

Dora Thorne

Charlotte M. Braeme

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Chapter I

"The consequences of folly seldom end with its originator," said Lord Earle to his son. "Rely upon it, Ronald, if you were to take this most foolish and unadvisable step, you would bring misery upon yourself and every one connected with you. Listen to reason."

"There is no reason in prejudice," replied the young man haughtily. "You can not bring forward one valid reason against my marriage."

Despite his annoyance, a smile broke over Lord Earle's grave face.

"I can bring a thousand reasons, if necessary," he replied. "I grant everything you say. Dora Thorne is very pretty; but remember, she is quite a rustic and unformed beauty—and I almost doubt whether she can read or spell properly. She is modest and good, I grant, and I never heard one syllable against her. Ronald, let me appeal to your better judgment—are a moderate amount of rustic prettiness and shy modesty sufficient qualifications for your wife, who will have to take your mother's place?"

"They are quite sufficient to satisfy me," replied the young man.

"You have others to consider," said Lord Earle, quickly.

"I love her," interrupted his son; and again his father smiled.

"We know what it means," he said, "when boys of nineteen talk about love. Believe me, Ronald, if I were to consent to your request, you would be the first in after years to reproach me for weak compliance with your youthful folly."

"You would not call it folly," retorted Ronald, his face flushing hotly, "if Dora were an heiress, or the daughter of some—"

"Spare me a long discourse," again interrupted Lord Earle. "You are quite right; if the young girl in question belonged to your own station, or even if she were near it, that would be quite a different matter. I am not annoyed that you have, as you think, fallen in love, or that you wish to marry, although you are young. I am annoyed that you should dream of wishing to marry a simple rustic, the daughter of my lodge keeper. It is so supremely ridiculous that I can hardly treat the matter seriously."

"It is serious enough for me," returned his son with a long, deep sigh. "If I do not marry Dora Thorne, I shall never marry at all."

"Better that than a mesalliance," said Lord Earle, shortly.

"She is good," cried Ronald—"good and fair, modest and graceful. Her heart is pure as her face is fair. What mesalliance can there be, father? I never have believed and never shall believe in the cruel laws of caste. In what is one man better than or superior to another save that he is more intelligent or more virtuous?"

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"I shall never interfere in your politics, Ronald," said Lord Earle, laughing quietly. "Before you are twenty—one you will have gone through many stages of that fever. Youth is almost invariably liberal, age conservative. Adopt what line of politics you will, but do not bring theory into practice in this instance."

"I should consider myself a hero," continued the young man, "if I could be the first to break through the trammels of custom and the absurd laws of caste."

"You would not be the first," said Lord Earle, quietly. "Many before you have made unequal marriages; many will do so after you, but in every case I believe regret and disappointment followed."

"They would not in my case," said Ronald, eagerly; "and with Dora Thorne by my side, I could do anything; without her, I can do nothing."

Lord Earle looked grieved at the pertinacity of his son.

"Most fathers would refuse to hear all this nonsense, Ronald," he said, gently. "I listen, and try to convince you by reasonable arguments that the step you seem bent upon taking is one that will entail nothing but misery. I have said no angry word to you, nor shall I do so. I tell you simply it can not be. Dora Thorne, my lodge keeper's daughter, is no fitting wife for my son, the heir of Earlescourt. Come with me, Ronald; I will show you further what I mean."

They went together, the father and son, so like in face yet so dissimilar in mind. They had been walking up and down the broad terrace, one of the chief beauties of Earlescourt. The park and pleasure grounds, with flushed summer beauty, lay smiling around them. The song of hundreds of birds trilled through the sweet summer air, the water of many fountains rippled musically, rare flowers charmed the eye and sent forth sweet perfume; but neither song of birds nor fragrance of flowers—neither sunshine nor music—brought any brightness to the grave faces of the father and son.

With slow steps they quitted the broad terrace, and entered the hall. They passed through a long suite of magnificent apartments, up the broad marble staircase, through long corridors, until they reached the picture gallery, one of the finest in England. Nearly every great master was represented there. Murillo, Guido, Raphael, Claude Lorraine, Salvator Rosa, Correggio, and Tintoretto. The lords of Earlescourt had all loved pictures, and each of them had added to the treasures of that wonderful gallery.

One portion of the gallery was set aside for the portraits of the family. Grim old warriors and fair ladies hung side by side; faces of marvelous beauty, bearing the signs of noble descent, shone out clearly from their gilded frames.

"Look, Ronald," Lord Earle said, laying one hand upon his shoulder, "you stand before your ancestors now. Yours is a grand old race. England knows and honors it. Look at these pictured faces of the wives our fathers chose. There is Lady Sybella Earle; when one of Cromwell's soldiers drew his dagger to slay her husband, the truest friend King Charles ever had, she flung herself before him, and received the blow in his stead. She died, and he lived—noble and beautiful, is she not? Now look at the Lady Alicia—this fair patrician lady smiling by the side of her grim lord; she, at the risk of her life, helped him to fly from prison, where he lay condemned to death for some great political wrong. She saved him, and for her sake he received pardon. Here is the Lady Helena—she is not beautiful, but look at the intellect, the queenly brow, the soul-lit eyes! She, I need not tell you, was a poetess. Wherever the English language was spoken, her verses were read—men were nobler and better for reading them. The ladies of our race were such that brave men may be proud of them. Is it not so, Ronald?"

"Yes," he replied, calmly; "they were noble women."

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Lord Earle then led his son to a large painting, upon which the western sunbeams lingered, brightening the fair face they shone upon, until it seemed living and smiling. A deep and tender reverence stole into Lord Earle's voice as he spoke:

"No fairer or more noble woman ever ruled at Earlescourt than your mother, Ronald. She is the daughter of 'a hundred earls,' high-bred, beautiful, and refined. Now, let me ask you, in the name of common sense, do you wish to place my lodge keeper's daughter by your mother's side? Admit that she is pretty and good—is it in the fitting order of things that she should be here?"

For the first time, in the heedless, fiery course of his love, Ronald Earle paused. He looked at the serene and noble face before him, the broad brow, the sweet, arched lips, the refined patrician features, and there came to him the memory of another face, charming, shy and blushing, with a rustic, graceful beauty different from the one before him as sunlight compared to moonlight. The words faltered upon his lips—instinctively he felt that pretty, blushing Dora had no place there. Lord Earle looked relieved as he saw the doubt upon his son's face.

"You see it, Ronald," he cried. "Your idea of the 'fusion' of races is well enough in theory, but it will not do brought into practice. I have been patient with you—I have treated you, not as a school boy whose head is half turned by his first love, but as a sensible man endowed with reason and thought. Now give me a reward. Promise me here that you will make a brave effort, give up all foolish thoughts of Dora Thorne, and not see her again. Go abroad for a year or two—you will soon forget this boyish folly, and bless the good sense that has saved you from it. Will you promise me, Ronald?"

"I can not, father," he replied, "for I have promised Dora to make her my wife. I can not break my word. You yourself could never counsel that."

"In this case I can," said Lord Earle, eagerly. "That promise is not binding, even in honor; the girl herself, if she has any reason, can not and does not expect it."

"She believed me," said Ronald, simply. "Besides, I love her, father."

"Hush," replied Lord Earle, angrily, "I will listen to no more nonsense. There is a limit to my patience. Once and for all, Ronald, I tell you that I decidedly forbid any mention of such a marriage; it is degrading and ridiculous. I forbid you to marry Dora Thorne; if you disobey me, you must bear the penalty."

"And what would the penalty be?" asked the heir of Earlescourt, with a coolness and calmness that irritated the father.

"One you would hardly wish to pay," replied the earl. "If, in spite of my prayers, entreaties, and commands, you persist in marrying the girl, I will never look upon your face again. My home shall be no longer your home. You will lose my love, my esteem, and what perhaps those who have lured you to ruin may value still more, my wealth. I can not disinherit you; but, if you persist in this folly, I will not allow you one farthing. You shall be to me as one dead until I die myself."

"I have three hundred a year," said Ronald, calmly; "that my godfather left me."

Lord Earle's face now grew white with anger.

"Yes," he replied, "you have that; it would not find you in gloves and cigars now. But, Ronald, you can not be serious, my boy. I have loved you—I have been so proud of you—you can not mean to defy and wound me."

His voice faltered, and his son looked up quickly, touched to the heart by his father's emotion.

"Give me your consent, father," he cried, passionately. "You know I love you, and I love Dora; I can not give up Dora."

"Enough," said Lord Earle; "words seem useless. You hear my final resolve; I shall never change it—no after repentance, no entreaties, will move me. Choose between your parents, your home, your position, and the love of this fair, foolish girl, of whom in a few months you will be tired and weary. Choose between us. I ask for no promises; you have refused to give it. I appeal no more to your affection; I leave you to decide for yourself. I might coerce and force you, but I will not do so. Obey me, and I will make your happiness my study. Defy me, and marry the girl then, in life, I will never look upon your face again. Henceforth, I will have no son; you will not be worthy of the name. There is no appeal. I leave you now to make your choice; this is my final resolve."

Chapter II

The Earles, of Earlescourt, were one of the oldest families in England. The "Barony of Earle" is mentioned in the early reigns of the Tudor kings. They never appeared to have taken any great part either in politics or warfare. The annals of the family told of simple, virtuous lives; they contained, too, some few romantic incidents. Some of the older barons had been brave soldiers; and there were stories of hair-breadth escapes and great exploits by flood and field. Two or three had taken to politics, and had suffered through their eagerness and zeal; but, as a rule, the barons of Earle had been simple, kindly gentlemen, contented to live at home upon their own estates, satisfied with the duties they found there, careful in the alliances they contracted, and equally careful in the bringing up and establishment of their children. One and all they had been zealous cultivators of the fine arts. Earlescourt was almost overcrowded with pictures, statues, and works of art.

Son succeeded father, inheriting with title and estate the same kindly, simple dispositions and the same tastes, until Rupert Earle, nineteenth baron, with whom our story opens, became Lord Earle. Simplicity and kindness were not his characteristics. He was proud, ambitious, and inflexible; he longed for the time when the Earles should become famous, when their name should be one of weight in council. In early life his ambitious desires seemed about to be realized. He was but twenty when he succeeded his father, and was an only child, clever, keen and ambitious. In his twenty-first year he married Lady Helena Brooklyn, the daughter of one of the proudest peers in Britain. There lay before him a fair and useful life. His wife was an elegant, accomplished woman, who knew the world and its ways—who had, from her earliest childhood, been accustomed to the highest and best society. Lord Earle often told her, laughingly, that she would have made an excellent embassadress—her manners were so bland and gracious; she had the rare gift of appearing interested in every one and in everything.

With such a wife at the head of his establishment, Lord Earle hoped for great things. He looked to a prosperous career as a statesman; no honors seemed to him too high, no ambition too great. But a hard fate lay before him. He made one brilliant and successful speech in Parliament—a speech never forgotten by those who heard it, for its astonishing eloquence, its keen wit, its bitter satire. Never again did his voice rouse alike friend and foe. He was seized with a sudden and dangerous illness which brought him to the brink of the grave. After a long and desperate struggle with the "grim enemy," he slowly recovered, but all hope of public life was over for him. The doctors said he might live to be a hale old man if he took proper precautions; he must live quietly, avoid all excitement, and never dream again of politics.

To Lord Earle this seemed like a sentence of exile or death. His wife tried her utmost to comfort and console him, but for some years he lived only to repine at his lot. Lady Helena devoted herself to him. Earlescourt became the center and home of famous hospitality; men of letters, artists, and men of note visited there, and in time Lord Earle became reconciled to his fate. All his hopes and his ambitions were now centered in his son, Ronald, a fine, noble boy, like his father in every respect save one. He had the same clear-cut Saxon face, with clear, honest eyes and proud lips, the same fair hair and stately carriage, but in one respect they differed. Lord Earle was firm and inflexible; no one ever thought of appealing against his decision or trying to change his resolution. If "my lord"

had spoken, the matter was settled. Even Lady Helena knew that any attempt to influence him was vain. Ronald, on the contrary, could be stubborn, but not firm. He was more easily influenced; appeal to the better part of his nature, to his affection or sense of duty, was seldom made in vain.

No other children gladdened the Lord Earle's heart, and all his hopes were centered in his son. For the second time in his life great hopes and ambitions rose within him. What he had not achieved his son would do; the honor he could no longer seek might one day be his son's. There was something almost pitiful in the love of the stern, disappointed man for his child. He longed for the time when Ronald would be of age to commence his public career. He planned for his son as he had never planned for himself.

Time passed on, and the heir of Earlescourt went to Oxford, as his father had done before him. Then came the second bitter disappointment of Lord Earle's life. He himself was a Tory of the old school. Liberal principles were an abomination to him; he hated and detested everything connected with Liberalism. It was a great shock when Ronald returned from college a "full-fledged Liberal." With his usual keenness he saw that all discussion was useless.

"Let the Liberal fever wear out," said one of his friends; "you will find, Lord Earle, that all young men favor it. Conservatism is the result of age and experience. By the time your son takes a position in the world, he will have passed through many stages of Liberalism."

Lord Earle devoutly believed it. When the first shock of his disappointment was over, Ronald's political zeal began to amuse him. He liked to see the boy earnest in everything. He smiled when Ronald, in his clear, young voice, read out the speeches of the chief of his party. He smiled when the young man, eager to bring theory into practice, fraternized with the tenant farmers, and visited families from whom his father shrunk in aristocratic dread.

There was little doubt that in those days Ronald Earl believed himself called to a great mission. He dreamed of the time when the barriers of caste would be thrown down, when men would have equal rights and privileges, when the aristocracy of intellect and virtue would take precedence of noble birth, when wealth would be more equally distributed, and the days when one man perished of hunger while another reveled in luxury should cease to be. His dreams were neither exactly Liberal nor Radical; they were simply Utopian. Even then, when he was most zealous, had any one proposed to him that he should inaugurate the new state of things, and be the first to divide his fortune, the futility of his theories would have struck him more plainly. Mingling in good society, the influence of clever men and beautiful women would, Lord Earle believed, convert his son in time. He did not oppose him, knowing that all opposition would but increase his zeal. It was a bitter disappointment to him, but he bore it bravely, for he never ceased to hope.

A new trouble was dawning for Lord Earle, one far more serious than the Utopian dream of his son; of all his sorrows it was the keenest and the longest felt. Ronald fell in love, and was bent on marrying a simple rustic beauty, the lodge keeper's daughter.

Earlescourt was one of the fairest spots in fair and tranquil England. It stood in the deep green heart of the land, in the midst of one of the bonny, fertile midland counties.

The Hall was surrounded by a large park, where the deer browsed under the stately spreading trees, where there were flowery dells and knolls that would charm an artist; a wide brook, almost broad and deep enough to be called a river, rippled through it.

Earlescourt was noted for its trees, a grand old cedar stood in the middle of the park; the shivering aspen, the graceful elm, the majestic oak, the tall, flowering chestnut were all seen to greatest perfection there.

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Art had done much, Nature more, to beautify the home of the Earles. Charming pleasure gardens were laid out with unrivaled skill; the broad, deep lake was half hidden by the drooping willows bending over it, and the white water lilies that lay on its tranquil breast.

The Hall itself was a picturesque, gray old building, with turrets covered with ivy, and square towers of modern build; there were deep oriel windows, stately old rooms that told of the ancient race, and cheerful modern apartments replete with modern comfort.

One of the great beauties of Earlescourt was the broad terrace that ran along one side of the house; the view from it was unequalled for quiet loveliness. The lake shone in the distance from between the trees; the perfume from the hawthorn hedges filled the air, the fountains rippled merrily in the sunshine, and the flowers bloomed in sweet summer beauty.

Lord Earle loved his beautiful home; he spared no expense in improvements, and the time came when Earlescourt was known as a model estate.

One thing he did of which he repented till the hour of his death. On the western side of the park he built a new lodge, and installed therein Stephen Thorne and his wife, little dreaming as he did so that the first link in what was to be a fatal tragedy was forged.

Ronald was nineteen, and Lord Earle thought, his son's college career ended, he should travel for two or three years. He could not go with him, but he hoped that surveillance would not be needed, that his boy would be wise enough and manly enough to take his first steps in life alone. At college he won the highest honors; great things were prophesied for Ronald Earle. They might have been accomplished but for the unfortunate event that darkened Earlescourt with a cloud of shame and sorrow.

Lord and Lady Earle had gone to pay a visit to an old friend, Sir Hugh Charteris, of Greenoke. Thinking Ronald would not reach home until the third week in June, they accepted Sir Hugh's invitation, and promised to spend the first two weeks in June with him. But Ronald altered his plans; the visit he was making did not prove to be a very pleasant one, and he returned to Earlescourt two days after Lord and Lady Earle had left it. His father wrote immediately, pressing him to join the party at Greenoke. He declined, saying that after the hard study of the few last months he longed for quiet and rest.

