

At Last

Marion Harland

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CHAPTER I. DEWLESS ROSES.

Mrs. Rachel Sutton was a born match maker, and she had cultivated the gift by diligent practice. As the sight of a tendrilled vine suggests the need and fitness of a trellis, and a stray glove invariably brings to mind the thought of its absent fellow, so every disengaged spinster of marriageable age was an appeal pathetic and sure to the dear woman's helpful sympathy, and her whole soul went out in compassion over such "nice" and an appropriated bachelors as crossed her orbit, like blind and dizzy comets.

Her propensity, and her conscientious indulgence of the same, were proverbial among her acquaintances, but no one not even prudish and fearsome maidens of altogether uncertain age, and prudent mammas, equally alive to expediency and decorum had ever labelled her "Dangerous," while with young people she was a universal favorite. Although, with an eye single to her hobby, she regarded a man as an uninteresting molecule of animated nature, unless circumstances warranted her in recognizing in him the possible lover of some waiting fair one, and it was notorious that she reprobated as worse than useless positively demoralizing, in fact such friendships between young persons of opposite sexes as held out no earnest of prospective betrothal, she was confidante--general to half the girls in the county, and a standing advisory committee of one upon all points relative to their associations with the beaux of the region. The latter, on their side, paid their court to the worthy and influential widow as punctiliously, if not so heartily, as did their gentle friends. Not that the task was

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disagreeable. At fifty years of age, Mrs. Button was plump and comely; her fair curls unfaded, and still full and glossy; her blue eyes capable of languishing into moist appreciation of a woful heart—history, or sparkling rapturously at the news of a triumphant wooing; her little fat hands were swift and graceful, and her complexion so infantine in its clear white and pink as to lead many to believe and some I need not say of which gender to practise clandestinely upon the story that she had bathed her face in warm milk, night and morning, for forty years. The more sagacious averred, however, that the secret of her continued youth lay in her kindly, unwithered heart, in her loving thoughtfulness for others' weal, and her avoidance, upon philosophical and religious grounds, of whatever approximated the discontented retrospection which goes with the multitude by the name of self-examination.

Our bonnie widow had her foibles and vanities, but the first were amiable, the latter superficial and harmless, usually rather pleasant than objectionable. She was very proud, for instance, of her success in the profession she had taken up, and which she pursued con amore; very jealous for the reputation for connubial felicity of those she had aided to couple in the leash matrimonial, and more uncharitable toward malicious meddlers or thoughtless triflers with the course of true love; more implacable to match-breakers than to the most atrocious phases of schism, heresy, and sedition in church or state, against which she had, from her childhood, been taught to pray. The remotest allusion to a divorce case threw her into a cold perspiration, and apologies for such legal severance of the hallowed bond were commented upon as rank and noxious blasphemy, to which no Christian or virtuous woman should lend her ear for an instant. If she had ever entertained "opinions" hinting at the allegorical nature of the Mosaic account of the Fall, her theory would unquestionably have been that Satan's insidious whisper to the First Mother prated of the beauties of feminine individuality, and enlarged upon the feasibility of an elopement from Adam and a separate maintenance upon the knowledge-giving, forbidden fruit. Upon second marriages supposing the otherwise indissoluble tie to have been cut by Death she was a trifle less severe, but it was generally understood that she had grave doubts as to their propriety unless in exceptional cases.

"When there is a family of motherless children, and the father is himself young, it seems hard to require him to live alone for the rest of his life," she would allow candidly. "Not that I pretend to say that a connection formed through prudential motives is a real marriage in the sight of Heaven. Only that there is no human law against it. And the odds are as eight to ten that an efficient hired housekeeper would render his home more comfortable, and his children happier than would a stepmother. As for a woman marrying twice" her gentle tone and eyes growing sternly decisive "it is difficult for one to tolerate the idea. That is, if she really loved her first husband. If not, she may plead this as some excuse for making the venture poor thing! But whether, even then, she has the moral right to lessen some good girl's chances of getting a husband by taking two for herself, has ever been and must remain a mooted question in my mind."

Her conduct in this respect was thoroughly consistent with her avowed principles. She was but thirty when her husband died, after living happily with her for ten years. Her only child had preceded him to the grave four years before, and the attractive relict of Frederic Sutton, comfortably jointured and without incumbrance of near relatives, would have become a toast with gay bachelors and enterprising widowers, but for the quiet propriety of her demeanor, and the steadiness with which she insisted for the most part, tacitly upon her right to be considered a married woman still.

"Once Frederic's wife always his!" was the sole burden of her answer to a proposal of marriage received when she was forty-five, and the discomfited suitor filed it in his memory alongside of Caesar's hackneyed war dispatch.

She had laid off crape and bombazine at the close of the first lustrum of her widowhood as inconvenient and unwholesome wear, but never assumed colored apparel. On the morning on which our story opens, she took her seat at the breakfast-table in her nephew's house of which she was matron and supervisor—in-chief clad in a white cambric wrapper, belted with black; her collar fastened with a mourning-pin of Frederic's hair, and a lace cap, trimmed with black ribbon, set above her luxuriant tresses. She looked fresh and bright as the early

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September day, with her sunny face and in her daintily–neat attire, as she arranged cups and saucers for seven people upon the waiter before her, instructing the butler, at the same time, to ring the bell again for those she was to serve. She was very busy and happy at that date. The neighborhood was gay, after the open–hearted, open–handed style of hospitality that distinguished the brave old days of Virginia plantation–life. A merry troupe of maidens and cavaliers visited by invitation one homestead after another, crowding bedrooms beyond the capacity of any chambers of equal size to be found in the land, excepting in a country house in the Old Dominion; surrounding bountiful tables with smiling visages and restless tongues; dancing, walking, driving, and singing away the long, warm days, that seemed all too short to the soberest and plainest of the company; which sped by like dream–hours to most of the number.

Winston Aylett, owner and tenant of the ancient mansion of Ridgeley the great house of a neighborhood where small houses and men of narrow means were infrequent had gone North about the first of June, upon a tour of indefinite length, but which was certainly to include Newport, the lakes, and Niagara, and was still absent. His aunt, Mrs. Sutton, and his only sister, Mabel, did the honors of his home in his stead, and, if the truth must be admitted, more acceptably to their guests than he had ever succeeded in doing. For a week past, the house had been tolerably well filled ditto Mrs. Sutton's hands; ditto her great heart. Had she not three love affairs, in different but encouraging stages of progression, under her roof and her patronage! And were not all three, to her apprehension, matches worthy of Heaven's making, and her co–operation? A devout Episcopalian, she was yet an unquestioning believer in predestination and "special Providences" and what but Providence had brought together the dear creatures now basking in the benignant beam of her smile, sailing smoothly toward the haven of Wedlock before the prospering breezes of Circumstance (of her manufacture)?

While putting sugar and cream into the cups intended for the happy pairs, she reviewed the situation rapidly in her mind, and sketched the day's manoeuvres.

First, there was the case of Tom Barksdale and Imogene Tabb highly satisfactory and creditable to all the parties concerned in it, but not romantic. Tom, a sturdy young planter, who had studied law while at the University, but never practised it, being already provided for by his opulent father, had visited his relatives, the Tabbs, in August, and straightway fallen in love with the one single daughter of his second cousin a pretty, amiable girl, who would inherit a neat fortune at her parent's death, and whose pedigree became identical with that of the Barksdales a couple of generations back, and was therefore unimpeachable. The friends on both sides were enchanted; the lovers fully persuaded that they were made for one another, an opinion cordially endorsed by Mrs. Sutton, and they could confer with no higher authority.

Next came Alfred Branch and Rosa Tazewell incipient, but promising at this juncture, inasmuch as Rosa had lately smiled more encouragingly upon her timid wooer than she had deigned to do before they were domesticated at Ridgeley. Mrs. Sutton did not approve of unmaidenly forwardness. The woman who would unsought be won, would have fared ill in her esteem. Her lectures upon the beauties and advantages of a modest, yet alluring reserve, were cut up into familiar and much–prized quotations among her disciples, and were acted upon the more willingly for the prestige that surrounded her exploits as high priestess of Hymen. But Rosa had been too coy to Alfred's evident devotion almost repellent at seasons. Had these rebuffs not alternated with attacks of remorse, during which the exceeding gentleness of her demeanor gradually pried the crushed hopes of her adorer out of the slough, and cleansed their drooping plumes of mud, the courtship would have fallen through, ere Mrs. Sutton could bring her skill to bear upon it. Guided, and yet soothed by her velvet rein, Rosa really seemed to become more steady. She was assuredly more thoughtful, and there was no better sign of Cupid's advance upon the outworks of a girl's heart than reverie. If her fits of musing were a shade too pensive, the experienced eye of the observer descried no cause for discouragement in this feature. Rosa was a spoiled, wayward child, freakish and mischievous, to whom liberty was too dear to be resigned without a sigh. By and by, she would wear her shackles as ornaments, like all other sensible and loving women.

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Thus preaching to Alfred, when he confided to her the fluctuations of rapture and despair that were his lot in his intercourse with the sometimes radiant and inviting, sometimes forbidding sprite, whose wings he would fain bind with his embrace, and thus reassuring herself, when perplexed by a flash of Rosa's native perverseness, Mrs. Sutton was sanguine that all would come right in the end. What was to be would be, and despite the rapids in their wooing, Alfred would find in Rosa a faithful, affectionate little wife, while she could never hope to secure a better, more indulgent, and, in most respects, more eligible, partner than the Ayletts' well-to-do, well-looking neighbor.

But the couple who occupied the central foreground of our match-maker's thoughts were her niece, Mabel Aylott, and her own departed husband's namesake, Frederic Chilton. She dilated to herself and to Mabel with especial gusto upon the "wonderful leading," the inward whisper that had prompted her to propose a trip to the Rockbridge Alum Springs early in July. Neither she nor Mabel was ailing in the slightest degree, but she imagined they would be the brighter for a glimpse of the mountains and the livelier scenes of that pleasant Spa and whom should they meet there but the son of "dear Frederic's" old friend, Mr. Chilton, and of course they saw a great deal of him and the rest followed as Providence meant it should.

"The rest" expressed laconically the essence of numberless walks by moonlight and starlight; innumerable dances in the great ball-room, and the sweeter, more interesting confabulations that made the young people better acquainted in four weeks than would six years of conventional calls and small-talk. They stayed the month out, although "Aunt Rachel" had, upon their arrival, named a fortnight as the extreme limit of their sojourn. Frederic Chilton was their escort to Eastern Virginia, and remained a week at Ridgeley perhaps to recover from the fatigue of the journey. So soon as he returned to Philadelphia, in which place he had lately opened a law-office, he wrote to Mabel, declaring his affection for her, and suing for reciprocation. She granted him a gracious reply, and sanctioned by fond, sympathetic Aunt Rachel, in the absence of Mabel's brother and guardian, the correspondence was kept up briskly until Frederic's second visit in September. Ungenerous gossips, envious of her talents and influence, had occasionally sneered at Mrs. Sutton's appropriation of the credit of other alliances but this one was her handiwork beyond dispute hers and Providence's. She never forgot the partnership. She had carried her head more erect, and there was a brighter sparkle in her blue orbs since the evening Mabel had come blushing to her room, Fred's proposal in her hand to ask counsel and congratulations. Everybody saw through the discreet veil with which she flattered herself she concealed her exultation when others than the affianced twain were by and while nobody was so unkind as to expose the thinness of the pretence, she was given to understand in many and gratifying ways that her masterpiece was considered, in the Aylett circle, a suitable crown to the achievements that had preceded it. Mabel was popular and beloved, and her betrothed, in appearance and manner, in breeding and intelligence, justified Mrs. Sutton's pride in her niece's choice.

The old lady colored up, with the quick, vivid rose-tint of sudden and real pleasure that rarely outlives early girlhood, when the first respondent to the breakfast-bell proved to be her Frederic's god-son.

"You are always punctual! I wish you would teach the good habit to some other people," she said, after answering his cordial "good-morning."

"None of us deserve to be praised on that score, to-day," rejoined he, looking at his watch. "I did not awake until the dressing-bell rang. Our riding-party was out late last night. The extreme beauty of the evening beguiled us into going further than we intended, when we set out."

"Yes! you young folks are falling into shockingly irregular habits take unprecedented liberties with me and with Time!" shaking her head. "If Winston do not return soon, you will set my mild rule entirely at defiance."

Chilton laughed but was serious the next instant.

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"I expected confidently to meet him at this visit," he said, glancing at the door to guard against being overheard. "Should he not return to-day, ought I not, before leaving this to-morrow, to write to him, since he is legally his sister's guardian? It is, you and she tell me, a mere form, but one that should not be dispensed with any longer."

"That may be so. Winston is rigorous in requiring what is due to his position is, in some respects, a fearful formalist. But he will hardly oppose your wishes and Mabel's. He has her real happiness at heart, I believe, although he is, at times, an over-strict and exacting guardian perhaps to counterbalance my indulgent policy. He is unlike any other young man I know."

"His sister is very much attached to him."

"She loves him I was about to say, preposterously. Her implicit belief in and obedience to him have increased his self-confidence into a dogmatic assertion of infallibility. But" fearing she might create an unfortunate impression upon the listener's mind "Winston has grounds for his good opinion of himself. His character is unblemished his principles and aims are excellent. Only" relapsing hopelessly into the confidential strain in which most of the conference had been carried "between ourselves, my dear Frederic, I am never quite easy with these patterns to the rest of human-kind. I should even prefer a tiny vein of depravity to such very rectangular virtue."

"You are seldom ill at ease, if human perfection is all that renders you uncomfortable," responded Frederic. "There are not many in whose composition one cannot trace, not a tiny, but a broad vein of Adamic nature. What a delicious morning!" he added, sauntering to the window.

"And how sorry I am for those who did not get up in time to enjoy the freshness of its beauty!" cried a gay voice from the portico, and Mabel entered by the glass door behind him her hands loaded with roses, herself so beaming that her lover refrained with difficulty from kissing the saucy mouth then and there.

He did take both her hands, under pretext of relieving her of the flowers, and Aunt Rachel judiciously turned her back upon them, and began a diligent search in the beaufet for a vase.

"Do you expect us to believe that you have been more industrious than we? As if we did not know that you bribed the gardener to have a bouquet cut and laid ready for you at the back-door," Frederic charged upon the matutinal Flora. "Else, where are other evidences of your stroll, in dew-sprinkled draperies and wet feet? Confess that you ran down stairs just two minutes ago! Now that I come to think of it, I am positive that I heard you, while Mrs. Sutton was lamenting your drowsy proclivities after sunrise."

"I have been sitting in the summer-house for an hour reading!" protested Mabel, wondrously resigned to the detention, after a single, and not violent attempt at release. "If you had opened your shutters you must have seen me. But I knew I was secure from observation on that side of the house, at least until eight o'clock, about which time the glories of the new day usually penetrate very tightly-closed lids. As to dew there isn't a drop upon grass or blossom. And, by the same token, we shall have a storm within twenty-four hours."

"Is that true? That is a meteorological presage I never heard of until now."

"There is a moral in it, which I leave you to study out for yourself, while I arrange the roses I and not the gardener gathered."

In a whisper, she subjoined "Let me go! Some one is coming!" and in a second more was at the sideboard, hurrying the flowers into the antique china bowl, destined to grace the centre of the breakfast table.

"Good-morning, Miss Rosa. You are just in season to enjoy the society of your sister," Frederic said, lightly, pointing to the billows of mingled white and red, tossing under Mabel's fingers.

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The new-comer approached the sideboard, leaned languidly upon her elbow, and picked up a half-blown bud at random from the pile.

"They are scentless!" she complained.

"Because dewless!" replied Mabel, with profound gravity. "It is the tearful heart that gives out the sweetest fragrance."

"I have more faith in sunshine," interrupted Rosa, a tinge of contempt in her smile and accent. "Or to drop metaphors, at which I always bungle it is my belief that it is easy for happy people to be good. All this talk about the sweetness of crushed blossoms, throwing their fragrance from the wounded part, and the riven sandal-tree, and the blessed uses of adversity, is outrageous balderdash, according to my doctrine. A buried thing is but one degree better than a dead one. What it is the fashion of poets and sentimentalists to call perfume, is the odor of incipient decay."

"You are illustrating your position by means of my poor oriental pearl," remonstrated Mabel, playfully, wresting the hand that was beating the life and whiteness out of the floweret upon the marble top of the beaufet. "Take this hardy geant de batailles, instead. My bouquet must have a cluster of pearls for a heart."

"What a fierce crimson!" Frederic remarked upon the widely-opened rose Miss Tazewell received in place of the delicate bud. "That must be the 'hue angry, yet brave,' which, Mr. George Herbert asserts, 'bids the rash gazer wipe his eye.'"

"More poetical nonsense!" said Rosa, deliberately tearing the bold "geant" to pieces down to the bare stem, "unless he meant to be comic, and intimate that the gazer was so rash as to come too near the bush, and ran a thorn into the pupil."

No one answered, except by the indulgent smile that usually greeted her sallies, however absurd, among those accustomed to the spoiled child's vagaries.

Mabel was making some leisurely additions to her bouquet in the shape of ribbon grass and pendent ivy sprays, coaxing these with persuasive touches to trail over the edge and entwine the pedestal of the salver on which her bowl was elevated; her head set slightly on one side, her lips apart in a smile of enjoyment in her work and in herself. It was a picture the lover studied fondly one that hung forever thereafter in his gallery of mental portraits. Beyond a pair of fine gray eyes, the pliant grace of her figure and the buoyant carriage of youth, health, and a glad heart, Mabel's pretensions to beauty were comparatively few, said the world. Frederic Chilton had, nevertheless, fallen in love with her at sight, and considered her, now, the handsomest woman of his acquaintance. Her dress was a simple lawn a sheer white fabric, with bunches of purple grass bound up with yellow wheat, scattered over it; her hair was lustrous and abundant, and her face, besides being happy, was frank and intelligent, with wonderful mobility of expression. In temperament and sentiment; in capacity for, and in demonstration of affection, she suited Frederic to the finest fibre of his mind and heart. He, for one, did not carp at Aunt Rachel's declaration that they were intended to spend time and eternity together.

Still, Mabel Aylett was not a belle, and Rosa Tazewell was. Callow collegians and enterprising young merchants from the city; sunbrowned owners of spreading acres and hosts of laborers; students and practitioners of law and medicine, and an occasional theologian, had broken their hearts for perhaps a month at a time, for love of her, since she was a school-girl in short dresses. Yet there had been a date very far back in the acquaintanceship of each of these with the charmer, when he had marvelled at the infatuation which had blinded her previous adorers. She was "a neat little thing," with her round waist, her tiny hands and feet and roguish eye but there was nothing else remarkable about her features, and in coloring, the picture was too dark for his taste. Why, she might be mistaken for a creole! And each critic held fast to his expressed opinion until the roguish eyes met his directly and

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with meaning, and he found himself diving into the bright, shimmering wells, and drowning still ecstatically before he reached the bottom whence streamed the light of passionate feeling, striking upward through the surface. What her glances did not effect was done by her dazzling smile and musical voice.

As one of her victims swore, "It was a dearer delight to be rejected by her than to be accepted by a dozen other girls she did the thing up so handsomely! And yet, do you know, sir, I could have shot myself for a barbarous brute when I saw the pitying tears standing upon her lashes, and heard the tremor in her sweet tones, as she begged me to forgive her for not loving me!"

Those she had once captivated never quite rid themselves of the glamour of her arts; remained her trusty squires, ready to serve, or to defend her always afterward.

Aunt Rachel, intent, during the short pause, upon the movements of the servant who was setting the smoking breakfast upon the table, glanced around when all was properly arranged, to summon the two to their places but something in Rosa's attitude and countenance held her momentarily speechless. Mabel still bent over her roses, in smiling interest, and Frederic Chilton was watching her but not as the third person of the group about the beaufet watched them both between her half-closed lids, her black brows close together, and the glittering teeth visible under the curling upper lip.

"She looked like a panther lying in wait for her prey!" Mrs. Sutton said to her niece, many months later, in attempting to describe the scene. "Or like a bright-eyed snake coiled for a spring. The sight of her sent shivers all down my spine."

Her interruption of the tableau sounded oddly abrupt to ears used to her pleasant accents.

"Come, young people! how long are you going to keep me waiting? Breakfast is cooling fast!"

"I beg your pardon, Auntie! I did not notice that it had been brought in," apologized Mabel, drawing back, that Frederic might lift the loaded salver carefully to its place upon the board.

As they were closing about this, they were joined by Messrs. Barksdale and Branch, Miss Tabb delaying her appearance until the repast was nearly over, and meeting the raillery of the party upon her late rising with the sweet, soft smile her cousin-betrothed admired as the indication of unadulterated amiability. The breakfast-hour, always pleasant, was to-day particularly merry. Rosa led off in the laughing debates, the play of repartee, friendly jest, and anecdote that incited all to mirth and speech and tempted them to linger around the table long after the business of the meal was concluded.

"This is the perfection of country life!" said Frederic Chilton, when, at last, there was a movement to end the sitting. "But it spoils one fearfully for the everyday practicalities of the city a Northern city, especially."

"Better stay where you are, then, instead of deserting our ranks to-morrow," suggested Rosa, gliding by his side out upon the long portico at the end of the house. "What does your nature crave that Ridgeley cannot supply?"

"Work, and a career!"

"You still feel the need of these?" significantly.

"Otherwise I were no man!"

"You are right!"

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Her disdainful eyes wandered to the farther end of the portico, where Alfred Branch, in his natty suit of white grasscloth, plucked at his ebon whiskers with untanned fingers, and talked society nothings with the ever-complaisant Imogene.

"Come what may, you, Mr. Chilton, have occupation for thought and hands; are not tied down to a detestable routine of vapid pleasures and common-place people!"

"You are every independent woman and man is as free in this respect as myself, Miss Rosa. None need be a slave to conventionality unless he choose."

She made a gesture that was like twisting a chain upon her wrist.

"You know you are not sincere in saying that. I wondered, moreover, when you were railing at the practicalities of city life, if you were learning, like the rest of the men, to accommodate your talk to your audience. Where is the use of your trying to disguise the truth that all women are slaves? I used to envy you when I was in Philadelphia, last winter, when you pleaded business engagements as an excuse for declining invitations to dinner-parties and balls. Now, if a woman defies popular decrees by refusing to exhibit herself for the popular entertainment, the horrible whisper is forthwith circulated that she has been 'disappointed,' and is hiding her green wound in her sewing-room or oratory. 'Disappointed,' forsooth! That is what they say of every girl who is not married to somebody by the time she is twenty-five. It matters not whether she cares for him or not. Having but one object in existence, there can be but one species of disappointment. Marry she must, or be PITIED!" with a stinging emphasis on the last word.

Tom Barksdale and Mabel were pacing the portico from end to end, chatting with the cheerful familiarity of old friends. Catching some of thin energetic sentence, Mabel looked over her shoulder.

"Who of us is fated to be pitied, did you say, Rosa dear?"

"Never yourself!" was the curt reply. "Rest content with that assurance."

Her restless fingers began to gather the red leaves that already variegated the foliage of the creeper shading the porch. Strangely indisposed to answer her animadversions upon the world's judgment of her sex, or to acknowledge the implied compliment to his betrothed, Frederic watched the lithe, dark hands, as they overflowed with the vermilion trophies of autumn. The September sunshine sifted through the vines in patches upon the floor; the low laughter and blended voices of the four talkers; the echo of Tom's manly tread, and Mabel's lighter footfall, were all jocund music, befitting the brightness of the day and world. What was the spell by which this pettish girl who stood by him, her luminous eyes fixed in sardonic melancholy upon the promenaders, while she rubbed the dying leaves into atoms between her palms had stamped scenes and sounds with immortality, yet thrilled him with the indefinite sense of unreality and dread one feels in scanning the lineaments of the beloved dead? Had her nervous folly infected him? What absurd phantasy was hers, and what his concern in her whims?

A stifled cry from Mabel aroused him to active attention. A gentlemen had stepped from the house upon the piazza, and after bending to kiss her, was shaking hands with her companions.

"The Grand Mogul!" muttered Rosa, with a comic grimace, and not offering to stir in the direction of the stranger.

In another moment Mabel had led him up to her lover, and introduced, in her pretty, ladylike way, and bravely enough, considering her blushes, "Mr. Chilton" to "my brother, Mr. Winston Aylett."

CHAPTER II. AN EXCHANGE OF CONFIDENCES.

"And so you know nothing of this gentleman beyond what he has told you of his character and antecedents?"

Aunt Rachel had knocked at the door of her nephew's study after dinner, on the day of his return, and asked for an interview.

"Although I know you must be very busy with your accounts, and so forth, having been away from the plantation for so long," she said, deprecatingly, yet accepting the invitation to enter.

Mr. Aylett's eye left hers as he replied that he was quite at liberty to listen to whatever she had to say, but his manner was entirely his own polished and cool.

Family tradition had it that he was naturally a man of strong passions and violent temper, but since his college days, he had never, as far as living mortal could testify, lifted the impassive mask he wore, at the bidding of anger, surprise, or alarm. He ran all his tilts and he was not a non-combatant by any means with locked visor. In person, he was commanding in stature; his features were symmetrical; his bearing high-bred. His conversation was sensible, but never brilliant or animated. In his own household he was calmly despotic; in his county, respected and unpopular one of whom nobody dared speak ill, yet whom nobody had reason to love. There was a single person who believed herself to be an exception to this rule. This was his sister Mabel. Some said she worshipped him in default of any other object upon which she could expend the wealth of her young, ardent heart; others, that his strong will enforced her homage. The fact of her devotion was undeniable, and upon his appreciation of this Aunt Rachel built her expectations of a favorable hearing when she volunteered to prepare the way for Mr. Chilton's formal application for the hand of her nephew's ward. Between herself and Winston there existed little real liking and less affinity. She was useful to him, and his tolerance of her society was courteous, but she understood perfectly that he secretly despised many of her views and actions, as, indeed, he did those of most women. Her present mission was undertaken for the love she bore Mabel and her sister. It was not kind to send the girl to tell her own story. It was neither kind nor fair to subject their guest to the ordeal of an unheralded disclosure of his sentiments and aspirations, with the puissant lord of Ridgeley as sole auditor.

"Fred would never get over the first impression of your brother's chilling reserve," said the self-appointed envoy to Mabel, when she insisted that her affianced would plead his cause more eloquently than a third person could. "For, you, must confess, my love, that Winston, although in most respects a model to other young men, is unapproachable by strangers."

As she said "your accounts and so forth," she looked at the table from which Mr. Aylett had arisen to set a chair for her. There was a pile of account-books at the side against the wall, but they were shut, and over heaped by pamphlets and newspapers; while before the owner's seat lay an open portfolio, an unfinished letter within it. Winston wiped his pen with deliberation, closed the portfolio, snapped to the spring-top of his inkstand, and finally wheeled his office chair away from the desk to face his visitor.

"Is it upon business that you wish to speak to me?"

He always disdained circumlocution, prided himself upon the directness and simplicity of his address. This acted now as a dissuasive to the sentimental address Mrs. Sutton had meditated as a means of winning the flinty walls behind which his social affections and sympathies were supposed to be intrenched. Had her mission been in behalf of any other cause, she would have drawn off her forces upon some pretext, and effected an ignominious retreat. Nerved by the thought of Mabel's bashfulness and solicitude, and Frederic's strangerhood, she stood to her guns.

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Winston heard her story, from the not very coherent preamble, to the warm and unqualified endorsement of Frederic Chilton's credentials, and her moved mention of the mutual attachment of the youthful pair, and never changed his attitude, or manifested any inclination to stay the narration by question or comment. When she ceased speaking, his physiognomy denoted no emotion whatever. Yet, Mabel was his nearest living relative. She had been bequeathed to his care, when only ten years old, by the will of their dying father, and grown up under his eye as his child, rather than a sister. And he was hearing, for the first time, of her desire to quit the home they had shared together from her birth, for the protection and companionship of another. Mrs. Sutton thought herself pretty well versed in "Winston's ways," but she had expected to detect a shade of softness in the cold, never-bright eyes and anticipated another rejoinder than the sentence that stands at the head of this chapter.

"And so you know nothing of this gentleman beyond what he has told you of his character and antecedents?" he said the slender white fingers, his aunt fancied, looked cruel even in their idleness, lightly linked together while his elbows rested upon the arms of his chair.

"My dear Winston! what a question! Haven't I told you that he is my husband's namesake and godson! I was at his father's house a score of times, at least, in dear Frederic's life-time. It was a charming place, and I never saw a more lovely family. I recollect this boy perfectly, as was very natural, seeing that his name was such a compliment to my husband. He was a fine, manly little fellow, and the eldest son. The christening-feast was postponed, for some reason I do not now remember, until he was two years old. It was a very fine affair. The company was composed of the very elite of that part of Maryland, and the Bishop himself baptized the two babies Frederic, and a younger sister. I know all about him, you see, instead of nothing!"

"What was the date of this festival?" asked Winston's unwavering voice.

"Let me see! We had been married seven years that fall. It must have been in the winter of 18."

"Twenty-three years ago!" said Winston, yet more quietly. "Doubtless, your intimacy with this estimable and distinguished family continued up to the time of your husband's death?"

"It did."

"And afterward?"

Mrs. Sutton's color waned, and her voice sank, as the inquisition proceeded. "Dear Frederic's" death was not the subject she would have chosen of her free will to discuss with this man of steel and ice.

"I never visited them again. I could not "

If she hoped to retain a semblance of composure, she must shift her ground.

"I returned to my father's house, which was, as you know, more remote from the borders of Maryland "

"You kept up a correspondence, perhaps?" Winston interposed, overlooking her agitation as irrelevant to the matter under investigation.

"No! For many months I wrote no letters at all, and Mr. Chilton was never a punctual correspondent. The best of friends are apt to be dilatory in such respects, as they advance in life."

"I gather, then, from what you have ADMITTED" there was no actual stress upon the word, but it stood obnoxiously apart from the remainder of the sentence, to Mrs. Sutton's auriculars "from what you have admitted, that for twenty years you have lost sight of this gentleman and his relatives, and that you might never have

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remembered the circumstance of their existence, had he not introduced himself to you at the Springs this summer."

"You are mistaken, there!" corrected the widow, eagerly. "Rosa Tazewell introduced him to Mabel at the first 'hop' she Mabel attended there. He is very unassuming. He would never have forced himself upon my notice. I was struck by his appearance and resemblance to his father, and inquired of Mabel who he was. The recognition followed as a matter of course."

"He was an acquaintance of Miss Tazewell did you say?"

"Yes she knew him very well when she was visiting in Philadelphia last winter."

"And proffered the introduction to Mabel?" the faintest imaginable glimmer of sarcastic amusement in his eyes, but none in his accent.

"He requested it, I believe."

"That is more probable. Excuse my frankness, aunt, when I say that it would have been more in consonance with the laws controlling the conduct of really thoroughbred people, had your paragon I use the term in no offensive sense applied to me, instead of to you, for permission to pay his addresses to my ward. I am willing to ascribe this blunder, however, to ignorance of the code of polite society, and not to intentional disrespect, since you represent the gentleman as amiable and well-meaning. I am, furthermore, willing to examine his certificates of character and means, with a view to determining what are his recommendations to my sister's preference, over and above ball-room graces and the fact that he is Mr. Sutton's namesake, and whether it will be safe and advisable to grant my consent to their marriage. Whatever is for Mabel's real welfare shall be done, while I cannot but wish that her choice had fallen upon some one nearer home. The prosecution of inquiries as to the reputation of one whose residence is so distant, is a difficult and delicate task."

"If you will only talk to him for ten minutes he will remove your scruples, satisfy you that all is as it should be," asserted Mrs. Sutton, more confidently to him than herself.

"I trust it will be as you say but credulity is not my besetting sin. I am ready to see the gentleman at any hour you and he may see fit to appoint."

"I will send MR. CHILTON to you at once, then." Mrs. Sutton collected the scattering remnants of hope and resolution, that she might deal a parting shot.

"Winston is an AWFUL trial to my temper, although he never loses his own," she was wont to soliloquize, in the lack of a confidante to whom she could expatiate upon his eccentricities and general untowardness. His marked avoidance of Frederic's name in this conference savored to her of insulting meaning. She had rather he had coupled it with opprobrious epithets whenever he referred to him, than spoken of him as "this" or "that gentleman." If he took this high and chilly tone, with Mabel's wooer, there was no telling what might be the result of the affair.

"Don't mind him if he is stiff and uncompromising for a while," she enjoined upon Frederic, in apprising him of the seignior's readiness to grant him audience, "It is only his way, and he is Mabel's brother."

"I will bear the latter hint in mind," rejoined the young man, with the gay, affectionate smile he often bestowed upon her. "I don't believe he can awe me into resignation of my purpose, or provoke me into dislike of the rest of the family."

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Mabel was in her aunt's room, plying her with queries, hard to be evaded, touching the tenor and consequences of her recent negotiations, when a servant brought a message from her brother. She was wanted in the study. The girl turned very white, as she prepared to obey, without an idea of delay or of refusal.

"O Auntie! what if he should order me to give Frederic up!" she ejaculated, pausing at the door, in an agony of trepidation. "I never disobeyed him in my life."

"He will not do that, dear, never fear! He can find no pretext for such summary proceedings. And should he oppose your wishes, be firm of purpose, and do not forsake your affianced husband," advised the old lady, solemnly. "There is a duty which takes precedence, in the sight of Heaven and man, of that you owe your brother. Remember this, and take courage."

Mabel's roses returned in profusion, when, upon entering the arbiter's dread presence, she saw Frederic Chilton, standing on the opposite side of the table from that at which sat her brother at his ease, his white fingers still idly interlaced, his pale patrician face emotionless as that of the bust of Apollo upon the top of the bookcase behind him. It was Frederic who led her to a chair, when she stopped, trembling midway in the apartment, and his touch upon her arm inspirited her to raise her regards to Winston's countenance at the sound of his voice.

"I have sent for you, Mabel, that I may repeat in you hearing the reply I have returned to Mr. Chilton's application for my sanction to your engagement I should say, perhaps, to your reciprocal attachment. The betrothal of a minor without the consent, positive or implied, of her parent or guardian is, as I have just explained to Mr. Chilton, but an empty name in this State. I have promised, then, not to oppose your marriage, provided the inquiries I shall institute concerning Mr. Chilton's previous life, his character, and his ability to maintain you in comfort, are answered satisfactorily. He will understand and excuse my pertinacity upon this point when he reflects upon the value of the stake involved in this transaction."

In all their intercourse, Frederic had no more gracious notice from Mabel's brother than this semi-apology, delivered with stately condescension, and a courtly bow in his direction.

It sounded very grand to Mabel, whose fears of opposition or severity from her Mentor had shaken courage and nerves into pitiable distress. Frederic could desire nothing more affable than Winston's smile; no more abundant encouragement than was afforded by his voluntary pledge. Had not the thought savored of disloyalty to her lover, she would have confessed herself disappointed that his reply did not effervesce with gratitude, that his deportment was distant, his tone constrained.

"I appreciate the last-named consideration, Mr. Aylett, I believe, thoroughly, as you do. I have already told you that I invite, not shirk, the investigation you propose. I now repeat my offer of whatever facility is at my command for carrying this on. No honorable man could do less. Unless I mistake, you wish now to see your sister alone."

He bent his head slightly, and without other and especial salutation to his betrothed, withdrew.

Odd, white dints came and went in Winston's nostrils the one and unerring facial sign of displeasure he ever exhibited, if we except a certain hardening of eye and contour that chiselled his lineaments into a yet closer resemblance to marble.

"He is very sensitive and proud, I know," faltered Mabel, hastily marking these, and understanding what they portended.

"You need not like him the less on that account, always provided that the supports of his pride are legitimate and substantial," answered her brother, carelessly transferring to his tablets several names from a sheet of paper upon

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the table the addresses of persons to whom Frederic had referred him for confirmation of his statements regarding his social and professional standing.

"I hope, for your sake, Mabel," he pursued pocketing the memoranda, "that this affair may be speedily and agreeably adjusted; while I cannot deny that I deprecate the unseemly haste with which Mrs. Sutton and her ally have urged it on, in my absence. Had they intended to court suspicion, they could not have done it more effectually. You could not have had a more injudicious chaperone to the Springs."

"Indeed, brother, she was not to blame," began the generous girl, forgetting her embarrassment in zealous defence of the aunt she loved. "It was not she who presented me to Mr. Chilton, and she has never attempted to bias my decision in any manner."

"I have heard the history in detail." Had his breeding been less fine, he would have yawned in her face. "I know that you are indebted for Mr. Chilton's acquaintanceship to Miss Tazewell's generosity. But in strict justice, Mrs. Sutton should be held responsible for whatever unhappiness may arise from the intimacy. You were left by myself in her charge."

"I do not believe it will end unhappily," Mabel was moved to reply, with spirit that became her better than the shyness she had heretofore displayed, or the submissive demeanor usual with her in tête-à-têtes with her guardian.

He smiled in calm superiority.

"I have expressed my hope to that effect. Of expectations it will be time enough to speak when I am better informed upon divers points. I am not one to take much for granted, am less sanguine than my romantic aunt, or even than my more practical sister. Assuming, however, that all is as you would have it, your wish would be, I suppose, for an early marriage?"

"There has been little said about that," responded Mabel, reddening then rallying to add smilingly "such an arrangement would have involved the taking for granted a good many things your consent among them."

Winston passed over the addenda.

"But that little, especially when uttered by Mr. Chilton, trenched upon the inexpediency of long engagements did it not?"

Mabel was mute, her eyes downcast.

"I agree with him there, at any rate. You are nineteen years of age; he twenty-five. Your property is unincumbered, and can be transferred to your keeping at very short notice. Mr. Chilton represents that his income from his patrimonial estate, eked out by professional gains, is sufficient to warrant him in marrying forthwith. I shall see that no time is lost in making the inquiries upon which depends the progress of the negotiation. Business calls me North in a week or ten days. I shall stop a day in Philadelphia, and settle your affair."

The frightfully business-like manner of disposing of her happiness appalled the listener into silence. The loss of Frederic; the destruction of her love-dream; the weary years of lonely wretchedness that would follow the bereavement, were to him only unimportant incidentals to her "affair;" weighed in the scale of his impartial judgment no more than would unconsidered dust. For the first time in the life to which he had been the guiding-star, she ventured to wonder if the unswerving rectitude that had elevated him above the level of other men, in her esteem and affection, were so glorious a thing after all; if a tempering, not of human frailty, but of charity for the shortcomings, sympathy for the needs, of ordinary mortals, would not subdue the effulgence of his

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talents and virtues into mild lustre, more tolerable to the optics of fallible beholders

Unsuspecting, with all his astuteness, of her sacrilegious doubts, Winston proceeded:

"In the event of your marriage, you would desire, no doubt, that Mrs. Sutton should take up her abode with you? You would find her useful in many ways, and she would get on amicably with her husband's godson."

"I do not think she expects to go with me," answered Mabel, staggered by his coolly confident air. "I certainly have never entertained the idea. I imagined that she would remain with you, while you needed her services."

"That will not be long. I shall be married on the 10th of October."

"Married! brother!" starting up in amazement. "You are not in earnest!"

"I should not jest upon such a theme," replied Winston, in grave rebuke. "My plans are definitely laid. It is not my purpose to keep them secret a day longer. I meant to communicate them to yourself and Mrs. Sutton this afternoon, but yours claimed precedence."

Mabel sat down again, totally confounded, and struggling hard with her tears. The thought of her brother's marriage was not in itself disagreeable. She had often lamented his insensibility to the attractions of such women as she fancied would add to his happiness, and grace the high place to which his wife would be exalted. She never liked to hear him called invulnerable; repelled the hypothesis of his incurable bachelorhood as derogatory to his heart and head. This unlooked-for intelligence, had it reached her in a different way, would have delighted as much as it astonished her. The fear lest her consent to wed Frederic and leave Ridgeley might be the occasion of discomfort and sadness to her forsaken brother had shadowed all her visions of future bliss. She ought to have hailed with unmixed satisfaction the certainty that he would not miss her sisterly ministrations, or feel the need of her companionship in that of one nearer and dearer than was his child-ward. She had striven not to resent even in her own mind, his cavalier treatment of her lover; had hearkened respectfully and without demur to his unsympathizing calculations of what was possible and what feasible in the project of her union with the man of her choice. For how could he know anything of the palpitations, the anxieties, the raptures of love, when he was a stranger to the touch of a kindred emotion? He meant well; he had her welfare in view; unfortunate as was his style of discussing the means for insuring this for he loved her dearly, dearly!

She must never question this, although he had dealt the comfortable persuasion a cruel blow; wounded her in a vital part by withholding from her the circumstance of his attachment and betrothal until the near approach of the wedding day rendered continued secrecy inexpedient. No softening memory of his affianced had inclined him to listen with kindly warmth to her timid avowals, or Frederic's manly protestations of their mutual attachment. He recognized no analogy in the two cases; stood aloof from them in the flush of his successful love, as if he had never known the pregnant meaning of the word. Smarting under the sense of injury to pride and affection, her language, when she could trust her voice, was a protest that, in Winston's judgment, ill beseemed her age and station.

"Why did you not tell me of this earlier, brother? It was unjust and unkind to keep me in the dark until now."

"You forget yourself, Mabel. I am not under obligation to account to you for my actions."

He said it composedly, as if stating a truth wholly disconnected with feeling on his part or on hers.

"I have given you the information to which you refer, in season for you to make ample preparation for my wife's reception. And, mark me, she must see no sulkiness, no airs of strangeness or intolerance, because I have managed a matter that concerns me chiefly, as seemed to me best. Say the same to Mrs. Sutton, if you please; also

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that I will submit to no dictation, and ask no advice."

Mabel's anger seldom outlived its utterance. The hot sparkle in her eye was quenched by moisture, as she laid her hand caressingly upon her brother's.

"Winston! you cannot suppose that we could be wanting in cordiality to any one whom you love, much less to your wife. Let her come when she may, she will be heartily welcomed by us both. But this has fallen suddenly upon me, and I am a little out of sorts to-day, I believe excited and nervous and, O, my darling! my oldest and best of friends! I hope your love will bring to you the happiness you deserve."

The tears had their course, at last, bathing the hand she bowed to kiss. The simple ardor of the outbreak would have affected many men to a show of responsive weakness. Even Winston Aylett's physiognomy was more human and less statuesque, as he patted her head, and bade her be composed.

"If you persist in enacting Niobe, I shall believe that you are chagrined at the prospect of having the sister you have repeatedly besought me to give you," he said, playfully for him. "You have not asked me her name, and where she lives. What has become of your curiosity? I never knew it to be quiescent before."

"I thought you would tell me whatever it was best for me to know," replied Mabel, drying her eyes.

If she had said that she was too well-trained to assail him with interrogatories he had not invited, it would have been nearer the mark.

"There is nothing relating to her which I desire to conceal," he rejoined, with some stiffness, "or she would never have become my promised wife. She is a Miss Dorrance, the daughter of a widow residing in the vicinity of Boston, Massachusetts. I met her first at Trenton Falls, where a happy accident brought me into association with her party. I travelled with them to the Lakes and among the White Mountains, and, while in Boston, visited her daily. We were betrothed a week ago, and having, as I have observed, an aversion to protracted engagements, I prevailed upon her to appoint the tenth of next month as our marriage day. There you have the story in brief. I have not Mrs. Sutton's talents as a raconteur, nor her disposition to turn hearts inside out for the edification of her auditors."

"Does she Miss Dorrance look like anybody I know?" asked Mabel, hesitating to declare herself dissatisfied with the skeleton love-tale, yet uncertain how to learn more.

"A roundabout way of asking if she is passable in appearance," Winston said, with his smile of conscious superiority. "Judge for yourself!" taking from his pocket a miniature.

"How beautiful! What a very handsome woman?" the sister exclaimed at sight of the pictured face.

"You are correct. She is, moreover, a thorough lady, and highly-educated. Ridgeley will have a queenly mistress. The likeness is considered faithful, but it does not do her justice."

He took it from Mabel, and they scanned it together; she resting against his shoulder. She felt his chest heave twice; heard him swallow spasmodically in the suppression of some mighty emotion, and the palpable effort drew her very near to him. She never doubted from that moment, what she had more cause in after days to believe, that he loved the woman he had won with a fervor of passion that seemed foreign to his temperament as the evidence of it was to his conduct.

The September sun was near the horizon, and between the bowed shutters one slender, gilded arrow shot athwart the portrait, producing a marvellous and sinister change in its expression. The large, limpid eyes became shallow

and cunning; the smile lurking about the mouth was the more treacherous and deadly for its sweetness; while the burnished coils of hair brushed away from the temples had the opaline tints and sinuous roll of a serpent.

Mabel shrank back before the horror of the absurd imagination.

Winston raised the picture to his lips.

"My peerless one!"

CHAPTER III. UNWHOLESOME VAPORS.

"DORRANCE!" repeated Frederic, after his betrothed, when she rehearsed to him in their moonlight promenade upon the piazza the leading incidents of her brother's wooing. "She lives near Boston, you say, and her mother is a widow?"

"Yes. What have you ever heard about her?"

"Nothing whatever. I was startled by the name but very foolishly! I once knew a family of Dorrances New Yorkers but the father, a retired naval officer, was alive, and all the daughters were married. The youngest of them would be, by this time, much older than you judge the original of the miniature to be."

"She is not more than twenty-two, at the most," Mabel was sure.

Frederic's hurried articulation and abstracted manner excited her curiosity, and unrestrained by Winston's curb, it was not "quiescent." The thought was spoken so soon as it was formed.

"There was something unpleasant in your intercourse with them, then? or something objectionable in the people themselves? Could they have been relatives of this widow and her daughter? The name is not a common one to my ears."

"Nor to mine; yet we have no proof to sustain your supposition. I should be very sorry "

He stopped.

Mabel studied his perturbed countenance with augmented uneasiness.

"Was not the family respectable?"

"Perfectly, my shrewd little catechist!" seeming to shake off an uncomfortable incubus, as he laughed down at her serious face. "They vaunted themselves upon the antiquity of their line, and were more liberal in allusions to departed grandeur than was quite well-bred. When I knew them they were not wealthy, or in what they would have called 'society.' Indeed, the mother kept a private boarding-house near the law-school I attended. There were several sons very decent, enterprising fellows. But one lived at home, and a daughter, the wife of a lieutenant in the navy, whom I never saw. I boarded with them for six months, or thereabout."

