

But Elizabeth was not to be shaken. Tania would arrive about seven, and Major Keene must promise to dine and spend the evening with her. A difficult position? Nay, Elizabeth could be brought to see no difficulty. In the old Mentone days the child had always been ardent, jealous, even, in her affection for George Keene. What should have changed her?

They partook of a hurried luncheon, Mrs. Meredith looking charming in her dark, tight-fitting tra-

velling robe, then drove off in a hansom to Euston Station, where they had a short eight minutes together, before the starting of the express.

"My luggage is to follow by the next train. William will see to it. And I have left Alison for Tania." Elizabeth leant her head forth through the carriage window as she communicated these domestic details. "Of course, it will be utterly wretched for me without Alison, but I cannot think of self at such a moment. Tania must have a maid. And, George, take her about."

"The maid?"

"Take Tania, if she will be taken—the water colours, Madame Tussaud's, those dear little dreadful dwarfs in Piccadilly—anywhere that a girl not really out may go. And—and Major Keene——"

The guard, British fashion, was locking up his passengers like so many dangerous animals in their cages, when a little movement of Elizabeth's head brought Keene's ear within whispering distance of her lips.

"Don't you think, by choosing your opportunity

nicely, you might manage to let Tania know how matters stand?"

"Never!" exclaimed Keene promptly. "At that point I rebel."

Elizabeth blushed. The other occupants of the carriage, three typical specimens of the ageing Cheltenham spinster, glanced covertly at this pretty woman and young officer whispering together with such interest.

"Madame Tussaud's, if you will, or the water colours, or the dear little dreadful dwarfs. Beyond the dwarfs, not a step."

"If I am kept on in Cheltenham I might write about Tania to one of my sisters," Elizabeth reflected, "or, better still, there is Amelia Vanbrugh. Amelia would see the situation at a glance. You are not on any special duty this afternoon?"

George Keene was never on duty save in the hours and at the place Elizabeth commanded.

"Then you can come across her easily. Like all good Americans, Miss Vanbrugh is unfailingly to be found in the Park between five and six, 'looking on,' she says, 'from her conservative point of

A Playwright's Daughter, etc.

view, at our young democracy.' You can explain the position in five words; ask her, if need be, to help—to keep watch——”

But the guard's whistle had blown. There was a last hand-pressure, an over lingering one it may have seemed to the spinster conscience, a last adieu waved by Elizabeth through the window, and the train sped away.

The afternoon was brilliant. Hyde Park showed its accustomed stir and colour, and plenitude of human life. And as George Keene walked along in the sunshine he was conscious, I will not say of a sense of recovered liberty, but of a buoyancy of humour, a lightness of spirits, more than his wont. In due time his steps led him under the shadow of the Rotten Row trees, and into the arms—using the term metaphorically—of the person he had been ordered to seek; a lady whose nationality was not enigmatic, richly though plainly dressed, and with a face whose intellectual refined charm was still, at the age of forty-four, considerable.

Miss Vanbrugh pointed out to our friend that

a little green chair at some steps distance was vacant, at the same time so modifying her own position that Keene was shortly enabled to wedge himself in by her side. Then they shook hands—very slender hands the American lady had, gloved with the same exquisite niceness that made itself visible in every detail of her dress. And then Miss Vanbrugh confessed, with quiet directness, that her thoughts had been dwelling on Major Keene precisely at the moment of his appearance.

“I ought,” said she, “to go through the stereotyped formula, inform you that the wind is easterly, that the Ministry narrowly escaped a beating last night, and that the Princess has passed five times and is wearing a blue bonnet. But it is my Yankee fashion to go to the point straight. Yes, I was thinking of you and our Mentone days just as you came up. This honest sunshine takes away one’s thoughts, I suppose, from London. At that period of your lives you were a group worth studying; poor Dion, Elizabeth Orme, the terrible child, and yourself.”

“I trust that such of us as survive are too happy

to be worth studying now. A group worth studying reminds one of a people with a history."

"We will enter upon the question of happiness twelve months hence! How is it that Mrs. Meredith is absent from the Park?"

Keene gave the narrative of Elizabeth's exodus, repeating such vestiges of a message as she had sent in the hurry of departure to her friend.

"And what in the world can Major Keene want of me!" she exclaimed, incisively. Amelia Vanbrugh's life had been spent mainly in Europe. She was an artist, and a novelist, of modest merit, "a poor copyist in pastels," she would say of her own conscientious, quiet-toned work. But the New England voice was clear, unmistakeable as ever; and its effect had piquancy. You could not forget that Amelia's views of men and manners were taken from a hillock just an inch or two higher than the level flat of our level little English world. "Does Mrs. Meredith think that I am to keep guard—one is at a loss for words—to put a glass shade over such a perishable treasure," she looked at her companion, comically, "as Major Keene?"

The question was not without its spice of mischief. Miss Vanbrugh was one of the few persons to whom the engagement had been formally made known, and in Miss Vanbrugh's soul lurked doubts as to the success of the experiment. She suspected Keene, under his cold exterior, of passion—Elizabeth, under her emotional manner, of tepidity.

When a woman, as well versed in the world as Amelia Vanbrugh, calls a love affair "an experiment," the term, of itself, has an unpleasantly prophetic ring.

"Presumptively, Miss Vanbrugh, you are to keep guard over Tania Meredith."

"Tania!"

"Mind, I only say, presumptively. A telegram reached us to-day announcing that Tania's French friends were bringing her to England twenty-four hours before she was due, and as Mrs. Meredith felt it her duty, all the same, to start for Cheltenham—"

"Major Keene is left to receive the Russian daughter! Tania, of course, knows a secret concerning Elizabeth's future happiness?" said Miss Vanbrugh, euphemistically.

"Tania as yet knows nothing." The Major looked straight at the kaleidoscopic crowd before his eyes. "Elizabeth feels a degree of nervousness, a dread of the girl's possible disapproval, which I do not share. When I recall the small Tania of Mentone days, I see a child, spoilt, certainly, but with a really generous disposition in spite of some oddities of temper."

"And when I recall the Tania of Mentone days I see a little *diabliesse*," said Miss Vanbrugh, her kindly woman's face toning down the hardness of the word. "Dion Meredith had had an illness, before either the Ormes or yourself came to Mentone. It fell to my hand to help nurse him, and the girl's passionate gratitude made me look twice at her. Children of that age have no business with big feeling! On the strength of our supposed amity, the task of breaking her father's new engagement was, I recollect, given to me. We, hearthless spinsters, Major Keene, are called upon, pretty often, to smoothe the path of lovers—sometimes of man and wife."

"I hope I shall never trouble you with work of

the kind," said George Keene, cheerfully. "In the meantime, pray let me hear the worst about Tania. I have a direct and personal interest, remember, in that young person's tempers."

"I told her, as best I could, what was coming, or rather what had come. Meredith had proposed for Elizabeth the night before, Mrs. Orme's consent was given. The child stared at me dumbly—a stare I have not found it easy to forget. Then she fell down, without a movement in her body, on the floor. It was a genuine faint, poor little wretch, but she came to pretty quickly, and I got her to lie down on the sofa—it was in my room that the scene took place. By-and-bye, she started excitedly to her feet. She paced up and down the room, her face white with anger, her black hair hanging in a tangle on her shoulders. At last she stopped short. 'I will go back to Russia!' she cried, clutching the bunch of images that hung round her neck. 'I will go to Aunt Pradine, to a begging convent—anywhere. But first,' she looked at me with those orbs of hers, 'I mean to kill his lover—yes, to kill her with my own hands!' 'People who kill others

are hanged next day,' I observed, coolly. 'If you kill Elizabeth, I shall come with the best will in the world to assist at your execution.'"

"And if Tania kills me, come to my funeral!" cried Keene, rising. "I like our little Muscovite's temper, as I am going to like our little Muscovite herself in about an hour's time. Tania can love, she can hate, she can be furiously jealous. In such a character one has materials to go upon."

"Oh! one has certainly materials!" answered Amelia Vanbrugh, drily.

CHAPTER IV.

"AS I KISS'D OFF HER TEARS."

THE genuine Russian type! This was Keene's first thought when he found himself ushered into Mrs. Meredith's drawing-room: but the Russian type at its loveliest.

His remembrance of Tania at Mentone had been quickened by Miss Vanbrugh's parable—a thin, Slav-featured child, with a mane of wild black hair, with orbs from which the tenderer emotions seldom glanced. What he saw was a tall, magnificently-built young figure, a complexion like the petals of a magnolia, silken hair, sculpturesquely worn upon a full, low forehead, a smile of extraordinary sweetness; two very white hands, outheld.

"Mrs. Meredith has unexpectedly left London," the girl began, with entire self-possession, "and I am asked to be your hostess. Will you pardon my temerity?" Her English was perfect, but the slightest

foreign tone clung to her accents. "Oh, Monsieur Keene!"—by this time her manner had altered: she was holding his hands in a hearty grasp, looking over the lines of his face with eager scrutiny—"l'ami Keene, as we used to call you in Mentone—you are changed. On the pavement I had passed you by. And yet—the same, the same!"

For a moment there seemed a distinct prospect of her embracing him. She did not loosen his hands—did not for a second lower her eager gaze.

"I thought we should meet like strangers, but we cannot, can we? I am Tania, as I was in old days, to you—and to him!"

Her lips quivered, but the luminous full eyes were tearless.

"Tania, with a startling difference," said Keene, gravely lifting her hands to his lips, and kissing them, each in turn. "The outward Tania is gone. How much of Tania's character still remains we shall have to learn."

Tania Meredith turned away with a soft laugh, leaving him, for a few seconds, still in possession of her hands.

"That was lectured in quite a proper tone—*goody, goody*, do you not say in English?—the tone a guardian ought to use towards his ward. How can one change one's character? We are wise or stupid, good or bad, dark or blonde, have a flat nose or a Grecian profile, and remain so."

She uttered this little fatalist creed with simple composure, moved a step or two in the direction of a window, then stood erect, her arms folded upon her breast. In this position her profile was offered, clear, defined, in the evening light, to Major Keene. He noted the one fault of her face—a certain flatness between the eyes of which few men were sensible so long as the play of feature, the fiery glances, the mobile lips, held judgment suspended.

Coupling the attitude with her words, George Keene divined that it was one of Tania's vanities to display her faults from the first.

"It was charming of Mrs. Meredith to invite you, Major Keene—the one person I should like to see in this wilderness, London. But Elizabeth is everything that is thoughtful. Yes, and I have just reformed enough to be sorry for my old sins against

her. Elizabeth was my father's good angel," she went on, stealing a wistful look at Keene's face, "and I know, from a hundred things in Elizabeth's letters, that she mourns for him to this hour."

What choice had Keene but to generalize?

"Mrs. Meredith's," he observed, "was a nature that must be beautiful in every relation of life. She thought only of the welfare of those she loved. He was convinced Tania would occupy the place of a daughter in her heart, and——"

"Never!" exclaimed Tania, with decision. "I can have no mother but Mamma, quietly lying in the graveyard among the steppes. Oh, the blue heaven of our Russian steppes! Is this the nearest approach to blue a London heaven can make in June?"

Clasping her hands above her head, she looked up at such strip of sky as showed above the opposite house-roofs. The sleeves of her dinner dress were loose, and, as they fell back, revealed, almost to the shoulder, a pair of white, exquisitely shaped arms, such arms as we degenerate moderns associate

with marble and the artist's chisel rather than with perishable flesh and blood.

"London is grimy, even in June, Miss Meredith. You must like London for its people, and tolerate the climate."

"'Miss Meredith!'"

"I have been waiting for your permission to say 'Tania.'"

"But I could never say 'l'ami Keene,' as I used. There is an authority, surely, a Mistress Grundy?" the girl questioned, solemn of face. "Papa often talked of her—an old lady who decides all things not worth deciding in England. No? Then, for this evening, we must compromise. You shall be Major Keene, and I—Tania."

And so, finally, they remained to each other—Major Keene, Tania—until an hour when no further compromise, no intervention of Mistress Grundy, was possible.

Tania made herself abundantly entertaining throughout dinner. She had inherited the true dramatic instinct, caught the point of all life's acci-

dents, great or small, and, not having MS. plays to hoard for, made the most of them in her talk.

Her stock of impressions was liberal. "Taking into account always that I am not out," she urged the qualification upon Keene more than once, "from the time I was four I have been listening to everything that could be heard, and seeing everything that could be seen. In winter Gran'mère lived in Moscow or Petersburg, in summer in the Steppes. Since Papa's marriage, I have been educated by my old Aunt Pradine, chiefly in such places as Paris and Monaco. But I am not out. Until I shall put on a frightfully low dress by daylight and make my curtsy before the English throne, please consider me invisible. Correctly speaking, I am in the nursery still."

But when they were again in the drawing-room the girl's wild spirits subsided—no, that is not the word—Tania Meredith's spirits sank instantaneously into gloom. She flung herself on a sofa, covered her face with her handkerchief, and, so far as movements of the chest and shoulders can be held to give reliable evidence of feminine emotion, began to weep.

George Keene repented him sore in that he had not persuaded Amelia Vanbrugh to dine with them.

"You are knocked up by your journey," he was beginning, tentatively. "Really, I wish Mrs. Meredith were here to cheer you. Mrs. Meredith would know——"

"Oh, Mrs. Meredith, Mrs. Meredith!" exclaimed Tania, springing to her feet. "Unless you want me to detest Mrs. Meredith, do not for ever chant her praises. I stand in no need of Elizabeth. I was very happy, quietly crying"—the marks of tears were obvious on her cheeks and lashes—"crying because I would like to have Papa back this first night I am in London. Would you not also like to have Papa back?"

George Keene—in his ordinary dealings a scrupulously truthful man—did not answer. His position was so fantastically false, that the alternative of unburthening his conscience by confession seemed all but imperative.

Tania was too engrossed in her thoughts to notice his embarrassment,

"Here is a note that I have stored up, for years, to show you," said she, taking a letter-case from her pocket and coming to Keene's side. "Papa must have written it, feeling death upon him; mindful of me to his last breath. When I look at that note, I hear him speaking, I see his face as clearly as I now see yours. Read!"

And she held forth a sheet of paper on which a dozen lines were shakily traced. The ink was yellow. The creases in the paper showed how often the note had been folded, and re-folded, by the child's loving hands.

"I wonder what my little girl is doing in this June weather? I, alas! am at my old work, sickness. Dear little Tania—very love of my youth—I am not to see your face again. But my girl will not be left friendless. George Keene is in London, and will be with me—— till all is over. With my last breath I shall commit you to his charge. Of Elizabeth, I cannot trust myself to write. Elizabeth's heart will be buried in her husband's grave. My

child, I kiss your forehead, your dear hands, for the last time!

"Your father,

"DION MEREDITH."

When Keene had finished reading, Tania raised the letter to her lips, before replacing it in its case.

"And did Papa—I should like to hear it in words—did my father speak of me on his death-bed?" she faltered this, looking up at him with her tear-charged eyes.

"Dion spoke of you," answered Keene, upon whom—so contradictory are lovers' hearts—a light was breaking with most discomfiting vividness. "He left me a trust, which it will be the delight——"

"Halte-là!" cried Tania, wiping her tears away, as she broke into a laugh. "Wait a year and a day, before you make pretty speeches in that matter! The charge of Tania Meredith can be a delight to no man. Let us turn our thoughts to safer subjects."

She moved to the open piano, seated herself—with her little tired, imperious manner—and swept her left hand rapidly over the keys.

“Elizabeth sings, I assume?” (Elizabeth did sing, to Keene’s sorrow. His appreciation of music was passionate; Elizabeth’s gift—decidedly not heaven-sent.) “It seems humorous, rather, to think of an aboriginal Englishwoman singing! But, I dare say, those are my Slav prejudices. Now, what do you choose? Bravura, travestie, sentiment? I can do all.”

Keene liked the girl so well, he would fain have asked her to do nothing. More than once, in his life, disenchantment had come to him, with the first three notes sung by some woman he admired. Not only did he dread that Tania would sing false, that her voice would be harsh, unsympathetic—he suspected her taste.

If this child of seventeen had seen all that could be seen, and listened to all that could be heard, under the tutorship of an ex-woman of the world like the Countess Roscow,—who should surmise what manner of song might be her favourite?

"You hesitate—I will choose for you. And, mind, I am only going to sing once. I will give you something British—Irish, at least—then. My politics are faulty! Stand, pray, where you can see my face, l'ami Keene. I like the sensation of an audience, and sing the better for it."

Then, with crisp, fine touch, she played the five preludatory bars which give the melody and sang for him—of all imaginable songs—"Savourneen Deelish." Surely the wildest, saddest air that ever came into the heart of man to indite!

Nature had given her a pure mezzo-soprano voice, excellent teaching, and constant hearing of the best music had trained it. She had tenderness, passion, despair at command.

"Oh! the moment was sad when my love and I parted,

Savourna deelish, shighan oh!

As I kissed off her tears I was nigh broken-hearted,

Savourna deelish, shighan oh!"

By the time the last notes died into silence George Keene's cheek had grown pale. But he paid her no compliments. Neither then nor afterwards did the girl win one flattering word from him as to her voice.

"Pretty well for a Muscovite," she observed, measuring her success accurately. Then she rose and closed the instrument. "But, to speak truth, I am mortally sleepy. If I sang another song I should begin to dream in its midst. Good-night, monsieur." She bestowed her hand upon him as an empress might do upon some courtier she was dismissing. "Come again early to-morrow, and take me everywhere. We will visit Saint Paul's, Westminster Abbey, Hampton Court, the Parks, and, of course, some theatre, the best theatre in London, in the evening."

And five minutes later George Keene was walking eastward towards his club, a startling reading of Dion's last words engaging his thoughts, the wild love-strains of "Savourneen Deelish" in his heart.

CHAPTER V.

STALLS AT THE LYCEUM.

BEFORE seeing Tania next day he contrived an interview with Miss Vanbrugh.

The little American lady was living ostentatiously to the north of Oxford Street, and in quarters well known to many of her brothers and sisters of the pen; quarters, where a human creature may get excellent food, civil attendance, air, quiet, at about a quarter the price charged by West End hotel-keepers for poisoning, deafening, robbing and generally neglecting their clients.

Amelia received George Keene with a momentarily expressive smile.

“So you want me already! I have been expecting a summons all morning. Let me congratulate you, Major Keene, on being alive, as far as one can see, unwounded. Tania did not disappoint you?”

"Tania did not disappoint me. She arrived, and she is charming. An unaffected girl, with the simple manners of a child, and full of bright intelligence—just her father's happy, unexpected way of putting things. You remember?"

"Accurately. Is she the least like him in face? Is she growing—one won't say handsome, but human?"

Keene smiled under cover of his thick moustache.

"Very distinctly human, Miss Vanbrugh, bordering even on good looks, and, I imagine, possessing a brain, as a daughter of Dion's would be likely to do. But you must judge of her for yourself. I have been lucky enough," said the Major, coming rather abruptly to his point, "to get Lyceum stalls for to-night. Tania naturally wishes to see everything, to go everywhere."

"And Major Keene is to be her attendant slave?"

"With Miss Vanbrugh in fellow bondage," said Keene, laughing.

"You undermine my virtue by bribes. I can't

withstand the 'whipt cream of intellectual recreation.' *Much Ado About Nothing*, at the Lyceum, is my price—with a margin. Otherwise, I should say Miss Tania might wait until she can attend play-houses under her lawful chaperone's wing."

"You mean Mrs. Meredith? In the abstract, I agree with you, Miss Vanbrugh. As a matter of fact," said Keene, "we may forecast that Mrs. Meredith will wear mourning for the next four weeks. I had a disconsolate telegram from Cheltenham this morning. Uncle Joseph has departed."

"Disconsolate fiddlesticks!" Miss Vanbrugh's hands gave a slender but expressive flourish. "As Tania has arrived, Tania ought to be brought out, have all the chances, without delay. What does the London world know about an obscure old Cheltenham general? Elizabeth, herself, has not seen General Orme twice in her life. Why should she wear mourning for him at all?"

"Ah—why?" echoed Keene, taking an orange-coloured envelope from his breast-pocket. "It would require deeper learning than mine to answer that question. Why need Elizabeth, why need any

woman, wear mourning? 'Uncle Joseph gone to his rest.'" He read the telegram aloud. "'Everything sad and uncertain. Break the death gently to Tania.'"

Miss Vanbrugh gave a terse laugh.

"I am not as a rule indecorous, Major Keene, but this new mode of breaking a death is irresistible. Did you receive the telegram or get the Lyceum tickets first? And pray, in my capacity of chaperon, do you insist upon my wearing a black gown?"

"I insist on one thing only, that you do not fail us. We shall call for you at a quarter to eight. Now mind! I have your promise."

The gravity of Keene's tone caused Miss Vanbrugh a certain inward triumph.

"Remember, you like strong characters," she observed to him, as they were shaking hands; "people who can love and who can hate furiously. For my part, when there is such abundance of material I should be apt to say, 'Beware, look out for complications!'"

The warning was given jestingly. That Tania Meredith should have expanded into beautiful



womanhood was a complication Miss Vanbrugh in no way foreboded. The child might border on good looks possibly. She might be original, bizarre. Recollecting the sallow skin, the angular outlines, the gleaming ireful orbs of former days, Amelia's charitable imagination could carry her no higher than this. So when a quarter to eight was striking that evening, when Miss Vanbrugh, in becoming silver grey, had crossed the pavement to the carriage that awaited her, it came to pass that she saw a vision which took her breath away.

"There—there is a mistake then?" She turned for explanation to Keene, who, his crush-hat under his arm, was preparing to hand her to her seat. "Tania Meredith is not coming?"

"Tania Meredith is here," cried out a clear well-rounded voice. "We meet otherwise than at my execution after all. Major Keene, I change my place. Miss Vanbrugh will like to behold me until we reach the theatre."

Most people would have liked to behold Tania as she looked in the amber light that June evening.

She had arrayed herself in one of the Parisian

toilettes intended for the coming campaign; a pale blue dress, of softest texture, simply fashioned, without furbelows or trimming, as befitted her extreme youth. A cloud of white lace draped her shoulders, just permitting the outlines of her fine bare arms to be divined. A diamond of unusual size and lustre, set round with smaller stones so as to form a star, glittered at her throat—her only ornament.

“You may look as much as you like,” she cried, seating herself with her back to the driver in order that her chaperons might both face her. “I am accustomed to being immensely looked at, and delight in it. Now own up, Miss Vanbrugh; say candidly what you think.”

It was a characteristic of Miss Vanbrugh's alert nature ever to meet surprises half way. She rose to the occasion instantly.

“I think my dear, in the first place, you are too young to wear diamonds.”

The slightest approach to a frown knitted Tania's handsome brows. “This particular clasp was given me when I was a child. The diamond has a his-

tory. There is a meaning in my wearing it. Otherwise I should be guilty of a solecism. Unmarried girls must only wear diamonds in their dreams."

"Miss Vanbrugh is envious. You look very passable, Tania; diamonds and all," said Keene.

Tania laughed aloud, a delightfully fresh laugh, and still with a somewhat equivocal ring underlying its freshness.

"I am consoled, Miss Vanbrugh. If Major Keene thinks me passable, even you shall not put me out of conceit with my looks."

When they had entered the theatre Keene gave his arm to the elder lady.

"You think her human," he whispered, Tania, for a moment, having parted company from them in the crowd.

"She is extravagantly pretty and a sorceress," said Amelia Vanbrugh; "we shall find it hard, all of us, to keep our judgments cool. Depend upon it a good deal of the old Tania lurks beneath this fair exterior."

The curtain rose almost at the moment that they entered the stalls, and Tania's absorption in

the play was instant. The happy humour of the great actor's Benedick: the charm and vivacity of Beatrice, the marvellous realism of the whole mediæval panorama seemed to transport her with enthusiasm. She called many a "Bravo!" aloud. She clapped her hands with most un-English vigour when the two leading *artistes* came before the curtain at the conclusion of the act. Then, abruptly Tania Meredith sank back in her chair, tired-looking and pale.

"There is the worst of a play—agree with me, Major Keene! It is too like life with these pauses. One wants to be at tension-point always."