Knowing that every attention would be paid to his son's comfort, Lord Earle thought but little of the matter. In after years he bitterly regretted that he had not insisted upon his son's going to Greenoke. So it happened that Ronald Earle, his college career ended, his future lying like a bright, unruffled dream before him, had two weeks to spend alone in Earlescourt.

The first day was pleasant enough. Ronald went to see the horses, inspected the kennels, gladdened the gamekeeper's heart by his keen appreciation of good sport, rowed on the lake, played a solitary game at billiards, dined in great state, read three chapters or "Mill on Liberalism," four of a sensational novel, and fell asleep satisfied with that day, but rather at a loss to know what he should do on the next.

It was a beautiful June day; no cloud was in the smiling heavens, the sun shone bright, and Nature looked so fair and tempting that it was impossible to remain indoors. Out in the gardens the summer air seemed to thrill with the song of the birds. Butterflies spread their bright wings and coquetted with the fragrant blossoms; busy humming bees buried themselves in the white cups of the lily and the crimson heart of the rose.

Ronald wandered through the gardens; the delicate golden laburnum blossoms fell at his feet, and he sat down beneath a large acacia. The sun was warm, and Ronald thought a dish of strawberries would be very acceptable. He debated within himself for some time whether he should return to the house and order them, or walk down to

the fruit garden and gather them for himself.

What impulse was it that sent him on that fair June morning, when all Nature sung of love and happiness, to the spot where he met his fate?

Chapter III

The strawberry gardens at Earlescourt were very extensive. Far down among the green beds Ronald Earle saw a young girl kneeling, gathering the ripe fruit, which she placed in a large basket lined with leaves, and he went down to her.

"I should like a few of those strawberries," he said, gently, and she raised to his a face he never forgot. Involuntarily he raised his hat, in homage to her youth and her shy, sweet beauty. "For whom are you gathering these?" he asked, wondering who she was, and whence she came.

In a moment the young girl stood up, and made the prettiest and most graceful of courtesies.

"They are for the housekeeper, sir," she replied; and her voice was musical and clear as a silver bell.

"Then may I ask who you are?" continued Ronald.

"I am Dora Thorne," she replied, "the lodge keeper's daughter."

"How is it I have never seen you before?" he asked.

"Because I have lived always with my aunt, at Dale," she replied. "I only came home last year."

"I see," said Ronald. "Will you give me some of those strawberries?" he asked. "They look so ripe and tempting."

He sat down on one of the garden chairs and watched her. The pretty white fingers looked so fair, contrasted with the crimson fruit and green leaves. Deftly and quickly she contrived a small basket of leaves, and filled it with fruit. She brought it to him, and then for the first time Ronald saw her clearly, and that one glance was fatal to him.

She was no calm, grand beauty. She had a shy, sweet, blushing face, resembling nothing so much as a rosebud, with fresh, ripe lips; pretty little teeth, which gleamed like white jewels, large dark eyes, bright as stars, and veiled by long lashes; dark hair, soft and shining. She was indeed so fair, so modest and graceful, that Ronald Earle was charmed.

"It must be because you gathered them that they are so nice," he said, taking the little basket from her hands. "Rest awhile, Dora—you must be tired with this hot sun shining full upon you. Sit here under the shade of this apple tree."

He watched the crimson blushes that dyed her fair young face. She never once raised her dark eyes to his. He had seen beautiful and stately ladies, but none so coy or bewitching as this pretty maiden. The more he looked at her the more he admired her. She had no delicate patrician loveliness, no refined grace; but for glowing, shy, fresh beauty, who could equal her?

So the young heir of Earlescourt sat, pretending to enjoy the strawberries, but in reality engrossed by the charming figure before him. She neither stirred nor spoke. Under the boughs of the apple tree, with the sunbeams

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falling upon her, she made a fair picture, and his eyes were riveted upon it.

It was all very delightful, and very wrong. Ronald should not have talked to the lodge keeper's daughter, and sweet, rustic Dora Thorne should have known better. But they were young, and such days come but seldom, and pass all too quickly.

"Dora Thorne," said Ronald, musingly—"what a pretty name! How well it suits you! It is quite a little song in itself."

She smiled with delight at his words; then her shy, dark eyes were raised for a moment, and quickly dropped again.

"Have you read Tennyson's 'Dora?'" he asked.

"No," she replied—"I have little time for reading."

"I will tell you the story," he said, patronizingly. "Ever since I read it I have had an ideal 'Dora,' and you realize my dream."

She had not the least idea what he meant; but when he recited the musical words, her fancy and imagination were stirred; she saw the wheat field, the golden corn, the little child and its anxious mother. When Ronald ceased speaking, he saw her hands were clasped and her lips quivering.

"Did you like that?" he asked, with unconscious patronage.

"So much!" she replied. "Ah, he must be a great man who wrote those words; and you remember them all."

Her simple admiration flattered and charmed him. He recited other verses for her, and the girl listened in a trance of delight. The sunshine and western wind brought no warning to the heir of Earlescourt that he was forging the first link of a dreadful tragedy; he thought only of the shy, blushing beauty and coy grace of the young girl!

Suddenly from over the trees there came the sound of the great bell at the Hall. Then Dora started.

"It is one o'clock!" she cried. "What shall I do? Mrs. Morton will be angry with me."

"Angry!" said Ronald, annoyed at this sudden breakup of his Arcadian dream. "Angry with you! For what?"

"She is waiting for the strawberries," replied conscious Dora, "and my basket is not half full."

It was a new idea to him that any one should dare to be angry with this pretty, gentle Dora.

"I will help you," he said.

In less than a minute the heir of Earlescourt was kneeling by Dora Thorne, gathering quickly the ripe strawberries, and the basket was soon filled.

"There," said Ronald, "you need not fear Mrs. Morton now, Dora. You must go, I suppose; it seems hard to leave this bright sunshine to go indoors!"

"I—I would rather stay," said Dora, frankly; "but I have much to do."

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"Shall you be here tomorrow?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied; "it will take me all the week to gather strawberries for the housekeeper."

"Goodbye, Dora," he said, "I shall see you again."

He held out his hand, and her little fingers trembled and fluttered in his grasp. She looked so happy, yet so frightened, so charming, yet so shy. He could have clasped her in his arms at that moment, and have said he loved her; but Ronald was a gentleman. He bowed over the little hand, and then relinquished it. He watched the pretty, fairy figure, as the young girl tripped away.

"Shame on all artificial training!" said Ronald to himself. "What would our fine ladies give for such a face? Imagine beauty without coquetry or affectation. The girl's heart is as pure as a stainless lily; she never heard of 'a grand match' or a 'good parti.' If Tennyson's Dora was like her, I do not wonder at anything that happened."

Instead of thinking to himself that he had done a foolish thing that bright morning, and that his plain duty was to forget all about the girl, Ronald lighted his cigar, and began to dream of the face that had charmed him.

Dora took the fruit to Mrs. Morton, and received no reprimand; then she was sent home to the cottage, her work for the day ended. She had to pass through the park. Was it the same road she had trodden this morning? What caused the new and shining glory that had fallen on every leaf and tree? The blue heavens seemed to smile upon her; every flower, every song of the bright birds had a new meaning. What was it? Her own heart was beating as it had never beaten before; her face was flushed, and the sweet, limpid eyes shone with a new light. What was it? Then she came to the brook-side and sat down on the violet bank.

The rippling water was singing a new song, something of love and youth, of beauty and happiness—something of a new and fairy-like life; and with the faint ripple and fall of the water came back to her the voice that had filled her ears and touched her heart. Would she ever again forget the handsome face that had smiled so kindly upon her? Surely he was a king among men, and he had praised her, said her name was like a song, and that she was like the Dora of the beautiful poem. This grand gentleman, with the clear, handsome face and dainty white hands, actually admired her.

So Dora dreamed by the brook-side, and she was to see him again and again; she gave no thought to a cold, dark time when she should see him no more. Tomorrow the sun would shine, the birds sing, and she should see him once again.

Dora never remembered how that happy day passed. Good Mrs. Thorne looked at her child, and sighed to think how pretty she was and how soon that sweet, dimpled face would be worn with care.

Dora's first proceeding was characteristic enough. She went to her own room and locked the door; then she put the cracked little mirror in the sunshine, and proceeded to examine her face. She wanted to see why Ronald Earle admired her; she wondered much at this new power she seemed possessed of; she placed the glass on the table, and sat down to study her own face. She saw that it was very fair; the coloring was delicate and vivid, like that of the heart of a rose; the fresh, red lips were arched and smiling; the dark, shy eyes, with their long silken lashes, were bright and clear; a pretty, dimpled, smiling face told of a sweet, simple, loving nature—that was all; there was no intellect, no soul, no high-bred refinement; nothing but the charm of bright, half-startled beauty.

Dora was half puzzled. She had never thought much of her own appearance. Having lived always with sensible, simple people, the pernicious language of flattery was unknown to her. It was with a half-guilty thrill of delight that she for the first time realized the charm of her own sweet face.

Dora Thorne

The sunny hours flew by. Dora never noted them; she thought only of the morning past and the morning to come, while Ronald dreamed of her almost unconsciously. She had been a bright feature in a bright day; his artistic taste had been gratified, his eyes had been charmed. The pretty picture haunted him, and he remembered with pleasure that on the morrow he should see the shy, sweet face again. No thought of harm or wrong even entered his mind. He did not think that he had been imprudent. He had recited a beautiful poem to a pretty, coy girl, and in a grand, lordly way he believed himself to have performed a kind action.

The morning came, and they brought bright, blushing Dora to her work; again the little white fingers glistened amid the crimson berries. Then Dora heard him coming. She heard his footsteps, and her face grew "ruby red." He made no pretense of finding her accidentally.

"Good morning, Dora," he said; "you look as bright as the sunshine and as fair as the flowers. Put away the basket; I have brought a book of poems, and mean to read some to you. I will help you with your work afterward."

Dora, nothing loath, sat down, and straightway they were both in fairyland. He read industriously, stealing every now and then a glance at his pretty companion. She knew nothing of what he was reading, but his voice made sweeter music than she had ever heard before.

At length the book was closed, and Ronald wondered what thoughts were running through his companion's simple, artless mind. So he talked to her of her daily life, her work, her pleasures, her friends. As he talked he grew more and more charmed; she had no great amount of intellect, no wit or keen powers of repartee, but the girl's love of nature made her a poetess. She seemed to know all the secrets of the trees and the flowers; no beauty escaped her; the rustle of green leaves, the sighs of the western wind, the solemn hush of the deep-green woods, the changing tints of the summer sky delighted her. Beautiful words, embodying beautiful thoughts, rippled over the fresh, ripe lips. She knew nothing else. She had seen no pictures, read no books, knew nothing of the fine arts, was totally ignorant of all scholarly lore, but deep in her heart lay a passionate love for the fair face of nature.

It was new to Ronald. He had heard fashionable ladies speak of everything they delighted in. He had ever heard of "music in the fall of rain drops," or character in flowers.

Once Dora forgot her shyness, and when Ronald said something, she laughed in reply. How sweet and pure that laughter was—like a soft peal of silver bells! When Ronald Earle went to sleep that night, the sound haunted his dreams.

Chapter IV

Every morning brought the young heir of Earlescourt to the bright sunny gardens where Dora worked among the strawberries. As the days passed she began to lose something of her shy, startled manner, and laughed and talked to him as she would have done to her own brother. His vanity was gratified by the sweetest homage of all, the unconscious, unspoken love and admiration of the young girl. He liked to watch the blushes on her face, and the quivering of her lips when she caught the first sound of his coming footsteps. He liked to watch her dark eyes droop, and then to see them raised to his with a beautiful, startled light.

Insensibly his own heart became interested. At first he had merely thought of passing a pleasant hour; then he admired Dora, and tried to believe that reading to her was an act of pure benevolence; but, as the days passed on, something stronger and sweeter attracted him. He began to love her—and she was his first love.

Wonderful to say, these long tete-a-tetes had not attracted observation. No rumor of them escaped, so that no thorn appeared in this path of roses which led to the brink of a precipice.

Dora Thorne

It wanted three days until the time settled for the return of Lord and Lady Earle. Sir Harry Laurence, of Holtham Hall, asked Ronald to spend a day with him; and, having no valid excuse, he consented.

"I shall not see you tomorrow, Dora," he said. "I am going away for the day."

She looked at him with a startled face. One whole day without him! Then, with a sudden deadly pain, came the thought that these golden days must end; the time must come when she should see him no more. The pretty, dimpled face grew pale, and a dark shadow came into the clear eyes.

"Dora," cried Ronald, "why do you look so frightened? What is it?"

She gave him no answer, but turned away. He caught her hands in his own.

"Are you grieved that I am going away for one whole day?" he asked. But she looked so piteous and so startled that he waited for no reply. "I shall continue to see you," he resumed. "I could not let any day pass without that."

"And afterward," she said, simply, raising her eyes to his full of tears.

Then Ronald paused abruptly—he had never given one thought to the "afterward." Why, of course strawberries would not grow forever—it would not always be summer. Lord Earle would soon be back again, and then he must go abroad. Where would Dora be then? He did not like the thought—it perplexed him. Short as was the time he had known her, Dora had, in some mysterious way, grown to be a part of himself. He could not think of a day wherein he should not see her blushing, pretty face, and hear the music of her words. He was startled, and clasped her little hands more tightly within his own.

"You would not like to lose me, Dora?" he said, gently.

"No," she replied; and then tears fell from her dark eyes.

Poor Ronald! Had he been wise, he would have flown then; but he bent his head over her, and kissed the tears away. The pretty rounded cheek, so soft and child-like, he kissed again, and then clasped the slight girlish figure in his arms.

"Do not shed another tear, Dora," he whispered; "we will not lose each other. I love you, and you shall be my wife."

One minute before he spoke the idea had not even crossed his mind; it seemed to him afterward that another voice had spoken by his lips.

"Your wife!" she cried, looking at him in some alarm. "Ah, no! You are very kind and good, but that could never be."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because you are so far above me," replied the girl. "I and mine are servants and dependents of yours. We are not equal; I must learn to forget you," sobbed Dora, "and break my own heart!"

She could not have touched Ronald more deeply; in a moment he had poured forth a torrent of words that amazed her. Fraternity and equality, caste and folly, his mission and belief, his love and devotion, were all mingled in one torrent of eloquence that simply alarmed her.

Dora Thorne

"Never say that again, Dora," he continued, his fair, boyish face flushing. "You are the equal of a queen upon her throne; you are fair and true, sweet and good. What be a queen more than that?"

"A queen knows more," sighed Dora. "I know nothing in all the wide world."

"Then I will teach you," he said. "Ah, Dora, you know enough! You have beautiful thoughts, and you clothe them in beautiful words. Do not turn from me; say you love me and will be my wife. I love you, Dora—do not make me unhappy."

"I would not make you unhappy," she said, "for the whole world; if you wish me to love you—oh, you know I love you—if you wish me to go away and forget you, I will do my best."

But the very thought of it brought tears again. She looked so pretty, so bewildered between sorrow and joy, so dazzled by happiness, and yet so piteously uncertain, that Ronald was more charmed than ever.

"My darling Dora," he said, "you do love me. Your eyes speak, if your lips do not tell me. Will you be my wife? I can not live without you."

It was the prettiest picture in the world to see the color return to the sweet face. Ronald bent his head, and heard the sweet whisper.

"You shall never rue your trust, Dora," he said, proudly; but she interrupted him.

"What will Lord Earle say?" she asked; and again Ronald was startled by that question.

"My father can say nothing," he replied. "I am old enough to please myself, and this is a free country. I shall introduce you to him, Dora, and tell him you have promised to be my wife. No more tears, love. There is nothing but happiness before us."

And so he believed. He could think of nothing, care for nothing but Dora—her pretty face, her artless, simple ways, her undisguised love for him. There was but one excuse. He was young, and it was his first love; yet despite his happiness, his pride, his independence, he did often wonder in what words he should tell his father that he had promised to marry the lodge keeper's daughter. There were even times when he shivered, as one seized with sudden cold, at the thought.

The four days passed like a long, bright dream. It was a pretty romance, but sadly misplaced—a pretty summer idyll. They were but boy and girl. Dora met Ronald in the park, by the brook—side, and in the green meadows where the white hawthorn grew. They talked of but one thing, their love. Ronald never tired of watching Dora's fair face and pretty ways; she never wearied of telling him over and over again, in a hundred different ways, how noble and kind he was, and how dearly she loved him.

Lord Earle wrote to say that he should be home on the Thursday evening, and that they were bringing back a party of guests with them.

"There will be no time to tell my father just at present," said Ronald; "so, Dora, we must keep our secret. It will not do to tell your father before I tell mine."