"You never saw the daughter! How was that?"

"I must have expressed myself awkwardly if I conveyed any such idea. I did not meet the seafaring husband who was off upon a long cruise. The wife I met constantly knew very well. You need not look at me so intently, love, as if you feared that some dark mystery lurked behind this matter-of-fact recital. If I do not tell you every event

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of my former life, it is not because it was vile. I could not sustain the light of your innocent eyes if I had ever been guilty of aught dishonorable or criminal. But even the follies and mistakes of a young man's early career are not fit themes for your ears. And I was no wiser, no more wary, than other youths of the same age; was apt to believe that fair which was only specious, and that I might play, uninjured, with edged tools. Nor had I seen you then, my treasure my snow-drop of purity! Mabel! do you know how solemn a thing it is to be loved and trusted by a man, as I love and confide in you? It terrifies me when I think of the absoluteness of my dependence upon your fidelity of how rich I am in having you how poor, wretched, and miserable I should be without you. I shall not draw a free breath until you are mine beyond the chance of recall."

"Nobody else wants me!" breathed Mabel in his ear, nestling within the arm that enfolded and held her tightly in the corner of the piazza shaded by the creeper. "The danger of losing me is not imminent to-night, at all events," she resumed, presently, with a touch of the sportiveness that lent her manner an airy charm in lighter talk than that which had engrossed her for the past hour.

The evening was warm and still to sultriness, and the moonlight, filtered into pensive pallor through a low-lying haze, yet sufficed to show how confidingly Imogene leaned upon her attendant in sauntering down the long main alley of the garden. Rosa was at the piano in the parlor, singing to the enamored Alfred. Mrs. Sutton had withdrawn to her own room to ruminare upon the astounding disclosure of her nephew's engagement, while Winston bent over his study-table busy with the interrupted letter his aunt had seen in his portfolio.

"There is no one here who has the leisure or the disposition to contest your rights, you perceive," said Mabel, running through a laughing summary of their companions' occupations.

"Betrothals are epidemic in this household and neighborhood," Winston was writing. "There are no fewer than three pairs of turtles cooing down stairs as I pen this to you, my bird of paradise. The case that next to mine to ours commands my interest is that of my sister. I came home to learn that the little Mabel I used to hold on my knee had entered into an engagement conditional upon my sanction with that traditional tricky personage, a Philadelphia lawyer Mr. Frederic Chilton, at the door of whose manifold perfections, as set forth by my loquacious aunt, you may lay the blame of this delayed epistle. I know nothing of this aspirant to the dignity of brotherhood with myself, saving the facts that he is tolerably good looking, claims to be the scion of an old Maryland family, and that self-conceit is apparently his predominant quality."

"What is that?" asked Frederic, halting before the windows, of the drawing-room, as a wild, sorrowful strain, like the wail of a breaking heart, arose upon the waveless air.

Rosa was a vocalist of note in her circle, and she had never rendered anything with more effect than she did the song to which even the preoccupied strollers among the garden borders stayed their steps to listen. Through the open casement Mabel and her lover could see the face of the musician, slightly uplifted toward the moonlight; her eyes, dark and dreamy, as under the cloud of many years of weary waiting and final hopelessness. Her articulation was always pure, but the passionate emphasis of every word constrained the breathless attention of her audience to the close of the simple lay:

"Thy name was once the magic spell
By which my thoughts were bound;
And burning dreams of light and love
Were wakened by the sound.
My heart beat quick when stranger-tongues,
With idle praise or blame,
Awoke its deepest thrill of joy
To tremble at thy name.

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"Long years, long years have passed away,
And altered is thy brow;
And we who met so fondly once
Must meet as strangers now.
The friends of yore come 'round me still,
But talk no more of thee,
'Twere idle e'en to wish it now,
For what art thou to me?"

"Yet still thy name thy blessed name!
My lonely bosom fills,
Like an echo that hath lost itself
Among the distant hills,
That still, with melancholy note,
Keeps faintly lingering on,
When the joyous sound that woke it first
Is gone forever gone!"

"A neat conceit that last verse, and the music is a fair imitation of a dying bugle—echo!" said Winston Aylett to himself, resuming the writing he had suspended for a minute. "That girl should take to the stage. If one did not know better, her eyes and singing together would delude him into the idea that she had a heart. Honest Alfred evidently believes that she has, and that the patient labor of love will win it for himself. Bah!"

Frederic and Mabel retired noiselessly from their post of observation, as "honest Alfred" made a motion to take in his the hand lying prone and passive upon the finger—board. They exchanged a smile, significant and tender, in withdrawing.

"We understand the signs of the times," whispered Frederic, at the upper turn of their promenade. "Heaven bless all true lovers under the sun!"

"Don't!" said Rosa, vehemently, snatching away her hand from her suitor's hold. "Leave me alone! If you touch me again I shall scream! I think you were made up without nerves, either in the heart or in the brain if you have any!"

Before the aghast Alfred rallied from the recoil occasioned by her gesture and words, her feet were pattering over the oaken hall and staircase in rapid retreat to her chamber.

"You are really happy, then?" queried Mabel. "Quite content?"

"Did I not tell you awhile ago that I was not satisfied?" returned Chilton. "Two months since I should, in anticipation of this hour, have declared that it would be fraught with unalloyed rapture. I was happier yesterday than I am to—day. It is not merely that we must part to—morrow, or that your brother's precautionary measures and disapproval of what has passed between us have acted like a shower—bath to the fervor of my newly born hopes. I am willing that my life should be subjected to the utmost rigor of his researches, and another month, at farthest, will reunite us. Nor do I believe in presentiments. I am more inclined to attribute the uneasiness that has hovered over me all the day to physical causes. We will call it a mild splenetic case, induced by the sultry weather, and the very slow on coming of the storm presaged by your dewless roses."

He laughed naturally and pleasantly. Having confessed to what he regarded as a ridiculous succumbing of his buoyant spirit to atmospheric influences, he shook off the nightmare as if it had never sat upon him.

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Mabel was grave still.

"There is something weirdly oppressive in the night," she said, in a low, awed tone. "But the burden you describe has weighed me down since morning. While Rosa was singing, I felt suddenly removed from you by a horrid gulf. What if all this should be the preparation to us for some impending danger?"

"Sweet! these are unwholesome vapors of the imagination. Nothing can be a disaster that leaves us to one another," was the text of Frederic's fond soothing; and by the time Mrs. Sutton descended from her chamber of meditation, to remind Imogene that the seeds of ague and fever lurked in the river-fogs, the couple from the piazza came into the lighted parlor, all smiles and animation, wondering, jocosely, what had become of the recent occupants of the apartment.

Neither reappeared until breakfast-time next morning. Rosa was like freshly-poured champagne, in sweet and sparkle. Alfred, rueful and limp, as if the dripping clouds that verified Mabel's prediction had soaked him all night. He was dry and comfortable to carry out the figure within twenty minutes after his beloved fluttered, like a tame canary, into the chair next his own in five more, was more truly her slave, living in, and upon her smiles adoring her very caprices as he had never admired another woman's virtues than he had been prior to the brief, but tempestuous scene over night. She was the life of the party assembled in the dining-room. Imogene had caught cold, walking bareheaded in the evening air, and Tom condoled with her upon her influenza and sore-throat too sincerely to do justice to the rest of his friends and his breakfast. Mr. Aylett was never talkative, and his unvarying, soulless politeness to all produced the conserving effect upon chill and low spirits that the atmosphere of a refrigerator does upon whatever is placed within it. Mrs. Sutton's motherly heart was yearning pityingly over the lovers who were soon to be sundered, while Mabel's essay at cheerful equanimity imposed upon nobody's credulity. Frederic comported himself like a man the more courageously because the host's cold eye was upon him, and he surmised that sighs and sentimentality would meet very scant indulgence in that quarter. Moreover, he was not so unreasonable as to descry insupportable hardships in this parting. By agreement with Mr. Aylett and his sister, he was, if all went prosperously, to revisit Ridgeley at the end of six weeks, when his design was to entreat his betrothed to name the wedding day. The prospect might well support him under the present trial. He bore Rosa's badinage gallantly, tossing back sprightly and telling rejoinders that called forth the smiling applause of the auditors, and commanded her respectful recognition of him as a foeman worthy of her steel.

"Nine o'clock," said Winston, at length, consulting his watch, and pushing back his chair. "The carriage will be at the door in fifteen minutes, Mr. Chilton. The road is heavy this morning, and the stage passes the village at ten."

"I shall be ready," responded Frederic. "I am sorry your carriage and coachman must be exposed to the rain."

"That is nothing. They are used to it. I never alter my plan of travel on account of the weather, how ever severe the storm. This warm rain can hurt nobody."

"It is pouring hard," remarked Mrs. Button, solicitously. "And that stage is wretchedly uncomfortable in the best weather. I wish you could be persuaded to stay with us until it clears off, Mr. Chilton, and" making a bold push "I am sure my nephew concurs in my desire."

"Mr. Chilton should require no verbal assurance of my hospitable feelings toward him and my other guests," said Mr. Aylett, frigidly smooth as ice-cream. "If I forbear to press him to prolong his stay, it is in reflection of the golden law laid down for the direction of hosts 'Welcome the coming, speed the parting guest.'"

"You are both very kind, but I must go," Frederic replied, concisely and civilly, following Mabel into the parlor, whither the other visitors were fabled to have repaired. As he had guessed, his betrothed was the only person there; the quartette having dispersed with kindly tact, for which he gave them due credit.

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"Don't think hardly of me, dear," he began, seating himself beside her on the sofa.

"Allow me to offer you a few of the finest cigars I have enjoyed for many years," said Mr. Aylett, entering in season to check Frederic's movement to encircle Mabel's drooping form with his arm. "You smoke, I believe? You may have an opportunity of indulging in this solace in an empty stage. At least, there is little probability that you will be denied the luxury by the presence of lady passengers. I procured those in Havana, last winter. In case you should like them well enough to order some for yourself, I will give you the address of the merchant from whom I purchased them."

He wrote a line upon a card, as he might sign a beggar's petition with a supercilious parade of benevolence and passed it to the other, who accepted it with a phrase of acknowledgment neither hearty nor grateful. Then the master of the house paced the floor with a slow, regular step, his hands behind him; his countenance placidly ruminative, his thoughts apparently engaged with anything rather than the pain upon the corner-sofa, whose leave-taking he had mercilessly marred. Frederic dumb and furious; Mabel equally dumb and amazed to alarm, knowing as she did that her brother's actions were never purposeless, sat still, their hands clasped stealthily amid the folds of Mabel's dress; their eyes saying the dear and passionate things forbidden to their tongues. Neither would feign indifference, or attempt a lame dialogue upon other topics than those that filled their minds. Mr. Aylett was not one to pay outward heed to hints when he chose to ignore them. He kept up his walk until the carriage was driven around to the front door, informed the parting guest that it awaited his commands, likewise that he would need all the time that remained to him if he hoped to catch the stage; without leaving the room, called to a servant to bring down Mr. Chilton's baggage, and did not lose sight of his sister's lover until the last farewell was said, and Frederic bestowed inside the vehicle. There was nothing offensively officious or malicious in all this. Having declared as an incontrovertible dogma, that a ward could form no engagement without the formal sanction of her legal guardian, he saw fit to put the seal upon the decision at this, their adieu, in a manner they were not likely to forget. An hour's harangue would not have imbued them with the sense of his authority, his determination to exercise it, and their impotency to resist it, as did this practical lesson.

Mrs. Sutton could scarcely restrain her tearful remonstrances against what was, to her perception, an act of arbitrary and wanton cruelty, and other spectators had their views upon the subject.

"Very inconsiderate in Aylett! I wonder how he would like the same game to be played upon himself!" commented Alfred, aside, to his Dulcinea.

Her lip curled in disdainful amusement.

"As if he had ever done an inconsiderate thing since he put off long clothes! There is method in all this, if we were clever enough to fathom it."

Within herself, she determined that she would solve the enigma before she was a week older.

Frederic cast one hasty, eager look at the portico, as the carriage turned out of the yard. Mabel stood in the foreground, her figure framed by the climbing roses drooping over the front steps. She was very pale, and, forgetful for the moment of the observation of the bystanders, leaned slightly forward, her eyes strained upon the carriage-window one hand laid upon her heart, the other resting against the pillar nearest her, as for support. She waved her handkerchief, in response to his smile and lifted hat, and simultaneously with this interchange of adieux her brother took her by the arm.

"You are getting wet there, Mabel! Come into the house! It is well I have come back to look after you!"

CHAPTER IV. "FOUNDED UPON A ROCK."

If Mrs. Sutton had raised horrified eyes and despairing hands upon learning the date of her nephew's proposed marriage, it was because she miscalculated his executive abilities, and the energy she had never until now seen fairly put forth. Within three days after his return, the homestead was alive with masons, carpenters, painters, and upholsterers, engaged by the prompt bridegroom on his passage through Richmond; and so explicit were his orders as to the minutest detail of the work appointed to each, that he could safely leave the scene of action at the time appointed for the flying trip northward, to which he had referred in his dialogue with Mabel on the afternoon of his arrival.

The party of visitors had emigrated to other regions, a couple of days after Frederic Chilton's departure, with the exception of Rosa Tazewell, who accepted Mabel's invitation to prolong her sojourn, the more willingly since she "flattered herself she could be of use in the general upheaving of the ancient foundations, and establishment of the new. If there was one thing she enjoyed above another, it was a tremendous bustle a lively revolution."

She made her boast of personal utility good by installing herself forthwith as Mrs. Sutton's aid-de-camp, and rendering herself so far indispensable in the work of reconstruction that Mr. Aylett deigned to ask her not to desert her post in his absence.

"Yours is the genius of renovation, Miss Rosa," the potentate was pleased to say in his handsomest style. "Do not, I beg of you, forsake my aunt and sister in their need. Let me feel that I leave one head as the motive-power of the multitudinous hands."

She agreed, in the same strain, to oblige him a decision greeted with satisfaction by the pair in whose behalf he besought her friendly offices. The versatile invention and deft fingers of the little brunette were welcome to the heavily-taxed housekeeper, as were her gay good-humor and words of cheer and affection to the younger of her companions. The two girls became more confidential in six days than eighteen years of neighborly intercourse had sufficed to make them. Mabel's innate delicacy and excellent common sense would, in ordinary circumstances, have barred effusiveness upon the theme nearest her heart, but love at nineteen is rarely discreet, even when the persuasives to communicativeness are less powerful than were the sorcery of Rosa's sympathy and the confessions that paved the way to answering and trustful communicativeness on her friend's part.

They were having what she called "a good, long, comforting, as well as comfortable chat" over their sewing in Mabel's chamber on the afternoon of the eighth day of Winston's absence. The weather was lovely, with the mellow brightness and balmy airs that make Virginian autumns a joy and glory until November is half spent, and the atmosphere held, at sunset, the warmth and much of the radiance which had set the day a perfect gem in the heart of the golden month. Into the eastern windows gazed the full moon, a crimson globe upon the hazy horizon, while Venus lay, large and tremulous, among the dying fires of the west.

"Lovers love the western star," quoted Rosa, merrily, taking Mabel's work from her and throwing it upon the bed. "Come and enjoy the holy hour with me."

They leaned together upon the window-sill, their young faces tinted by the changeful hues of the sky, both thoughtful and mute, until Rosa broke the silence by a heavy sigh.

"O Mabel, you should be a happy, happy girl; blessed among women. You can love freely and joyously and have pride and faith in the one beloved."

"As you will some day," rejoined the other, drawing nearer to her, "when you, in your turn, shall know the unspeakable sweetness of unquestioning faith of utter dependence upon him to whom you have given your

heart."

"Utter dependence!" echoed Rosa. "That would mean utter wreck of heart, hope everything should the anchor give way. It is a hazardous experiment, ma belle!"

The other looked down at her with simple fearlessness.

"For it was founded upon a rock!" she repeated softly; yet the exultant ring of her accent vibrated upon the ear like a joyous challenge.

Rosa's fretful movement was involuntary.

"Mine would drag in the sand at every turn of the tide, every rise of the wind, if I were to follow your advice, and say 'yes' to the pertinacious Alfred," she said reproachfully.

"Don't say advice, dear!" corrected the other. "I only endeavored to convince you that there must be latent tenderness beneath your sufferance of Mr. Branch's devotion; that if you really were averse to the thought of marrying him, you could not take pleasure in his society or enjoy the marks of his attachment which are apparent to you and to everybody else."

"Can't you understand," said the beauty, petulantly, "that it is one thing to flirt with a man in public, and another to cherish his image in private? There is no better touchstone of affection than the holiness and calm of an hour like this. If Frederic were with you, the scene would be the fairer, the season more sacred for its association with thoughts of him and his love. Whereas, my Alfred's adoring platitudes would disgust me with the sunset, with the world, and with myself, for permitting him to haunt my presence and hang upon my smile foppish barnacle that he is! If you knew how I despise myself sometimes!"

"Dear Rosa! I shall never try again to persuade that you care for him as a woman should for the man GOD intended her to marry. But why not act worthily of yourself justly to him, and reject him decidedly?"

"Because" her face shrewd and wilful as it had been sorrowful just now "I am by no means certain that I can do better than to marry him. He is rich, good-looking (so people say!), well-born, gentlemanly, and pleasant of temper. An imposing array of advantages, you see! I might go further, and fare very much worse. We shall not expect to pass our days in gazing at sunsets and walking in the moonlight, you know. It is not every woman who can marry the man she loves best. While the right to select and to woo is usurped by the masculine portion of the community, it must, perforce, be Hobson's choice with an uncountable majority of feminines. I should not complain. The stall allotted to me by Hobson alias Fate might hold a worse-conditioned animal than my worshipping swain."

"What a wicked rattle you are!" Mabel said, affecting to box her ears. "I could not love you if I believed you to be in earnest. As to your figure of the stabled steed this disapproving customer has the consolation that she need not accept him, unless she wishes to do so. She has the invaluable privilege of saying 'no' as often and obstinately as she pleases."

"I deny it," said Rosa, perversely. "Parents, in this age, do not make a custom of locking up refractory daughters in nunneries or garrets until they consent to wed Baron Buncombe or my Lord Nozoo, but there are, nevertheless, compulsory marriages in plenty. Society warns me to make a creditable match, upon penalty, if I decline, of being pointed out to the succeeding and a fast-succeeding generation it is! as a disappointed old maid *passée belle*, who squandered her capital of fascinations, and has become a pauper upon public toleration, while my mother, sisters, and brothers are growing impatient at my many and profitless flirtations, and anxious to see me 'settled.' My mother's pet text, since I was sixteen, has been her prayerful desire that I, the last of her nestlings, should

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make choice of a tenable bough and helpful partner, and set up a separate establishment before she dies. When that event occurs, I shall be, in effect, homeless a boarder around upon my rebukeful relatives, who 'always thought how my trifling would end,' and who will be forever scribbling 'vanitas vanitatum,' upon the tombstone of my departed youth my day of beaux and offers. You may shake your head and look heroic with all your might! You are no better off than I, should your brother see cause to refuse his consent to your marriage with Mr. Chilton. He could, and probably would, coerce you into another alliance before you were twenty-one. There are so many ways of letting the life out of a woman's heart, when it is already faint from disappointment! The spirit is oftener broken by unyielding, but not seemingly cruel pressure, than by outrageous violence. And Winston would show himself an adept in such arts, if occasion offered."

"Rosa Tazewell! you are speaking of my brother, my friend and benefactor! one of the best, noblest, most disinterested creatures Heaven ever made!" cried Mabel, erect and indignant. "You have no warrant I shall never give you the right to asperse him in my presence. He is incapable of cruelty or unfairness. It is my duty to obey him, but it is no less a pleasure, for he is a hundred-fold wiser and better than I am knows far more truly what is for my real advantage. As to his conduct in this affair of Frederic and myself, you cannot deny that it has been generous and consistent throughout. He has been cautious never harsh!"

"So!" said Rosa, scrutinizing the flushed countenance of the other, her own full of intense meaning, "you HAVE had your misgivings!"

Mabel reddened more warmly.

"Misgivings! What do you mean?"

"That the uncalled-for vehemence of your defence is a proof of disturbed confidence, of wanting belief in the infallibility of your semi-deity. The trailing robes of divinity have been blown aside by a chance breath of suspicion, and you had a glimpse of the clay feet. I am glad of it. Scepticism is the parent of rebellion, and the time is coming when fealty to your betrothed may demand disloyalty to the power that now is."

Mabel's smile was meant to be careless, but it was only uneasy, and gave the lie direct to her asseveration.

"I have no apprehensions of such a conflict. Winston's word is as good as another man's oath. It is pledged to my marriage with Frederic Chilton, in the event of the prosperous issue of his inquiries into his, Frederic's, character and prospects. That these will be answered favorably, I have the word of another, who is every whit as trustworthy. Where is there room for doubt?"

The brunette shook her head unconvinced.

"Have your own way! I can afford to abide the showing of the logic of events."

"And I!" retorted Mabel, hastily, turning from her, without attempting to dissemble her chagrin, to answer a knock at the door.

It was a servant, with two letters. The annoyance passed from her brow, like the sheerest mist, as she read the superscriptions one in her brother's handwriting, the other in Frederic's.

Rosa interfered to prevent the breaking of the seals.

"I am going to leave you to the undisturbed enjoyment of your feast," she said, in her most winsome manner. "But won't it taste the sweeter if your antepast is the delight of forgiveness? Say you are not angry with me mia cara!"

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"You are a ridiculous child!" Mabel bent to kiss the pleading lips, then the great, melting eyes. "Who could be out of temper with you for half a minute at a time? You did try my patience with your nonsense, but since it WAS nonsense, I have forgotten it all, and love you none the less for your prankish humor you gypsy!"

"She calls my prophecies humbug turns a deaf ear to my warnings!" cried the incorrigible rattle, clasping her hands above her head and rolling her eyes tragically. "I have a lively appreciation, at this instant, of Cassandra's agonies when Troilus named her 'our mad sister!'"

'Woe! woe! woe!
Let us pay betimes
A moiety of that mass of moans to come!'"

Laughing anew at her frantic rush from the chamber, Mabel sat down in the broad window-seat to read her love-letter.

Frederic was too manly in feeling and habit of speech to deal in florid rhapsodies, but each line had its message from his heart to hers. He loved her purely and in truth, and there was not a sentence that did not tell her this, by inference, if not directly. He trusted her and this, too, he told her, more as a husband might the wife of years than a lover of her he had won so lately. Their hopes were the same and their lives, and she dwelt longest upon the sketched plans for the future of these. It brought him closer to her than anything else put her secret and reluctant imaginations of evil, and Rosa's daring insinuations, out of sight and recollection. She read slowly, and with frequent pauses, that she might take in the exquisite flavor of this and that phrase of endearment; set before herself in beauty and distinctness the scenes he portrayed as the adornment of the prospect which was theirs.

The second and yet more deliberate perusal over, she folded the sheet with lingering touches to every corner, thrust it into the envelope, and drew it forth again to peep once more at the signature "Forever and truly, your own Frederic;" pressed it to her lips, then to her heart, and bestowed it securely in her writing-desk, before she unclosed her brother's epistle.

With her finger upon the seal a big drop of red wax, like a petrified blood-gout, stamped with the Aylett coat-of-arms she leaned through the casement to watch for the flutter of Rosa's white dress among the vari-colored maples shading the lawn sang a clear, sweet second to the song that ascended to her eyrie:

"Why weep ye by the tide, ladye?
Why weep ye by the tide?
I'll wed ye to my youngest son,
And ye shall be his bride.
And ye shall be his bride, ladye,
Sae comely to be seen;
But aye she loot the tears down fa'
For lock o' Hazeldean."

"MY DEAR MABEL" [wrote the lord of Ridgeley] "I wish you, so soon as you receive this, to communicate with Jenkyns and Smythe concerning the new parlor furniture I ordered from them. In talking it over, Clara and I have decided that it had better be covered with maroon, instead of green, as you advised. I enclose a sample of damask which they must match exactly. I would I write direct to them, but think it likely that Jenkyns, the managing man of the firm, is in your neighborhood at this time. He told me, when I was in town, of his intention to visit Mrs. Wilson, his sister, I believe, who lives on the White Oak road, about three miles from Ridgeley. Send for him, and put the samples into his hands. If he cannot get the precise color in Richmond, let him order it from New York.

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"The carpets for the parlor, dining-room, and Clara's chamber I have bought in Lowell. Clara accompanied me thither, and gave me the benefit of her taste in the selection. I have resolved, also, to purchase wallpaper in Boston to match these. Say as much to Jenkyns. I shall have the boxes directed to his care and instruct him further respecting making the carpets and hanging the paper when I return.

"Ask Roberts (the mason) whether it will be practicable to build a fire-place in the large lower hall. Another chimney would be an unsightly appendage to the roof, but Clara agrees with me, since studying the plan of the house I brought on for her inspection, that a flue could be run through the closet in your room into the rear one of the west chimneys. She thinks the hall must be freezing cold in winter, and caught eagerly at my idea that a blazing fire at one end would lighten the sombre effect of the oaken wainscot and lofty ceiling. I proposed to tear down the panelling, but she was horrified at the thought. I could not take more pride and interest in preserving the antique character of the home of my forefathers than does she. She will have it that the hall, thus improved, and hung with a few old pictures, some bits of ancient armor, and carpeted with maroon and green will be truly baronial. You and she will agree admirably in your enthusiastic love of the venerable, and in your aesthetic tastes. I congratulate myself hourly upon my good fortune in securing such a companion for myself, and such an instructress for yourself. You cannot fail to derive infinite benefit from intercourse with her.

"This brings me to another subject to which I desire to call your immediate attention. I wish her to select a couple of dresses suitable for your wear on the night of our reception-party, and at others which will, undoubtedly, be given in our honor. She objects to doing this unless I obtain from you a written request that she should thus aid me. She fears you may consider her action 'premature and officious.' Write to her at once, requesting her to do this sisterly favor for you, setting forth your distance from the city, the meagre assortment of the goods to be had in the Richmond stores, etc., and giving her carte blanche as to cost and style. It will be an inestimable advantage to your appearance on the occasions named should she oblige you in this particular. I earnestly desire that you should look your best at your introduction to her."

"'Maroon and green!' a 'baronial' hall, and new party-dresses for insignificant me!" Mabel stopped to say aloud in great amusement. "What would my sage brother have said to such paltry memoranda six months ago? He is an apt scholar, or he has an able teacher. Ah, well! love is a marvellous transmogifier!"

With this apothegm from the storehouse of her lately acquired wisdom, she passed to the next paragraph.

"Now for another matter about which I meant to write to you yesterday, but I was prevented by our expedition to Lowell. The evenings I of course devote to Clara. I have not been so engrossed by my own very important concerns as to neglect yours. I stopped a day in Philadelphia, illy as I could afford the time, to make such investigations as I could, without exciting invidious suspicion, into the character of the person whom I found domesticated at Ridgeley on my return from my summer tour. The information I picked up in that cautious city was so meagre and tantalizing as to provoke me into the belief that he had selected his references with an eye to the slenderness of their knowledge of his personal history. Accident, however, has since placed within my reach a means of learning all that I wish to know. Without wearying you with explanations, which, indeed, I have no time to write being engaged to drive out with Clara in an hour from this time I will transcribe a portion of a letter received by me, two days since, from a gentleman of unexceptional standing, and upon whose word you may safely depend.

"He says: 'In reply to your queries as to my acquaintanceship with one Frederic Chilton, now a practising lawyer in the city of Philadelphia, I would, if conscience permitted, repay your frankness by evasion of a disagreeable truth. But in the circumstances which induced your appeal, I have no option. Hesitation or concealment would be unkind and dishonorable. I knew the man you speak of well I may say intimately, while we were fellow-students in the law school, in 18 . He was then what I have but too much reason for believing him at this day a plausible, unprincipled man of pleasure. Our intercourse, which commenced at the card-table, terminated with a severe horsewhipping I administered to him in punishment of an offence offered a married lady a relative of my

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own. Taking advantage of the protracted absence of her husband, who was a naval officer, he offered her many attentions, received by herself as tokens of innocent and friendly regard, until he forgot himself so far as to make her open and insulting proposals, even urging her to consent to an elopement, and threatening, in the event of her refusal, to ruin her by infamous calumnies. Her father was infirm; her husband in a foreign land. His base persecution would have met with no chastisement, had not I espoused the terrified woman's cause. These are the bare facts of the case. He merited a flogging as you, a chivalric Virginian, will admit. I a Northern man, with cooler blood, but I hope, as true a sense of honor and right as your own inflicted this, as I am prepared to testify before any number of witnesses."

[Mabel was reading very fast, her eyes hurrying from side to side of the page, her face blanching, and her hands more numb with every word.]

"The above is a verbatim copy of that portion of my friend's letter which pertains to your affair," continued Mr. Aylett. "I shall write to Mrs. Sutton's protegee by the mail that carries this, informing him of my opportune discovery, through no instrumentality of his providing, of the poverty of his claims to the title of gentleman, and the audacity of his pretensions to my sister's hand. Have what letters, etc., you have received from him ready packed to return to his address when I come home. My principal regret, in the review of the unfortunate entanglement, is that he ever visited Ridgeley and was known in the vicinity as your suitor. You will suffer from this, in the future, more than you can now suppose. A woman hardly ever outlives such a stigma.

"You may expect me on Thursday next, the 21st, at which time I hope to see most of the alterations I have ordered in an encouraging state of forwardness. Should Jenkyns be in town when you get this, write out my directions clearly and in full, and send them, with sample of damask, by mail.

"Your affectionate brother,

"WINSTON AYLETT"

The clammy, nerveless hands dropped the fatal sheet below them into Mabel's lap. She did not cry out or moan. Things stricken to the heart generally fall dumbly. It was not her cramped position within the window-seat that paralyzed her limbs, nor the chill of the twilight that crept through vein and bone. For one sick second she believed herself to be dying, and would not have stirred a muscle or spoken a syllable to save the life which had suddenly grown worthless worthless, since she was never to see Frederic again; be no more to him than if she had never laid her head upon his bosom; never felt his kisses upon lip and forehead; never lived upon his words of love as rapt mortals, admitted in trances to the banquet of the gods, eat ambrosia, and drink to divinest ecstasy of nectar the elixir of immortal life and joy, sparkling in golden chalices.

She had had her dream ravishing and brief but the awakening was terrible as the struggle back to life from a swoon or deathful lethargy. As to thinking, I believe nobody thinks at such seasons. Nature shrinks in speechless horror at sight of the descending weight, and when it has fallen, lies motionless, gasping in breath to enable her to support the intolerable anguish, not speculating how to avert the next stroke. Frederic and she were parted! Had not Winston said so! And when was he known to reverse a verdict! She had nothing to do but sit still and let the waters go over her head.

Rosa was seated upon the upper step of the west porch, her chin cradled in her hand, her elbow on her knee, gazing on the darkening sky, and crooning Scotch ballads in a pensive, dreamy way. Mabel, from her perch, eyed her as if she were a creature belonging to another world seen dimly, and comprehended yet more imperfectly. Yet it could not have been half an hour thirty fleeting minutes since the two had talked as dear friends out of the fulness of their hearts. Where were the hopes and happy memories that had made hers then a garden of pleasant things, a fruitful field which Heaven had blessed? In that little inch of time, the flood had come and taken them all away.

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Would the dry aching in her throat and chest ever be less? Tears had gushed freely and healthfully after her last leave-taking with Frederic the looked farewell, which was all Winston's surveillance had granted them. She had been wounded then by her brother's singular want of tact or feeling. She had not the spirit to resent anything to-night, unless it were that God had made and suffered to live a being so wretched and useless as herself. She supposed it was wicked but she did not care! She ought to be resigned to the mysterious dispensations of Providence that was the prescribed phraseology of pious people. She had heard the cant times without number. What more would they have than her utter destitution of love and bliss? Was she not miserable enough to satisfy the sternest believer in purgatorial purification? to appease the wrath even of Him who had wrought her desolation? It must be the judgment of a retributive Deity upon her idolatrous affection that she was bearing her worship of Frederic. Yes, she had loved him; she loved him now better than she did anything else upon earth better than she did anything in Heaven.

In the partial insanity of her woe and despair, she lifted her gray face and vacant eyes to the vast, empty vault, beyond which dwelt her Maker afar off, and said the words aloud spat them at Him through hard, ashy lips.

"I love him! I love him! You have taken him from me but I will love him for all that!"

Heaven or Fate her blasphemous mood did not distinguish the one from the other was a robber. Her brother was pitiless as the death that would not answer to her call. Between them she was bereaved.

It was but a touch the lightest breath of natural feeling that broke up the hot crust, that shut down the fountain of tears Rosa's voice, tuneful and sad as a nightingale's, chanting the border-lays she loved so well:

"When I gae out at e'en,
Or walk at morning air,
Ilk rustling bush will seem to say
I used to meet thee there.
Then I'll sit down and cry,
And live beneath the tree.
And when a leaf falls in my lap,
I'll oa' it a word from thee."

She had sung it herself to Frederic the night before he left her, and as she finished the artless ballad, he took her in his arms and kissed her.

As he would never do again!

"My darling! my darling!" she cried aloud.

Then the grief-drops came in a flood.

CHAPTER V. CLEAN HANDS.

The servant who summoned Mabel to supper brought down word that she was not feeling well, and did not wish any.

"Not well! Bless me!" exclaimed Mrs. Sutton, starting up. "Rosa, love, excuse me for three seconds, please. I must see what is the matter. I do hope there is no bad news from " (arrested by the recollection that there were servants in the room, she substituted for the name upon her lips) "in her letters."

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"I don't think she's much sick ma'am," said the maid. "She is a-settin' in the window."

"Where I left her with her letters, an hour and more ago," observed Rosa. "Don't hurry back if she needs you, Aunt Rachel. I will make myself at home; shall not mind eating alone for once."

Not withstanding the array of dainties before her, she only nibbled the edge of a cream biscuit with her little white teeth, and crumbled the rest of it upon her plate in listlessness or profound and active reverie, while the hostess was away. She, too, had her conjectures and her anxieties a knotty problem to work out, and the longer she pondered the more confident was she that she had grasped at least one filament of the clue leading to elucidation.

Mabel had not stirred from her place sat yet with her brother's letter in her lap, her hands lying heavily upon it, although her muslin dress was ghostly in the stream of moonlight flowing across the chamber. She had wept her eyes dry, and her voice was monotonous, but unfaltering.

"I am not really sick, aunt, but I have no appetite, and having a great deal to think of, I preferred staying here to going to the table," was her answer to Mrs Sutton's inquiries.

"Your hands are cold and lifeless as clay, my child. What is the matter? It is not like you to be moping up here, alone in the dark."

"Won't you leave me to myself for a while, and keep Rosa down-stairs?" asked Mabel, more patiently than peevishly. "Before bed-time I will see you in your room, and we can talk of what has disturbed me."

"My daughter," murmured the gentle-hearted chaperone, trying to draw the erect head to her shoulder, as she stood by her niece.

Mabel resisted the kindly force.

"No, no, aunt. I cannot bear that yet. I have just begun to think connectedly, and petting would unnerve me."

This was strange talk from the frank-hearted child she had reared from babyhood, and while she desisted from further attempts at consolation, Aunt Rachel took a very sober visage back to the supper-room with her, and as little appetite as Rosa had manifested. The meal was quickly over, and by way of obeying the second part of Mabel's behest, the innocent diplomatist begged Rosa to go to the piano.

"I always enjoy your delightful music, my dear. It makes the house more lively."

"Thank you, dear Mrs. Sutton. I should take pleasure in obliging you; but if Mabel is out of sorts, I don't believe she will care to have the house lively to-night," was the amiable rejoinder. "Moreover, I am dying to finish 'David Copperfield.' Will you allow me to curl myself up in the big chair here, and read for an hour?"

Mrs. Sutton gave a consent that was almost glad in its alacrity, and pretended to occupy herself with the newspapers brought by the evening mail, until she judged that Mabel had had season in which to compose her thoughts. Then she muttered something about "breakfast," "muffins," and "Daphne," caught up her key-basket, and bustled out.

Rosa's book fell from before her face at the sound of the closing door. The liquid eyes were turbid; her features moved by some passion mightier far than curiosity or compassion for her friend's distress.

"I have done nothing literally nothing, to bring this on!" was the reflection which brought most calm to her agitated mind. "If it should be as I think, I am guiltless of treachery. My skirts are clear. My hands are clean! Yet

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there have been moments when I could have dipped them in blood that this end might be attained!"

Too restless to remain quiet, she tossed her book aside and wandered from side to side of the room, halting frequently to hearken for Mrs. Sutton's return, or some noise from the conference chamber that might alleviate her suspense.

"I tried to put her on her guard," she broke forth at length, bent, it would seem, upon self-justification against an invisible accuser. "I saw aversion in Winston's eye the day he came home to find the other here. He would never forgive his slave the presumption of choosing a husband for herself. Did I not tell her so? Yet this has caught her like a rabbit in a trap unprepared for endurance or resistance. The spiritless baby! Would I give him up, except with life, if he loved me as he does her?"

It was not a baby's face that was confronting Mrs. Sutton's just then. It was no weak, spiritless slave who sustained the pelting shower of her comments, her wonderment and her entreaties that Mabel would refuse to abide by her brother's decision her guardian though he was and if she would not write to Frederic with her own hand, empower her aunt to apply to him for an explanation of the disgraceful mystery.

"We should condemn no man unheard," she argued.

"It is but fair to give him an opportunity of telling his side of the story."

"Winston's letter will inform him of what and by whom he is accused," said Mabel. "He will have the opportunity you speak of. I should not be content with my brother's action, were this not so. I have been over the whole ground again and again, since sunset. We you and I are powerless. This story is either true or false. If what we have read really happened, what could arise from our correspondence with the offender against honor and virtue? It would but complicate difficulties. If he is unjustly accused, he can prove it, and put his slanderers to shame without our promptings. Our interference would be an intimation that he needed our championship."

"I believe he will clear himself of every stain," returned Mrs. Sutton earnestly. "This is either a vile plot concocted by some secret foe, or the Frederic Chilton mentioned here," pushing the letter away from her on the table, with a gesture of loathing, "is another person."

"That is very unlikely!"

Mabel leaned her forehead wearily upon her hand, and did not finish the sentence immediately.

"I will be candid with you, aunt, upon this subject, as I have tried to be in every other confidence with which I have burdened you. Frederic Chilton was a student in the law-school, which was also attended by Winston's correspondent, and at the date specified by him. I have reason to think there was something unpleasant something he wished to conceal from me, and perhaps from everybody else, connected with his stay there. He referred to it ambiguously on the last evening of his visit here, as a folly, a youthful indiscretion. I have the impression, moreover, that a married woman was mixed up in this trouble, whatever it was a lady, some years older than himself, whose husband, a naval officer, was absent upon a long cruise. This may be the germ of the story related here, and it may have nothing whatever to do with it."

In saying "here," she pointed to the letter. Both avoided touching it as it lay between them, the big seal uppermost, and looking more like bright, fresh blood than ever, in the lamplight.

"My dear, all this proves nothing absolutely nothing except that the shock and overmuch solitary musing have made you morbid and unreasonable."

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Mrs. Sutton assumed a collected air, and delivered herself with the mien of one who was determined to submit to no trifling, and to credit no scrap of evidence against her friend which counter-reasoning could set aside.

"My husband's godson we must remember he is that, Mabel! could never be guilty of the infamous conduct ascribed to this Chilton by Winston Aylett's anonymous friend. I am accounted a tolerable judge of character, and I maintain that it is a moral impossibility for my instincts and experience to be so utterly at fault as these two men would make you believe. As to the corroboration of your 'impression,' that would be consummate nonsense in the eye of the law. Let us sift the pros and cons of this affair as rational, unprejudiced beings should not jump at conclusions. And I must say, Mabel" was the consistent peroration of this address, uttered in a mildly-aggrieved tone, while the blue eyes began to shine through a rising fog "it seems to me very singular really wounds me is not what I looked for in you that you should rank yourself with my poor boy's enemies!"

"I, his enemy!" The word was a sharp cry not loud, but telling of unfathomed deeps of anguish, from the verge of which the listener drew back with a shudder. "I would have married him without a single glance at the past! Let him but say 'it is untrue all that you fear and they declare,' and I would disbelieve this tale, instantly and utterly, though a thousand witnesses swore to the truth of it. Or, let him be all that they say, I would marry him to-night, if I had the right to do it. But I promised and to promise with an Aylett is to fulfil that I would be ruled by my guardian's will, should the investigation, to which Frederic himself did not object, terminate unfavorably for my hopes, and contrary to his declaration."

"It was a rash promise, and such are better broken than kept."

"Your Bible, Aunt Rachel to-night, I cannot call it mine! commends him who swears to his own heart and changes not," replied the niece, with restored steadiness. "It would have been the same had I refused my consent to Winston's proposal. I am a minor, and who would wait two years for me?"

"Anybody who loved you, provided your trust in him equalled his in you," said Mrs. Sutton, slyly.

Mabel's answer was direct.

"You want me to say that I do not believe this tale of Mr. Chilton's early errors; to brand it as a mistake or fabrication. You insinuate that, in reserving my sentence until I shall have heard both sides of it, I show myself unworthy of the love of a true man; betray of what mean stuff my affection is made. I suppose blind faith is sublime! But for my part, I had rather be loved in spite of my known faults, than receive wilfully ignorant worship."

The daring stroke at Mrs. Sutton's hypothesis of the inseparable union between esteem and affection, excited her into an impolitic admission.

"My child, you make my blood run cold! You do not mean that you could love a man for whose character you had no respect!"

"There is a difference between learning to love and continuing to love," said Mabel, sententiously. "But we have had enough of useless talk, aunt. In two days more Winston will be here. Until then, let matters remain as they are. You can tell Rosa as much or as little as you like of what has happened. She must suspect that something has gone awry. To-morrow, I will look up this Mr. Jenkyns, and deliver the messages with which I am charged likewise consult the mason about the 'baronial' fireplace," smiling bitterly.

"You never saw another creature so altered as she is," Mrs. Sutton bewailed to Rosa, in rehearsing the scene. "If this thing should turn out to be true, she is ruined and heart-broken for life. She will become a cold, cynical, unfeeling woman a feminine copy of her granite brother."

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"If!" reiterated Rosa, testily. "There is not one syllable of truth in it from Alpha to Omega! I know he is your nephew, and that it is one of the Medo-Persian laws of Ridgeley that the king can do no wrong; but I would sooner believe that Winston Aylett invented the slander throughout, than question Fred Chilton's integrity. There is foul play somewhere, as you will discover in time or out of it!"

To Mabel, Frederic's spirited champion said never a word of the event that held their eyes waking until dawn each motionless as sleepless lest her bed fellow should discover her real state.

"I have had no share in causing the rupture. I am not called upon to heal it," meditated she. "In this, the law of self-preservation is my surest guide."

Her resolve to remain neutral was sharply and unexpectedly tested the next afternoon.

The two girls went out for a ramble about four o'clock, taking the beaten foot-path that led through cultivated fields, and between wooded hills, to a small post-town two miles distant. The day was sunless, but not chilly, and when they had outwalked the hearing of the murmur of rural life that pervaded the barnyard and adjacent "quarters," the silence was oppressive, except when broken by the whirr of a partridge, the melancholy caw of the crows, scared from their feast upon the scattered grains knocked from over-ripe ears of corn during the recent "fodder-pulling," and, as they neared it, by the fretting of a rapid brook over its stony bottom.

The pretence of social converse had been given up before the friends cleared the first field beyond the orchard. Rosa's exquisite tact withheld her from obtruding commonplaces upon the attention of a mind torn by suspense distracted between disappointment and outraged pride, and Mabel had not besought her sympathy in her grievous strait. They walked on swiftly, the one staring straight forward, yet seeing nothing; the other, although thoughtful, losing not one feature of the landscape the light-gray sky, the encircling forest, the yellow broom-straw clothing the hill-sides, the crooked fences, lined with purple brush, golden-rod, black-bearded alder and sumach, flaming with scarlet berry cones and motley leaves. It was her principle and habit to seize upon whatever morsels of delight were dropped in her way, and she had a taste for attractive bits of scenery, as for melody. There was no reason why the evil estate of her companion should debar her from quiet enjoyment of the autumn day. She was sorry that Mabel was suffering. It was unpleasant to see pain or grief. Smiles were prettier than glum looks. She hoped she had enough humanity about her to enable her to recognize these facts. But, in her soul, she despised the girl for her tacit acquiescence in her brother's decree; condemned her yet more for her partial credence of the rumor of her lover's unworthiness. It was as well, taking these things into account, that Mabel was not communicative with regard to the great change that had befallen her since this hour yesterday, when she had exultingly proclaimed that her trust was "founded upon a rock."

"*Varium et mutabile semper faemina!*" reflected Rosa, who knew that much Latin and attracted by the waving of the bright grasses beneath the waves of the rivulet they were crossing, she stopped to lean over the railing and poke them aside from the stones with a chincapin switch she had picked up a little way back.

Mabel did not look around; apparently did not observe that she walked on alone.

"I dare say she would not miss me for the next mile!" soliloquized the idle loungee, snatching foam-flakes from their nestling-places behind the rocks, and watching them as they danced down the stream.

Something, whiter and more regular in shape than they, lay upon the margin of the brook, partly concealed by a clump of sedge. A letter, with the address uppermost! Rosa's optics were keen. She easily made out the direction upon the envelope from where she stood. It was Frederic Chilton's name in Mrs. Sutton's quaint, old-fashioned "back-hand" chirography. An hour before, as Rosa now recollected, she had seen, from her window, a negro man take the path to the village, arranging some papers in the crown of his tattered straw hat. He had dropped this, the most important of all, probably in stooping to drink from his hollowed palms at the spring-stream. However this

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might be, there it lay the warning to the calumniated lover that his traducers were making clean (or foul) work with his fair fame in the quarter where he wished to stand at his best; perhaps citing him to appear and answer the damaging charges in person before the same tribunal.