"And the actors may want a glass of champagne," suggested Keene.

"Ah, that is looking at matters from their side of the question—no habit of mine! I can never see anything or person save as it affects myself."

Miss Vanbrugh, who had listened, gave a series of little Lord Burleigh nods at the frank selfishness of this confession.

But no one was thinking of Miss Vanbrugh!

George Keene's eyes were fixed upon his neigh-

bour's face, and Tania's wore the far-off, impenetrable expression which, perhaps, was the greatest charm of her unique and dream-like beauty.

"You may fancy," she ran on irrelevantly, "how much delight I take out of Aunt Pradine's innocent pleasures. Her friends are horrors, Court beauties of the days of Nicholas. They wear wigs. They meet to drink yellow tea, denounce the age, and play Jarasch. I have to play Jarasch, when a hand is short, and none of Pradine's pug-dogs require nursing. I think, sometimes, I would rather live like the peasants among the Steppes than——"

Tania Meredith broke off short. A smile of brilliant recognition lit up her face. Then she blushed deeply—the first time Keene had seen a change of colour on her cheek—she lifted her hand for a second to the diamond that flashed and scintillated at her throat.

"Some friends of Pradine's, at the moment, too, when I was maligning them in a lump. Do you see how guiltily I am blushing?"

"I see the blush," answered Major Keene, with emphasis, "the guilt we must imagine."

An inordinately got-up Frenchwoman, to whom towering pyramids of hair, abundant rice powder, gleaming jewels, lent distinction of a kind, was, at this moment taking her place in a box on the first tier, giving the house the benefit of a well-cut and mature shoulder. A typically French husband, stout, complacent, suave, with a grizzled moustache, and wearing a decoration on his breast, took the other front chair. In the back of the box were discernible, across the lady's ample contours, an opera glass, held in a pair of lavender-gloved hands, a bald-flattish head, and the outlines of a tall, rather ungainly, man's figure.

The opera glass was obviously levelled at Tania Meredith's face.

"General de la Marche and his wife," whispered the girl, readily. "The people who brought me over yesterday, friends of Pradine's, but who are, mercifully, too French to play Jarasch. It was my duty to send a note to their hotel this morning, filled with solicitude for Madame's state of nerves after her voyage. Only I never do my duty!"

"And the gentleman of the opera glass?" asked

Keene, a full stop betokening that Tania held her explanation to be complete.

She lifted her eyes to the box and smiled with them, a little art of whose secret, as Keene hereafter found, she was a thorough mistress.

"That, as far as I can see amidst Madame's pouffs and plumes, is a compatriot of mine, Prince Serge Roudine."

"A compatriot and a friend?"

Keene's tone was interrogative.

"A friend! Why that is scarcely the word to use." She looked at him with answering steadiness. "I don't know about English customs, the decalogue of Mistress Grundy. Young girls abroad do not have friendships outside their own family. See, monsieur, the curtain rises"—she touched Keene's wrist with one of the movements whose airy spontaneity bewitched him—"don't let us have a thought in the world save Benedick and Beatrice."

CHAPTER VI.

PRINCE SERGE ROUDINE.

THE usual Lyceum crowd blocked the egresses of the theatre after the play was over. And so, the night being fine, Keene counselled Miss Vanbrugh and Tania to walk at once to their carriage rather than wait indefinitely for their carriage to make its way to them. They had not proceeded far before Tania recognised Prince Roudine, at the side of General and Madame de la Marche, a few steps ahead of them.

"An opportunity not to be lost. You will keep me in sight, will you not?" Her eyes appealed in turn to Keene and to Miss Vanbrugh. "As for me, I shall put on my prettiest manner, express my delight at Madame's recovery from her sea-sickness, my raptures over her appearance, my gratitude to her for her recent chaperonage—and escape the necessity of a visit! But take care not to lose me."

She hurried on, with step as quick as the denseness of the crowd permitted. She rested a touch on Madame de la Marche's shoulder. There was a gracefully warm meeting between the ladies, the two men standing bare-headed in the lamp-light. Then Tania and the General shook hands. And then she bestowed a formal salutation, the salutation of a girl trained to walk along other lines than Anglo-Saxon ones, upon her compatriot.

Serge Roudine was a man, young in years, but prematurely old-looking by reason of his baldness. There was a kind of shuffle in his gait, which gave you an impression of weakness, moral, physical, or both. The general outlines of his figure were drooping and flabby. His fair-complexioned, regular-featured face was vaguely agreeable. His chill blue eyes had a directness in their glance which his friends might term frank, or his detractors insolent. His blonde beard was worn pointed, according to the prevailing Henri Quatre mode. A balanced mixture of self-confidence and politeness—the latter touching on servility—gave to his manner what

novel writers of the fine school have called "the perfume of aristocracy."

After several little rounds of effusive French cordiality had been exchanged between Tania and her friends, the General, it would seem, caught sight of his carriage, and, offering his arm to his wife, hurried forward through the crowd.

During a minute's space Tania Meredith and the Russian were alone.

Prince Roudine bent low, he whispered a few words in her ear. Tania glanced quickly round. Keene and Miss Vanbrugh were within a couple of yards of her. And, seeing them, she answered aloud:

"In the Russian tongue, we assume," said George Keene, two or three minutes later. A cold and summary look had been fastened by each of the two men on the other, ere Roudine bowed himself away. "Miss Vanbrugh, linguist though she is, could make nothing of your secrets."

"So I hoped," cried Tania, in her gayest voice. "German, for the stage. French, for a ballroom.

English—oh! English for courts of law. English, if you must be on oath. Russian, for a secret!”

The girl continued to chatter and laugh with somewhat forced persistency. How was the chaperonage to end? This she asked as they took their places in the carriage. Major Keene might be set down at his club, and then she would see Miss Vanbrugh, safe, and drive home alone in the moonlight. That would be all delightfully proper, would it not?

“If we were in Boston, I should answer, ‘yes,’” said Amelia Vanbrugh. “In five-and-twenty years I have not mastered the minor European codes. Major Keene must decide. Ought Tania to have one chaperon or two, and may she drive with propriety to Prince’s Gate?”

“Tania in no case can drive alone,” said Keene, a little grimly. “We will take you home first, Miss Vanbrugh, and then——”

“Poor Major Keene!” interrupted Tania, in her provocative voice, as he hesitated. “Pity the sorrows of a guardian, an unprotected guardian, forced to drive about London at midnight with a ward of

seventeen! Will you not be delighted, monsieur, when Elizabeth returns?"

"Delighted," answered Keene on the instant, "I don't think I should long survive with such a fearful responsibility on my hands."

Of course this was said in jest. But when Miss Vanbrugh had left them, when the two were driving westward in the summer night, each was aware that some impalpable change had come over their relationship.

Wisely permitting the Prince Roudine episode to rest, Tania began a discussion of the play and the players, themes respecting which one, at least, of her remarks was apposite.

"Did Benedick and Beatrice really feel the tender passion? You, Major Keene, have, of course, read the commentators. Or was it just self-love—self-love with a mild flavouring of gratitude, which made them yield? The actors, being great artists, gave us the tender passion reading. But I incline to think it was a common-sense marriage, in reality—trite ending for a play or for a life!"

George Keene possessed his soul in silence.

"And common-sense might suit the English best. As I looked round the house I wondered if any audience in Europe could be so cold, so self-restrained. But then I don't know how Anglo-Saxons feel—think. I can speak English as you hear, and five or six other languages, too. I can only think in French, which is bad, for I intend to be English. Since I came to London I have decided as to that, I intend to be English to the finger-tips."

"English to the finger-tips," observed Keene. "Yet you think in French, and when you wish to talk secrets you employ Russian!"

There was a shade of irony in his tone. Tania drew her laces together round her white throat, leant back in her corner of the carriage, and closed her eyelids.

"I am too sleepy for argument, monsieur, and shall try to dream awhile. Wake me up as soon as we reach the turning of Elizabeth's street."

She looked irresistibly handsome in the mingled glimmer of lamp and starlight, her closed lips

graver than he had seen them yet, the thick black lashes resting on her young cheeks.

Among the memories of her with which Keene's heart must be charged till he dies, this one of Tania in her mock slumber, the delicate webs of lace gathered round her shoulders, the diamond gleaming at her throat, must, assuredly, remain one of the vividest!

Suddenly she opened her eyes, wide, and found him watching her.

"Why were you annoyed with me for speaking to Prince Roudine after we left the theatre? Sleep has restored my moral strength. I can bear whatever hard things you have to say. You disapprove of him, simply as an Englishman disapproves of everything un-English, no doubt?"

"I disapprove of him as an associate for Tania Meredith," said Keene with promptitude. "Prince Roudine's reputation as a gambler is known of all men. He had just played away a fortune at the time when you and I made each other's acquaintance in Mentone."

"Which fortune, I wonder?" speculated Tania

Meredith coolly. "Poor Serge has played away so many. Happily for him the Roudines are not a long-lived race. When a cousin dies, as the doctors say he must in the course of the next three months, Monsieur Serge will come into some huge estates, exhaustless quicksilver mines in White Russia."

"White Russia seems connected with the Roudine name. Surely it was there——"

"That Prince Roudine—old Alexis, Serge's grandfather—ordered a family of peasants to be beaten to death. Quite correct. When Serge is angered, deeply moved," went on the girl, knowingly or unknowingly committing herself, "a look comes across his face which reminds one pretty strongly of that little Roudine legend. I have seen it once." She gave an involuntary shudder. "I hope it will not often come into my life to see Serge Roudine angered."

"I hope," observed Keene, "it will not often come into your life to see Serge Roudine at all."

"In saying that," a smile stole furtively round Tania's lips, "you wish me happiness. As long as I continue happy, Prince Roudine will be no more

to me than any stranger who passes at this moment on the pavement."

"And reverse the medal. We can none of us be put, as Miss Vanbrugh would phrase it, under a glass case. Youth, beauty must take their chance of misfortune like the rest."

"If ever my happiness is gone," said Tania Meredith, turning pale, "my last hope dead, if I stand bankrupt—there is the word, bankrupt——" she clasped her shrouded hands on her breast, a sigh broke from her, "then my promise is given. Prince Roudine may marry me if he will."

Keene looked at her incredulously.

"You think this theatrical," she exclaimed, "and you English people hate theatre. You think it sentimental, and you despise sentiment. But England, remember, is not the whole world. There are feelings, superstitions if you like, not to be meted out by the insular yard measure. Serge Roudine and I are compatriots. We understand each other."

They were now within a hundred yards of Elizabeth's house. Tania spoke never a word until

the street door stood open and Keene was offering his hand after bidding her goodnight.

"No, I have changed my mind. I desire you to come in," said she, with her little well-played air of authority. "The night is a fine one for walking. Ten minutes cannot make much difference in your hour of reaching home."

It was easier for George Keene to obey than to protest. The strict proprieties might, doubtless, be risked by his compliance. But his whole outside relations with Tania Meredith had, during the last twenty-eight hours, been a risking of the strict proprieties. Essentially the girl was as rigidly guarded—or so Keene held—as though Elizabeth, Miss Vanbrugh and Madame de la Marche in a trio stood at her elbow; perhaps more so. And he followed.

CHAPTER VII.

ACTRESS, NOT IMPOSTOR.

MRS. MEREDITH'S drawing-room was half-lighted. A dish of strawberries, with accessories of sugar and iced water, stood temptingly displayed on a tiny tea table. Tania uttered a well-pleased, very French expletive. She threw off her laces, her gloves, then seated herself at the table with the air of one who means instant execution.

"Come and help me, Major Keene. Are not one's lips fevered with London gas and London dust? I stand in frightful awe," she ran on, "of Elizabeth's household. You don't know how these unservant-like men and women take the breath out of one! But I had courage enough to beg that fruit and ice might await my return. That is what poor Pradine orders when we visit the theatres, of course with a *samovar* and cigarettes for herself. Now, let me select for you. See, you shall have the finest

in the dish. And do not let us quarrel any more."

She looked irresistibly pretty in her soft clinging dress, with her expressive hands, her charming little tricks of manner as she encrusted strawberry after strawberry in sugar before submitting it to her white teeth. But George Keene stood on guard. Sweet, girlish though Tania was, he had begun vaguely to suspect double dealing, to guess at histrionic talent. The smile that had gone from her eyes to the box on the first tier was not forgotten of him.

"Iced water is a horribly pernicious drink." This he observed when a large tumbler of the fluid was about to wash down Tania's strawberries. "I would not for worlds dispute Aunt Pradine's wisdom, still——"

"Warn me one minute later," interrupted Tania, quaffing off the goblet with immense gusto. "Iced-water pernicious. Now I know why I adore it. One has these hidden affinities for the unwholesome. You say affinities? It would be kinder, Major Keene, if you corrected my atrocious English sometimes."

She rose, walked to the open window, and looked forth at the night. "What an anomaly," raising her clasped hands pensively beneath her chin, "to think of pure, clean starlight resting on smoky London."

"You must tolerate London, smoke and all, if you intend honestly to become English. But I am not sure," hinted Keene, "as to your intentions. A few minutes back you spoke of a Russian as a compatriot."

"Did I? You take notice of what I say, then—*and care?*"

He crossed to her side. "I care deeply, Tania, as your guardian, as your father's friend, for all that concerns your relations with Prince Roudine."

The girl was in the same attitude still. Her chiselled hands supported her chin. Her eyes were lifted to Keene's, her lips eloquent and prompt for speechfulness.

"You make the matter too grave. If you knew how my promise was given—how the jest began," her glance, for a moment, sank beneath his, "you

would be less severe. Do you mind giving me another ten minutes?"

"I would give ten years," said Keene, hotly, "to know that Serge Roudine had never been introduced to you."

"He never was introduced." Tania's cheeks dimpled. "Our acquaintance soared above conventionalities from the first."

"And the jest began—?"

"More than two years ago, in Monte Carlo. One January afternoon Pradine's maid told me that her mistress had migraine. (We say migraine for any unusual engagement with the wig-maker or the dentist), and that Mademoiselle Tania might distract herself in the public gardens for an hour. Mademoiselle Tania, of course, started straight away for the Casino. In those days," said the girl, "my frock reached my ancles, my hair was tied in a pig-tail. I was an ugly duckling. No one looked at me, no one minded me. Some Russian friends of Pradine's were entering when I reached the door, and I passed in as if I belonged to them. I edged my way to the roulette table, and by accident, found myself at

the side of Prince Roudine. At this moment, I think I see him before me. He had been losing for two days. His face was like a face in death-agony. Some impulse made me rest my hand on his chair, and he turned. He looked at me, fixedly, with haggard, blood-shot eyes. Then, in English, he asked me to stake for him."

"And you consented, poor little Tania! You knew enough about roulette to understand his meaning."

"I had seen Pradine play in Paris. I understood nothing about this Monte Carlo game, or what the croupiers called, or why the gold should be raked first to one side the table then the other. But when Serge Roudine, with his face of death, asked me to stake, I thought of a pistol-shot I heard one night, and of the story that followed! I had not courage to refuse. I put a pile of gold for him upon the first number that came to my hand, and he won, thirty-three times the amount. I staked again, again. Serge Roudine won always. It was the turning-point—so, afterwards, he was pleased to say—of his fortune."

"And the beginning of the jest?"

"Prince Roudine called at our hotel next day. He made me accept this clasp—the diamond, as I told Miss Vanbrugh, which has a history. My old aunt received him as if he had been the Czar. We are noble, but of the created nobility. We are not of the same world as the Roudines. He was devoted to us for the rest of our stay at Monaco. She was in a seventh heaven. If I did not know she was sixty-six, well struck, I should say Aunt Pradine's heart was a little touched."

"And Tania's?" asked George Keene, as she hesitated.

"I believe I liked him, for the diamond's sake—as long as I might keep my distance, only look at him across Pradine. He had lifted me out of the ugly duckling stage for ever. But for me, said the people in the hotel, there had been another abrupt winding-up of affairs that night—another pistol-shot. All the great ladies would stare at me as I passed. 'There is the little girl who staked for Roudine,' they said aloud. I had a rôle to play. Papa used to make me act bits out of his plays

when I was a small child. This was the first time I had been an actress in a real, living scene. And that went for much with my temperament."

The appeal took effect. It seemed to Keene that Dion Meredith in the flesh was looking at him from the girl's vivid eyes.

"Yes, I believe I liked Monsieur Roudine then—as far as one can like for a diamond's sake. It was a different matter when we came across him at Monaco last winter. I know nothing about love or lovers," observed Tania, with philosophy, "save what I have seen on the stage or sung of in songs. Still, one can make guesses, Major Keene."

"One can make guesses," assented Keene, in a somewhat colourless tone.

"And so, when Pradine told me one day that Prince Roudine had spoken to her overnight, was honouring me with his serious regards, the news came as a thing of course. Tania Meredith, she declared, was the luckiest girl in Europe—Serge Roudine the most generous, most delicate of men! The prince was willing that the engagement should last a year—longer even if I wished it. I might

have my London season—see something of my father's country, before I married. 'To such an offer,' added Pradine, tears of joy streaming down her venerable enamel, 'there could be only one right and duteous answer.'"

"The word 'No,'" suggested Keene, promptly.

"The word 'No,' with reservations. I had not Major Keene to give me counsel. 'My best Pradine,' I cried, 'you pass over one not insignificant detail. I desire happiness—desire it as a right, and, please God, mean to get it. I was ready, a year ago, to accept Serge Roudine's diamonds. I am ready, if he likes, to accept his friendship now. Until my last hope in life lies dead—until my heart is bankrupt—I will not accept Monsieur Roudine, no, not with twice the Roudine estates, for my lover.'"

George Keene laughed aloud. "Then you are bound by ropes of cobweb. A child not yet seventeen," his eyes dwelt lingeringly on her fresh and dainty prettiness, "entering upon an engagement of conjectural despair! Why should you look forward to your last hope dying—to your heart becoming bankrupt?"

"Perhaps because I am half Slav in blood. A Russian woman loves melancholy thoughts as a Parisian loves her ball dresses, or an Englishwoman—nay, I am at a loss! Tell me, Major Keene, what is it that an Englishwoman loves?"

"On occasion—such a thing has been recorded—the man she marries."

Tania turned her face into shadow. She wound up her story briefly, and with reserve.

"Pradine, you may be sure, put a little gilding on my rough message, for next day, at an appointed hour, Monsieur Roudine called. He behaved like the polished gentleman he can be when he chooses. Half in jest, half earnest—but with the look I spoke to you of in his eyes—he declared himself contented with my terms. I wished to try my pinions before holy matrimony should clip them for ever. The wish was natural! I held romantic notions of happiness, as a right. Let me keep to them!"

"Giving Roudine the reversal, should the notions fall through. In that," said Keene, "the prince showed his gambler's knowledge of human nature, made an accurate calculation of life's chances. The

first time Tania Meredith is piqued, cries for the moon and cannot have it, she is to say 'Kismet! I am bankrupt!'"

"And let Serge Roudine take his own, like the bad spirit in a legend. Childish folly, from first to last—is it not? Tell the truth, l'ami Keene, you think me shallow, hare-brained, frivolous?"

"I think," said Keene, "that you are a very charming impostor, without knowing it. Five years hence you will be truer to your own nature than you are now."

"I shall be Tania Meredith till I die," said she, gravely. "Actress, if you will, impostor — never! And I shall know great happiness, or bankruptcy; no middle state possible, I think. You are going already, then?" Major Keene was in the act of extending his crush-hat. "Before you start, will you have a verse of one song, just to give emphasis to the confession I have made you."

Tania took her place at the piano. A low wailing prelude responded to her sympathetic touch. Then, in dialect, she improvised a song such as the peasants chant on summer nights in the Ukraine.

A song wild as the whispers of a stream set to music, sad as death, tender as spring, suddenly ceasing (as love, as life cease) in the full flow and passion of the melody.

Keene was stirred to the inmost fibre of his heart, and Tania Meredith knew it.

"The name of the song?" She looked up at him with her smile. "Oh, our poor little national airs have not all got set names. The story? An every-day one. A Slav girl is telling the stars that hope is dead, that she is bankrupt. Nothing more."

Tania stood at the window when her visitor was gone. She sent a kiss after Keene's disappearing figure—alas! and more than a kiss. Half in ignorance, her girlish fancy had been set upon him, increasingly, with the growth of years, and at this moment she knew her weakness.

From to-night, on, it was to be George Keene's will that should sway her, not her own. She had lost the power of free choice.

CHAPTER VIII.

ELIZABETH'S PHILOSOPHY.

ANOTHER twenty four dangerous hours sped by. Then a peremptory love letter startled Elizabeth from engrossing interviews with undertakers and milliners at Cheltenham. A brother officer, under orders for India, had invited George Keene to spend the next three or four days at Shorncliffe, and Mrs. Meredith's presence in London was absolutely needed. Subjects too urgent and too delicate to trust to paper weighed on Keene's mind. Would his mistress discuss them with him? Would Elizabeth, at once, return to London.

Elizabeth returned — under protest. It had certainly been the correct thing to stay over the funeral, and the politic thing. This she told her sweetheart in their first moments of re-union. General Orme had left every shilling to his wife, and poor helpless Aunt Jane had not a blood rela-

tion living. But, of course, one must put personal interests aside. Such a *Napoleonic letter* as Major Keene's was a command.

The widow looked fair and youthful in her fresh sables, and Keene's welcome of her was ardent—ardent to a degree which a less self-engrossed woman might well have regarded as significant. Tania was to be absent throughout the afternoon, Miss Vanbrugh having borne the girl forcibly away to the Exhibitions, and Elizabeth, as she crossed the threshold of her house, gave notice to the servants that she was not at home. So Keene's opportunities of disburthening his mind were ample.

He commenced by a somewhat desultory mention of Tania's name.

"It is the greatest relief to hear of her nice looks. Beauty in itself matters nothing." Mrs. Meredith glanced into one of the many strips of mirror in her rose-tinted boudoir—George Keene's position was sufficiently recognised by the household for him to be admitted there. "But nice looks to a girl of seventeen mean a fair perspective. Actually handsome dear Tania cannot be."

"Well, there may be faults, if one pick her face to pieces. Miss Vanbrugh, who is without prejudice, calls her extravagantly pretty."

"Fancy! It *has* been so nice of you, George, taking all this trouble, really quite too unselfish. You have found some way, I hope, to hint—to suggest——"

"Some method to tell her in Spanish," said Keene, with a short laugh. "No, my dear Elizabeth, I have not. You possess the finest tact of any woman living. I leave all difficult explanations to you."

"Tania has at least given you civility, I trust, in return for your kindness?"

"Oh, more than civility. She treats me with the frank good-fellowship of our old Mentone days. Her devotion," said Keene, "to poor Dion's memory is something passionate."

Elizabeth's pink cheeks grew pinker. She turned her wedding-ring round and round with restless fingers, then brushed away an imaginary speck of dust from her sombre dress.

"I think it is some people's fate to be always in cruel positions. Tania's constancy to the past"

—the word fell from her lips with discriminate vagueness—“will but edge her criticism of myself. Oh! George, might it not be wise to think things over twice—to postpone our selfish happiness until——”

Keene was at her side instantly.

“I have thought things over not twice, but a hundred times, during your absence,” he exclaimed, “and out of my thoughts one stands clear as day. Our marriage need not be delayed. It was for this I asked you to return. If Tania’s veto is so much to be dreaded, let her remain ignorant of facts until they are accomplished ones.”

“Major Keene!”

“We are not boy and girl. We decided from the first not to trouble ourselves with lawyers or settlements. Here, in this big, nothing-knowing London, we can be married on any day, at any hour, we choose. You could ask one of your sisters, I could ask my mother, to invite Tania into the country. A fortnight later we should announce ourselves, sober Darby and Joan, to the world.”

Keene spoke fast and consecutively, something

in the tone of a man who has prepared his speech beforehand, and is determined, at any cost, to get through with it. Dion Meredith's widow turned red, then white. She searched in haste for her pocket-handkerchief.

"I am punished! A woman never should admit a thought of second love. Why, George, what can you think of my principles? You propose"—the handkerchief really came into play—"a clandestine marriage!"

"It is a sounding expression—but does not frighten me," said Keene. "You look at things, naturally, from a woman's point of view."