They arranged to keep the secret until Lord Earle should be alone again. They were to meet twice every day—in the early morning, while the dew lay on the grass, and in the evening, when the Hall would be full of bustle and gayety.

Dora Thorne

Ronald felt guilty—he hardly knew how or why—when his father commiserated him for the two lonely weeks he had spent. Lonely! He had not felt them so; they had passed all too quickly for him. How many destinies were settled in that short time!

There was little time for telling his secret to Lord Earle. The few guests who had returned to Earlescourt were men of note, and their host devoted himself to their entertainment.

Lady Earle saw some great change in her son. She fancied that he spent a great deal of time out of doors. She asked him about it, wondering if he had taken to studying botany, for late and early he never tired of rambling in the park. She wondered again at the flush that crimsoned his face; but the time was coming when she would understand it all.

It is probable that if Ronald at that time had had as much of Dora's society as he liked, he would soon have discovered his mistake, and no great harm would have been done; but the foolish romance of foolish meetings had a charm for him. In those hurried interviews he had only time to think of Dora's love—he never noted her deficiencies; he was charmed with her tenderness and grace; her artless affection was so pretty; the difference between her and those with whom he was accustomed to talk was so great; her very ignorance had a piquant charm for him. So they went on to their fate.

One by one Lord Earle's guests departed, yet Ronald had not told his secret. A new element crept into his love, and urged him on. Walking one day through the park with his father they overtook Dora's father. A young man was with him and the two were talking earnestly together, so earnestly that they never heard the two gentlemen; and in passing by Ronald distinguished the words, "You give me your daughter, Mr. Thorne, and trust me to make her happy."

Ronald Earle turned quickly to look at the speaker. He saw before him a young man, evidently a well-to-do farmer from his appearance, with a calm, kind face and clear and honest eyes; and he was asking for Dora—Dora who was to be his wife and live at Earlescourt. He could hardly control his impatience; and it seemed to him that evening would never come.

Dinner was over at last. Lord Earle sat with Sir Harry Laurence over a bottle of claret, and Lady Earle was in the drawing room and had taken up her book. Ronald hastened to the favorite trysting place, the brook-side. Dora was there already, and he saw that her face was still wet with tears. She refused at first to tell him her sorrow. Then she whispered a pitiful little story, that made her lover resolve upon some rash deeds.

Ralph Holt had been speaking to her father, and had asked her to marry him. She had said "No;" but her mother had wept, and her father had grown angry, and had said she should obey him.

"He has a large farm," said Dora, with a bitter sigh. "He says I should live like a great lady, and have nothing to do. He would be kind to my father and mother; but I do not love him," she added.

Clasping her tender little hands round Ronald's arm, "I do not love him," she sobbed; "and, Ronald, I do love you."

He bent down and kissed her pretty, tear-bedewed face, all the chivalry of his nature aroused by her words.

"You shall be my wife, Dora," he said, proudly, "and not his. This very evening I will tell my father, and ask his consent to our marriage. My mother is sure to love you—she is so kind and gracious to every one. Do not tremble, my darling; neither Ralph Holt nor any one else shall take you from me."

She was soon comforted! There was no bound or limit to her faith in Ronald Earle.

"Go home now," he said, "and tomorrow my father himself shall see you. I will teach that young farmer his place. No more tears, Dora—our troubles will end tonight."

He went with her down the broad walk, and then returned to the Hall. He walked very proudly, with his gallant head erect, saying to himself that this was a free country and he could do what he liked; but for all that his heart beat loudly when he entered the drawing room and found Lord and Lady Earle. They looked up smilingly at him, all unconscious that their beloved son, the heir of Earlescourt, was there to ask permission to marry the lodge keeper's daughter.

Chapter V

Ronald Earle had plenty of courage—no young hero ever led a forlorn hope with more bravery than he displayed in the interview with his parents, which might have daunted a bolder man. As he approached, Lady Earle raised her eyes with a languid smile.

"Out again, Ronald!" she said. "Sir Harry Laurence left his adieus for you. I think the park possesses some peculiar fascination. Have you been walking quickly? Your face is flushed."

He made no reply, but drew near to his mother; he bent over her and raised her hand to his lips.

"I am come to tell you something," he said. "Father, will you listen to me? I ask your permission to marry Dora Thorne, one of the fairest, sweetest girls in England."

His voice never faltered, and the brave young face never quailed. Lord Earle looked at him in utter amazement.

"To marry Dora Thorne!" he said. "And who, in the name of reason, is Dora Thorne?"

"The lodge keeper's daughter," replied Ronald, stoutly. "I love her, father, and she loves me."

He was somewhat disconcerted when Lord Earle, for all reply, broke into an uncontrollable fit of laughter. He had expected a storm—expostulations, perhaps, and reproaches—anything but this.

"You can not be serious, Ronald," said his mother, smiling.

"I am so much in earnest," he replied, "that I would give up all I have in the world—my life itself, for Dora."

Then Lord Earle ceased laughing, and looked earnestly at the handsome, flushed face.

"No," said he, "you can not be serious. You dare not ask your mother to receive a servant's daughter as her own child. Your jest is in bad taste, Ronald."

"It is no jest," he replied. "We Earles are always terribly in earnest. I have promised to marry Dora Thorne, and, with your permission, I intend to keep my word."

An angry flush rose to Lord Earle's face, but he controlled his impatience.

"In any case," he replied, quietly, "you are too young to think of marriage yet. If you had chosen the daughter of a duke, I should, for the present, refuse."

"I shall be twenty in a few months," said Ronald, "and I am willing to wait until then."

Dora Thorne

Lady Earle laid her white jeweled hand on her son's shoulder, and said, gently:

"My dear Ronald, have you lost your senses? Tell me, who is Dora Thorne?" She saw tears shining in his eyes; his brave young face touched her heart. "Tell me," she continued, "who is she? Where have you seen her? What is she like?"

"She is so beautiful, mother," he said, "that I am sure you would love her; she is as fair and sweet as she is modest and true. I met her in the gardens some weeks ago, and I have met her every day since."

Lord and Lady Earle exchanged a glance of dismay which did not escape Ronald.

"Why have you not told us of this before?" asked his father, angrily.

"I asked her to be my wife while you were from home," replied Ronald. "She promised and I have only been waiting until our guests left us and you had more time."

"Is it to see Dora Thorne that you have been out so constantly?" asked Lady Earle.

"Yes, I could not let a day pass without seeing her," he replied; "it would be like a day without sunshine."

"Does any one else know of this folly?" asked Lord Earle, angrily.

"No, you may be quite sure, father, I should tell you before I told any one else," replied Ronald.

They looked at him in silent dismay, vexed and amazed at what he had done—irritated at his utter folly, yet forced to admire his honor, his courage, his truth. Both felt that some sons would have carefully concealed such a love affair from them. They were proud of his candor and integrity, although deploring his folly.

"Tell us all about it, Ronald," said Lady Earle.

Without the least hesitation, Ronald told them every word; and despite their vexation, neither could help smiling—it was such a pretty story—a romance, all sunshine, smiles, tears, and flowers. Lord Earle's face cleared as he listened, and he laid one hand on his boy's shoulder.

"Ronald," said he, "we shall disagree about your love; but remember, I do full justice to your truth. After all, the fault is my own. I might have known that a young fellow of your age, left all alone, was sure to get into mischief; you have done so. Say no more now; I clearly and distinctly refuse my consent. I appeal to your honor that you meet this young girl no more. We will talk of it another time."

When the door closed behind him, Lord and Lady Earle looked at each other. The lady's face was pale and agitated.

"Oh, Rupert," she said, "how brave and noble he is! Poor foolish boy! How proud he looked of his absurd mistake. We shall have trouble with him, I foresee!"

"I do not think so," replied her husband. "Valentine Charteris will be here soon, and when Ronald sees her he will forget this rustic beauty."

"It will be better not to thwart him," interrupted Lady Earle. "Let me manage the matter, Rupert. I will go down to the lodge tomorrow, and persuade them to send the girl away; and then we will take Ronald abroad, and he will forget all about it in a few months."

Dora Thorne

All night long the gentle lady of Earlescourt was troubled by strange dreams—by vague, dark fears that haunted her and would not be laid to rest.

"Evil will come of it," she said to herself—"evil and sorrow. This distant shadow saddens me now."

The next day she went to the lodge, and asked for Dora. She half pardoned her son's folly when she saw the pretty dimpled face, the rings of dark hair, lying on the white neck. The girl was indeed charming and modest, but unfitted—oh, how unfitted! ever to be Lady Earle. She was graceful as a wild flower is graceful; but she had no manner, no dignity, no cultivation. She stood blushing, confused, and speechless, before the "great lady."

"You know what I want you for, Dora," said Lady Earle, kindly. "My son has told us of the acquaintance between you. I am come to say it must cease. I do not wish to hurt or wound you. Your own sense must tell you that you can never be received by Lord Earle and myself as our daughter. We will not speak of your inferiority in birth and position. You are not my son's equal in refinement or education; he would soon discover that, and tire of you."

Dora spoke no word, the tears falling from her bright eyes; this time there was no young lover to kiss them away. She made no reply and when Lady Earle sent for her father, Dora ran away; she would hear no more.

"I know nothing of it, my lady," said the worthy lodge keeper, who was even more surprised than his master had been. "Young Ralph Holt wants to marry my daughter, and I have said that she shall be his wife. I never dreamed that she knew the young master; she has not mentioned his name."

Lady Earle's diplomacy succeeded beyond her most sanguine expectations. Stephen Thorne and his wife, although rather dazzled by the fact that their daughter had captivated the future Lord Earlescourt, let common sense and reason prevail, and saw the disparity and misery such a marriage would cause. They promised to be gentle and kind to Dora, not to scold or reproach her, and to allow some little time to elapse before urging Ralph Holt's claims.

When Lady Earle rose, she placed a twenty-pound banknote in the hands of Stephen Thorne, saying:

"You are sending Dora to Eastham; that will cover the expenses."

"I could not do that, my lady," said Stephen, refusing to take the money. "I can not sell poor Dora's love."

Then Lady Earle held out her delicate white hand, and the man bowed low over it. Before the sun set that evening, Stephen Thorne had taken Dora to Eastham, where she was to remain until Ronald had gone abroad.

For a few days it seemed as though the storm had blown over. There was one angry interview between father and son, when Ronald declared that sending Dora away was a breach of faith, and that he would find her out and marry her how and when he could. Lord Earle thought his words were but the wild folly of a boy deprived of a much-desired toy. He did not give them serious heed.

The story of Earlescourt might have been different, had not Ronald, while still amazed and irritated by his father's cool contempt, encountered Ralph Holt. They met at the gate leading from the fields to the high road; it was closed between them, and neither could make way.

"I have a little account to settle with you, my young lordling," said Ralph, angrily. "Doves never mate with eagles; if you want to marry, choose one of your own class, and leave Dora Thorne to me."

"Dora Thorne is mine," said Ronald, haughtily.

Dora Thorne

"She will never be," was the quick reply. "See, young master, I have loved Dora since she was a—a pretty, bright-eyed child. Her father lived near my father's farm then. I have cared for her all my life—I do not know that I have ever looked twice at another woman's face. Do not step in between me and my love. The world is wide, and you can choose where you will—do not rob me of Dora Thorne."

There was a mournful dignity in the man's face that touched Ronald.

"I am sorry for you," he said, "if you love Dora; for she will be my wife."

"Never!" cried Ralph. "Since you will not listen to fair words, I defy you. I will go to Eastham and never leave Dora again until she will be my own."

High, angry words passed between them, but Ralph in his passion had told the secret Ronald had longed to know—Dora was at Eastham.

It was a sad story and yet no rare one. Love and jealousy robbed the boy of his better sense; duty and honor were forgotten. Under pretense of visiting one of his college friends, Ronald went to Eastham. Lord and Lady Earle saw him depart without any apprehension; they never suspected that he knew where Dora was.

It was a sad story, and bitter sorrow came from it. Word by word it can not be written, but when the heir of Earlescourt saw Dora again, her artless delight, her pretty joy and sorrow mingled, her fear and dislike of Ralph, her love for himself drove all thought of duty and honor from his mind. He prayed her to become his wife secretly. He had said that when once they were married his father would forgive them, and all would be well. He believed what he said; Dora had no will but his. She forgot all Lady Earle's warnings; she remembered only Ronald and his love. So they were married in the quiet parish church of Helsmeer, twenty miles from Eastham, and no human being either knew or guessed their secret.

There was no excuse, no palliation for an act that was undutiful, dishonorable, and deceitful—there was nothing to plead for him, save that he was young, and had never known a wish refused.

They were married. Dora Thorne became Dora Earle. Ronald parted from his pretty wife immediately. He arranged all his plans with what he considered consummate wisdom. He was to return home, and try by every argument in his power to soften his father and win his consent. If he still refused, then time would show him the best course. Come what might, Dora was his; nothing on earth could part them. He cared for very little else. Even if the very worst came, and his father sent him from home, it would only be for a time, and there was Dora to comfort him.

He returned to Earlescourt, and though his eyes were never raised in clear, true honesty to his father's face, Lord Earle saw that his son looked happy, and believed the cloud had passed away.

Dora was to remain at Eastham until she heard from him. He could not write to her, nor could she send one line to him; but he promised and believed that very soon he should take her in all honor to Earlescourt.

Chapter VI

It was a beautiful morning toward the end of August; the balmy sweetness of spring had given way to the glowing radiance of summer. The golden corn waved in the fields, the hedge rows were filled with wild flowers, the fruit hung ripe in the orchards. Nature wore her brightest smile. The breakfast room at Earlescourt was a pretty apartment; it opened on a flower garden, and through the long French windows came the sweet perfume of rose blossoms.

Dora Thorne

It was a pretty scene—the sunbeams fell upon the rich silver, the delicate china, the vases of sweet flowers. Lord Earle sat at the head of the table, busily engaged with his letters. Lady Earle, in the daintiest of morning toilets, was smiling over the pretty pink notes full of fashionable gossip. Her delicate, patrician face looked clear and pure in the fresh morning light. But there was no smile on Ronald's face. He was wondering, for the hundredth time, how he was to tell his father what he had done. He longed to be with his pretty Dora; and yet there was a severe storm to encounter before he could bring her home.

"Ah," said Lady Earle, suddenly, "here is good news—Lady Charteris is positively coming, Rupert. Sir Hugh will join her in a few days. She will be here with Valentine tomorrow."

"I am very glad," said Lord Earle, looking up with pleasure and surprise. "We must ask Lady Laurence to meet them."

Ronald sighed; his parents busily discussed the hospitalities and pleasures to be offered their guests. A grand dinner party was planned, and a ball, to which half the country side were to be invited.

"Valentine loves gayety," said Lady Earle, "and we must give her plenty of it."

"I shall have all this to go through," sighed Ronald—"grand parties, dinners, and balls, while my heart longs to be with my darling; and in the midst of it all, how shall I find time to talk to my father? I will begin this very day."

When dinner was over, Ronald proposed to Lord Earle that they should go out on the terrace and smoke a cigar there. Then took place the conversation with which our story opens, when the master of Earlescourt declared his final resolve.

Ronald was more disturbed than he cared to own even to himself. Once the words hovered upon his lips that he had married Dora. Had Lord Earl been angry or contemptuous, he would have uttered them; but in the presence of his father's calm, dignified wisdom, he was abashed and uncertain. For the first time he felt the truth of all his father said. Not that he loved Dora less, or repented of the rash private marriage, but Lord Earle's appeal to his sense of the "fitness of things" touched him.

There was little time for reflection. Lady Charteris and her daughter were coming on the morrow. Again Lady Earle entered the field as a diplomatist, and came off victorious.

"Ronald," said his mother, as they parted that evening, "I know that, as a rule, young men of your age do not care for the society of elderly ladies; I must ask you to make an exception in favor of Lady Charteris. They showed me great kindness at Greenoke, and you must help me to return it. I shall consider every attention shown to the lady and her daughter as shown to myself."

Ronald smiled at his mother's words, and told her he would never fail in her service.

"If he sees much of Valentine," thought his mother, "he can not help loving her. Then all will be well."

Ronald was not in the house when the guests arrived; they came rather before the appointed time. His mother and Lady Charteris had gone to the library together, leaving Valentine in the drawing room alone. Ronald found her there. Opening the door, he saw the sleeve of a white dress; believing Lady Earle was there, he went carelessly into the room, then started in astonishment at the vision before him. Once in a century, perhaps, one sees a woman like Valentine Charteris; of the purest and loveliest Greek type, a calm, grand, magnificent blonde, with clear, straight brows, fair hair that shone like satin and lay in thick folds around her queenly head—tall and stately, with a finished ease and grace of manner that could only result from long and careful training. She rose when Ronald entered the room, and her beautiful eyes were lifted calmly to his face. Suddenly a rush of color dyed the white

Dora Thorne

brow. Valentine remembered what Lady Earle had said of her son. She knew that both his mother and hers wished that she should be Ronald's wife.