"If she would only let me drop him a friendly line asking him, for her sake, to contradict this horrid slander!" the distraught matron had sighed, last night, in her recapitulation of the conversation with her obdurate niece. "But she will not hear of it."

"I hardly think he would like it either," Rosa had rejoined. "It would hint at distrust on your part or on hers. Mr. Aylett's letter should be sufficient to elicit the defence you crave."

"You are in the right, perhaps!" But Mrs. Sutton had looked miserably discontented. "Yet to be frank with you, Rosa, Winston is not apt to be conciliatory in his measures when he takes it into his head that the family honor is assailed. I am afraid he has written haughtily, if not insolently, to poor Frederic."

Rosa had no doubt of this, even while she answered, "Neither haughtiness nor downright insolence would prevent a man who has so much at stake as has Mr. Chilton, from taking instant steps to re-establish himself in the respect of the family he desires to enter. This is a very delicate matter take what view of it we may. Hadn't you better wait a few days before you interfere? Nothing can be lost something may be gained by prudent delay."

"And I suppose Winston WOULD be very much displeased at my officiousness, as he would term it," had been Mrs. Sutton's reluctant concession to her young guest's discreet counsels. "But it is very hard to remain quiet, and see everything going to destruction about one!"

She had evidently reconsidered her resolution to let things take their wrong-headed course, and in virtue of her prerogatives as match-maker and mender, had thrust her oar into the very muddy whirlpool boiling about the bark of her darling's happiness.

Rosa wrought out this chain of sequences, with many other links, stretching far past present exigences and possibilities, ere Mabel's figure disappeared behind the shoulder of the hill rising beyond the brook. Should Frederic Chilton receive that letter, in less than a week in three days, perhaps, for he was a man prompt to resolve and to do he would present himself at Ridgeley to speak in his own behalf an event Rosa considered eminently undesirable. Certainly Mabel's pusillanimity merited no such reward. She had no right to question the rectitude that one she professed to love, nor her aunt the right to act as mediator. If Mabel Aylett, with her found sense and judgment, and her inherent strength of will, would not hold fast to her faith in her affianced husband, and defy her brother to sunder them, let her lose that which she prized so lightly.

If the epistle, soaking slowly there in the wet, had been committed to Rosa's charge, she would have scorned to intercept it; would have deposited it safely and punctually in the post-office. As it was, if she left it alone, Frederic would never get it, and Mrs. Sutton remain unconscious of its fate unless some other passer-by should perceive and rescue it from illegibility and dissolution; unless Mabel should espy it on their return-walk, or, coming back, the next moment, to seek her truant mate, catch sight of the snowy leaflet of peace in its snuggerly under the sedge.

A startled partridge flew over Rosa's head from the thither rising ground, and in the belief that he was the harbinger of the approach she dreaded, she dislodged the envelope from its covert, with a quick touch of her little wand, and it floated down the stream.

Slowly all too gradually at first swinging lazily wound in the eddies, catching, now against a jutting stone, now entangled by a blade of grass Rosa's heart in her throat as she watched it, lest Mabel's footsteps should be audible upon the rocky path, Mabel's hat appear above the spur of the hill. Then the channel caught it, whirled it over and

over, faster and faster, and sucked it downward.

Mrs. Sutton was at the tea-table with the girls that evening, when Johnson, the sable Mercury, showed himself at the door, to inform his superior that he had "got everything at de sto' she sent him fur to buy."

"You mailed the letters, Johnson?" said the mild mistress, rather anxiously.

"All on dem, Mistis!"

"The unconscionable liar!" thought Rosa, virtuously, "he ought to be flogged! But it is none of my business to contradict him."

She did not say now, "My hands are clean!"

CHAPTER VI. CRAFT OR DIPLOMACY!

"YOUR letter notifies me, in general terms, that the answers returned to your inquiries as to my antecedents and present reputation are the reverse of satisfactory. You feel constrained, you add, in view of the information thus obtained, to interdict my further intercourse with your sister or any other member of your family. Since I cannot battle with shadows, or refute insinuations the drift of which I do not in the least comprehend, may I trouble you to put the allegations to which you refer into a definite and tangible shape? Let me know who are my accusers, and what are the iniquities with which they charge me. The worst criminal against human and divine laws has the right to demand thus much before he is convicted and sentenced.

"As to your prohibition of my continued correspondence with Miss Aylett, I shall consider her my promised wife, and write to her regularly as such, until you have made good your indictment against me, or until I receive the assurance under her own hand and seal that my conduct in thus addressing her is obnoxious to herself.

"I have the honor, sir, of signing myself

"Your obedient servant,

"FREDERIC S. CHILTON."

The cool contempt of the reply to his imperative dismissal of whatever claims the presumptuous adventurer his aunt had encouraged believed he had upon Mabel's notice or affection, was likely to irk Winston Aylett as more intemperate language could not. It did more. It baffled him, for a time. He could, and he meant, to withhold the lover's letter from his sister's eyes. He could and upon this also he was determined command her, in the masterful manner that heretofore had never failed to work submission, never to meet, speak, or write again to the man he almost hated; will her to forget her childish fancy for his handsome face and glozing arts, and in the fulness of time, to bestow her in marriage upon a partner of his own providing. He had no misgivings as to his ability to accomplish all this, if the blackguard aforesaid could be kept out of her way until that remedial agent, Time, and lawful authority had a chance to do their work.

But he was openly defied to prevent communication between the betrothed pair, unless his injunction had Mabel's endorsement; and, upon alighting from the stage at the village, on his return to Ridgeley, he had taken from the post-office, along with the impertinent missive addressed to himself, one for Mabel, superscribed by the same hand. From the first, he had no intention of transferring it to the keeping of the proper owner, It was forwarded in direct disobedience to his commands, and the writer should be made to understand the futility of opposition to these. For several hours, his only purpose respecting it was to enclose it, unopened, in an envelope directed by

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himself, and send it back to the audacious author, by the next mail. He was balked in this project by no fastidious scruples as to his right thus to dispose of his ward's property. Nature, or what he assumed was natural affection, concurred with duty in urging him to hinder an alliance by which Mabel's happiness would be imperilled and her relatives scandalized. But when, in the solitude of his study, he vouchsafed a second reading to Frederic's letter, preparatory to the response he designed should annihilate his hopes and chastise his impudence, a doubt of the efficacy of his schemes attacked him for the first time. "Under her own hand and seal," were terms the explicitness of which commended them to his grave consideration. His next thought was to oblige Mabel to indite a formal renunciation of her unworthy suitor. There were several objections to this measure.

Firstly, he disliked whatever smacked of scenic effect, and women were apt to get up scenes hysterics, attitudes, and the like upon trivial provocation, He wanted to get the thing over quietly and soon.

Secondly, he was not very sure that he should find in Mabel the docile puppet she had appeared to him for so many years of tutelage. She had matured marvelously of late. Her very manner of meeting him that afternoon impressed him by its self-possession and freedom from the emotion that used to gush from eyes and lips, in happy tears, and broken, delighted greeting at his approach. For aught he knew to the contrary, she might have accepted his fiat as just, if not merciful, and not a dream of rebellion been fostered thereby. The grave tranquillity of her demeanor might arise from the chastening influences of the mortification she had sustained, and a consciousness of ill-desert that bred humility. He would fain have believed all this, but until he broached the subject to her, his incertitude could not be removed, and in a step so momentous as that which he meditated, it behooved him to try well the solidity of the ground beneath him.

Lastly, our blood-prince of the kingdom of Ridgeley was, whether he confessed it or not, acting under orders.

"Be very tolerant with that poor little deceived sister of yours!" his fiancée had implored, her diamond eyes bedimmed by quick-springing damps of commiseration. "Recollect that the consciousness of wasted love is always harder to bear than what is commonly known as bereavement. If you find her refractory, be patient and persuasive, instead of dictatorial. Craft often effects what overt violence would attempt in vain."

"Craft!" The word struck unpleasantly upon the Virginia lordling's ear, and he echoed it with a suspicion of a frown upon his brow. "I am not an adept in chicanery!"

"But you are a born diplomatist!" seductively. "And because I am of the same credulous sex as our mistaken little darling, you will not proceed to open warfare with her, even should she be both to resign her lover? It is the glory of the strong to show charity to the weak and erring."

For her sake, then, our flattered diplomatist would try the effect of guile, instead of brutality, upon the helpless girl, the balance of whose fate was grasped by his shapely hand. For one base second, the idea of attempting an imitation of his sister's handwriting flashed through his mind. But he was a gentleman, and forgery is not a gentlemanly vice, any more than is counterfeiting bank-notes. Finally, the author of craft the subtle, refined virtue bepraised by his bride-elect the devil came to his help.

Mabel, like most other girls, had a dainty and fantastic taste in the matter of letter-paper and envelopes. She used none but French stationery, stamped with her monogram a curious device, wrought in two colors and at the top of each sheet stood out in bas-relief the Aylett crest. With these harmless whimsies Frederic was, without doubt, familiar. If his letter were returned to him, wrapped in a blank page, taken from her papetiere and within one of her envelopes, it would not signify so much whose handwriting was upon the exterior. Papetiere and writing-desk were in Mabel's bed-room, but she was in the parlor, practising an instrumental duet with Rosa a favorite with Miss Dorrance. Winston had brought it south with him, and asked his sister to learn it forthwith, in just the accent he used to employ when prescribing what studies she should pursue at school. There was nothing in his errand that he should be ashamed of, he reminded himself with impatient severity, as he traversed the upper hall on

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tip-toe to the western chamber. He had, on sundry previous occasions, sought, in the receptacles he was about to ransack, for sealing-wax, pencils, and the like trifles. Mabel was too wise a woman not to keep her secrets under lock and key, and if there were private documents left in his way, he was too honorable to pry into them.

Shutting the door cautiously, that the snap and blaze might not betray him, he struck a wax match, warranted to burn a minute-and-a-half, and raised the lid of the desk. His unseen but wily coadjutor had guided him cunningly. In fingering a heap of envelopes in order to find one large enough for his purpose, he brought to light one addressed to "Mr. Frederic Chilton, Box 910, Philadelphia, Penn."

Upon the reverse was a small blot that had condemned it in Mabel's sight, as unfit to be sent to her most valued correspondent, and which she had not observed before writing the direction. Selecting another, she had thrown this back carelessly into the desk, meaning to burn it when it should be convenient, and forgotten all about it.

The livid dints were deep and restless in Winston's nostrils, as seen by the light of the tiny taper he raised to extinguish, when his prize was secured. The devil supplied him with another crafty hint, as he was in the act of folding one edge of Frederic's letter that it might fit into the new cover. Why not strip off the letter entirely, that it might seem to have been opened, read, and then flung back upon the writer's hands with contumely? Half-way measures were unsafe and foolish. Stratagem, to be efficient, should be not only deft, but thorough; else it was bungling, not diplomacy. His hand did not shake in divesting the closely-written sheet of its wrapping, but in one respect his behavior was in consonance with the gentlemanly instincts he vaunted as a proof of pure old blood. He averted his eyes lest he should see a line the lover had penned to his mistress. The letter slipped smoothly into the quarters prepared for it smoothly as Satan's mark usually goes on until his tool has made his damnation sure.

"Well done?" said Diabolus.

"That was a clever hit!" chimed in his assistant, complacently, after he had put the sealed envelope into his portfolio for safe-keeping, and burned the torn one he had removed. "Nobody but an idiot or a madman would persist in following a girl up after such a quietus."

He replied to Frederic's note to himself shortly and with disdain, using the third person throughout, and informing Mr. Chilton with unmistakable distinctness that Miss Aylett had offered no opposition whatever to her brother's will in this unfortunate affair. So far as he Mr. Aylett could judge, her views coincided exactly with his own. Mr. Chilton's letters and presents should be returned to him at an early day, and thus should be finished the closing chapter of a volume which ought never to have been begun.

All this done to his mind, he set the door of his room ajar, and watched for Mabel's passage to hers.

He had not to wait long. The young ladies had fallen into habits of early retiring of late a marked change from their olden fashion of singing and talking out the midnight hour. Himself unseen, Mr. Aylett scrutinized the two mounting the stairs side by side Rosa's dark, mobile face, arch with smiles, while she chattered over a bit of country gossip she had heard that afternoon from a visitor, and the weary calm of Mabel's visage, the drooping eyelids, and, when appealed to directly by her volatile comrade, the measured, not melancholy cadence of her answer, The girl had had a sore fight, and won a Pyrrhian victory. She was not vanquished, but she was worsted. Some men, upon appreciating what this meant, and how her grief had been wrought, would have had direful visitings of conscience, surrendered themselves to the mastery of doubts as to the righteousness and humanity of stringent action such as he had just consummated. He was not unmoved. He really loved his only sister, as proud, selfish men love those of their own lineage who have never disputed their supremacy, and derogated from their importance. He said something under his breath before he called her, but the curse was not upon himself.

"The low-bred hound!" he muttered. "This is his doing!"

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Mabel halted at the stair-head, the blood suddenly and utterly forsaking her cheeks when he spoke her name, although his address was purposely kind, and, he thought, inviting.

"Can you spare me a moment?" he continued, smilingly, to win her advance. "I will not detain you long. I know you are agonizing to have your talk out, Miss Rosa."

Rosa laughed, with a saucy retort, and turned into her chamber.

Mabel entered her brother's, and without speaking, took the seat he offered. She was to be sentenced, and she must reserve her forces to sustain the pain without a groan.

"You saw Jenkyns did you not?" began Mr. Aylett, with the manner of one at peace with himself, and those of his fellow-men whose existence he chose to acknowledge.

"I did. He made memoranda of your orders, and said all should be done as you wished."

"I ordered the masons, this evening, to begin the hall-chimney to-morrow. While the work is going on, you had better occupy some other bed-room. I shall hurry it forward, day and night, or it will not be done in season for us when we return from our bridal-tour. The carpets must be down, and the paper dry by the fifteenth at farthest. Clara bought your dresses, and offers to have them made, if you will send her an accurate measurement. You are about her height, although not so well-proportioned. Your figure is angular, where hers is round. She is your senior by several years, yet one might easily mistake her for a girl of twenty, her complexion is so fresh. Her twenty-five years show themselves in nothing except her ease of manner, maturity of thought, and elegance of diction."

He would have sneered at this strain in another as hyperbolic and fatuous. The absurdity of it in his mouth consisted mainly in the cool arrogance of the assumption that whatever belonged to him was above adverse criticism, and would be maligned if it were referred to without appending an encomium. Much of fervor might and did mingle in his thoughts of her he was to wed, but none warmed his enumeration of her perfections. He did nothing *con amore*, unless it were exalting the dignity and glory of the Aylett name, and maintaining his right to support their ancient honors.

Mabel did not respond to his gratuitous praise of the fair and benevolent Clara. While he was talking, he seemed to recede a great way from her; his tones to ring hollowly upon her hearing, his form to grow indistinct. Was he playing with her suspense, or could it be that he a being with heart and nerves like hers, had no conception of the rack on which she was stretched no suspicion that every one of his deliberate sentences was a turn of the screw that redoubled her torture? The Ayletts were a strong-willed race, and she repressed all sign of suffering save intense pallor; made this less palpable by screening her eyes from the lamp-light with a paper she took from the table, and thereby throwing her features into deep shadow.

"But it is not my intention to trouble you with matters that concern me alone," he pursued, without varying his intonations. "As I anticipated, Mr. Chilton declines explaining the ugly story relative to his earlier career of dissipation and deceit, which I forwarded to you. He indulges, instead, in a tirade of personal abuse touching my right to control you, declaring his purpose to pursue you with letters and attentions until he shall be discarded by yourself. We will not stay to discuss the gentlemanliness and delicacy of his behavior in this regard. I merely declare, that, having had a fair opportunity of honest confession or denial of statements detrimental to his principles and pursuits, and having shirked both, he has placed himself outside the pale of respectful consideration. Has he written to you since his receipt of my letter?"

"No!"

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Mabel was staring at a figure in the carpet, on a line with her feet. Had she regarded her brother never so attentively, she would have detected no change in his countenance. He did not prepare questions without also studying how to deliver them.

"I am glad he has the moral decency to forbear carrying out his threat of persecution."

He could say it with the greater hardihood in the remembrance that the "persecution" had been attempted.

"I wish he had written!" rejoined Mabel, abruptly, but without passion. "He was right to protest against accepting his dismissal from any other than myself."

She had not removed her eyes from the spot on the carpet, or lowered the paper screen. She looked like a statue and spoke like an automaton.

Mr. Aylett's nostrils quivered ominously.

"Is it your wish to recommence the correspondence I have ended?"

"You know that I would strike off my right hand sooner than do it. But if he had written to me, I should have answered his letter, if it had been only to bid him farewell. Since he has not chosen to do this, I cannot take the initiative."

If Winston had never entertained a favorable opinion of his own sagacity prior to hearing this avowal, it would have forced itself upon him now. How timely was the thought, how felicitous the accident, that had aided him to ward off the disaster of renewed intercourse!

Involuntarily his fingers crept nearer to the closed portfolio.

"No good could have come of that!" returned he coldly. "When an amputation is to be performed, wise people submit to it without useless preliminaries. The exchange of farewells in this case would be inexpedient in the highest degree. You would compromise yourself by continued acknowledgment of this fellow's acquaintance. My will is that you and the world should forget, as soon as it can be done, that you ever saw or heard of him. The connection was degrading."

"Don't abuse him, brother! Let the knowledge that we are parted forever, satisfy your resentment. Since he has not appealed to me from your verdict, I am left to suppose that, upon second thoughts, he has resolved to acquiesce in your will. I do not blame him for the change of purpose." Still impassive in feature and voice, still not withdrawing her fixed gaze from that one point upon the floor. "He, too, has pride, and it matches yours. I do not say mine. I question, sometimes, if I have any."

"If your conjecture be correct, you cannot object to return the letters you have already received from him," said Winston, pressing on to the conclusion of a disagreeable business. "Since you are not likely to add to your stock of these valuables, you do not care to retain them, I suppose? I believe the rule is total surrender of souvenirs when a rupture is pronounced hopeless."

"I shall keep them a week longer!"

She assigned no reason for the resolution, and her manner, without being sullen, aggravated her brother into wrath, the effusion of which was a withering sneer.

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"Your hope in his repentance is creditable to the strength or weakness of woman's love. But have your way. The illustrious record of his former life is a powerful argument in favor of clemency. In a week, then!"

He nodded dismissal, wheeled his chair around to the table, dipped a pen in the standish, and pulled an account-book toward him.

He was surprised and not pleased, nevertheless, that Mabel retired without other reply than a simple "Good-night," said without temper, or any evidence of excitement. A month before, a milder sarcasm, the lightest breath of reproof, would have brought her to his feet in a paroxysm of tears, to implore pardon for her contumacy, and to promise obedience for all time to come. She was getting beyond his control the while she offered no open resistance to his government. Was sorrowful shame, or her infatuation for the adventurer he cursed in his heart by his gods, the influence that was petrifying her into this unlovely caricature of her once bright and affectionate self?

She presented herself, unsummoned, in his study at the expiration of the period she had designated, a packet in her hand, neatly done up and sealed.

"I will trouble you to direct it," was all she said, as she laid it before him.

"This is done of your own free will remember!" he said, impressively. "In after years, should you be so unreasonable as to regret it, there must be no misconception on the subject between us. If you wish, at this, the eleventh hour, to draw back, I shall not oppose you."

"You will write the address, then, if you please!" was Mabel's reply, showing him the surface intended for it.

Then she left him.

"A sensible girl, after all! a genuine Aylett, in will and stoicism!" commented the master of the situation, beginning in his round, legible characters, the inscription he hoped never to trace again. "So endeth her first lesson in Cupid's manual!"

He never knew that Mrs. Sutton had bolstered the Aylett will and stoicism into stanchness at this closing scene. In a fit of despondency, she had that morning imparted to Mabel the fact that she had written to Frederic, ten days before, and had no answer, although she had besought an immediate one.

"I have expected him confidently every day for a week," she lamented. "I didn't suppose he would stay at Ridgeley, after what has happened; but there's the hotel in the village, and, as I told him, he could accomplish more by an hour's talk with you than by fifty letters. It is very mysterious his continued silence! He always appeared so frank and reasonable. Nothing else like it has ever occurred in my experience and I have had a great deal, my dear!"

"I am sorry you wrote, aunt," replied Mabel, sorrowfully dignified. "Sorry you have subjected yourself to unnecessary mortification. I am past feeling it for myself. We cannot longer doubt that Mr. Chilton desires to hold no further communication with any of us."

Within the hour she made up the packet and carried it to her brother.

CHAPTER VII. WASSAIL.

ALMOST sixteen months had passed since the dewless September morning, when Mabel had gathered roses in

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the garden walks, and her brother's return had shaken the dew with the bloom from her young heart. It was the evening of Christmas-day, and the tide of wassail, the blaze of yule, were high at Ridgeley. Without, the fall of snow that had commenced at sundown, was waxing heavier and the wind fiercer. In-doors, fires roared and crackled upon every hearth; there was a stir of busy or merry life in every room. About the spacious fire-place in the "baronial" hall was a wide semicircle of young people, and before that in the parlor, a cluster of elders, whose graver talk was enlivened, from time to time, by the peals of laughter that tossed into jubilant surf the stream of the juniors' converse.

Nearest the mantel, on the left wing of the line, sat the three months' bride, Imogene Barksdale, placid, dove-eyed, and smiling as of yore, very comely with her expression of satisfied prettiness nobody called vanity, and bedecked in her "second day's dress" of azure silk and her bridal ornaments. Her husband hovered on the outside of the ring, now pulling the floating curls of a girl-cousin (every third girl in the country was his cousin, once, twice, or thrice-removed, and none resented the liberties he, as a married man, was pleased to take), anon whispering in the ear of a bashful maiden interrogatories as to her latest admirer or rumored engagement; oftenest leaning upon the back of his wife's chair, a listener to what was going on, his hand lightly touching her lace-veiled shoulders, until her head gradually inclined against his arm. They were a loving couple, and not shy of testifying their consent to the world.

"They remind me irresistibly of a pair of plump babies sucking at opposite ends of a stick of sugar candy!" Rosa Tazewell said aside to the hostess, as the latter paused beside her on her way through the hall to the parlor.

"The candy is very sweet!" replied Mrs. Aylett, charitably, but laughing at the conceit the low, musical laugh that was at once girlish in its gleefulness, yet perfectly well-bred.

Mr. Aylett heard it from his stand on the parlor-rug, and sent a quick glance in that direction. It was slow in returning to the group surrounding him. He had married a beautiful woman so said everybody and a fascinating, as even everybody's wife did not dispute. In his sight, she was simply and entirely worthy of the distinction he had bestowed upon her; an adornment to Ridgeley and his name. From their wedding-day, his deportment toward her had been the same as it was to-night attentive, but never officious; deferential, yet far removed from servility; a manner that, without approximating uxoriousness, yet impressed the spectator with the conviction that she was with him first and dearest among women; a partner of whom, if that were possible, he was more proud than fond and of the depth and reality of his affection there could be no question.

She declined to seat herself in the circle, although warmly importuned by her guests thus to add brilliancy to their joyous party, yet remained standing near Rosa, interested and amused by the running fire of compliment and badinage that went to make up the hilarious confusion. If the family record had been consulted, the truth that she had counted her thirty-second summer would have astonished her husband, with her new neighbors. Apparently she was not over twenty-five. Her chestnut hair was a marvel for brightness and profusion, her broad brow smooth and white, her figure, as Winston had described it to his sister, rounded, even to voluptuousness, yet supple as it had been at fifteen. In her cheeks, too, the blushes fluctuated readily and softly, and when she smiled, her teeth showed like those of a little child in size and purity. Her voice matched her beauty well, never loud, always melodious, with a peculiar, gliding, legato movement of the graceful sentences, for the pleasing effect of which she was indebted partly to Nature, and much more to Art. She appeared on this evening in a green silk dress, matronly in shade and general style, but not devoid of coquettish arrangement in the square corsage, the opening of which was filled with foam-like puffs of tulle, threatening, when her bust heaved in mirth or animated speech, to overflow the sheeny boundaries. A chaplet of ivy-leaves encircled her head, and trailed upon one shoulder; her bracelets were heavy, chased gold without gems of any kind; a single diamond glittered a point of prismatic light at her throat. Her wedding-ring was her only other ornament.

"Very sweet, I grant you, and very flavorless," returned Rosa. "And alarmingly apt to turn sour upon the stomach. I had rather be fed upon pepper lozenges."

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"You should have been born in the Spice Islands," said the hostess, tapping the dark cheek with her fore finger. "But we could not spare you from our wassail-cup to-night, my dear Lady Pimento!"

She bent slightly, that the flattery might reach no other ear. She may not have known that Rosa's Creole skin was at a wretched disadvantage, as seen against the green silk background; but others noticed it, and thought how few complexions were comparable to the wearer's. She had the faculty of converting into a foil nearly every woman who approached her.

"Thank you! So I am pimento, am I?" queried Rosa, pertly. "And each of us is to personate some condiment sweet, ardent, or aromatic in the exhilarating draught! Which shall Mr. Harrison here be?"

"Cinnamon or ginger, nutmeg or cloves?"

"That is a line of a college drinking-song!"

The speaker was a young man of eight-and-twenty; who sat between Rosa and Mabel, and whose attentions to the latter were marked. Of medium height, with sandy hair and whiskers, high cheek-bones, that gave a Gaelic cast to his physiognomy; which was remarkable for nothing in particular when at rest, and followed somewhat tardily the operations of his mind when he talked, he would probably have been the least likely person present to rivet a stranger's notice but for the circumstance that he played shadow to the host's sister and was Mrs. Aylett's brother. With regard to the feeling entertained by the former of those ladies for him, there were many and diverse opinions, but his sister's partiality was unequivocally exhibited. Of her three brothers, this the youngest, the least handsome, and the only bachelor was her favorite. She took pains to apprise his fellow-guests of this interesting fact by petting him openly, and exerting her fullest artifices to bring him out in becoming colors.

"It is," she answered him now, admiringly. "What a memory you have, my dear Herbert! Now I am never positive with whom to credit a quotation. I recollect, since you have spoken, that your famous quartette-club used to render that with much eclat, and how it was encored at the brilliant private concert you gave in behalf of some popular charity or other."

Thus encouraged, Mr. Dorrance proceeded to enlarge the fragment:

"Nose, nose, jolly red nose!
Where got you that jolly red nose?
Nutmeg and ginger, cinnamon and cloves,
These gave me this jolly red nose."

"You did not quote the third line correctly, Miss Tazewell."

"Never having been a college bacchanalian, I am excusable for the inaccuracy," she retorted. "I did not even know where I picked up the foolish bit. Having ascertained the origin to be of doubtful respectability, I shall never use it again."

"My sister has alluded to our quartette-club," pursued Mr. Dorrance, turning from the caustic beauty to Mabel, without noticing the impertinent thrust. "It was the most successful thing of the kind I ever knew of, being composed of thoroughly-trained musicians amateurs, of course and practising nothing but classic music, the productions of the best masters. There is something both instructive and elevating in such an association."

"Especially when the theme of their consideration is the 'Jolly Red Nose,'" interposed the wicked minx at his other elbow.

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Two giddy girls tittered, unawed by Mrs. Aylett's proximity and her brother's owl-like stare at his critic.

"You may not be aware, Miss Tazewell, that the lyric to which you have reference is celebrated, both for its antiquity, and the pleasing harmonies that must ever commend it to the taste of the true lover of music; although I allow that to a disciple of the modern and more flimsy school of this glorious art, it may seem puerile and ridiculous," he remarked, in grandiose patronage. Then, again to Mabel, "There were four of us as I said all students. What is it, Clara?"

"I have dropped my bracelet upon the floor, between you and Miss Tazewell," stooping to shake out Rosa's full skirts from which the trinket fell with a clinking sound.

Three gentlemen darted forward to pick it up, but her husband noted approvingly that while she accepted it graciously from the lucky finder, and thanked the others for their kindly interest in the fate of her "bauble," she held out her arm to her brother, that he might clasp it again in its place. Affable always, winning whomsoever she chose to admiration of her personal and mental endowments, she never departed from matronly decorum. The company agreed silently, or in guarded asides, that she was charming. No tongue even the most reckless or venomous ever lisped the dread word, levity, in connection with her name.

"Take care, my dear brother! you will pinch me!" those near heard her say, and she twisted the golden cirlet that the clasp might be uppermost.

Rosa's alert ear caught the hurried murmur which succeeded, and was muffled, so to speak, by her affectionate smile of gratitude.

"What were you about to say? Will you never learn prudence?"

"The dove has talons, then?" mused the eavesdropper, "But what was he in danger of revealing?"

If the interdicted revelation had connection, close or remote, with the famous quartette club, he kept well away from it after this reminder, beginning, when he resumed his seat, to discourse upon the comparative excellence of wood and coal fires, of open chimney-places and stoves.

Mrs. Aylett smiled an engaging and regretful "au revoir" to the circle, and passed on to look after the comfort and pleasure of her elder visitors, and Rosa soon discovered that her awakened curiosity would be in no wise appeased by listening to the steady, pattering drone of Mr. Dorrance's oration. Oratorical he was to a degree that excited the secret amusement of the facile Southern youths about him. With them, the art of light conversation had been a study from boyhood, the topics suitable for and pleasing to ladies' ears carefully culled and adroitly handled. To amuse and entertain was their main object. Erudite dissertations upon science and literature; abstruse arguments whatever resembled a moral thesis, a political, religious, or philosophical lecture met with the sure ban of ridicule from them, as from the fair whose devoted cavaliers they were. If they laughed, when it was safe and not impolitic to do so, at the ponderous elocution of the Northern barrister, they marvelled exceedingly more at Mabel's indulgence of his attentions. That a girl, who, in virtue of her snug fortune and attractive face, her blood and her breeding, might, as they put it, have the "pick of the county," if she wanted a husband, should lend a willing ear to the pompous platitudes, the heavy rolling periods of this alien to her native State a man without grace of manner or beauty in their nomenclature, "a solemn prig," defied all ingenuity of explanation, was an increasing wonder outlasting the prescribed nine days. He rode with the ill assurance of one who, accustomed to the sawdust floor, treadmill round, and enclosing walls of a city riding-school, was bewildered by the unequal roads and free air of the breezy country. He talked learnedly of hunting, quoting written authorities upon this or that point, of whom the unenlightened Virginians had never heard, much less read; equipped himself for the sport in a bewildering arsenal of new-fangled guns, game-bags, shot-pouches, and powder-horns, with numerous belts, diagonal, perpendicular, and horizontal, and in the field carried his gun a la Winkle; never, by any happy

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accident, brought down his bird, but was continually outraging sporting rules by firing out of time, and flushing coveys prematurely by unseasonable talking and precipitate strides in advance of his disgusted companions.

Yet he was not a fool. In the discussion of graver matters politics, law, and history that arose in the smoking-room, he was not to be put down by more fluent tongues; demolished sophistry by solid reasoning, impregnable assertions, and an array of facts that might be prolix, but was always formidable in short, sustained fully the character ascribed to him by his brother-in-law, of a "thoroughly sensible fellow."

"No genius, I allow!" Mr. Aylett would add, in speaking of his wife's bantling among his compatriots, "but a man whose industry and sound practical knowledge of every branch of his profession will make for him the fortune and name genius rarely wins."

With the younger ladies, his society was, it is superfluous to observe, at the lowest premium civility and native kindness of disposition would permit them to declare by the nameless and innumerable methods in which the dear creatures are proficient. To Rosa Tazewell he could not be anything better than a target for the arrows of her satire, or the whetstone, upon the unyielding surface of which she sharpened them. But she showed her prudential foresight in never laughing at him when out of his sight, and in Mabel's. At long ago as the night of Mr. Aylett's wedding-party at Ridgeley, her sharp eyes had seen, or she fancied they did, that the hum-drum groomsman was mightily captivated by the daughter of the house, and she had divined that Mrs. Aylett's clever ruses for throwing the two together were the outworks of her design for uniting, by a double bond, the houses of Dorrance and Aylett. She knew, furthermore, that Herbert Dorrance had travelled with the Ridgeley family for three weeks in October, and that he had now been domesticated at the homestead for ten days. Mrs. Aylett's show of fondness for him was laughable, considering what an uninteresting specimen of masculinity he was; but the handsome dame was too worldly-wise, too sage a judge of quid pro quo, to entice him to waste so much of the time he was addicted to announcing was money to him, for the sake of a good so intangible as sisterly sentimentality.

Unless there were some substantial and remunerative ulterior object to be gained by his tarrying in the neighborhood, cunning Rosa believed that "dear Bertie" would have been packed off to Buffalo, or whatever outlandish place he lived in, so soon as the bridal festivities were over, and not showed his straw-colored whiskers again in Virginia in three years, at least, instead of running down to the plantation every three months.

"If such an ingredient as the compound, double-distilled essence of flatness is to be infused into the wassail-cup, it is he who will supply it!" thought the spicy damsel, with a bewitching shrug of the plump shoulder nearest him, while engaged in a lively play of words with a gentleman on her other hand. "What can possess Mabel to encourage him systematically in her decorous style, passes my powers of divination. Maybe she means to use him as a poultice for her bruised heart. In that case, insipidity would be no objection."

Mabel had not the air of one whose heart is bruised or torn. That she had gained in queenliness within the past year was not evidence of austerity or the callousness that ensues upon the healing of a wound. The Ayletts were a stately race, and the few who, while she was in her teens, had carped at her lack of pride because of her disposition to choose friends from the walks of life lower than her own, and criticised as unbecoming the playful familiarity that caused underlings and plebeians the publicans and sinners of the aristocrat's creed to worship the ground on which she trod the censors in the court of etiquette conferred upon her altered demeanor the patent of their approbation, averring, for the thousandth time, that good blood would assert itself in the long run and bring forth the respectable fruits of refinement, self-appreciation, and condescension. The change had come over her by perceptible, but not violent, stages of progression, dating Mrs. Sutton saw with pain; Rosa, with enforced respect from the sunset hour in which she had read her brother's sentence of condemnation upon her then betrothed, now estranged, lover. After that one evening, she had not striven to conceal herself and her hurt in solitude. Neither had she borrowed from desperation a brazen helmet to hide the forehead the cruel letter had, for a brief space, laid low in the dust of anguished humiliation.

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If a whisper of her disappointment and the attendant incidents crept through the ranks of her associates, it died away for want of confirmation in her clear level-lidded eyes, elastic footfall and the willingness and frequency with which she appeared and played her part in the various scenes of gayety that made the winter succeeding her brother's marriage one long to be remembered by the pleasure-seekers of the vicinity. She had not disdained the assistance of her sister-in-law's judgment and experience in the choice of the dresses that were to grace these merry-makings, and, thanks to her own naturally excellent taste, now tacitly disputed the palm of elegant attire with that lady. Her Christmas costume, which, in many others of her age, would have been objected to by critical fashionists, as old-maidish and grave, yet set off her pale complexion none of the Ayletts were rosy after they reached man's or woman's estate and heightened her distingue bearing into regal grace. Yet it was only a heavy black silk, rich and glossy as satin, cut, as was then the universal rule of evening dress, tolerably low in the neck, with short sleeves; bunches of pomegranate-blossoms and buds for breast and shoulder-knots, and among the classic braids of her dark hair a half-wreath of the same.

She had the valuable gift of sitting still without stiffness, and not fidgetting with fan, bouquet, or hand-kerchief, as she listened or talked. Rosa's mercurial temperament betrayed itself, every instant, in the bird-like turn of her small head, the fluttering or chafing of her brown fingers, and not unfrequently by an impatient stamp, or other movement of her foot that exposed fairy toe and instep. Contemplation of the one rested and refreshed the observer; of the other, amused and excited him. Mr. Dorrance's phlegmatic nature found supreme content in dwelling upon the incarnation of patrician tranquillity at his right hand, and he regarded the actions of his frisky would-be tormentor very much as a placid, well-gorged salmon would survey, from his bed of ease upon the bottom of a stream, the gyrations of a painted dragon fly overhead.

A lull in the general conversation the reaction after a hearty laugh at a happy repartee gave others besides Mabel the opportunity of profiting by his learned remarks.

"But does not that seem to you a short-sighted policy," he was urging upon his auditor, with the assistance of a thumb and forefinger of one hand, joined as upon a pinch of snuff, and tapping the centre of the other palm; "does not that appear inexcusable profligacy of extravagance, which fells and consumes whole surface forests of magnificent trees virgin growth (I use the term as it is usually applied, although, philosophically considered, it is inaccurate) giants, which centuries will not replace, instead of seeking beneath the superficial covering of mould, nourishing these, for the exhaustless riches, carboniferous remains of antediluvian woods, hidden in the bowels of your mountains, and underlying your worn-out fields?"

Rosa was shaking with internal laughter she would give no escape except through her dancing eyes.

Indeed, Mr. Dorrance's was the only staid countenance there, as Mabel said, pleasantly, moving her chair beyond the bounds of the ring, "I, for one, find the combustion of the upper forest growth too powerful, just at this instant. This is a genuine Christmas-storm is it not? Listen to the wind?"

In the stillness enjoined by her gesture, the growl of the blast in the chimney and in the grove; the groaning, tapping, and creaking of the tree branches; the pelting sleet and the rattle of casements all over the house brought to the least imaginative a picture of out-door desolation and fireside comfort that prolonged the hush of attention. Tom Barksdale's pretty wife slipped her hand covertly into his tight grasp, and their smile was of mutual congratulation that they were brightly and warmly housed and together. Rosa, preternaturally grave and quiet, lapsed into a profound study of the mountain of red-hot embers. Several young ladies shuddered audibly, as well as visibly, and were reassured by a whispered word, or the slightest conceivable movement of their gallants' chairs nearer their own.

"I think we have the grandest storms at Ridgeley that visit our continent," resumed Mabel thoughtfully. "I suppose because the house stands so high. The wind never sounds to me anywhere else as it does here on winter nights."

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Yielding to the weird attraction of the scene invoked by her fancy, she arose and walked to the window at the eastern extremity of the hall, pulling aside the curtain that she might peer into the wild darkness. The crimson light of the burning logs and the lamp rays threw a strongly defined shadow of her figure upon the piazza floor, distinct as that projected by a solar microscope upon a sheeted wall; sent long, searching rays into the misty fall of the snow, past the spot from which she had her last glimpse of Frederic Chilton, so many, many months ago, showing the black outline of the gate where he had looked back to lift his hat to her.

What was there in the wintry night and thick tempest to recall the warmth and odor of that moist September morning, the smell of the dripping roses overhead, the balmy humidity of every breath she drew? What in her present companion that reminded her of the loving clasp that had thrilled her heart into palpitation? the earnest depth of the eyes that held hers during the one sharp, yet sweet moment of parting eyes that pledged the fealty of her lover's soul, and demanded hers then and forever? His conscience might have been sullied by crimes more heinous than those charged upon him by her brother and his friends; he might he HAD let her go easily, as one resigns his careless hold upon a paltry, unprized toy; but when her hand had rested thus in his, and his passionate regards penetrated her soul, he loved her, alone and entirely! She would fold this conviction to her torpid heart for a little while before she turned herself away finally from the memories of that love—summer and battle—autumn of her existence. If it aroused in the chilled thing some slight pangs of sentiency, it would do her no hurt to realize through these that it had once been alive.

She saw a shadow approaching to join itself to hers upon the whitened floor without, before Mr. Dorrance interrupted her reverie by words.

"The fury of the tempest you admire proves its paternity," he said, with a manifest effort at lightness. "It emanates from the vast magazines of frost, snow, and wintry wind that lie far to the north—east even of my home, and THAT is in a region you would think drear and inhospitable after the more clement airs of of your native State."

"We have very cold weather in Virginia sometimes," returned Mabel, still scanning the sentinel gate—posts, and the pyramidal arbor—vitae trees flanking them.

Her gaze was a mournful farewell, but she neglected none of the amenities of hospitality. She was used to talking commonplaces.

"We feel it all the more, too, on account of the mildness of the greater part of the winter," she subjoined.

"Allow me!" said the other, looping back the curtain she had until now held in her hand. "Whereas our systems are braced by a more uniform temperature to endure the severity of our frosts, and high, keen blasts."

"I suppose so," assented Mabel, mechanically, and unconscious as himself that meaning glances were stolen at them from the fireside circle, while the hum and conversation was continuous and louder, for the good—natured intent on the speakers' part to afford the supposed lovers the chance of carrying on their dialogue unheard.

"But our houses are very comfortable often very beautiful," Mr. Dorrance persevered, keeping to the scent of his game, as a trained pointer scours a stubble—field, narrowing his beat at every circuit; "and the hearts of those who live in them are warm and constant. It is not always true that

"The cold in clime are cold in blood;
Their love can scarce deserve the name.

"I have thought sometimes that that feeling is strongest and most enduring, the demonstration of which is guarded and infrequent, as the deepest portion of the channel is the most quiet."

At Last

If his philosophical and scientific talk were heavy and solid, his poetry and metaphors were ponderous and labored. Yet Mabel listened to him now, neither facing nor avoiding him, looking down at her hands, laid, one above the other, upon the window-sill, the image of maidenly and courteous attention.

Why should she affect diffidence, or seek to escape what she had foreseen for weeks, and made no effort to ward off? She had come to the conclusion in October that Herbert Dorrance would, when the forms he considered indispensable to regular courtship had been gone through with, ask her to marry him, and coolly taken her resolution to accept him. This morning, on the reception of a handsome Christmas gift from him, and discovering in his actions something more pointed than his customary punctilious devoirs, and in his didacticism the outermost of the closing circle of pursuit she had furthermore concluded that his happy thought was to celebrate the festal season by his betrothment. She was quite ready for the declaration, which, she anticipated, would be pompous and formal. She would have excused him from "doing" the poetical part of it; but, since it was on the programme, it was not her province to interfere.

"I am no enthusiast," he next averred, Rosa would have said, very unnecessarily "the tricks of sighing lovers are beyond or beneath my imitation. I could not 'write a sonnet to my mistress' eyebrow,' or move her to tearful pity by sounding declarations of my adoration of her peerless charms, and my anguish at the bare imagination of the possibility that these would ever be another's. But, so far as the earnest affection and sincere esteem of an honest man can satisfy the requirements of a good woman's heart, yours shall be filled, Mabel, if you will be my wife. I have admired you from the first day of our meeting. For six months I have been truly attached to you, and seriously meditated this declaration. Your brother is satisfied with the exhibit I have made of my affairs and my prospects, and sanctions my addresses. I can maintain you more than comfortably, and it shall be one of the principal aims of my life to consult your welfare in all my plans for my own advancement. I have been settled in the large and flourishing city of Albany about seven years, and ignoring the trammels of mock humility, let me say to you have, within that period, gained to a flattering extent the confidence of the most respectable portion of the community; have built up an excellent and growing business connection, and secured the entree of the best society there. These are the pecuniary and social aspects of the alliance I propose for your consideration. Through my sister, and by means of the intimate association into which her marriage with your brother has drawn you and myself, you have been enabled, within the twelvemonth that has elapsed since our introduction, one to the other, to learn whatever you wished to know with respect to my personal character, my tastes, temper, and habits. It has given me heartfelt pleasure to discover that these are, in the main, analogous to your own. I have built upon this similarity or harmony would be the better word sanguine hopes of our future happiness, should you see your way clear to accept my proffered hand, consent to link your future with mine."

"I beg to lay the 'ouse in Walcot Square, the business and myself, before Miss Summerson, for her acceptance," said magnanimous Mr. Guppy, thus clinching his declaration that "the image he had supposed was eradicated from his 'art was NOT eradicated."

It was more in keeping with Rosa's character than Mabel's to recollect the comic scene in the book they had read together lately, but the latter did remember it at this instant, and despite the momentous issues involved in her immediate action, was strongly tempted to laugh in her wooer's solemn face.

Then so abrupt and fearful are the transitions from the extremes of one emotion to another arose before her another picture. As in a dissolving view, she beheld herself walking with Frederic Chilton in the moonlighted alleys of the garden; midsummer flowers blooming to the right and left, her head drooping, in shy happiness, as the lily-bell bows to shed its freight of dew; his face glowing with the ardor of verbal confession of that he had already sought to express by letter heard his fervent, pleading murmur, "Mabel! look up, my darling! and tell me again that you will not send me away beggared and starving. I cannot yet believe in the reality of my bliss!"

These were the love-words of an "enthusiast" these –

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The vision vanished at the short, hard breath, she drew in unclasping her locked hands, and lifting her grave, tranquil eyes to the level of her suitor's.

"I will follow your example in repudiating spurious sentiment, Mr. Dorrance. I believe you to be a good, true man and that the attachment you profess for me is sincere. I believe, moreover, that my chances of securing real peace of mind will be fairer, should I commit myself to your guardianship, than if I were to surrender my affections to the keeping of one whose vows were more impassioned, who, professing to adore me as a divinity, should yet be destitute of your high moral principle and stainless honor. When I was younger and more rash in judgment and feeling, I was led into a sad mistake by the evidence of eye, ear, and a girl's imagination. I ought to tell you this, if you have not already heard the story. I will not deceive you into the persuasion that I can ever feel for you, or any other man, the love, or what I thought was love, I knew in the few brief weeks of my early betrothal. But you must know how that ended, and I have no desire to repeat the mad experiment of risking my earthly all upon one throw of fate. If friendship or esteem, and the resolve to show myself a worthy recipient of your generous confidence will content you, all else shall be as you wish."

In her determination to be candid, to leave him in no uncertainty as to her actual sentiments, she had concerted a response but a degree less stilted than his proposal. She would have been ashamed of it had he appeared less gratified.

His dull eyes brightened; his face flushed and beamed with unfeigned delight, and in his transport he said the most natural and graceful thing that ever escaped him during his wooing.

"I am content! The second love of Mabel Aylett must ever be more to me than the first of any other woman!"

True, he nearly spoiled all the next minute, by producing from his pocket a wee velvet case, from which he extracted a valuable diamond ring, and proceeded, then and there, in the shadow of the accommodating curtain, to fit it upon her finger. He had foreseen that she would not be hardly won, and with characteristic providence had prepared himself for the event.