She did, indeed. Elizabeth had long ago decided upon the shade of pearl-grey *faille*; the bonnet—the very gloves and shoes in which she would approach the altar. She had, in fancy, invited her wedding guests; her officiating clergy—had, mentally, composed short paragraphs, in which the fashionable newspapers should make mention of the well-bred and dignified solemnity.

"A woman loves the pomps and vanities of a wedding day, by instinct. A man detests them. If

he is making an ignoble marriage, he would like to do it in the shade. If—like myself—he has had the fortune to win a fair and excellent woman, whom he loves, he desires not idle starers at his happiness.”

“But a secret marriage!” ejaculated Elizabeth, half hysterically. “You speak of happiness. My happiness would be ruined, if I thought people talked about me. And people would talk. They would say I was always making odd marriages, like that terrible Mrs. Lawson Digby. Would you choose to have one spoken of as a second Mrs. Lawson Digby?”

Keene had never seen his beloved so warmly in earnest. After getting away from the debateable regions inhabited by artists, actors and playwrights, Elizabeth’s warmth—considering on what lines her being moved—was logical. To be always in correct taste, to perform every action of human existence with rigid, yet graceful propriety—were not these the leading formulas of poor Elizabeth’s creed? I can scarcely say that Keene urged his point with insistence. He stood at one of those junctures

where, after an official protest of conscience, the strongest men are fatally prone to drift—opportunity helping.

Elizabeth was opportunity incarnate. "I have thought everything out," said she. "In the midst of my Cheltenham trials—and the mere doing without Alison, at such a time, was a bitter drop in my cup—I fixed my reflections not on oneself, but on what would be one's paramount duties to others. In these days, Major Keene, there are women who, in the height of the season, would not go into mourning for an uncle. I have my own ideas. There are five distinct Orme families, all in London, and all keeping their eyes on one's smallest action."

"So you mean to mourn for the five distinct families' sakes. I understand?"

"I mean to mourn for my Papa's brother—and in the country. At Tania's age, to lose four weeks of the season can matter little. We shall return in time for a number of the best balls, and then there will be Goodwood, and afterwards Cowes——"

"And when are we to be married?" interrupted

Keene, loyal again to the still, small voice. "You have thought dutifully of Uncle Joseph, and you think of what the world will say, and of the five Orme families, and of Tania. Will you make an effort in another direction? Think of what will be best—it sounds disgustingly selfish, I know—for me."

"Oh, George, can you ask?" Elizabeth rested a dimpled hand, caressingly, on his arm. "This Shorncliffe visit will occupy you for the next four days, and then, of course, you will come and look us up. You will find, by that time, how excellently Tania and I understand each other."

And Keene submitted—drifted. His destiny was ruled, he thought. A woman's tact—a woman's knowledge of her sex—would enable Elizabeth to steer clear of dangers which to his grosser masculine sense seemed imminent.

But the heart, the conscience within him, were ill at ease, notwithstanding.

CHAPTER IX.

THE OLD ADAM.

MRS. MEREDITH'S confidence in herself was not ill-grounded. Like many other guileless little women of her stamp, Elizabeth understood the art of gliding over the very thinnest ice to admiration. Her meeting with Tania went off well. The long evening that followed seemed too short for their confidences. Elizabeth recalled the old Mentone days with plaintive delicacy. She dwelt on the outside interests of both their lives. At length, but not until other subjects were exhausted, she brought the talk round to the events of the past few days, to Tania's advent in London.

"It seemed the unkindest thing for me to be absent—but, of course, Alison in an emergency is priceless. I do hope they have made you comfortable—for this house, my dear child, and all it contains, is yours. So fortunate having dear good Miss Vanbrugh in town."

"Fortunate, was it?" echoed Tania, mechanically, and with a glance from beneath her level brows.

"I could have asked any number of acquaintance to call. But English people want so much explanation. Now, Amelia Vanbrugh has known about us all for years."

"She has, indeed."

"And Major Keene." Elizabeth had taken up her embroidery, and was working beside a lamp placed on a tiny table at her elbow. Some stitches appeared just at this moment to go wrong. She busied herself in unpicking them, and her face was down-bent. "It has been the greatest pleasure to your guardian to show you a little of London."

"He has seemed to like it," Tania assented, calmly.

"But he and you were always friends. Major Keene—did I tell you?—Major Keene called on me this afternoon, before starting for Shorncliffe. We are joint guardians, you know. Our interest in your welfare gives us much to talk over."

Elizabeth's voice faltered, and Tania's heart went out towards her. The plain black cashmere

worn by the elder lady, the sad little muslin bands at throat and wrists, the airy nothing which imagination might call a cap surmounting her thick fair hair, all were suggestive to Tania of modestly prolonged widowhood. The possibility of new love, of a second marriage, was outside the fabric of her thoughts. Love! Why, Elizabeth would soon be in her twenty-ninth year. To a girl half-way through her teens, nine-and-twenty means middle life.

She crossed to Elizabeth's side, knelt down by her, and stole a hand under her arm.

"If you talk of me, you must find very bad things to say. Remembering the Mentone days, I own that I deserve harsh judgments."

"But you are not the Mentone Tania," said Elisabeth, suavely. "In place of the little wilful, passionate girl, we have ——"

"A girl so many *centimètres* taller, so many *kilo* heavier—a girl as wilful, as passionate, but without the same occasion for jealousy. If circumstances were different to what they are," a smile lurked round the corners of Tania's lips, "you would see how much of the old Adam is in me still."

"We need not speculate unprofitably. Jealous feeling"—Mrs. Meredith spoke with conviction—"jealous feeling is absolutely out of the question, now."

It was Elizabeth's habit of mind to see only a little of a thing, then fill it in with Elizabeth's ideas of what the thing ought to be. Need I say that, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, she did her filling-in wrong?"

"Absolutely," Tania assented. "What can I feel towards you but love, gratitude," Elizabeth winced in the spirit, "for all the happiness you gave Papa?"

The girl clasped her hands over her eyes. Tears stole down her cheeks—soft, good tears, the like of which are, I think, in this world, wept for the dead, and the dead only.

Elizabeth folded her work with decent sedateness.

"I can never look upon him as gone—perished. When I was little, Aunt Pradine used to call me a heathen for saying Papa lived still, and when we went to Russia she would get the popes, one after

another, to 'explain' things to me—explain the mysteries of life and death! Elizabeth," she whispered, lifting her face to Mrs. Meredith's, "*you* know my meaning. When the winds and the rain are strong, and you lie listening to them at midnight, or when you hear fine music, or some great new hope stirs you, don't you know Papa is near—so near," Tania's voice sank to a whisper, "you long till your heart breaks to feel his hand?"

Elizabeth laid her embroidery aside. She cried a little, as was incumbent on her. Then she platitudinized. Creatures of clay must seek to be true to all responsibilities, loyal to both worlds. The departed naturally hold a most sacred place in our remembrance. But we must guard against morbid trains of thought. Sorrow is not our normal condition. We must do our duty—Tania would not think her harsh for saying so?—to the living.

Elizabeth, I say, platitudinized, unmercifully. Standing in Elizabeth's shoes, could the most original thinker in Europe have done otherwise? She platitudinized. For the moment she felt strong. And still, when her blonde head rested on its pillow that

night, Mrs. Meredith, in silence and darkness, knew a sufficiently evil half hour.

"If circumstances were different, you would see how much of the old Adam is in me still."

The gentle little widow held sound orthodox views as to the depravity of one's neighbour's human nature, and believed without stint in Tania's old Adam. She shivered as she thought of the confession it would be incumbent upon herself to make—shivered (not foreseeing a graver peril) from the vision of the girl's anger, the passionate resentment which must be in store for Keene as her dead father's rival.

Poor Elizabeth! She was really a sweet and tunable woman, well adapted for life's even pathways, a stiff, safe hedge on either side! She liked the persons belonging to her to be in good health, successful, well off, a credit to one; would nurse such persons in sickness, would mourn for them as long as the world held it decorous to mourn, when their time came to depart. Here were the limits of her capacity. She knew no longing whatsoever to press Dion's dead hand. She never fancied him at

her side. Wind and rain at midnight had no voices for her. This cherished grief of Tania's Slav nature, this life-long regret underlying youth and hope and enjoyment, seemed to Elizabeth a voluntary, if not impious clinging to the uncomfortable.

How fortunate—the thought was brought home to her by the simplest possible association of ideas—how trebly fortunate that Tania's good looks were beyond cavil. In her fresh youth, well introduced, adroitly chaperoned, Tania must marry so certainly, so well—in her inmost soul Elizabeth devoutly added, so soon! Why, there was scarce a necessity to enter upon risky confidence with her at all. The girl's predilections happily were in George Keene's favour. Let her, with the instinctive sharpness of her age, grow to divine the truth gradually. Let events, the passing events of everyday life, when Tania should see Keene and herself together, tell their own story.

And, could existing facts have been done away with, Mrs. Meredith's idea was reasonable. Like many other schemes of compromise, it made no allowance, however, for existing facts, and so

contained the sure elements of disaster from the first.

Nothing could augur better than Tania's dispositions next morning. Sunshine was in Tania's breast, a new sense of buoyant hope, of perfect security. She would have started for China, for Greenland, at Elizabeth's will, so long as it had been the will of George Keene also. Give up three months of the season? She asked nothing better than to give up the London season *in toto*. Bournemouth, Penzance, the Lakes—Elizabeth was attempting, rather dreading, to sketch out plans for the murder of twenty-one days. Why, any place at present must be good. With the nightingales singing and the country a-flower, how could one be badly off? Who could want to remain among streets and houses at Midsummer?

Mrs. Meredith dispatched a message inviting Miss Vanbrugh to lunch with them.

"It seems too absurd to consult a foreigner about one's coming and goings. But Amelia really is a living A. B. C. These Americans know England like guide-books. We cannot do better than

let Miss Vanbrugh dispose of us for the next three weeks. June *is* such a wretched month," said Elizabeth, with her usual emphasis, "such a deplorable month to leave London in."

Miss Vanbrugh disposed of them, off-hand.

"You want, during your three weeks' mourning, to be amused, unseen of the five Orme families, and of the world in general. My dear Mrs. Meredith—don't tell me you grieve for Uncle Joseph! Yes, that is what you want. Well, you can't be amused in Britain. You would be out of season everywhere, thrown upon your own resources—and a very hard fall you would find that. There would be nothing left but to quarrel with Tania. I don't advise you," added Miss Vanbrugh, with a glance at the girl's handsome face, "to quarrel with Tania. You must go abroad."

"In June!" cried the widow, aghast. "I never knew that any one went anywhere before August—except, of course, the poor brides and bridegrooms. What was that amusing little book about it? The trials of a bride and bridegroom, you know, in damp weather. It all ended badly, I remember."

"But we are not bride and bridegroom," exclaimed Tania. "And we do not mean to end badly." Long afterwards the thoughtless words may have recurred to both her hearers. "Now, Miss Vanbrugh, our destiny is in your hands. Tell us what label to put on our portmanteaus."

Miss Vanbrugh suggested Teufelsbad, best known among the beauty, or cosmetic, baths of Europe. She would, herself, be moving to Brussels in two days' time. Why not travel thus far together? In the Taunus mountains they would find distractions of a kind—music, riding parties, the occupation of drinking complexion water, the certainty of making acquaintance. "Something," added the American lady with emphasis, "to keep Tania, for the time being, out of mischief."

And with the help of Bradshaw and Bädeker, the details of the project were soon under brisk discussion. Tania and Miss Vanbrugh knew the virtues of the waters, the cures which they had wrought, by heart. Elizabeth's was the mildly persistent opposition of ignorance.

"The Teufelsbad springs are worthy of their

name," said Miss Vanbrugh. "The plainest woman looks ten years younger after a course of them."

"I went there three years ago with Pradine," said Tania, "and she regained her complexion. Pradine's complexion!"

Elizabeth's opposition waxed fainter.

"It is not a plan of my choosing, but for Tania's sake, I have said 'yes.'" This came into her evening letter to Major Keene. "Under other circumstances, I might have gone to my sister Harriet. But a quiet Essex Rectory would never do for Tania—indeed, Harriet's husband is so *low*, one can scarce tell how he would relish a Greek catholic. Miss Vanbrugh travels with us as far as Brussels. Is there any chance that Major Keene will follow in our steps, a few days later? Please see us off, at noon on Saturday, from the Dover pier. Tania has shown very nice feeling in giving up three weeks of her London season. She even offered—though one would not hear of it—to put on *black ribbons* for uncle Joseph! It is in these little things,"—Elizabeth's sounding-line sank not, it will be observed, beneath the surface currents of human nature

—"in these little things, dearest George, that one discerns character."

That Mrs. Meredith should write a daily letter to her affianced lover needed no apology. The engagement not being proclaimed, it barely argued disingenuousness that she should conceal the fact of their correspondence. But truths suppressed have numberless little tricks of forcing themselves—yes, and with the pressing audacity of open falsehood—on the conscience. When Saturday came, and just as the mid-day train was slackening speed at Dover, it occurred suddenly, uncomfortably, to Elizabeth that George Keene's presence on the Admiralty Pier might be a coincidence needing explanation. There was not time for diplomacy; indeed, the widow stood in too wholesome dread of Miss Vanbrugh to speak aloud. So a whisper, fatally easy of misconstruction, found its way into Tania's ear. Elizabeth had written a line to Major Keene about their journey. Shorncliffe being so near, it was possible he might have run over to Dover to see them off!

Tania's heart throbbed to ecstasy. Away on

the platform the girl had already caught sight of Keene's waiting figure.

"I hope we have got our packages right. Alison, of course, will be worse than useless the moment the steamer moves. Seven small things and the guide-books. Now, Elizabeth, don't trust to me about the guide-books."

So these two actresses in a drama whose issues were grave, played each her part.

The train was accidentally late. Parting words must, perforce, be few. By means of rather transparent strategy, Keene drew Mrs. Meredith aside. Then, with brusqueness, revealing an unknown side of his character, he inquired how matters stood with Tania?

"Need you ask?" cried Elizabeth. At a distance of fifteen or twenty feet, Tania, radiant as the noon itself, was talking merrily with Miss Vanbrugh. "I think you have only to look at her to see that matters are going well."

They were going too well—in an opposite direction to the right one. Keene had felt the pressure of the girl's hand, had watched the tell-tale bright-

ness of her cheek, a minute since. His heart gave a passionate throb—a throb almost of conscious infidelity.

“You know my meaning, Elizabeth. Have you made the fact of our engagement plain to Tania?”

“Not in so many words. I have cleared the way, George. I——”

“There shall be no more delay in this.” A harshness foreign to Elizabeth’s experience was in his voice. “We know there are risks”—he paused a second—“probabilities of her disapproving your choice. These will not be lessened by waiting. The dilemma, if dilemma there be, ought never to have arisen.”

He was moved more strongly, thought his betrothed, with feminine superiority, than the occasion warranted. She declared herself ready to humour Tania within just limits, adding that she was in no degree scared by visions of that young lady’s anger. It seemed as though Major Keene were an ogre—Elizabeth gave a soft little glance at her handsome lover—an ogre seeking to grind Tania’s bones to

make his bread, instead of the kindest friend the child possessed in the world.

And then, lifting her rose-tinted face to Keene's, she bestowed on him a tender, farewell whisper, "You will follow us, George, of course? To what better use could you put your leave? I have asked you the question twice by letter, but have had no answer."

The moisture rose in Elizabeth's blue eyes.

"Ask me as you bid me good-bye, with Tania listening," exclaimed Keene. "She may perhaps draw veracious conclusions from such a request."

Elizabeth looked at him hard.

"And, unless Tania be too formidable, one may hope Major Keene will find courage to say 'Yes.'"

As much irony as poor Elizabeth was capable of lurked in her tone. Nevertheless, some minutes later, and when Keene was about to leave them on board the Calais-Douvres, the invitation was given with the nicest, most unpremeditated little manner imaginable.

"If there could be any mortal occupation for an Englishman among these Taunus mountains, we

would suggest to you to follow us." She said this as her hand rested in Keene's parting grasp. "Miss Vanbrugh, you know the place. Could an out-and-out John Bull exist for three days at Teufelsbad?"

"I should think Major Keene might exist there for exactly three weeks," observed the American lady, drily. "To my mind, Major Keene might just as well be starting with us now."

"Of course he might," cried Tania, her face a-glow. "No luggage? Why, a man may buy every mortal thing he wants in Brussels. *I* invite you, Major Keene. Come."

"You must hold to that invitation, Tania," said Keene, with emphasis. "Remain of the same mind, and when you get to your journey's end, write 'Come.' I shall not tarry on the road."

It chanced that Tania stood the nearest of the group to the gangway. As Keene went by, she whispered a few last words to him.

"I hope you were repeating the invitation, my dear," said Elizabeth, graciously. "Major Keene

may be more serious than you think in this matter of following us."

"I spoke to Major Keene upon another subject," Tania answered, with her bewildering frankness. "I told him that I do not feel myself in the smallest danger of bankruptcy."

There was enough swell in the Channel to test the travellers' sea-going qualities. Elizabeth was no sailor. Elizabeth (with a lemon-coloured Alison) vanished swiftly out of sight of man. Tania stayed on deck, after a restless fashion enjoying movement, and sunshine and brisk salt wind, but giving many a wistful northward look, as the white outlines of the English cliffs grew fainter and fainter, Miss Vanbrugh, ostensibly reading, sat perched on a deck-stool at the girl's side. And in Miss Vanbrugh's mind revolved many a shrewd thought. George Keene's altered manner, the enigmatic word bankruptcy, spoken as Tania Meredith spoke it, had not been lost upon her.

A passage in her book, or memory, seemed to strike her, appositely.

"'Sooner or later'—listen, if you please, Tania,

I am reciting for your benefit—"sooner or later, each one of us must conquer circumstances, or submit to circumstances, or perish. No other way of walking through life conceivable." For a woman," mused Miss Vanbrugh, giving a side glance at her companion, "the wiser part, doubtless, is to submit."

"For a living, flesh-and-blood-woman, or for the heroine of a novel?" Tania asked. "A heroine, naturally, is created to suffer. She must be all conscience, nerves, unselfishness—prompt at any hour of the twenty-four for self-sacrifice. As if self-sacrifice, of itself, were a good thing!"

"It may be a graceful way of accepting the inevitable," said Amelia.

"The inevitable accepts us. What will be, will be. As well make the most of that which the hour holds. While we are young, happiness is our right, like air, like sunshine."

"And if you are called upon to give it up for the sake of others?"

Tania was silent for some moments. "I should never give happiness up. It would have to be taken from me," she observed, with finality.

"And afterwards?"

"Well, afterwards — remember your quotation, Miss Vanbrugh! A third alternative is offered. We can perish."

"But perish nobly," persisted the New England woman, with warmth. "For once, speak from your soul, Tania Meredith. There may be ways of perishing better than all personal happiness—and you know it."

Tania Meredith was unresponsive.

CHAPTER X.

CONFESSION.

It was late on Monday night when they reached Teufelsbad—too late to dispatch a letter by the outgoing foreign post. So Elizabeth's conscience found still occasion for delay.

Next day, long before her stepmother's time for rising, Tania was up and abroad. The morning was warm with sunshine, fresh with mountain wind, and as the girl walked buoyantly upward through the pine forests—the gloom pierced, at intervals, by shafts of rosy fire, the thickets and hollows thick with resinous odour, she felt new life, new hopes, new beliefs quicken in her heart.

Self-confidence was, with Tania Meredith, a strong inherited force, ever in action. She no more doubted of her power to win love, than of her power to command admiration. Oh, how good it was to be young and fair! How fit a background was the

day's wild beauty, the spring-time of the world, to her own individual happiness! An hour's constant ascent brought her to the highest point of the forests—a plateau where oaks and birches relieved the sombre pine foliage, and from whence a distant silver streak of Rhine was visible. Suspended from an over-arching oak hung a branch of honeysuckle, with tempting pink and buff and crimson blossoms about to open. Tania stretched up her hands to break it off—the dew came down in a shower upon her face, and, swayed by some abrupt and masterful impulse, she stopped short.

The honeysuckle, in five or six days, would be full blown, odorous. She would return for it in the red of another morning like this, and not alone. A hand she loved would pluck it for her.

Her heart beat violently, her colour changed. It seemed to her that Keene was at her side,—her sweetheart; that she felt the pressure of his arm, his kiss. She knelt down by the oak and rested her cheek against its fresh cool bark. Could she ever be as blest as this again? The thought possessed her with a persistence that had in it an element of

pain. Could the fulfilment of any joy equal in intensity this passion of sweet and dawning hope?"

Mrs. Meredith, from the balcony of their salon, smiled welcome to the girl as she approached the Curhaus. Tania's arms were laden with great bunches of wild flowers bought from the children who sell such merchandize beside the springs. The mountain wind had given her unwonted colour. Her hair, unconfined by comb or ribbon, fell round her lithe young figure in ebon waves. She looked more than handsome; and Elizabeth, with ungrudging generosity, sang aloud her praises when she entered.

"I ought not to say it, Tania, though I don't think yours is a head to be turned, but you are beautiful, perfectly beautiful!"

"Full face or profile?" asked Tania, bluntly. "Pray don't clothe me with imaginary purple and fine linen, Elizabeth. As we were crossing the Channel, Miss Vanbrugh tried hard to make a heroine of me. You declare, now, I am a beauty. Fortunately, I know the truth."

"There is a counsellor who never misleads."

Elizabeth pointed to a mirror in which both figures were reflected; "Oh, taking us together," said Tania, "we rise above the average. That I confess. Suppose we carry a table to the gallery and drink our coffee there, make a hit—that is the thing you know—make a hit from the first rising of the curtain."

The salon and bed-chamber chosen by Elizabeth were on the upper floor of a little villa or pavilion that stood in the Curhaus gardens; charming rooms, looking out on everything best worth seeing in Teufelsbad, and connected by a covered wooden gallery with the main body of the building. To this gallery Tania carried forth chairs and a table. She arranged the breakfast equipage, with no attempt at eluding curious glances. The guests were just about returning from their morning water-drinking, and the sight of two new and pretty women did not fail of creating due sensation.

Tania was as used to admiration as to living in public. She took the upturned looks, the murmured compliments, as simple matter of fact.

"The conclusion arrived at by the Teufelsbad

mind is favourable." So she remarked presently. "Of course, Elizabeth, you understand that we have had a *succès fou*? One recognizes flattery by instinct in every tongue. Let us see—two, four, five." She reckoned carelessly on her finger-tips. "Yes, although I am not out, I must have heard in five languages that I am adorable—without counting dialects."

"I hope you will hear it, once for all, seriously, and in English," said Elizabeth, rising. "We are sent into the world for quite other objects than to awaken indiscriminate admiration."

"Yet the feeling is pleasant when we do awaken it," Tania persisted.

Mrs. Meredith returned to her salon, the girl following. She seated herself at such an angle that the searching morning light did not fall upon her face.

"I have been waiting a long time for an opportunity—there is something I wish to talk to you about, seriously."

Her words seemed to tread oddly on each other's heels. Tania assumed a look of mock terror.

“‘Seriously,’ twice over in one minute! I hope, my dear Elizabeth, we are not going to have business talk. When I am twenty-one I suppose I must attend to money. But that is four years off. Meantime, whatever my guardians decide for me is right.”

“No. It is not anything of the kind. I trust Tania you will not be unpleasantly surprised, I should like to think you would not be surprised at all. But what I am going to talk to you about is—my own future.”

Tania Meredith’s demeanour altered. Not the faintest suspicion had she of what was coming. That Elizabeth should re-marry was, as I have said, a possibility outside the very fabric of her thoughts. Still, a dull misgiving overcame her, a sense of growing change in their relations, change whose effects would be to alienate herself from George Keene. She knew not what she feared, but kept silence. Her eyes fixed themselves, dilating, darkening, on Elizabeth’s averted face.

“Nothing will ever make me different to you, Tania. Let me say that one thing first. Nothing can ever lessen my love for Dion’s child.”

The girl's lips grew set, her glances blazed. There was a hint at apostacy in Mrs. Meredith's tone which took her soul's breath away.