"I beg your pardon," he said hastily, "I thought Lady Earle was here."

"She is in the library," said Valentine, with a smile that dazzled him.

He bowed and withdrew. This, then, was Valentine Charteris, the fine lady whose coming he had dreaded. She was very beautiful—he had never seen a face like hers.

No thought of love, or of comparing this magnificent woman with simple, pretty Dora, ever entered his mind. But Ronald was a true artist, and one of no mean skill. He thought of that pure Grecian face as he would have thought of a beautiful picture or an exquisite statue. He never thought of the loving, sensitive woman's heart hidden under it.

It was not difficult when dinner was over to open the grand piano for Valentine, to fetch her music, and listen while she talked of operas he had never heard. It was pleasant to watch her as she sat in the evening gloaming, her superb beauty enhanced by the delicate evening dress of fine white lace; the shapely shoulders were polished and white, the exquisite arms rounded and clasped by a bracelet of pearls. She wore a rose in the bodice of her dress, and, as Ronald bent over the music she was showing him the sweet, subtle perfume came to him like a message from Dora.

Valentine Charteris had one charm even greater than her beauty. She talked well and gracefully—the play of her features, the movement of her lips, were something not to be forgotten; and her smile seemed to break like a sunbeam over her whole face—it was irresistible.

Poor Ronald stood by her, watching the expression that seemed to change with every word; listening to pretty polished language that was in itself a charm. The two mothers, looking on, and Lord Earle felt himself relieved from a heavy weight of care. Then Lady Earle asked Valentine to sing. She was quite free from all affectation.

"What kind of music do you prefer?" she asked, looking at Ronald.

"Simple old ballads," he replied, thinking of Dora, and how prettily she would sing them.

He started when the first note of Valentine's magnificent voice rang clear and sweet in the quiet gloaming. She sang some quaint old story of a knight who loved a maiden—loved and rode away, returning after long years to find a green grave. Ronald sat thinking of Dora. Ah, perhaps, had he forsaken her, the pretty dimpled face would have faded away! He felt pleased that he had been true. Then the music ceased.

"Is that what you like?" asked Valentine Charteris, "it is of the stronger sentimental school."

Simple, honest Ronald wondered if sentiment was a sin against etiquette, or why fashionable ladies generally spoke of it with a sneer.

"Do you laugh at sentiment?" he asked; and Valentine opened her fine eyes in wonder at the question. Lady Earle half overheard it, and smiled in great satisfaction. Matters must be going on well, she thought, if Ronald had already begun to speak of sentiment. She never thought that his heart and mind were with Dora while he spoke—pretty Dora, who cried over his poetry, and devoutly believed in the language of flowers.

The evening passed rapidly, and Ronald felt something like regret when it ended. Lady Earle was too wise to make any comments; she never asked her son if he liked Valentine or what he thought of her.

Dora Thorne

"I am afraid you are tired," she said, with a charming smile; "thank you for helping to amuse my friends."

When Ronald thought over what he had done, his share seemed very small; still his mother was pleased, and he went to rest resolved that on the morrow he would be doubly attentive to Miss Charteris.

Three days passed, and Ronald had grown quite at ease with Valentine. They read and disputed over the same books; Ronald brought out his large folio of drawings, and Valentine wondered at his skill. He bent over her, explaining the sketches, laughing and talking gayly, as though there was no dark background to his life.

"You are an accomplished artist," said Miss Charteris, "you must have given much time to study."

"I am fond of it," said Ronald; "if fate had not made me an only son, I should have chosen painting as my profession."

In after years these words came back to them as a sad prophecy.

Ronald liked Miss Charteris. Apart from her grand beauty, she had the charm, too, of a kindly heart and an affectionate nature. He saw how much Lady Earle loved her, and resolved to tell Valentine all about Dora, and ask her to try to influence his mother. With that aim and end in view, he talked continually to the young lady; he accompanied her in all her walks and drives, and they sang and sketched together. Ronald, knowing himself so safely bound to Dora, forgot in what light his conduct must appear to others. Lady Earle had forgotten her fears; she believed that her son was learning to love Valentine, and her husband shared her belief.

All things just then were *couleur de rose* at Earlescourt. Ronald looked and felt happy—he had great faith in Valentine's persuasive powers.

Days passed by rapidly; the time for the grand ball was drawing near. Lady Earle half wondered when her son would speak of Miss Charteris, and Valentine wondered why he lingered near her, why oftentimes he was on the point of speaking, and then drew back. She quite believed he cared for her, and she liked him in return, as much as she was capable of liking any one.

She was no tragedy queen, but a loving, affectionate girl, unable to reach the height of passionate love, or the depth of despair. She was well disposed toward Ronald—Lady Earle spoke so much of him at Greenoke. She knew too that a marriage with him would delight her mother.

Valentine's favorable impression of Ronald was deepened when she saw him. Despite the one great act of duplicity which shadowed his whole life, Ronald was true and honorable. Valentine admired his clear Saxon face and firm lips; she admired his deep bright eyes, that darkened with every passing emotion; she liked his gentle, chivalrous manner, his earnest words, his deferential attention to herself, his affectionate devotion to Lady Earle.

There was not a braver or more gallant man in England than this young heir of Earlescourt. He inherited the personal beauty and courage of his race. He gave promise of a splendid manhood; and no one knew how proudly Lord Earle had rejoiced in that promise.

In her calm stately way, Valentine liked him; she even loved him, and would have been happy as his wife. She enjoyed his keen, intellectual powers and his originality of thought. Even the "dreadful politics," that scared and shocked his father, amused her.

Ronald, whose heart was full of the pretty little wife he dared neither see nor write to, gave no heed to Valentine's manner; it never occurred to him what construction could be put upon his friendly liking for her.

Chapter VII

The day came for the grand ball, and during breakfast the ladies discussed the important question of bouquets; from that the conversation changed to flowers. "There are so many of them," said Valentine, "and they are all so beautiful, I am always at a loss which to choose."

"I should never hesitate a moment," said Ronald, laughingly. "You will accuse me, perhaps of being sentimental, but I must give preference to the white lily—bells. Lilies of the valley are the fairest flowers that grow."

Lady Earle overheard the remark; no one else appeared to notice it, and she was not much surprised when Valentine entered the ball room to see white lilies in her fair hair, and a bouquet of the same flowers, half-shrouded by green leaves, in her hand.

Many eyes turned admiringly upon the calm, stately beauty and her white flowers. Ronald saw them. He could not help remarking the exquisite toilet, marred by no obtrusive colors, the pretty lily wreath and fragrant bouquet. It never occurred to him that Valentine had chosen those delicate blossoms in compliment to him. He thought he had never seen a fairer picture than this magnificent blonde; then she faded from his mind. He looked round on those fair and noble ladies, thinking that Dora's shy, sweet face was far lovelier than any there. He looked at the costly jewels, the waving plumes, the sweeping satins, and thought of Dora's plain, pretty dress. A softened look came into his eyes, as he pictured his shy, graceful wife. Some day she, too, would walk through these gorgeous rooms, and then would all admire the wisdom of his choice. So the heir of Earlescourt dreamed as he watched the brilliant crowd that began to fill the ball room; but his reverie was suddenly broken by a summons from Lady Earle.

"Ronald," said she, looking slightly impatient, "have you forgotten that it is your place to open the ball? You must ask Miss Charteris to dance with you."

"That will be no hardship," he replied, smiling at his mother's earnest manner. "I would rather dance with Miss Charteris than any one else."

Lady Earle wisely kept silence; her son went up to Valentine and made his request. He danced with her again and again—not as Lady Earle hoped, from any unusual preference, but because it gave him less trouble than selecting partners among strange young ladies. Valentine understood him; they talked easily, and without restraint. He paid her no compliments, and she did not seem to expect any. With other ladies, Ronald was always thinking, "What would they say if they knew of that fair young wife at Eastham?" With Valentine no such idea haunted him—he had an instinctive belief in her true and firm friendship.

Lady Earle overheard a few whispered comments, and they filled her heart with delight. Old friends whispered to her that "it would be a splendid match for her son," and "how happy she would be with such a daughter-in-law as Miss Charteris, so beautiful and dignified;" and all this because Ronald wanted to secure Valentine's friendship, so that she might intercede for Dora.

When, for the fourth time, Ronald asked Miss Charteris "for the next dance," she looked up at him with a smile.

"Do you know how often we have danced together this evening?" she asked.

"What does it matter?" he replied, wondering at the flush that crimsoned her face. "Forgive me, Miss Charteris, if I say that you realize my idea of the poetry of motion."

"Is that why you ask me so frequently?" she said, archly.

Dora Thorne

"Yes," replied honest Ronald; "it is a great pleasure; for one good dancer there are fifty bad ones."

He did not quite understand the pretty, piqued expression of her face.

"You have not told me," said Valentine, "whether you like my flowers."

"They are very beautiful," he replied; but the compliment of her selection was all lost upon him.

Miss Charteris did not know whether he was simply indifferent or timid.

"You told me these lilies were your favorite flowers," she said.

"Yes," replied Ronald; "but they are not the flowers that resemble you." He was thinking how much simple, loving Dora was like the pretty delicate little blossoms. "You are like the tall queenly lilies."

He paused, for Valentine was looking at him with a wondering smile.

"Do you know you have paid me two compliments in less than five minutes?" she said. "And yesterday we agreed that between true friends they were quite unnecessary."

"I—I did not intend to pay idle compliments," he replied. "I merely said what I thought. You are like a tall, grand, white lily, Miss Charteris. I have often thought so. If you will not dance with me again, will you walk through the rooms?"

Many admiring glances followed them—a handsomer pair was seldom seen. They passed through the long suite of rooms and on to the conservatory, where lamps gleamed like stars between the green plants and rare exotics.

"Will you rest here?" said Ronald. "The ball room is so crowded one can not speak there."

"Ah," thought Miss Charteris, "then he really has something to say to me!"

Despite her calm dignity and serene manner, Valentine's heart beat high. She loved the gallant young heir—his honest, kindly nature had a great charm for her. She saw that the handsome face bending over the flowers was agitated and pale. Miss Charteris looked down at the lilies in her hand. He came nearer to her, and looked anxiously at her beautiful face.

"I am not eloquent," said Ronald—"I have no great gift of speech; but, Miss Charteris, I should like to find some words that would reach your heart and dwell there."

He wanted to tell her of Dora, to describe her sweet face with its dimples and blushes, her graceful manner, her timid, sensitive disposition. He wanted to make her love Dora, to help him to soften his mother's prejudices and his father's anger; no wonder his lips quivered and his voice faltered.

"For some days past I have been longing to speak to you," continued Ronald; "now my courage almost fails me. Miss Charteris, say something that will give me confidence." She looked up at him, and any other man would have read the love in her face.

"The simplest words you can use will always interest me," she said, gently.

His face cleared, and he began: "You are kind and generous—"

Then came an interruption—Sir Harry Laurence, with a lady, entered the conservatory.

"This is refreshing," he said to Ronald. "I have been ten minutes trying to get here, the rooms are so full."

Miss Charteris smiled in replying, wishing Sir Harry had waited ten minutes longer.

"Promise me," said Ronald, detaining her, as Sir Harry passed on, "that you will give me one half hour tomorrow."

"I will do so," replied she.

"And you will listen to me, Miss Charteris?" he continued. "You will hear all I have to say?"

Valentine made no reply; several other people came, some to admire the alcove filled with ferns which drooped from the wall by which she was standing, others to breathe the fragrant air. She could not speak without being overheard; but, with a charming smile, she took a beautiful lily from her bouquet and held it out to him. They then went back into the ball room.

"He loves me," thought Valentine; and, as far as her calm, serene nature was capable of passionate delight, she felt it.

"She will befriend me," thought Ronald; "but why did she give me this flower?"

The most remote suspicion that Valentine had mistaken him—that she loved him—never crossed the mind of Ronald Earle. He was singularly free from vanity. Perhaps if he had a little more confidence in himself, the story of the Earles might have been different.

Lady Charteris looked at her daughter's calm, proud face. She had noticed the little interview in the conservatory, and drew her own conclusions from it. Valentine's face confirmed them there was a delicate flush upon it, and a new light shone in the lustrous eyes.

"You like Earlescourt?" said Lady Charteris to her daughter that evening, as they sat in her drawing room alone.

"Yes, mamma, I like it very much," said Valentine.

"And from what I see," continued the elder lady, "I think it is likely to be your home."

"Yes, I believe so," said Valentine, bending over her mother, and kissing her. "Ronald has asked me to give him one half hour tomorrow, and I am very happy, mamma."

For one so calm and stately, it was admission enough. Lady Charteris knew, from the tone of her daughter's voice, that she loved Ronald Earle.

Ronald slept calmly, half hoping that the end of his troubles was drawing nigh. Valentine, whom his mother loved so well, would intercede for Dora. Lord Earle would be sure to relent; and he could bring Dora home, and all would be well. If ever and anon a cold fear crept into his heart that simple, pretty Dora would be sadly out of place in that magnificent house, he dashed it from him. Miss Charteris slept calmly, too, but her dreams were different from Ronald's. She thought of the time when she would be mistress of that fair domain, and the wife of its brave young lord. She loved him well. No one had ever pleased her as he had —no one would ever charm her again. Valentine had made the grand mistake of her life.

Dora Thorne

The morrow so eagerly looked for was a fair, bright day. The sun shone warm and bright, the air was soft and fragrant, the sky blue and cloudless. Lady Charteris did not leave her room for breakfast, and Valentine remained with her mother.

When breakfast was ended, Ronald lingered about, hoping to see Valentine. He had not waited long before he saw the glimmer of her white dress and blue ribbons. He met her in the hall.

"Will you come out into the gardens, Miss Charteris?" he asked. "The morning is so beautiful, and you promised me one half hour. Do not take that book with you. I shall want all your attention for I have a story to tell you."

He walked by her side through the pleasure gardens where the lake gleamed in the sunshine, the water lilies sleeping on its quiet bosom; through the fragrant flower beds where the bees hummed and the butterflies made love to the fairest blossoms.

"Let us go on to the park," said Valentine; "the sun is too warm here."

"I know a little spot just fitted for a fairy bower," said Ronald. "Let me show it to you. I can tell my story better there."

They went through the broad gates of the park, across which the checkered sunbeams fell, where the deer browsed and king-cups and tall foxgloves grew—on to the brook side where Dora had rested so short a time since to think of her new-found happiness.

The pale primroses had all died away, the violets were gone; but in their place the deep green bank was covered with other flowers of bright and sunny hue. The shade of tall trees covered the bank, the little brook sang merrily, and birds chimed in with the rippling water; the summer air was filled with the faint, sweet summer music.

"It is a pretty spot," said Miss Charteris.

The green grass seemed to dance in the breeze, and Ronald made something like a throne amid it.

"You shall be queen, and I your suppliant," he said. "You promise to listen; I will tell you my story."

They sat a few minutes in deep silence, broken only by the singing brook and the music of the birds; a solemn hush seemed to have fallen on them, while the leaves rustled in the wind.

If Ronald Earle's heart and mind had not been filled with another and very different image, he must have seen how fair Valentine looked; the sunlight glinting through the dense green foliage fell upon her face, while the white dress and blue ribbons, the fair floating hair, against the dark background of the bank and the trees, made a charming picture; but Ronald never saw it. After long years the memory of it came back to him, and he wondered at his own blindness. He never saw the trembling of the white fingers that played carelessly with sprays of purple foxglove; he never saw the faint flush upon her face, the quiver of her proud, beautiful lips, or the love light in her eyes. He only saw and thought of Dora.

"I told you, Miss Charteris, last evening, that I was not eloquent," began Ronald. "When anything lies deep in my heart, I find great difficulty in telling it in words."

"All sacred and deep feeling is quiet," said Valentine; "a torrent of words does not always show an earnest nature. I have many thoughts that I could never express."

Dora Thorne

"If I could only be sure that you would understand me, Miss Charteris," said Ronald—"that you would see and comprehend the motives that I can hardly explain myself! Sitting here in the summer sunshine, I can scarcely realize how dark the cloud is that hangs over me. You are so kind and patient, I will tell you my story in my own way." She gathered a rich cluster of bluebells, and bent over them, pulling the pretty flowers into pieces, and throwing leaf after leaf into the stream.

"Three months since," continued Ronald, "I came home to Earlescourt. Lord and Lady Earle were both at Greenoke; I, and not quite myself, preferred remaining here alone and quiet. One morning I went out into the garden, listless for want of something to do. I saw there—ah! Now I want words, Miss Charteris—the fairest girl the sun ever shone upon."

He saw the flowers fall from Valentine's grasp; she put her hand to her brow, as though to shield her face.