The blood leaped to Mabel's temples and the fire to her eye, at the prompt seal set by the practical non-enthusiast upon the contract, but she bit her lip, and submitted after a second of thought. He owed his exemption from rebuke to her memory of his latest utterance. She could not mistake the tone of genuine feeling, and she overlooked the breach of taste that followed; treasured up the heart-saying as one of the few souvenirs she cared to preserve of his courtship.

"If he is content, I need not be miserable," was the consolatory reflection with which she took upon herself her new and binding obligations.

CHAPTER VIII. THE FACE AT THE WINDOW.

MRS. AYLETT was in her best feather that night; the suave chatelaine, the dutiful consort; the tactful warder of the interesting pair whose movements she had not ceased to watch from the moment they took their places with the party about the fire-place in the hall until she, alone of all the company, saw Herbert Dorrance draw the diamond signet from its receptacle, and the sparkle of the jewel as it slipped to its abiding-place upon Mabel's finger.

Lest something unusual in their look or behavior should excite the suspicions of their companions, make them the focus of inquisitive observation and whispered remark, the diplomate passed again into the hall, sweeping along in advance of them when they deserted their curtained recess, and would have joined the rest of the company.

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"Are we to have no dancing this evening?" she said, in hospitable solicitude. "It wants an hour yet of supper-time. The exercise will do you all good, particularly the young ladies, who have not stirred beyond the piazzas to-day. I have been waiting for an invitation to play for you, but my desire for your welfare has overcome native humility. Will you accept my services as your musician?"

The suggestion was acceded to by acclamation, and while one gentleman led her to the grand piano which stood between the front windows of the drawing-room, and another opened a music-book which she named, a set was quickly formed in the long apartment, the soberer portion of the crowd ranging themselves along the walls as lookers-on.

Mrs. Aylett was a proficient in dance-music. She never volunteered to perform that which she was not conscious of doing well. She had occasionally taken the floor for a single quadrille, to oblige a favored guest always a middle-aged or elderly gentleman or moved through a cotillion with ease and spirit as partner to her husband, but she declined dancing, as a rule; was altogether indifferent to the amusement, while she delighted to oblige her friends by playing for them whenever and as long as they required her aid. Without saying, in so many words, that she disapproved of the waltz for unmarried ladies, and frowned upon promiscuous dancing for matrons, she yet managed to regulate the social code of the neighborhood in both these respects, was imitated and quoted by the most discreet of chaperones and belles.

Mr. Dorrance was Mabel's partner; Rosa stood up with Randolph Harrison, a gay youth, who was her latest attache; Tom Barksdale led out a blushing, yet sprightly school-girl, and Imogene was his vis-a-vis supported by an ancient admirer, who had comforted himself for her preference for another man by falling in love with a prettier woman. The room was decorated with garlands of running cedar a vine known in higher latitudes as "ground-pine," and which carpeted acres of the Ridgeley woods. The vases on the mantel were filled with holly, and other gayly colored berry boughs, while roses, lemon and orange blossoms, mignonette and violets from the conservatory were set about on tables and brackets, blending fresher and more wholesome odors with those of the Parisian extracts wafted from the ladies' dresses and handkerchiefs.

Mr. Aylett had accidentally, it would seem his wife understood that the action was premeditated stationed himself at an angle to the piano that allowed him a fair view of her, and did not grudge the merriest bachelor there his share of enjoyment, while he could keep furtive watch upon the changeful countenance, the Sappho-like head, and the delicate hands which one could have thought made the music, rather than did the obedient keys they touched. The wedded lovers had taste and pride in equal proportions, and a parade of their satisfaction in one another for the edification or amusement of indifferent spectators would have been revolting to both, but the ray that sped from half-averted eyes, from time to time, and was returned by a kindling glance, also shot sidelong beneath dropped lashes, said more to each other than would a quarto volume of stereotyped protestations and caresses, such as Tom Barksdale dealt out profusely to his beautiful Imogene. Clearly, neither Mr. nor Mrs. Winston Aylett was fond of sugar-candy.

Mabel's faith in the sincerity of her sister-in-law's agreeable sayings and ways was not invariable nor absolute. She liked her after a certain fashion; got along swimmingly with her, the amazed public decided "SO much better than could have been expected, and than was customary with relations by marriage, and not by descent;" yet her more upright nature and different training helped her to detect the petty artifices with which Clara cajoled the unwary, moulded the plastic at her will. But she had never questioned the reality of her love for Winston. As a wife, her deportment was exemplary, her devotion too freely and consistently rendered to have its spring in policy or affectation. She gloried in her handsome, courtly lord, and in his attachment for herself. Whether she would have espied the same causes for loving exultation in him, had he been a poor clergyman or merchant's clerk, was an irrelevant consideration. The master of Ridgeley was not to be contemplated apart from the possessions and dignities that were his inalienable pedestal. Clara Dorrance was a clever woman, and she had given these due weight in accepting his hand; and they may have had their influence in moving her to unceasing, yet unobtrusive endeavor to make herself still more necessary to his happiness, to strengthen her hold upon him by every means

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an affectionate and beloved wife has at her command. She had done well for herself she was thinking while he concluded as silently within himself that the slight pensiveness tempering the expressive face was its loveliest dress.

She beautiful and penniless, ambitious, and a devotee of pleasure yet dependent for food and clothing upon her mother's life—interest in an estate, not one penny of which would revert to her children at her decease; without kindred and without society in the elegant suburb they had inhabited for four or five years, might have been elated at a less brilliant match than that she had made. The "best people" of the aforesaid suburb were exclusive; slow to form intimacies with their unaccredited neighbors, and very hasty in breaking them at the faintest whiff of a doubtful or tainted reputation. And of the second best the Dorrances had kept themselves clear. Having met and captivated her wealthy lover on a rarely fortunate summer jaunt, made in company with her eldest brother, his wife, and two relatives of the last—named, Clara did not repel him or disgust the best people of Roxbury by indiscreet raptures over, or exhibition of, her prize.

"I feel with you an invincible repugnance to throwing open our hearts to the inspection of the unsympathizing world, at the most sacred moment of our lives," she said, in stating her preference for a quiet morning—wedding, a family breakfast, and instant departure upon their bridal—trip. "If I begin to invite my friends and neighbors, our cottage lawn and garden included would not contain them, and after all were asked whom I could remember, as many more would be mortally offended at being forgotten."

The bridegroom gladly acquiescing, with a compliment to her womanly delicacy, the ceremony was performed in the presence of the bride's nearest relatives; an elegant repast was served, at which the Dorrance plate made an imposing show, and Clara turned her back upon the scenes and reminiscences of her past life to commence the world anew.

Yes, she had done very well for herself how wonderfully well she knew better than did any one else, and at this date she had fresh cause for self—gratulation. Through her, Herbert, her favorite brother, was likely to form an alliance which would be a timely and substantial stepping—stone to his aggrandizement and wealth. There were more reasons why she should hold her head higher why the blood should clothe her cheek with a richer carmine, and a smile encircle the mouth, as one swift glance took in the spacious, luxurious room, thronged with well—dressed aristocrats, her husband the stateliest, most honored of them all, yet her fond thrall; the splendid apparel in which his wealth had bedecked her, the queen of the scene more reasons, I say, for the ineffable thrill of pleasure that coursed, a rapid, intoxicating stream, through her veins, than grateful affection for the author of all these goods. With a Sybarite's dread of pain and loneliness, she seldom trusted herself to look at the dark curtain in the background, against which her latter—day glories shone the more dazzlingly. But to—night she felt safe upon her throne sat, the lady of kingdoms, sultana in the realm of her spouse's heart and in his domain, and could stare full upon the past could measure, without shuddering, the height of her actual and assumed estate above

Mr. Aylett stepped forward in haste and concern at the deadly pallor that overspread her face the look of horror, fear, loathing, before which smile and brightness fled, blasted into wretchedness. The revellers stopped in their giddy measure at the discordant jangle, preluding a dead silence.

Mabel, chancing in the evolutions of the set to be nearest the window, and noting the direction of the fainting woman's eyes, was quick enough to see a shadow flit across the yellow square of light upon the snowy floor of the portico a man's shape, as it appeared to her, crouching and slinking out of view into the darkness.

"She saw something, or somebody, through the window, and was frightened," she said, in a low voice, checking Tom Barksdale and another gentleman, who would have pressed with the inconsiderate crowd toward the senseless figure Mr. Aylett had laid upon the sofa. "Will you see what it was?"

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The request cleared the room directly of all the men of the assembly, with the exception of Winston and Dr. Ritchie, a young physician, who was superintending the administration of restoratives to Mrs. Aylett.

She was reviving rapidly when the search party gave in their report. There were fresh tracks upon the piazza, and these they had traced to the back of the house, losing them there in the drifting snow, the wind blowing like a hurricane, and ploughing what had fallen and what was descending into constantly changing heaps. But the watch-dogs had been unchained, and four of the negro men detailed as sentinels, the gentlemen engaging to make the round of the premises again before bed-time.

The effect of this communication was the reverse of tranquillizing upon the patient. The wild, terrified look in her eye resembled the unreasoning fear of lunacy as she seized her husband's arm.

"Indeed, indeed they must not. It is not right or safe to make such a serious matter of my foolish nervousness. I am not sure there was any one there! It was probably an optical delusion. I was plunged in a reverie, thinking of happy, peaceful, lovely things" with the sickly feint of a meaning smile into his face "and, happening to look at the window, I fancied that I saw" with all her self-command her voice failed here, and she put her hand before her eyes for a moment before she could go on "I thought I saw SOMETHING! It may have been a human face it may have been the shadow of the curtains, or the reflection of the lights upon the glass; but it startled me, appearing so abruptly. Please say no more about it. If it was a living creature, it must have been one of the servants, tempted by curiosity to peep at the dancers."

"It will prove to be a costly indulgence to him, if I can discover who the rascal was," said Mr. Aylett, decisively. "I would not have had you so startled for the worth of all the lazy hounds on the premises."

His wife laid her hand upon his.

"It is Christmas night, my love, and the poor fellow is excusable. He showed excellent taste. It was a very pretty scene. I shall not soon forgive myself for throwing it into such 'admired disorder.' Miss Scott" [to a musical spinster] "may I tax your politeness so far as to ask you to take my seat at the piano? I must go to my room for a few minutes," raising her finger smilingly to her displaced ivy wreath. "If you would testify your tolerance of my folly, please go on with your amusement. I shall be encouraged to return when I hear the music."

Her collected, urbane self once more, she took her husband's arm, and passed through the opening ranks of her friends, bowing to this side and that, with apologetic banter and graceful words of regret still very pale, but changed in no other respect.

"A singular episode in an evening's entertainment," said Mr. Dorrance, leading Mabel to her stand in the re-forming set. "I never knew Clara to succumb before to any type of syncope or asphyxia. She is a woman of remarkable nerve and courage. And, by the way, how preposterous is the common use of the word 'nervous.' The ablest lexicographers define it as 'strong, well-strung, full of nerve,' whereas, in ordinary parlance, it has come to signify the very opposite of these. When I speak of a nervous speaker or writer, for example, what do I mean?"

"One who imbibes unwholesomely large quantities of strong green tea, and sees hobgoblins peering at her through the window-panes!" said Rosa, sarcastically artless, tripping by in season to overhear this clause of his small-talk.

Mabel's imperturbable good-breeding prevented embarrassment or resentment at the interruption. At heart, she was vexed that Rosa should omit no opportunity of shooting privily and audaciously at her practical admirer, but to betray her appreciation of the impertinence would be to subject herself to imputations of sensitiveness on his account.

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"I saw the hobgoblin without the aid of green tea," she rejoined. "There was really some one upon the porch, but why the apparition should scare Clara out of her wits, I cannot divine. The negro is an incurable Paul Pry, and, next to dancing a Christmas jig himself, is the pleasure of seeing others do it."

Mrs. Aylett verified her brother's encomium upon her nerve by reappearing in the saloon by the time another set was over, and just before the announcement of supper, radiant and self–possessed, prepared to do double social duty to atone for the fright she had caused, and the temporary damp her swoon had cast over the festivities.

The revel went joyously forward Christmas–games and incantations, the dexterous introduction, by a jocose old gentleman, of a mistletoe–bough into the festoons draping the chandelier, and divers other tricks, all of which were taken in excellent part by the victims thereof, and vociferously applauded by the spectators. The great hall–clock had rung out twelve strokes, and two or three methodical seniors were beginning to whisper to one another their intention to take French leave of the indefatigable juniors and seek their couches, when a continued tumult arose from the yard barking and shouts, and voices in angry or eager dispute.

Unmindful of the nipping air, the ladies flew to the windows and raised them, while the gentlemen, in a body, rushed out upon the porch, many to the lawn the scene of the disturbance.

"They have caught him!"

"There are several of them a gang of thieves, no doubt!"

"No! I see but one! They are bringing him to the house!" were morsels of information passed over the shoulders of the foremost rank of inquisitive fair ones to the rear, but none were able to answer the returning inquiries.

"Who is it?"

"What does he look like like?"

"Does he offer any resistance?"

"Do you suppose he is a burglar, or only a common vagrant?"

"I thought the Ridgeley grounds were never infested by prowling beggars, or other vagabonds," said a lady to Mrs. Aylett, who prudently remained near the fire, even then shivering with the cold, and casting uneasy looks at the windows.

"Mr. Aylett is a model to his brother magistrates in his treatment of such nuisances," remarked another "His name is a terror to strollers, whether they be organ–grinders, pedlers, or incendiaries."

Mrs. Aylett, excessively pale, applied her vinaigrette to her nose, and trembled yet more violently.

"I believe he is very strict," she assented. "But I am really afraid those ladies will take cold! The snow–air is piercing. And they are most of them heated with dancing. Cannot we prevail upon them to close the windows, now that the mysterious prowler is secured? We shall hear all about him when the gentlemen return, and they will not stay out of doors longer than is necessary."

They began to pour back into the room, while she was speaking, laughing, and talking, all together shaking the snow–powder from their hair and hands, and anathematizing the cold and their thin boots. The particulars of the midnight disturbance were quickly disseminated. The ebon sentinels had, directed by the barking of their canine associates, discovered, under a holly hedge on one side of the yard, a man lying upon the earth, and almost buried

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in the snow he seemed not to have strength to throw off. He was either drunk or so nearly frozen as to be incapable of answering coherently their demands as to what was his name and what his business upon the premises. The interrogations of the gentlemen and the ungentle shakings administered by his captors elicited nothing but groans and muttered oaths. He could not, or would not, walk without support, and to leave him where he was, or to turn him adrift into the public road, would be certain death. Therefore Mr. Aylett had ordered him to be confined for the night in a garret room. In the morning he might be examined to more purpose.

"But he ought to have a fire, and something hot and nourishing to drink!" exclaimed Mrs. Button, upon hearing the story. "He will freeze in that barn of a place poor wretch!"

"I imagine he has no need of additional stimulants," said Mrs. Aylett, dryly, again resorting to her smelling-bottle. "From what the gentlemen say, I judge that he had laid in a supply of caloric sufficient to last through the night. And the first use he would make of fire would be to burn the house over our heads. His lodgings are certainly more comfortable than those selected by himself. There is little danger of his finding fault with them. What manner of looking creature is he?"

"An unkempt vagabond!" rejoined Randolph Harrison, rubbing his blue fingers before the fire. "His clothes are ragged, and frozen stiff. I suppose he has been out in the storm ever since it set in. There were icicles upon his beard and hair, his hat having fallen off. It is a miracle he did not freeze to death long ago. It is a bitter night."

"Did you say he was an old man?" inquired the hostess languidly, from the depths of her easy chair.

"He is not a young one, for his hair is grizzled. But we will form ourselves into a court of inquiry in the morning, with Mr. Aylett as presiding officer have in the nocturnal wanderer, and hear what account he can give of himself. Who knows what romantic history we may hear one that may become a Christmas legend in after years?"

"You will get nothing more sensational than the confessions of a hen-roost robber, I suspect," said Mrs. Aylett, more wearily than was consistent with her role of attentive hostess.

Her husband noticed the tokens of exhaustion, and interposed to spare her further exertion.

"Our friends will excuse you if you retire without delay, Clara. You still feel the effects of your agitation and faintness."

This was the signal for a general dispersion of the ladies the gentlemen, or most of them, adjourning to the smoking-room.

Since the late extraordinary influx of visitors, Mabel had shared her aunt's chamber, but, instead of seeking this now, she went straight from the parlor to the supper-room, where she found, as she had expected, Mrs. Sutton in the height of business, directing the setting of the breakfast-table, clearing away the debris of the evening feast, and counting the silver with unusual care, lest a stray fork or spoon had, by some hocus-pocus known to the class, been slipped into the pocket of the supposititious burglar.

"Aunt," began Mabel, drawing her aside, "that poor wretch up-stairs must be cared for. It is the height of cruelty to lock him up in a fireless room, without provisions or dry clothing. If he should die, would we be guiltless?"

Mrs. Sutton's benevolent physiognomy was perplexed.

"Didn't I say as much in the other room, before everybody, my dear? And didn't SHE put me down with one of her magisterial sentences? She is mistress here not you or I. Besides, Winston has the key of that east garret in

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his pocket, and I would not be the one to ask him for it, since he has had his wife's opinion upon the subject of humanity to prisoners."

"I shall not trouble him with my petition. I discovered by accident, when I was a child, that the key of the north room would open that door. If I order, upon my own responsibility, that a cup of hot coffee, and some bread and meat be taken up to him, you will not deny them to me, I suppose?"

"Certainly not, my child! but I dare not send a servant with them. Winston's orders were positive they all tell me that not a soul should attempt to hold communication with him. And what he says he means."

"Then," replied Winston's sister, with a spark of his spirit, "I will take the waiter up myself. I cannot sleep with this horror hanging over me the fear lest, through my neglect or cowardice, a fellow-being whose only offence against society, so far as we know is his dropping down in a faint or stupor under a hedge on the Ridgeley plantation should lose his life."

"Your feelings are only what I should expect from you, my love; but think twice before you go up-stairs yourself! It would be considered an outrageous impropriety, were it found out."

"Less outrageous than to let a stranger perish for want of such attention as one would vouchsafe to a stray dog?" questioned Mabel, with a queer smile. "Roger! pour me out a bowl of coffee at once. Put it on a waiter with a plate of bread and butter or stay! oysters will be more warming and nourishing. I am very sure that Daphne is keeping a saucepanful hot for her supper and yours. Hurry!"

The waiter, whose wife was the cook, ducked his head with a grin confirmatory of his young mistress' shrewd suspicion, and vanished to obey her orders, never dreaming but she wanted the edibles for her private consumption. He enjoyed late and hot suppers, and why not she? Thanks to this persuasion, the coffee was strong, clear, and boiling, the oysters done to a turn, and smoking from the saucepan.

Taking the tray from him, with a gracious "Thank you! This is just as it should be," Mabel negatived his offer to carry it to her room, and started up-stairs.

Mrs. Sutton followed with a lighted candle.

"Winston or no Winston, you shall not face that desperado alone," she said, obstinately. "There is no telling what he may do murder you, perhaps, or at least knock you down in order to escape. Winston talks as if he were the captain of the forty thieves."

"He is pretty well hors de combat now, at any rate," smiled Mabel, but allowing her aunt to precede her with the light to the upper floor. "And should he offer violence scalding coffee may defend me as effectually as Morgiana's boiling oil routed the gang. MY captain had to be carried up-stairs by four servants, who left him upon a pile of old mattresses in one corner of the room. Here we are!"

They were in a wide hall at the top of the house, the unceiled rafters above their heads, carpetless boards beneath their feet. Mabel set her waiter upon a worm-eaten, iron-bound chest, and went further down the passage to get the key of the north room. Her light footstep stirred dismal echoes in the dark corners; the wind screamed through every crack and keyhole, like a legion of piping devils; rumbled lugubriously over the steep roof. The one candle flickering in the draught showed Mabel's white bust and arms, like those of a phantom, beaming through a cloud of blackness, when she stooped to try the key in the lock of the prison-chamber.

After fitting it, she knocked before she turned it in the rusty wards again, and more loudly then spoke, putting her lips close to the key-hole:

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"We are friends, and have brought you supper. Can we come in?"

There was no answer, and with a beating heart she unlocked the door, pushed it ajar, and motioned to Aunt Rachel to hold her candle up, that she might gain a view of the interior.

The wan, uncertain rays revealed the heap of mattresses, and upon them what looked like a mass of rough, wet clothing, without sound or motion.

"He is pretending to be asleep! Take care!" whispered Mrs. Sutton, trying to restrain Mabel as she pressed by her into the room.

"He is dead, I fear!" was the low answer.

Forgetful of her nephew's prohibition and her recent fears, the good widow entered, and leaned anxiously over the stranger's form. A tall, gaunt man, clad in threadbare garments, which hung loosely upon the shrunken breast and arms, black hair and beard, mottled with white, ragged, and unshorn, and dank from exposure to the snow and sleet; a chalky-white face, with closed and sunken eyes, sharpened nose, and prominent cheek-bones this was what they beheld as the candle flamed up steadily in the comparatively still air of the ceiled apartment. The miserable coat was buttoned up to his chin, and the shreds of a coarse woollen comforter, torn from his throat at his capture, still hung about his shoulders. His clothes were sodden with wet, as Harrison had said, and the solitary pretence at rendering him comfortable for the night, had been the act of a negro, who contemptuously flung an old blanket across his nether limbs before leaving him to his lethargic slumbers. He had not moved since they tossed him, like a worthless sack, upon this sorry resting-place, but lay an unsightly huddle of arms, legs, and head, such as was never achieved, much less continued, by any one save a drunken man or a corpse. Mabel ended the awed silence.

"This is torpor not sleep, nor yet death," she said, without recoiling from the pitiful wreck.

Indeed, as she spoke, she bent to feel his pulse; held the emaciated wrist in her warm fingers until she could determine whether the feeble stroke were a reality, or a trick of the imagination.

"Dr. Ritchie should see him immediately. He is in the smoking-room. If you call him out, it will excite less remark than if I were to do it. Don't let Winston guess why you want him," were her directions to her aunt, uttered quickly, but distinctly.

"Yon will not stay here! At least, go into the hall! What will the doctor think?"

"I shall remain where I am. The poor creature is too far gone to presume upon my condescension," with a faint sarcastic emphasis.

At Mrs. Sutton's return with the physician, she perceived that her niece had not awaited her coming in sentimental idleness. A thick woollen coverlet was wrapped about the prostrate figure, and Mabel, upon her knees on the dusty hearth, was applying the candle to a heap of waste paper and bits of board she had ferreted out in closets and cuddly-holes. It caught and blazed up hurriedly in season to facilitate the doctor's examination of the patient, thrown so oddly upon his care. Mrs. Sutton had not neglected, in her haste, to procure a warm shawl from her room, and she folded it about the girl's shoulders, whispering an entreaty that she would go to bed, and leave the man to her management and Dr. Ritchie.

Mabel waved her off impatiently.

"Presently! when I hear how he is!" moving toward the comfortless couch.

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The physician looked around at the rustle of her dress, his pleasant face perturbed, and perhaps remorseful.

"This is a bad business! I wish I had examined him when he was brought in. There would have been more hope of doing something for him then. But, to tell the truth, I was one of the five or six prudent fellows who stayed upon the piazza, and witnessed the capture from a distance. I had no idea of the man's real situation. Mrs. Sutton! can I have brandy, hot water, and mustard at once! Miss Mabel! may I trouble you to call your brother? He ought to be advised of this unforeseen turn of affairs."

His emissaries were prompt. In less than ten minutes, all the appliances the household could furnish for the restoration of the failing life were at his command. An immense fire roared in the long-disused chimney; warm blankets, bottles of hot water and mustard-poultices were prepared by a corps of officious servants; the master of the mansion, with three or four friends at his heels, and a half-smoked cigar in his hand, had looked in for a moment, to hope that Dr. Ritchie would not hesitate to order whatever was needed, and to predict a favorable result as the meed of his skill.

Half an hour after her brother's visit, Mabel tapped at the door to inquire how the patient was, and whether she could be of use in any way. She still wore her evening dress, and the fire of excitement had not gone out in her eyes and complexion.

"Don't sit up longer," said the doctor, with the authority of an old friend. "It will not benefit your protege for you to have a headache, pale cheeks, and heavy eyes to-morrow, while it will render others, whose claims upon you are stronger, very miserable."

She thanked him laconically for his thoughtfulness, and bade him "good-night," without a responsive gleam of playfulness. Her heart was weighed down with sick horror. The almost certainty of which he spoke with professional coolness, was to her, who had never within her recollection stood beside a death-bed, a thing too frightful to be anticipated without dread, however its terrors might be alleviated by affection and wealth. As the finale of their Christmas frolic perhaps the consequence of wilful neglect in those who should have known better than to abandon the wanderer to the ravages of hunger, cold, and intoxication the idea was ghastly beyond description.

She was about to diverge from the main hall on the second floor into the lateral passage leading to Mrs. Sutton's room in the wing, when her name was called in a gentle, guarded key by her sister-in-law.

CHAPTER IX. HE DEPARTETH IN DARKNESS.

"COME in! I want to talk to you!" said Mrs. Aylett, beckoning Mabel into her chamber, from the door of which she had hailed her. "Sit down, my poor girl! You are white as a sheet with fatigue. I cannot see why you should have been suffered to know anything about this very disagreeable occurrence. And Emmeline has been telling me that Mrs. Sutton actually let you go up into that Arctic room."

"It was my choice. Aunt Rachel went along to carry the light and to keep me company. She would have dissuaded me from the enterprise if she could," responded Mabel, sinking into the low, cushioned chair before the fire, which the mistress of the luxurious apartment had just wheeled forward for her, and confessing to herself, for the first time, that she was chilly and very tired.

"But where were the servants, my dear? Surely you are not required, in your brother's house, to perform such menial services as taking food and medicine to a sick vagrant."

"Winston had forbidden them to go near the room. I wish I had gone up earlier. I might have been the means of

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saving a life which, however worthless it may seem to us, must be of value to some one."

"Is he so far gone?"

The inquiry was hoarsely whispered, and the speaker leaned back in her fauteuil, a spark of fierce eagerness in her dilated eyes, Mabel, in her own anxiety, did not consider overstrained solicitude in behalf of a disreputable stranger. She had more sympathy with it than with the relapse into apparent nonchalance that succeeded her repetition of the doctor's report.

"He does not think the unfortunate wretch will revive, even temporarily, then?" commented the lady, conventionally compassionate, playing with her ringed fingers, turning her diamond solitaire in various directions to catch the firelight. "How unlucky he should have strayed upon our grounds! Was he on his way to the village?"

"Who can say? Not he, assuredly. He has not spoken a coherent word. Dr. Ritchie thinks he will never be conscious again."

"I am afraid the event will mar our holiday gayeties to some extent, stranger though he is!" deplored the hostess. "Some people are superstitious about such things. His must have been the spectral visage I saw at the window. I was sure it was that of a white man although Winston tried, to persuade me to the contrary."

"It is dreadful!" ejaculated Mabel energetically. "He, poor homeless wayfarer, perishing with cold and want in the very light of our summer-like rooms; getting his only glimpse of the fires that would have brought back vitality to his freezing body through closed windows! Then to be hunted down by dogs, and locked up by more unfeeling men, as if he were a ravenous beast, instead of a suffering fellow-mortal! I shall always feel as if I were, in some measure, chargeable with his death should he die. Heaven forgive us our selfish thoughtlessness, our criminal disregard of our brother's life!"

"I understood you to say there was no hope!" interrupted Mrs. Aylett.

"So Dr. Ritchie declares. But I cannot bear to believe it!"

She pressed her fingers upon her eyeballs as if she would exclude some horrid vision.

"My dear sister! your nerves have been cruelly tried. To-morrow, you will see this matter and everything else through a different medium. As for the object of your amiable pity, he is, without doubt, some low, dissipated creature, of whom the world will be well rid."

"I am not certain of that. There are traces of something like refinement and gentle breeding about him in all his squalor and unconsciousness. I noticed his hands particularly. They are slender and long, and his features in youth and health must have been handsome. Dr. Ritchie thought the same. Who can tell that his wife is not mourning his absence to-night, as the fondest woman under this roof would regret her husband's disappearance? And she may never learn when and how he died never visit his grave!"

"I have lived in this wicked world longer than you have, my sweet Mabel; so you must not quarrel with me if these fancy pictures do not move me as they do your guileless heart," said Mrs. Aylett, the sinister shadow of a mocking smile playing about her mouth. "Nor must you be offended with me for suggesting as a pendant to your crayon sketch of widowhood and desolation the probability that the decease of a drunken thief or beggar cannot be a serious bereavement, even to his nearest of kin. Women who are beaten and trampled under foot by those who should be their comfort and protection are generally relieved when they take to vagrancy as a profession. It may be that this man's wife, if she were cognizant of his condition, would not lift a finger, or take a step to prolong his life for one hour. Such things have been."

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"More shame to human nature that they have!" was the impetuous rejoinder. "In every true woman's heart there must be tender memories of buried loves, let their death have been natural or violent."

"So says your gentler nature. There are women and I believe they are in the majority in this crooked lower sphere in whose hearts the monument to departed affection when love is indeed no more is a hatred that can never die. But we have wandered an immense distance from the unlucky chicken-thief or burglar overhead. Dr. Ritchie's sudden and ostentatious attack of philanthropy will hardly beguile him into watching over his charge a guardian angel in dress-coat and white silk neck-tie until morning?"

"Mammy is to relieve him so soon as he is convinced that human skill can do nothing for his relief," said Mabel very gravely.

Her sister-in-law's high spirits and jocular tone jarred upon her most disagreeably, but she tried to bear in mind in what dissimilar circumstances they had passed the last hour. If Clara appeared unfeeling, and her remarks were distinguished by less taste than was customary in one so thoroughly bred, it was because the exhilaration of the evening was yet upon her, and she had not seen the death's-head prone upon the pillows in the cheerless attic. Thoughts of poverty and dying beds were unseemly in this apartment when the very warmth and fragrance of the air told of fostering and sheltering love. The heavy curtains did not sway in the blast that hurled its whole fury against the windows; the furniture was handsome, and in perfect harmony with the dark, yet glowing hues of the carpet, and with the tinted walls. A tall dressing mirror let into a recess reflected the picture, brilliant with firelight that colored the shadows themselves; lengthened into a deep perspective the apparent extent of the chamber and showed, like a fine old painting, the central figure in the vista.

Mrs. Aylett had exchanged her evening dress for a cashmere wrapper, the dark-blue ground of which was enlivened by a Grecian pattern of gold and scarlet; her unbound hair draped her shoulders, and framed her arch face, as she threaded the bronze ripples with her fingers. She looked contented, restful, complacent in herself and her belongings one whom Time had touched lovingly as he swept by, and whom sorrow had forgotten.

"Not asleep yet!" was her husband's exclamation, entering before anything further passed between the two women; and when his sister started up, with an apology for being found there at so late an hour, he added, more reproachfully than he ever spoke to his wife, "You should not have kept her up, Mabel! Her strength has been too much taxed already to-night. I hoped and believed that she had been in bed and asleep for an hour."

"Don't blame her!" said Mrs. Aylett, hastily. "I called her in as she was proceeding to bed in the most decorous manner possible. I may as well own the truth of my weakness. I was nervously wakeful the effect, in part, of the ultra-strong coffee Dr. Ritchie advised me to drink at supper-time in part, of the silly sensation I got up to terrify my friends. So I maneuvered to secure a fireside companion until you should have dispatched your cigar. Gossip is as pleasant a sedative to ladies as is a prime Havana to their lords."

"And what is the latest morceau?" inquired Mr Aylett, indulgently, when Mabel had gone.

He was standing by his wife's chair, and she leaned her head against him, her bright eyes uplifted to his, her hair falling in a long, burnished fringe over his arm a fond, sparkling siren, whom no man, with living blood in his veins, could help stooping to kiss before her lips had shaped a reply.

"You wouldn't think it an appetizing morsel! But I listened with interest to our unsophisticated Mabel's account of her Quixotic expedition to what will, I foresee, be the haunted chamber of Ridgeley in the next generation. Her penchant for adventure has, I suspect, embellished her portrait of the hapless house-breaker."

"A common-looking tramp!" returned Winston, disdainfully. "As villanous a dog in physiognomy and dress as I ever saw! Such an one as generally draws his last breath where he drew the first in a ditch or jail; and too seldom,

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for the peace and safety of society, finds his noblest earthly elevation upon a gallows. It is a nuisance, though, having him pay this trifling debt of Nature nobody but Nature would trust him in my house. There must be an inquest and a commotion. The whole thing is an insufferable bore. Ritchie has given him up, and gone to bed, leaving old Phillis on the watch, with unlimited rations of whiskey, and a pile of fire-wood higher than herself. But I did not mean that you should hear anything about this dirty business. It is not fit for my darling's ears. Mabel showed even less than her usual discretion in detailing the incidents of her adventure to you."

Flattery of his sister had never been a failing with him, but, since his marriage, the occasions were manifold in which her inferiority to his wife was so glaring as to elicit a verbal expression of disapproval. It was remarkable that Clara's advocacy of Mabel's cause, at these times, so frequently failed to alter his purpose of censure or to mitigate it, since, in all other respects, her influence over him was more firmly established each day and hour.

Old Phillis, Mabel's nurse and the doctress of the plantation albeit a less zealous devotee than her master had intimated of the potent beverages left within her reach, ostensibly for the use of her patient should he revive sufficiently to swallow a few drops was yet too drowsy from the fatigues of the day, sundry cups of Christmas egg-nogg, and the obesity of age, to maintain alert vigil over one she, in common with her fellow-servitors, scorned as an aggravated specimen of the always and ever-to-be despicable genus, "poor white folks." There was next to nothing for her to do when the fire had been replenished, the bottles of hot water renewed at the feet and heart, and fresh mustard draughts wound about the almost pulseless limbs of the dying stranger. She did contrive to keep Somnus at arm's length for a while longer, by a minute examination of his upper clothing, which, by Dr. Ritchie's directions, had been removed, that the remedies might be more conveniently applied, and the heated blankets the sooner infuse a vital glow through the storm-beaten frame. The ancient crone took them up with the tips of her fingers ragged coat, vest, and pantaloons rummaged in the same contemptuous fashion every pocket, and kicked over the worn, soaked boots with the toe of her leather brogan, sniffing her disappointment at the worthlessness of the habiliments and the result of her search.

"Fit fur nothin' but to bury his poor carcuss in!" she grunted, and had recourse to her own plethoric pocket for a clay pipe and a bag of tobacco.

This lighted by a coal from the hearth, she tied a second handkerchief over that she wore, turban-wise, on her head, mumbling something about "cold ears" and "rheumatiz;" settled herself in a rush-bottomed chair, put her feet upon the rounds of another, and was regularly on duty, prepared for any emergency, and to be alarmed at nothing that might occur.

So strict was the discipline she established over herself in fifteen minutes, that she did not stir at the creaking of the bolt, or the shriller warning of the unoiled hinges, as the door moved cautiously back, and a cloaked form became dimly visible in the opening. A survey of the inside of the chamber, the unmoving nurse and her senseless charge, with the fumes of brandy and tobacco, reassured the visitant. Her stockingless feet were thrust into wadded slippers; over her white night-dress was a dark-blue wrapper, and, in addition to this protection against the cold, she was enveloped in a great shawl, disposed like a cowl about her head. Without rustle or incautious mis-step she gained the side of the improvised bed, and leaned over it. The face of the occupant was turned slightly toward the left shoulder, and away from the light. The apparition raised herself, with a gesture of impatience, caught the candle from the rickety table at the head of the mattress, snuffed it hurriedly, and again stooped toward the recumbent figure, with it in her hand.

It was then that the vigilant watcher unclosed her flabby lids, slowly, and without start or exclamation, much as a dozing cat blinks when a redder sparkle from the fire dazzles her out of dreams. One hard wink, one bewildered stare, and Phillis was awake and wary. Her chin sank yet lower upon her chest, but the black eyes were rolled upward until they bore directly upon the strange tableau. The shawl had dropped from the lady's head, and the candle shone broadly upon her features, as upon the sick man's profile. Apparently dissatisfied with this view, she slipped her disengaged hand under the cheek which was downward, and drew his face around into full sight.

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"And bless your soul, honey!" Aunt Phillis told her young mistress, long afterward, "you never see sech a look as was on hern while her eyes was thar bright and big, they was jist like live coals sot in a lump of dough she growed so white!"

Nevertheless the spy could return the candle to its place upon the table without perceptible tremor of lip or limb, and after bestowing one scrutinizing glance upon the nurse, who was fast asleep beneath it, she went to the heap of damp clothing. These she lifted one by one less gingerly than Phillis had done, and ransacked every likely hiding-place of papers or valuables, going through the operation with a rapid dexterity that astounded the old woman's weak mind, and made her ashamed of her own clumsiness. Anticipating the final stealthy look in her direction, the heavy lids fell once again, and were not raised until the rusty bolt passed gratefully into the socket, and she felt that the place was deserted by all save herself and the dying stroller.

She was in no danger of dozing upon her post after this visitation. For the few hours of darkness that yet remained, she sat in her chair, her elbows upon her knees, smoking, and pondering upon what she had witnessed, varying her occupations by feeding the fire and such care of the patient as she considered advisable; likening, in her rude, yet excitable imagination, the rumbling of the gale in the chimney and across the roof-tree, to the roll of the chariot-wheels which were to carry away the parting soul; the tap and rattle of sleet and wind at the windows to the summons of demons, impatient at Death's delay.

"The Lord send him an easy death, and let him go up, instead of down!" she groaned aloud, once.

But the dubious shake of the head accompanying the benevolent petition betokened her disbelief in the possibility of a favorable reply. In her articles of faith it was only by a miracle that a "no-account white man," picked up out of the highway, and whose pockets were barren as were those she had examined, could get an impetus in that direction.

The stormy dawn was revealing, with dreary distinctness, the shabby disorder of the lumber-room, when Dr. Ritchie appeared in his dressing-gown, rubbing his eyes, and yawning audibly.

"Gone hey?" was his comment upon the negress' movements.

She had bound a strip of linen about the lank jaws; combed back the grizzled hair from the forehead into sleek respectability; crossed the hands at the wrists, as only dead hands are ever laid; straightened the limbs, and was in the act of spreading a clean sheet over her finished work.

"Nigh upon an hour since, sir," she responded, respectfully.

"He did not revive at all after I left him?"

"Not a breath or a motion, sir. He went off at the last jist as easy as a lamb. Never tried to say nothin', nor opened his eyes after you went down. 'Twould a' been a pity ef you had a' lost more sleep a-settin' up with him. Ah, well, poor soul! 'taint for us to say whar he is now. I would hope he is in glory, ef I could. I 'spose the Almighty knows, and that's enough."

The doctor arrested her hand when she would have covered the face.

"He must have been a fine-looking fellow in his day!" he said, more to himself than to her. "But he has lived fast, burned himself up alive with liquor."

"I didn't call nobody, sir, to help me, 'cause nobody couldn't do no good, and I was afeared of wakin' the gentlemen and ladies, a trottin' up and downstairs," continued Phillis, bent upon exculpating herself from all

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blame in the affair, and mistaking his momentary pensiveness for displeasure.

"You were quite right, old lady! All the doctors and medicines in the world could not have pulled him through after the drink and the snow had had their way with him for so many hours poor devil! Well! I'll go back to bed now, and finish my morning nap."

He was at the threshold when he bethought himself of a final injunction.

"You had better keep an eye upon these things, Aunty!" pointing to the coat and other garments she had ranged upon chairs to dry in front of the fire. "There will be a coroner's inquest, I suppose, and there may be papers in his pockets which will tell who he was and where he belonged. When you are through in here, lock the door and take out the key and if you can help it, don't let a whisper of this get abroad before breakfast. It will spoil the ladies' appetites. If anybody asks how he is, say 'a little better.' He can't be worse off than he was in life, let him be where he may."

"Yes, sir," answered Phillis, in meek obedience. "But I don't think he was the kind his folks would care to keep track on, nor the sort that carries valeyble papers 'round with 'em."

"I reckon you are not far out of the way there!" laughed the doctor, subduedly, lest the echo in the empty hall might reach the sleepers on the second floor, and he ran lightly down the garret steps.

The inquest sat that afternoon. It was a leisure season with planters, and a jury was easily collected by special messengers twelve jolly neighbors, who were not averse to the prospect of a glass of Mrs. Sutton's famous egg-nogg, and a social smoke around the fire in the great dining-room, even though these were prefaced by ten minutes' solemn discussion over the remains of the nameless wayfarer.

His shirt was marked with some illegible characters, done in faded ink, which four of the jury spelled out as "James Knowlton," three others made up into "Jonas Lamson," and the remaining five declined deciphering at all. Upon one sock were the letters "R. M." upon the fellow, "G. B." With these unavailable exceptions, there was literally no clue to his name, profession, or residence, to be gathered from his person or apparel. The intelligent jury brought in a unanimous verdict "Name unknown. Died from the effects of drink and exposure;" the foreman pulled the sheet again over the blank, chalky face, and the shivering dozen wound their way to the warmer regions, where the expected confection awaited them.

Their decorous carousal was at its height, and the ladies, one and all, had sought their respective rooms to recuperate their wearied energies by a loll, if not a siesta, that they might be in trim for the evening's enjoyment (Christmas lasted a whole week at Ridgeley) when four strapping field hands, barefooted, that their tramp might not break the epicurean slumbers, brought down from the desolate upper chamber a rough pine coffin, manufactured and screwed tight by the plantation carpenter, and after halting a minute in the back porch to pull on their boots, took their way across the lawn and fields to the servants' burial-place. This was in a pine grove, two furlongs or more from the garden fence, forming the lower enclosure of the mansion grounds. The intervening dell was knee-deep in drifted snow, the hillside bare in spots, and ridged high in others, where the wind-currents had swirled from base to summit. The passage was a toilsome one, and the stalwart bearers halted several times to shift their light burden before they laid it down upon the mound of mixed snow and red clay at the mouth of the grave. Half-a-dozen others were waiting there to assist in the interment, and at the head of the pit stood a white-headed negro, shaking with palsy and cold the colored chaplain of the region, who, more out of custom and superstition than a sense of religious responsibility least of all motives, through respect for the dead had braved the inclement weather to say a prayer over the wanderer's last home.

The storm had abated at noon, and the snow no longer fell, but there had been no sunshine through all the gloomy day, and the clouds were now mustering thickly again to battle, while the rising gale in the pine-tops was hoarse

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and wrathful. Far as the eye could reach were untrodden fields of snow; gently-rolling hills, studded with shrubs and tinged in patches by russet bristles of broom-straw; the river swollen into blackness between the white banks, and the dark horizon of forest seeming to uphold the gray firmament. To the right of the spectator, who stood on the eminence occupied by the cemetery, lay Ridgeley, with its environing outhouses, crowning the most ambitious height of the chain, the smoke from its chimneys and those of the village of cabins beating laboriously upward, to be borne down at last by the lowering mass of chilled vapor.

The coffin was deposited in its place with scant show of reverence, and without removing their hats, the bystanders leaned on their spades, and looked to the preacher for the ceremony that was to authorize them to hurry through with their distasteful task. That the gloom of the hour and scene, and the utter forlornness of all the accompaniments of what was meant for Christian burial, had stamped themselves upon the mind and heart of the unlettered slave, was evident from the brief sentences he quavered out joining his withered hands and raising his bleared eyes toward the threatening heavens:

"Lord! what is man, that thou art mindful of him! For that which befalleth man befalleth beasts even one thing befalleth them. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth? Man cometh in with vanity and departeth in darkness, and his name shall be covered with darkness. The dead know not anything, for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy is now perished, neither have they a portion for ever in anything that is done under the sun.

"Lord! teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom. Oh, spare ME, that I may recover strength, ere I go hence and be no more!

"In the name of the FATHER, SON, and HOLY GHOST dust to dust, and ashes to ashes! Amen!"

"By the way, Mr. Aylett, the poor wretch up-stairs should be buried at the expense of the county," remarked the coroner, before taking leave of Ridgeley and the egg-nogg bowl. "I will take the poor-house on my way home, and tell the overseer to send a coffin and a cart over in the morning. You don't care to have the corpse in the house longer than necessary, I take it? The sooner he is in the Potter's Field, the more agreeable for you and everybody else."

Mr. Aylett pointed through the back window at the winding path across the fields.

A short line of black dots was seen coming along it, in the direction of the house. As they neared it they were discovered to be men, each with a hoe or shovel upon his shoulder.

"The deed is done!" said the master, smiling. "My good fellows there have spared the county the expense, and the overseer the trouble of this little matter. As for the Potter's Field, a place in my servants' burying-ground is quite as respectable, and more convenient in this weather."

The jurors were grouped about the fire in the baronial hall, buttoning up overcoats and splatterdashes, and drawing on their riding-gloves, all having come on horseback. In the midst of the general bepraisement of their host's gentlemanly and liberal conduct, Mrs. Aylett swam down the staircase, resplendent in silver-gray satin, pearl necklace and bracelets, orange flowers and camelias in her hair semi-bridal attire, that became her as nothing else ever had done.

"My dear madam," said the foreman of the inquest a courtly disciple of the old school of manner, and phraseology as the august body of freeholders parted to either side to leave her a passage-way to the fireplace "your husband is a happy man, and his wife should be a happy woman in having won the affection of such a model of chivalry" stating succinctly the late proof the "model" had offered to an admiring world of his

chivalric principles.

The delicate hand stole to its resting-place upon her lord's arm, as the lady answered, her ingenuous eyes suffused with the emotion that gave but the more sweetness to her smile.

"I AM a happy woman, Mr. Nelson! I think there is not a prouder or more blessed wife in all the land than I am this evening."

Laugh, jest, and dance ruled the fleeting hours in the halls of the old country-house that night, and the presiding genius of the revel was still the beautiful hostess never more beautiful, never so winning before. No one noticed that, by her orders, or her husband's, the window through which she had beheld the goblin visage was closely curtained. Or, this may have been an accidental disposition of the drapery, since no trace of her momentary alarm remained in her countenance or demeanor.

In the kitchen a double allowance of toddy was served out, by their master's orders, to the men who had taken part in the interment on the hill-top. And, in their noisy talk over their potations the vagrant was scarcely mentioned.