"You defend yourself, though there is no accusation. Speak what you have got to say, or let it rest. Make me no half confidences."

"Let it rest," ejaculated Elizabeth, twisting her fingers in her nervous misery, "that is easy enough to say. Perhaps, if I thought of myself only, I should, for the present, let it rest. But I have a duty to perform. Before I married your dear father, Tania, there had been another engagement. I say this as a preface."

Tania moved a step or two away. She stood, her hands locked, looking more like a woman cut in stone, than a passionate eager creature of flesh and blood. Not by an utterance did she help out Mrs. Meredith in her confession.

"Yes, as a preface!" Elizabeth spoke in a detached, irrelevant manner. Cowardice was fast getting the better of her. She stretched her memory to things wide of the mark from simple mental vertigo. "I don't know that I should say

engagement, a warm youthful friendship rather, but—but means were wanting. In those days Fellows could not marry, you see, and Canon Clithero, when I was eighteen, was a Fellow of Balliol. Surely, Tania, you know Canon Clithero's name?"

"I have not that honour," said Tania, an awful tightening at her heart, but speaking with rigid politeness. "I know no one in England save you, Elizabeth, and Major Keene."

"His position at the present time is most beautiful—it is scarcely presumptuous to say *courtly*—and his width of intellect, his affability of manner render him popular with the classes. Stay, I can show you his portrait."

A velvet and silver photograph album, without which Elizabeth never travelled, lay close at hand. She rose and, bending across its pages, turned over leaf after leaf with unsteady touch.

"This album only holds my friends, the few people I respect most on earth. Ah! and here is the Canon." Elizabeth crossed to Tania, looking scared, and with no colour in her cheeks. She placed the book between the girl's chill hands.

"Great indication of power on that brow, is there not?"

The photograph was of a gentleman, plain to no common degree of plainness. The eyes were small, the mouth was largely inexpressive, the nose celestial.

"Yes, that is Canon Clithero's photograph," repeated poor Elizabeth, "and a very excellent one it is—taken recently."

"His photograph!" repeated Tania, letting the book fall rather than depositing it on a table beside which she stood. "What a vile, inhuman thing," accentuating each syllable cruelly, "*a living Canon* must be!"

Elizabeth returned to her seat. The failure of her attempts at circumlocution seemed to yield to her the courage of despair.

"If I had married Mr. Clithero my social position now would be a different one. I could not have known greater happiness than came to me as your father's wife. I loved Dion with my whole heart. I hope I did my duty always. I mourned

for him sincerely. But—but I am a young woman still—and it is my intention,” each word seemed wrung from her with an effort, “to marry again.”

For a full minute, or more, there was deathly silence between them. Then:

“You have been long in coming to the point,” said Tania, a stony quiet in her voice. “That, I can understand. Such a confession must be a difficult one to any woman! For myself—well, I shall want time, you know—time to get used to the thought of seeing his place filled.”

“It can never be filled,” murmured Elizabeth, beneath her breath.

“Still, it is not for me to interfere. You tell me in earnest,”—but though she suffered acutely, the hue of undisturbed blood was in the girl’s face; the blow was no mortal one—“You tell me that my father, Dion Meredith, is to be succeeded by the original of this photograph?”

“Your father, in one sense, can never be succeeded.” For the moment, Elizabeth was not without a certain little pathetic dignity. “I can never

love again, as I loved Dion in my youth. But I have not strength of character to live my life out, alone—and I have made a choice that the world, yes, and you, dear Tania, must approve. I have promised to marry your guardian, Major Keene.”

Tania Meredith stood calm, upright, during an appreciable space of time. So, it has been seen on battle-fields, will stand a soldier, shot through the heart. Then she swerved aside; she leant against the upright of the open window, hiding her face, with a woman's first instinct, from Elizabeth. She looked at the green valley, the purple mountains, with a sort of stupid wonder that they should remain unchanged. She watched the fountain flash in the sun; watched a peasant child hold up flowers to her from the road below. And then she knew that her life was ruined; happiness wrested from her; and that she must make no sign, must act her part out; let no one guess her humiliation, her secret, to the end!

“You have been considerate.” The sound of her own voice startled her. “I don't say that I can look upon my father's successor without a certain

aversion, at first. But you have been considerate, both of you. The news has been broken with delicacy. I thank you, Elizabeth."

And she turned slowly round. Her eyes, tearless, unflinching, rested full on the other woman's face.

"I think I ought to have told you, dear, in London," faltered Elizabeth. "But my nerves were so shaken! There was, really, so much to be considered just then. Why, Major Keene himself——"

"You have acted well," Tania cut her short. "Let me wish you joy." She crossed the room; she kissed Elizabeth on the cheek. "And now, do not forget that we have an invitation—a joint invitation—to send. The next post goes at noon. When your letter to Major Keene is written, I will add my postscript to it."

And she did so. The letter, itself, concerns us not. This was the postscript—written in Tania's clear, large Italian hand—taught her, lovingly, by Dion, when she was a child:

"Best congratulations. Follow us at once, Major Keene, and receive good wishes from the lips of—

"Your friend,

"TANIA."

CHAPTER XI.

TANIA SETS FIRE TO HER SHIPS.

DID the message mean truce—or conflict? George Keene asked himself this question pretty often during his journey from Shorncliffe to the Taunus Mountains.

Tania's character—viewed by such lights as he possessed—was one rendering meek and instant surrender the last thing likely. She would be Tania Meredith till she died; actress, if you will, not impostor. She would know great happiness, or bankruptcy—no middle state possible!

It was a relief to him on the evening of his arrival; a relief, just rimmed with disappointment, to find his mistress alone. Elizabeth's cheerful, many-windowed salon was decked with enormous bouquets of roses; festooned, even on the walls, with garlands of wild flowers and forest leaves.

"All Tania's doing," explained the widow, a

conscious blush upon her face. "The poor child insisted that there must be *fête* to honour Major Keene's coming—some foolish Russian custom, I think, about engaged people. You see, one has to accept Tania. I have come to that decision, George—take for granted what we cannot understand."

The remark was philosophic, but to Keene, in his present feverish mood, had an undertone of doubt that boded ill. He enquired why Tania was absent? The flowers gave him a graceful welcome, but he would have preferred a single hearty handshake from the girl's hand.

"Tania will not be here till late in the day. We must not expect too much at starting," said Mrs. Meredith. "If she really feels this aversion towards you, George——"

"Aversion!" interrupted Keene, blankly.

"It was her expression when first I told her of our engagement. No, you will not see her till late. At this moment, they are all miles away—some afternoon party among the forests. A tribe of Russians arrived from Paris one day later than we did, and Tania spends her existence with them. The

Count is showing her marked attention. He gives a supper on the terrace to-night, and——”

A change on Major Keene's face caused Elizabeth to pause.

“Young Count Bludoff, secretary to the ambassador in Paris, and really the most charming creature! You might mistake him for an Englishman. It is not a warm reception, I confess, but we must make allowances,” observed Elizabeth, largely. “At seventeen, the present is everything. Poor Tania—impossible to deny it, now that one sees her under temptation—is just a little fonder of worldly pleasure than most English girls of her age.”

“Offer no apology, my dear Elizabeth,” said Keene. “Such kindly reception as I counted upon I have had—from you. Tania, no doubt, will see me when it is her pleasure, later on.”

He went away to his hotel, thirty yards distant from the Curhaus, but on the other side of the road. Elizabeth, rigidly faithful ever to the Unimportant, had commanded her lover on no account to put up under the same roof with herself. He

dined, taking his time over the meal. He listened, without impatience, to his host's budget of news—an English-speaking host who told of Excellencies already arrived, of Highnesses who were coming, to the baths. There was to be an illumination of the valley, a serenade given by the official band, this evening. A distinguished party of guests would sup, by invitation of Count Bludoff, on the south terrace of the Curhaus. The society, of course, would include the charming English Fräulein (this was edged in with the politeness of a watering-place landlord early in the season), the charming Fräulein whose beauty and fine spirits were on the tongue of every visitor in Teufelsbad.

Keene lingered over his bottle of sour Rhine wine until night had sufficiently gathered for him to pass beneath Elizabeth's windows unnoticed. To this point had conscience already made coward of him. Then, following his host's directions, he proceeded, through the covered iron Trinkhalle, to the terrace, distinguishable from afar by reason of its lights, its hum of convivial voices, where Count Bludoff was entertaining his friends. One minute

later, and a figure he recognised stood at a distance of seven or eight yards before his sight.

Tania Meredith had left the table at which most of the guests were still assembled; she stood leaning over the balustrade of the terrace. The host himself—a young, very blonde man, with ultra-Russian features—was in attendance on her. His downbent head, his animated gestures, bore evidence, by implication, that his homage was well received.

“Poor little coquette—unconscious actress! Her own country people, her own artificial world, suited her to a nicety.”

The reflection came across Keene with unwarrantable bitterness as, shrouded himself in shadow, he watched the scene. And it was best so. He was Elizabeth’s plighted lover. Elizabeth’s goodness, intellect, companionship, were the domestic blessings he must look forward to until he died. Tania was nothing to him! Already the last chance allegiance of an idle hour was causing the girl’s easily filled cup of enjoyment to overflow. Already——

But his musings were suddenly interrupted; the festivities of the night had begun. The official band was clashing forth a Wagner overture, coloured fires had lit up valley and garden and terrace with rosy vividness. George Keene and the object of his thoughts were face to face.

In an instant, Tania must have seen him, have divined that he was watching her. She lifted both hands to her mouth, she blew him a theatrical kiss. Then she extended her ten finger-tips in air, with a little gesture, universally accepted as negative among continental peoples, but which to Keene's British notions, telegraphed the word "Come."

He moved towards her instantly, and Tania quitting Count Bludoff, advanced to the head of the stairs connecting the Curhaus gardens with the terrace. Her manner was airily self-possessed, her tread a little slower than its wont, and unlike the tread Keene knew—perhaps, by reason of her wearing extravagantly high-heeled shoes. During the past three or four days it had been Tania's caprice to follow all un-English modes to exaggeration. She had even altered the fashion of her hair, wearing it

low, above her eyebrows, and high and *frisé* upon the crown of her head. Her attire, as usual, was white, an embroidered cambric, much trimmed and furbelowed, and with open sleeves displaying to the full the lustrous beauty of her fair young arms.

The diamond that Keene abhorred was at her throat.

"You are here, then, in Teufelsbad! Well,—and you are welcome."

George Keene felt that she had altered, aged! The delicately fluctuating lips seemed to have set. Gone was the first soft bloom, the fledgling immaturity which, a week ago, had been the leading charm of Tania Meredith.

"Yes. You are welcome, Major Keene. You are congratulated."

She gave him both hands—they burned like fire—and for a second or two held his in a firm, hard grip. Then she turned from him.

"You arrive at an opportune moment, monsieur. Next to sunshine, what can be prettier than the mock rose-light of a Chinese fire? Charming imposture—you taught me the phrase, remember—

better suited than honest sunshine, perhaps, for such a world as we inhabit. How comes it that you are alone?"

Keene answered, casuistically, that Mrs. Meredith had remained indoors.

"Oh, the mountain nights *are* so chilly," cried Tania, in her mocking voice, "the London climate *is* so safe—that rich fog wrapping one round like a blanket, as Sancho Panza says of sleep! Well, if you have a spare five minutes, I shall introduce you to the Teufelsbad society. We, Pariso-Russians, are virtuous to excess, you must know, as much shocked at everything that is not shocking as the English. By to-morrow all the world would talk! 'Who is this young officer running about Europe after Tania Meredith?' It is my duty to tell them that the young officer does not run about Europe after Tania Meredith."

George Keene's spirit groaned, so deeply that the groan was almost audible to ears of flesh.

"I shall present you first to the Duchesse de Beaujeu. She is Muscovite by birth, the leading figure of many histories, and comes here, yearly, to

renew her bloom. No one knows her grace's age. There are people who speak of the first Empire, others of Ninon de l'Enclos—I incline towards Ninon de l'Enclos. She has outlived all the politics and all the creeds, has outlived friends, lovers, enemies, and wins frightfully at Banco! I shall introduce you to some old Crimean generals, who believe they beat the English before Sevastopol with gun and sabre."

Keene put in a disclaimer, under his breath.

"And to some younger diplomatists who know they have beaten the English a dozen times since with pen and ink. Imposture, all of it!" cried the girl, lightly. "Like the baths with their pinch of alkali, and the bath doctors with their solemn talk, like the fine ladies who put on a shade more rouge when they go away, and declare the Teufelsbad waters have brought back their complexion. Imposture! Like Tania Meredith—shall we say," her voice falling to a whisper, "like George Keene. Come!"

But ere they had advanced a couple of steps there was a new transformation scene. Flattering roseate hues (born of nitrate of strontian)—hues

which turn old women into young ones, and young women into enchantresses, had died out, and in their place reigned that intolerable greenish white glare which lends to human flesh the colour of the charnel-house.

"It suits the actors to perfection." Tania Meredith stopped short. "Look at our duchess, at our most illustrious court ladies, with all their years and all their actions written livid on their faces. I will wait for a minute, monsieur, before presenting you. The vulgar truth of sulphur would convert our compliments, our bowings, our pretty speeches into sarcasm."

So the two paused side by side, with eyes turned to the valley.

Ill though man may face his own pyrotechnics, Nature looks doubly fair under their disguise. Every variety of grass or foliage, every growth of bark, showed crisply distinct, glistening as though some fairy hoar-frost had suddenly descended through the sleeping night. The fountain before the Curhaus was kissed into showers of diamonds. Like a thread of silver sparkled the little river that ran down, cold from the mountains, through the village street.

When the weird white glow had shivered into darkness, Tania rested a feverish hand on Keene's arm.

"You democratic English people are never ceremonious," she observed. "We Russians observe French manners, especially in regard of family announcements. 'My future step-papa,'" Thus she rehearsed in a whisper. "'Allow me to present George Keene, Major in such a regiment of her Britannic Majesty, to your grace, your highness!'"

And two or three minutes later the rehearsal had become performance, with due effect of scene and accessories. Like most Russian children on their travels, Tania Meredith had grown up in public. She did not know the meaning of self-consciousness. With each of her acquaintance she ran through a gracious, artificial little phrase or two, now in French, now in English, as she introduced Major Keene. She never forgot to emphasize their potential relationship.

At seventeen, most of us recoil, cowardly, from the inevitable, believe in possible good chances up

to the eleventh hour, die hard in the matter of slain happiness.

Tania's was the attitude of the born fatalist.

What must be must be. No shirking an accomplished fact. Every one should know, and from her lips, that Keene was Mrs. Meredith's lover. She set fire resolutely to her ships.

CHAPTER XII.

BANKRUPT!

TEUFELSBAD, even in seasons of wild dissipation, goes to its pillow early. Is it not a fixed rule with the doctors who dispense the waters of eternal youth that the invalids, Faust-like, shall bathe themselves in morning dew? By order of a paternal administration the Curhaus shuts at eleven.

At a quarter before eleven on this evening of which I write, illuminations and music were over. The terrace had cleared. Diplomats, duchesses, generals, rank and file, all had vanished. The fire-flies, sailing from bush to bush in the gardens, the nightingales jug-jugging to each other, below in the valley, seemed to possess Teufelsbad unquestioned.

George Keene, after dutifully bidding good night to his betrothed, lit his pipe and prepared himself for half an hour's stretch in the open before returning to his hotel. A few lights were still burn-

ing, chiefly in the offices and kitchens of the Curhaus. There was light also in the Musik-Saal, a detached ground-floor room, situate at a remote corner of the building, and immediately under shadow of an outlying belt of pine forest.

Keene glanced in through one of the open doors as he passed. The Saal was empty, save for the full-length reflection in an opposite mirror of his own intensely English figure.

“There, in the joy of his life, and glory of shooting jacket.”

The line came back upon his memory stinging, ironical. “The joy of his life.” A man, under thirty, with the fairest chances of human happiness in his grasp, yet bound by honour to relinquish them—to forget!

He moved brusquely forward, groped his way in the darkness up a steep path leading forestward, then found himself in solitude as profound as though he were treading the wildest recesses of the Brocken. The pine-woods, frankincensed under sunshine, were at this hour coldly odourless. All Nature seemed hushed. No noise was there but an occasional stir

of wind among the boughs, or the fitful plash of the fountains deep below in the Curhaus garden.

Suddenly, a strain of music woke the night, a pianoforte prelude swept forth by a touch that had genius in it, a silken strong touch George Keene recognized.

Tania was seated alone before the instrument in the Musik-Saal. As Keene returned, his steps falling unheard over the carpet of woven fir needles, he saw her figure through the gloom. Her face was deathly pale, an unnatural lustre shone from her eyes. She was playing, in wild wailing minor, a peasant chant, not unlike the one she had composed for him on Elizabeth's piano, in London. But to-night inspiration failed her. Ere long her fingers stopped. Her hands drooped listlessly on the keys, her head was bowed. Then, as if with strong effort, Tania Meredith gathered herself together. She hesitated — glanced back across her shoulder — and struck the first bars of a melody well, too well, remembered by them both!

“Long I fought for my country, far, far from my true love,
Savourna Deelish, shighan-oh!”

Tania sang the ballad through, with voice so passion-fraught, it seemed at each moment it must break down, through sheer excess of emotion. And every note made its way straight to Keene's heart. When it was over she rose, drew a scarf that lay beside her round her shoulders, then issued forth, grave, subdued of bearing, into the night.

For a few moments she stood motionless, her white figure silhouetted against the ink-green background of pine forest, her black hair waving and glistening above the satin fairness of her face. Keene had withdrawn under shadow of a neighbouring portico, believing she would pass on without noticing him.

"Was I in good voice, l'ami Keene? Rather, I think. And why, pray, do you seek to avoid me? Are we beginning, you and I, to enact the make-believe game of all the rest of the world?"

She spoke with intrepid sincerity, a heavy enforced calmness in her voice.

"Did you begin the game by asking me to come here?" he returned. "Has your aversion to me—to my position, lessened?"

"My aversion to you—" unseen of him, the poor child clasped her heart piteously—"has lessened. And I was honest, in inviting you to follow us. As well get over the taste of a disagreeable thing quickly. What will be, will be."

To this Keene was silent. They walked with lingering steps along the path that fringed the forest, a longer road, it may be, than was strictly necessary, in the direction of Mrs. Meredith's quarters.

"I have not said to Elizabeth what I think you must guess, that I shall not live with her. On the day I heard that my father was forgotten, I wrote to my own people. I told them I wanted no London season, had finished with England for ever. News of this kind spreads quickly. In a few days, hours, perhaps—I am hurried on, just now, like a little weak branch, Major Keene, a weak branch broken and thrown into a torrent—it is likely I shall see a Russian friend of whom you know, Monsieur Roudine."

Fortunately for Keene, the darkness hid his face.

"You will keep, then, to the cobweb oath," he was beginning, hurriedly.

Tania interrupted him with cold firmness.

"I see no cause for breaking my word to Prince Roudine. An oath of cobwebs, you object, a promise made in a moment of caprice to be fulfilled in a moment of pique! Quite right. I agree with your opinion of myself. I agree with everything you can say for, or against, Prince Roudine."

"All against," put in George Keene, with bitterness.

"Not all, to be just," said Tania Meredith. "Serge Roudine is not disloyal, even to such shadow of a bond as exists between himself and me. Still," she laughed, the fresh laugh Keene remembered, but with its former equivocal ring sharpened to cynicism, not a good laugh for a man to have on his conscience — "disloyalty is such an absurdly elastic word, as Elizabeth would remark."

Keene took refuge in common-place. Elizabeth's nature was too fine, her interest in Tania too sincere, for her to encourage the pretensions of Prince Serge Roudine.

"Sincere! I don't recognise the meaning of the word," the girl exclaimed. "I am bankrupt, remember—as well say things out—bankrupt in faith, worst insolvency of all! For the future, I believe in no man's friendship, in no woman's constancy! That story-book is shut. Why, I should like to know, should Elizabeth, should you, gainsay my liking for Prince Roudine?"

"Because," broke forth Keene, "such liking must end in marriage—marriage, that would be sacrilege. A child of seventeen, you, poor little Tania Meredith, ignorant of life, and of your own heart, married to a *roué*, a gambler, a man——"

She cut him short with poignant haste.

"I am not ignorant of my heart, sir. Let make-believes go! If it is my fate to walk through life disenchanted, without illusions, as well walk through it rich—the one best means for women to forget themselves. Prince Roudine is enormously rich. And as to his sins—I don't know," said Tania, recklessly, "that they are worse than other people's. He is faithful. A rare virtue, Major Keene, though the fidelity be only tenacious clinging to one's own

superstition! The prince still looks upon me as his good influence—in the matter of rouge-et-noir and roulette.”

George Keene's heart smote him.

“And why need you marry at all? Why make your choice for another half-dozen years?” He spoke thick and fast, getting through his difficult part with no marked success. “Why should your relations with Mrs. Meredith alter? My leave will be over soon. I shall either exchange and go to India, or be sent back to Egypt. There are a hundred open possibilities in my life, in the lives of all of us. Long before I return, some younger and better man than Roudine may come across you, and——”

“And you would have the satisfaction, you, my guardian, of seeing me safely married to a husband of Elizabeth's choosing. Well, you may think it an ingratitude, an impiety,” said Tania; they had come to their walk's end, her hand, for a second, rested in George Keene's, “an impiety against Providence, as established by the Church of England, if I shrink from such good fortune, and prefer electing for my-

self. But I do so! The carefully-chosen Englishman might be excellent, doubtless, like caviare or olives, if you could once acquire a taste for him. I should never acquire it. I have my Muscovite prejudices. I would sooner run my chance of misery with Serge Roudine."

CHAPTER XIII.

"COLD THE FALSE LOVER."

THE days succeeded each other, each day bringing less of peace to Dion Meredith's widow.

Elizabeth never for one moment doubted her lover's good faith. She knew George Keene to be strong of will, and holding incorruptible views of life's obligations; a soldier who, from his boyhood, had lived out of the drift of contemporary agnosticism, a simple gentleman, who "called no old notions fudge," who bent not his conscience to his dealings. She believed in her lover, I repeat, without stint. And still, in her essentially feminine soul, Elizabeth had an uneasy sense that she was girt about, more abundantly than was comfortable, by the heroic!

Perhaps, for the first time in her existence, Elizabeth's faith in certain little moral nostrums,

certain cherished pills of her own against earthquake, knew decline.

She came to suspect, by processes of instinct, not reason, that the situation was beyond her personal control.

"Tania is polite to us both." This confidence fell from her in a letter to Miss Vanbrugh. "With Major Keene she is almost exacting. At every hour of the day poor George must be at Tania's call—a visit to pay, a walk, a drive—and *half the time* she fails in her appointments, goes coolly off in an opposite direction with Count Bludoff, the exceedingly nice-looking young Russian I have told you about. George takes things beautifully! Still, dear Amelia, he is changed—impatient, absent. When I watch him, I feel there is some new look upon his face, a look as though Tania *all but* overtaxed his powers of patience. Everything in our life seems strained. Try as I will, I do not see fair weather prospects before any of us."

Elizabeth's colour went. A slight fall of the cheek gave the prophetic look of age to a face

whose prettiness was certain to fade rapidly when once the process should set in.

The foreign ladies, viewing affairs from this side and from that, began to whisper among themselves, that ce pauvre cher Monsieur Keene was marrying his grandmother!

"The Teufelsbad waters have an invariable effect," observed Tania, looking hard at her step-mother one morning, as they walked up and down beside the springs, glasses in hand. "They pull you down before they build you up. We must pay, alas! to be made beautiful. How many baths have you had, Elizabeth? Eight. Then the cure works. To help on its working, you must take more exercise, amusement. Major Keene should not allow you to mope. Now we Muscovites,"—since Keene's advent, Tania had rigidly enrolled herself in the Russian ranks—"we Muscovites, will start by ten, to breakfast at a mountain inn near the Steinwand. Why should you not come, too?"

"I!" exclaimed Elisabeth, colouring with surprise at the invitation.

"Yes, you, Mrs. Meredith, and you, Major Keene

—rub off your insular rust a little. No invitation? Oh, it is not a private party. Madame de Beaujeu is nominal hostess, but each one will pay his own share, and find his own amusement."