"Does the light annoy you?" he asked.

"No," she replied, steadily; "go on with your story."

"A clever man," said Ronald, "might paint for you the pretty face, all smiles and dimples, the dark shining rings of hair that fell upon a white brow, the sweet, shy eyes fringed by long lashes, seldom raised, but full of wonderful light when once you could look into their depths. I can only tell you how in a few days I grew to love the fair young face, and how Dora Thorne that was her name, Miss Charteris—loved me."

Valentine never moved nor spoke; Ronald could see the bright flush die away, and the proud lips quiver.

"I must tell you all quickly," said Ronald. "She is not what people call a lady, this beautiful wild flower of mine. Her father lives at the lodge; he is Lord Earle's lodge keeper, and she knows nothing of the world or its ways. She has never been taught or trained, though her voice is like sweet music, and her laugh like the chime of silver bells. She is like a bright April day, smiles and tears, sunshine and rain—so near together that I never know whether I love her best weeping or laughing."

He paused, but Valentine did not speak; her hand still shaded her face.

"I loved her very much," said Ronald, "and I told her so. I asked her to be my wife, and she promised. When my father came home from Greenoke I asked his consent, and he laughed at me. He would not believe me serious. I need not tell you the details. They sent my pretty Dora away, and some one who loved her—who wanted to make her his wife—came, and quarreled with me. He my rival—swore that Dora should be his. In his passion he betrayed the secret so well kept from me. He told me where she was, and I went to see her."

There was no movement in the quiet figure, no words passed the white lips.

"I went to see her," he continued; "she was so unhappy, so pretty in her sorrow and love, so innocent, so fond of me, that I forgot all I should have remembered, and married her."

Valentine started then and uttered a low cry.

"You are shocked," said Ronald; "but, Miss Charteris, think of her so young and gentle! They would have forced her to marry the farmer, and she disliked him. What else could I do to save her?"

Even then, in the midst of that sharp sorrow, Valentine could not help admiring Ronald's brave simplicity, his chivalry, his honor.

Dora Thorne

"I married her," he said, "and I mean to be true to her. I thought my father would relent and forgive us, but I fear I was too sanguine. Since my marriage my father has told me that if I do not give up Dora he will not see me again. Every day I resolve to tell him what I have done, but something interferes to prevent it. I have never seen my wife since our wedding day. She is still at Eastham. Now, Miss Charteris, be my friend, and help me."

Bravely enough Valentine put away her sorrow—another time she would look it in the face; all her thoughts must now be for him.

"I will do anything to serve you," she said, gently. "What can I do?"

"My mother loves you very much," said Ronald; "she will listen to you. When I have told her, will you, in your sweet, persuasive way, interfere for Dora? Lady Earle will be influenced by what you say."

A quiver of pain passed over the proud, calm face of Valentine Charteris.

"If you think it wise for a stranger to interfere in so delicate a matter, I will do so cheerfully," she said; "but let me counsel on thing. Tell Lord and Lady Earle at once. Do not delay, every hour is of consequence."

"What do you think of my story?" asked Ronald, anxiously. "Have I done right or wrong?"

"Do not ask me," replied Valentine.

"Yes," he urged, "I will ask again; you are my friend. Tell me, have I done right or wrong?"

"I can speak nothing but truth," replied Valentine, "and I think you have done wrong. Do not be angry. Honor is everything; it ranks before life or love. In some degree you have tarnished yours by an underhand proceeding, a private marriage, one forbidden by your parents and distasteful to them."

Ronald's face fell as her words came to him slowly and clearly.

"I thought," said he, "I was doing a brave deed in marrying Dora. She had no one to take her part but me."

"It was a brave deed in one sense," said Valentine. "You have proved yourself generous and disinterested. Heaven grant that you may be happy!"

"She is young and impressionable," said Ronald; "I can easily mold her to my own way of thinking. You look very grave, Miss Charteris."

"I am thinking of you," she said, gently; "it seems to me a grave matter. Pardon me—but did you reflect well—were you quite convinced that the whole happiness of your life was at stake? If so, I need say no more. It is an unequal marriage, one not at all fitting in the order of things."

How strange that she should use his father's words!

"Tell your father at once," she continued. "You can never retrace the step you have taken. You may never wish to do so, but you can and must retrieve the error of duplicity and concealment."

"You will try and make my mother love Dora?" said Ronald.

"That I will," replied Valentine. "You sketched her portrait well. I can almost see her. I will speak of her beauty, her grace, her tenderness."

"You are a true friend," said Ronald, gratefully.

"Do not overrate my influence," said Valentine. "You must learn to look your life boldly in the face. Candidly and honestly I think that, from mistaken notions of honor and chivalry, you have done wrong. A man must be brave. Perhaps one of the hardest lessons in life is to bear unflinchingly the effects and consequences of one's own deeds. You must do that, you must not flinch, you must bear what follows like a man and a hero."

"I will," said Ronald, looking at the fair face, and half wishing that the little Dora could talk to him as this noble girl did; such noble words as hers made men heroes. Then he remembered how Dora would weep if he were in trouble, and clasp her arms round his neck.

"We shall still be friends, Miss Charteris?" he said, pleadingly. "Whatever comes you will not give me up?"

"I will be your friend while I live," said Valentine, holding out her white hand, and her voice never faltered. "You have trusted me—I shall never forget that. I am your friend, and Dora's also."

The words came so prettily from her lips that Ronald smiled.

"Dora would be quite alarmed at you," he said; "she is so timid and shy."

Then he told Valentine of Dora's pretty, artless ways, of her love for all things beautiful in nature, always returning to one theme—her great love for him. He little dreamed that the calm, stately beauty listened as one on the rack—that while he was talking of Dora she was trying to realize the cold, dreary blank that had suddenly fallen over her life, trying to think what the future would be passed without him, owing to herself that for this rash, chivalrous marriage, for his generous love, she admired him more than ever.

The hand that played carelessly among the wild flowers had ceased to tremble, the proud lips had regained their color, and then Valentine arose, as she was going out with Lady Earle after lunch.

A feeling of something like blank despair seized Valentine when she thought of what she must say to her other. As she remembered their few words the previous evening, her face flushed hotly.

"I can never thank you enough for your kind patience," said Ronald, as they walked back through the shady park and the bright flower gardens.

Valentine smiled and raised her face to the quiet summer sky, thinking of the hope that had been hers a few short hours before.

"You will go at once and see your father, will you not?" she said to Ronald, as they parted.

"I am going now," he replied; but at that very moment Lady Earle came up to him.

"Ronald," she said, "come into my boudoir. Your father is there he wants to see you before he goes to Holtham."

Valentine went straight to her mother's room. Lady Charteris sat waiting for her, beguiling the time with a book. She smiled as her daughter entered.

"I hope you have had a pleasant walk," she said; but both smile and words died away as she saw the expression on her daughter's face, as she bent over her mother.

"Mamma," said Valentine, gently, "all I said to you last night about Earlescourt was a great mistake—it will never be my home. My vanity misled me."

"Have you quarreled with Ronald?" asked Lady Charteris, quietly.

"No," was the calm reply. "We are excellent friends but, mamma, I was mistaken. He did want to tell me something, but it was of his love for some one else—not for me."

"He has behaved shamefully to you!" cried Lady Charteris.

"Hush, mamma!" said Valentine. "You forget how such words humiliate me. I have refused men of far better position than Ronald Earle. Never let it be imagined that I have mistaken his intentions."

"Of course not," said her mother. "I only say it to yourself, Valentine; he seemed unable to live out of your sight—morning, noon, and night he was always by your side."

"He only wanted me to be his friend," said Valentine.

"Ah, he is selfish, like all the men!" said Lady Charteris. "With whom has he fallen in love, my dear?"

"Do not ask me," replied Valentine. "He is in a terrible dilemma. Do not talk to me about it, mamma. I made a foolish mistake, and do not wish to be reminded of it."

Lady Charteris detected the suppressed pain in the tone of her child's voice, and instantly formed her plans.

"I think of returning tomorrow," she said. "Your father is getting impatient to have us with him. He can not come to Earlescourt himself. You say Mr. Earle is in a terrible dilemma, Valentine. I hope there will be no scandalous expose while we are here. I detest scenes."

"Lord Earle is far too proud for anything of that kind," said Valentine. "If there should be any unpleasantness, it will not appear on the surface. Mamma, you will not mention this to me again."

Valentine threw off her lace shawl and pretty hat; she then took up the book her mother had laid down.

"My walk has tired me," she said; "the sun is very warm."

She lay down upon the sofa and turned her face to the window, where the roses came nodding in.

"Stay here and read," said lady Charteris, with delicate tact. "I am going to write my letters."

Valentine lay still, looking at the summer beauty outside. No one knew of the tears that gathered slowly in those proud eyes; no one knew of the passionate weeping that could not be stilled.

When Lady Charteris returned in two hours, Valentine had regained her calm, and there was no trace of tears in the smiles which welcomed her. Proudly and calmly she bore the great disappointment of her life. She was no tragedy queen; she never said to herself that her life was blighted or useless or burdensome. But she did say that she would never marry until she found some one with Ronald's simple chivalry, his loyal, true nature, and without the weakness which had caused and would cause so much suffering.

Chapter VIII

Lady Earle's boudoir was always considered one of the prettiest rooms at Earlescourt. Few, but rare, pictures adorned its walls. The long French windows opened on to the prettiest part of the gardens, where a large fountain rippled merrily in the sunshine. Groups of flowers in rare and costly vases perfumed the room.

Lord Earle had but drawn a pretty lounging chair to the window, and sat there, looking happier than he had looked for months. Lady Earle went on with her task of arranging some delicate leaves and blossoms ready for sketching.

"Ronald," said his father, "I have been waiting here some time. Have you been out?"

"I have been in the park with Miss Charteris," replied Ronald.

Lord Earle smiled again, evidently well pleased to hear that intelligence.

"A pleasant and sensible method of spending your time," he continued; "and, strange to say, it is on that very subject I wish to speak to you. Your attentions to Miss Charteris—"

"My attentions!" cried Ronald. "You are mistaken. I have never paid any."

"You need have no fear this time," said Lord Earle. "Your mother tells me of the numerous comments made last evening on your long tete-a-tete in the conservatory. I know some of your secrets. There can be no doubt that Miss Charteris has a great regard for you. I sent for you to say that, far from my again offering any opposition to your marriage, the dearest wish of my heart will be gratified when I call Valentine Charteris my daughter."

He paused for a reply, but none came. Ronald's face had grown strangely pale.

"We never named our wish to you," continued Lord Earle, "but years ago your mother and I hoped you would some day love Miss Charteris. She is very beautiful; she is the truest, noblest, the best woman I know. I am proud of your choice, Ronald—more proud than words can express."

Still Ronald made no reply, and Lady Earle looked up at him quickly.

"You need not fear for Valentine," she said. "I must not betray any secrets; she likes you, Ronald; I will say no more. If you ask her to be your wife, I do not think you will ask in vain."

"There is some great mistake," said Ronald, his pale lips quivering. "Miss Charteris has no thought for me."

"She has no thought for any one else," rejoined Lady Earle, quickly.

"And I," continued Ronald, "never dreamed of making her my wife. I do not love her. I can never marry Valentine Charteris."

The smiles died from Lord Earle's face, and his wife dropped the pretty blossoms she was arranging.

"Then why have you paid the girl so much attention?" asked his father, gravely. "Every one has remarked your manner; you never seemed happy away from her."

"I wished to make her my friend," said Ronald; "I never thought of anything else."

Dora Thorne

He stood aghast when he remembered why he had tried so hard to win her friendship. What if Valentine misunderstood him?

"Others thought for you," said Lady Earle, dryly. "Of course, if I am mistaken, there is no more to be said; I merely intended to say how happy such a marriage would make me. If you do not love the young lady the matter ends, I suppose."

"Can you not love her, Ronald?" asked his mother, gently. "She is so fair and good, so well fitted to be the future mistress of Earlescourt. Can you not love her?"

"Nothing was further from my thoughts," he replied.

"Surely," interrupted Lady Earle, "you have forgotten the idle, boyish folly that angered your father some time since—that can not be your reason?"

"Hush, mother," said Ronald, standing erect and dauntless; "I was coming to tell you my secret when you met me. Father, I deceived and disobeyed you. I followed Dora Thorne to Eastham, and married her there."

A low cry came from Lady Earle's lips. Ronald saw his father's face grow white—livid—with anger; but no word broke the awful silence that fell upon them. Hours seemed to pass in the space of a few minutes.

"You married her," said Lord Earle, in a low, hoarse voice, "remembering what I said?"

"I married her," replied Ronald, "hoping you would retract hard, cruel words that you never meant. I could not help it, father; she has no one but me; they would have forced her to marry some one she did not like."

"Enough," interrupted Lord Earle. "Tell me when and where. Let me understand whether the deed is irrevocable or not."

Calmly, but with trembling lips, Ronald gave him every particular.

"Yes, the marriage is legal enough," said the master of Earlescourt. "You had to choose between duty, honor, home, position—and Dora Thorne. You preferred Dora; you must leave the rest."

"Father, you will forgive me," cried Ronald. "I am your only son."

"Yes," said Lord Earle, drearily, "you are my only son. Heaven grant no other child may pierce his father's heart as you have done mine! Years ago, Ronald, my life was blighted—my hopes, wishes, ambitions, and plans all melted; they lived again in you. I longed with wicked impatience for the time when you should carry out my dreams, and add fresh luster to a grand old name. I have lived in your life; and now, for the sake of a simple, pretty, foolish girl, you have forsaken me—you have deliberately trampled upon every hope that I had."

"Let me atone for it," cried Ronald. "I never thought of these things."

"You can not atone," said Lord Earle, gravely. "I can never trust you again. From this time forth I have no son. My heir you must be when the life you have darkened ends. My son is dead to me."

There was no anger in the stern, grave face turned toward the unhappy young man.

"I never broke my word," he continued, "and never shall. You have chosen your own path; take it. You preferred this Dora to me; go to her. I told you if you persisted in your folly, I would never look upon your face again, and I

never will."

"Oh, Rupert!" cried Lady Earle; "be merciful. He is my only child. I shall die if you send him from me."

"He preferred this Dora to you or to me," said Lord Earle. "I am sorry for you, Helena—Heaven knows it wrings my heart—but I shall not break my word! I will not reproach you," he continued, turning to his son, "it would be a waste of time and words; you knew the alternative, and are doubtless prepared for it."

"I must bear it, father; the deed was my own," said Ronald.

"We will end this scene," said Lord Earle, turning from his unhappy wife, who was weeping passionately. "Look at your mother, Ronald; kiss her for the last time and go from her; bear with you the memory of her love and of her tenderness, and of how you have repaid them. Take your last look at me. I have loved you—I have been proud of you, hopeful for you; now I dismiss you from my presence, unworthy son of a noble race. The same roof will never shelter us again. Make what arrangements you will. You have some little fortune; it must maintain you. I will never contribute one farthing to the support of my lodge keeper's daughter. Go where you like—do as you like. You have chosen your own path. Some day you must return to Earlescourt as its master. I thank Heaven it will be when the degradation of my home and the dishonor of my race can not touch me. Go now; I shall expect you to have quitted the Hall before tomorrow morning."

"You can not mean it, father," cried Ronald. "Send me from you punish me—I deserve it; but let me see you again!"

"Never in life," said Lord Earle, calmly. "Remember, when you see me lying dead, that death itself was less bitter than the hour in which I learned that you had deceived me."

"Mother," cried the unhappy youth, "plead for me!"

"It is useless," replied his father; "your choice has been made deliberately. I am not cruel. If you write to me I shall return your letters unopened. I shall refuse to see or hear from you, or to allow you to come near Earlescourt; but you can write to your mother—I do not forbid that. She can see you under any roof save mine. Now, farewell; the sunshine, the hope, the happiness of my life go with you, but I shall keep my word. See my solicitor, Mr. Burt, about your money, and he will arrange everything in my place."

"Father," cried Ronald, with tears in his eyes, "say one kind word, touch my hand once again!"

"No," said Lord Earle, turning from the outstretched hand; "that is not the hand of an honorable man; I can not hold it in my own."

Then Ronald bent down to kiss his mother; her face was white and still; she was not conscious of his tears or his passionate pleading. Lord Earle raised her face. "Go," said he, calmly; "do not let your mother find you here when she recovers."

He never forgot the pleading of those sorrowful eyes, the anguish of the brave young face, as Ronald turned from him and left the room.

When Lady Earle awoke to consciousness of her misery, her son had left her. No one would have called Lord Earle hard or stern who saw him clasp his weeping wife in his arms, and console her by every kind and tender word he could utter.

Dora Thorne

Lord Earle did not know that in his wife's heart there was a hope that in time he would relent. It was hard to lose her brave boy for a few months or even years; but he would return, his father must forgive him, her sorrow would be but for a time. But Lord Earle, inflexible and unflinching, knew that he should never in life see his son again.