Only the pines, hoarser in their sough, by reason of the falling snow that clogged their boughs, chanted a requiem above the rough hillock at their feet.

"Man cometh in with vanity, and departeth in darkness, and his name is covered with darkness!"

CHAPTER X. ROSA.

"THAT is a new appearance."

"Who can she be?"

"Unique is she not?" were queries bandied from one to another of the various parties of guests scattered through the extensive parlors of the most fashionable of Washington hotels, at the entrance of a company of five or six late arrivals. All the persons composing it were well dressed, and had the carriage of people of means and breeding. Beyond this there was nothing noteworthy about any of them, excepting the youngest of the three ladies of what seemed to be a family group. When they stopped for consultation upon their plans for this, their first evening in the capital, directly beneath the central chandelier of the largest drawing-room, she stood, unintentionally, perhaps, upon the outside of the little circle, and not exerting herself to feign interest in the parley, sought amusement in a keen, but polite survey of the assembly, apparently in no wise disconcerted at the volley of glances she encountered in return.

If she were always in the same looks she wore just now, she must have been pretty well inured to batteries of admiration by this date in her sunny life. She was below the medium of woman's stature, round and pliant in form and limbs; in complexion dark as a gypsy but with a clear skin that let the rise and fall of the blood beneath be marked as distinctly as in that of the fairest blonde. Her eyes were brown or black, it was hard to say which, so changeful were their lights and shades; and her other features, however unclassic in mould, if criticised separately, taken as a whole, formed a picture of surpassing fascination. If her eyes and cleft chin meant mischief, her mouth engaged to make amends by smiles and seductive words, more sweet than honey, because their flavor would never clog upon him who tasted thereof. Her attire was striking it would have been bizarre upon any other lady in the room, but it enhanced the small stranger's beauty. A black robe India silk or silk grenadine, or some other light and lustrous material was bespangled with butterflies, gilded, green, and crimson, the many folds of the skirt flowing to the carpet in a train designed to add to apparent height, and, in front, allowing an enchanting glimpse of a tiny slipper, high in the instep, and tapering prettily toward the toe. In her hair were glints of a

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curiously-wrought chain, wound under and among the bandeaux; on her wrists, plump and dimpled as a baby's, more chain-work of the like precious metal, ending in tinkling fringe that swung, glittering, to and fro, with the restless motion of the elfin hands, she never ceased to clasp and chafe and fret one with the other, while she thus stood and awaited the decision of her companions. But instead of detracting from the charm of her appearance, the seemingly unconscious gesture only heightened it. It was the overflow of the exuberant vitality that throbbed redly in her cheeks, flashed in her eye, and made buoyant her step.

"What an artless sprite it is!" said one old gentleman, who had stared at her from the instant of her entrance, in mute enjoyment, to the great amusement of his more knowing nephews.

"All but the artless!" rejoined one of the sophisticated youngsters. "She is gotten up too well for that. Ten to one she is an experienced stager, who calculates to a nicety the capabilities of every twist of her silky hair and twinkle of an eyelash. Hallo! that IS gushing nicely done, if it isn't almost equal to the genuine thing, in fact."

The ambiguous compliment was provoked by a change of scene and a new actor, that opened other optics than his lazy ones to their extremest extent. A gentleman had come in alone and quietly a tall, manly personage, whose serious countenance had just time to soften into a smile of recognition before the black-robed fairy flew up to him both hands extended her face one glad sunbeam of surprise and welcome.

"YOU here!" she exclaimed, in a low, thrilling tone, shedding into his the unclouded rays of her glorious eyes, while one of her hands lingered in his friendly hold. "This is almost too good to be true! When did you come? How long are you going to stay? and what did you come for? Yours is the only familiar physiognomy I have beheld since our arrival, and my eyes were becoming ravenous for a sight of remembered things. Which reminds me" coloring bewitchingly, with an odd mixture of mirth and chagrin in smile and voice "that I have been getting up quite a little show on my own account, forgetful of les regles, and I suppose the horrified lookers-on think of les moeurs. May I atone for my inadvertence by presenting you, in good and regular form, to my somewhat shocked, but very respectable, relatives? Did you know that I was in Congress this year that is, Mr. Mason, my aunt's husband, is an Honorable, and I am here with them?"

The gentleman gave her his arm, and they strolled leisurely in the direction of the party she had deserted so unceremoniously.

"I did not know it, but I am glad to learn that you are to make a long visit to the city. I have business that may detain me here for a week perhaps a fort-night," was his answer to the first question she suffered him thus to honor.

Then the introduction to Mr. and Mrs. Mason, their married daughter, Mrs. Cunningham, and her husband, was performed. The Member's wife was a portly, good-natured Virginia matron, whose ruling desire to make all about her comfortable as herself, sometimes led to contretemps that were trying to the subjects of her kindness, and would have been distressing to her, had she ever, by any chance, guessed what she had done.

She opened the social game now, by saying, agreeably: "Your name is not a strange one to us, Mr. Chilton. We have often heard you spoken of in the most affectionate terms by our friends, but not near neighbors, the Ayletts, of Ridgeley, county. Is it long since you met or heard from them?"

"Some months, madam. I hope they were in their usual health when you last saw them?"

Receiving her affirmative reply with a courteous bow, and the assurance that he was "happy to hear it," Mr. Chilton turned to Rosa, and engaged her in conversation upon divers popular topics of the day, all of which she was careful should conduct them in the opposite direction from Ridgeley, and his affectionate intimates, the Ayletts. He appreciated and was grateful for her tact and delicacy. Her unaffected pleasure at meeting him had

At Last

been as pleasant as it was unlooked-for, aware as he was, from Mabel's letter immediately preceding the rapture of their engagement, that Rosa must have been staying with her when it occurred. The slander that had blackened him in the esteem of his betrothed had, he naturally supposed, injured his reputation beyond hope of retrieval with her acquaintances. Rosa, her bosom companion, could not but have heard the whole history, yet met him with undiminished cordiality, as a valued friend. Either the Ayletts had been unnaturally discreet, or the faith of the interesting girl in his integrity was firmer and better worth preserving than he had imagined in the past. Perhaps, too, since he was but mortal man, although one whose heritage in the school of experience had been of the sternest, he was not entirely insensible to the privilege of promenading the long suite of apartments with the prettiest girl of the season hanging upon his arm, and granting her undivided attention to all that he said, indifferent to, or unmindful of, the flattering notice she attracted.

Over and above all these recommendations to his peculiar regard was her association with the happy days of his early love. Not an intonation, not a look of hers, but reminded him of Ridgeley and of Mabel. It was a perilous indulgence this recurrence to a dream he had vowed to forget, but the temptation had befallen him suddenly, and he surrendered himself to the intoxication.

Yes! she was going to the President's levee that evening, Rosa said. A sort of raree-show was it not? with the Chief Magistrate for head mountebank. He was worse off in one respect than the poorest cottager in the nation he was commonly reported to govern, inasmuch as he had not the right to invite whom he pleased to his house, and when the mob overran his premises he must treat all with equal affability. She pitied his wife! She would rather, if the choice were offered her, be one of the revolving wax dummies used in shop-windows for showing the latest style of evening costume and hair-dressing for the dolls had no wits of their own to begin with, and were not expected to say clever things, as the President's consort was, after she had lost hers in the crush of the aforesaid mob, who eyed her freely as an appendage to their chattel, the man they had bought by their votes, and put in the highest seat in the Republic. No! she was not provided with an escort to the White House. She did not know three people in Washington beside her relatives, and, looking forward to creeping into the palatial East Room at her uncle's back, or in the shadow of her cousin's husband, the vision of enjoyment had not been exactly enrapturing BUT, her companion's proposal to join their party and help elbow the crowd away from her, lent a different coloring to the horizon.

BUT again flushing prettily was he certain that the expedition would not bore him? Doubtless he had had some other engagement in prospect for the evening, before he stumbled over her. He ought to know her well enough not to disguise his real wishes by gallant phrases.

"I have never been otherwise than sincere with you," Frederic said, honestly; "I had thought of going to the levee alone, as a possible method of whiling away an idle evening. If you will allow me to accompany you thither, I shall be gratified shall derive actual pleasure from the motley scene. It will not be the only time you and I have studied varieties of physiognomy and character in a mixed assembly. Do you recollect the hops at the Rockbridge Alum Springs?"

"I do," replied Rosa, laconically and very soberly.

He thought she suppressed a sigh in saying it. She was a warm-hearted little creature with all her vagaries, and he was less inclined to reject her unobtrusive sympathy than if a more sedate or prudent person had proffered it.

It was certain he could not have selected a more entertaining associate for that evening. She amused him in spite of the painful recollections revived by their intercourse. She did not pass unobserved in the dense crowd that packed the lower floor of the White House. Her face, all glee and sparkle, the varied music of her soft Southern tongue, her becoming attire were, in turn, the subject of eulogistic comment among the most distinguished connoisseurs present. It was not probable that these should all be unheard by her cavalier, or that he should listen to them with profound indifference.

At Last

He was astonished, therefore, when she protested that she had had "enough of it," and proposed that they should extricate themselves from the press and go home. It was contrary to the commonly received tenets of his sex respecting the insatiable nature of feminine vanity, that she should weary so soon of adulation which would have rendered a light head dizzy. Mrs. Mason was not ready to leave the halls of mirth. She had met scores of old friends, and was having a "nice, sociable time" in a corner, while Mrs. Cunningham had "not begun to enjoy herself, looking at the queer people and the superb dresses."

Of course, they had no objection to their wilful relative doing as she liked, but did not conceal their amazement at her bad taste.

"Take the carriage, dear! You'll find it around out there somewhere," drawled the easy-tempered aunt. "And let Thomas come back for us. He will be in time an hour from this."

"Would it be an unpardonable infraction of etiquette if we were to walk home?" questioned Rosa of Mr. Chilton, when they were out of Mr. Mason's hearing. "The night is very mild."

"But your feet. Are they not too lightly shod for the pavement?"

"I left a pair of thick gaiters in the dressing-room, which I wore in the carriage."

"Then I will be answerable for the breach of etiquette, should it ever be found out," was the reply, and Rosa disappeared into the tiring-room to equip herself for the walk.

It was a lovely night for December moonlighted and bland as October, and neither manifested a disposition to accelerate the saunter into which they had fallen at their first step beyond the portico. Rosa dropped her rattling tone, and began to talk seriously and sensibly of the scene they had left, the flatness of fashionable society after the freshness of novelty had passed from it, and her preference for home life and tried friends.

"Yet I always rate these the more truly after a peep at a different sphere," she said. "Our Old Virginia country-house is never so dear and fair at any other time as when I return to it after playing at fine lady abroad for a month or six weeks. I used to fret at the monotony of my daily existence; think my simple pleasures tame. I am thankful that I go back to them, as I grow older, as one does to pure, cold water, after drinking strong wine."

"You are blessed in having this fountain to which you may resort in your heart-drought," answered Frederic, sadly. "The gods do not often deny the gift of home and domestic affections to woman. It is an exception to a universal rule when a man who has reached thirty without building a nest for himself, has a pleasant shelter spared, or offered to him elsewhere."

"Yet you would weary, in a week, of the indolent, aimless life led by most of our youthful heirs expectant and apparent," returned Rosa. "I remember once telling you how I envied you for having work and a career. I was youthful then myself and foolish as immature."

"I recollect!" and there was no more talk for several squares.

Rosa was getting alarmed at the thought of her temerity in reverting to this incident in their former intercourse, and meditating the expediency of entering upon an apology, which might, after all, augment, rather than correct the mischief she had done, when Frederic accosted her as if there had been no hiatus in the dialogue.

"I recollect!" he repeated, just as before. "It was upon the back piazza at Ridgeley, after breakfast on that warm September morning, when the air was a silvery haze, and there was no dew upon the roses. I, too, have grown older I trust, wiser and stronger since I talked so largely of my career what I hoped to be and to do. When did

At Last

you see her Miss Aylett," abruptly, and with a total change of manner.

"The Rubicon is forded," thought Rosa, complacently, the while her compassion for him was sincere and strong. "He can never shut his heart inexorably against me after this."

Aloud, she replied after an instant's hesitation designed to prepare him for what was to follow "I was with Mabel for several days last May. We have not met since."

"She is alive and well?" he asked, anxiously.

An inexplicable something in her manner warned him that all was not right.

"She is or was, when I last heard news of her; we do not correspond. She does not live at Ridgeley now."

There she stopped, before adding the apex to the nicely graduated climax.

"Not live with her brother! I do not understand."

"Have you not heard of her marriage?"

"No!"

He did not reel or tremble, but she felt that the bolt had pierced a vital part, and wisely forbore to offer consolation he could not hear.

But when he would have parted with her at the door of her uncle's parlor, she saw how deadly pale he was, and put her hands into his, beseechingly.

"Come in! I cannot let you go until you have said that you forgive me!"

There were tears in her eyes, and in her coaxing accents, and he yielded to the gentle face that sought to lead him into the room. It was fearful agony that contracted his forehead and lips when he would have spoken reassuringly, and they were drops of genuine commiseration that drenched the girl's cheeks while she listened.

"I have nothing to forgive you! You have been all kindness and consideration I ought not to have asked questions, but I believed myself when I boasted of my strength. I thought the bitterness of the heart's death had passed. Now, I know I never despaired before! Great Heavens! how I loved that woman! and this is the end!"

He walked to the other side of the room.

Rosa durst not follow him even with her eyes. She sat, her face concealed by her handkerchief, weeping many tears for him more for herself, until she heard his step close beside her, and he seated himself upon her sofa.

"Rosa! dear friend! my sympathizing little sister! I shall not readily gain my own pardon for having distressed you so sorely. When you can do it with comparative ease to yourself, I want you to tell me one or two things more, and then we will never allude to irreparable by-gones again."

"I am ready!" removing her soaked cambric, and forcing a fluttering smile that might show how composed she was; "don't think of me! I was only grieved for your sake, and sorry because I had unwittingly hurt you. I was in hopes I imagined "

At Last

"That I had outlived my disappointment? You said, that same September day, that women hid their green wounds in sewing rooms and oratories. Mine should have been cauterized long ago, by other and harsher means, you think. It seldom bleeds but tonight, I had not time to ward off the point of the knife and it touched a raw spot. Don't let me frighten you! now that the worst is upon me, I must be calmer presently. You were at Ridgeley, in September, a year since, when she who was then Miss Aylett" compelling himself to the articulation of the sentence that signified the later change "received her brother's command to reject me?"

"I was."

"He would never tell me upon what evil report his prohibition was based. He was more communicative with his sister, I suppose?"

And Rosa, following the example of other women and men who vaunt their principles more highly than she did hers, made a frank disclosure of part of the truth and held her tongue as to the rest.

"I couldn't help seeing that something was wrong, for Mabel, who, up to the receipt of her brother's letter and one from you that came by the same mail, had been very cheerful and talkative, suddenly grew more serious and reserved than was her habit at any time; but she told me nothing whatever, never mentioned your name again in my hearing. Mrs. Sutton did hint to me her fear that Mr. Aylett had heard something prejudicial to your character, which had greatly displeased him and shocked Mabel, but even she was unaccountably reticent. Intense as was my anxiety to learn the particulars of the story, and upon what evidence they were induced to believe it, I dared not press my inquiry into what it was plain they intended to guard as a family secret."

His reply was just what she had foreseen and guarded against.

"It would have been a kind and worthy deed, had you written to warn me of my danger, and advised me to make my defence in person. As it was, I was thrown off roughly and pitilessly my demand upon the brother for the particulars of the accusation against me my appeal to the sister loving and earnest as words could make it for permission to visit her and learn from her own lips that she trusted or disowned me, were alike disregarded. Mr. Aylett's response was a second letter, more coldly insulting than the first hers, the return of my last, after she had opened and read it, then the surrender of my gifts, letters, notes, everything that could remind her that we had ever met and loved. Mrs. Sutton, too, my father's old and firm friend, deserted me in my extremity. And she must have been acquainted with the character and extent of the charges preferred against me. I had hoped better things from her, if only because I bear her dead husband's name. Did she never speak in your hearing of writing to me?"

"She did but said, in the next breath, that it would be useless, since the minds of the others were fully made up. I knew she thought Winston arbitrary, and Mabel credulous; but she was afraid to interfere. As for myself, what could I have told you that you had not already heard? I could only hope that the cloud was not heavy, and would soon blow over. From the hour in which it cast the first shadow upon her, Mabel was estranged from me the decline of our intimacy commenced. The Ayletts take pride in keeping their own counsel. Winston, who never liked me, and whom I detested, was as confidential with me in this affair as my old playfellow and school-mate. Believe me when I declare that if my intercession could have availed aught with her, I would have run the risk of her displeasure and Winston's anathemas by offering it."

"I do believe you! Nor need you expatiate to me upon the obduracy of the Aylett pride. Surely, no one living has more reason than I to comprehend how unreasoning and implacable I find it is. I looked for injustice at Winston Aylett's hands. I read him truly in our only private interview. Insolent, vain, despotic wedded to his dogmas, and intolerant of others' opinion, he disliked me because I refused to play the obedient vassal to his will and requirements; stood upright as one man should in the presence of a brother-mortal, instead of cringing at his lordship's footstool. But he was powerless to do more than annoy me without his sister's co-operation."

At Last

"She stood in great, almost slavish, awe of him," urged Rosa, in extenuation of Mabel's infidelity.

"Aye!" savagely. "And love was not strong enough to cast out fear! She was justifiable if she hesitated to entrust herself and her happiness to the keeping of one she had known but two months. It was prudent not false in her to weigh, to the finest grain, the evidence furnished by her brother to prove my unfitness to be her husband. But having done all this, she should have remembered that I had rights also. It was infamous, cowardly, cruel beyond degree, to cast her vote against me without giving me a chance of self-exculpation. Her hand not his struck the dagger into my back!"

Again Rosa's fingers involuntarily (?) stole into his, to recall him to a knowledge of where he was, and there were fresh tears, ready to fall from her gazelle eyes, when his agitation began to subside.

"My poor child!" he said, penitently. "I am behaving like a madman, you like a pitying angel! We will have no more scenes, and you must oblige me by forgetting this one, as fast as may be. From to-night Mabel Aylett is to me as if she had never been. To nobody except yourself have I betrayed the secret of my hurt. After this, when you think of it, believe that it is a hurt no longer."

Rosa "had out" her fit of crying when he went away, betaking herself to her chamber and locking the door that her aunt might not surprise her while the traces of tears disfigured her cheeks. But she was anything but broken-hearted, and only slightly sore in spirit in the retrospect of what had ensued upon her communication to the discarded lover. He had, indeed, given more evidence of his unconquered passion for Mabel than she had expected. His undisguised pleasure in renewed companionship with herself; his excellent spirits during the greater part of the evening; his unembarrassed reply to her aunt's malapropos observation, and fluent chat upon other themes, had misled her into the hope that the ungenerous and uncivil conduct of the Ayletts had disgusted and alienated him from sister, no less than from brother. It was a disappointment to discover that it cost him a terrible effort to pronounce Mabel's name, while the abrupt intelligence of her marriage had distracted him to incoherent ravings, which had nearly amounted to curses upon the authors of his pain.

"And all for a woman who could bring herself, after being engaged to Frederic Chilton, to marry that dolt of a Dorrance!" she said, indignantly. "I wonder if he would have been consoled or chagrined had I painted the portrait of the man who had superseded him. It is as well that I did not make the experiment. He would be magnanimous enough when he cooled down which he will do by to-morrow morning to pity her, and that is next to the last thing I want him to do. Thank goodness! the denouement is over, and the topic an interdicted one from this time forth. Now for the verification or refutation of the saying that a heart is most easily caught in the rebound. There was some jargon we learned at school about the angle of incidence being equal to that of reflection. You see, my dearly beloved self," nodding with returning sauciness at her image in the mirror before which she was combing her hair, "I undertake this business in the spirit of philosophical investigation."

She needed to keep her courage up by these and the like whimsical conceits, when the forenoon of the next day passed away without a glimpse of Mr. Chilton. He had not yet left his card for the Masons, nor called to inquire after her health, when the summons sounded to the five o'clock dinner. A horrible apprehension seized and devoured her heart by the time the dessert was brought on, and there were no signs of his appearance. He had, ashamed to meet her after last night's exposure of his weakness, or dreading the power of the reminiscences the sight of her would awaken, left the city without coming to say "Farewell." That is, she had driven him from her forever!

The room went around with her in a dizzy waltz, as the notion crossed her brain.

"The sight and smell of all these sweets make me sick, Aunt Mary," she said, rising from the table. "My head aches awfully! May I go to my room and lie down?"

At Last

"Try some of this nice lemon-ice, my love!" prescribed the plump matron. "The acid will set you all straight. No? You don't think you are going to have a chill, do you? Father!" nudging her husband who was burying his spoon in a Charlotte Russe, "this dear child doesn't want any dessert. Won't you pilot her through the crowd?"

"Only to the door, uncle! Then come back to your dinner!" Rosa made answer to his disconcerted stare. "I can find my way to my chamber without help."

She could have done it, had she been in possession of her accustomed faculties. But between the harrowing suspicion that engrossed her mind and the nervous moisture that gathered in her eyes with each step, she mounted a story too high, and did not perceive her blunder until, happening to think that her apartment must lie somewhere in the region she had gained, she consulted the numbers upon the adjacent doors, and saw that she had wandered a hundred rooms out of her way, She stopped short to consider which of the corridors, stretching in gas-lit vistas on either hand, would conduct her soonest to the desired haven, when a gentleman emerging from a chamber close by stepped directly upon her train.

CHAPTER XI. IN THE REBOUND.

"I beg your pardon!" said a deep, familiar voice. Then the formality vanished from face and address. "Is this YOU?" holding out his hand in hearty friendliness that instantly dispelled Rosa's forebodings." What or whom are you seeking in these wilds?"

The crystal beads glistened upon her lashes in the fulness and joy of her deliverance from doubt and fear, and before she could twinkle them back, broke into smaller brilliants upon her cheeks and the bosom of her dress. It was very babyish and foolish, but it is to be questioned whether she could have contrived a more telling situation had she studied it for a month.

"What is it!" inquired Frederic, kindly, not releasing the fingers that twitched, more than struggled, in his. "Have you been frightened?"

"Yes," with grieved, but fearless simplicity, "I was frightened because I thought I had offended you perhaps driven you away and that I should never be able to ask your forgiveness for my cruel abruptness last night! In thinking about and worrying over this, I somehow lost my way, and was just trying to remember by what route I reached this strange neighborhood, when your appearance startled me."

"You did not know, then, that this is Bachelor's Hall the haunt of unmated Benedicts, wifeless visitors to the city, and celibate M. C.'s?" he rejoined, pleasantly. "Let me be your guide to more desirable as well as more accessible quarters!"

On the stairs he bent to scan her blushing countenance.

"How am I to punish you for your naughty distrust of my friendship and common sense? I have been too busy all day to spare a minute for social pleasure. I dined at two o'clock, having an appointment at three, returned at half-past five, and was just coming down to your parlor to look you up. Another bit of unimportant news, with which I should not have annoyed you if you had not merited a little vexation by your preposterous fancies, is, that, instead of taking an early train to Philadelphia, I have to-day entered into engagements that will oblige me to prolong my stay in this place until the first of February."

He looked bright and cheerful, ready for sport or badinage. Rosa caught herself wondering many times during that evening, and the succeeding days of the three weeks they passed under the same roof, if she had dreamed of not beheld with her bodily optics that one stormy burst of passion which had been his farewell to the hope of a final

reconciliation with Mabel Aylett.

He never spoke of her again, or referred, in the most distant manner, to his visit at Ridgeley. The omission was an agreeable one to Rosa for several reasons. Silence, she believed, was to oblivion as a means to an end. Judging from herself, she adopted the theory that people were apt to forget what they never talked of themselves, nor heard mentioned by others. Furthermore, she was relieved from the necessity of concocting diplomatic evasions, dexterously skirting the truth, to say nothing of plump falsehoods. These last cost her conscience some unpleasant twinges. To avoid narrating in full what had happened was a work of art. A downright lie was a stroke of heavy business, unsuited to her airy genius and when the Aylett–Chilton complication was upon the tapis, it was difficult to avoid undertaking such.

For three weeks, then, Mr. Frederic Chilton and the Virginian belle visited concert, theatre, and assembly–room in company, sat side by side in the spectators' gallery of House and Senate chamber, walked in daylight along the broad avenues from one magnificent distance to another, and on home–evenings which were not many chatted together familiarly, the well–pleased Masons thought confidentially, by the fireside in the family parlor. It must not be inferred from their constant intercourse that he had the field entirely to himself. Gallants of divers pretensions first–class, mediocre, and contemptible considered with a practical eye to "settlement," hovered about the fascinating witch as moths about a gas–burner, and had no citable cause of complaint of non–appreciation, inasmuch as she shed equal light upon all, save one. "My very old friend, Mr. Chilton," she was wont to denominate him in conversation with those who inwardly called themselves fools for their jealousy of a man of whom she spoke thus frankly, with never a stammer or blush; yet they acknowledged to themselves all the while that they were both suspicious and envious of his superior advantages. However backward Frederic may have been in the beginning to monopolize the notice and time of his "sisterly friend," he was not an insensate block, who could not perceive and value the compliment paid him by her partiality ever apparent, but never unmaidenly. Impute it to whatever motive he might, the distinction titillated his vanity, touched, at least, the outermost covering of his heart. It might be pity, it might be pleasant, mournful memories of other days it was most likely of all a sincere platonic affection, for one with tastes and feelings akin to hers that gave lustre to her eyes, and gentle meaning to her smile when he drew near. At any rate, it would be churlish not to accept the preference these conveyed, and to like her and his position as her chosen knight better every day; it was inevitable that he should marvel not without melancholy—at the flight of time that brought so soon the day of parting.

The Masons, with himself, were engaged to attend a large party on the last evening of January. Without analyzing the impulse that constrained him to do so, he had refrained from reminding Rosa that his stay in Washington was so nearly over, and, with masculine consistency, he was half disposed to be affronted that she had forgotten what he had said to her of its extent. He had never seen her more lively in more radiant spirits and looks than she was upon the night of the 30th. He had dropped into her aunt's parlor about ten o'clock, and detected Rosa in the act of dragging her new ball–dress from the box in which the mantua maker had sent it home.

"Conceive, if you can but you can't, being a man what I have undergone for an hour and more!" she cried, at seeing him. "My treasure the darlingest love of a dress I have ever ordered was brought in exactly two seconds before a brace of honorables lumbering machines that they are! knocked at the door. So, lest they should brand me as a frivolous doll (as if anybody with a soul, and an infinitesimal degree of love for the beautiful, COULD help admiring the divine thing!), I pushed the poor box under the sofa, and there it has lain in ignominious neglect, like a pearl of purest ray serene smothered in an oyster, all the time they were here. I was purposely cross and stupid, too, in the hope of getting rid of them the sooner. If you despise what most of your indiscriminating sex call fancy articles, consider a woman's fondness for a ravishing robe despicable and irrational, Mr. Chilton, you need not look this way. You could hardly have a severer certainly not a more appropriate punishment."

"You depreciate my aesthetic proclivities," he rejoined, catching her tone. "You would not trust my bungling fingers to help excavate the gem, I know; but I may surely use my eyes admire, as we bid children do with my hands behind my back."

At Last

Notwithstanding his boast of knowingness in the mysteries of feminine apparel, he could not have told of what material the divine robe was made except that it was some shiny white stuff, with wide embroidery upon the flounces. But Rosa, her aunt, and cousin had gone into ecstasies over it, and instigated by kind-hearted Mrs. Mason, the enraptured owner had rushed off to Mrs. Mason's chamber to try it on, returning presently in full array, elate at the "perfect fit," and insisting upon a unanimous declaration that she "had never before worn anything one-thousandth part as becoming."

"It is a winsome, fantastic, enchanting little being!" remarked Mr. Chilton, in soliloquy at his dressing-table, the next evening. "I hope she will enjoy the gathering to-night, as she hopes to do. Will she miss me at the next she attends?"

Then laughing at the sentimental visage portrayed upon the mirror "It would be the acme of ludicrous folly for me to disturb myself on that score. We have had a pleasant time together she and I and tomorrow it will be over. There is the whole story except that, in a month I shall cease to think of her, unless her name is accidentally uttered in my hearing I wish I could forget some other things as easily! and she will probably be the affianced darling of one of the lumbering Honorables the elder and homelier of the brace, I fancy, since he is the wealthier, and the humming-bird should have a fitting cage."

Expressing in his composed lineaments and firm stride nothing like disconsolateness at the programme, he flung his cloak over his arm, took his white gloves in his hand, cast a passing glance at the glass to see that his whiskers and hair were in order, and ran down the two flights of stairs lying between Bachelor's Hall and the Masons' private parlor.

"Come in!" said a plaintive voice, in answer to his knock.

Rosa was alone in the cosy apartment. She was curled up in a great padded chair, set upon the hearth-rug. Her dress was a plain black silk; she wore a scarlet shawl, and her head-gear was some odd, but distractingly pretty construction of white lace, a square folded in two unequal triangles, and knotted loosely, handkerchief-wise, the points in front, under her chin.

"Not ready!" exclaimed Frederic, in merry reproach. "You, the model of punctual women!"

"I am not going!" sighed the humming-bird, dolorously. "I have had a horrid sore throat all day and a headache and Aunt Mary got frightened, and forbade me to put my head out of doors."

"That is a heart-rending affliction! And could you not send the incomparable dress as your representative?"

"Don't laugh!" she said, jerking away her head. "I cannot bear it to-night not that I care the millionth part of a fig for all the parties in christendom; and as for the dress, you think that I haven't a soul above such frippery and gewgaws: but I wish I had never seen it. I shall never wear it as long as I live!"

And out came the laced cambric to absorb the gathering dew.

"There is something in this I do not understand," said Frederic, setting a chair for himself close to hers. "Are you really suffering? I imagined that yours was a case of simple cold, and that Mrs. Mason advised you to remain indoors chiefly on account of the weather. It is raining hard!"

"I am glad it is!" she replied, with the manner of one bereft of human sympathy, and extracting gloomy delight from the unison of nature with her morbid broodings. "And my throat isn't nearly so painful as I made Aunt Mary believe. I did not want to go out. Parties are an awful bore when one is sad-hearted."

At Last

"You really must forgive me!" said Frederic, as she twitched her face away again at the laugh he could not suppress. "But sadness and you should not be thought of in the same week. Honestly, now! is not the inimitable fabric you sported for five minutes last night, at the bottom of what appears to you a fathomless abyss of woe? Have you tried the efficacy of rational consolation in the thought of how many more parties there will be this winter to which you can wear it? The Secretary of State is to give one in ten days, which is to be the sensation of the season. That of to-night is, in comparison, as a caucus to a general convention."

"I shall never put on the hateful thing again. If Julia Cunningham chooses to bedizen herself in it, she is welcome to it flounces and all. Yet I did like it! I had hoped but no matter what! You had better be going, Mr. Chilton. Aunt and the rest of them went three-quarters of an hour ago."

"Does a dress go out of fashion in so short a time?" persisted innocent Frederic, bent upon mitigating her sorrow. "If my memory serves me aright, I have seen ladies wear the same ball-dress several times in the same winter."

"You will never see this on me," snapped Rosa, her eyes ominously fiery again. "Did you hear me advise you of the lateness of the hour?"

"Suppose I decline appearing at all in the festal scene?" said the gentleman. "I shall not be missed. I will just run down and dismiss the carriage then, with your permission, will return and spend the evening here."

Her cheeks looked as if they had been touched with wet vermilion, when he resumed his place near her, and the folds of the handkerchief in her hand hung more limply.

"I ought not to allow this sacrifice!" she faltered gratefully. "Because I have the vapors, I have no right to keep you within reach of the infection. It is shamefully, wickedly selfish!"

"It is no such thing!" he contradicted. "If you would know the truth, I was, myself, averse to attending this 'crush.' But for your indisposition, I should hail with unmixed pleasure the chance that releases me from the obligation to form a part of the throng. It is far more in consonance with my feelings to pass this, our last evening together, as we have spent so many others, in quiet talk at this fireside. I had not supposed it possible that I could ever feel so much at home in a hotel a Washington caravansary especially as I have within the last three weeks. Do you know, or have you not burdened your memory with such unimportant memoranda as the fact, that I must set my face Philadelphia-ward to-morrow?"

"I had not dreamed that the time was so near at hand it seemed such a little while since the evening of our arrival until I happened, last night, after you left us, to take up Mrs. Rogers' invitation-card for this evening. THEN, I recollected!"

Her listless resignation had in it something piteous, and the lever of compassion impelled him to further efforts of cheer.

"I have to thank you for all the enjoyment of my visit to this, heretofore to me, dismal city. If you should ever visit Philadelphia as I earnestly hope you will you must acquaint me with your whereabouts immediately upon your arrival. I should be sorry to think that our friendship is to end here and now."

"As well here and now, as anywhere and at any time!" returned Rosa, yet more resignedly. "And the end must come, sooner or later. This was what I was saying over to myself when you came in. I am a fool a baby to mind it!" angrily dashing away the obtrusive brine from her mournful eyelids. "I WISH you would leave me alone for a few minutes, Mr. Chilton, until I can behave myself!"

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For a second it seemed that her companion would take her at her word, so puzzled and troubled was his countenance, and he moved slightly, as about to obey the petulant behest; then sat still.

"I have found no fault in your behavior!" he said, too coolly to please Rosa's notion.

"I know you despise me!" she burst forth, chokingly. "I believe I am hysterical, and the more I rail at my stupidity and folly, the more unmanageable my nerves if it is my nerves that are out of order become. But I have been so happy, so content and grateful, lately! And everything will be so different after after TO-MORROW!"

Her voice had failed to a sobbing whisper, and the diaphanous cambric veiled her bowed face.

Frederic Chilton did not stir a finger or attempt to speak for a full minute, but in that minute he thought a volume, felt acutely.

This, then, was what he had been doing in his hours of relaxation from the business which had occupied his mind to the banishment of nearly every other consideration; that had driven into comparative obscurity the old gnawing grief which had incorporated itself with his being! The intimacy with a beautiful, sprightly girl had been a holiday diversion to him after arduous brain-labor, recreation sought conscientiously and systematically, that his mental powers might be clearer and fresher for the next day's toil in court and among perplexing records; in hunting up titles and disputed property, and proving their validity. He had gained the cause that had brought him to the capital, and cost him so much fatigue and anxiety, and was proud of his success. But what of this other piece of work? Would not the most cold-blooded flirt, who ever prated of fidelity, when he meant betrayal and desertion, blush to father this business? And she, poor, guileless lamb, must bear the pain, the mortification, perhaps the contumely, which ought to be his in seven-fold measure!

"Stay, Rosa!" he said, huskily, when she attempted to rise. "Do not leave me yet. I may not be altogether so unworthy, so basely callous as I have given you reason to suppose. Can it be that I have misconstrued what you have said, or do you really care that our separation is so near? I had not thought of this."

"I understand." She lowered her flag of distress and confronted him sorrowfully, not in resentment. "You believed me incapable of deep and lasting feeling; saw in me no more than the world does, a giddy coquette, feather-haired and shallow-hearted. Be it so. Perhaps it is best that you should not be undeceived. Such injustice and prejudice are the penalties a woman must suffer who wears a tinsel cloak over her finer affections admits but few, sometimes but one, to her sanctum sanctorum. The gushing, loving, extensively-loving class fare better. You have been very kind and attentive to me in my strangerhood here, Mr. Chilton. I must always revert to your conduct with gratitude. By the way" a hysterical laugh breaking into her dignified acknowledgment of benefits received "that is the same, in substance, that you said to me a while ago, isn't it? So we are even owe each other nothing."

"Except to love one another." The solemn accents hushed her reckless prattle. "Rosa, can you learn this lesson?"

She had shrunk down sunk is not the word to convey an idea of the prostration of strength, the collapse of resolution, expressed by the figure cowering in the deep chair, its face upborne and hidden by the shaking hands. They were cold as ice, Frederic felt, when he would have drawn them aside.

"We will have no foolish reserves, my child. Much, if not all, the happiness of our future lives may depend upon our perfect sincerity now. You do not require to be told how poor is the offering of my heart. You are the only person who has ever entered into the secret of its emptiness and desolation; seen blight, where there should be bloom; ashes, where flame should glow. But such as it is, it is yours, if you will have it. If you are willing to trust yourself with me, I will cherish as I now honor you, truly and forever; leave no means untried that can add to your happiness. Dare you make the venture?"

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Her unstudied caress was beautiful and pathetic in its lowliness of humility and earnest affection too earnest for the commonplace outlet of words. It was to slip to her knees at his feet, and kiss his hand, then lay her cheek upon it, as some dumb, devoted thing might do.

Then she was lifted into his arms, and kissed with a fervor she mistook for awakening passion, and her heart bounded more madly in the belief that her victory was complete, that he would henceforward be hers in feeling as in name.

Yet the words breathed into her ear as her head rested upon his bosom might have taught her the fallacy of her conviction and her hopes.

"My noble, faithful girl! What have I to offer you in payment for all this?"

"I ask nothing, except the right to be with, and to serve you!" responded Rosa.

And she thought she spoke the whole truth for once.

CHAPTER XII. AUNT RACHEL WAXES UNCHARITABLE.

"A SLY, artful, treacherous jade?" articulated Mrs. Sutton, energetically. "I have no patience with her. And they say she is so overjoyed at her conquest that she trumpets the engagement everywhere. Such shameless carrying on I never heard of. If she ever crosses my path I shall treat her to some wholesome truths."

"What good would that do, aunt?" asked Mabel Dorrance, without raising her head from her sewing. "And what has she done that should incense you or any one else against her? She was free to choose a husband, and we have no right to cavil at her choice. I hope she will be very happy. I used to love her we loved each other very fondly once. There are some excellent traits in Rosa's character, and when she is once married she will be less volatile."

"Don't you believe it. Her flightiness and insincerity are ingrain! I believed in her once myself she had such beguiling ways, it was hard to disapprove of anything she said or did. But I was secretly aware, all the time, that there was a radical defect in her composition. A woman who has been engaged, or as good as engaged, to six or eight different men, cannot retain much purity of mind or strength of affection. I heard you tell her yourself once that such unscrupulous flirtation and bandying of hearts were profane touches that rubbed the down from the peach."

"That was the extravagant talk of a silly, romantic girl," replied Mabel, with a smile that changed to a sigh before the sentence was finished. "I was somewhat given to lecturing other people, in those days, upon subjects of which I knew little or nothing. Nine men out of ten care little how roughly the peach has been rubbed, provided the flavor is not injured to their taste. It is only once in a great while that you meet with one whose palate is so nice that he can detect the difference between fruit that has been hawked through the market and that just picked from the tree. First love is a myth at which rational people laugh."

"Perhaps so," said Mrs. Sutton dubiously.

In view of the circumstances of Mabel's marriage, she felt that it behooved her to be circumspect in condemnation of transferred affections.

"But that does not alter the fact of Rosa Tazewell's infamous behavior to Alfred Branch and others of her beaux. Isn't the poor fellow drinking himself into his grave, all through his disappointment? And here she is going to be as honored a wife as if she had never perjured herself, or ruined an honest, loving man's prospects for life!"

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Mabel went on with her work, and did not reply.

"I have had uncomfortable suspicions about certain passages in her intercourse with us, since I heard this news," continued Mrs. Sutton, edging her chair toward her niece, and dropping her voice. "I am afraid I can date the beginning of her cruelty to Alfred back to that September she spent here to the latter part of it, I mean. Little scenes come to my memory that caused me trifling uneasiness then. I shall never forget, for instance, how she eyed you, the morning Winston came home so unexpectedly."

And she described the incident recorded in the latter part of our opening chapter.

"Can it be," she pursued, "that she had even then designs upon the man she is about to marry? She knew all the circumstances of the trouble that ensued, and if disposed to be meddling, she had the means at her command."

"I told her nothing," said Mabel briefly.

"But she pumped me pretty effectually," confessed the aunt shamefacedly. "I thought there could be no harm in giving her a synopsis of the case she being your intimate friend."

Another gleam of pensive amusement crossed Mabel's face. She knew too well the nature of her aunt's "synopsis" to doubt that Rosa was conversant with every phase of the affair, concerning which her own lips had been so sternly sealed.

"You have nothing with which to reproach yourself," she said, tranquilly. "She marries with her eyes open."

"You don't imagine for one instant that she would be annoyed by any such scruples as beset you!" cried Mrs. Sutton scoffingly. "Why, the woman would sooner go to the altar with a handsome, dashing libertine, who had broken hearts by the dozen, than marry a quiet, honest Christian, who had never breathed of love to any ears except hers. The aim of her life is to create or experience a sensation. I don't quite see how she could have made trouble in that sad affair, but I should like to be positive that she did not."

"You may safely acquit her of that sin," rejoined Mabel. "There was neither need nor room for her interference. Whatever may have been her inclination, she was shrewd enough to perceive that the natural course of events was bringing about the desired end if it were a desirable one to her without her help or hindrance. But, aunt! doesn't it strike you that this is a very profitless talk, and very uncharitable? It is a sorry task, this volunteering our assistance to the dead past to bury its dead. And I, for one, have too much bound up in the future to offer my service in the painful work. Look! is not this pretty?"

She was embroidering a white merino cloak for an infant, in a pattern so rich and elaborate, that Mrs. Sutton groaned in commingled admiration and sympathy as she inspected it.

"You are throwing time and strength away upon this work!" she expostulated. "I don't know another lady in your circumstances who would not take her friends' advice, and put out all the sewing you need to have done. But your eyes and fingers have labored incessantly for six months upon the finest work you could devise, and you begin to look like a shadow. I don't wonder Mr. Dorrance seems uneasy sometimes. He complained this morning that you did not take enough exercise in the open air."

"He is not anxious, nor should he be. I am well, and stronger than you will believe. As to the work, it has been one great delight of my existence during the period you speak of. I could not endure that anybody but myself should assist in fashioning the dainty, tiny garments that make my hope an almost present reality. Every stitch seems to bring nearer the fulfilment of the dear promise. I only regret that this is the last of the set. I shall be at a loss for occupation for the next two months. And I fear from something Herbert said to-day, that he does not

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intend for me to return to Albany until the spring fairly opens. Dr. Williams has been talking to him about my cough."

"Dr. Williams is a fussy old woman, and Mr. Dorrance" began Mrs. Sutton.

Mabel quietly took up the word.

"Mr. Dorrance is ignorant of diseases and medicines, as men usually are who have not studied these with a view to practise upon themselves or others. I have said that he is not really uneasy; but he says, and with truth, that the Northern March and April are raw and cold, and will try my strength severely. Winston and Clara share in his fears. It is very kind in them to tender me the hospitalities of their house for so long a time, but I should feel more at home in my own, during my illness and convalescence."

"Why not tell your husband this plainly?"

"Because it might bias his judgment and embarrass his action. I am willing to do as he thinks best."

There were not many subjects upon which Mrs. Sutton was irascible, but she patted the floor with her foot now as if this was one of them her discontent finding vent at length in what she regarded as a perfectly safe query.

"Will he remain with you?"

"He cannot. His business is large and increasing. He can afford but this one fortnight vacation."

"How do you expect to get along without him?"

"I expect my dear old aunt to come often and see me," said Mabel affectionately, parrying the catechism "Clara suggested, of her own accord, when the extension of my visit was discussed, that you should be invited to be with me late in April and I don't want you to refuse. Do you understand, and mean to be complaisant? You are all the mother I have ever known, auntie."

"My lamb! you need not fear lest I shall not improve every opportunity of seeing and comforting you. I shall return a civil and grateful reply to Mrs. Aylett's invitation, for your sake! and for the same reason try and remember, while I remain her guest, that her right to be and to reign at Ridgeley is superior to yours or mine."

The good lady was not to be harshly censured if she now and then, in private confabulation with her favorite, let fall a remark which was the reverse of complimentary to her niece-in-law. Mabel's marriage was the signal for a radical reorganization of the Ridgeley domestic establishment, by which Mrs. Sutton was reduced from the busy, responsible situation of housekeeper to the unenviable one of unnoticed and unconsulted supernumerary.

"Not that I wish you to desert your old quarters, still less to feel like a stranger with us," said Mrs. Aylett graciously, while she affixed shining brass labels to the keys of closets, sideboards, and store-rooms the keys Aunt Rachel could distinguish from one another, and all others in the world, in the darkest night, without any labels whatever; which had grown smooth and bright by many years' friction of her nimble fingers. "But Mr. Aylett wishes me to assume the real, as well as nominal, government of the establishment" Mrs. Aylett was fond of the polysyllable as conveying better than any other term she could employ the grandeur of her position as Baroness of Ridgeley. "He insists that the servants are growing worthless and refractory under the rule of so many. Hereafter this is his law, not mine hereafter, those attached to the house department are to come to me about their orders, and the plantation workmen to him. I shall undoubtedly have much trouble in curing the satellites appointed to me of their irregular habits, and reducing them to something resembling system; but Winston's extreme dissatisfaction with the anarchy that prevailed under the ancien regime moves me to the

undertaking."

"They have always for generations back, I may say been called excellent servants; faithful in the discharge of their duties, and attached to their owners," returned Mrs. Sutton tremulously. "And since I have been in charge ever since my dear sister's death, I have done my best with them, as with everything else committed by my nephew to my care. But of course I have nothing to urge against your plan. If I can help you in any way" –

"Thank you! You are extremely kind, my dear madam," honeyedly. "But I should be ashamed and sorry to be compelled to call upon you for assistance in performing what you have done so easily and successfully for fifteen years. I must learn confidence in my own powers, if I would be respected by underlings. They would be quick to detect the power behind the throne; let me hold counsel with you ever so secretly, and my authority would be weakened by the discovery. I have not the vanity to believe that my maiden attempt at housewifery will be attended by the distinction that has crowned yours, but practice will perfect in this, as in other labors. And my dear Mrs. Sutton, Mr. Aylett bids me say, in his name, as it gives me pleasure to do in my own, that although your occupation is gone, you are ever welcome to a home at Ridgeley, free of all expense. It is our hope that you may still content yourself here, even if Mabel has gone from the nest. I suppose, however, nothing will satisfy her, when she goes to housekeeping, but having you with her as a permanent institution. My brother intimated as much to me before his marriage."