Elizabeth glanced at her black gown. If George would care to go, said she, turning imploringly to her lover. For herself, the bath doctors enjoined rest and quiet as of the first importance in carrying out the cure. Besides, she had work to finish, English letters to write. Of course, Tania ought to have a chaperon—

"And yet, most illogical of women, you propose my going un-chaperoned," interrupted the girl, with one of her joyless laughs. "For I absolutely refuse to look upon Major Keene in that sort of light! *We are not in London now.* As well call Count Bludoff my chaperon."

Keene felt the sting of the speech. A tone of independence, un-noted by Elizabeth, lay beneath Tania Meredith's words—independence that was well nigh a challenge.

"Tania is right," he observed coolly. "If there is any question of chaperonage, I am unavailable.

We are not in London. We have not Miss Vanbrugh to see after us."

For a moment it looked as though Tania's conscience was about to be relieved by the discharge of perilous matter. Her lips closed tight over her teeth; a thunder-cloud rested on her brow. Then the mood passed.

"Miss Vanbrugh, as a chaperon, was delightful; a charming New England paraphrase of European make-believe. You, Elizabeth, I am sure, must be the orthodox thing itself. Come with us to-day. I ask it of you, as a favour. I want to know the meaning of a real English chaperon, once, before I die."

And Elizabeth, in obedience to a look from Keene, yielded the point.

"Who can understand the child?" she whispered to him, as the time drew near for starting. Tania, the visible life and spirit of the party, was standing among a group of Russians before the central staircase of the Curhaus. "What prompted that talk about London and chaperonship? Temper?"

"Temper, if one choose to call it so, but generous

temper," answered Keene, without meeting his sweetheart's gaze. "Tania is swift of step, sharp of stroke, honest as daylight. If she meant to kill her man," he added, in a queerish tone, "she would give him warning first."

"I should prefer to be neither killed nor warned," said Elizabeth, with a shiver.

A couple of well-horsed brakes started, successively, from the Curhaus at ten o'clock. Major Keene and the Merediths were in the second one, and, by accident, Tania and her guardian faced each other, on the seats nearest the door. Their road, for half a league, ran parallel with the forest path scaled by Tania on her first mourning in Teufelsbad. Towards the summit of the mountain it grew sheer. The driver brought his horses to a standstill at a point where a sharp turning, a rain-worn channel across the granite causeway, permitted the wheels to find resistance. He looked back, cap in hand, and in Rhenish patois invited such of the party as were sound of wind and limb to walk. Another five minutes, if the most worthy ladies and gentlemen would lessen the load, and his horses—

trusty beasts, not to be surpassed in Nassau—would have made good the ascent.

Tania and Major Keene were the first to alight. To them succeeded a couple of enormously stout and slow-moving Polish ladies.

And then fluttered forth the cambric and embroidery, the rice powder, the last Parisian shepherdess hat of the old Duchesse de Beaujeu. It thus happened that by the time Elizabeth left the carriage, the two persons nominally belonging to her were out of sight.

"There is a point of view I should like to show you," said Tania, "straight away among the plantations here, to the left. Suppose you act pioneer, Major Keene. You have a greater number of kilos to bring down upon the thickets than I, and the view, if we find it, is worth risking a scratch for. Besides, I want some honeysuckles from a tree I know of for Elizabeth."

The air among the young woods was a miracle of genial freshness. The bounteous odours of June came from every branch pushed back by Keene's arm. Although Tania's spirit was heavy unto death,

the physical influence of all this burst of early summer stirred her pulses.

"My love it is living, warm—
Cold the false lover!"

she began in silvery half-voice to sing the burthen of the old folk-song—of course, in German.

"I don't know Russ, but I must give you warning, I know a few words of German," said Keene, when she had sung the first two stanzas.

And then he turned and looked at her.

"My song betrays no secrets," answered Tania Meredith. "My lover, whatever his other crimes, is not false."

"Your lover?"

She met his eyes steadily. They had got beyond the plantation's dense shades. A gleam of yellow filtered through a roof of quivering birch leaves upon the girl's face.

"The English word 'lover' is a strong one. Out of a hundred suitors, do six, does one, really love? We must let that pass. Major Keene,"—abruptly—
"I have an item of gossip to tell you—gossip in

which all we Muscovites are interested. Serge Roudine is expected to arrive at Teufelsbad to-day."

Keene's cheek paled, soldier, citizen of the world though he was, and Tania marked its change of colour.

"He will be in time, I hope, for our ball. Cavaliers are so desperately scarce! You have heard we are to dance in the Musik-Saal to night? Do not think," she went on, with a short laugh, "that the prince comes by invitation of mine. All I know is, that he and Count Bludoff correspond. Monsieur Roudine thought fit to appear unexpectedly in London, as you saw. Monsieur Roudine thinks fit to appear in Teufelsbad now."

"Knowing well that Tania Meredith 'will bid him welcome,'" broke from Keene with warmth.

Her tone was studiously inexpressive.

"I bid all my friends welcome, as you, Major Keene, have proved. And, did we not settle, long ago, there was one subject on which you and I had best agree to differ—Prince Roudine? We are here, not to quarrel, I think, but to admire a panorama of the Rhine Valley. See—it lies before us."

The panorama she had looked upon, when life's cup seemed over-full—when the blood ran like wine within her veins. There, among the chromes and greys of fertile plain, was the streak of silver winding river—beyond, an outline of mountain, bathed in violet mist. In the foreground—so close, that Tania already stood shadowed by its boughs—was the oak she had rested her cheek against, in her passionate rapture of happiness and of hope.

Great masses of down-hanging honeysuckle,—sun-warmed, breeze-tossed—gave forth the flower's characteristic scent; the wild, uncloying essence which no distiller's art has ever succeeded in bottling for ball-room use.

Tania bore herself right valiantly. "Come beside me for a short time, l'ami Keene. Yes, here, where I am standing." She crossed her hands upon her breast. During about a minute's space, her lips moved. Then she looked at Keene, fixedly. "Can you guess what I have just done?" Her voice broke a little, as she asked him this. "I have spoken a long good-bye."

A good-bye, Reader, to everything that makes

life, life. A good-bye such as convent-bred girls are taught to say while the organ swells, and black-robed sisters stand around; and a crowd, half edified, half in tears, look on at the renunciation. A good-bye such as "happily placed" women sob to their pillows, occasionally, when the rain falls at midnight!

"A good-bye, a charm, a philtre. Don't be frightened. I *can't* bewitch you. One of the innocent little sorceries we Slav girls know about—à propos, you may be sure, of spring-time, of sweet-hearts. Now, you must play your part. Break off a spray—one only: no need to make the flowers bleed: of this honeysuckle above my head. That renders the philtre complete."

She had got back her wildest spirits. The woods rang with her voice, her laughter, as they walked quickly to the summit of the hill where the brake awaited them.

Elizabeth was conversing in her best French, with the old Duchesse de Beaujeu (indigenous, or foreign, the simple little woman dearly loved a title),

when a tap from the handle of a scarlet sunshade came on her shoulder.

"Something sweet for you, Elizabeth." The girl flung her honeysuckle into Mrs. Meredith's lap. "Major Keene and I have run the chance, three times over, of having our eyes scratched out, in order to get it for you."

Elizabeth picked up the gift with her fingertips.

"Honeysuckle *is* so earwiggy! In future, Tania, dear, please bring me any other flower that grows."

The request was un-needed. Tania never brought her another flower of any growth.

The large, slow-moving Poles were now in possession of the seats beside the door. Revolutionary and disintegrating forces had been at work throughout the whole social arrangements of the brake. Tania Meredith and young Count Bludoff found themselves side by side. It was a juxtaposition, ensuring flow of soul. They became, at once, the talkers of the party.

Hitherto, George Keene had been a looker-on, a diviner, rather, in respect of Tania's social gifts.

He could bear witness to them, now, at first-hand. Her talk had the inimitable note of instinct. Her mind was flexible and penetrative; and she was never frivolous—to a man, steeped, in the matter of feminine talk, in frivolity, here was a difference to be marked, in red letter!

It pleased young Bludoff—heedful, no doubt, of an English soldier's presence—to trench on politics; the Russian railways in Central Asia; the Balkan fraternities; British "policy" in Egypt; the Greece for which Lord Byron died! Tania had a bright, incisive word or two ever ready. Her common sense had been whetted by talking to people of all opinions, all nations. She was without shyness. She had none of the Young Person's coy little disaffection for large subjects.

By-and-bye George Keene joined in—somewhere, let us say, in Central Asia—and it was Tania's turn to listen. In a war of words between Sword and Pen, it is generally a matter of courtesy whether Sword shall hold his own throughout a dozen sentences. But Keene was a great deal more than a soldier. The quiet straight-forwardness, the truth,

the unspoiled originality of his character, made him a strong opponent to mere cleverness, even the cleverness of a budding diplomatist and a courtier.

"You have neither of you convinced the other," said Tania, as they drove in sight of the mountain inn, which was their destination. "But you have, both, convinced me. When I hear people talk of those Indian railways in future, I shall know—not the truth, perhaps, but what the Russian mind and the English mind consider truth."

Bludoff answered, slightly beneath his voice, and in French. As Mademoiselle Meredith, from to-day forth, was to be Russian—yes, with emphasis, a Russian of Russians—English opinion would be a factor of no great importance in her thoughts. And then there came a mention of Prince Serge Roudine.

"To-day is to-day," said Tania, with indifference. "And the evil thereof is sufficient."

Her countryman smiled, significantly.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CLIMAX OF THE DRAMA.

WHEN breakfast was ended, George Keene found himself in a minority of one. He had nothing in common with the elder Russians of the party. Elizabeth continued on terms of progressive intimacy with her duchess. The whole of the young people, Count Bludoff and Tania at their head, had trooped away in noisy procession through the woods.

He lit a cigar, not without a sense of relief at being alone, and after an hour or so of desultory wandering, found himself at the foot of the Steinwand, a spur of cliff jutting up, grey and precipitous, above the fir forests, and with a few vestiges of twelfth-century wall still traceable among the masses of brambles and ivy which crowned the summit.

A rough wooden paling ran along a considerable portion of the cliff's base. Where the paling ceased,

a black board, conspicuously lettered in white, had been erected by the bath administration of Teufelsbad. Visitors might safely ascend—so they were admonished in German and in French—about a hundred paces further. The edge of the cliff was dangerous, the masonry rotting. Numerous recent and fatal accidents imposed the duty upon the administration of making this state of things public.

George Keene, a cautious man, because a man used to danger, obeyed the injunctions laid upon him. He advanced the prescribed hundred paces, found an inviting bank, over-shadowed by a group of larches, and lighting a new cigar, prepared to give himself up to reverie.

The freshness at this altitude was welcome after the dense, resinous atmosphere of the lower forests. Welcome, too, were the loneliness, the silence of the noontide June day. Upon the plateau of sward which edged the precipice, straight ahead, a mosaic of wild flowers shone and waved in the sun. Giant camomiles were there in profusion, scarlet poppies, and tall meadowsweet, clematis, with its white blossom and horned tendrils, honeysuckles, briar-

roses—a tangle of many-hued and fragrant bloom set, like a crown, above the dark horror of the abyss.

A glance sufficed to show that no painted board, no sensational warning, could exaggerate the actual dangers of the spot. At one angle of the cliff it seemed literally that the flower-covered ledge hung in air, foundationless. A few stones of the old battlement kept their place, held together, doubtless, by ivy, bind-weed, and tree roots, the woven growth of years. Underneath, the action of time and rain had hollowed out the friable rocks into an arch. The whole structure looked to Keene as though a gust of wind, nay, as though the careless tread of a girl's foot, might send it toppling.

The tread of a girl's foot!—Even as he thought this, there rose a faint sound as of loosening earth, followed, some seconds later, by a fall upon the masses of pine foliage far beneath. George Keene knew one of the vague bodily thrills which overcome men at the suggestion of an unknown peril. He rose, sheltering the sun from his eyes with inverted hands. He made out—yes, beyond doubt—

a human figure, reclining, half hidden, among the bed of grasses and flowers that fringed the precipice.

It was a woman—her white dress scarce discernible among the clouds of camomile and meadow-sweet; her silk parasol, the same hue of scarlet as the poppies, gleaming in the sun. It was Tania.

If George Keene had mis-estimated the real state of his heart amidst the hurrying uncertainties, the caprices, the contradictions of the past week—if, I say, he had called passion friendship, in his constant loyal effort to render friendship passion, this minute's torture must surely have set matters straight before his conscience.

A stunted, lightning-riven elm stood seven or eight feet back from the spot where Tania had perched herself.

As Keene made his breathless way towards the girl, his mind, with the quickness of long habit, reconnoitred every possible chance of safety that lay open to her. The elm's roots must, he argued, spread to no little distance beneath the surrounding débris of ruins and stone. If a fall of cliff were

imminent—and the patter upon the foliage beneath still went on—the tree itself, earth-bound by the growth of centuries, might be trusted, for a few minutes' space at least, to hold fast.

The difficulty was, how to approach the girl without alarming her. Something, however, must be chanced in every moment of mortal peril. The risk of her seeing him, starting to his feet, moving nearer the cliff's edge, were not greater than the certain danger for which, in calm unconsciousness, she sat and waited.

With stealthily noiseless footsteps Keene reached the tree. He passed his left arm round one of the boughs, then stirred slightly with his hand among the leaves.

Tania turned her head, but looked as though she saw him not.

"My love it is living, warm,
Cold the false lover."

She began to sing, low, soft as human singing could be. But there are states of the atmosphere in which a whisper may bring down an avalanche. Keene's overstrained sense could detect an increase

in the sound of falling earth beneath. It was madness to linger another second.

"Tania!"

He spoke her name clearly, with marked and eager emphasis.

"Always Tania," said the girl, her eyes exploring vacancy. "Major Keene thought he would get away from his Muscovite party, spend his noontide with no other companionship than his own happy thoughts. In vain! Even Major Keene cannot escape his destiny. Come. There is room."

Tania motioned him to take his place at her side. Then she lifted her eyes. And Keene knew that she appreciated her danger, and liked the savour of it.

"You cannot imagine how well one feels here. The mountain air, or the smell of all these flowers, must have some intoxicating power over the brain. If it was in me to write a line of poetry, my genius would be aroused. But I am not poetic."

"You are foolhardy," said Keene, with what steadiness he could command. "Hush, for a moment! Do you know the meaning of that sound—

of the constant fall of earth and stones among the pine trees?"

"I should imagine the cliff to be giving way a little," said Tania, her manner gay, her lips red and smiling. "When I was in Teufelsbad long ago, Pradine came out here once, with a society, for breakfast. It was the same thing then. I climbed up the cliffs after briar roses, like these I have been gathering, and heard just that same *huish* of crumbling earth. I liked it, perhaps because I was a child, not knowing the sweets and value of grown-up life! I like it now."

Keene pulled down the bough as far as it could safely be bent. He tightened his grasp upon it provisionally. He communed within himself as to how much strain that bough might be made to bear without breaking.

"Major Keene."

"Miss Meredith."

"I never knew a man's colour would come and go like a girl's, but you have a cheek that betrays you. For the second time to-day you have turned pale."

"If you were in any other position than this—by God!" said Keene, very low, "I would teach you wisdom."

"But here I am mistress of the situation. Well, I feel in better spirits than I have done for a long time past. You dare not advance a step—no, dare not—stout English soldier though you be! And I—" she moved an appreciable space nearer the border of the cliff—"hold life as lightly as I blow this down away."

She plucked one of the "clocks," by which children pretend to tell the hour. She held it before her mouth; then, with slight slow breaths, caused the feathery seeds to disperse and sail above her head.

During the long years to be, years when Tania shall live—a memory, only—in Keene's heart, perhaps this picture of her as she was—her marble face, with warm lights thrown on it from the red sunshade, her bare white hands, her throat—the bunch of briar roses lying on her frock, the background of ambient sky, will oftenest be present to him.

"It seems to me, l'ami Keene, that a pair of people, situated as we are, ought to have histrionic worth, be suggestive, at least, to a play-writer. With a cleverly done stage trick an audience might see the cliff sliding away, inch by inch, underneath, and——"

Keene governed himself by strong effort.

"Will you take my hand, Tania? Will you rise this instant? See! I am moving near enough to reach you."

"There must be previous entanglements, naturally—misunderstandings, quarrels, make-believe. This little cliff business would just be the climax of the drama. The heroine will not move, save under conditions. The hero consigns his sweetheart to an abyss if he advances to save her. For of course the pair must be sweethearts." She turned round, letting her sunshade fall to the ground. She looked at Keene, with eyes that had in them a final appeal, or conveyed a final judgment. "The playwright must have a human interest. You and I are but dummies! For the playwright, and for his

piece, it would be necessary to introduce love, or hatred, or——”

A cry broke from Tania's mocking lips. The beauty of her face was rent, suddenly, to horror. She rose partially to her feet, then sank to earth—earth that already swayed without resistance beneath her weight. Sky, forest, horizon, grew dim before her.

Lightning-quick, quicker far than it takes me to write this line, George Keene quitted his waiting place. He flew to the girl; he got his grip upon her shoulder. Lightning-quick he dragged her, heavy, senseless, as she lay, a few steps back. Then, stooping, he passed his left arm round her waist, and with his right caught the elm's rough boll. The tree was on the verge of upheaval. It quivered like a sapling under his grasp.

“We are safe—in another minute we shall be safe. Take courage, Tania. Put your arms round my neck—hold to me fast. Why it is but an attempt at a landslip; a sorry imitation of Jules Verne!”

So he sought to rally her.

But no answer came. Tania's hands hung inert. A livid, corpse-like hue was gaining round her lips.

Keene lifted her in his arms and fled, fast as his steps would bear him. Small time was there for delay. The rush of falling earth increased momentarily. The flowers, the verdure had been swept away. Only a wavering grey line marked the precipice along which, bearing his helpless burthen, George Keene must travel. Happily the man's brain was cool, every muscle of his body under command. He gained the lower slope in safety. Then, at the tree-shaded spot from whence he had first espied her, he rested the girl gently down and waited for life to show itself in her face.

The swoon was long, and a horrible possibility flashed across him. He raised her head against his breast; he chafed her hands. In a passion of remorseful tenderness he called to her by name to come back.

At the sound of Keene's voice her eyelids unclosed. The blood began to show itself in her dusky face.

"I am falling; hold me close—closer," she said weakly. "Who talks of death, l'ami Keene? Nay, but this is life—to die together."

Thus, unconsciously, was Tania's secret at length wrung from her.

Another few seconds passed, seconds which one of these two must look back, as upon a snatch of heaven, through the futile blankness of the remaining years. Then the roll of approaching wheels, the sound of voices, of laughter, broke the silence. They were close to one of the forest bye-roads, and a division of the breakfast party, tired of waiting, had driven round in search of them.

The colour came in a flood to Tania's cheeks. She staggered to her feet, and turning from Keene, leant her weight heavily against a tree. So she remained in silence—mechanically collecting her thoughts, mechanically framing the words in which she should recommence the acting of her part—until the carriage came in sight. Then, with slow, carefully mastered steps, Tania Meredith walked forward.

"A hairbreadth escape, Monsieur Bludoff! An irrevocable loss!" Young Bludoff had left the brake and was advancing to meet her. "My scarlet sunshade lies buried fathoms deep beneath the débris of cliff yonder—a bouquet with it, monsieur; a knot of wild roses, specially intended for *your* button hole!"

And a little later, she was recounting the adventure with great dramatic vigour and drollery, for the public benefit as they drove along. But the bent she gave her story, her tone, her gestures, all savoured of farce—farce untinged by sentiment.

"If things had turned out otherwise, Elizabeth?" This she asked, looking mischievously at the widow's scared face. "If just a slice more of the cliff had given way, if Major Keene and I had had a fall—say, of a hundred and twenty mètres, what would you have done?"

Elizabeth turned white and red by turns.

"It was tempting Providence," she began, "to speculate on trials from which one had been mercifully delivered, and——"

"I shall tell you what you would have done,

my dear," cried Tania cheerily. "You would have worn the exact depth of mourning English milliners allow (where there is no blood-relationship), have read serious novels only, for the first three weeks, attended nothing but oratorios for the remainder of the season, and in time have derived comfort from the breadth of intellect, the spiritual exhortations of Canon Clithero!"

But having thus cruelly displayed the valour of her tongue, the girl's spirits left her. She sank back in her place, wan as a ghost, and uttered never another word throughout the remainder of the drive.

Prince Serge Roudine, a cigarette between his lips, was lounging on the Curhaus steps when the party reached home. Tania Meredith's destiny had passed out of her own keeping for evermore.

CHAPTER XV.

A SOUL AT STAKE.

THE advent of the young Russian millionaire was the biggest event chronicled by Teufelsbad this season. The band serenaded him from the gardens during dinner, coloured fires were lighted, rockets sent up in space for him as the shadows fell. The heart of woman, throughout the community in general, beat faster.

That the prince had travelled hither as a suitor, that the glamour of a wayward English girl drew him, in June, to Teufelsbad—a bath so virtuous that a man must think twice ere he play a game of dominoes by daylight—was notorious. But the heart of woman can, in the case of millionaires, be agitated, vicariously.

For suitors do not, in every case, become husbands—here came in a suggestion of maturer feminine judgment. The Roudines, as a race, were no

perpetrators of love matches. Do we not know the blood? Have we not heard too many of their family histories? A fancy, of a kind, existed—a gambler's fancy, with a good two-thirds of superstition at bottom—a whim dating from the Monte Carlo episode of Mademoiselle Tania's childhood. Were these materials upon which to rest the august edifice of marriage? The girl, considering her mixed blood, was charming enough. White arms, a throat, a trick of expression that sat well on a face of seventeen. At five-and-twenty that face would be hard! And in respect of temper——

Whispering together as their daughters, graceful clouds of rose or white, floated through the twilight towards the ball-room—whispering together under the pleached horn-beam alleys of the gardens, prophecies not a few were thrown out this night, by Russian matrons, as to the evil things in store for Roudine, should his gambler's fancy eventually find issue in action.

Who had not seen the English stepmother turn pale under the lash of Tania's tongue? While as for the guardian, "*ce pauvre cher Major*," Russian

mothers believed that more was to be known as to Major Keene's martyrdom than appeared on the surface.

Neither Mrs. Meredith nor her lover attended the ball. Towards the close of the evening, however, and when he had bidden Elizabeth a last good-night, Keene found himself walking along a remembered path, the path that fringed the forest, and where he had walked with Tania on the night of his arrival. The band was playing a noisy *Americaine* as he drew near the Musik-Saal. He could hear the shuffle of feet, caught sound of one of Tania Meredith's laughs—hearty, mirthful, yet which now as always had an equivocal ring to George Keene's ear. He stopped and recognized her voice, clear, musical among the other voices. And then he took his courage between his hands, walked to the nearest open window and looked in.

The *Americaine* was at its height. Tania and he prince, in fit order of things, were partners. Serge Roudine was no dancer. Serge Roudine was, as the Anglo-Saxon phrase has it, no lady's man. Through gracious elasticity of general taste, how-

ever, most of the dances to-night had moulded themselves into such square form as a gaitless millionaire could, by silken threads, be pulled through. At the moment when Keene's glance fell on the scene the prince's Terpsichorian incapacity had, perhaps, reached its lowest depth. Every figure in the set was adrift. The very fiddlers shrugged their shoulders in despair, vainly struggling between official decorum and the hardness of following the illustrious visitor's champagne-guided movements.

Serge Roudine himself, red in the face, with the horrible gravity of a man who has over-dined, plunged wildly to and fro among his fellow dancers: his partner, with supreme, with audacious ease of movement, airily—shall we say a trifle pantomimically?—following in his wake!

A thousand times she had been lovelier, gracefuller, more divinely girlish. The flesh-and-blood beauty of Tania Meredith had never before stood out in such shadowless provocation before Keene's sight. She was dressed in black, her arms were bare to the shoulder, Roudine's diamond glittered

at her throat, a spray of crimson roses was in her hair. Her expression was radiant. All immature brusqueries of manner or movement seemed to have left her. She looked that which it was her destiny soon to become, a coquette, using her pretty smile at opportune moments, a perfect society actress, a finished woman of the world.