No one knew what Lord Earle suffered; as Valentine Charteris said, he was too proud for scenes. He dined with Lady Charteris and her daughter, excusing his wife, and never naming his son. After dinner he shut himself in his own room, and suffered his agony along.

* * * * *

Earlescourt was full of bustle and activity. The young heir was leaving suddenly; boxes and trunks had to be packed. He did not say where he was going; indeed those who helped him said afterward that his face was fixed and pale, and that he moved about like one in a dream.

Everything was arranged for Ronald's departure by the night mail from Greenfield, the nearest station to Earlescourt. He took with him neither horses nor servants; even his valet, Morton, was left behind. "My lady" was ill, and shut up in her room all day.

Valentine Charteris sat alone in the drawing room when Ronald came in to bid her farewell. She was amazed at the unhappy termination of the interview. She would have gone instantly to Lord Earle, but Ronald told her it was useless—no prayers, no pleadings could change his determination.

As Ronald stood here, looking into Valentine's beautiful face, he remembered his mother's words, that she cared for him as she cared for no other. Could it be possible that this magnificent girl, with her serene, queenly dignity, loved him? She looked distressed by his sorrow. When he spoke of his mother, and she saw the quivering lips he vainly tried to still, tears filled her eyes.

"Where shall you go," she asked, "and what shall you do?"

"I shall go to my wife at once," he replied, "and take her abroad. Do not look so pained and grieved for me, Miss Charteris I must do the best I can. If my income will not support me, I must work; a few months' study will make me a tolerable artist. Do not forget my mother, Valentine, and bid me 'Godspeed.'"

Her heart yearned for him—so young, so simple, so brave. She longed to tell him how much she admired him—how she wanted to help him, and would be his friend while she lived. But Miss Charteris rarely yielded to any emotion; she had laid her hand in his and said:

"Goodbye, Ronald—God bless you! Be brave; it is not one great deed that makes a hero. The man who bears trouble well is the greatest hero of all."

As he left his home in that quiet starlit night, Ronald little thought that, while his mother lay weeping as though her heart would break, a beautiful face, wet with bitter tears, watched him from one of the upper windows, and his father, shut up alone, listened to every sound, and heard the door closed behind his son as he would have heard his own death knell.

The next day Lady Charteris and her daughter left Earlescourt. Lord Earle gave no sign of the heavy blow which had struck him. He was their attentive host while they remained; he escorted them to their carriage, and parted from them with smiling words. Then he went back to the house, where he was never more to hear the sound of the voice he loved best on earth.

As the days and months passed, and the young heir did not return, wonder and surprise reigned at Earlescourt. Lord Earle never mentioned his son's name. People said he had gone abroad, and was living somewhere in Italy. To Lord Earle it seemed that his life was ended; he had no further plans, ambition died away; the grand purpose of his life would never be fulfilled.

Lady Earle said nothing of the trouble that had fallen upon her. She hoped against hope that the time would come when her husband would pardon their only son. Valentine Charteris bore her disappointment well. She never forgot the simple, chivalrous man who had clung to her friendship and relied so vainly upon her influence.

Many lovers sighed round Valentine. One after another she dismissed them. She was waiting until she saw some one like Ronald Earle—like him in all things save the weakness which had so fatally shadowed his life.

Chapter IX

In a small, pretty villa, on the banks of the Arno, Ronald Earle established himself with his young wife. He had gone direct to Eastham, after leaving Earlescourt, his heart aching with sorrow for home and all that he had left there, and beating high with joy at the thought that now nothing stood between him and Dora. He told her of the quarrel—of his father's stern words—and Dora, as he had foreseen clung round his neck and wept.

She would love him all the more, she said. She must love him enough to make up for home and every one else.

Yet, strange to say, when Ronald told his pretty, weeping wife all that happened, he made no mention of Valentine Charteris—he did not even utter her name.

Ronald's arrangements were soon made. He sent for Stephen Thorne and his wife, and told them how and when he had married Dora.

"I am sorry for it," said Stephen. "No good will ever come of such an unequal match. My girl had better have stayed at home, or married the young farmer who loved her. The distance between you is too great, Mr. Earle, and I fear me you will find it out."

Ronald laughed at the idea that he should ever tire of Dora. How little these prosaic, commonplace people knew of love!

The good lodge keeper and his wife parted from Dora with many tears. She was never to brighten their home again with her sweet face and gay voice. She was going away to strange lands over the sea. Many dark forebodings haunted them; but it was too late for advice and interference now.

The first news that came to the villa on the banks of the Arno was that Stephen Thorne and his wife had left the lodge and taken a small farm somewhere in the county of Kent. Lady Earle had found them the means, and they had left without one word from Lord Earle. He never asked whither they had gone.

Despite his father's anger and his mother's sorrow, despite his poverty and loss of position, Ronald for some months was very happy with his young wife. It was so pleasant to teach Dora, to watch her sweet, dimpled face and the dark eyes grow large with wonder; to hear her simple, naive remarks, her original ideas; to see her pretty, artless ways; above all, it was pleasant to be so dearly loved.

He often thought that there never had been, never could be, a wife so loving as Dora. He could not teach her much, although he tried hard. She sang simple little ballads sweetly and clearly; but although master after master tried his best, she could never be taught to play—not even as much as the easy accompaniments of her own

songs. Ronald hoped that with time and attention she would be able to sketch, but Dora never managed it. Obediently enough she took pencil and paper in her hands and tried, but the strokes would never come straight. Sometimes the drawing she made would resemble something so comical that both she and Ronald laughed heartily; while the consciousness of her own inferiority grieved her, and large, bright tears would frequently fall upon the paper. Then Ronald would take the pencils away, and Dora would cling around his neck and ask him if he would not have been happier with a cleverer wife.

"No, a thousand times, no," he would say; he loved Dora better in her artless simplicity than he could have loved the cleverest woman in the world.

"And you are quite sure," said Dora, "that you will never repent marrying me?"

"No, again," was the reply. "You are the crowning joy of my life."

It was pleasant to sit amid the oleanders and myrtles, reading the great poems of the world to Dora. Even if she did not understand them, her face lighted with pleasure as the grand words came from Ronald's lips. It was pleasant, too, to sit on the banks of the Arno, watching the blue waters gleaming in the sun. Dora was at home there. She would say little of books, of pictures, or music; but she could talk of beautiful Nature, and never tire. She knew the changing colors of the sky, the varied hues of the waves, the different voices of the wind, the songs of the birds. All these had a separate and distinct meaning for her.

Ronald could not teach her much more. She liked the beautiful poems he read, but never could remember who had written them. She forgot the names of great authors, or mixed them up so terribly that Ronald, in despair, told her it would be better not to talk of books just yet—not until she was more familiar with them.

But he soon found out that Dora could not read for many minutes together. She would open her book, and make a desperate attempt; then her dark eyes would wander away to the distant mountains, or to the glistening river. She could never read while the sun shone or the birds sang.

Seeing that, Ronald gave up all attempts at literature in the daytime; when the lamps were lighted in the evening, and the fair face of Nature was shut out, he tried again, and succeeded for ten minutes; then Dora's eyes drooped, the white lids with their jetty fringe closed; and with great dismay he found that over the masterpieces of the world Dora had fallen asleep.

Two long, bright years had passed away before Ronald began to perceive that he could educate his pretty young wife no further. She was a strange mixture of ignorance and uncultivated poetry. She could speak well; her voice was sweet, her accent, caught from him, good; alone he never noticed any deficiencies, but if he met an English friend in Florence and brought him home to dine, then Ronald began to wish that Dora would leave off blushing and grow less shy, that she could talk a little more, and that he might lose all fear of her making some terrible blunder.

The third year of their married life dawned; Dora was just twenty, and Ronald twenty-three. There had been no rejoicing when he had attained his majority; it passed over unnoticed and unmarked. News came to them from England, letters from the little farm in Kent, telling of simple home intelligence, and letters from Lady Earle, always sad and stained with tears. She had no good news to tell them. Lord Earle was well, but he would never allow his son's name to be mentioned before him, and she longed to see her son. In all her letters Lady Earle said: "Give my love to Dora."

In this, the third year of his married life, Ronald began to feel the pressure of poverty. His income was not more than three hundred a year. To Dora this seemed boundless riches; but the heir of Earlescourt had spent more in dress and cigars. Now debts began to press upon him, writing home he knew was useless. He would not ask Lady

Dora Thorne

Earle, although he knew that she would have parted with the last jewel in her case for him.

Ronald gave himself up to the study of painting. A pretty little studio was built, and Dora spent long hours in admiring both her husband and his work. He gave promise of being some day a good artist—not a genius. The world would never rave about his pictures; but, in time, he would be a conscientious, painstaking artist. Among his small coterie of friends some approved, others laughed.

"Why not go to the Jews?" asked fashionable young men. "Earlescourt must be yours some day. You can borrow money if you like."

Ronald steadily refused to entertain the idea. He wondered at modern ideas of honor—that men saw no shame in borrowing upon the lives of their nearest and dearest, yet thought it a disgrace to be a follower of one of the grandest of arts. He made one compromise—that was for his father's sake. As an artist, he was known by Dora's name of Thorne, and, before long, Ronald Thorne's pictures were in great request. There was no dash of genius about them; but they were careful studies. Some few were sold, and the price realized proved no unwelcome addition to a small income.

Ronald became known in Florence. People who had not thought much of Mr. Earle were eager to know the clever artist and his pretty, shy wife. Then the trial of Ronald Earle began in earnest. Had he lived always away from the world, out of society, the chances are that his fate would have been different; but invitations began to pour in upon him and Dora, and Ronald, half tired of his solitude, although he never suspected it, accepted them eagerly.

Dora did not like the change; she felt lonely and lost where Ronald was so popular and so much at home.

Among those who eagerly sought Ronald's society was the pretty coquette, the Countess Rosali, an English lady who had married the Count Rosali, a Florentine noble of great wealth.

No one in Florence was half so popular as the fair countess. Among the dark, glowing beauties of sunny Italy she was like a bright sunbeam. Her fair, piquant face was charming from its delicate bright coloring and gay smiles; her hair, of the rare color painted by the old masters, yet so seldom seen, was of pure golden hue, looking always as though the sun shone upon it.

Countess Rosali, there was no denying the fact, certainly did enjoy a little flirtation. Her grave, serious husband knew it, and looked on quite calmly. To his grave mind the pretty countess resembled a butterfly far more than a rational being. He knew that, though she might laugh and talk to others, though she might seek admiration and enjoy delicate flattery, yet in her heart she was true as steel. She loved bright colors, and everything else that was gay and brilliant. She had gathered the roses; perhaps some one else had her share of thorns.

The fair, dainty lady had a great desire to see Mr. Thorne. She had seen one of his pictures at the house of one of her friends a simple little thing, but it had charmed her. It was merely a bouquet of English wild flowers; but then they were so naturally painted! The bluebells looked as though they had just been gathered. One almost fancied dew drops on the delicate wild roses; a spray of pink hawthorn, daisies and golden buttercups mingled with woodbine and meadow-sweet, told sweet stories of the English meadows.

"Whoever painted that," said the fair countess, "loves flowers, and knows what English flowers mean."

The countess did not rest until Ronald had been introduced to her, and then she would know his wife. Her grave, silent husband smiled at her evident admiration of the handsome young Englishman. She liked his clear, Saxon face and fair hair; she liked his simple, kindly manner, so full of chivalry and truth. She liked pretty Dora, too; but there were times when the dainty, fastidious countess looked at the young wife in wonder, for, as she said one evening to her husband:

"There is something in Mrs. Thorne that puzzles me—she does not always speak or look like a lady—"

Few days passed without bringing Ronald and Dora to the Villa Rosali. It would have been better for Ronald had he never left his pretty home on the banks of the Arno.

Chapter X

Going into society increased the expenses which Ronald and his wife found already heavy enough. There were times when the money received from the sale of his pictures failed in liquidating bills; then Ronald grew anxious, and Dora, not knowing what better to do, wept and blamed herself for all the trouble. It was a relief then to leave the home over which the clouds lowered and seek the gay villa, where something pleasant and amusing was always going on.

The countess gathered around her the elite of Florentine society; she selected her friends and acquaintances as carefully as she selected her dresses, jewels, and flowers. She refused to know "bores" and "nobodies"; her lady friends must be pretty, piquant, or fashionable, any gentleman admitted into her charmed circle must have genius, wit, or talent to recommend him. Though grave matrons shook their heads and looked prudish when the Countess Rosali was mentioned, yet to belong to her set was to receive the "stamp of fashion." No day passed without some amusement at the villa—picnic, excursion, soiree, dance, or, what its fair mistress preferred, private theatricals and charades.

"Help me," she said one morning, as Ronald and Dora, in compliance with her urgent invitation, came to spend the day at the villa—"help me; I want to do something that will surprise every one. There are some great English people coming to Florence—one of your heiresses, who is at the same time a beauty. We must have some grand charades or tableaux. What would you advise? Think of something original that will take Florence by surprise."

"Wishing any one to be original," said Ronald, smiling at her quick, eager ways, "immediately deprives one of all thought. I must have time; it seems to me you have exhausted every subject."

"An artist has never-failing resources," she replied; "when every 'fount of inspiration' is closed it will be time to tell me there are no ideas. You must have seen many charades, Mrs. Thorne," she said, turning suddenly to Dora; "they are very popular in England. Tell me of some."

Dora blushed. She thought of the lodge and its one small parlor, and then felt wretched and uncomfortable, out of place, and unhappy.

"I have never seen any charades," she said, stiffly, and with crimson cheeks.

The countess opened her blue eyes in surprise, and Ronald looked anxiously from one to the other.

"My wife was too young when we were married to have seen much of the world," he said, inwardly hoping that the tears he saw gathering in Dora's dark eyes would not fall.

"Ah, then, she will be of no use in our council," replied the countess, quickly. "Let us go out on the terrace; there is always inspiration under an Italian sky."

She led the way to a pretty veranda on the terrace, and they sat under the shade of a large spreading vine.

"Now we can discuss my difficulty in peace," said the lady, in her pretty, imperious way. "I will, with your permission, tell you some of my ideas."

Dora Thorne

The countess was not particularly gifted, but Ronald was charmed by the series of pictures she placed before him, all well chosen, with startling points of interest, scenes from noble poems, pictures from fine old tragedies. She never paused or seemed tired, while Dora sat, her face still flushed, looking more awkward and ill at ease than Ronald had ever seen her. For the first time, as they sat under the vine that morning, Ronald contrasted his wife with his dainty, brilliant hostess, and felt that she lost by the contrast—"awkward and ill at ease," self-conscious to a miserable degree. For the first time Ronald felt slightly ashamed of Dora, and wished that she knew more, and could take some part in the conversation. Dimples and smiles, curling rings of dark hair, and pretty rosebud lips were, he thought, all very well, but a man grew tired of them in time, unless there was something to keep up the charm. But poor little Dora had no resources beyond her smiles and tears. She sat shrinking and timid, half frightened at the bright lady who knew so much and told it so well; feeling her heart cold with its first dread that Ronald was not pleased with her. Her eyes wandered to the far-off hills. Ah! Could it be that he would ever tire of her and wished that he had married some one like himself. The very thought pierced her heart, and the timid young wife sat with a sorrowful look upon her face that took away all its simple beauty.

"I will show you a sketch of the costume," said the countess; "it is in my desk. Pray excuse me."

She was gone in an instant, and Dora was alone with her husband.

"For Heaven's sake, Dora," he said, quickly, "do look a little brighter; what will the countess think of you? You look like a frightened school girl."

It was an injudicious speech. If Ronald had only caressed her, all would have been sunshine again; as it was, the first impatient words she had ever heard from him smote her with a new, strange pain, and the tears overflowed.

"Do not—pray—never do that," said Ronald; "we shall be the laughing stock of all Florence. Well-bred people never give way to emotion."

"Here is the sketch," said the countess, holding a small drawing in her hand. Her quick glance took in Dora's tears and the disturbed expression of Ronald's face.

With kind and graceful tact the countess gave Dora time to recover herself; but that was the last time she ever invited the young artist and his wife alone. Countess Rosali had a great dread of all domestic scenes.

Neither Dora nor Ronald ever alluded again to this little incident; it had one bad effect—it frightened the timid young wife, and made her dread going into society. When invitations to grand houses came, she would say, "Go alone, Ronald; if I am with you they are sure to ask me ever so many questions which I can not answer; then you will be vexed with me, and I shall be ashamed of my ignorance."

"Why do you not learn?" Ronald would ask, disarmed by her sweet humility.

"I can not," said Dora, shaking her pretty head. "The only lesson I ever learned in my life was how to love you."

"You have learned that by heart," replied Ronald. Then he would kiss her pitiful little face and go without her.