Declining with mild hauteur, that gave great, but secret amusement to her would-be benefactress, the handsome offer of a free asylum, Mrs. Sutton went to live with a cousin of her late husband's, whose snug plantation was situated about twelve miles from the Aylett place, and in the neighborhood of the Tazewells. It was a pleasant, but not a permanent arrangement, she gave out to her numerous friends, any of whom would have accounted themselves favored by an acceptance of a home for life in their families.

"Ridgeley was changed and lonely since Mabel's departure, and her own habits were too active to be conformed to those of so small a household. Indeed, there was nothing for her to do there any longer, so she was glad to avail herself of Mrs. William Sutton's invitation to stay a while with her. The children made the house so lively. In the fall, the house Mr. Dorrance was having built for his Southern bride would be ready for them, and Mabel's claim upon her aunt's society and services must take precedence of all others."

The fall came, and Mabel wrote detailed descriptions of the beautiful home Herbert had prepared for her; wrote, moreover, with more feeling and animation, of the new and precious hopes of happiness held out to her loving heart in the prospect of what the spring would give into her arms, but said nothing of her aunt's coming to her for the winter, or for an indefinite period, the bounds of which were to be set only by her beloved relative's wishes. The omission was trying enough to the foster-mother's heart and patience, even while she believed the knowledge of it to be confined to herself. She could still hold up her head bravely among her kindred and acquaintances, and talk of the "dear child's" good fortune and contentment with it; how popular and beloved she was among them, and what an elegant house her generous husband had bestowed upon her; could still hint at the instability of her own plans, and the possibility that she might, at any day or hour, determine to leave her native State and follow her "daughter" into what the latter represented was not an unpleasant exile.

An end was put to this innocent deception for, if any deception can be termed innocent, it is surely that by which he who practises it is himself beguiled the blameless guile was then arrested by a story repeated to her by her indignant hosts, as having emanated directly from Mrs. Aylett. She had given expression, publicly, at a large dinner-party, to her amazement and pity at the self-delusion under which "poor, dear Mrs. Sutton" labored, in expecting to take up her residence with Mr. and Mrs. Dorrance.

"My brother laments her hallucination as much, if not more than his wife does," she said, in her best modulations of creamy compassion. "But, indeed, my dear Mrs. Branch, they are not accountable for it. Not a syllable has ever escaped either of them which a reasonable person could construe into a request that she should become an inmate

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of their household. So careful have they been to avoid exciting her expectations in this regard, that they have refrained from extending to her an invitation for even a month. Those who are most familiar with the poor lady's peculiarities do not require to be told how ill-advised would be the arrangement she desires. Mabel is a thoroughly sensible woman, and too devoted a wife to advocate anything so injudicious, while her husband is naturally jealous for her dignity and the inviolability of her authority in her own house. Mrs. Sutton left Ridgeley in opposition to our earnest entreaties that she would spend the evening of her days with us. I was assured then, as I am now, that she would receive the same love and respect nowhere else. But she could not brook the semblance of interference with her rule where she had reigned so long and irresponsibly. And while we may deplore, we can hardly find fault with this weakness. It must have been a trial and not an ordinary one to be obliged, at her age, to resign the sceptre she had swayed for upward of fifteen years."

"Their words are smoother than oil, but in their mouths is a drawn sword," quoted Mrs. Sutton, in meek protest against the sugared malice of this slander when it was told to her. "This is none of Mabel's doings. She loves me dearly as ever, but one might as well hope to move the Blue Ridge as to teach that pragmatist husband of hers to consult her wishes and her good, before he does his own. His head is hard as a flint, and his heart never mind! Heaven forgive me if I am unjust to him! I should be thankful that he does not really mean to misuse my darling. Now, my dears, you see how undesirable an inmate of any house I am rated to be. If you wish to retract your offer of a hiding-place for my old head, I shall not take it amiss. Thanks to Providence and my dear Frederic I have enough, to maintain me decently anywhere in this country. I shall never be chargeable to anybody for my food, victuals, and lodgings. If you are willing to let me board here and do odd stitches for the children when they tear their aprons and rub out the knees of their trowsers just to keep me out of mischief, you understand! I promise to be as little officious in housewifely concerns as it is in my nature to be."

William Sutton and his wife a woman who was both sagacious and amiable reiterated their assurances that she could not confer a greater boon upon them than by remaining where she was, and with them she had stayed until Mr. Aylett sent over the Ridgeley carriage, one day in the third week in February, with a note from Mabel, begging her aunt to present herself, without needless delay, at the homestead, since she was not reckoned sufficiently strong to attempt the uneven and muddy roads that still separated them. Mrs. Aylett also dispatched a billet by the coachman, the graceful burden of which was the same as that of Mabel's petition, and the two long-sundered friends were speedily together; fellow-partakers of a bountiful and painstaking hospitality, which kept them continually in mind that they were guests, and not at home.

The dialogue relative to Rosa Tazewell's matrimonial project took place on the third day of Mrs. Sutton's visit, in Mabel's chamber, and when the former, having talked off the topmost bubbles of her righteous wrath, recollected several very important letters business and friendly she ought to have written a week ago, and trotted off to her room where she could perform the neglected duty without visible and outward temptation to that she was more fond of doing to wit, talking the young wife continued to work steadily, and with apparent composure. It was not a bright face on which the light from the western windows fell, yet it was not unhappy. She had never pretended to herself that her marriage was a step toward happiness, but she had believed that it would secure to her a larger share of peace, immunity from disturbance, and independence of thought and action, than fell to her lot in her brother's house, and for these negative benefits she longed wearily.

Mr. Aylett was not wantonly or openly unkind to his ward, and ungenerous persecution was utterly incompatible with the temper and habits of his lady wife, but between them they had contrived to make the girl's life very miserable. It was Winston's cue adopted, let us hope, from the strict sense of duty he avowed had ever actuated him in his treatment of the charge bequeathed him by his father to deport himself with calm, seldom-relaxed severity to one who had showed herself to be entirely unworthy of confidence; to exercise unremitting surveillance upon her personal association with young people out of the family and her correspondence, and to curb by look and oral reproof the most distant approach to what he condemned as indiscreet levity. In a thousand ways many of them ingenious, and all severe, she was made to feel the curtailment of her liberty, and given to understand that it was the just retribution of her unlucky love-affair with an unprincipled adventurer. Mrs. Aylett

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professed to discountenance this policy to be Mabel's secret friend and ally, while she deemed it unwise to combat her husband's will by overt measures for his sister's protection.

Thus, for a year, the object of his real displeasure and her affected commiseration lived under a cloud, too proud to complain of her thralldom, but feeling it every second; mourning, in the seclusion of the trebly barred chambers of her heart, over her shattered idol and squandered affections, and fancying, in the morbid distrust engendered by the discovery of her lover's baseness, and the weight of her brother's unsparing reprobation of her insane imprudence, that she descried in every face, save Aunt Rachel's, contempt or rebuke for the faux pas that had so nearly cast a stigma upon her name and lineage.

In Herbert Dorrance's honest admiration and assiduous courtship the most suspicious scrutiny could detect no tincture of either of these feelings, and it was not long before she took refuge in his society from the risk of being wounded and angered by the supposed exhibition of them in others. Here was one man who could not but know of her folly, in all its length, breadth, and depth, who was a witness of her daily chastisement for it at her guardian's hands, yet who esteemed her unsullied by the unworthy attachment, undegraded by punishment. Gratitude had a powerful auxiliary in her feverish longing to escape from scenes that kept alive to the quick, memories she would have annihilated, had her ability been commensurate with her will. All other associations with the house in which she, and her father before her, had been born, and in which she had passed her childhood and girlish days, were overrun by the thickly thronging and pertinacious recollections of the two short weeks Frederic Chilton had spent there with her. He haunted her walks and drives; trod, by her side, the resounding floor of the vine-covered portico, sat with her in parlor and halls; sang to her accompaniment when she would have exorcised the phantom by music was always, whenever and wherever he appeared the tender, ingenuous, manly youth she had loved and revered as the impersonation of her ideal lord; the demi-god whom she had worshipped, heart and soul set, in her exulting imagination no lower than the angels, and beheld in the end, with besmirched brow and debased mien, a disgraced sensualist, not merely a deceiver of another woman's innocent confidence, and her tempter to dishonor and wretchedness, but a poltroon a whipped coward who had not dared to lift voice or pen in denial or extenuation of his crime.

The law of reaction is of more nearly universal application in moral and in physical science than men are willing to believe. We have seen how cunningly Rosa calculated upon it, and wiser people than she, every day, attribute the most momentous actions of their lives to its influence.

"My advice to every woman is to marry for GOODNESS simple integrity of word and deed!" said a lady, once in my hearing.

She was an excellent scholar, attractive in person and in manner, gifted in conversation and opulent in purse. Her hand had been sought in marriage by more than one, and in early womanhood she had made choice among her suitors of a man whose plausible exterior was the screen of a black heart and infamous life. Convinced of her mistake barely in time to escape copartnership in his stained name and ruined fortunes, she set up the history of her deadly peril as a beacon to others as ardent and unwary as her old-time self. Either to put a double point upon the moral, or to insure herself against similar mishap in the future, she wedded an amiable and correct fool, a mere incidental in the work of human creation, who was as incapable of making his mark upon the age that produced him as an angle-worm is of lettering solid granite.

Mabel's husband was not a simpleton, or characterless; but if he had been, his prospects of success would not have been materially damaged by her knowledge of his deficiencies. A union with him was a safe investment, and must be several degrees more supportable than was her position at Ridgeley, banned by its owner and patronized by his wife. I neither excuse nor blame her for thus deciding and transacting. Should I censure, a majority of my readers nearly all of the masculine portion would pick holes in my unpractical philosophy, scout my reasoning as illogical, brand my conclusions as pernicious winding up their protest with the sigh of the mazed disciples, when stunned by the great Teacher's deliverance upon the subject of divorce, "If the case of the man be so with

his wife, it is not good to marry!"

Which dogma I likewise decline to dispute falling back thankfully upon the blessed stronghold of unambitious story-tellers namely, that my vocation is to describe what IS not make fancy-sketches of millennial days, when rectitude shall be the best, because most remunerative policy; when sincerity shall be wisdom proven and indisputable, and consistency the rule of human faith and practice the world over, instead of being, as it now is, one of the lost (or never invented) fine arts.

CHAPTER XIII. JULIUS LENNOX.

"You are puttin' your eyes out, workin' so stiddy, honey, and it's gettin' dark."

Mabel aroused herself from her intent attitude, and looked at the window. There was a brassy glimmer in the cloudy west; the rest of the sky was covered by thick vapors.

"The days are still very short," she said, folding her work, and becoming aware that her eyes ached from long and close study of the intricate pattern.

It was Mammy Phillis who had interrupted her reverie, and she now laid an armful of seasoned hickory wood upon the hearth, and set herself about mending the fire, taking up the ashes which had accumulated since morning, putting the charred sticks together, and collecting the embers into a compact bed.

"We're goin' to have fallin' weather 'fore long," she observed, oracularly. "The wind has changed since dinner, and when the wind whirls about on a sudden, we upon this ridge is the fust to find it out. I must see that them lazy chil'len, Lena and Lizy, fills your wood-box to-night with dry wood; I'd be loth to have you ketch cold while you are here."

"You are very good, Mammy, but why do you trouble yourself to attend to my fire? You should have sent up Lena with that great load of logs."

"I ain't easy without I see to you myself, at least once a day. It 'minds me of the good ole times to wait upon you. O, Lord! how long?" shaking her tartan turban with a portentous groan, her chin almost scraping the hearth, as she stooped to blow into the crater of fiery coals.

Mabel was too well versed in the customs of the race and class to take alarm at the mysterious invocation. She watched the old woman's movements in a sort of pensive amusement at the recollection of an incident of her childhood, brought vividly to her mind by the servant's air and exclamation.

She was playing in the yard one day, when "Mammy" emerged from her cottage-door, and came toward her, with a batch of sweet cakes she had just baked for her nursling.

In crossing the gravel walk leading to the "house," she struck her toe against the brick facing of this, and the cakes flew in all directions.

"Good Lord! my poor toe and my poor chile's cakes!" was her vehement interjection; and as she bent to gather up the cookies, she grunted out the same adjuration, coupled with "my poor ole back!" a negress' stock subject of complaint, let her be but twenty years old and as strong as an ox.

"Mammy!" said the privileged child, reprovingly, "I thought you were too good a Christian to break the commandments in that way. You shouldn't take the Lord's name in vain."

At Last

"Gracious! Sugar-pie! how you talk! Ef I don't call 'pon Him in time of trouble, who can I ask to help me?" was the confident reply.

With no thought of any more formidable cause of outcry than a cramp in the much-quoted spine, Mabel dreamed on sketchily and indolently, enjoying the sight of the once-familiar process of building a wood-fire, until the yellow serpents of flame crept, red-tongued through the interstices of the lower logs, and the larger and upper began to sing the low, drowsy tune, more suggestive of home-cheer and fireside comfort than the shrill, monotonous chirp of the famous cricket on the hearth. The pipe-clayed bricks on which the andirons rested were next swept clean; the hearth-brush hung up on its nail, and the architect of the edifice stepped back with a satisfied nod.

"I have often wished for a glimpse of one of your beautiful fires, Mammy, since I have been in Albany," said Mabel, kindly. "Our rooms and halls are all heated by furnaces. An open fireplace would be a novelty to Northerners, and such a roaring, blazing pile of hard wood as that, be considered at unpardonable extravagance."

"Humph! I never did have no 'pinion of them people." Phillis tossed her turban and cocked her prominent chin. "It's all make money, and save! save! If I was 'lowed to go with you, I'll be bound I'd see you have sech things as you've been 'customed to. The new folks, them what comed from nothin' and nowhar, and made every dollar they can call their own with their own hands, don't know how to feel for and look after real ladies."

"You are wrong about that, if you mean that I have not every comfort I could ask. My house is warm in the bitterest weather, and far more handsomely furnished than this. And I have many kind friends. I like the Northern people, and so would you, if you knew them well."

"They send dreadful poor samples down this way, then," muttered Phillis, significantly. "And, some as pertends to be somebody is nobody, or wuss, ef the truth was known. Don't talk to me 'bout 'em, Miss Mabel, darling! 'Twas a mighty black day for us when one on 'em fust laid eyes upon Mars' Winston. You've hearn, ain't you, that my house is to be tore down, and I'm to go into the quarters 'long with the field hands and sich like common trash? So long as our skins is all the same color, some folks can't see no difference in us."

"I had not heard it. I am sorry."

Mabel spoke earnestly, for "Mammy's house," a neat frame cottage a story-and-a-half high, embowered in locust-trees, and with a thrifty, although aged garden honeysuckle clambering all over the front, was to her one of the dearest pictures of her early days. She could see herself, now the motherless babe whom Aunt Rachel and Mammy had never let feel her orphanage sitting on the door-step, bedecking her doll with the odorous pink-and-white blossoms in summer time, and in autumn with the light-red berries.

"Why is that done?" she asked.

"I spiles the prospect, honey!" fiercely ironical. "Northern folks has tender eyes, and I hurts 'em me and my poor little house what ole marster built for me when Mars' Winston was a baby, and your blessed ma couldn't be easy 'thout I was near her WE spiles the prospect! So, it must be knocked down and carted away for rubbish to build pig-pens, I 'spose, and me sent off to live 'mong low-lived niggers, sech as I've always held myself above. She ain't never put it into Mars' Winston's head to cut down the trees that shets off the "prospect" of the colored people's burying-ground from her winder. There's some things she'd as lief not see. I oughtn't to mind this so much, I know, for I ain't got long for to stay here nohow, but I did hope to die in my nest!" sobbing behind her apron.

"I am very sorry more grieved than you can think!" repeated Mabel. "If I could help you in any way, I would. But I cannot!"

At Last

"Bless your heart! Don't I know that, dear! Here, you ain't got no more power nor me. But I WAS a--thinkin' that maybe you wouldn't think me too old for a nuss when you come to want one, and could manage to take me with you when you went home. I'se a heap of wear in me yit, and there ain't nothing 'bout babies I don't understand."

Mabel colored painfully.

"If I had my way" she began then altered her plan of reply. "I could not enter into such an arrangement without consulting Mr. Dorrance, Mammy, and I am afraid he would not think as favorably of it as you and I do. He has been brought up with different ideas, you see."

"Um--HUM!"

An interjection capable of as many and as varied meanings in the mouth of a colored woman of her stamp as was little Jean Baptiste's "altro!" It signified now "I comprehend a great deal more than you want me to perceive you poor, downtrodden angel!"

"Um--HUM. I always did say he was his sister's own brother for all they don't look a bit alike. What's born into a man never comes out!"

"Mr. Dorrance is my husband, Mammy! I shall not let you speak disrespectfully of him. He does what he believes to be right and just," returned Mabel, sternly.

"I ain't a--goin' to arger that with you, my sugar--plum! You're right to stand up for him. I beg your pardon ef I've seemed sassy or hurt your feelin's. And I dar' say, there mayn't be nothin' wuss 'bout him nor his outside. And that don't matter so much, ef people's insides is clean and straight in the sight of the Lord. But HER outside is all that's decent about her, ef you'll listen to me "

"You are forgetting yourself again!" said Mabel, unable to suppress a smile. "Mrs. Aylett is your mistress "

The woman's queer behavior arrested the remonstrance. Stepping on tiptoe to the door she locked it, and approached her young mistress with an ostentatious attempt at treading lightly, shaking her head and pursing up her mouth in token of secrecy, while she fumbled in her bosom for something that seemed hard to get at. Drawing it forth at last she laid it in Mabel's lap a small leather wallet, glossy with use, tattered at the corners, and tied up with a bit of dirty twine.

"What is this, and what am I to do with it?"

Mabel shrank from touching it, so foul and generally disreputable was its appearance.

"Keep both your ears open, dearie, and I'll tell you all I know!"

And with infinite prolixity and numerous digressions she recounted how, in removing the sodden clothing of the unknown man who had been picked up on the lawn on that memorable stormy Christmas night, more than a year before, this had slipped from an inner breast-pocket of the coat, "right into her hand." Not caring to disturb the doctor's examination of his patient, or to tempt the cupidity of her fellow-servants by starting the notion that there might be other valuables hidden in the articles they handled so carelessly, she had pocketed it, unobserved by them, guessing that it would be of service at the inquest. Her purpose of producing it then was, according to her showing, reversed by Mrs. Aylett's stolen visit to the chamber and minute inspection of garments she would not have touched unless urged to the disagreeable task by some mighty consideration of duty, self-interest, or fear.

At Last

"Then,' thinks I" Phillis stated the various steps of her reasoning "you wouldn't take the trouble to pull over them nasty, muddy close, 'thout you expected to get some good out on 'em, or was afeard of somethin' or 'nother fallin' into somebody else's hands.' Whichsomever this mought be,'twasn't my business to be gittin' up a row and a to-do before the crowner and all them gentlemen. 'Least said soonest mended,' says I to myself, and keeps mum about the whole thing what I'd got, and what I'd seen. But when I come to think it all over arterward, I was skeered for true at what I'd done, and for fear Mars' Winston wouldn't like it. What reason could I give him for hidin' of the pocketbook, ef I give it up to him? Ef I tole all the truth, SHE'D be mad as a March hare, and like as not face me down that all I had said was a dream or a lie, or that I was drunk that night and couldn't see straight. I'd hearn her tell too many fibs with a smooth tongue and a sweet smile not to be sure of that! So, all I should git for my care of the reperotation of my fam'ly would be her ill-will, and to be 'cused by other people of stealin', and for the rest of my days she'd do all she could to spite me. For I'm sure as I stand here, Miss Mabel, that she knew, or thought she knew, somethin' 'bout that poor, despisable wretch that died up in the garret. What else brought him a-spyin' 'round here, and what was there to make her faint when she ketched sight of him a-lookin' in at her through the winder? and what COULD a sent her upstars when everybody else was asleep, fur to haul his close about, and poke them fine white fingers of hern into his pockets, and pull his WHISKERY face over to the light so's to see it better? Depend 'pon it, there's a bad story at the bottom of this somewhere. I've hearn of many a sich that came of gentlemens' marrying forringers what nobody knowed anything about. Anyhow, I want you to take keer of this 'ere pocketbook. Ef I was to die all of a suddent, and 'twas found 'mong my things, some mischief mought be hatched out on it. It's safer in your hands nor it is in mine. Now, I'll jest light your lamp, and you can 'xamine it, and pitch it into the fire, ef you like, when you're through."

In a cooler moment Mabel would have hesitated to obey the advice of an ignorant, prejudiced person, her inferior in station and intelligence. But in the whirl of astonishment, incredulity, and speculation created by the tale she had heard, she untied the string which formed the primitive fastening of the worn wallet, and unclosed it.

The main compartment contained four tickets, issued by as many different pawnbrokers, testifying that such and such articles had been deposited with them for and in consideration of moneys advanced by them to Thomas Lindsay; a liquor-seller's score against William Jones unpaid; and a tavern bill, in which brandy and water, whiskey and mint-juleps, were the principal items charged against Edmund Jackson. This last was the only paper which bore the indorsement "Rec'd payment," and this circumstance had, probably, led to its preservation. The adjoining division of the wallet was sewed up with stout black thread and Mabel had to resort to her scissors before she could get at its contents. These were a couple of worn envelopes, crumpled and dog-eared, and stained with liquor or salt water, but still bearing the address, in a feminine hand, of "Lieutenant Julius Lennox, U. S. N." In addition to this, one was directed to Havana, Cuba; the other to Calcutta, in care, of a mercantile or banking-house at each place. A third cover bore the superscription, "CERTIFICATE," in bold characters.

The negress' watchful eyes dilated with greedy expectancy at Mrs. Dorrance's ghastly face when this last had been examind, but she was foiled if she hoped for any valuable addition to her store of information, or anything resembling elucidation of her pet mystery.

"It will take me some time to read all these," remarked Mabel, still scanning the half-sheet she held. "You had better not wait, Mammy. They are safe with me. No one else shall see them, and no harm can come to you through them."

She promised mechanically what she supposed would soonest buy for her privacy and needed quiet, and gave no heed to the manifest disappointment of her visitor.

When she was at last alone, Mrs. Dorrance relocked the door, and bent close to the lamp, as if more light upon the surface of the document would tend to clear up the terrible secret thus strangely committed to her discretion and mercy. The paper was a certificate, drawn up in regular form, and signed by a clergyman, whose address was appended below, in a different hand writing of a marriage between Julius Lennox and Clara Louise Dorrance.

At Last

"Her very name!" repeated the whitening lips. "I remember asking her once what the 'L' in her signature stood for."

But while she said it, there was a look in the reader's eye that bespoke inability or reluctance to grapple with the revelation threatened by the discovery.

"The letters may tell me more!" she added, in the same frightened whisper, refolding the certificate.

They did for they were in the long, sloping chirography of her sister-in-law, and signed "Your ever-fond, but lonely wife." Each contained, moreover, allusions to "Ellis," to "Clermont," to "Julia," and to "Herbert" all family names in the Dorrance connection; spoke gratefully of her parents' kindness to his "poor Louise" in the absence of "her beloved Julius;" and was liberally spiced with passionate protestations of her inconsolableness and yearnings for his return. Both were dated ten years back, and the paper was yellow with time, besides being creased and thumbed as by many readings.

"What am I to do?" thought Mabel, sinking into her chair, trembling all over with terror and incertitude.

If there were one sentiment in Winston Aylett's heart that equalled his haughtiness, it was love for his wife. But could it be that he had totally forgotten pride and his habitual caution in the selection of the woman who was to be the partner of his home, fortune, and reputation possibly the mother of children who were to perpetuate the noble name he bore? By what miracle of unrighteous craft, what subornation of witnesses, what concealments, what barefaced and unscrupulous falsehoods had this adventuress been imposed upon him as unmarried, when the evidence of her former wedlock was held by a low stroller a drunken wretch who might betray it in an unguarded or insane hour, and who, judging from his exterior, would not be averse to publishing or selling the information if he could make more money by doing this than by preserving the secret. And how came he by these papers?

Confused, partly by his numerous aliases, more by incapacity to conceive of such depth and complication of horror as were revealed by the idea, the perplexed thinker did not, for a while, admit to herself the possibility that the nameless vagabond may have been Clara's living husband, instead of a mercenary villain who had secured surreptitiously the proofs of a marriage she wished the world to forget. Having learned that she had wedded, a second time, in her maiden name, and that her antecedents were unsuspected in her present home, the thought of extorting a bribe to continued silence, from the wealthy lady of Ridgeley, would have occurred to any common rascal with more audacity than principle. It was but a spark the merest point of light that showed her the verge of the precipice toward which one link after another of the chain of circumstantial evidence was dragging her.

Groping dizzily among her recollections of that Christmas night, there gleamed luridly upon her the vision of Mrs. Aylett's strange smile, as she said, "It may be that his wife, if she were cognizant of his condition, would not lift a finger or take a step to save his life, or to prolong it for an hour!"

Then, in response to Mabel's indignant reply the momentary passion darting from her hitherto languorous orbs, and vibrating in her accents, in adding "There are women in whose hearts the monument to departed affection is a hatred that can never die."

If this man were a stranger, from whom she had nothing to fear, why her extraordinary agitation at seeing him, even imperfectly, through the window? She must have known him well to recognize him in the darkness and at that fleeting glimpse. Perhaps she had believed him dead, until then! This would account for her clandestine visit to his chamber, to which Mrs. Sutton and her niece had gone, without effort at concealment; explain the rigid examination of his clothing ensuing upon her scrutiny of his features.

"I must be mad!" Mabel said, here, pressing her hand to her head. "There does not live the woman, however wicked and hypocritical, who could sit at ease in the midst of ill-gotten luxury, on an inclement night, and talk

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smilingly of other things, if she suspected that one she had known, much less loved, lay dying in wretchedness and solitude so near her."

The vagrant was some evil-disposed spy, whose person Clara knew, and whose intentions she had reason to dread were unfriendly. Had she dared for she was daring to attempt this nefarious plot against the fair fame and happiness of an honorable gentleman, her family would not have become her accomplices. They could not have blinded themselves to the perils of the enterprise, the extreme probabilities of detection, the consequences of Winston's anger. Herbert, at least, would have forbidden the unlawful deceit. When his sister was wedded to Winston, he believed that her first husband was no longer in the land of the living as she must also have done.

"For he is a good an upright man!" thought the wife. "But he was privy to the fact of her previous marriage! Why have I never heard of it? He has invariably spoken of Clara as having lived single in her mother's house up to the date of her union with my brother."

She could not but remember, likewise, that there was a certain tone about the Dorrance connection she had never quite comprehended or liked a reticence with respect to details of family history, while they were voluble upon generalities, over-fond of lauding one another's exploits, virtues, and accomplishments; referring in wonderful pride to "our beloved father," and extolling "our precious mother," who, by the way, was so little in request among the children, that she had, since Clara's marriage, occupied apartments in a second-rate boarding-house in Boston. Mabel, when convinced of the futility of her hope of having Aunt Rachel with her, had proposed to offer Mrs. Dorrance a house in the commodious mansion of her youngest son; but Herbert, with no show of gratification at what he must have known was a sacrifice of her inclinations, had coolly reasoned down the suggestion. The whole tribe if she excepted her husband, and perhaps Clara had, to her perception, a tinge of Bohemianism, although all were in comfortable circumstances, and lived showily. Mabel had often chided herself for uncharitable judgment and groundless prejudice, in admitting these impressions of her relatives-in-law; but they returned upon her in this twilight reverie with the force of convictions she was, each moment, less able to combat. What darker secret lay back of the concealment her rectitude of principle and sense of justice declared to be unjustifiable? and might not this concerted and persistent reserve imply others yet more culpable?

It showed her correct estimate of her brother's character, that she never for a second accused him of connivance in the deceit practised upon his relations and neighbors. He would not have scrupled to wed a widow, knowing and acknowledging her to be such. Nothing not love, tenfold more ardent and irrational than that he felt for his siren wife could have wrought upon him to introduce to the world, as Mrs. Aylett of Ridgeley, one who had been before married, and was ashamed, for any cause whatever, to avow this. The blemish left by the acrid breath of common scandal upon a woman's fame was to him ineffaceable by any process yet discovered by pitying man or angels. The maligned one may not have erred from the straightest road of virtue and discretion, but she had been "talked about," and was no consort for him. In his State and caste, private marriages were things disallowed, and but one shade more respectable than liaisons that did not pretend to the sanctity of wedlock. What would he say when the contents of this dingy pocket-book were spread before him? Ought his sister to do this?

COULD she? He had not earned compassionate consideration from her by any act of gentleness and forbearance. He had handled the lopping-knife without ruth, and let the gaping wounds bleed as long as the bitter ichor would ooze from her heart. She had learned hardness and self-control from the lesson, but not vindictiveness. Now that the power was hers to visit upon his haughty spirit something of the humiliation and distress he had not spared her; that it was her turn to harangue upon mesalliances and love-matches, and want of circumspect investigation into early records before committing one's self to a contract of marriage she recoiled at the thought; felt, in her exceeding pity for the trustful husband, a stirring of the love she had herself once borne him in the days when the changed homestead was her world, and its master a king among men.

And yet and yet was it the truest friendship the most prudent course to prolong the ignorance which left him liable at any moment to be shocked into the perpetration of some desperate deed by the discovery, through some

other channel, of his wife's perfidy, and the abominable snare that had been woven about him!

CHAPTER XIV. "BORN DEAD."

MABEL was still turning the vexed question of right and expediency over in her fast-heating brain, the next evening, as she sat in the parlor, and feigned to hearken to the diligent duett-practising going on at the piano, her husband and Mrs. Aylett being the performers.

Mrs. Sutton had gone home that afternoon, engaging to return for a longer sojourn in the course of a month. Mr. Aylett read his newspaper at one side of the centre table, and his sister employed her fingers and eyes at the other with a trifle of fancy-work—an antimacassar she was crocheting for her hostess. Her industrious or fidgetty habits were chronic and inveterate, and people, in remarking upon them, did not reflect that this species of restlessness is in itself a disease, seldom analyzed, more seldom cured. There are few students or physicians of human nature, in this world of superficial observers, who go deep enough into the springs of man's action to distinguish the external symptoms of heart-cancer from ossification, or to learn the difference between satiety and atrophy. A night of nervous sleeplessness, a day of irresolution and dread, had aggravated almost beyond her control the restlessness which in Mabel was the unerring indication of unhealthiness of mind and body. To sit still was impracticable; to talk connectedly and easily would soon be as difficult. She was glad to see Aunt Rachel go immeasurably relieved when a musical evening was proposed by the brother and sister, seconding the motion with alacrity that called forth a pleased smile from the one, and a look of surprised inquisitiveness from the other.

"You have grown more fond of instrumental music," said Mrs. Aylett, half interrogatively. "You used always to prefer vocal."

"Try me and see what an appreciative listener I am," rejoined Mabel, with a sickly smile, and the concert commenced.

Overmuch thought upon the revelation of the preceding day had begotten in her, fears of the imminence of the dangers to Winston's peace of mind a persuasion that the birds of the air and the restless air itself might bear to him the news she still withheld. Mammy had averred, upon her cross-examination, that "not a living soul had ever seen the wallet" since it fell from the dying man's pocket an affirmation Mabel could not decide whether to believe or discredit. If she could but be certain that the secret was all hers!

She trembled guiltily when her brother folded his last paper, and sauntered around to the back of her chair, leaning upon it, while he affected to be interested in her work, and the too-ready scarlet blood pulsed now hotly in her cheeks with each moment of his mute observation.

"I heard a piece of news to-day," he said, presently, in his most even tone; but Mabel's start upon her seat was almost a leap, while her fingers moved faster and more irregularly.

"I suspect, from your unsettled demeanor this evening, that it reached you before it did me," continued he. "I can attribute your badly suppressed perturbation to no other cause. Mrs. Sutton is such an indefatigable gossip, that this item could hardly have passed her by. Has she told you that Rosa Tazewell is shortly to become Mrs. Chilton?"

"She has."

He thought she was nerving herself to a simulation of hardihood, and the long-indulged habit of censorship was strong upon him.

"I had trusted, until to-day, Mabel, that you had conquered that disgraceful weakness," he resumed, yet more

pitilessly.

Domination was one of his besetting sins. He never saw a helpless or cowering thing without feeling the inclination to set his foot upon it, and the least show of resistance in such, piqued him into despotism.

"I was aware that it was not dead when you married a man worth a thousand such scoundrels as that fellow in Philadelphia. I believed that the sentiment was powerful in impelling you to that marriage, and that this irrevocable measure would be an antidote to the evil. It was a wise course, and I commended you for pursuing it. But I am too well read in your countenance and moods not to see that there is something far amiss with you. You have been playing a part for twenty-four hours, and you have played it wretchedly. Your nervous flutters and laugh, your sudden changes of complexion, and the incoherence of your language, would betray you to the least penetrating observer. I caution you to be on your guard lest your husband should take just offence at all this. The need of dissimulation is the evidence that something is radically wrong in your moral nature, and is derogatory to your lawful partner. I am ashamed to remind you of the golden maxim of wedded life that without perfect and mutual confidence there can be no substantial happiness. Does Dorrance know of your escapade at the Springs?"

"If you refer to my engagement to Mr. Chilton, I told him of it before our marriage."

"I rejoice to hear it am pleased at this one proof of good sense and right feeling," in lofty patronage. "You owed him no less. You have, without doubt been informed long since how I obtained the most important proof against that villain?"

"I have not heard Mr. Chilton's name in a year until yesterday," said Mabel, the scarlet spots ceasing to flicker, and her voice hard as was his own.

Unable to interpret her sudden steadiness of demeanor and accent, Winston leaped to the irritating conclusion that she was sullen, and meditated a defiant retreat from this untimely usurpation of his olden authority.

"It was injudicious miserably ill-judged in Dorrance not to acquaint you with this. I have always feared lest his indulgence might not be the most salutary method of repressing your self-will and pride of opinion. You, more than any other woman I know, require the tight rein of vigilant discipline. I intimated as much to Dorrance when he asked my consent to your engagement. But this is his lookout, not mine. What I began to say was that, in MY opinion, he would have acted more sensibly had he not encouraged your squeamish repugnance to talking of your early fault and its mortifying consequences."

"Fortunately for me, my husband is a man of feeling and delicacy!" Mabel was goaded to boast. "I said to him, the evening of our betrothal, that the subject you have chosen to revive to-night was painful to me, and he has respected the reluctance you condemn."

"He would have overcome it more quickly and thoroughly had he informed you that he had had the honor of horse-whipping your ci-devant betrothed!" sneered Winston, with white dented nostrils. "That he was the author of the letter, a portion of which I copied for your perusal, when I announced the dissolution of your provisional engagement the main agent, in effect, of the rupture, since but for him I should have had much difficulty in proving what I had believed from the beginning that the rascal ought to be shot for presuming to think of you in any other light than as the merest acquaintance. And he should never have been that, had I been with you that unlucky summer."

"We have been over that ground so often, Winston, that both of us should be tolerably familiar with it," rejoined Mabel, decidedly. "I prefer that, instead of reviewing the circumstances of what you term my 'early fault,' you should show me the evidence of your singular assertion respecting Mr. Dorrance's agency in a matter in which he could not at that time have had the slightest personal interest. Or, shall I ask him? It is an enigma to me."

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Without other answer than a contemptuous laugh, Winston left the room, unnoticed by the musicians. But before she could form a conjecture as to the meaning of his abrupt movement, he was back with a letter in his hand.

"Documentary testimony!" he said, shortly, passing it to her. "I should have forwarded it entire, instead of transcribing an extract, but for Clara's fear lest you should be led thereby to dislike her brother before you had ever seen him. I take it there is no danger of prejudicing you against him now!"

The letter was from Herbert Dorrance, and began thus:

"Mr. Aylett:

"Dear Sir, Your favor of the 15th, enclosed in one from my sister, reached me this morning."

Then followed the expose of Frederic Chilton's misdeeds, which Winston had transferred to his own epistle to Mabel, as the leading argument in his refusal to sanction her engagement.

Mabel read it through without flinching; then turned over to the first page and put her finger upon a paragraph.

"Who was the lady here mentioned?"

Mr. Aylett shrugged his fine shoulders.

"I have never interested myself to inquire. Beyond the statement of your friend's rascality, the story was nothing to me."

"Herbert!"

The ringing call sharp and clear checked the pianists in the middle of a bar.

"Step here a moment, if you please!"

The novelty of the imperative tone and the glitter of his wife's eyes moved Mr. Dorrance to more prompt compliance than he would have adjudged to be dignified and husbandly in the case of another man.

Mabel held out the letter at his approach, still pointing to the passage she had asked her brother to explain.

"To whom does this refer? Who was the relative whose husband was a naval officer?"

Herbert Dorrance's constitutional phlegm was a valuable ally in the very contracted quarters into which this question drove him, but his sister was his deliverer. Affecting forgetfulness of the letter and its contents, he glanced down one page, Mrs. Aylett leaning upon his arm, and reading with him.

"I don't think you need mind telling the name, here and at this late day, Herbert," she said, seriously and slowly, "provided Mabel will never repeat the story when it can do harm. Have you never heard any of us speak of poor Ellen Lester, my mother's niece, who died several years before your marriage?" accosting her sister-in-law, with a face so devoid of aught resembling cowardly or guilty fears, that Mabel's brain, tried and shaken, tottered into disbelief at her own wild surmises.

"Not that I remember!"

At Last

"Is that so? Yet it might easily have been. She accompanied her husband upon his last voyage, and the ship was never heard of again. Her parents are dead, too, so there are few to cherish her memory. She was a school-fellow of mine, and Herbert loved her as a sister."

Mabel was gazing fixedly at her husband's stolid countenance and averted eyes, and made no rejoinder until the silent intensity of her regards compelled him to look up. Reading distrust and alarm in these, he shook off his sister's warning hold.

"When you wish to catechise me upon family matters, Mabel, it is my wish that you should do it in private," he said, roughly. "Then you shall learn all that it concerns you to know. There are subjects into which only prurient curiosity cares to pry."

"I beg your pardon!" answered Mabel, quietly. "I have but to say, in self-defence, that I did not ask to see the letter."

"It is a matter of profound indifference to me whether you did or not," was the reply. "For aught that I know or cared, you may have read it a year and a half ago. I retract nothing that is set down there. Clara, shall we go on with our music?"

Glancing around stealthily at the finale of the (sic) he saw that Mabel's chair was vacant, and Mr. Aylett was reading composedly beneath the lamp.

Clara made the same discovery at the same moment, and came forward laughing to her husband.

"What had you been saying to our dear, excitable Mabel, that challenged the introduction of that unfortunate document?"

"Told her of Frederic Chilton's intended marriage!" curtly, and without laying aside his volume.

"Preposterous!"

"I agree with you but it is the truth."

Herbert stood apart glowing at the fire.

"You must have approached the subject unskilfully," urged the peacemaker. "These old sores are best left alone."

"It is best for married woman to have none," retorted Winston, doggedly.

"She does not persist in doubting his unworthiness, does she?" queried the wife, aside, but not so cautiously that her brother did not hear her.

He wheeled about suddenly.

"She SHALL believe it, or call me a liar to my face!" he uttered, angrily. "I will put a stop to this sentimental folly!"

"You are late in beginning your reforms," observed Mr. Aylett, dryly.

"You are a less sensible man than I give you credit for being, if you ever begin!" interposed his sister.

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"Leave Mabel to herself until she recovers from the shock if it be one of this intelligence. The surest means of keeping alive a dying coal is to stir and blow upon it. And even we" lifting the heavy locks of her husband's hair in playful dalliance "even we are mortal. We have had our peccadilloes and our repentances, and have now our little concealments of affairs that would interest nobody but ourselves. Do you hear what I am saying, Herbert! Leave off your high tragedy airs and attend to reason, as expressed in your sister's advice. While your wife is my invalid guest, I will not have her subjected to any inquisitorial process. There is a time for everything under the sun, saith the preacher. This is the season for tender forbearance, and if need be, of forgiveness."

Herbert blessed her humane tolerance in his alarmed heart, when Mabel awoke from her troubled slumbers at midnight, in extreme pain, that culminated before dawn, in convulsions.

Two physicians were hastily summoned, and when Mrs. Sutton arrived about noon, she met Phillis outside the door of the sick-chamber, carrying a lifeless infant in her arms, and weeping bitterly.

This was the end of the months of hopeful longing and glad anticipation which were Heaven's messengers of healing and comfort to the sick and lonely heart. The cunningly-fashioned robes were never to have a wearer, the clasping arms to remain still empty. Oh wondrous mystery past finding out of the human soul! Had the lungs once heaved with breath, the heart given one throb; the eyes caught one beam of Heaven's light ere they were sealed fast in eternal darkness, she, who travailed with the infant through the inexpressible agony of birth, would have been written a mother among women; have had the right accorded her, without the cavil of formalist or the disputations of science, to claim the precious thing as her own still a living baby-spirit that had fluttered back to the bosom of the Almighty Father, after alighting, for one painful moment, upon the confines of the lower world. As it was, custom ordained that there should be no mourning for what had never really been. Anguish, hope, and the patient love at which we do not scoff when the mother-bird broods over the eggs that may never hatch these were to be no more named or remembered. In silence and without sympathy she must endure her disappointment. The tenderest woman about whose knees cluster living children, and who has sowed in tears the blessed seed, that in the resurrection-morn shall be gathered in beauteous sheaves of richest recompense would smile in pitying contempt over the tiny headstone which should be lettered "Born Dead."

All this and much more Mabel was to learn with the return of health and reason, but she lay now, like one who had passed for herself the narrow sea that separates the Now from the Hereafter; her features chiselled into the unmoving outlines of a waxen image, only a feeble flutter of breath and pulse telling that this was lethargy, not death. They watched her all night, Mrs. Sutton on one side and Phillis on the other, the family physician stealing in with slippared tread from hour to hour, to note with his sensitive touch if the few poor drops of vital blood yet trickled from veins to heart, always with the same directions, "Give her the stimulant while she can swallow it. It is the only hope of saving her."

Armed with this, the two devoted women fought the Destroyer, praying inaudibly, while they wrought, for the life of the child they had reared to her sorrowful womanhood.

"HE'S asleep, and so is SHE!" whispered Phillis, once, pointing alternately to the adjoining room where Herbert Dorrance awaited the issue of this critical stage of his wife's illness, and to Mrs. Aylett's chamber across the hall. "The Lord forgive 'em both! It won't be they two that will shed many tears if so be she doesn't see the light of another day the murdered lamb! They tormented the life out of her. I passed by her room last night before bed-time, and heard her a-sobbin' and talkin' to herself, and walkin' up and down the floor, and THEY a-bangin' away on the pyano down in the parlor!"

The faithful creature's prejudice wronged one of the hated pair. Mrs. Aylett's slumbers upon her downy couch might be none the less serene for her sister-in-law's danger, but Herbert's was the sleep of exhaustion, not callousness. He had been up all the previous night, and racked by the wildest anxiety throughout the intervening day, and to compass this vigil was beyond his physical powers. Mabel would not miss him, and he could do

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nothing for her would only be in the way, being totally unpractised in the art of nursing, he reasoned; and there was no telling what new draught upon his strength the morrow might bring. He would just lie down for an hour; then he would be fresh for whatever service might be required of him. With this prudent resolve, he threw himself along the bed in the spare-room, and was oblivious of everything sublunary until sunrise.

"If there should be any change, call me!" Mrs. Aylett had enjoined, plaintively. "Winston will not hear of my sitting up, but I shall not close my eyes all night, so do not hesitate to disturb me, if I can be of any use whatever."

Which, it is idle to remark, was the last thing either of the nurses thought of doing. If their darling were, in truth, dying, they were the fittest persons to receive her latest sigh; for had they not been present at her birth, and did not her mother go to glory from their supporting arms?

There was a change, and not a favorable one, before daybreak. The patient, from mutterings and restless starts, passed into violent delirium, laughing, crying, and singing in a style so opposed to the prescribed diagnosis of her case, as to lash the provincial doctor to his wits' end, and extinguish in Aunt Rachel's sanguine heart the faint hope to which she had clung until now. Herbert, awakened finally by the turbulent sounds from the room he had been told must be kept perfectly quiet, jumped up, and showed himself, with disordered hair and blinking eyes, in the door of communication, just as Mabel struggled to rise, and pleaded weepingly with those who held her down that they would restore her child to her.

"I had her in my arms not a moment ago!" she insisted. "See! the print of her little head is here on my breast! You have taken her away among you! I saw it all those who ordered that it should be done and those who did it, when I was too weak to hold her, or to keep them back!"

And passing from the height of furious invective to deadly and earnest calm, she told them off upon her fingers.

"Clara Aylett! Rosa Tazewell! Winston Aylett! (he married Clara Louise Dorrance, you know!) Herbert Dorrance! JULIUS LENNOX!"

The household was astir by this time, and Mrs. Aylett entered from the hall as her brother did from his bedroom. There was but one spectator who was sufficiently composed to note and marvel at the scared look exchanged by the two at the sound of the last name. This was Mr. Aylett, who, from his position behind his wife, had an excellent view of all the actors in the exciting tableau before she fell back, swooning, in his arms.

He was alone with her in their chamber when she revived, and the earliest effort of her restored consciousness was to seize both his hands in hers, and scan his face searchingly it would seem agonizingly until his fond smile dispelled the unspoken dread.

"Ah!" she murmured, hiding her face upon his bosom, "she is still alive, then! I thought I thought" a mighty sob "Don't despise your weak, silly wife, darling! but it was very terrible! I believed it was the last struggle, and was appalled at the sight. And my poor Herbert! he was frightfully overcome. Did you notice him? Will you send him to me, dear? I can soothe him better than any one else prepare him for what is, I fear, inevitable. I shall not give way again to my terrors."

The brother and sister were still together when word was brought, two hours later that Mabel had fallen into a profound sleep a good omen, the doctor said.

"Thank Heaven!" ejaculated Herbert, fervently, his eyes softening until he turned away to conceal his emotion.

He was haggard with solicitude, while Mrs. Aylett's healthful bloom betokened slight interest in the termination of the seizure, a glance at which had thrown her into a faint. Nor did she echo the thanksgiving. She waited until

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the messenger had gone, and continued the conversation her entrance had interrupted.