And at a word from him, Keene—at the lifting of a finger—she would fly from it all, and in the shelter of a true man's love find salvation! It was no subtle collusion with self that whispered the suggestion, no faint yearning towards possible disloyalty. It was, simply, a dull acknowledgment of fact; such acknowledgment as we make when the first moon shines on an upheaved sod in lieu of the face that was our heaven. At the lifting of a finger, at the faintest sign of surrender made by him, she would fly——

“You are enchanted at my good spirits?” Her light speech broke on his reverie. The dance was over. Tania and Prince Roudine had paused at the window outside which Keene stood, in shadow. “To confess the truth to you, monsieur, I am surprised

myself. But that is my way. I can be nothing by halves. If I were a general going into battle where loss was certain, do you think I would not march with colours flying, the bands in their parade position, yes, and with orders to play gay tunes as long as a gasp of breath was in their bodies?"

Serge Roudine stared at the girl hard.

"Mockery—always mockery," said he, lowering his voice. "You do not spoil me with compliments, Tania Meredith! But I suppose I shall understand you better some day."

He laughed, unpleasantly. A determined look, foreign to him in general, made itself felt on his weak, effeminate face.

"Never!" was Tania's instant exclamation. "If we saw each other every day for thirty years, you would understand no more of me on the last day than you do now."

"I may understand you better than you think. In this wicked world," observed Roudine, with malice, "people have a knack of chattering—surmising. Are you sure—the word you must remember, made-

moiselle, is your own—that you are not at this hour—bankrupt?”

She started for a moment, then returned his look with cool deliberation.

“And has Prince Roudine travelled all the way to Teufelsbad to ask the question? Is it possible that the old jest has a place still in his memory?”

At this oblique and feminine reply, the Russian changed his tone, he snatched her hand, almost with passion.

“Jest? By heaven, no! The one reality I cling to. After to-morrow you shall trifle with me no more, Tania Meredith, *car je vous aime*,” breaking, in his sincerity, from English into French, “*je vous aime—d’amour!*”

George Keene at once walked forward with steps intentionally yielding notice of his presence. He made his way through one of the pleached alleys to the Upper Curhaus gardens. The myriad little voices of the plantations were atune. The fire-flies sailed, fairy barks in an enchanted ocean, from thicket to thicket. The night was clear, warm, aglow with possibilities, a typical midsummer night

for dreaming lovers, intolerable to George Keene's hot and restless heart! Before he had taken a hundred steps he turned, drawn by the illogical might of jealousy, to look upon what he loathed: to realise by his senses, and to the uttermost, the hugeness of his sacrifice.

The final waltz of the evening had begun, and Tania was dancing it with Count Bludoff. As the two figures gyrated in graceful rhythm, Keene, from his hidden post of observation, had a vision, a last one, of the girl in the fulness of her health—the chiselled arms white in the lamp-light, the young limbs twinkling—an incarnate figure of music. For the last time, I say, Keene looked upon Tania's unblemished fairness, her untouched lips, her maidenly sweet cheeks. And he counted up the cost of his own faithfulness: he contemplated the reward thereof that the years would bring him, and found all things barren.

A man cannot be a hero to his valet. There are hours—oh, reader, let us make free confession, do they not outnumber the other hours?—when a man cannot be a very grandiose hero to himself.

When the dances were done, the ladies came forth in groups of threes and fours, cloaked and hooded, into the night. Tania glanced up at the forests, above which a crescent moon had newly risen.

"If I had a chosen friend at command," said she, "I would take a two hours' walk across the mountains. I would see how the Rhine looks from a plateau where the honeysuckles grow. On a night like this one has no desire for sleep."

Serge Roudine moved to her side. He bent over her and whispered.

"Monsieur is extremely amiable," Tania answered coldly. "All the more so because damp woods, honeysuckles and slow-worms must be so entirely outside Monsieur's experience! We Britons," she accented each syllable with bitter flippancy, "are the only people living, who appreciate damp woods and slow-worms for their own sakes."

She allowed Prince Roudine to walk beside her as far as the entrance door that led to Mrs. Meredith's staircase, taking care that three or four indifferent persons should bear them company. There

she parted from him, with florid Pariso-Russian manner, with the superabundance of bowing and salutation which it had been Tania Meredith's caprice to assume since she came to Teufelsbad.

“Good-night, everyone. Good-bye.”

George Keene, lingering still within earshot, caught the clear English words. Something in the girl's voice made him feel—when would he cease to feel—that the “Good-bye” was intended for himself!

CHAPTER XVI.

INTO THE JAWS OF DEATH.

TANIA MEREDITH had no desire for sleep. The exertion, the strain of the past twelve hours, seemed to have brought feverish strength rather than nature's benign tiredness to her body and brain alike.

"If I were a general going into battle where loss was certain, would I not march with gay tunes playing, with colours flying?"

Her idle speech to Roudine, the craving for action, for escape which underlay it, haunted her. If life's chances would but come to a girl as they come to men! If even now, at this eleventh hour, she might perish nobly! If any fate but her own self-elected one—the fate of moral suicide—were still possible!

She was thinking her misery out, harassed and distraught, beside her window, when midnight began slowly to toll from the church tower in the

village. She counted the strokes one by one. She held her breath as the latest vibrations died into silence. Then a chill fear fell on her. Shudderingly, Tania Meredith realised that to-morrow was here, the to-morrow after which she should trifle with Serge Roudine—assert her liberty—no longer. As well seek her pillow now, pray that a single sweet and good dream might come to her—a dream, perhaps, of her father, of the sunlit days in Italy, before bidding farewell to all sweet and good and sunlit things for ever.

The girl looked her last at the hotel where Keene lodged, at the mountain heights and forests silvered by moonlight. The world was a changed world for her, already! She closed the window, moved to her dressing table; mechanically, she was lifting her hands to unclasp Roudine's diamond from her throat, when abrupt, piercing-shrill through the midnight quiet, came a woman's shriek! A shriek presently followed by hurried shuffling footsteps, by the murmur of an English voice approaching along the passage outside.

Tania Meredith crossed the room, unlocked the

door, and beheld Alison, the priceless maid, in hastily donned attire, with chattering teeth, and with the livid pallor of cowardice on her face.

A strange, faint heaviness was discernible in the air of the corridor.

"Thank Heaven you are up, Miss Meredith, and dressed! There—there is fire at the gallery side the house. I was not fairly asleep, ma'am, and the smell of burning roused me. I tried to pass along, but the awful heat drove me back. Oh! my mistress, my mistress!"

The woman clutched at the uprights of the door with trembling hands. She stood motionless, aghast, a picture of selfish, helpless, craven fear.

Past her, like a lightning-streak, flashed Tania.

"Fire—and you did not go to your mistress, first—you saved *yourself*? Save yourself now, then! Make for the stairs—get outside. There are men-servants staying in the offices below. Awaken them!"

The girl turned. She gave her orders across her shoulder, coolly as orders were ever given on a field of battle, and accompanied by a look capable

of stinging even the abigail soul to shame. Then, with unprotected throat and arms, wearing her diamonds, her roses, her training silken skirts, Tania Meredith sped on.

About a dozen steps further she passed a window, flung open by Alison in her flight. At this point the smell of burning became distinct. There was a sound, distant but unmistakeable, of crackling wood. Could the fire, after all, be outside the building—a fire, chance kindled, as so often happens among the pine forests? Tania Meredith sped on. At a sharp turning of the corridor an exclamation of horror broke from her lips. Volumes of smoke, lit here and there by an angry, lurid glow, lay between her and Elizabeth's apartments. The gallery which connected the little garden villa with the main body of the Curhaus was on fire, probably—though this was never known—from some servant's carelessness, some half-smoked pipe, some unextinguished lantern left in the offices below.

An exclamation of horror broke from Tania's lips. Not for a second did the stout heart within her flinch. Gathering together the thick silk dra-

pery of her dress, she held it in a fold across her mouth; then, through blinding smoke, through heat that as yet was just short of scorching, fought her way, inch by inch, across the gallery.

Upon the further side, the current of air was stronger. She felt that her lungs could draw breath with somewhat less of difficulty. And here Tania Meredith stopped short. She collected her thoughts. She realised that the supreme moment of existence had struck. If Elizabeth's door were unfastened, if Elizabeth answered instantly to her call, good. If not why then, *not!* And she, Tania, must die, at seventeen, for the slayer of her happiness, the woman who had twice come between her and the supreme desire of her heart. Well, and death can strike but once—is not all! Good if we can meet death with a purged conscience, conquering to the last, not conquered. Good, if perishing be one's fate, to perish nobly.

Six or seven steps led to Mrs. Meredith's sleeping chamber. The girl ran up them lightly; rested her fingers on the handle. It was fast. She called, knocked. There came no answer. And the crack-

ling of the wood grew louder; bluish tongues of flame began to flicker at intervals through the smoke-clouds.

With the strength of desperation, Tania brought her whole weight to bear against the door. It was frail of structure. The hinges were rickety, the fastenings weak and time-loosened. After the loss of another minute she made good her entrance; then groped her way, intuitively, rather than guided by the thin and wavering moonlight, to the bedside.

"Elizabeth! awake! Out of your bed this instant! We are on fire!"

And without delay the sleeper found herself dragged, by capable arms, into the middle of the room.

She clutched at Tania wildly. "My rings! Save my rings! Let me down by the window," she was beginning——

"A good thirty feet from the ground!" said Tania, with calm, almost cheerful voice. "You will do as I tell you, and, please God, shall come through without a singe. Water! why this is oppor-

tune! Look for your trinkets, Elizabeth, save your rings, while I prepare a wrap for you."

A cosmetic bath, ready filled for the widow's morning use, stood at hand. Tania seized a coverlid from the bed, and wetted it thoroughly. She enveloped Elizabeth, as one might envelope a child, in its folds, and lifted her, shivering, sobbing, in her arms.

"Keep quiet for your life—oh, preposterously frightened woman! Don't cry out—don't breathe a breath more than you can help, and we will pull through yet."

And then forth upon her mission, across the space of passage dividing the steps from the gallery, Tania Meredith started.

The gallery was in flames—the floor already so near sinking that in places it felt soft and yielding, as though one trod on paste-board. The poor girl crouched her head down, and the coverlid shrouded her face. Her silken skirts, by now saturated with water, in a measure protected her. But the arms, bare to the shoulder, the hands clenched with superhuman endurance round their burthen—these

must the cruel fire-tongues lick, round these must the scorching wreaths curl unhindered!

The gallant child held on, sustained, as martyrs at the stake, as high souls throughout all time have been sustained under bodily torture, by indomitable moral will. On, until the floor no longer seemed fluid beneath her tread, until she heard the sound of voices, until air was breaking—cold draughts of anguish—upon her hands and arms.

Then Tania's hold loosened. With a cry—not of weakness, not of complaint—with the blind animal outcry of mortal pain, she swooned away into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XVII.

SAVED.

No band played at the Brunnen next morning—no gay crowd assembled under the limes and acacias on the promenade.

Prince Serge Roudine, by the earliest hour at which valises could be packed and posthorses obtained, was on his road to Frankfort—and ashen, haggard Serge Roudine, wearing the look of a man to whom some omen of sinister personal fortune had been brought home!

The Duchesse de Beaujeu, with a few other immemorial pleasure-seekers, started off for a week's distraction in Homburg, events having taken a turn really too distressing to the pleasure-seeking mind.

The officials of the bath establishment consulted together in whispers. No great destruction of property had taken place, fire-engines and men having

reached the spot ten minutes after the English lady's-maid succeeded in raising alarm. A few ground-floor offices, the rooms occupied by Miladi Meredith, the gallery of communication, lay in ruins. This was all. If only the catastrophe could be kept out of the newspapers—if only (the official voice grew lower) no fatality ensued, the lustre of the coming season, the pockets of the Teufelsbad Bath Company, need not suffer.

No fatality! There was the doubt which made the June day black and terror-fraught, even to people who knew no more of Tania Meredith than her beauty, her youth, the contagious brightness of her spirits and good fellowship.

It happened that one of the first Berlin surgeons was staying, for a week, at the baths; a trained nursing sister was also among the guests. And Tania, from the first, was received into their skilled and willing hands. So, at least, her sufferings were minimized. This was miserable, starving consolation; it was no consolation; but it was all that George Keene had. The man had been trained in too hard a school to let his feelings be seen of

others. He troubled neither doctor nor nurse with vain inquiries. He simply waited, quietly pacing up and down a few feet of corridor within call of the room to which the poor girl had been carried. Waited—for the hours to work their will!

Hours of unspeakable, remorseful dread. George Keene remembered lying, years before, on a strip of African sand, disabled, without water; watching for daybreak to show whether friends or foes were around him. Till now, he had looked back upon that night as upon the darkest point of his existence. On this June day, oppressed by the tacit, inscrutable derision of nature—the odours from the warm woods entering at every door and window, the wild birds sending up their choruses from very wantonness of joy—he had a new, an altogether changed, experience of the *worst* a human soul may have to undergo and live through.

A little before sunset the Doctor came out to him; an unsmiling, humane-eyed man, speaking professional English adequately.

With his first words George Keene knew the truth. Theoretically, the prognosis should be hope-

ful, the injuries extending over less than a sixth of the child's frame. What we have to fear in all these cases is death from shock. The patient was out of pain now, and quiet, but the mind wandered. One could scarcely think that midnight would find her alive. The Herr Major was her relative, friend?

"Her nearest living friend," answered Keene, tersely.

"Then you will do well to see her without delay. The nurse has a belief that she watches the door, that she looks for some one. The Herr Major is sure of his nerves?" The Herr Major was quite sure of his nerves. "Come in, then—and be collected, prepared for change. Just kneel down at her side and say no word. If she recognise you—good."

The room was silent, cool. A pine-shaded window stood open above the bed where Tania was passing, through no ignoble death, out of the reach of blame for evermore. By her side a German nursing sister, grave of mien, stood watching. On a table, half hidden by some remains of scorched

and blackened rose-petals, lay Roudine's diamond, its scintillations lighting up the chamber of death, as Keene entered, with weird brilliancy.

The surgeon motioned him to advance; then, touching the nurse's arm, moved away with her into an adjoining window recess.

Tania Meredith and George Keene were once more alone.

He knelt down slowly, noiselessly, and looked upon her face—undisfigured, but grey and drawn, through extremity of recent pain. The features were pinched, the bright eyes fixed, as though on some visionary object, standing at the foot of her bed.

After a little, her wan lips moved tremulously.

"Wait for me, Papa! Turn the boat round towards the rocks. I'm coming quick—don't leave me—now it is growing dark. Papa, you'll not give Elizabeth all the love, remember."

She stopped for a few seconds, then began to mutter about Paris—about the theatres and Serge Roudine. Then, again, she was addressing her father, in broken little sentences, half French, half

English, fragments of some home-made childish game the two used to play together in their Mentone days. And then, it seemed that she grew suddenly tired. Her eyelids closed.

The sleep, such sleep as it was, lasted over two or three minutes only. Then, with a shiver, Tania Meredith awoke; her eyes fell on the kneeling figure at her side. Her mind never wandered after she recognized him.

"L'ami Keene."

"My Tania."

An ineffable smile played round the pale mouth. An expression fairer than it had worn in life, purged of all feeling save love and tenderness, transformed her face.

"Kiss me, Keene. My dear, I am quite happy. I was hard, rebellious, not good enough to live—there was no place for me, you know! But that is past. And now—I have you for my own."

She could move neither hand nor arm, but a look—that trick Tania had of smiling with her eyes—asked him to put his face closer. She remained

still for another—this time a longer—pause; then, abruptly, her colour changed, the lips fell.

The surgeon came forward and touched her pulse. He rested a kindly hand on Keene's shoulder—

“The case has terminated, Herr Major—painlessly.”

BERTIE GRIFFITHS:

A MEMORY.

BERTIE GRIFFITHS:

A MEMORY.

CHAPTER I.

“KILLED, at Königgrätz, on the third instant, the Honourable Bertie Griffiths.”

It was in the Wiesbaden Cur-Saal, about three years before I read this announcement of his death in the papers, that I first saw poor Bertie: a man evidently and openly at odds with fortune, shabbily-dressed, downcast, solitary; always taking his seat at one particular corner of the table—always, as far as my first experience went, losing, and never, by look or gesture, betraying anything save the most stony and absolute indifference to his losses. There were plenty of men of much the same stamp as himself to be seen in those rooms; and Bertie, with

his threadbare coat and ill-luck and impassive manner, never interested me more than the rest until a certain summer night—a summer night stealing in fair and soft upon haggard faces, upon trembling hands, through the closed shutters of the Cur-Saal windows—when the following incident occurred:

A mere lad—a London clerk or shopboy he looked like—had been seduced, probably for the first time in his life, into playing; first florins, then gold, and had ended by losing all he possessed—how much I don't know, perhaps about ten or fifteen pounds. When he saw the full extent of his ruin, the lad's grief, his horror, simply overcame him, and he burst into a sudden hysterical fit of sobbing.

"*Rouge gagne,*" cried the croupiers, staring apathetically at him for a second or two. "*Messieurs, faites votre jeu.*"

The players, one and all, went on stolidly with their own calculations; I myself fell to speculating upon the young fellow's future life; wondering whether this would prove its turning-point either for

good or evil; compromising with certain promptings of conscience by deciding philosophically that the best thing that could happen to any boy was to lose, as this one had done, on the earliest occasion when he should seek to extract pleasure from the unwholesome stimulus of the *tapis vert*.

And Griffiths?—for the first time, certainly, since I had seen him at the tables—Griffiths had won. A heap of gold—not a very large sum, but a good deal for a man wearing such a coat as he did!—was lying before him on the table when the boy's sob broke upon the dead silence of the room; and then (I speak sober truth, but I respect any reader for his incredulity)—then, without a moment's hesitation, he pushed over a portion of his winnings—ten or twelve louis-d'or perhaps—to the lad's side.

“Not from compassion—not from any one out of the whole stock of Christian virtues,” he protested, when, some days later, I chanced to speak to him of his Sultan-like piece of generosity. “Nothing higher than the superstition that 'tis lucky occasionally to be generous guided me, and probably if I had known that the fellow meant to pocket the gift,

and walk away with it as he did, I would not have made it at all. I just pushed the money over to him to stake with. If he had gone on, and won, I should have asked him for every kreuzer of it back again!" And so on.

No man I ever knew disliked more thoroughly than Griffiths did to be accredited with anything approaching to weakness or softer emotion. He was far above the vulgarity of affecting vice, but he invariably scouted the slightest pretension to virtue with the most unaffected good faith. You saw that he did not wish you to think him one whit better, as he would never appear one whit less poor and broken-down, than he really was: and I think in this very indifference—indifference born half of pride, half of real rugged honesty—lay one of the greatest charms in poor Bertie's wayward character.

His luck did not forsake him during the remainder of that night, and something more akin to excitement than I had before seen in him glowed on his pale face as he stood buttoning up his gold in the breast-pocket of his shabby overcoat before

leaving the Cur-Saal. Losing, I imagine, had become so habitual to him, in every transaction of his life, as to have lost its savour. To win afforded him at least an emotion: that brief self-forgetfulness for which men of his stamp crave almost with passion! His eccentric piece of generosity, and something in that new expression that I had seen upon his face, set me thinking of him, with a heightened and curious interest; and as I was walking back, an hour or two later, to my hotel, I had just resolved that I would, if opportunity offered, seek to make my friendless countryman's acquaintance, when an abrupt turn in the lime avenue that leads from the Cur-Saal gardens towards the town brought me full and unexpectedly upon the unconscious object of my thoughts.

At this moment I see poor Bertie in my thoughts just as I saw him in the wan and trembling twilight of the young June morning! I don't know that I ever saw a face that more thoroughly took your interest by storm than his. As I came up he was lying outstretched upon one of the benches under the trees, engaged in a twofold occupation, reading,

and smoking a very short, very black pipe, and I had time to watch him narrowly. He was quite a young man still—one or two-and-thirty at most; with a marble-white complexion, melancholy dark eyes, and chesnut beard and hair. That he was a man of gentle birth, you could not look at him and doubt. The unconscious ease with which he wore his shabby coat, the clear-cut features, the delicate though firm and sinuous hand, all bore the unmistakable brand of good blood, however lost the fortunes of him in whose veins it ran. Looking at his face in that soft light, I remember thinking how like it was to the face of the principal figure in Titian's picture of the "Tribute Money," which I had stood before in Dresden about a fortnight ago—a face in which human intelligence, human beauty, were developed to the utmost, but on which no mean or sordid human passion had place.

I often thought of that picture afterwards when I looked at Bertie's face in repose.

I had never had an opportunity of speaking to him yet—for Griffiths shrank morbidly from any chance of becoming known to his own countrymen

—but at this moment when I happened to come upon him there was an expression by many shades less distant than usual on his face, and so, without waiting to consider how he might receive me, I walked up and made the request, which in all Germany one may make unchallenged to a common soldier or a Grand Duke alike, of a light.

He stared full in my face for a moment or two without taking his pipe from his mouth, not with a supercilious stare exactly—that does not express the peculiar expression of Bertie's eyes—but with a look at once proud, shy, distrustful. I knew that he was taking every inch of my moral measure as I stood there before him, that he thoroughly fathomed my intention in addressing him, that in all probability he was going to answer my demand by an impertinence! The sight of his threadbare coat—so fearfully threadbare now that I saw it close—made me feel with something very like shame that I *had* no right to intrude upon him; and, feeling this, and while he still continued to look at me in silence, I half turned to go, saluting him slightly as one would salute a foreigner as I did so.

Bertie took his pipe from between his lips, laid it and his book upon the bench beside him, drew forth a match-case from his pocket (jingling his new-won louis-d'or considerably at the same time), and presented it to me. His study of me, I suppose, had ended in my favour, for as he did this he made some common-place remark, in no unfriendly voice, upon the fineness of the morning.

"Yes, this is the best time of the whole day to see Wiesbaden," I answered, taking, as a gesture of the poor fellow's seemed to invite me to do, the other end of the bench: "when the night-birds are cleared out and the early morning ones are not yet astir. But," I added, "I wonder you find your brain clear enough to read after all the gas and heat and excitement of the night."

"I don't care much about sleep at any time," he answered carelessly, "and seldom feel the want of it. I am clearer now than I shall be when I have gone through my pretence of sleep at midday. Gas and heat don't affect me—excitement I never feel. Besides," he went on, "I know the book I am read-

ing by heart, so it does not require any great strain of mind to follow its meaning."

I took the volume in my hand; it was a copy of Shelley—very old and worn I recollect—and opened it at that passage in the "Prometheus Unbound," where disdain, revenge, despair, have all died out in the chained god's heart, leaving only a contemptuous pity for those who chained him, and he cries out:

"I hate no more
As then—'ere misery made me wise."

Was there anything in that fable of impotent agony akin to the stoic indifference of the marble face at my side? I hazarded some stereotyped criticism upon Shelley's treatment of the subject with a view to sounding my companion's opinions.

"The poem is a fine one," he remarked coldly. "All that Shelley writes must be fine, as far as mere poetry goes. The doctrines he would advance have, I suspect, about as much truth in them as those he would deny. Men will never regenerate themselves any more than they can be regenerated by another.

Regenerated—what *is* regeneration? Shelley was as hot and as wrong-headed as any sectarian who ever lived—only over a religion of his own making.”

Bertie took his pipe from his mouth, gazed intently up at the faint daybreak above his head, then, and just as I expected he was going to say something awfully incorrect in theology, he remarked: “Do you know, it really would be much better to remain here for the next hour or two than to go back to the suffocating heat and sulphur-fumes of the town? I wonder whether it would be possible to get some brandy and water from one of the hotels, or—or a petit verre of brandy alone would do.”