By slow degrees it became a settled rule that Dora should stay at home and Ronald go out. He had no scruples in leaving her—she never objected; her face was always smiling and bright when he went away, and the same when he returned. He said to himself that Dora was happier at home than elsewhere, that fine ladies frightened her and made her unhappy.

Their ways in life, now became separate and distinct, Ronald going more than ever into society, Dora clinging more to the safe shelter of home.

Dora Thorne

But society was expensive in two ways—not only from the outlay in dress and other necessities, but in the time taken from work. There were many days when Ronald never went near his studio, and only returned home late in the evening to leave early in the morning. He was only human, this young hero who had sacrificed so much for love; and there were times, after some brilliant fete or soiree, when the remembrance of home, Dora, hard work, narrow means, would come to him like a heavy weight or the shadow of a dark cloud.

Not that he loved her less—pretty, tender Dora; but there was not one feeling or taste in common between them. Harder men would have tired of her long before. They never cared to speak much of home, for Dora noticed that Ronald was always sad after a letter from Lady Earle. The time came when she hesitated to speak of her own parents, lest he should remember much that she would have liked him to forget.

If any true friend had stepped in then, and warned them, life would have been a different story for Ronald Earle and his wife.

Ronald's story became known in Florence. He was the son of a wealthy English peer, who had offended his father by a "low" marriage; in time he would succeed to the title. Hospitalities were lavished upon him, the best houses in Florence were thrown open to him, and he was eagerly welcomed there. When people met him continually unaccompanied by his young wife they smiled significantly, and bright eyes grew soft with pity. Poor, pretty Dora!

Ronald never knew how the long hours of his absence were spent by Dora. She never looked sad or weary to him, he never saw any traces of tears, yet Dora shed many. Through the long sunny hours and far into the night she sat alone, thinking of the home she had left in far-off England—where she had been loved and worshiped by her rough, homely, honest father and a loving mother; thinking too, of Ralph, and his pretty, quiet homestead in the green fields, where she would have been honored as its mistress, where no fine ladies would have vexed her with questions, and no one would have thought her ignorant or awkward; thinking of all these things, yet loving Ronald none the less, except that a certain kind of fear began to mingle with her love.

Gradually, slowly, but surely, the fascination of the gay and brilliant society in which Ronald was so eagerly courted laid hold of him. He did not sin willfully or consciously; little by little a distaste for his own home and a weariness of Dora's society overcame him. He was never unkind to her, for Ronald was a gentleman; but he lingered no more through the long sunny morning by her side. He gave up all attempts to educate her. He ceased to tease her about books; he never offered to read to her; and pretty, simple Dora, taught by the keen instinct of love, noted it all.

Ronald saw some little change in her. The dimples and smiles had almost vanished from her face. He seldom heard the laugh that had once been so sweet to him. There was retiring grace in her manner that suited her well. He thought she was catching the "tone of good society," and liked the change.

Some natures become ennobled under the pressure of adversity; but limited means and petty money cares had no good effect upon Ronald Earle. He fretted under them. He could do nothing as other people did. He could not purchase a magnificent bouquet for the countess; his means would not permit it. He could not afford a horse such as all his gentlemen friends rode. Adversity developed no good qualities in him; the discipline was harder and sterner still that made of him a true man at last.

Ronald went on with his painting fitfully, sometimes producing a good picture, but often failing.

The greatest patron of the fine arts in Florence was the Prince di Borgezi. His magnificent palace was like one picture gallery. He saw some sketches of Ronald's, and gave an order to him to paint a large picture, leaving him to choose the subject. In vain by night and by day did Ronald ponder on what that subject should be. He longed to make his name immortal by it. He thought once of Tennyson's "Dora," and of sketching his wife for the principal

figure. He did make a sketch, but he found that he could not paint Dora's face; he could not place the dimpling smiles and bright blushes on canvas, and they were the chief charm. He therefore abandoned the idea.

Standing one day where the sunbeams fell lightly through the thick myrtles, an inspiration came to him. He would paint a picture of Queen Guinevere in her gay sweet youth and bright innocent beauty—Guinevere with her lovely face and golden hair, the white plumes waving and jewels flashing; the bright figure on the milk-white palfrey shining in the mellow sunlight that came through the green trees.

Lancelot should ride by her side; he could see every detail of the picture; he knew just the noble, brave, tender face Sir Lancelot should have; but where could he find a model for Guinevere? Where was there a face that would realize his artist dreams of her? The painting was half completed before he thought of Valentine Charteris and her magnificent blonde beauty—the very ideal of Queen Guinevere.

With renewed energy Ronald set to work. Every feature of that perfect face was engraved upon his mind. He made sketch after sketch, until, in its serene, sweet loveliness, Valentine's face smiled upon him.

Chapter XI

"Queen Guinevere" was a success far beyond Ronald's dearest hopes. Artists and amateurs, connoisseurs of all ranks and degrees were delighted with it. The great charm of the picture was the lovely young face. "Whom was it like? Where had he found his model?" "Was ever any woman so perfectly beautiful?:" Such were the questions that people never seemed tired of repeating.

The picture was hung in the gallery of the palace, and the Prince di Borgezi became one of Ronald's best patrons.

The prince gave a grand ball in honor of a beautiful English lady, who, with her family, had just arrived in Florence. Countess Rosali raved about her, wisely making a friend where any one else would have feared a rival.

Ronald had contrived an invitation, but was prevented from attending. All the elite of Florence were there, and great was the excitement when Countess Rosali entered the ball room with an exceedingly beautiful woman—a queenly blonde—the lady about whom all Florence was interested—an English heiress, clever as she was fair, speaking French with a courtly grace and Italian with fluent skill; and when the prince stood before her he recognized in one moment the original of his famous "Guinevere."

The countess was in danger—a fairer, brighter star had arisen. Valentine Charteris was the belle of the most brilliant hall ever given in Florence.

When the prince had received his guest, and danced once with Miss Charteris, he asked her if she would like to see his celebrated picture, the "Guinevere," whose fame was spreading fast.

"Nothing," she said, "would please her better;" and as the Countess Rosali stood near, the prince included her in the invitation.

"Certainly; I never tire of the 'Guinevere,' never weary of the artist's triumph, for he is one of the most valued of my friends."

Prince di Borgezi smiled, thinking how much of the fair coquette's admiration went to the artist's talent, and how much to his handsome face.

They entered the long gallery, where some of the finest pictures in Italy were hung. The prince led the ladies to

the southern end. Valentine saw before her a magnificent painting—tall forest trees, whose thick branches were interwoven, every green leaf distinct and clear; she saw the mellow light that fell through them, the milk-white palfrey and the jeweled harness, the handsome knight who rode near; and then she saw her own face, bright, smiling, glowing with beauty, bright in innocence, sweet in purity. Valentine stared in astonishment, and her companion smiled.

"There can be no doubt about the resemblance," said the countess. "The artist has made you Queen Guinevere, Miss Charteris."

"Yes," said Valentine, wonderingly; "it is my own face. How came it there? Who is the artist?"

"His name is Ronald Thorne," replied the countess. "There is quite a romance about him."

The countess saw Miss Charteris grow pale and silent.

"Have you ever seen him?" inquired the countess. "Do you know him?"

"Yes," said Valentine, "my family and his have been on intimate terms for years. I knew that he was in Italy with his wife."

"Ah," rejoined the countess, eagerly, "then perhaps you know all about his marriage? Who was Mrs. Thorne? Why did he quarrel with his father? Do tell us, Miss Charteris."

"Nay," said Valentine; "if Mrs. Thorne has any secrets, I shall not reveal them. I must tell mamma they are in Florence. We must call and see them."

"I was fond of Mrs. Thorne once," said the countess, plaintively, "but really there is nothing in her."

"There must be something both estimable and lovable," replied Valentine quickly, "or Mr. Thorne would never have married her."

Prince di Borgesi smiled approval of the young lady's reply.

"You admire my picture, Miss Charteris?" he asked.

"The more so because it is the work of an old friend," said Valentine; and again the prince admired the grace of her words.

"Any other woman in her place," he thought, "would have blushed and coquetted. How charming she is!"

From that moment Prince di Borgezi resolved to win Valentine if he could.

Lady Charteris was half pleased, half sorry, to hear that Ronald was in Florence. No one deplored his rash, foolish marriage more than she did. She thought Lord Earle stern and cruel; she pitied the young man she had once liked so well, yet for all that she did not feel inclined to renew the acquaintance. When Valentine asked her to drive next morning to the little villa on the banks of the Arno, she at first half declined.

"I promised to be Ronald's friend years ago," said Valentine, calmly; "and now, mamma, you must allow me to keep my word. We must visit his wife, and pay her every attention. To refuse would imply a doubt of me, and that I could not endure."

Dora Thorne

"You shall do as you like, my dear," replied Lady Charteris; "the young man's mother is my dearest friend, and for her sake we will be kind to him."

* * * * *

It was one of those Italian mornings when the fair face of Nature seemed bathed in beauty. The air was full of the music of birds; the waters of the Arno rolled languidly on; oleanders and myrtles were in full bloom; birds sang as they sing only under the blue sky of Italy.

It was not yet noon when Lady Charteris and her daughter reached the little villa. Before they came to the house, Valentine caught one glimpse of a pretty, pale face with large dark eyes. Could that be pretty, smiling Dora? There were the shining rings of dark hair; but where were the smiles Ronald had described? That was not a happy face. Care and sorrow were in every line of it.

They were told that Mr. Thorne was in his studio, and would see them there. They had sent no card, and Ronald believed the "two ladies" to have called on some business connected with pictures. He started with surprise when Lady Charteris and Valentine entered. There were a few words of confused greeting, a hurried explanation of the circumstances that led Sir Hugh to Florence; and then Valentine looked long and steadily at the only man she had ever cared for. He was altered; the frank, handsome face looked worn and thin; it had a restless expression. He did not look like a man who had found peace. Lady Charteris told him of her last visit to Earlescourt—how his mother never ceased speaking of him, and his father still preserved the same rigid, unbending silence.

"I have seen your picture," said Lady Charteris. "How well you remembered my daughter's face."

"It is one not easily forgotten," he replied; and then another deep silence fell upon him.

"Where is Mrs. Earle?" asked Valentine. "Our visit is chiefly to her. Pray introduce her to mamma. I know her already by description."

"I left my wife in the garden," said Ronald; "shall we join her there?"

They followed him into the pretty sunlit garden, where Valentine had seen the pale, sad face.

"My wife is timid," said Ronald, "always nervous with strangers."

Dora was sitting under the shade of a large flowering tree, her hands folded, and her eyes riveted on the distant hills; there was something in her listless manner that touched both ladies more than any words could have done. A deep flush crimsoned her face when Ronald and his guests stood before her. She rose, not ungracefully; her eyelids drooped in their old shy manner. As Ronald introduced his wife, something in the girl's wistful face went straight to Lady Charteris's heart. She spoke not a word, but folded Dora in her arms and kissed her as her own mother might have done.

"You must learn to love us," said Valentine; "we are your husband's dearest friends."

Poor Dora had no graceful words ready; her heart was full of gratitude, but she knew not how to express it. Ronald looked at her anxiously, and she caught his glance.

"Now," thought Dora, "he will not be pleased." She tried to say something of her pleasure in seeing them, but the words were so stiff and ungracious that Ronald hastened to interrupt them.

Dora Thorne

A luncheon of fruit and wine was brought out into the garden, and they talked merrily—of Earlescourt and the dear old friends there; of the ball and Prince di Borgesi; in all of which Dora felt that she had no share.

Who was this beautiful lady, with her fair face and golden hair?

The same face she saw that Ronald had painted in his picture, and every one admired. How graceful she was! How she talked! The words seemed to ripple like music over her perfect lips. Where had Ronald known her? Why had he never told her of Miss Charteris?

"Ah!" thought Dora, "if I could be like her!" And a sudden sense of wonder struck her that Ronald had not loved and married this fair and gracious lady.

Valentine neither forgot nor neglected her. She tried to draw her into their conversation, but Dora replied so uneasily and so briefly to all her remarks that she saw the truest kindness was to leave her alone.

They spent a few hours pleasantly, and Lady Charteris would not leave until Ronald promised to take his wife to spend a long day with them.

"I can hardly promise for Dora," said Ronald, kindly; "she seldom leaves home."

"Mrs. Earle will not refuse me," said Valentine, with that smile which no one ever resisted. "She will come with you, and we will make her happy."

When the day was settled, the ladies drove away, and Ronald watched the carriage until it was out of sight.

"My dear Valentine," cried Lady Charteris when they were out of hearing, "my dear child, what could possess Ronald Earle? What could he see in that shy, awkward girl to induce him to give up everything and go into exile for her sake? She is not even pretty."

"She is altered, mamma," began Valentine.

"Altered!" interrupted Lady Charteris. "I should imagine she is, and unhappy, too. She is frightened to speak—she has no style, no manner, no dignity. He must have been insane."

"I am quite sure he loved her," said Valentine, warmly, "and loves her now."

"That is just the mystery," replied her mother—"a clever man like he is, accustomed to intelligent and beautiful women. I shall never understand it."

"Do not try," said Valentine, calmly. "She is evidently nervous and sensitive. I mean to be a true friend to Ronald, mamma; I shall try to train and form his wife."

Poor Dora! She was already trained and formed, but no one would understand that. People do not expect the perfume of the rose in a wild strawberry blossom, or the fragrance of the heliotrope in a common bluebell. Yet they wondered that in this simple girl, ignorant of the world and its ways, they did not find a cultivated mind, a graceful manner, and a dignified carriage. Their only thought was to train and form her, whereas Nature and not Art had done both.

"Dora," said Ronald, as the carriage disappeared from view, "try to like Lady Charteris and her daughter; they are so kindly disposed toward you. I shall be so pleased to see you good friends"

"I will try," she replied, cheerfully. "How beautiful she is, Ronald! Tell me about her. You remember her face exactly; should you remember mine as well?"

It was the first touch of jealousy stirring in the simple, loving heart.

"Far better," said Ronald, with a smile; and then he looked up in alarm, for Dora was weeping wildly, and clinging to him.

"Oh, Ronald!" she said, "for your sake I wish I was like her. Shall you ever tire of me, or wish you had not married me?"

Ronald soothed and comforted his wife, and did not return to his studio that day, but sat talking to her, telling her how noble and good Valentine Charteris was.

Chapter XII

It is very seldom that a man of good disposition goes wrong willfully. Ronald Earle would have felt indignant if any one had accused him of dishonor or even neglect. He thought Dora enjoyed herself more at home than in society, consequently he left her there. Habits soon grow. The time came when he thought it was the wiser course. He felt more at ease without her. If Dora by chance accompanied him, he watched her anxiously, fearful lest others should discover and comment upon the little deficiencies she felt so acutely.

The visit to Lady Charteris was duly paid—a day that Ronald enjoyed, and Dora thought would never end. She could not feel at home with these fine ladies, although Lady Charteris was kind to her and Valentine laid herself out to please; not even when Valentine, pitying her shy, timid manner and evident constraint, took her out into the garden and tried hard to win her confidence. Dora's heart seemed to close against the beautiful, brilliant lady who knew her husband and all his friends so well. A fierce, hot breath of jealousy stirred the simple nature. Ronald talked to Miss Charteris of things all unknown to her; they seemed to have the same thoughts and feelings, while she was outside the charmed circle, and could never enter it. She watched the growing admiration on Ronald's face when Valentine played and sang, and her restless heart grew weary and faint. She had never felt jealous before. When Countess Rosali talked and laughed with her husband, treating him sometimes as a captive and again as a victor, Dora never cared; but every smile on this woman's fair face pained her—she hardly knew why.

When Miss Charteris, under pretense of showing her favorite flower, took Dora away from the others, and condescended to her as she had never done to any other, actually caressing the anxious little face and herself offering to be Mrs. Earle's true friend, Dora's heart closed against her. She only replied by faint monosyllables, and never raised her dark eyes to the face turned so kindly upon her.

When Ronald had taken his young wife away, Lady Charteris sat with her daughter in an unbroken silence.

"Poor boy!" said the other lady at length, "and poor Dora! This is one more added to the list of unhappy marriages. How will it end?"

As she watched the sun set in the golden west, Valentine asked herself the same question: "How will it end?"

If any one had told Dora she was jealous, she would have denied it indignantly, although Valentine was seldom out of her mind.

From pure kindness Lady Charteris wished Ronald to paint her daughter's portrait; it was to be a large picture they could take back to Greenoke. He was pleased with the commission, and began to work at it eagerly. Lady

Dora Thorne

Charteris came with Valentine, and remained with her during the long sittings, doing everything in her power to please and win the artist's timid wife.