"I incline to the belief that she caught the name, in some manner, on Christmas before last. HE was delirious, too, and although doctor and nurse reported that he did not speak articulately after he was brought in, she may have heard more than they. From what has been told me, I gather that she was in the room with him alone, while Mrs. Sutton was down—stairs looking for Dr. Ritchie. In a lucid interval he may have given his name possibly some particulars of his history. Unless are you positive there has been no indiscretion on your part, or that others may have talked negligently to her, because she was a member of the family?"

"There are topics of which we your mother, sister, and brothers never speak, even to one another. You may trust us that far," rejoined Herbert, emphatically. "Nor do I see what we can do, except wait for other proof that Mabel really knows anything beyond a name she has picked up at random and never, to my knowledge, repeated, save in her ravings. Should she recover, the test can be easily applied, and we can judge then, how to handle the dilemma."

"Should she recover!" He said the words reluctantly, as loth to express the doubt.

His sister's lips twitched nervously into a sinister smile. It was as if she would have whispered, had she dared, "Heaven forbid!"

"You have chosen a toilsome and a perilous path, Clara," he resumed, by and by. "I do not wonder that you are, with all your courage and sanguine trust in your own powers, sometimes disquieted, and often weary."

"Who says that I am ever weary? And did you ever know me to disquiet myself in vain?" with the low, musical ripple of laughter that belonged to her sunniest mood. "Had I been born in the classic age, I should have been a devout disciple of Epicurus. Don't imagine that my success has not, thus far, amply repaid me for my toil and ingenuity. Having lived upon excitement all my days, I should starve without it. Pleasure, like safety, is the dearer for being plucked from that evergreen nettle, Danger!"

CHAPTER XV. THE GOOD SAMARITAN.

THE snows of ten winters had powdered the nameless stranger's grave in the servant's burial-ground of the Ridgeley plantation. For nine years the wallet taken from his person had lain unopened in a hidden drawer of Mabel Dorrance's escritoire, and the half-guessed secret been hidden in her breast. Mammy Phillis had followed her mistress to the tomb, six months after her removal from her beloved cottage to the despised "quarters." She never held up her head from the day of her degradation, died from a broken heart, murmured those who best knew her of a "fit of spleen," said Mrs. Aylett, in cool reprehension of her unmannerly vassal.

Mabel had guarded the mystery well. Her husband examined her covertly, as he thought; awkwardly, according to her ideas with regard to the vagaries of her delirium, and was foiled by the grave simplicity of her manner and replies.

"All she knows or remembers is substantially this," Herbert jotted down in his notes for his sister's perusal: "she has associated in some way she cannot tell exactly how or why the name with the tramp who died in the garret. She is not sure that it was his designation. Thinks it was not, or that, if used by him, it was an alias. Has an impression that it was marked upon his clothing, or upon a paper found in his pocket. Showed no agitation and little interest in the subject, except when she inquired if I saw the stranger at all living or dead. Was glad I could reply truly, 'No.' Answer seemed to gratify her, which you may consider a disagreeable augury. Am convinced that her illness resulted from natural and unavoidable causes that neither F—C—nor J L—had any connection with it. It will be months before mind and body recover their tone."

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"Lawyerly! ergo, absurd and unsatisfactory!" pronounced the reader, to whom the foregoing leaf had been committed on the morning of her brother's departure with his slowly—convalescing wife for their Albany home. "But until the nettle pricks more nearly, I shall continue to enjoy my roses."

They had blossomed thickly about her path during this decade. Her matronly beauty was the wonder and praise of the community. The changing seasons that had bleached the locks upon her husband's temples and heightened his forehead had spared the bronzed chestnut of her luxuriant tresses. Her figure was larger and fuller, but graceful, and more queenly than of yore if that could be. There was not an untuneful inflection in her voice, or a furrow between her brows. Under her careful management the homestead wore every year an air of increased elegance. No other furniture for many miles on both sides of the river could compare with hers; no other servants were so well—trained, no grounds so beautifully ornamented and trimly kept.

"But for all that Ridgeley is a lonely, desolate place to me," said Mrs. Sutton, one early spring morning to her niece and crony, Mrs. William Sutton. "A house without children is worse than a last year's bird's nest. It is a riddle to me how Clara Aylett contrives to occupy her time."

"She should have some of these socks to darn, if it hangs upon her hands," replied Mrs. William, humorously, running her five fingers through the toe of one she had just picked up from the great willow basket set between the two upon the porch—floor.

"The Lord isn't very apt to make mothers out of that sort of material," said the elder lady. "Nor fathers out of Winston Ayletts. They are so wrapped up in their self—consequence as to have no thought for others."

"Yet they say Mr. Aylett regrets that he has no heir. It is a great pity Mabel lost her only child as she did. The family will become extinct in another generation. It is such a noble estate, too!"

"Large families were never the rule among the Ayletts," responded Aunt Rachel. "But I did hope my dear Mabel would be an exception to the rest in this respect. She would adopt a little girl, but her husband will not consent. Those Dorrances are a cold—hearted race. He, too, is heaping up riches, without knowing who shall gather them. Heigh—ho!"

Her darning—needle quilted the yawning heel of Tommy Sutton's sock with precision and celerity, and she ruminated silently upon the vicissitudes and failures of mortal life until she was interrupted by Mrs. William's exclamation:

"There is Mrs. Tazewell's carriage at the gate, and the driver has a letter in his hand. I hope the old lady is not worse!"

Aunt Rachel met the man at the steps, with neighborly anxiety.

"How is your mistress, Jack?"

"'Bout the same, ma'am. But Miss Rosa she came last night very unexpected, and it kinder worsted Mistis to see her so poorly. This note is from Miss Rosa, ma'am, and I am to take back an answer."

Mrs. Sutton read it standing in the porch the scented leaflet that had a look of the writer all over it, from the scarlet monogram at the top of the sheet and upon the envelope, to the flourish of the signature "Rosa T. C." the curl of the C carried around the rest like a medallion frame:

"DEAR, GOOD AUNT RACHEL, I have come to Old Virginia to try and shake off an uncomfortable cough which has haunted me all winter. The Northern quacks can do nothing for me. One ray of this delicious sunshine

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is worth all their nostrums. I was not prepared to find mamma helpless, or I should not have descended upon her so unceremoniously. Being here, I cannot retreat in good order or with safety to my health, nor without wounding her. Frederic must return to Philadelphia next week, by which time I hope to be quite invigorated. Now for my audacious proposal. Can you come over and tell me how to get well in the quickest and least troublesome way? Dear Auntie! you loved me once. When you see what a poor, spiritless shadow I have grown or lessened to be, you will care a little bit for me again, for the sake of lang syne."

Mrs. Sutton wiped her spectacles and gave the note to her niece.

"There is but one thing for me to do, you see, my dear. Jack! I shall be ready in twenty minutes."

If the line of duty wavered before her sight during the three-mile drive, it lay straight and distinct ahead of her when she stood in Rosa's chamber.

"My child!" she ejaculated, upon the threshold "you did not tell me that you were confined to your bed!"

"I ought not to be!"

The rebellious pout and tone were Rosa's, as were also the black eyes unnaturally large and bright though they were but the pretty lips were wan, and strained by lines of pain; the pomegranate flush was no longer variable, and was nestled in hollows, and the hands were wasted to translucency.

"I am quite strong enough to be up, and would be, if my tyrannical doctors and their tractable tool, my lord and master, had not decreed that I shall lie here until midday, if I am very obedient; eat my meals; take their poisonous medicines, and abstain from coughing. If I offend in any of these particulars I am not to rise until three o'clock when they are in an especially glum humor not at all that day. But now you are here, we shall combat them valorously. Dear Auntie!" putting the thin arms about the old lady's plump neck, and laughing through a spring rain of tears, "how good and safe it is to be with you again! And you are the same kind, lovely darling! no older by a day no uglier by a solitary wrinkle! I couldn't sleep last night, for fearing you would not come to me!"

"You should not have doubted it, dear!" said the motherly voice, blithe as affectionate, while soft, agile fingers undid the tight embrace, and commenced, from the force of habit, to arrange the tumbled bed-clothes. "Wherever I can be of most use is the place in which I wish to be."

"I know you have always lived for others," answered Rosa, with an involuntary sigh, a shadow glooming her eyes.

"For whom else should I live and work?" laughed Mrs. Sutton, in her cheerful, guileless fashion. "My personal wants are few and easily supplied, and I like to be busy. I account it a privilege to be able to fuss about my friends when they are ailing."

By way of doing as she liked, she attacked the disorderly room. Rosa's three trunks stood in a row against the wall all of them open the tray of the largest lying beside it upon the carpet, the lid of this thrown back and the contents in utter confusion; laces hanging over the sides and trailing upon the floor. A casket of medicines was uppermost in the next trunk, crushing a confused medley of collars, ribbons, gloves, and handkerchiefs. A dressing-gown lay upon the seat of one chair, a skirt over the back of another; boots and slippers peeped from the valance of the antique bedstead; there was a formidable array of bottles upon mantel and bureau conspicuous among them cod-liver oil, cologne, and laudanum incongruous appendages to the various appliances of the toilette scattered between them.

Mrs. Sutton understood it all the hurry and agitation of the unlooked-for arrival; the faintness and prostration of the consumptive; the restless night, and the well-meant but inefficient ministrations of negroes in an

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establishment where the mistress had been feeble for years, and was now chained to her room and chair by paralysis.

"And Rosa was always an indolent flyabout in health; accustomed to have a score of servants at her heels to pick up whatever she dropped or threw aside," she said to herself. "My Mabel was a pink of neatness and order compared with her. Dear me! here is a bottle of oil, cracked, and an immense grease-spot in the front breadth of a splendid silk dress! I hope these things do not annoy her as they would me!"

Whether the universal disarray made Rosa uncomfortable or not, she enjoyed the aspect of the tidy apartment, when her nurse brought her noiseless labors to a close by exchanging her night-gown for a flannel wrapper; putting clean linen upon her and the bed; combing the tangled hair and washing her hands, wrists, and face in tepid water, interfused with cologne.

"It prevents a sick person from taking cold when bathed, and freshens her up wonderfully, I think," was her explanation of the fragrant preparation.

"YOU freshen me more than all things else combined!" said Rosa, gratefully. "Ah, auntie! how often I have thought of, and wished for you this tedious and dismal winter! I used to spend entire weeks in bed, attended by a horrid hired nurse, who took snuff and drank ugh! and snubbed and terrified me whenever I as she described it 'took a notion into my head;' that is, when I asked for something she thought was too troublesome for her ladyship to prepare, or wanted Fred to stay all night in my room, or sit by me in the evening, and pet me. She 'couldn't bear to have men around, cluttering up everything!' she would growl the instant his back was turned, with a deal more of the same talk, until I was afraid to ask him to take a seat the next time he came in. He was continually bringing home baskets of fruit, and game, and bouquets for me. She let me have the flowers, but she ate nine-tenths of the nice things herself, I never suspecting her, and he was too delicate to ask if I enjoyed his presents. At length he surprised her in the act of devouring a bunch of hot-house grapes, for which he had paid almost their weight in gold, and then all came to light, and he sent her off in a hurry. Poor Fred, there were great tears in his eyes when he learned what persecution I had undergone, rather than vex him by complaints."

"It would have been better had you told him sooner, dear! It would have spared you and him much suffering."

"I knew how engrossed he was by his business, and how ignorant he was of household or medical matters, and I saved him all the bother I could. I have tried, in some things and some times, to be a good wife, Aunt Rachel! But often I have failed, O, how egregiously! and" beginning to weep "the thought pierces my heart by day and by night. What if I never have an opportunity of doing any better, of covering up the traces of my footsteps?"

Mrs. Sutton patted the wasted hand with her cool one, but essayed no other soothing.

"Where is your husband now? I understood from your note that he was with you."

"He rode over to Dr. Ritchie's this morning, directly he had given me my breakfast. He thinks highly of his skill, and he would not be contented without bringing him to see me. I really believe he is anxious I should get well! Strange isn't it? when I am such a burden upon his mind and hands."

Aunt Rachel smiled.

"Not at all strange, you ridiculous child! Two of the most dearly-loved wives I ever knew were invalids, and bedridden, not for weeks only, but for years. You can best show your gratitude for his affection and kindness by getting better rapidly while he is here, that he may leave you with a lighter heart."

"He is kind! too kind!" murmured Rosa, composing herself among the cushions, as if to sleep.

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She was quiet so long that Mrs. Button had leisure for some reflections relating to her own personal action in the somewhat embarrassing position she occupied. She had never seen Frederic Charlton from the day he left Ridgeley as Mabel's betrothed. His visits to the neighborhood since his marriage had been few and brief, and she had studied to avoid him whenever she happened to be with the William Suttons during one of these. He might have guessed her design, or unwittingly favored it on his own account. The meeting would not be more pleasant to him than to her. But why had he allowed his wife to send for her? The alteration in him must indeed be great, if he could, without a conflict with resentful and painful memories, bow his pride to sue for the services of a relative of the Ayletts, and formerly one of their household, even in such a cause as that which now commanded her sympathies.

At this point of her cogitation she became aware that Rosa's eyes were wide open, and staring at her with a whimsical blending of curiosity, melancholy, and gratification.

"Aunt Rachel!" she said, bluntly, "you are a very good woman! the best and most forgiving human being I ever heard of. I should not feel one particle of surprise to see you float up gently through the roof, at any minute cap, spectacles, and all translated to the society of your sister angels and no questions asked by St. Peter at the gate of Paradise!"

"My love!"

Well as she knew her erratic disposition and wild style of speech, Mrs. Sutton moved her hand toward the patient's pulse.

"I am not raving! I speak the words of truth and soberness very sad soberness, too! Believing as you do that Frederic was once the cause of much sorrow to you and to one you loved, and having no reason to care one iota for me, but rather to distrust me, you nevertheless obey my call upon you for service, as if I had every right to make it. And when here, you treat me just as you would Mabel, were her situation as deplorable, her need equal to mine."

"Why shouldn't I?" questioned Mrs. Sutton, simply. "I have no ground for a quarrel with you. And if I had well, the truth is, my dear, I have a poor memory for such things!"

Rosa caught at the scarcely perceptible emphasis upon the "YOU," and disregarded the remainder of the remark.

"You cannot yet acquit Frederic of wrong-doing! Indeed, Mrs. Sutton, he has been foully wronged among you. It is not because he is my husband that I say this. Mabel's name has never passed his lips – nor mine in his hearing, since I became his wife. And every one of the family has been equally guarded when he was by. I doubt, sometimes, if he has ever heard whom she married or where she lives so carefully has he shunned every reference to her or any of the Ridgeley people. During the nine years we have lived together, he has given me no cause to suspect that he ever thinks of her, or laments the broken engagement. If I have made myself wretched by imagining the contrary, it was my fault, not his my foolish, wicked jealousy. I would scorn to imply a doubt of his integrity, by reminding him of the charges proffered against him by Winston Aylett, and believed by his sister much less ask him to contradict them. I never put any faith in them from the outset. It comforts me to recollect that my confidence in him stood fast when everybody else distrusted him my noble, slandered darling! But my declaration of his innocence is founded upon his blameless life and upright principles. No one could be with him as I have been, and doubt him. He is a perfect man if there was ever a sinless mortal great-hearted, gentle, and sincere. Do not I know this? Have I not proved him to the utmost?"

Her rapid, impassioned declamation was ended by a copious flood of grief that provoked a frightful fit of coughing. When this was subdued she was weaker than a year-old infant, and lay between stupor and dreaming for so long a time, that Mrs. Sutton became alarmed.

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There must be no repetition of this scene. She must ward off similar mishaps by whatever measures she could force or cajole her conscience into adopting. Rosa's state was more precarious than her account had led her friend to believe, or than the nurse's experienced eye had seen at their meeting. The main hope of her recovery was in the warmer climate and assiduous attendance. Above all, she should not be allowed to exhaust herself by talking, or hysterical paroxysms. She had no more self-control than a child, and she must be treated as such. Mrs. Sutton's jesuitical resolve was to humor her by every imaginable device, even to feigned friendship for Frederic Chilton.

Fortified by this resolution, she heard, without any show of pride or trepidation, the clatter of horses' hoofs in the yard; the sound of voices below stairs, as Mr. Chilton ushered the physician into the parlor, and the light, careful tread with which he mounted to his wife's apartment. His momentary pause at the entrance, and surprised look at beholding the other tenant of the chamber, were the best passport to her indulgence he could have desired. It was clear to her instantly that poor Rosa's passion for manoeuvring had survived the wreck of health and prostration of spirits. She had never chosen the straight path if she could find a crooked or a by-road, and her project for obtaining Mrs. Sutton's services and company had been put into execution, without consultation with her husband. However reprehensible this might be in the abstract, it was not in the kind old soul to betray her, as she advanced, placidly and civilly, to reassure the startled man.

"How are you, Mr. Chilton? You hardly expected to meet me here, I suppose? But I am a near neighbor of Mrs. Tazewell now, and hearing that Rosa was sick, I came over to see if I could do anything for her, knowing how infirm her mother is."

"You are very kind!" He grasped her hand more tightly than he intended, or was conscious of. "We were ignorant ourselves of Mrs. Tazewell's true condition. Mrs. Chilton's sisters have forwarded more encouraging reports to her of her mother's illness than they would have been warranted in doing by anything except the fear that a faithful account would operate injuriously upon the daughter's health. I should have chosen some other home for my wife, had I known the actual state of affairs here. Change of scene and climate was imperatively demanded."

He spoke low and rapidly hardly above his breath; but the black eyes, unclosing, flashed upon him.

"So you have come back!" said Rosa's weak voice. "You stayed away an eternity!"

Her coquettish displeasure and the asperity of her accent contrasted so oddly with her vehemently expressed attachment for her husband and extolment of his virtues, that Mrs. Sutton regarded her in speechless amazement. She submitted to his kiss, without returning it even raising her hand pettishly as to repel further endearments. "I should have died of the blue devils if Aunt Rachel hadn't, by the merest accident, heard that I was ailing, and driven over, like the Good Samaritan she is, to take pity upon me in my destitution; to pour oil not cod-liver into my wounds, and wine into my mouth. She is better than all the men-doctors that were ever created; so if you have brought your bearded Esculapius home with you, you may tell him, with my compliments, that I won't see him yet awhile. He was an old beau of mine, and I hope I have too much respect for what I used to be, to let him get a glimpse of me until Dr. Sutton has set me up in better flesh and looks. She brought me some enchanting jelly one of her magical preparations for the amelioration of human misery, and I am to have a bowl of her unparalleled chicken-broth for dinner. I wish dinner-time were come! the very thought makes me ravenous. I am to do nothing for a week, but eat, drink, and sleep, at the end of which period I shall be dismissed as thoroughly cured. So, Mr. Chilton, you can go back to your beloved clients whenever you please!"

To Mrs. Sutton's apprehension this was an infelicitous introduction of herself to the husband's toleration. Certainly, she did not know many men who would have parried the thrusts at themselves with the dexterity he manifested, and acknowledged her merits and kindly offices willingly and gracefully. He did not apologize for his protracted absence, nor insist upon conveying his physician to the sick-chamber; but he chatted for five minutes or thereabouts upon such topics as he knew would entertain the captious invalid, and finally arose from the bed-side, where he had been sitting, fondling her hot hands, with a good-humored laugh.

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"But all the while I am enjoying myself here, the hirsute Galen aforesaid is munching the invisible salad of the solitary in the parlor! I am to eject him incontinently, am I? My conscience will not let me withhold the admission, when I do this, that my wife's judgment in the matter of medical attendants is vastly superior to mine. While Mrs. Sutton is so good as to remain with you, you are right in thinking that you have need of no other physician."

Aunt Rachel would have entered a disclaimer, but Rosa spoke before she could open her mouth.

"I didn't say that, Frederic! There was never such another impatient and inconsiderate creature upon the globe as yourself. It would be unpardonably rude in us to send the man away, if he is a charlatan, without letting him see me. Have him up, by all means, and let us hear what priggish nonsense he has to say. He will feel the easier when it is done."

Dr. Ritchie's private report to Mrs. Sutton, who accompanied him to the lower floor, under color of seeing that he was served with luncheon, was discouraging. The disease had made fearful inroads upon a constitution that had never been robust, and the nervous excitability of the patient was likely to accelerate her decline. She might linger for several months. It would not surprise him to hear that she had died within twelve hours after his visit. It was but fair and professional he added, that he should, through Mrs. Sutton, advise Mr. Chilton of her state, although, unless he were mistaken, he had already anticipated his verdict.

This Mrs. Sutton found was the case, when she essayed that evening to insure him against the awful shock of his wife's unexpected dissolution.

"She has never been entirely well since the death of our second child, a year ago," he said. "The little one was buried on a very stormy day, and the mother would not be dissuaded from going to the cemetery. The severe cold, acting upon a system enfeebled by grief, induced an attack of pneumonia. Dr. Ritchie but coincides with every other physician I have consulted."

"It is a pity you are obliged to leave her so soon," observed the sympathizing nurse. "Although she may be more comfortable a week hence than she is now."

"A week! I had no intention of returning in less than a month's time. I made all my arrangements to that effect before leaving home. Rosa's reference to my desire to go back to my clients was sheer badinage" smiling mournfully. "You have heard her talk often enough to understand how little of earnest there is in the raillery." More insincerity! For, contradictory as it may appear, Mrs. Sutton felt constrained to believe his unsupported word, in opposition to his wife's written assertion that he designed to return to his practice the ensuing week.

"She thought I would be more apt to come if I imagined that he would soon be gone!" was her grieved reflection. "If she could beguile me hither by this assurance, she trusted to her coaxings and my compassion to retain me. O Rosa! Rosa! cannot even the honest hour teach you to be truthful?"

CHAPTER XVI. THE HONEST HOUR.

The shadow of death drew on apace to the sight of all, save the consumptive, and her semi-imbecile mother. These seemed alike blind to the fatal symptoms that were more strongly defined with every passing day. The paralytic sat in her wheeled chair, in the March sunshine, at the window of her chamber, and talked droningly of other times and paltry pleasures to that one of her daughters or grand-children whose turn it was to minister to her comfort and amusement, and insisted upon having all the neighborhood news repeated in her dull ear with wearisome to the narrator amplifications and reiterations, shaking with childish laughter at the humorous passages, and whimpering at the pathetic. Rosa cheated time of heaviness by unceasing demands upon her

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attendants for service and diversion. Unable to sleep, except at long intervals, in snatches of fitful dozing, she had a horror of being alone for an instant, from dusk until dawn; was ingenious in contrivances to surprise an unwary watcher nodding upon her post; plenteous and plaintive in lamentations, if the device succeeded. Fifty times a night her pillows must be shaken, her drink, food, or medicine given, and after each of these offices had been performed, occurred the petition:

"Now sit where I can see you whenever I open my eyes! It drives me crazy to imagine for a moment that I am by myself. I want to be sure all the while that some living human being is near at hand. I have such frightful dreams! I awake always with the impression that I am drowning or suffocating, or floating away into a sea of darkness alone!"

With the light of day, her spirits revived, and her hopes of speedy recovery.

"You need not grudge waiting upon me now, for I shall be up and about shortly well and spry as the best of you!" she would say. "And while I am playing invalid, I mean to have my quantum of attention. I have been avaricious of devotion all my life, and this is a golden chance that may never happen again."

Her husband she would not willingly suffer to leave her for an instant. But for Mrs. Sutton's management and kindly authority, he would have been condemned to take his meals at her bedside and from the same tray with herself. She would be removed from the bed to the lounge by no other arms than his, and at any hour of the twenty-four he was liable to be called upon to read, sing, or talk her into composure. Variable as ever in mood and fancy, and more capricious in the exhibition of these, she was fond, sullen, teasing, and mirthful with him as the humor of the moment dictated; sometimes assailing him with reproaches for his indifference and want of regard for her wishes and tastes, now that she was no longer young, pretty, and sprightly; at others, clinging to him with protestations of repentance and love, bewailing her waywardness and imploring his forbearance; then, taking him to task for the slightest inadvertence the spilling of a drop of her medicine or jarring of her sofa or bed; anon lauding him to the skies as the most skilful nurse she had, and enjoining upon all about her to render verbal testimonial to his irreproachableness as husband and man oh! it was a wearisome, oftentimes a revolting duty to listen to and bear with it all keep in mind though one did that the intolerable restlessness precluded centuries of dreamless repose.

Mrs. Sutton could endure everything else better and she believed that it was the same with Frederic than the needless and puerile trickery to which Rosa resorted to achieve the most trivial purposes. If she wished that one of her sisters should pass the day with her, or to sit up for a part of the night, she worked upon her by means of others' intercessions, or broached the subject by covert passages, the end of which, she flattered herself, was successfully masked, until her train was ready for explosion. Did she set her fancy upon any particular article of diet, the same tortuous course was pursued to present the delicacy in question to the mind of him or her who, she designed, should be the provider. Under her sauciest rattle of fun or perversity lurked some subtle meaning. She had either some end to subserve, or wanted to possess herself of some bit of information she could have gained sooner and more easily by direct inquiry. Cajolery and intrigue had become a second nature, stronger than the original; and it never occurred to her that her wiles, in her mental and bodily decadence, were transparent as they had once been artful.

A discovery, made on the fourth day of her visit, excited Mrs. Sutton's sympathies in behalf of the much enduring husband to a pitch it required long and serious pondering upon the wife's weakness and critical condition to restrain from indignant demonstration.

Rosa was sleeping more soundly than usual under the influence of an anodyne, and Frederic, with a whispered apology to his coadjutor, went into the next room, leaving the door ajar. From her seat, Mrs. Sutton had a distinct view of him in an opposite mirror a circumstance of which she was not aware for several minutes. Happening, then, to look up from her knitting she saw that he was writing, and half an hour afterward that he was leaning

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back in his chair, looking at something in the hollow of his hand, a mingling of such love and sadness in his countenance that she felt it would be unlawful prying into his most sacred feelings for her to watch him longer. He turned his head at the slight rustle she made in removing to another part of the room, and beckoned to her. At her approach, he arose and held out a morocco case, containing the miniature of a child a bright-eyed, delicate-featured girl of seven or eight summers exquisitely painted.

"You have never seen my little Florence, I think?"

"I have not. She is pretty and resembles you strongly."

He did not color or laugh at the unconscious compliment, or seem pleased at her praise of his darling. Instead, there crept over his face a shade of more painful sadness, darkening his eyes and compressing his lip, as he answered

"So every one says. She is the dearest child in the world a sunbeam of gladness in any house amiable, affectionate, and intelligent. I wish you would read her last letter to me. She is a better correspondent than many grown people." Then, smiling, apologetically, "If my commendation seem overstrained, you will excuse a father's partiality."

The letter although the unformed chirography betrayed the writer's inexperience in pen-practice was correctly spelled and easy in style, crowded with loving messages to "dear papa and mamma;" relating anecdotes of school and home life, and while expressive of her longings for her parents' return, professing willingness to stay where she was "until mamma should be well enough to come back."

"I pray every night that God will cure her, and make us all happy again," she wrote. "I dreamed one night last week that I saw her dressed for a party, all rosy and funny and laughing, as she used to be, and that she kissed me, and put her arm around me, and called me 'baby Florence' and 'little one,' in her sweet voice. Wasn't it strange? I awoke myself crying, I was so happy! I do try to be brave, and not fret about what cannot be helped, papa, because I promised you I would; but sometimes it is right hard work. It is always easier for a whole day after I get one of your nice, long letters. It is not QUITE as good as having real talk with you, but it is the best treat I can have when you are away."

Mrs. Sutton wiped her eyes.

"The dear child!" she said, in the subdued tone habitual to the frequenters of the sick-room. "No wonder you want to see her! Why didn't you give her a holiday, and bring her to Virginia with you?"

"I dreaded the effect of a child's high animal spirits and thoughtless bustle upon her mother's health" the shadow thickening into trouble. "The next best thing to having her with me is to know that she is kindly and lovingly looked after by my married sister, of whom she is very fond. Florence is merrier, if not always happier, with her young cousins than if she were condemned to the repression and joyless routine of a house where the care of the sick is the most engrossing business to all."

The more Mrs. Sutton meditated upon this conversation, the more enigmatical it appeared that the mother never spoke of missing her only living child never pined for the sound of her vivacious talk and the sight of her winning ways. Curiosity her strong love for all children, and a lively interest in Florence and Florence's father, the two who assuredly did feel the separation got the ascendancy over discretion that night, when Rosa, too nervous to sleep, begged her to talk, "to scare away the horrors that were sitting, a blue-black brood, upon her pillow."

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"Your little daughter would be an endless source of entertainment to you if she were here," said downright Aunt Rachel, with no show of circumlocution. "I am surprised you do not send for her."

"Children of that age are a nuisance!" returned Rosa, peevishly. "And of all tiresome ones that I ever saw, Florence is the most trying. She doesn't talk after I bid her hold her tongue, but her big, solemn eyes see and her ears hear all that passes. If there is one thing that pushes me nearer to the verge of distraction than another it is to have my own words quoted to me when I have forgotten that I ever uttered them. And she literal little bore! is always pretending to take all that I say in earnest. If I were to tell her to go to Guinea, it is my belief she would put on her bonnet, cloak, and gloves, pocket a biscuit for luncheon and a story-book to read by the way, and set out forthwith, asking the first decent-looking man she met in the street at what wharf she would find a vessel bound for Africa."

Mrs. Sutton was obliged to laugh.

"She must be a truthful, sincere little thing!"

"Didn't I tell you she is TOO outrageously literal and unimaginative? Just let me give you an example of how she tires and vexes me. One day, about a fortnight before I left home, she set her heart upon spending the whole of Saturday afternoon with me. Her father objected, for he understands, if he does not sympathize with me, what a trial she is to flesh and spirit. But I was moderately comfortable, and my nerves were less unruly than usual, so I said we would try and get on together.

"No sooner had he gone than the catechism commenced:

"Now, mamma, what can I do to amuse you?"

"She talks like a woman of fifty.

"What should you propose if I were to leave it to you?" I asked.

"I suppose," said my Lady Cutshort, "that it would excite you too much to talk, so I had better read aloud. What book do you prefer?"

"I named one a novel I had not finished and resigned myself to martyrdom. She reads fluently her father says prettily; but the piping voice rasped my auriculars to the quick, and I soon stopped the exhibition. Then we essayed conversation, but our range of themes was limited, and a dismal silence succeeded to a short dialogue. By and by I told her that I was sleepy, hoping she would take the hint and leave my room.

"Then, mamma, I will just get my work-basket, and sit here, as still as a mouse, and prevent all disturbance."

"With that, she gets out her miniature thimble and scissors, and falls to work upon a pair of slippers she was embroidering for her father's birthday present, sitting up, starched and prim as an old maid, her lips pursed, and her forehead gravely consequential. I could not close my eyes without seeing her still, like an undersized nightmare, her hair smooth to the least hair, her dress neat to the smallest fold, stitching, stitching, the affected, conceited marmoset!

"At last I said:

"Put down your sewing, Florence, and look out of the window at the people going by. You must be very tired."

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"Not in the least, mamma, dear,' answered Miss Pert. 'I like to work, and there is nothing interesting going on outside.'

"I tossed and sighed, and she was by me in a second.

"Darling mamma! my poor, sweet little mother!' in her reed-like chirp; 'can I do nothing to make you feel better?' putting her hands upon my head and stroking my face until my flesh crawled.

"Yes,' said I, out of all patience. 'Take yourself off, and don't let me see you again until to-morrow morning! You kill me with your teasing.'

"And would you believe it? she just put up her sewing in the basket and went directly out, without a tear or a murmur, and when her father came home he could not prevail upon her, by commands or persuasions, to accompany him further than the door of my chamber. So he, who won't admit that she can do anything wrong, instead of whipping her for her obstinacy, as he ought to have done, guessed she 'had some reason' for her disobedience which she did not like to tell, and interrogated poor, persecuted me. When he had heard my version of the manner in which we had spent the afternoon, he only said, 'I should have foreseen this. But the child she is only a child, Rosa! did her best!' and he looked so mournful that I, knowing he blamed me for his bantling's freak of temper, told him plainly that he cared a thousand times more for this diminutive bundle of hypocrisy than he ever did for me, and that his absurd favoritism was fast begetting in me a positive dislike for her. I couldn't endure the sight of the sulky little mischief-maker for a week after her complaint of barbarity had brought the look into his face I knew so well."

"O Rosa, she is your own flesh and blood! and, as her father said, a mere baby yet! You said, too, that she refused to assign any cause to him for her singular conduct."

"She might better have made open outcry than have left upon his mind the impression that I had banished her cruelly and unnecessarily. But I despair of giving you an idea of how provoking she can be. She is a Chilton, through and through, in feature, manner, and disposition one of those 'goody' children, you know! a class of animals that are simply intolerable to me. She is too precocious and unbaby-like to be in the least interesting. You should have seen my little Violet to understand what a constant disappointment Florence is. She was myself in miniature, and moreover the most witching, prankish, peppery elf that was ever made. The best trait in Florence's character was her love for her baby-sister. She gave up everything to her while she was alive, and they told me that she would not eat, and scarcely slept, for days after her death. Her father will have it that she is singularly sensitive, and has marvellous depths of feeling; but if this be so, it is queer I never found it out. Nobody could help adoring Violet my aweet, lost, beautiful angel!"

The hysterical sobs were pumping up the tears now in hot torrents, and these Mrs. Sutton was fain to assuage by loving arts she would not but for the danger of allowing them to flow have been in the temper to employ, so full was her heart of yearning pity for the hardly-used babe, and displeasure at the mother's weak selfishness. It was easier to forgive and forget Rosa's sins; to lessen, in the retrospect, her worst faults into foibles, than it would have been to overlook the more venal failings of one less mercurial, and whose personal fascinations did not equal hers.

Ere the close of another day, Mrs. Sutton had excused her unnatural insensibility to her child's virtues and affection, by representing to herself how fearfully disease had warped judgment and perception; had cast over the enormities she could not palliate the pall of solemn remembrance of the truth that death's dark door was already as surely shut between mother and daughter, as if the grave held the former. A week of chill March rains and wind was disastrous to the patient, who had seemed to draw her main supplies of strength from the sunshine admitted freely to her room, with the spring air, redolent with the delicious odors of the freshly-turned earth, the budding trees, and early blossoms from the garden heneath her windows. She shrank and shivered under the ungenial sky,

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while the drizzling mist soaked life and animation out of the fragile body. Occasional fits of delirium, increased difficulty of breathing, and a steady decline of the slender remains of vital force, warned her attendants that their care would not be required much longer. She was still obstinate in her disbelief of the grave nature of her malady. The most distant reference to her decease would arouse her to angry refutation of the hinted doubt of her recovery, and excited her to offer proof of her declaration that she was less ill than others supposed; she would summon up a poor counterfeit of energy and mirth, more ghastly than her previous lassitude; deny that she suffered from any cause, save the unfailing nervous depression consequent upon the unfavorable weather.

Then came a day on which the sun looked forth with augmented splendor from his sombrely curtained pavilion; when the naked branches of the deciduous trees, the serried lances of the evergreens, and the broad leaves of the tent-like magnolias the pride of the Tazewell place shone as from a bath of molten silver. The battered flowers ventured into later and healthier bloom, and a robin, swinging upon the lilac spray nearest Rosa's window, sang blithe greeting to the reinstated spring.

Rosa heard him opened her eyes, and smiled.

"One maybe the very same used to sing there every morning when I was a girl used to awake me from my second nap. I could sleep all night then, and never dream once!"

A messenger had been sent, at daybreak, for her sisters and brother, who resided several miles away, but as yet Mrs. Sutton and Frederic were her only nurses. She had dozed almost constantly during the night, and been delirious when awakened to take nourishment or tonics, muttering senseless and disconnected words, and moaning in pain, the location and nature of which she could not describe to the solicitous watchers.

"I remember that Mabel and I," she continued, dreamily, after a long pause then correcting herself, "I ask your pardon, Frederic! I said I wouldn't speak of her ever again to you, but we were so much together in those days. Moreover, it has troubled me at times, that you did not know who your real friends were, and she did like you and and what am I saying! You shouldn't let me run on so!"

She raised her hand with difficulty, and tried to wipe away the film gathering over her dilated eyes.

"Never mind, my darling! Do not attempt to talk! You are too weak and tired!" said her husband, tenderly.

"Tired!" catching at the word, "That is it! There is nothing else the matter, whatever Dr. Ritchie and the rest of them may say. Tired! for how many years I have been THAT! It seems like a thousand. This world is a tiresome place to most people, I think I shall never forget how jaded Mabel looked that week," breaking off, as before, with a frightened start, such as a dreamer gives when he fancies he is falling from an immeasurable height. "Indeed, Fred, dear!" feeling for his hand upon the coverlet, "I did not mean to wound or offend you. It was a terrible ordeal for you, my love! But you came out of it as silver seven times refined. That is what the text says isn't it? And you and Aunt Rachel are friends once more! That is one good deed I have done. I hope it will be recorded up THERE! Heaven knows there are not so many that I can afford to have one overlooked!"

Another season of dozing, and she awoke, rubbing her hands feebly together, as to cleanse them.

"My hands ought to be whiter purer! I know what ails them. I should have picked up the letter she Mrs. Sutton wrote you. But I loved you so even then!" beseechingly. "You will not hate me when I am gone? I mean when you get back to Philadelphia, and I am well enough to be left here. I was sure, if you got it, you would come to Ridgeley, and I let it go down the stream down down! Frederic!"

"I am here, dearest!" slipping his arm under, and raising her, as her shrill cry rang out, and she grasped the empty air. "Rosa, my WIFE!"

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"I thought I was strangling in the water! I am your wife am I not? She couldn't take you from me if she were here. I wish she were! I always liked Mabel. She was a good, true woman but she did not love you as I did!"

Panting for breath, she leaned upon her husband's breast, and her eyelids fell together again. Only for a moment! Then a smile fond, sweet, and penitent played among the ashy shadows encircling her mouth. "Poor little Florence! I am sorry I was cross to her. Tell her so, papa!" Her husband stooped to kiss her, laid her back upon the pillows, closed the sightless eyes, and left Mrs. Sutton alone with the dead.

CHAPTER XVII. AFTER FIFTEEN YEARS.

"OLD Mrs. Tazewell has departed this life at last!" said Winston Aylett, entering his own parlor one bleak November evening on his return from the village post-office. "I met Al. Branch on the road just now. For a wonder he was sober in honor of the occasion, I suppose. He and Gus. Tabb are to sit up with the corpse to-night."

"When did she die?" queried his wife, drawing her skirts aside, that he might get nearer the fire.

"At twelve o'clock to-day. That is, she ceased the unprofitable business of respiration at that hour. She died, virtually, five years ago. She has been little better than a mummy for that period."

"Poor old lady!" said Mabel Dorrance, regretfully, from her corner of the hearth. "Hers was a kind heart, while she could think and act intelligently. One of my earliest recollections is of the dainties with which she used to ply me when I visited Rosa. She was an indulgent parent and mistress, yet I suppose few even of those most nearly related to her will mourn her loss."

"It would be very foolish if they did!" Mr. Aylett picked up the tongs to mend the fire. "And very unnatural did they not rejoice at being rid of a burden. The old place has been going to destruction all these years, and it could not be sold while she cumbered the upper earth."

No one replied directly to this delicate and feeling observation, and Mrs. Aylett presently diverted the conversation slightly by saying,

"And Alfred Branch has gone to tender his services to the family! There is something romantic in his constancy to a memory. From the day of Rosa's death, he has embraced every chance of testifying his respect for and wish to serve her friends. He is a sadder wreck than was Mrs. Tazewell. You would hardly recognize him, Mabel. His hair and beard are white as those of a man of sixty-five, and his face bloated out of all comeliness."

"White heat!" interjected Mr. Aylett. "He can not last much longer."

"And all because a pretty girl said him 'Nay!'" pursued the wife.

Mr. Aylett and Mr. Dorrance made characteristic responses in a breath.

"The greater blockhead he!" said one.

The other, "His was never a rightly balanced mind, I suspect. I always thought him weak and impressionable."

"Are your adjectives synonymous?" asked Mrs. Aylett playfully.

"Generally!"

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Her brother had been reading at a distant window, while the daylight sufficed to show him the type of his book. He now laid it by, and came forward into the redder circle of radiance cast by the burning logs. He was in his forty-third year, saturnine of visage, coldly monotonous in accent, a business machine that did its work in good, substantial style, and undertook no "fancy jobs." He had amassed a handsome fortune, built a handsome house, and married a handsome woman, all of which appendages to his consequence he contemplated with grim complacency. As regarded spiritual likeness, mutual affection, and assimilation of feeling and opinion, he and his wife had receded, the one from the other, in the fourteen years of their wedded life. There had been no decided rupture. Both disliked altercations, and where radical opposition of sentiment existed, they avoided the unsafe ground by tacit consent. Mabel's uniform policy was that of outward submission to the mandates of her chief.

"After all, it makes little difference!" she fell into the habit of saying in the earlier years of matronhood, and he interpreted her listless acquiescence in his decrees as faith in the soundness of his judgment, the infallibility of his decisions. No woman of sense and spirit ever becomes an exemplar in unquestioning obedience to a mortal man, unless through apathy fatal torpor of mind or heart. Of this fact in moral history our respectable barrister was happily ignorant. He was no better versed in the lore of the heart feminine than when he accepted Mabel Aylett's esteem and friendly regard in lieu of the shy, but ardent attachment a betrothed maiden should have for the one she means to make her husband.

He respected her thoroughly, and loved her better than he did anybody else. She was the one woman he recognized as his sister's superior supremacy due to the influence of single-minded integrity and modest dignity. What Mabel said, he believed without gainsaying; while Clara's clever dicta required winnowing to separate the probably spurious from the possibly true. If his tone, in addressing his wife, was seldom affectionate, it was never careless, as that which replied to his sister's raillery.

"Generally," he said in his metallic, unmodulated voice. "The man who would cast away health, usefulness, and fortune in his chagrin at not winning the hand of a shallow-pated, volatile flirt, must be both silly and susceptible."

"Rosa Tazewell may have been shallow of heart, but she was not of pate," answered Mr. Aylett, with a cold sneer. "She was a fair plotter, and not fickle of purpose when she had her desires upon a much-coveted object. Her marriage proved that. She meant to captivate Chilton before she had known him a month yes, and to marry him, as she finally did. Her intermediate conquests were but the practice that was to perfect her in her profession. Does anybody know, by the way, if he has ever taken a second wife to his bereaved bosom?"

A brief silence, then Mrs. Aylett said, negligently, "I think not. Mrs. Trent, Rosa's sister, was expatiating to me a month since upon the beauty and accomplishments of his daughter, and she said nothing of a step-mother. Father and child live with a married sister of Mrs. Chilton, I believe."

"I had not heard that Rosa left a child," remarked Mabel, interested. "I understood that two died before the mother."

"Only one and that the younger. Miss Florence is now twelve years old, Mrs. Trent says. I saw her at church once, when she was visiting her grandmother and aunts. She is really passable but very unlike her mother."

Mabel did not join in the desultory talk that engaged the others until supper-time. There was a broken string in her heart, that jangled painfully when touched by an incautious hand.

"Twelve years old!" she was saying, inwardly. "My darling would have been thirteen, had she lived!"

And then flitted before her fancy a girlish form, with pure, loving eyes, and a voice melodious as a mocking-bird's. Warm arms were about her neck, and a round, soft cheek laid against hers as no human arms

At Last

and face would ever caress her, the childless, whose had been the hopes, fears, pains never the recompense of maternity.

She had been to the graveyard that day secretly, lest her husband should frown, Clara wonder, and Winston sneer at her love for and memory of that which had never existed, according to their rendering of the term. She had trimmed the wire-grass out of the little hollow, above which the mound had not been renewed since the day of her baby's burial, and, trusting to the infrequency of others' visits to the neglected enclosure, had laid a bunch of white rose-buds over the unmarked dust she accounted still a part of her heart, 'neath which it had lain so long. People said she had never been a mother; never had had a living child; had no hope of seeing it in heaven. God and she knew better.

"Clara, I wish you to attend Mrs. Tazewell's funeral this afternoon," said Mr. Aylett at breakfast the next day but one after this. "There were invidious remarks made upon your non-appearance at her daughter's, and I do not choose that my family shall furnish food for neighborhood scandal."

"My dear Winston, you must recollect what an insufferable headache I had that day."

"Don't have one to-day," ordered her husband laconically. "Mabel, do you care to go?"

"By all means. I would not fail, even in seeming, in rendering respect to one I used to like so much, and whose kindness to me was unvarying. You have no objection, Herbert?"

"None. I may accompany you the day being fine, and the roads in tolerable order."

The funeral was conducted with the disregard of what are, in other regions, established customs that distinguish such occasions in the rural districts of Virginia.

Written notices had been sent out, far and near, the day before, announcing that the services would begin at two o'clock, but when the Aylett party arrived at a quarter of an hour before the time specified, there was no appearance of regular exercises of any kind. A dozen carriages besides theirs were clustered about the front gate, and a long line of saddle-horses tethered to the fence. Knots of gentlemen in riding costume dotted the lawn and porches, and within-doors ladies sat, or walked at their ease in the parlor and dining room, or gathered in silent tearfulness around the open coffin in the wide central hall.

The bed-room of the deceased was a roomy apartment in a wing of the building, and to this Mabel was summoned before she could seat herself elsewhere.

"Miss Mary's compliments and love, ma'am; and she says won't you please step in thar, and set with Mistis' friends and relations?" was the audible message delivered to her by Mrs. Trent's spry waiting-maid.

Herbert looked dubious, and Mrs. Aylett enlarged her fine eyes in a manner that might mean either superciliousness or well-bred amazement. But Mabel was neither surprised nor doubtful as to the proper course for her to pursue. Time was when she was as much at home here as Rosa herself, and Mrs. Tazewell's partiality for her was shared by others of the family. That she had met none of them in ten or twelve years, did not at a season like the present dampen their affection. They would rather on this account seize upon the opportunity of honoring publicly their mother's old favorite.

The chamber was less light than the hall she traversed to reach it.