Now I knew enough of the kind of man I was talking to to feel sure that if he wanted brandy and did not have it, he would, before very long, become moodily silent and miserable: while, if his accustomed quantity, whatever that might be, could be got for him, he would probably at this hour in the morning become as frank and communicative as a schoolboy. If he would wait here for a few minutes, I answered, I could go through the side-

entrance of the Vier Jahreszeiten and order some brandy to be brought out to us here at once. A waiter always got up in time for the arrival of the early train from Frankfort, and was accustomed—I added this from a feeling of delicacy—to get me refreshments at whatever hour of the night or morning I happened to come in.

“All right,” returned Griffiths, quietly. I need not have troubled myself on his account—there was nothing unusual in his requiring brandy at any hour of the night or of the day: “All right, only I’m sorry that you should have so much trouble. The people of the Rose where I lodge wouldn’t open their buffet after midnight if one wanted wine for a penitent *in extremis*, or I would go myself.”

I had not much difficulty in getting what I wanted, the waiter on duty for the night being the *Oberkellner*, madame’s prime minister, and so invested with the highest keys of office—those of the cellar. Monsieur desired the refreshment of a little cognac and a cigar *Unter den Linden*? Nothing more delightful in these early summer mornings. Many distinguished visitors at their house had on

various occasions displayed precisely the same matutinal and simple tastes as monsieur. And so the matter was settled.

Griffiths was the most thoroughly engrossing companion I ever met with. When he had smoked another pipe and taken two or three glasses of brandy (I say "glasses" advisedly; the *Oberkellner* had given us wine-glasses, not petits verres, and Bertie, oblivious of water, drank his cognac much as virtuous men drink sherry), he thawed thoroughly, and it was not until the invalids were beginning to issue forth from the different lodging-houses that we rose and walked away together in the direction of the town.

When we came to the point at which our paths separated, I offered, as a matter of course, to shake hands with my new acquaintance as I bade him good morning. Was he too proud, too humble, too suspicious, to advance so quickly into intimacy? What was it that made him draw coldly aside, then pass on without the slightest recognition of the hand I had held out to him? Poor fellow, I know now; but during all the space of our brief friend-

ship—yes, up to the last sorry hour in which he bade me adieu—I continued to remark and wonder over this peculiarity in Bertie Griffiths. He never would shake my hand; never at meeting or parting would give me any other salutation than the short “Good day” and scarcely perceptible nod with which, on this first morning of our acquaintance, he walked away from my side.

I know now! Now that the hand has stiffened beyond possibility of wrong-doing—the heart, with all its contrition and with all its guilt, found rest at last.

CHAPTER II.

His acquaintance with myself seemed to bring Griffiths into more friendly relations with the world at large. His luck at the tables improved; he dressed somewhat better; gradually got to appear more by daylight; finally, little by little, was drawn on into occasionally joining the society of the other English people then in Wiesbaden.

There were a good many young and pretty girls in this society, few of whom, I think, would have been averse to Bertie's handsome face, or to Bertie's attentions, would he have proffered them. But from the first day on which I succeeded in bringing him among ladies at all, one pair of little white hands held him in absolute possession; and Bertie was a great deal too passive, a great deal too really indifferent, perhaps, to attempt to struggle from their grasp.

"Mrs. Gardiner saves me trouble, and keeps me out of mischief," he remarked, when one day I ventured to give him some friendly warnings on the subject of his growing intimacy with her. "With a younger, more inexperienced woman, I should probably have a vast deal of trouble in finding anything to say, or, which would be worse, run the risk of some serious folly. Now, Mrs. Gardiner has really a great deal to talk about, and can take care of herself, and of me too, and that is just what suits me. You need be under no fear. I have never committed any absurdity of *this* kind since I was a boy."

Mrs. Gardiner was a very small, very fair woman of about five-and-thirty; a woman who, if she had been born a Parisian, might have had the reputation of beauty still, and who, even with provincial dress and inartistic restoration of the ravages of time, was not without charm of person and manner. From the first hour in which I saw her smiling up into Bertie's face, I had a singularly strong conviction that she would work him mischief before she had finished with him. She belonged so precisely

to that blonde, thin-lipped, pale-eyed class of women to whom French novelists are prone to give the title of "femme-ange," and whom unhappy experience has brought my own mind to connect with a directly opposite nomenclature! I read of cruelty of cunning, of a whole host of the worst feline feminine vices, on her demure rose-and-white face; yes, from the morning when I first watched her as she led the choir in the organ-loft of the little English chapel: and as soon as I found Bertie would bear to be reasoned with about her, I unhesitatingly gave him fullest benefit of my opinion. The result was—much what the result of all advice with regard to such matters has been for the last six thousand years at least. He listened to me attentively; told me that my insight into character did my judgment great credit; that he thought very much as I did on every point concerning Mrs. Gardiner; and—grew daily more and more devoted to Mrs. Gardiner's society!

Of regard, of even a pretence at sentiment, there was, I am certain, none upon either side; but upon Mrs. Gardiner's there was plenty of the feel-

ing which outweighs every other in women of her type—vanity. Griffiths was, beyond question, the handsomest Englishman in Wiesbaden, and she was intensely flattered by his attention to herself. She was not one of the women who aspire after counting ugly dukes and sexagenarian millionaires in their train. What she craved for was that the crowd, strangers, or those who knew her name alike should turn and say: “Who is that handsome man so devoted to the pretty woman beside whom he walks?” and just up to this point was Bertie all that she desired. His broken fortunes, his tarnished name, took nothing from the personal charm of the man by whose side she lingered, and beneath whose eyes her own sank (with not unversed consciousness) every evening of her life in those dim-lighted Cur-Saal gardens! And, precisely because her regard for him was—what it was—I knew that her hour of awakening would be a bad one for Bertie. A woman who has really loved a man, may, on occasion, bid him good-bye, without attempting to give him a mortal wound at parting: a coquette who has been only vain of his allegiance to herself, never.

There was a grand ball one Saturday night, at the Cur-Saal, a grander ball than the usual weekly reunion, given in honour of the arrival of a Russian princess, nearly allied to the Duke of Nassau; and to this ball Bertie suffered himself to be taken by Mrs. Gardiner. Balls were not at all in Bertie's way, generally. It bored him to dance, himself: it bored him to look on at the dancing of others; but I suppose he was at a point now where it was difficult for him to refuse any request that Mrs. Gardiner's vanity thought fit to impose upon him. At all events he went. It would have been well for him that night, if he had stopped as usual at the red-baize door which separated the ball-room from the Spiel-Saal; well if he had lost every remaining florin that stood between him and starvation, sooner than have met whom he did, have given up the small remainder of peace that was left to him, the liberty of his own soul, into another's, and a woman's hands!

I was late in going to the ball myself, and on entering the room, the first person I saw was Griffiths: Griffiths neither bored nor responding to the

fades flatteries of Mrs. Gardiner's eyes, but with a young and fresh-faced English girl leaning on his arm, and himself looking ten years younger and handsomer than I had ever seen him yet. He came up at once to where I stood, and introduced me to his partner, Mrs. Howden. Mrs. Howden was travelling with an uncle and aunt, and her acquaintance with Bertie had begun that day at the table d'hôte of the Rose. Her party was to have proceeded to Switzerland on the following Monday morning, but—this Mrs. Howden told me, with a glance at Bertie—but Wiesbaden really seemed to be such a delightful place, with so much going on, that they had altered their plans, and decided to remain where they were for another fortnight or three weeks.

I went across the room to Mrs. Gardiner, pale through all her enamel as she watched Bertie and his companion, and inquired of her who Mrs. Howden was.

Mrs. Howden was no one at all: the widow of a subaltern who died in India a few months after his marriage, leaving her with nothing to exist upon

but her pension and the charity of an uncle of his—that objectionably vulgar old man who was her chaperon to-night. Pretty? well no—sweet-looking, decidedly sweet-looking of an evening; but her complexion quite gone—like all Indians, poor thing! and so unfortunately dressed, it was almost impossible to judge of her looks. So kind of Mr. Griffiths to dance with her, was it not? She was quite unnoticed until he, goodnaturedly, asked her to dance a quadrille.

Mr. Griffiths' kindness lasted until the end of the evening. As he was putting on Ada Howden's cloak before giving her back into her uncle's charge at the Cur-Saal door, Mrs. Gardiner swept close by him, and if it had rested with her goodwill alone, poor Bertie's troubles would then and there, I think, have been brought to a sudden close.

I told him so as we were walking home together an hour or two later. "If you are going to change, let your infidelity at least be gradual," I added. "That little woman would have stabbed you with pleasure as you stood at Mrs. Howden's side in the

doorway. She will do you an injury yet, unless you take the trouble to manage her."

Bertie laughed with his peculiar joyous laugh. "Injury! I should like to meet the man or woman who had the power to injure me. There's this advantage at least in being on the very lowest step of all in the social ladder—one can fall no further. Not Mrs. Gardiner, not any man or woman living, can place me one inch higher or lower than I am. The exact place I am to occupy in the world was decided for me a dozen years ago—decided for me, by my own hand, you know—by my own hand!"

He had alluded before me more than once to the isolation of his life, the total estrangement that existed between himself and every member of his family in England. This was the first time that he had spoken definitely of himself as of an outcast, and there was something in the blank, thorough hopelessness of his voice as he did so that touched me infinitely.

"You have a trick of talking in this way, Griffiths," I remarked, after a minute's silence, "and,

on my word, I believe the state of feeling that makes you do so is a morbid one. The majority of men and women are much too indifferent to each other for any of their verdicts, good or bad, to be absolutely final!"

Bertie took his pipe from his lips and gazed straight away through the purple of the summer night for a few seconds; then he turned and looked steadily, just as he had looked on that first morning that I ever spoke to him, into my face. "Will you answer me a question?" he exclaimed, abruptly. "Answer it honestly, boldly, as you would do if you were speaking to your own soul?"

"If I can, I will," I replied; but though I spoke promptly I felt ill at ease. I knew, instinctively, that he was going to ask me one of those questions which no man does, which no man can, answer as though he were speaking to his own soul.

"If you can! Well, you are right to give a guarded answer. You don't wish to quarrel with me, and you guess enough of my history to know that there are questions concerning it to which the

only honest answers must be damning ones to me. Do you think, then,"—uncertain though the light was, I could detect that his face grew more ghastly white than usual at this point—"do you think, if a man had committed some action which, as the world decides, must sink him utterly and for ever from the level of his peers, there *could* be found a woman—mind I only speak of remote possibility; I know pretty well the common rule of life—a woman who would take him, poor wretch! as he was and marry him, and, more and more unlikely still, be generous enough never to cast his stained name in his teeth so long as they both should live? Now, do you think this possible? Speak! I wish to hear your answer."

My answer, hesitatingly given, was that I had had no experience among very heroic or exalted human beings. The men and women I had known had belonged altogether to the common-place section of humanity, and—

"Go on," he interrupted me. "Spare yourself the trouble of saying all this; I am much too callous to be wounded by a few hard words now. Among

all the women you have known you never met one capable of acting in the way I speak of?"

"Well," I replied, "if you force me to give an opinion, I should say it would depend wholly upon the nature of the act by which such a man had forfeited what the world calls reputation. Women do not philosophize, they seldom trouble themselves over-much about being just; but as a rule they abide by and faithfully enforce on their sisters the code that men have framed for each other and for them. Look at K——," I mentioned a name notorious just then in Wiesbaden. "A man who betrayed the honour of his nearest friend; afterwards, and when it was in his power to do so, refused to make the last poor amends that society counts as reparation. Men did look coldly on him for a time, I believe; but I never heard of any woman judging him with excessive harshness. He is here now, as you know, received on terms of intimacy by Englishwomen who are considered the very essence of high principle, and, which is more perhaps, of exclusiveness."

"Of course," exclaimed Griffiths, "of course.

We are not philosophizing, not discussing fine questions of abstract right or wrong, but talking, in plain worldly language, of plain worldly facts. I speak of dishonour—not of such venial error as betraying the man you call your friend, but dishonour! If a man—a miserable lad rather—led on by the evil counsel of others, were in a moment of blind boyish cowardice to write a signature to some bill of whose very nature he was ignorant, and so commit himself to as much perdition as this life can compass, did you ever know a woman,” he went on, hoarsely, “whose love would be strong enough to condone shame like that?”

The confession which this speech implied did not, in truth, take me by surprise, for Bertie had often spoken of the hopelessness of his seeking to regain his lost position, the impossibility of a man’s ever rallying from the one offence that the world’s opinion has branded as irrevocable; and yet, when the actual truth came so nearly to be put into words, it occasioned me a chill towards the poor fellow, of which, even as I felt it, I could not but be ashamed. I had sought him out, I had forced my acquaintance-

ship upon him, he had never tried to conceal that he was an outcast from respectability; and how fit was I—how fit is any untempted man—to be the judge of another (God knows, in all save reputation, a truer and a nobler man than himself) whom cruellest fate has brought to such a pass as this?

“You are silent!” he exclaimed, with bitter emphasis; “and it is easy for me to know what your silence means. Remember it was of your own free will that men have ever seen you in my society——”

He stopped short; he turned half away; in another moment he would, I believe, have left me, as likely as not have never spoken to me again. And so I held my hand out to him. Whether he would or no, I grasped poor Bertie’s (icily cold its touch was) in mine; then I spoke a few of those quick words that come so rarely from one’s lips in this unemotional everyday life of ours, words such as, for very certain, no other man has ever heard me speak since.

“You are the only person here who would say as much,” he remarked presently, speaking again in his accustomed gentle, passionless manner; “but

then, perhaps you act and speak professionally? People who have a special interest in the study of human nature should be above the society of no man. As no reptile or insect can be too noxious for a naturalist to feel keenest interest in his habits of life, so no human creature can be too low in the social scale for a painter of character to seek to understand him—even a man who, if society had been logically true to its own first principles, ought at this moment to be a *forçat*. Have you ever been to Toulon or Brest?” he asked suddenly. “I have. I was at Toulon a year or two ago, and took a special—I may say a personal—interest in noticing the condition of the criminals. The result I arrived at was, that for a man of the lowest ranks, a common housebreaker or wife killer, ’tis not near such hard punishment to work on the hulks for life as it is for a gentleman”—the pathos of that word as he pronounced it!—“for a gentleman to commit a felon’s act, and receive only the verdict, only live out the judgment of his peers. One of these two men eats, sleeps, works, enjoys the companionship of others like himself—is degraded, in short, lower

than the level of an animal, without being in the slightest degree sensible of his degradation. The other——”

He stopped; he turned his face from me. The other—great heaven! I knew that he was standing here at my side! the broken-down, ruined outcast; the refined, generous-hearted “gentleman,” who sought alternately in blank materialism or feverish snatches of false excitement, to find forgetfulness of himself and of the worse than chains—the ban of social excommunication under which he lived and moved and had his being!

It was one of those occasions when whatever you try to say must of necessity fall wide of its mark; and to get away from the subject, if possible, without wounding him, I began to speak of Mrs. Howden.

“Wonderfully pretty, isn’t she?” said Bertie. I never heard him make use of such extravagant terms in speaking of any woman before. “Not only possessing the mere common-place beauty of hazel eyes, red lips, pink and white skin, but all those nameless feminine caressing charms of face and

manner that occasionally make one fool enough to believe one woman unlike all other women in the world. Is there honesty on that woman's face, do you think?"

My answer was that Mrs. Howden had white arms, a graceful neck, bright hair, dark eyelashes. This much I saw. I could in no way speak concerning the moral qualities I had not seen.

"In other words Mrs. Howden is a pretty woman, and you think neither better nor worse of her than of her kind." We were just parting at the door of the Rose as Bertie spoke. "Well, I dare say you are right—I dare say you are right. For myself, I am superstitious, and the moment that woman's eyes met mine to-night, I felt that in some way or another she was going to be connected with my fate. I have won, I must tell you; before I went to the ball I made a magnificent *coup*—red passed eleven times—and I take it as a good omen. What will you bet that you do not see me yet as a *père de famille*—a sober and respected member of English society?"

His laugh was hollower than ever as he turned

and entered the house. I felt that it would have been safe to stake every shilling I had in the world against such an outside chance as his rehabilitation!

CHAPTER III.

I KNEW afterwards what infatuation it was that lured Bertie Griffiths on to the last crowning mistake of a life in which everything had been mistaken. Ada Howden was like, or he believed her like, the woman to whom he was to have been married when the dark cloud of his life fell upon him; the woman who, Bertie fondly believed, died of a broken heart a year after her engagement to himself was broken off.

About this fidelity to death which I did not witness I can of course say nothing. Human creatures die at all ages and of many diseases, and it would be remarkable, perhaps, if no deaths ever occurred within such periods of love disasters as to give foundation to the popular superstition about dying of a broken heart. Of Ada Howden, I knew, simply, that she was a soft-eyed, waxen-faced

Englishwoman of twenty-two; strict to the core in all conventional ideas of right and wrong; lenient to whatever errors she had been taught in her little shallow school to consider as venial; and with just romance enough in her nature to allow her to fall tolerably seriously in love with Bertie Griffiths' handsome, pallid, melancholy face, from the first moment that she was introduced to him.

Before a fortnight had passed their intimacy was looked upon as acknowledged by all the English people in Wiesbaden. Bertie now grew daily more and more expansive in his confidences to myself; and it was impossible for me not to see—although he never would admit it when I tried to question him directly—that the last desperate hope of the poor fellow's life was already staked on the frail adventure of this woman's love. When he left her of an evening (he was actually beginning sometimes to get through the twenty-four hours without play) it was his habit to come to my rooms to smoke and talk over the events of the day, and invariably his conversation bore the same burden: Ada Howden's beauty, Ada Howden's goodness, with speculations

as to the possibility of a man's reclaiming himself in his own eyes, however lost already in the world's esteem, if such a woman as this could be brought to love him and take him, guilt, remorse and all, into her pure keeping!

I listened to his dreams—the last Bertie Griffiths should ever dream in this world—and as I listened I came to see more and more what kind of heart this unhappy man's was. How thorough, how simple in his belief in the goodness of others; how athirst still for the better purer things of life! yes, though his last dozen years had been spent alternately at the tables of Baden or Homburg, and amidst such outcast society as the gambling capitals of Europe offer as the final and sole resource of ruined people.

Who is it says, "There are some characters capable of committing one great sin and of resting upon it: there are others in whom the first sin is necessarily and certainly followed by a series of sins?" Bertie belonged pre-eminently to those who fall once, and stop there. In spite of every assistance from without; in spite of the errors, the vices if you will, into which, as a castaway, he had been

forced, his nature *was* uncorrupt: I firmly believe, when he died, was uncorrupt still.

Many were the opinions given as to Mrs. Howden's folly in encouraging a man so broken down in fortune as Griffiths; many the stories circulated—none of them as yet approaching the truth—respecting the real nature of the cloud which overshadowed his past life. Of course all these stories were told punctually to old Mr. and Mrs. Howden, and by them duly repeated for their niece's benefit; but Ada, like a true woman, only took Bertie's part more resolutely for the efforts of friends and relations to keep them asunder. Want of means she thought nothing of. The scanty allowance Griffiths received from his family and her own small means would allow them to live as well together as they could live apart. How could it matter to her what his past history was? All of his life that belonged to her would commence from the day on which she should become his wife. These generous sentiments Bertie repeated to me, as little by little he managed indirectly to draw them forth from Ada; and, while all I read in them

was her ignorance of the real truth, nothing could turn him from the belief that she was above the possibility of change; that she knew his life had been an unhappy one, and was willing to take him so, and not make scrutiny too deep into the details of the past.

Three weeks went by; the day was fixed for the Howdens to leave Wiesbaden for Switzerland; and one morning Bertie told me that the time had come when he meant definitely to ask Ada Howden to marry him. He had no fear about her answer. All that troubled him was the thought of the confession that he would have to make; the doubt as to whether, indeed, he was bound in honour to make this confession at all. He asked my opinion on the subject, but I declined giving it. It was a position, I told him, in which a man's own conscience alone could decide upon the right course for him to take. The fact was, as I had only too well divined, it mattered little whether Mrs. Howden heard the truth from Bertie's lips or from another's: the truth was coming! I had read this much already on Mrs. Gardiner's face; had read it in the tone with which

she asked me if I believed there was any foundation for the report of the engagement between Mrs. Howden and Griffiths. "Poor Mr. Griffiths—I am so truly sorry for him!" added the thin red lips; "he is of good birth, I find out—has thought it wise, probably, to drop his title hitherto! What is it that some poet says about honour more before the name than after? Well, well, we must not be uncharitable. Mrs. Howden really deserves the greatest credit if she means to marry him! So very kind of you to bring the poor fellow forward among us all as you have done!" Yes, I knew then that the *femme ange* was cognizant of the truth: I knew instinctively at what pitiless time the truth would be told. Mrs. Gardiner chose her revenge well. I found afterwards that she had commenced her researches into Bertie's history on the very day after he first met Mrs. Howden at the ball, and had actually received the letter which contained the coveted knowledge for more than a week before she spoke.

There are some few human creatures who enjoy with a sort of artistic zest every detail of their re-

venge; plan it deliberately, carry it out dispassionately, gloat over each minutest torture of their victim, from the first moment when he stands unconsciously within their toils until the supreme hour when cruelty itself is satiated and can devise no further means for prolonging its own gratification. To this class, Bertie's little blonde soft-tongued enemy belonged. Better that a man should awaken the jealousy of a West Indian creole—an honest savage, who would merely seek to kill her lover, her rival and herself, in her first blind access of passionate fury—than would the vanity of a woman like this: a woman who can reason first, and then avenge herself on calm high principle and from a sense of the duty she owes to her family and to society.

In furtherance I firmly believe of her own preconcerted schemes, Mrs. Gardiner got up a picnic, "an impromptu sociable affair among a few friends," for the very day when Griffiths was resolving to speak definitely to Ada. For the first time since her husband's death, we were told, Mrs. Howden appeared on this occasion without the faintest, the

most conventional lingering remnant of mourning in her dress; and, in her fresh floating muslins and little English hat, looked like a girl of eighteen, a light-hearted girl who had never been witness to a scene of anguish, never wept over an untimely grave in her life. When we had reached our place of destination and Mrs. Howden, flushed and radiant, had walked off with Bertie, "just to look at that view from the hill for the last time, Mr. Griffiths"—I could not help thinking how marvellously well nature has arranged all matters pertaining to love and regret for us. If popular adages were true—if the living remembered and the dead came back to look at the dear ones left, what kind of life would any of us, disembodied or in the flesh, lead? One year and a half, eighteen short months, ago, Ada's desolate heart was supposed to be buried in a lonely grave among the Indian hills, and now—well, now she is the wife of some comfortable city man whose name I have forgotten—but at the moment of which I speak she was looking, as romancists say women can look but once, into Bertie's face, and promising (for he spoke, poor

fellow! he spoke before they had been alone together five minutes) to be his, and his only, till death should take her from his side.

Dinner was spread in the open air, and all the rest of the party had taken their places when Bertie and Mrs. Howden reappeared, walking quickly, and visibly expatiating upon the surrounding scenery as it is usual for persons in their position to do. The moment I saw them I knew that Griffiths had offered to her and was accepted: as they approached nearer I became sensible of another and a very different circumstance. The conversation, which had been general not a minute before, hushed, and people, if they spoke to each other at all, spoke in whispers; old Mr. and Mrs. Howden looked nervous and uncertain how to act; Mrs. Gardiner alone was serene, calm, smiling.

"You have heard, I suppose?" whispered the voluble and mature young lady who was next me. "Such a shocking thing—and after everybody had taken him up so! One can't help feeling for Mrs. Howden—though I have no patience myself with these giddy little Indian widows—and still more

for Mrs. Gardiner who first introduced him to everybody. I really think the way in which she broke it to us all just now was *most* delicate, don't you? Oh, I forgot, you were away, smoking your cigar at the time. Mrs. Gardiner only heard the particulars this morning, too late to put the pic-nic off, and she thought it a duty to explain to all of us, as her guests, the extremely painful position in which she and her husband were placed. It was no common thing, you see," she added in a whisper: "a horrid gambling transaction, years ago, in Vienna—forged his uncle's name to a bill for an enormous sum—was found out—dismissed, and——"

I turned from her impatiently; I signed to Griffiths to come to me; and I whispered a word in his ear. For one moment whatever colour there was in his cheek forsook it, and the muscles round his mouth trembled convulsively. Then his face grew fearfully calm—he had gone through more than one such crisis before, I imagine—and he went quietly back to Mrs. Howden's side.

She smiled upon him still; no whisper had as yet had time to gain her ear: and in her first

delight at having won the man whom she believed herself to love, her poor little self-engrossed heart was too fluttered for her to notice the cold looks and meaning silence of the rest of the party. And so Bertie took her to her chair, close to Mrs. Gardiner at the head of the table, and the dinner went on: went on in almost absolute silence, broken only by ghastly liveliness on the part of Mrs. Gardiner, and by poor Bertie's hollow laugh as he talked on unceasingly—and scarcely stopping, I noticed, for her to answer his unconnected remarks—to Mrs. Howden.

I have been to a good many wearying festivities in my life, but none ever seemed to me so long as this dinner. When at length the cloth was removed, and I began to hope that the ladies at least would leave without anything occurring in the shape of a scene, Mrs. Gardiner turned—she had only addressed him generally hitherto—and said something which I did not exactly hear to Griffiths.

The blood neither went to his cheek nor left it: he looked steadily into her eyes. “Vienna? Certainly, Mrs. Gardiner, I was there—let me see, more

than a dozen years ago. I was one of the attachés at the English Embassy. You know all about it, I imagine?"

Bertie was superb at this moment. He knew that every man and woman, save one, at that table, had heard his history; that every one of them probably would look upon it as a matter of course to pass him without recognition in the street to-morrow. But no prince surrounded by complaisant courtiers, in the very zenith of popularity, ever sat more calmly, more profoundly indifferent, than did he. It is an instinct in even the lowest natures to respect any creature, human or animal, who dies game: Mrs. Gardiner was not devoid of it. Looking into Bertie's marble face, she would, I verily believe, have given much could she but have purchased back the last hour's perfidy, and have found herself in Ada Howden's place. As it was, her eyes sank: and she began to pluck nervously at the bouquet—Bertie had sent it to her that morning—which lay before her on the table.

"My reason for asking the question was that I received a letter to-day from Mrs. Hesketh—you

remember Mrs. Hesketh and her husband, no doubt, at Vienna? a letter in which she mentioned your name."

"Mrs. Hesketh? Let me consider." The most innocent man living could not have been more profoundly cool than was Bertie. "Ah, yes; I do recollect Mrs. Hesketh. She had the reputation of possessing the most thoroughly *mauvaise langue* in Vienna. Her husband tried to fight a duel that some scandal of hers got him into once; but fell down in a fit of terror, thinking himself killed before a shot was fired. I was his second, Mrs. Gardiner, and fearing the honour of the English army might be somewhat compromised by Captain Hesketh's weak nerves, managed to take the quarrel on myself and arrange it for him. I was rewarded by a shot through my shoulder, which, as you may remark"—I had done so often—"has made this arm nearly helpless. Really it is very good of Mrs. Hesketh to bear me so long in her recollection. I wish Hesketh would remember to send the five-and-twenty pounds he lost to me at lansquenet, the last night I ever saw him."

"And—and I am to conclude, then, that you are the Mr. Griffiths with whom Mrs. Hesketh was acquainted in Vienna? I thought, probably, it was a mistake; because you know here we have never heard of you as connected with Lord N——?"

Bertie looked with unvarying composure into his inquisitor's face. "Lord N—— is my father," he answered coldly. "Of the Heskeths I know nothing, except, as I have told you, that Mrs. Hesketh was a woman universally abhorred in Vienna, that her husband was a coward, and that, on the last occasion I met him, he lost five-and-twenty pounds to me at cards, which he has never paid. If Mr. Gardiner, or any friend of yours," he glanced carelessly down the table, "desires to ask me any other question, I shall be delighted to answer him at a proper place and time."

And then he turned and went on talking to Ada Howden, just as though the last three minutes had not told him he was branded—branded with unutterable shame in the eyes of every other man and woman there present.

Directly the ladies went away I moved to

Bertie's side. He was very white now: white, stern, silent. He drank no wine: he just sat quietly, with his arms folded, ready—longing, I can very well believe—for the first word from any man that could be construed into a question. No such word came, however. Sane men are not in the habit, in real life, of thrusting themselves into unpleasant or dangerous positions, however sincerely they may uphold theoretically the necessity of society keeping wrong-doers in their places: and as he sat there, with pale compressed lips and folded arms, Griffiths was, indisputably, not a pleasant-looking man to interfere with.

As we rose to leave the table I took his arm, and leading him apart from the rest, asked if there was any kind of way in which I could serve him. Should I at once seek to offer an explanation to Ada or her uncle? She might take a different view of the matter according to the light in which it was first presented to her mind.

"She will know the truth," interrupted Bertie, abruptly; his changed voice shocked me. "No matter how it is told! The truth—the truth will

be enough. I know exactly what I have to expect. What I am sorry for," he added, "is bringing you into all this. By the Lord, I don't think there's another man in Europe who would have brought up his chair by mine as you did just now. Look," he whispered, hurriedly, "there is that accursed woman making her way to Ada's side. You may go, if you will, and try to keep them apart. I can trust myself to do nothing until I have spoken to Ada alone."

The party was already preparing to return, and I managed quietly to place myself at Mrs. Howden's side and to remain there until I saw her into her carriage. She had evidently heard something—how much I could not tell—and kept glancing nervously at Bertie as he stood silently watching her and aloof from every one. When she was in her place I asked her, in a whisper, if we were likely to see her again that evening.

"I don't know," she faltered; "we are invited to the Gardiners, but I shall manage not to go; and if—if I can get any one to come with me, perhaps I may go for a walk late in the Cur-Saal gardens.

Would you mind," she leaned forward and whispered this, "would you mind saying to Mr. Griffiths that I have heard something that has pained me dreadfully, but I won't believe it—mind you say that—I won't believe it, or even listen to anything they tell me. If I possibly can, I *will* come to the gardens," she added after a minute's irresolution. "I shall sleep better if I can only hear a denial of everything from his own lips to-night."

And then she drove away, and I had to bear whatever crumb of consolation her message might be supposed to contain, to Bertie.

But I think he knew as well as I did when I repeated it that his hour was come.

CHAPTER IV.

It was a brilliant moonlit night. No breath of wind stirred the long avenue of lime-trees in the Cur-Saal gardens; no ripple trembled across the little lake beside which Bertie and I stood and waited for Mrs. Howden. A military festival was going on at Mainz that evening, and instead of the usual crowd only a few loiterers like ourselves disturbed the stillness of the gardens. All around us was calm, unruffled, hushed; and I think the very peace and freshness of the summer night made the contrast of poor Bertie's misery strike upon my heart with a sharper sense of pity.

"Will she come, do you think?" he exclaimed, for about the twentieth time, after some passing footstep had aroused and then disappointed his hopes. "Is it likely that she will put herself in the

false position of coming to meet me now? or do you suppose compassion, Christian charity will prompt her to come and say a few kind words before she bids me good-bye for ever!"

It was singular how utterly his tone had changed during the last few hours. Hitherto, as long as the game seemed ever so little in his favour, he had, as I conceived, been childishly sanguine as to success. Now, and although Ada had as yet said no one word to bid him despair, he seemed to find a kind of sullen pleasure in classing her with the rest of the world, and speaking of the rupture of their engagement as certain.

"Good faith!" he broke out, when I had said something about trusting to her promise of meeting us. "Good faith—promises! Why, don't you know that she would be perfectly justified in breaking all faith with me now? Of course she would, and 'tis better, far better, that she should not go through the pain of seeing me again. There is no such thing, save in One record, as a prodigal really returning to the bosom of respectability. I

have tried hard to do so during the last few weeks, and to-day, you see, was the culminating point of my success. I bore it well, you say? the women's averted looks, the men's silence. By heaven! I would rather—much—finish with my miserable life at once than go through an hour such as that one was to me again. I remember exactly the sensation I felt in the duel I fought for Hesketh, when I had myself fired ineffectually, and stood waiting the result of my opponent's deliberate aim. Well, that was child's play compared to what I went through this afternoon, braving out the cold glances of a dozen men and women, all of whom I know had the undoubted legitimate right to look upon me—God, that I should say it!—as something worse than a coward. That little craven, Hesketh, is the colonel of his regiment now, making speeches at public dinners in which he alludes to the glories his brave fellows, he at their head, reaped upon Crimean fields, and I——”

A light step fell on the gravel path a few yards behind the bench where we were sitting, and Bertie started nervously to his feet. A minute's pause, as

though the walker hesitated whether to proceed or go back, and then a white dress gleamed at the turning of the path, and in another moment Mrs. Howden was beside us.

"We thought, if you came at all, you would come here," I said, as I rose to meet her; I knew Bertie was beyond all common-place attempts at opening the conversation. "Griffiths says the lake has always been your favourite haunt at this hour of the evening."

She answered—and it did not strike me that her manner was extraordinarily agitated—that it was very good indeed of us to wait for her so long. She would not have been so late but she had had to remain until Mr. and Mrs. Howden had started for Mrs. Gardiner's, where an evening party was to wind up the day's amusement. "I made them believe, with an immense deal of difficulty," she added, "that I was suffering from headache, and would rather be left behind, and as soon as they were fairly gone I took my maid, under pretence of seeing if the air would do me good, and came here.

She is waiting for me yonder in the avenue, and I am afraid I shall not be able to stay more than a quarter of an hour;" and she glanced at Griffiths.

"A quarter of an hour is long enough," said Bertie; "long enough for me to hear what you are going to say to me. You'll sit down, won't you?" In spite of himself his voice *must* grow tender when this woman's eyes were meeting his. "I am afraid it is too much for you, coming here so late, and after all the fatigue and annoyance you have gone through to-day."

She took her place, without speaking, upon the bench where she and Bertie had spent so many solitary forenoons during the last fortnight, and I prepared to depart.

"Please don't go!" cried Mrs. Howden, quickly. "It is getting so late. I think, don't you, Mr. Griffiths, that it is much better we should all keep together?"

I did as she asked me, of course, but I read no good omen in the request. She had never had com-

punctuations about being alone with Griffiths a score of times before, and this morning she had promised to become his wife. Possibly Bertie thought as I did, for he never offered to take the place at her side, but remained standing motionless before her, his eyes intently scanning whatever the dim light would let him read of her face, his arms folded, as was his habit when his mind was worst at ease, across his breast.

"Ada," he exclaimed, abruptly, "this is not a time for hesitation or false delicacy; do you want to give me up?"

"To give you up! Oh, Mr. Griffiths, don't talk so dreadfully, please. You know very well you have no cause to do so. Should I," she cast her eyes down, "should I be here now if I meant to give you up—if I believed one word of the horrid things that they told me to-day?"

Bertie was silent. I knew that his heart was greedily, desperately taking in every soft expression of the girlish face, every soft tone of the touching voice, that already, in fact, belonged to him no

longer. "Should I be here if I believed what they told me?" Her faith in him, then, was all that held her to him yet! She waited only for his lips to confirm the truth, and then—all would be over between them for ever.

"Ada," and his voice was changed and shaken with passion, "I can't stop to think of conventionalities; I must speak the truth out. I have loved—I love you as very few men love, as no man, I think, ever loves but once in his life. If you married me, I believe the kind of love I should give you might make up for much. Don't you see you are the last—yes, the last hope I have on earth? and you know how desperately we all cherish a hope that comes to us late, and when we have quite ceased to look for happiness of any kind! I don't plead to you—I don't seek to influence you—but I do tell you that I think such a love as mine might make up for a good many of the evils you would have to go through as the wife of a lost and ruined man—even a man as lost, as ruined, as I am!"

In the moonlight I could see the tears rush into

Mrs. Howden's dark eyes; her delicate cheeks flushed, her lips began to quiver piteously. "Mr. Griffiths," she cried, in a broken voice, "you know I don't care for your poverty. You know I have not been altered by anything you have told me concerning your past life. All *that* would be forgotten in the future—only let me hear you deny the things Mrs. Gardiner said about you to-day, and then, while we lived, we would never return to any of these cruel subjects again."

Did the whisper of a sudden fierce temptation come across Bertie's soul? Did it occur to him how easily he might answer her falsely—gain her consent at once to become his wife—win, by a sudden *coup*, the last good thing that life could yet hold out to him—and leave the future and the additional load of guilt on his already heavily-weighted conscience to chance? Whatever his temptation, whatever his determination, I felt that it was not a time in which the presence of any third person could, by possibility, be wanted; and I turned silently, and had already walked some paces away from them, when Bertie's voice called me back.

"It is just as well that there should be a witness to what I have got to say," he remarked quietly. "If you don't mind stopping, I think it better that you should be here. Now, Ada, I am ready to answer you. Afterwards, if you will, the subject *shall* be sealed between us for ever. What is it that you wish me to deny?"

He had become thoroughly calm again now, and I knew that the whole truth was coming: Mrs. Howden's voice grew more and more uncertain.

"What I wish you to deny, Mr. Griffiths?—why, the dreadful story that was whispered about at the pic-nic to-day. Something that Mrs. Gardiner said happened to you in Vienna, you know."

"A good many things happened to me in Vienna. My engagement to Gertrude Wilson, for instance, was broken off there; but I have told you of that already."

"I know. I am not thinking of your engagement. What Mrs. Gardiner spoke of was—was—Mr. Griffiths, the cause that brought your engagement to an end!"

"You mean my being dismissed from the embassy?"

She gave one broken exclamation, half sob, half entreaty, and, turning her face away from him, buried it down between her hands. Bertie went on resolutely.

"Dismissed! I ought to have told you of this before, but somehow whenever I tried to approach it, my lips had not the courage to bring out the truth! I have told you a great deal, you know, Ada, and you forgave it all!"

"Nothing of this kind," she stammered. "I never imagined anything like this. I could have borne anything else!" And Mrs. Howden began to cry.

Griffiths came a step nearer, and bent down over her for full two or three minutes without uttering a syllable.

"Will you look at me, Mrs. Howden?" he said at last. "Just look up into my face while I speak. It is the last request with which I shall seek to trouble you."

She took her handkerchief from her eyes, and turned them up to his. Tear-shedding spoils most women's beauty for the time being; but it had not altered hers. Either her tears were innocuous, or she understood the rare art of allowing them to gather in, but not overflow her eyes. I realized better at that moment than I had ever done before how Bertie's infatuation had been encompassed by the insipid prettiness of Ada's face. It looked so pathetically childish, so fair, so mournful, so thoroughly innocent in the moonlight!

"I will try to do as you wish, Mr. Griffiths, but indeed—indeed I am too utterly wretched to hold my face up, even to you!" And the soft hazel eyes filled anew; the parted lips trembled; the little white hands fell clasped in the prettiest, most Greuze-like attitude of despair conceivable in Mrs. Howden's lap.

"Thank you. I shall not trouble you very long. Do you recollect—I think it was one day last week—we were sitting together in this place, and Colonel K—— passed by?"

Yes, Mrs. Howden recollected the circumstance.

"I asked you if you knew his history, and you answered yes. I asked, not without selfish reasons of my own, if it would be possible for you to overlook the past, and to love a man in such a position as his, and you answered yes. Well, I don't want to go into K——'s errors now, or to compare myself to him in any way. I simply wish to recall that question of mine and your reply to your recollection."

Mrs. Howden was silent for a minute, then she faltered out how she had heard that Colonel K—— had been "very extravagant and wild, and so on, but never any really serious accusation against him—that was a very different case, as every one would admit——"

"A very different one!" interrupted Bertie bitterly: "you are right. This man only betrayed his dearest friend, only left a defenceless woman to her despair in the hour when he might have repaired the wrongs that he had wrought! It is a very

different case, and yet, knowing his history, you could have overlooked it, and have become his wife if you had loved him. You know mine, and you are going to cast me off"—he never heeded the feeble deprecation of her upraised hands—"for ever! Mrs. Howden, you are acting very uprightly indeed. Your friends will applaud you—your own conscience will applaud you—you will, I doubt not, return thanksgiving to heaven, night and morning, for the next three months, for the merciful escape that you have had of becoming the wife of a dishonoured man. But, before we part, I will just put the truth to you as I see it. It won't alter your position, you know, to listen to me. You need never trouble yourself to think of my words again after to-night. But now, just for the very few minutes that we shall pass together in this world, I choose that you shall listen to me. Mrs. Gardiner, I perceive, told you the leading facts of my story. Did she tell you the details of it too?"

Ada Howden's head drooped again. "Mrs. Gardiner told me more, far more, than I could bear to listen to," she answered.

“Did she tell you of a lad, an ignorant, unsuspicious lad, brought fresh, on his arrival from England, into the society of men of the world, all older and astuter than himself? Did she tell you that this lad (he was not without courage of another kind; he had stood voluntarily, on his friend Captain Hesketh’s behalf, before the fire of one of the best marksmen in Europe) was shrinking, sensitive, timid as a woman regarding the opinion of the world—especially the little narrow world in which he lived? Well, I dare say she did not tell you all this. What should Mrs. Gardiner—what should any other human being know beyond the bare outside facts of the case? She told you that a youth, Bertie Griffiths by name, did, together with a certain friend of his, in the year 18 —, lose sums greater than it was in the power of either of them to pay to several members of the legation and officers in the Austrian service; that, in obedience to his friend’s advice, a man twice his age, and who escaped blameless, Bertie Griffiths put his name—unhappily, as it chanced, his uncle’s name too—to bills whose very import he scarcely understood; was suspected,

privately tried, and dismissed. Dismissed!—let me speak perfectly plainly—only was saved, through the powerful interest of his family, from becoming a convicted felon. These are the facts. What should Mrs. Gardiner—what should you—know of the unspotted conscience with which the lad was led on into that first unconscious crime? Of his fierce temptation, his horror of disgrace in leaving a debt of honour unpaid, his vacillation, his anguish of remorse when he discovered too late into *what* crime he had been seduced? What should you know of these things? My God, why do I even speak of them to you now!”

I don't know whether he had dreamed to the last that the eloquence of his suffering might change her—dreamed that at the crowning point of his confession and his misery Ada's compassion would outweigh her prudence, and, throwing her arms around his neck, she would sob out to him that she loved him still—loved him more for all the misery, all the shame that he had lived through! If he had so dreamed, this moment of awakening must have been black indeed. Ada Howden never spoke,

never gave token of any passionate feeling whatsoever, only clasped those pretty little hands of hers tightly together, and glanced hurriedly from right to left, as though hoping for some fortunate accident that might arise to deliver her from all the pain and disappointment that her own poor, selfish, unheroic heart was being called upon to feel.

"I see—you are anxious to go!" cried Griffiths, bitterly; "and I will not detain you. The remainder of my story need not take me three minutes to tell. I was dismissed, Mrs. Howden. At one-and-twenty I was a disgraced, ruined man, as you see me now. My mother—thank God I have this to remember!—my mother never could be brought to believe me guilty, and when she died, years afterwards, love and forgiveness for me were on her lips to the last. My other relations, my own father even, would not hear my name, and only allowed me enough to exist upon, on the express condition that I should never set my foot on English ground again. If I had gone through years of progressive infamy I could not have been more wholly lost, more branded, more excommunicated, in their sight, than this one

solitary unpremeditated crime had made me. I don't think my people acted worse or better than the majority of people would have done," went on poor Bertie. "It seems a fixed law among men that every criminal shall be forced to walk, until his life ends, along precisely the same path as that into which his feet first went astray. Put into a totally different position—at the age, mind, I was then—I don't believe I should have gone any further to the bad. With my inborn, hereditary thirst for gambling, to throw me upon an unoccupied continental life was simply to confirm the passion that had already been my ruin. You understand me?"

She was silent a moment, then murmured something about her belief that every man had the means of redemption in his own heart, if he chose.

"Ah!" said Bertie, gently, "that is your belief—the belief of a white soul!—and I like to hear it from your lips. Now, for me, I believe that a man becomes inevitably what all the rest of the world agrees to consider him. For more than eleven years I have been looked upon as a blackguard—to all intents and purposes, I have become one; and yet

—yet, Ada, this one good thing, this one remnant of my old nature has been left to me—I have been able still to crave after a better life than that to which I have sunk, able at rare intervals to believe in the possibility of my returning to it. During the last three weeks this dream has been realized, for I have loved you. Don't grudge this short time to me. For you, entering upon life, sure of being loved by some worthier man than me, three weeks is but a short space to lose; for me, who have done with life, who from this night on will have nothing either to lose or hope, three weeks of happiness is an enormous thing to have gained. And I have been quite happy, you know! I have blinded my reason successfully; I have believed every one of your words, every smile, every look that you have given me. I am not quite sure which gains the most by your resolution of giving me up. . . . If you had married me, I should have been your slave; and women, as a rule, love longest when slavery and humility are not upon their husband's side. As it is, I have nothing but goodwill to feel towards you. You have given me three weeks of

perfect happiness, to which, as long as I live, I shall look back with gratitude. Ada, good-bye!"

And then I thought that she was going to soften. She started to her feet, she let Bertie hold her hands in his, she held her white face up, perilously close to his lips. Had she been a better woman or a worse one, had she possessed a little more of the love that casts out fear, or a little less of really honest desire to cleave to the right, I believe that the conflict then passing through her heart must have ended in Bertie's favour; but Ada Howden was too morally feeble either to ascend or to fall very far. She had considered herself sincerely in love with Bertie Griffiths, and in her inmost heart had rather liked him better, as children like forbidden sweets, for his not untarnished reputation. Her first husband had been a very serious young officer of Engineers, and she had never felt quite sure that his seriousness had not wearied her, and that it would not be a great deal more enlivening to have something to work upon and convert, as in Bertie; but to marry a man who had committed what the whole world considers a dishonourable

action—to know that every one would have a right to look down upon and pity her, that if she went to London none of her own acquaintance probably would ask her to dinner, that her cousin Susan (married to the member for N——) would perhaps refuse to visit her any longer—these were sacrifices for which Mrs. Howden's love did not arm her. She was very sincerely agitated, and very sincerely sorry for her own disappointment, conscious also, dimly, that this poor outcast Bertie—misdeeds included—was much more what she could have loved than any of the honest men she had ever been thrown with in her life before. This was all. In her weakness was her strength. She softened, she wept, she held his hands in hers, but she never once vacillated in the course which, before she met him, she had laid down as the wise and fitting one for her to pursue.

“My heart will break, Mr. Griffiths; I am quite sure it will. I never went through such dreadful trouble before since I was born. Oh, I wish that I was stronger, and could say and do exactly the thing that is right!”

"You are giving me up. Don't you feel that you are doing what is right?"

"You are very cruel, Mr. Griffiths."

"Cruel!" He caught her suddenly to his breast; he covered her cheek, her forehead, with his kisses. "You'll never be loved as I would have loved you, Ada—never; but you are acting rightly. If I could, I would not bind you at this moment to my miserable life. Only, don't forget me! Ada, my darling, don't forget me! When you marry—when some day you have children's faces round you—don't forget me! 'Twill keep me from the blackest of all despair, to believe that, whatever happens, you will think of me still."

She promised him, fervently, as people who remember nothing deeply generally do promise; and then I knew that the last moment, the wrench of the final leave-taking, had indeed come, and I walked away from them.

When I returned, Bertie was alone, seated upon the bench, quite calm and composed, and turning

over mechanically between his fingers a little prim-rose-coloured glove, which I suppose Ada had either forgotten or given to him at parting.

"Can I do anything for you in Homburg?" he asked, as he rose and joined me. "I shall go off to-morrow by the first train. My luck in Wiesbaden is up. How chill the air feels," he added with a sort of shudder. "Let us turn into the Cur-Saal for awhile on our way home."

He played at roulette till midnight, losing, almost without variation, the whole evening; then, for the first time, Bertie Griffiths shook my hand, and we bade each other farewell.

I never saw him again after that night. Three years later, I read in the papers the announcement with which this memento is headed. Long afterwards I accidentally gathered the brief details of his death from an army surgeon, a countryman of my own, who served the Emperor Francis Joseph. Bertie Griffiths volunteered, at the commencement of the war, into one of the Austrian regiments then

on active service, and was found, shot through the heart, among the foremost heaps of slain upon the field of Königgrätz.

A woman's glove was hid away in his breast, and they let it rest there when they buried him.

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