She recognized Mary Trent, the daughter next in age to Rosa, who fell upon her neck in a sobbing embrace, then the other sisters and their brother, Morton Tazewell, with his wife, and was formally presented to their children.

At Last

Finally she turned inquiringly toward a gentleman who stood against the window opposite the door, with a little girl beside him.

Confused beyond measure, as the hitherto unthought-of consequences of her impulsive action in sending for her friend rushed upon her mind, Mrs. Trent faltered out:

"I forgot! You must excuse me, but I was so anxious to see you. My brother-in-law, Mr. Chilton. He arrived yesterday not having heard of mother's death."

And for the first time since they looked their passionate farewell into each other's eyes under the rose-arch of the portico at Ridgeley, on that rainy summer morning, the two who had been lovers again touched hands.

"I hope you are quite well, Mr. Chilton," said Mabel's firm, gentle voice. "Is this your daughter?" kissing the serious-faced child on the forehead, and looking intently into her eyes in the hope of discovering a resemblance to her mother.

Then she went back to a chair next to Mrs. Trent's, and began to talk softly of the event that had called them together, not glancing again at the window until the outer hall was stilled, that the clergyman might begin the funeral prayer.

"The services will be concluded at the grave," was the announcement that succeeded the sermon; and there followed the shuffling of the bearers' feet, and their measured tramp across the floors and down the steps of the back porch.

The daughters and daughter-in-law let fall their veils and pulled on their gloves, and Herbert Dorrance beckoned somewhat impatiently to his wife from the parlor door. While she was on her way to join him, she saw his complexion vary to a greenish sallow, his mouth work spasmodically, and his eyes sink in anger or dismay.

Winston Aylett likewise noted and knew it, for the same look of abject terror he had observed upon the hard Scotch face when Mabel enumerated upon her fingers those she accused of having robbed her of her babe.

The wife attributed it to displeasure at seeing Frederic Chilton among the mourners. Her whilom guardian, never charitable overmuch, inclined the more to the belief begotten within him by other incidents, to wit: that his brother-in-law's talk was more doughty than his deeds, and his real sentiment upon beholding the man he boasted of having flogged as a libertine and coward, was physical dread for his own safety. Watchful alike of the other party to the ancient quarrel, he was rewarded by the sight of Chilton's irrepressible start and frown, when Mabel put her hand within her husband's arm, and stood awaiting the formation of the procession. The discarded lover gazed steadfastly into Dorrance's countenance in passing to his place, in recognition that scouted assimilarity with salutation, but his eye did not waver or his color fade.

"I would not be afraid to wager that this is but another version of the fable of the statue of the man rampant and the lion couchant," thought Mr. Aylett, following with his wife in the funeral train down the grass-grown alley leading through the garden to the family burying-ground. "It would be an entertaining study of human veracity if I could hear Chilton's story, and compare the two. He is either an audacious rascal, or there is something back of all that I have heard which will not bear the light."

It was not remorse at the thought of the total alteration in his sister's life and feelings that had grown out of this imperfect or false evidence, but simple curiosity to inspect the lineaments and note the actions of the cool rascal whose audacity commanded his admiration, and note his bearing in the event of his coming into closer contact with his former foe, that prompted him to single him out for scrutiny among those whose relationship to the deceased secured them places nearest the grave.

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For a time the widower was gravely quiet, holding his child's hand and looking down steadfastly into the pit at his feet, perhaps remembering more vividly than anything else a certain sunny day in March, many years back, when another fissure yawned close by, where now a green mound the ridged scar with which the earth had closed the wound in her breast and a stately shaft of white marble were all that remained to the world of "Rosa, wife of Frederic Chilton." But, while the mould was being heaped upon the coffin, he raised his eyes, and let them rove aimlessly over the crowd, neither avoiding nor courting observation the cursory regard of a man who had no strong interest in any person or group there. They changed singularly in resting upon the family from Ridgeley. A stare of stupefaction gave place to living fires of angry suspicion and amazement lurid flame that testified its violence in the reddening of cheeks and brow, in the dilating nostril and quivering lips. Then he passed his hand downward over his features, evidently conscious of their distortion, and striving after a semblance of equanimity, and looked again in stern fixity, not at her from whom he had been parted in the early summer of his manhood, nor at his successful rival, nor yet at the guardian who had offered him gratuitous insult in addition to the injury of refusing to permit his ward's marriage with a disgraced adventurer but at Mrs. Aylett, the chatelaine of Ridgeley, the wife whose serene purity had never been blemished by a doubting breath; chaste and polished matron; the admired copy for younger and less discreet, but not more beautiful women. He surveyed her boldly if the imagination had not seemed preposterous Mr. Aylett would have said scornfully, as he might study the face and figure of some abandoned wretch who had accosted him in the public thoroughfare as an acquaintance.

A haughty and uncontrollable gesture from the husband succeeded in diverting the offender's notice to himself for one instant not more. But in that flash he detected a shade of difference in the expression that irked him; a ray, that was inquiry, sharp and eager, tempered by compassion, yet still contemptuous.

All this passed in less time than it has taken me to write a line descriptive of the pantomime. The mound was shaped, and the decorously mournful train turned from it to retrace their course to the house, Frederic Chilton imitating the example of those about him, but moving like a sleep-walker, his brows corrugated and eyes sightless to all surrounding objects. He had awakened when the Ridgeley carriage drove to the door. Mrs. Sutton detained Mabel in one of the upper chambers to concert plans for a visit to the homestead while the Dorrances should be there. Aunt and niece had not met since the arrival of the latter in Virginia, a fortnight before, the elder lady being in constant attendance upon Mrs. Tazewell.

"This is very stupid! And I am getting hungry!" said Mrs. Aylett, aside to her lord, as she stood near a front window, tapping the floor with her feet, while vehicle after vehicle received its load and rolled off. "We shall be the last on the ground. Herbert! can't you intimate to Mabel that we are impatient to be gone?"

"I don't know where she is!" growled the brother, for once non-complaisant to her behest, and not stirring from the chair in the corner into which he had dropped at his entrance.

His head hung upon his breast, and he appeared to study the lining of his hat-crown, balancing the brim by his forefingers between his knees. Mrs. Aylett had lowered her veil in the burying-ground or on her way thither, but it was a flimsy mass of black lace richly wrought, yet insufficient to hide the paleness of the upper part of her visage. Mr. Aylett watched and wondered, with but one definite idea in his brain beyond the resolve to ferret out the entire mystery in his stealthy, taciturn fashion. Herbert Dorrance had been, in some manner, compromised by his association with this Chilton, had reason to dread exposure from him, and his sister was the confidante of his guilty secret.

"I shall know all about it in due season," thought the master of himself and his dependents.

Not that he meant to extort or wheedle it from his consort's keeping, but he had implicit faith in his own detective talents.

At Last

"Here she is at last!" he said, when Mabel came down the staircase, holding Aunt Rachel's hand, and talking low and earnestly, her noble face and even gliding step a refreshing contrast to Mrs. Aylett's nervousness and Herbert's dogged sullenness.

"I am sorry I have kept you so long, but there will be less dust than if we had gone sooner. The other carriages will have had time to get out of our way," she said, pleasantly. "Winston," coming up to her brother, and speaking in an undertone, "will it be quite convenient for you to send for Aunt Rachel on next Friday?"

"Entirely! The carriage shall be at your service at any hour or day you wish," with more cordiality than was common with him.

However treacherous others might be in their reserve and half-confessions, here was one who had never deceived him or knowingly misled him to believe her better, or otherwise, than she was. Honesty and truth were stamped upon her face by a life-long practice of these homely virtues not by meretricious arts. It was tardy justice, but he rendered it without grudging, if not heartily.

A few words passed as to the hour at which the carriage was to call for Mrs. Sutton, and Mabel kissed her "Good-by," the others shaking hands with her, and with three or four of the Tazewell kinsmen who officiated as masters of ceremonies, and Mrs. Aylett made an impatient movement toward the front steps. Directly in her route, leaning against a pillar of the old-fashioned porch, was Frederic Chilton, no longer dreamy and perplexed, but on the alert with eye and ear not losing one sound of her voice, or trick of feature. She inclined her head slightly and courteously, the notice due a friend of the house she, as guest, was about to leave. He did not bow, nor relax the rigor of his watch. Only, when she was seated in the carriage, he bent respectfully and mutely before Mabel, who followed her hostess, and paying as little attention to the two gentlemen as they did to him walked up to Mrs. Sutton, and said something inaudible to the bystanders. As they drove out of the yard, the Ridgeley quartette saw the pair saunter, side by side, to the extreme end of the portico, apparently to be out of hearing of the rest, but no one remarked aloud upon the renewed intimacy and then confidential attitude.

"If it is anything very startling, the old gossip will never keep it to herself," Mr. Aylett congratulated himself, while his wife's complexion paled gradually to bloodlessness, and Herbert sat back in his corner, sulky and dumb. "And she is coming to us on Friday!"

CHAPTER XVIII. THUNDER IN THE AIR.

THE only malady that put Herbert Dorrance in frequent and unpleasant remembrance of his mortality was a fierce headache, which had of late years supervened upon any imprudence in diet, and upon excessive agitation of mind or physical exertion. His invariable custom, when he awoke at morning with one of these, was to trace it to its supposed source, and after determining that it was nothing more than might have been expected from the circumstance, to commit himself to his wife's nursing for the day.

She ought, therefore, to have been surprised when, while admitting that the pain in his head was intense, he yet, on the morrow succeeding Mrs. Tazewell's funeral, persisted in rising and dressing for breakfast.

"It must have been the roast duck at dinner yesterday," he calmly and languidly explained the attack. "It was fat, and the stuffing reeked with butter, sage, and onion. An ostrich could not have digested it. I was tired, too, and should not have eaten heartily of even the plainest food."

Mabel neither opposed nor sustained the theory. She had slept so ill herself as to know how restless he had been; had heard his hardly suppressed sighs and tossings to and fro, infallible indications with him of serious perturbation. Had his discomfort been bodily only, he would have felt no compunction in calling her to his aid, as

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he had done scores of times. Her sleepless hours had also been fraught with melancholy disquiet. Putting away from her with firmness begotten by virtue born of will and so much of this thoughtfulness as pertained to the bygone days with which Frederic Chilton was inseparably associated, she yet deliberated seriously upon the expediency of speaking out courageously to Herbert of the relation this man had once borne to her, the incidents of their recent meeting, and the effect she saw was produced upon her husband's mind by the sight of him.

"If we would have this negative happiness continue, this matter ought to be settled at once and forever," she said, inwardly. "He must not suspect me of weak and wicked clinging to the phantoms of my youth; must believe that I do not harbor a regret or wish incompatible with my duty as his wife. I will avail myself of the first favorable moment to assure him of the folly of his fears and of his discomfort."

Another consideration the natural sequence of her conviction of his unhappiness was a touching appeal to her woman's heart. If he had not loved her more fervently than his phlegmatic temperament and undemonstrative bearing would induce one to suppose, he would not dread the rekindling of her olden fancy for another. The image of him who, she had confessed, had taught her the depth and weight of her own affections, whom she had loved as she had never professed to care for him, would not have haunted his pillow to chase sleep, and torture him with forebodings.

"I must make him comprehend that Mabel Aylett at twenty, wilful, romantic, and undisciplined, was a different being from the woman who has called him 'husband,' without a blush, for fourteen years!"

It was these recollections that softened her kindly tones to tenderness; made the pressure of her hand upon his temples a caress, rather than a manual appliance for deadening pain; while she combated his intention of appearing at the breakfast-table.

"Lie down upon the sofa!" she entreated. "Let me bring up a cup of strong coffee for you; then darken the room, and chafe your head until you fall asleep, since you turn a deaf ear to all proposals of mustard foot-baths and Dr. Van Orden's panacea pills."

"No!" stubbornly. "Aylett and Clara would think it strange. They do not understand how a slight irregularity of diet or habit can produce such a result. They would attribute it to other causes. I may feel better when I have taken something nourishing."

The dreaded critics received the tidings of his indisposition without cavil at its imputed origin, treated the whole subject with comparative indifference, which would have mortified him a week ago, but seemed now to assuage his unrest. The breakfast hour was a quiet one. Herbert could not attempt the form of eating, despite his expressed hope of the curative effects of nourishment, and sipped his black coffee at tedious intervals of pain, looking more ill after each. Mabel was silent, and regardful of his suffering, while Mrs. Aylett toyed with the tea-cup, broke her biscuit into small heaps of crumbs upon her plate, and under her visor of ennui and indolent musing, kept her eye upon her vis-a-vis, whose face was opaque ice; and his intonations, when he deigned to speak, meant nothing save that he was controller of his own meditations, and would not be meddled with.

"You are not well enough to ride over to the Courthouse with me, Dorrance?" he said, interrogatively, his meal despatched. "It is court-day, you know?"

"What do you say, Mabel?" was Herbert's clumsy reference to his nurse. "Don't you think I might venture?"

"I would not, if I were in your place," she replied, cautiously dissuasive. "The day is raw, and there will be rain before evening. Dampness always aggravates neuralgia."

"It is neuralgia, then, is it?" queried Winston, shortly, drawing on his boots.

At Last

His sister looked up surprised.

"What else should it be?"

"Nothing unless the symptoms indicate softening of the brain!" he rejoined, with his slight, dissonant laugh. "In either case, your decision is wise. He is better off in your custody than he would be abroad. I hope I shall find you convalescent when I return. Good morning!"

His wife accompanied him to the outer door.

"It is chilly!" she shivered, as this was opened. "Are you warmly clad, love?" feeling his overcoat. "And don't forget your umbrella."

Her hand had not left his shoulder, and, in offering a parting kiss, she leaned her head there also.

"I wish you would not go!" she said impulsively and sincerely.

"Why?"

"I cannot say except that I dread to be left alone all day. You may laugh at me, but I feel as if something terrible were hanging over me or you. The spiritual oppression is like the physical presentiment sensitive temperaments suffer when a thunder-storm is brooding, but not ready to break. Yet I can refer my fears to no known cause."

"That is folly." Mr. Aylett bit off the end of a cigar, and felt in his vest pocket for a match-safe. "You should be able always to assign a reason for the fear as well as the hope that is in you. You have no idea, you say, from what recent event your prognostication takes its hue?"

She laughed, and straightened her fine neck.

"From the same imprudence that has consigned poor Herbert to the house for the day, I suspect a late and heavy dinner. I had the nightmare twice before morning. You will be home to supper?"

"Yes."

Hesitating upon the monosyllable, he took hold of her elbows, so as to bring her directly before him, and searched her countenance until it was dyed with blushes.

"Why do you color so furiously?" he asked in raillery that had a sad or sardonic accent. "I was about to ask if you would be inconsolable if I never came back. Perhaps your presentiment points to some such fatality. These little accidents have happened in better-regulated families than ours."

"WINSTON!"

She gasped and blanched in pain or terror.

"What is the matter? Have I hurt you?" releasing his grasp.

"Yes HERE!" laying his hand upon her heart, the beautiful eyes terrified and pathetic as those of a wounded deer. "For the love of Heaven, never stab me again with such suggestions. When you die, I shall not care to live. When you cease to love me, I shall wish we had died together on our marriage-day my husband!"

At Last

He let her twine her arms about his neck, laid his cheek to her brow, clasped her tightly and kissed her impetuously, madly, again and yet again disengaged himself, and ran down the steps. She was standing on the top one, still flushed and breathless from the violence of his embrace, when he looked back from the gate, her commanding figure framed by the embowering creepers, as Mabel's girlish shape had been when Frederic Chilton waved his farewell to her from the same spot.

Did either of them think of it, or would either have reckoned it an ominous coincidence, if the remembrance of that long-ago parting had presented itself then and there?

Herbert spent the day upon the lounge in the family sitting-room a cosy retreat, between the parlor and the conservatory, which had been added to the lower floor in the reign of the present queen. Her brother's seizure was no trifling ailment. Alternations of stupor and racking spasms of pain defied, for several hours, his wife's application of the remedies she had found efficacious in former attacks. Her ultimate resort was chloroform, and by the liberal use of this, relaxation of the tense nerves and a sleep that resembled healing repose were induced by the middle of the afternoon. The weather continued to threaten rain, although none had fallen as yet, and the wind moaned lugubriously in the leafless branches of the great walnut before the end window of the narrow apartment. It was a grand tree, the patriarch of the grove that sheltered the house from the north winds. Mabel, relieved from watchfulness, and to some extent from anxiety, by her husband's profound slumber, lay back in her chair with a long-drawn sigh, and looked out at the naked limbs of the wrestling giant the majestic sway and reel she used to note with childish awe and thought of many things which had befallen her since then, until the steady rocking of the boughs and hum of the November breeze soothed her into languor then drowsiness then oblivion.

She awoke in alarm at the sense of something hurtful or startling hovering near her.

The fire had been trimmed before she slept, and now flamed up gayly; the window was dusky, as were the distant corners of the room, and Herbert was gazing steadfastly at her.

"I fell asleep without knowing it. I am sorry! Have you wanted anything? How long have you been awake?"

"Only a few minutes, my dearest!" with no change in the mesmeric intentness of his gaze. "I want nothing more than to have you always near me. You have been a good, faithful wife, Mabel, better and nobler a thousandfold nobler than I deserved. I have thought it all over while you were sleeping so tranquilly in my sight. I wish my conscience were void of evil to all mankind as is yours. I awoke with an odd and awful impression upon my mind. The firelight flamed in a bright stream between your chair and me and I must have dreamed it or the chloroform had affected my head I thought it was a river of light dividing us! You were a calm, white angel who had entered into rest uncaring for and forgetful of me. I was lost, homeless, wandering forever and ever!"

Had her prosaic spouse addressed her in a rhythmic improvisation, Mabel could not have been more astounded.

"You are dreaming yet!" she said, kneeling by him and binding his temples with her cool, firm palms. "When we are divided, it will be by a dark not a bright river."

"Until death do us part!" Herbert repeated, thoughtfully. "I wish I could hear you say, once, that you do not regret that clause of your marriage vow. I was not your heart's choice, you know, Mabel, however decided may have been the approval of your friends and of your judgment. The thought oppresses me as it did not in the first years of our wedded life."

"I am glad you have spoken of this," began the wife. "I would disabuse your mind "

"All in the dark!" exclaimed Mrs. Aylett, at the door. "And what a stifling odor of chloroform!"

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Mabel got up, and drew a heavy travelling-shawl that covered Herbert's lower limbs over his arms and chest.

"I will open the window!" she said, deprecatingly.

A sluice of cold air rushed in, beating the blaze this way and that, puffing ashes from the hearth into the room, and eliciting from Mrs. Aylett what would have been a peevish interjection in another woman.

"My dear sister! the remedy is worse than the offence. Chloroform is preferable to creosote, or whatever abominable element is the principal ingredient of smoke and cold! The thermometer must be down to the freezing-point!"

Mabel lowered the sash.

"You have been sitting in a room without fire, I suspect. The temperature here is delightful. I am sorry we have exiled you from such comfortable quarters."

"Don't speak of it! I cannot endure to sit here alone or anywhere else. I have slept most of the afternoon. How the wind blows! I wish Winston were at home."

"It is a dark afternoon. He seldom returns from court so early as this. It is not six yet."

Mabel still essayed pacification of the other's ruffled mood.

"You are better, I see," Mrs. Aylett said abruptly to her brother. "You were not subject to these spells formerly. People generally outlive constitutional headaches so I have noticed. It is queer yours should occur so often and wax more violent each time. You should have medical advice before they ripen into a more serious disorder."

Herbert shaded his eyes from the fire, and lay with out replying, until his wife believed he had relapsed into a doze.

She was convinced of her mistake by his saying, slowly and distinctly,

"You do not enter into Clara's whole meaning, Mabel. We have been careful, all of us, never to tell you that our father was imbecile by the time he was fifty and died, in his sixtieth year, of the disease your brother named this morning softening of the brain. I, of all his children, am most like him physically. If it be true that this danger menaces me, you should be informed of it, and know, furthermore, that it is incurable."

Mabel also paused before answering.

"I cannot assent to the hypothesis of your inherited malady, Herbert. These headaches may mean nothing. But let that be as it may, you should have told me of this before."

"You see," broke in Mrs. Aylett's triumphant sarcasm. "The reward of your maiden attempt at conugal confidence is reproof. What have I warned you from the beginning?"

"Not reproof," corrected Mabel, in mild decision. "My knowledge of the secret he deemed it wise and kind to withhold would have gained for him my sympathy, and my more constant and intelligent care of his health. It is the hidden fear that grows and multiplies itself most rapidly. Before it is killed it must be dragged to the light."

"That is YOUR hypothesis," was the bright retort. "We Dorrances have justly earned a reputation for discretion by the excellent preservation of our own secrets, and those committed to our keeping by our friends. My motto is, tell

At Last

others nothing about yourself which they cannot learn without your confession. An autobiography is always either a bore or a blunder. Not that I would regulate the number and nature of your divulgations to your wife, Herbert. As to Winston's unlucky hit this morning, it was mere fortuity. I have never felt myself called upon to enlighten him in family secrets, and his is an incurious disposition. He never asks idle questions. He has a marvellous faculty of striking home—blows in the dark, but that is no reason why one should betray his wound by crying out. Apropos to darkness, may I ring for a lamp, or will the light hurt your eyes?"

"The fire—light is more trying," rejoined Mabel, pushing a screen before the sofa, and placing herself where she could, in its shadow, hold her husband's hand.

It was cold and limp when she lifted it, but tightened upon hers with the instinctive grip of gratitude too profound to be uttered.

She had never been so near loving him as at the instant in which he believed he had incurred her ever—lasting displeasure. Generosity and pity were fast undoing the petrifying influences of her early disappointment, their mutual reserve, and tacit misunderstandings. If half he feared were true, his need of her affection, her counsel and companionship were dire. Whatever wrong he had done her by keeping back the tale of hereditary infirmity, he had suffered more from the act than she could ever do. Who knew how much of what she, with others, mistook for constitutional phlegm and studied austerity, was the outward sign of the battle between dread of his inherited doom and the resolve of an iron will to defy natural laws and the sentence of destiny herself, and hold reason upon her rickety throne?

Heaven's gentlest and kindest angels were busy with Mabel Dorrance's heart in that reverie, and, as they wrought, the cloud that had rested there for fifteen years broke into rainbow smiles that illumined her countenance into the similitude of the shining ones.

"I bless Thee, Father, the All—wise and Ever—merciful, that she is safe!" was her voiceless thanksgiving.

No more bitter tears over the lonely, sunken grave! no more hearkening, with aching, never—to—be—satisfied ears for the patter of the "little feet that never trod." The great sorrow of her life that had been good in His sight was at length a blessing in hers. Her "hereafter" of knowledge of His doings had come to her in this world.

"Does it rain, Peter?" questioned Mrs. Aylett of the lad who brought in lights.

"Yes, ma'am. It's beginnin' to storm powerful!" he said, respectfully communicative.

"Your master has not come?"

"No, ma'am."

"See that the lantern over the great gate is lighted, and that some one is ready to take his horse. And, Peter," as he was going out, "tell Thomas not to bring in supper until Mr. Aylett returns."

She moved to the window, bowed her hands on either side of her eyes to exclude the radiance within, and strained them into the black, black night.

"He will have a dark and a disagreeable ride," she said, coming back to the fire.

Her uneasiness was so palpable as to excite Mabel's compassion.

At Last

"Every step of the road is familiar to him, and he is accustomed to night rides," she said, encouragingly. "Yes," absently. "But he will be very wet. Hear the rain!"

It plashed against the north window, and tinkled upon the tin roof of the conservatory, and Mabel, though aware of her brother's habitual disregard of wind and weather, could not but sympathize with the wifely concern evinced by the sober physiognomy and unsettled demeanor of one generally so calm. She observed, now, that her sister-in-law was arrayed more richly than usual, and her attire was always handsome and tasteful. A deep purple silk, trimmed upon skirt and waist with velvet bands of darker purple, showed off her clear skin to fine advantage, and was saved from monotony of effect by a headdress of lace and buff ribbons. A stately and a comely matron, she was bedight for her lord's return; weighed as heavy each minute that detained him from her arms.

She was still standing by the low mantel, her arm resting lightly upon it, the fire-blaze bringing out lustrous reflections in her drapery and hair, and tinging her pensive cheek with youthful carmine, when her husband entered.

CHAPTER XIX. NEMESIS.

IT was a peculiarity of Winston Aylett that he was never discomposed in seeming, however embarrassing or distressing might be his position. In his childhood he was one to whom, to use the common phrase, dirt would not stick. His face was clean and fair, his hands smooth, and his hair in order after rough and tumble experiences that sent his companions home begrimed, ragged, and unkempt frights. To-night, he had ridden a dozen miles in the teeth of the storm, and made no pause before appearing before his wife and sister, except to lay off his hat and overcoat in the hall. But had he expected to encounter a roomful of ladies, his costume could not have been more unexceptionable.

His linen was pure and fresh, even to the narrow line of wristband edging his coat sleeve; his clearly cut patrician features were tranquil in every line and tint; his step was the light, yet deliberate stride of an athlete without passion or bravado. Conscious power, inexorable will, and thorough self-command were stamped upon him from crown to foot, and his salutation to the small family party accompanied a smile as mirthless and cold as were his eyes.

Mrs. Aylett advanced a step, not more, and returned the bow that comprehended all present, with a pleased, not rapturous welcome.

"We were beginning to fear lest you might be wet," she said, emulating his polite equanimity. Genuine tact is always chameleon-like in quality. "It rains quite fast, does it not?"

"The storm is increasing, but I experienced no inconvenience from it, thank you."

He sat down in his favorite arm-chair, and spread his fingers before the fire.

"I am happy to see you so very much better" to Herbert. "There were many kind inquiries for you at the court-house to-day. Dr. Ritchie wanted to know if you had ever taken nux vomica for these neuralgic turns. I invited him to come in with me and prescribe for you, but he said he must push on home, so we parted at the outer gate."

So affable as almost to put others at their ease in his company, he chatted until supper was announced; regretted civilly Herbert's inability to go to the table, and gave his sister his arm into the dining-room, Mrs. Aylett following in their wake. If he did not eat heartily, he praised, in gentlemanly moderation, the viands selected by his consort for his delectation after his wet ride, and pleaded a late dinner as the reason of his present abstinence.

At Last

Then they adjourned to the apartment where they had left Mr. Dorrance, and the host produced his cigar-case.

"Mabel says that smoke never offends your olfactories, or affects your head unpleasantly, when you are suffering from this nervous affection," he said to Herbert.

"On the contrary, it often acts as a sedative," was the reply.

Winston lighted a cigar with an allumette from a bronze taper-stand a Christmas gift from his wife, which she kept supplied with fanciful spiles twisted and fringed into a variety of shapes; drew several long breaths to be certain that the fire had taken hold of the heart of the Havana, tossed the pretty paper into the embers, and resumed his seat in the chimney corner.

"A sedative is a good thing for people who allow their nerves to get out of gear," he remarked, dryly and leisurely, puffing contentedly in the middle and at the end of the sentence. "But he who does this subverts the order of the ruler and the ruled. I supposed I had nerves once, but it is an age since they have dared molest me. I know that I had my impulses when I was younger."

He stopped to fillip the ash forming upon the ignited end of his cigar, performing the operation with nicety, using the extreme tip of his middle-finger nail over the salver attached for the purpose to the bronze smoking-set.

"I obeyed one, above a dozen years ago. I learned only to-day that it was rash and unwise, and to how much evil it may lead."

"Not a very active evil, if you have just discovered it to be such."

The speaker was his sister. Herbert was motionless upon his couch. Mrs. Aylett, in the lounging-chair at the opposite side of the hearth from her husband, was cutting the leaves of a new magazine he had brought from the post-office, and did not seem to hear his remark.

"You reason upon the assumption that ignorance is bliss," said Mr. Aylett. "Allow me to express the opinion that the adage embodying that idea is the refuge of cowards and fools. No matter how grievous a bankrupt a man may be financially in spirit, he is craven or a blockhead to shrink the investigation of his accounts. Which allusion to bankruptcy brings me to the recital of a choicely offensive bit of scandal I heard to-day. It is seldom that I give heed to the like, but the delicious rottenness revealed by this tale enforced my hearing, and fixed the details in my mind. I could not but think, as I rode home, of the accessories which would add effectiveness, to-night, to my second-hand narrative. I had the whole scene, which is now before me, in my mind's eye the warm firelight and the shaded lamp brightening all within, while the rain pattered without; the interesting invalid over there gradually stirring into interest as the story progressed; you, Mabel, calmly and critically attentive; and my Lady Aylett, too proud to look the desire she really feels to handle the lovely carrion."

"Your figures are not provocative of insatiable appetite," returned his wife, with inimitable sang-froid, staying her paper knife that she might examine an engraving.

"Your appetite needs further excitants, then? So did mine until I began to suspect that the history might be authentic, and not a figment of the raconteur's imagination. The hero's name at first disposed me to set down the entire relation as a fiction. It is romantic enough to perfume a three-volume novel Julius Lennox!"

Mabel's instinctive thought was for her husband, but, in turning to him she could not but notice that Mrs. Aylett sat motionless, the paper-cutter between two leaves, and her left hand pressed hard upon the upper, but without attempting to sever them.

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Herbert twisted his head upon the pillow until he faced the back of the sofa, and a convulsion went through him, hardly quelled by the clasp of Mabel's hand upon his.

"Julius Lennox!" reiterated Mr. Aylett, between the fragrant puffs, "A lieutenant in the navy the good-looking, but, as the sequel proved, not over-steady, spouse of a lady who was the daughter of another naval officer of similar rank. The latter was compelled to leave the service on account of incipient idiocy, and retired, upon half-pay, to an unfashionable quarter of a certain great city, where his wife, a smart Yankee, opened a boarding-house for law and medical students, and contrived not only to keep the souls and bodies of her family together, but to marry off her two still single daughters the one to a barrister, the other to a physician. The lovely Louise Lennox a pretty alliteration, is it not? remained meanwhile under the paternal roof, her husband's ship being absent most of the time, and the handsome Julius having unlimited privileges in the line condemned by "Black-eyed Susan" in her parting interview with her sailor lover finding a mistress in every port. It is woman's nature and wisdom to seek consolation for such afflictions as the deprivation of the beloved one's society, and the almost certainty that he is basking his faithless self in the sunlight of another's eyes. Our heroine, being at once ardent and philosophical, put the *lex talionis* into force by falling in love with one of her mother's lodgers, a sprig of the legal profession. The favored youth so says my edition of the romance remained preternaturally unconscious of the sentiment he had inspired, attributing her manifestations of partiality to platonic regard, until she opened his modest eyes by proposing an elopement. He had completed his professional studies, taken out a license to practise law, was about to quit her and the city, and the no-longer-adored Julius was coming home a wreck in health and purse upon a six months' leave of absence. It must be owned the Lady Louise had some excuse for a measure that seemed to have amazed and horrified her *cicisbeo*. Recoiling from the proposition and herself with the virtuous indignation that is ever aroused in the manly bosom by similar advances, he packed up his trunk, double-locked it and his heart, paid his bill, and decamped from the dangerous precincts.

"Ignoble conclusion to a tender affair; but not so devoid of tragicality as would seem. Infuriated at the desertion of this modern Joseph, Louise, the lorn, avenged the slight offered her charms by declaring to her youngest brother, the only one who resided in the same city with herself, that Joseph had made dishonorable proposals to her a proceeding which demonstrates that the feminine character has withstood the proverbially changing effects of time from age to age. My narrative is but a later and a Gentile version of the Jewish novelette to which I have referred. The role of Potiphar was cast for the unsophisticated brother, who, being unable to immure the unimpressible Joseph in the Tombs, attempted the only means of redress that remained to him, to wit: Personal chastisement.

"And here," continued the narrator, yet more slowly, "I find myself perplexed by the discrepancy between the statement I have had to-day and one of this section of the story furnished me several years since. In the latter the indignant fraternal relative flogged the would-be betrayer within a quarter of an inch of his life. The other account reverses the position of the parties, and makes Joseph the incorruptible also the invincible. However this may have been, the adventure seems to have quenched the loving Louise's brilliancy for a season. We hear no more of her until after her father's decease, when she re-enters the lists of Cupid in another State, as the blushing and still beautiful virgin-betrothed of a man of birth and means, who woos and weds her under her maiden cognomen the entire family, including the valiant brother who figured as whippee or whipper, in the castigation exploit being accomplices in the righteous fraud. I might, did I not fear being prolix, tell of sundry side-issues growing out of the main stalk of this plot, such as the ingenious manoeuvres by which the promising couple of conspirators averted, upon the eve of the sister's bridal, the threatened expose of their machinations to entrap the wealthy lover. Suffice it to say that the duped husband (by brevet) lived for a decade and a half in the placid enjoyment of the ignorance which my sagacious sister here is disposed to confound with rational bliss nor is he quite sure, to this day, whether spouse No. 1 of the partner of his bosom still lives, or by clearance in what court of infamy or justice she managed to shuffle off her real name, and win a right to resume the title of spinster."

He lighted a fresh cigar, and for the space of perhaps a minute, a dead and ominous silence prevailed. Mabel, pallid and faint at heart, could not take her eyes from his countenance, with its cruel smile, frozen, shallow eyes,

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and the deep white dints coming and going in his nostrils.

He had judged without partiality. He would condemn without mercy. He would punish without remorse.

Herbert still faced the back of the lounge, but he had slipped his hand from the relaxing hold of hers, and pressed it over his eyes. She could not seek to possess herself of it again. Winston was not the only dupe of the nefarious fraud, the betrayal of which had overtaken the guilty pair thus late in their career of duplicity. Yet, however severely she had suffered in heart from their falsehood and her brother's intolerance, no stain would rest upon her name, while, terminate as the affair might, the disgraceful revelation would shipwreck her brother's happiness for life, if not bring upon the old homestead a storm of scandal that would leave no more trace of the honorable reputation heretofore borne by its owners than remained of the smiling plenty of the cities of the plain after the fiery wrath of the Lord had overthrown them.

Mrs. Aylett resumed the suspended operation of cutting the leaves of her new monthly; fluttered them to be certain that none were overlooked; laid down the periodical; brushed the scattered bits of paper from her silken skirt, and retaining the paper-knife a costly toy of mother-of-pearl and silver changed her position so as to look her husband directly in the eye.

"I believe I can give you the information you lack," she said, in curiously constrained accents, the concentration of some feeling to which she could or would not grant other vent. "Clara Louise Lennox obtained a divorce from her first husband on the grounds of drunkenness, failure to maintain her, infidelity, and personal ill-usage. He came home from sea, as you have said, the battered ruin of a MAN, fallen beyond hope of redemption. There was no law, written or moral, which obliged her, when once freed from it, to carry about with her and thrust upon the notice of others the loathsome body of death typified by his name and her matronly title. She commenced life anew at her father's death, contrary, let me say to the advice of all her friends, if I except the mother, who could refuse nothing to her favorite daughter. The scheme was boldly conceived. You have admitted that it was successfully carried out. In New York the family were not known beyond the circle with which they disdained to associate when the lodging-house business was abandoned. There were a thousand chances to one that in her new abode Miss Dorrance would be identified by some busybody with the divorced Mrs. Lennox. She risked her fortunes upon the one chance, and won. I do not expect you to believe that the impostor was moved by any other consideration in contracting her second marriage than the wish to seek the more exalted sphere of society and influence which Fate had hitherto denied her. You would sneer were I to hint, however remotely, at a regard for her high-born suitor the dashing, but dissipated officer had never awakened "

Mr. Aylett lifted his hand, smiling more evilly than before.

"Excuse the interruption! but after your statement of the fact that such sentimental asseverations would be futile, you waste time in recapitulating the loves of the lady aforementioned, and we in hearing them. I think I express the opinion of the audience fit, but few when I say that we require no other evidence than that afforded by the story I have told of Mrs. Lennox's susceptibility and capacity for affection. We are willing to take for granted that the latter was illimitable."

"As you like!" idly tapping the nails of her left hand with the knife. "Is there anything else pertaining to this history into which you would like to inquire?"

It was a sight to curdle the blood about one's heart, this duel between husband and wife, with double-edged blades, wreathed with flowers. Mr. Aylett's attitude of lazy indifference was not exceeded by Clara's proud languor. He laughed a little at the last question.

"I have speculated somewhat having nothing else in particular to engage my mind on my way home upon the point I named just now, and upon one other akin to it. All that the novel needs to round it off neatly is an

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encounter between the real and the quasi consorts. I cannot specify them by name, in consequence of the uncertainty I have mentioned. One was a bona-fide husband the other a bogus article, let New York divorce laws decide what they will, provided always that the fallen Julius had not bidden farewell to this lower earth before his loyal Louise plighted her faith to her Southern gallant. Death is the Alexander of the universe. There is no retying the knots he has cut."

From the pertinacity with which he returned to the question one could discern his actual anxiety to have it settled. Mabel understood that the only salve of possible application to his outraged pride and love was the discovery that Clara had been really a widow when he wedded her. The divorce and subsequent deception were sins of heinous dye against his ideas of respectability and unspotted honor, but he would never forgive the woman who had had two living husbands, freed from the former though she was by a legal fiction.

No one saw this more clearly than did she whose fate trembled upon the next words she should utter. With all her hardihood, she hesitated to reply. Luxury, wealth, and station were on one side; degradation and poverty on the other. The solitary hope of reinstatement in the affection, if not the esteem, of him she loved truly as it was in her to love anything beside herself, was arrayed against the certainty of alienation and the tearful odds of ignominious banishment.

Her answer, under the pressure of the warring emotions, was a semitone lower, and less distinctly enunciated than those that had gone before it.

"The denouement you propose for your romance is impracticable. Julius Lennox died before the date of the second marriage."

Herbert drew himself to a sitting posture by clutching the back of the lounge. His red eyes and tumbled hair made him look more like a mad than a sick man.

"In the name of Heaven," he demanded hoarsely, "have we not had enough lies, every one of which has been a blunder, and a fatal one? I told you, years ago, that the scene of this evening was a mere question of time; that, without a miracle, an edifice founded upon iniquity and cemented by falsehood must crush you before you could lay the top-stone. You would not be warned you held on your way without hesitation or compunction, and now you would add to sin fatuity. Do you suppose that after what your husband has learned of your untruthfulness he will accept your assertion on any subject without inquiry? And, how many in your own family and out of it although these may not know you by the name you now bear are cognizant of the fact that Julius Lennox was alive for almost fifteen months after you became Mrs. Aylett?"

Mabel's arm was about his neck, her hand upon his mouth.

"No more! no more! if you love me!" she whispered in an agony. "Should he guess all, he would murder her!"

"You are prepared to certify that he is dead NOW, are you, Mr. Dorrance?" queried Winston, suspicious of this by-play.

"I am!" sulkily.

"It is a pity!" was the ambiguous rejoinder.

Something clicked upon the hearth. It was the fragments of the toy stiletto, broken by an uncontrollable twitch of the small fingers that held it.

Then Mrs. Aylett arose, pale as a ghost, but unquailing in eye or mien.

"May I know your lordship's pleasure respecting your cast-off minion?"

"In the morning, yes!" glancing up disdainfully. "Meantime, let me wish you 'good-night' and happy dreams."

CHAPTER XX. INDIAN SUMMER.

"NO, no! my dear!" said Mrs. Sutton, earnestly. "I am shocked and astonished that you should ever have labored under such a delusion. Frederic told me the story, and a dreadful one it was, the day old Mrs. Tazewell was buried. Wasn't it wonderful that he never knew whom Winston had married until he saw her leaning upon his arm in the graveyard? He recognized Mr. Dorrance in the house, but supposed him to be a visitor at Ridgeley and a relative of Mrs. Aylett, having heard that her maiden name was Dorrance. As to his being your husband, it did not at first occur to him, so bewildered was he by your meeting and the thoughts awakened by it. But at sight of HER the truth rushed over him, nearly depriving him of his wits. He soon got out of me all that I knew, and by putting this and that together, we made out the mystery. I was so grieved and indignant and horrified that I was for sending him forthwith to Winston, that he might clear himself of the shocking charges they had preferred against him, by exposing the motives of his accusers. But he was stubborn and independent. 'It can do no good now,' he said. 'Fifteen years ago this discovery would have been my temporal salvation. And Dorrance is Mabel's husband. I cannot touch him without wounding her.' I could not reconcile this mode of reasoning with my conscience. If wrong had been done, it ought to be righted. I did not sleep a wink all night. I wept over my noble, generous, slandered boy, and over you, my darling! but my chief thought was anger at the shameless depravity, the cold-blooded cruelty of the brazen-faced adventuress who sat in your angel mother's place. For aught Frederic or I knew, her real husband was still alive. He had never heard of the divorce, you see, and the circumstance of her marrying Winston under her maiden name looked black.

"Well! I pondered upon the horrible affair until I could hold my peace no longer. Frederic and Florence went home with Mary Trent next morning, and knowing that Winston must pass the upper gate on his way to court, I put on my bonnet soon after breakfast, and strolled in that direction. By and by he rode up, stopped his horse, and began to talk so sociably that before I quite knew what I was doing, I was in the middle of my story. I wonder now how I did it, but I was excited, and he listened so patiently, questioned so quietly, that I did not realize, for several hours afterward, what a blaze I must have kindled in his heart and home, whether he believed me or not. The next thing I heard was not, as I expected, that he and his wife had quarrelled, or that he was going to challenge Frederic for having belied him, but that poor Dorrance was very ill with some affection of the brain. It was not until a year later just after his death that people began to talk about the strange carryings-on at Ridgeley; how Mr. and Mrs. Aylett occupied separate apartments, and never sat, or walked, or rode together, or spoke to one another, even at table, unless there were visitors present. Nobody could imagine what caused the estrangement, and for the sake of the family honor I guarded my tongue. She must be a wretched woman, if all of this be true. She is breaking fast under it, in spite of her pride and skill in concealment. I ought not to pity her when I remember how wicked she has been; but there is a look in her eye when she is not laughing or talking that gives me the heart-ache."

"She is very unhappy!" replied Mabel, sighing. "And so, I doubt not, is Winston, although he will not own it, and affects to ignore the fact of her failing health and spirits. It is one of these miserably delicate family complications with which the nearest of kin cannot meddle. They are very kind to me, and I think my visits have been a comfort to Clara. The solitude of the great house is a terrible trial to one so fond of company. For days together sometimes she does not exchange a word with anybody except the servants. It is a dreary, wretched evening of an ambitious life. I ventured to tell Winston, last week, that this would probably be my last visit to Ridgeley, since I was to be married next month.

"To Mr. Chilton, I suppose?" he said.

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I answered, "Yes!"

"You must be almost forty," he next remarked. "You have worn passably well, but you are no longer young."

"I am thirty-seven!" said I.

"Well!" he answered. "You are certainly old enough to know your own business best."

"That was all that passed. But I was glad to remember, as I looked at his whitening hair and bowed shoulder, that Frederic had not as I was foolish enough to suppose for a while told him the story that had blighted his life. Not that I could have blamed him had he done this. He had endured so much obloquy, suffered so keenly and so long, that almost any retaliatory measure would have been pardonable."

Herbert Dorrance's widow was, as had been said, on a farewell visit to her native State, and after spending a week at Ridgeley was concluding a pleasanter sojourn of the same length at William Sutton's. In another month her home in Philadelphia was to be the refuge of her aunt's declining years a prospect that delighted her as much as it afflicted those among whom this most benevolent and lovable of match-makers had dwelt during Mabel's first marriage.

The marriage it was now her constant purpose to forget not a difficult task in the happiness that diffused an Indian summer glow over her maturity of years and heart. After Herbert's death she had continued to reside in Albany, devoting herself so soon as she recovered from the fatigue of mind and body consequent upon her severe and protracted duties as nurse to the scarcely less painful work of attending his mother, who had contracted the seeds of consumption in the bleak sea-air of Boston. Grateful for an abode in the house of one who performed a daughter's part to her when her own children were content to commit her to the care of hirelings, the old lady lingered six months, and died, blessing her benefactress and engaging, in singleness of belief in the affection his wife had borne him, "to tell Herbert how good she had been to his mother."

None of the Dorrances could wag a tongue against their sister-in-law, when, at the expiration of her year of widowhood, she wrote to them, to announce her "re-engagement" to Frederic Chilton. She had been a faithful wife to their brother in sickness and imbecility; a ministering angel to their parent, and there was now no tie to bind her to their interest. They had a way of taking care of themselves, and it was not surprising if she had learned it.

They behaved charmingly this pair of elderly lovers said the young Suttons when Mr. Chilton arrived to escort his affianced back to Albany on the day succeeding the conversation from which I have taken the foregoing extracts, while Aunt Rachel's deaf old face was one beam of gratification.

"All my matches turn out well in the long run!" she boasted, with modest exultation. "I don't undertake the management of them, unless I am very sure that they are already projected in Heaven. And when they are, my loves, a legion of evil spirits or, what is just as bad, of wicked men and women, cannot hinder everything from coming right at last."

While she was relating, in the same sanguinely pious spirit, the tales that most entrance young girls, and at which their seniors smile in cynicism, or in tender recollection, as their own lives have contradicted or verified her theory of love's teachings and love's omnipotence, Frederic and Mabel, forgetting time and care, separation and sorrow, in the calm delight of reunion, were strolling upon the piazza in the starlight of a perfect June evening.

They stopped talking by tacit consent, by and by, to listen to Amy Sutton, a girl of eighteen, the vocalist of the flock, who was testing her voice and proficiency in reading music at sight by trying one after another of a volume of old songs which belonged to her mother.

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This was the verse that enchained the promenaders' attention:

"But still thy name, thy blessed name,
My lonely bosom fills;
Like an echo that hath lost itself
Among the distant hills.
That still, with melancholy note,
Keeps faintly lingering on,
When the joyous sound that woke it first
Is gone forever gone!"

"It is seventeen years since we heard it together, dearest!" said Frederic, bending to kiss the tear-laden eyes. "And I can say to you now, what I did not, while poor Rosa lived, own to myself that, try to hush it though I did, in all that time the lost echo was never still."

Her answer was prompt, and the sweeter for the blent sigh and smile which were her tribute to the Past, and greeting to the Future:

"An echo no longer, but a continuous strain of of heart music!"

THE END.