The fair face, in its calm, Grecian beauty, grew upon the canvas. Many a long hour, when Ronald was absent, Dora lingered over it. The portrait had a strange fascination for her. She dwelt upon every feature until, if the lips had opened and smiled a mocking smile at her, she would not have felt greatly surprised. It was less a picture to her than a living, breathing reality. She would watch Ronald as he worked at it, eager and enthusiastic; then, looking up and finding her dark eyes riveted upon him with so strange an expression, he would call her to see what progress he had made; and, never dreaming of the growing jealousy in Dora's heart, speak with an artist's delight of the peerless features.

Without any great or sudden change, day by day Dora grew more silent and reserved. She was learning to hide her thoughts, to keep her little troubles in her own heart and ponder them. The time was past when she would throw herself into Ronald's arms and weep out her sorrows there.

Ronald did not notice the change. Home seemed very dull. It was a great pleasure to leave the solitary little villa and sit in the brilliant salon of Lady Charteris's well-appointed home. It was pleasant to exchange dull monotony for sparkling conversation and gay society.

Valentine had many admirers. Every one knew the Prince di Borgesi would gladly have laid his fortune and title at her feet; but she cared for neither. Ronald often watched her as noble and learned men offered their homage to her. She smiled brightly, spoke well and gracefully; but he never saw in her face the look he once remembered there. Lady Charteris deplored her daughter's obstinacy. She took Ronald into her confidence, and confided to him her annoyance when one suitor after another was dismissed.

Ronald was not particularly vain. Like most men, he had a pleasing consciousness of his own worth; but he could not help remembering his mother's assurance that Valentine cared for him. Could it have been true? Was there ever a time when that beautiful girl, so indifferent to all homage, cared for him? Could there have been a time when the prize for which others sighed in vain was within his grasp and he slighted it?

He did not dwell upon these thoughts, but they would come into his mind. It was seldom that a day passed without his calling at the pretty home where Lady Charteris always welcomed him kindly. She was sorry for him. He was never de trop with her. Occasionally, too, she drove out to see his wife; but the visits were rather of duty than of pleasure.

Then Dora's health failed. She grew weak and languid—irritable at times—as unlike the smiling, blushing girl Ronald had met at Earlescourt gardens as it was possible for her to be. He wrote to tell his mother that at length there was hope of an heir to their ancient house. He was very kind and patient to his ailing, delicate wife, giving up parties and soirees to sit with her, but never able to guess why Dora's dark eyes looked so strangely upon him.

Lady Charteris had planned an excursion to some picturesque ruin that had pleased her daughter, who wished to make a sketch of it. Ronald was asked to join them, and he had been looking forward for many days to a few pleasant hours away from all care and anxiety—out in the beautiful country with Valentine. But when the morning came Dora looked pale and ill. She did not ask him to stay with her, but he read the wish in her face.

"I will not go, Dora," said her husband; "I will not leave you. I shall send a note of excuse to Lady Charteris, and take care of you all day."

"Is Miss Charteris going?" she asked, quietly.

"Yes, and several others," he replied.

Dora Thorne

"Then never mind me," said Dora; "do not give up a day's pleasure for me."

Ronald might have guessed there was something wrong from the tone of her voice, but Ronald was not of a suspicious nature.

"Now, Dora," he said, gently, "you know I would give up every pleasure in the world for you."

He bent over her, and kissed her pale little face. Time had been when the simple heart would have thrilled with happiness at his words; but Dora grew cold and hard.

"It used to be always so," she thought, "before she came with her beauty and took him from me."

How much misery would have been averted had she told Ronald of her jealous thoughts and fears! He never suspected them. When he returned home, looking bright and happy, she would ask him, "Have you seen Miss Charteris today?" and he, glad of her interest in his friends, would reply that he had been to her mother's house, and tell her of music he had heard or people he had met, or of Valentine's messages to her. So Dora fed the dark, bitter jealousy that had crept into her heart.

It was a proud but anxious day for Ronald when he wrote to tell his mother that he was now the father of little twin daughters, two pretty, fair babies, in place of the long looked-for heir of Earlescourt.

Lady Charteris was very kind to the lonely young mother—so kind that, had she borne any other name, Dora must have loved her. A glimpse of the old happiness came back, for Ronald was proud and pleased with the little twin sisters.

One bright morning, when Dora had been taken down into the pretty room where the infants lay sleeping, Lady Charteris and her daughter came in. Ronald joined them and there was a long discussion as to the names.

"You must have an eye to the future," said Valentine, smiling. "These little ladies will be very grand personages some day. It would be a nice compliment to Lady Earle if you called one Helena."

"I have made my choice," said Dora, in a clear, ringing voice. "I shall call this little one with the fair hair Lillian, the other Beatrice."

A faint flush rose to her face as she spoke. She would allow of no interference here. This smiling beauty should not give names to her children.

"I admire your choice," said Lady Charteris; "Beatrice and Lillian are very pretty names."

When Valentine bent over the cradle and kissed the children before taking leave, Dora said, "I have had my own way, you see, Miss Charteris, with my little ones. Mr. Earle did not oppose me."

Valentine thought the words harsh and strange; she had no clew to their meaning. She could not have imagined Dora jealous of her. She made some laughing reply, and passed on. Dora was not lonely now, the care of the little ones occupying her whole time; but, far from their binding Ronald to his home, he became more estranged from it than ever.

The pretty, picturesque villa was very small; there was no room available for a nursery. Wherever Dora sat, there must the little ones be; and although they were very charming to the mother and the nurse, the continued cries and noise irritated Ronald greatly. Then he grew vexed; Dora cried, and said he did not love them, and so the barrier grew day by day between those who should have been all in all to each other.

Dora Thorne

The children grew. Little Beatrice gave promise of great beauty. She had the Earle face, Ronald said. Lillian was a fair, sweet babe, too gentle, her mother thought, to live. Neither of them resembled her, and at times Dora wished it had been otherwise.

Perhaps in all Ronald Earle's troubled life he never spent a more unsettled or wretched year than this. "It is impossible to paint," he said to himself, "when disturbed by crying babies." So the greater part of his time was spent away from home. Some hours of every day were passed with Valentine; he never stopped to ask himself what impulse led him to seek her society; the calm repose of her fair presence contrasted so pleasantly with the petty troubles and small miseries of home. When Miss Charteris rode out he accompanied her; he liked to meet her at parties and balls. He would have thought a day sad and dark wherein he did not see her.

When the little ones reached their first birthday, Valentine, with her usual kind thought, purchased a grand assortment of toys, and drove over quite unexpectedly to the villa. It was not a very cheerful scene which met her gaze.

Ronald was busily engaged in writing. Dora, flushed and worn, was vainly trying to stop the cries of one child, while the other pulled at her dress. The anxious, dreary face struck Valentine with pain. She laid the parcel of toys down, and shook hands with Ronald, who looked somewhat ashamed of the aspect of affairs. Then, turning to Dora, she took the child from her arms, and little Beatrice, looking at her with wondering eyes, forgot to cry.

"You are not strong enough, Dora, to nurse this heavy child," said Miss Charteris. "Why do you not find some one to help you?"

"We can not afford it," said Ronald, gloomily.

"We spend too much in gloves and horses," added Dora, bitterly; but no sooner were the words spoken than she would have given the world to recall them.

Ronald made no reply, and Valentine, anxious to avert the storm she had unwittingly raised, drew attention to the toys.

When Valentine left them, Dora and Ronald had their first quarrel long and bitter. He could ill brook the insult her words implied—spoken before Valentine, too!—and she for the first time showed him how an undisciplined, untrained nature can throw off the restraint of good manners and good breeding. It was a quarrel never to be forgotten, when Ronald in the height of his rage wished that he had never seen Dora, and she re-echoed the wish. When such a quarrel takes place between man and wife, the bloom and freshness are gone from love. They may be reconciled, but they will never again be to each other what they once were. A strong barrier is broken down, and nothing can be put in its place.

Chapter XIII

The angry, passionate words spoken by Ronald—almost the first he had ever uttered—soon faded from his mind, but they rankled like poisoned arrows in Dora's heart. She believed them. Before evening her husband repented of his anger, and called himself a coward for having scolded Dora. He went up to her and raised her face to his.

"Little wife," He said, "we have both been wrong. I am very sorry—let us make friends."

There was just a suspicion of sullenness in Dora's nature, and it showed itself in full force now.

"It is no matter," she replied, coolly; "I knew long ago that you were tired of me."

Ronald would not answer, lest they should quarrel again, but he thought to himself that perhaps she was not far wrong.

From that day the breach between them widened. In after years Dora saw how much she was to blame. She understood then how distasteful her quiet, sullen reserve must have been to a high-bred, fastidious man like Ronald. She did not see it then, but nursed in her heart imaginary wrongs and injuries; and, above all, she yielded to a wild, fierce jealousy of Valentine Charteris.

For some weeks Miss Charteris saw the cloud deepening on Ronald's face. He grew silent, and lost the flow of spirit that had once seemed never to fail; and during the few weeks that followed, a strong resolution grew in her mind. She was his true friend, and she would try to restore peace and harmony between him and his wife. She waited for some days, but at her mother's house it was impossible to see him alone. Yet she honestly believed that, if she could talk to him, remind him of his first love for Dora, of her simplicity and many virtues, she might restore peace and harmony to her old friend's house. She thought Ronald to blame. He had voluntarily taken active duties upon himself, and to her clearly, rightly judging mind, there was no earthly reason why he should not fulfill them. He would not feel hurt at her speaking, she felt sure, for he had voluntarily sought her aid years ago. So Valentine waited day after day, hoping to find a chance for those few words she thought would do so much good; but, as no opportunity came, she resolved to make one. Taking her little jeweled pencil, she wrote the following lines that were in after-time a death warrant:

"Dear Mr. Earle,—I wish to speak to you particularly and privately. I shall be in our grounds tomorrow morning about ten; let me see you there before you enter the house. Your sincere friend, Valentine Charteris."

All the world might have read the note—there was nothing wrong in it—good intentions and a kindly heart dictated it, but it worked fatal mischief. When Ronald was leaving her mother's house, Miss Charteris openly placed the letter in his hands.

"This is the first note I have ever written to you," she said, with a smile. "You must not refuse the request it contains."

"I will send him home happy tomorrow," she thought, "he is easily influenced for good. He must make up the misunderstanding with his pretty little wife—neither of them look happy."

Ronald did not open the letter until he reached home. Then he read it with a half-consciousness of what Valentine wanted him for.

"She is a noble woman," he thought. "Her words made me brave before—they will do me good again."

He left the folded paper upon the table in his studio; and jealous little Dora, going in search of some work she had left, found it there. She read it word by word, the color dying slowly out of her face as she did so, and a bitter, deadly jealousy piercing her heart like a two-edged sword. It confirmed her worst fears, her darkest doubts. How dared this brilliant, beautiful woman lure Ronald from her? How dared she rob her of his love?

Ronald looked aghast at his wife's face as she re-entered the sitting room. He had been playing with the children, and had forgotten for the time both Valentine and her note. He cried out in alarm as she turned her white, wild face to him in dumb, silent despair.

"What is the matter, Dora?" he cried. "Are you ill or frightened? You look like a ghost."

She made no reply, and her husband, thinking she had relapsed into one of her little fits of temper, sighed heavily and bade her good night.

Dora Thorne

Poor, foolish, jealous heart—she never lay down to rest!

She had quite resolved she would go and meet the husband who was tired of her and the woman who lured him away. She would listen to all they had to say, and then confront them. No thought of the dishonor of such a proceeding struck her. Poor Dora was not gifted with great refinement of feeling—she looked upon the step she contemplated rather as a triumph over an enemy than a degradation to herself. She knew the place in the grounds where they should be sure to meet. Miss Charteris called it her bower; it was a thick cluster of trees under the shade of which stood a pretty, rustic seat; and Dora thought that, if she placed herself behind the trees, she would be able to hear all unseen.

Before Ronald partook of breakfast, Dora had quitted the house on her foolish errand. She knew the way to the house and the entrance to the garden. She had no fear; even were she discovered there, no one could surmise more than that she was resting on her way to the house. She crouched behind the trees and waited. It was wrong, weak, and wicked; but there was something so pitiful in the white face full of anguish, that one would hardly know whether to pity or blame her.

The sunshine reached her, the birds were singing in the trees, the flowers were all blooming—she, in her sorrow and desolation, heeded nothing. At length she saw them—Valentine in her white morning dress, her beautiful face full of deep, earnest emotion, and Ronald by her side. As she surmised, they walked straight to the trees, and Valentine signed to Ronald to take a seat by her side. Sweetly and clearly every word she uttered sounded to Ronald, but they fell like drops of molten lead on the jealous heart of Ronald's wife.

"You must try," Valentine was saying; "I used to think you would be a hero. You are proving yourself a very weak and erring man."

Dora could not distinguish Ronald's words so plainly; he said something about life and its mistakes.

"I told you once," said Valentine, "that the man who could endure so bravely the consequences of his own actions was a true hero. Grant the worst—that you have made a mistake. You must make the best you can of it, and you are not doing that now."

"No," he said gravely. "I am very unhappy—more so than you can imagine, Valentine. Life seems to have lost all its charms for me. I had such great hopes once, but they are all dead now."

"You are too young to say that," she replied; "a little courage, a little patience, and all will be well. If it comforts you to know that my warmest, deepest sympathy is with you—"

Valentine Charteris never finished her sentence; a pale, angry face and dark, gleaming eyes full of passion suddenly flashed before her.

"You may spare your pity, Miss Charteris," cried a hoarse voice. "Why have you made my husband dissatisfied with me? Why have you taken his love from me? Why do you write notes asking him to meet you, that you may both speak evil and wrong of his low-born wife?"

"Hush!" said Ronald, sternly, grasping her arm. "Stop those wild words, Dora! Are you mad?"

"No, not yet," she cried; "but this false woman will drive me so!"

Then Miss Charteris rose, her calm, grand face unruffled, not a quiver on her proud lips.

"Stay, Miss Charteris, one moment, I pray you," said Ronald, "while my wife apologizes for her folly."

Dora Thorne

"It is all true," cried Dora. "She wrote and asked you to meet her here."

"Dora," said her husband, gravely, "did you read the letter Miss Charteris wrote to me?"

"I did," she replied.

"And you deliberately came here to listen to what she had to say to me?" he continued. "You deliberately listened to what you were never intended to hear?"

His grave, stern dignity calmed her angry passion, and she looked half-frightened into his quiet white face.

"Answer me!" he said. "Have you crouched behind those trees deliberately and purposely to listen?"

"Yes," she said; "and I would do so again if any one tried to take my husband from me."

"Then may I be forgiven for the dishonor I have brought to my name and race!" said Ronald. "May I be forgiven for thinking such a woman fit to be my wife! Hear me," he continued, and the passion in his voice changed to contempt: "Miss Charteris is your friend; she asked me to meet her here that she might plead your cause, Dora—that she might advise me to remain more at home with you, to go less into society, to look more at the bright side of our married life, and be a better husband than I have been lately; it was for that she summoned me here."

"I—I do not believe it," sobbed his wife.

"That is at your option," he replied coolly. "Miss Charteris, I should kneel to ask your pardon for the insults you have received. If a man had uttered them, I would avenge them. The woman who spoke them bears my name. I entreat your pardon."

"It is granted," she replied; "your wife must have been mad, or she would have known I was her friend. I deeply regret that my good intentions have resulted so unhappily. Forget my annoyance, Mr. Earle, and forgive Dora; she could not have known what she was saying."

"I forgive her," said Ronald; "but I never wish to look upon her face again. I see nothing but dishonor there. My love died a violent death ten minutes since. The woman so dead to all delicacy, all honor as to listen and suspect will never more be wife of mine."

"Be pitiful," said Valentine, for Dora was weeping bitterly now; all her fire and passion, all her angry jealousy, had faded before his wrath.

"I am pitiful," he replied. "Heaven knows I pity her. I pity myself. We Earles love honorable women when we love at all. I will escort you to your house, Miss Charteris, and then Mrs. Earle and myself will make our arrangements."

In her sweet, womanly pity, Valentine bent down and kissed the despairing face.

"Try to believe that you are wrong and mistaken, Mrs. Earle," she said gently. "I had no thought save to be your friend."

They spoke no word as they passed through the pretty grounds. Valentine was full of pity for her companion, and of regret for her own share in that fatal morning's work.

When Ronald reached the cluster of trees again, Dora was not there. Just at that moment he cared but little whither she had gone. His vexation and sorrow seemed almost greater than he could bear.

Chapter XIV

The passion and despair of that undisciplined heart were something painful to see. Reason, sense, and honor, for a time were all dead. If Dora could have stamped out the calm beauty of Valentine's magnificent face, she would have done so. Ronald's anger, his bitter contempt, stung her, until her whole heart and soul were in angry revolt, until bitter thoughts raged like a wild tempest within her. She could not see much harm in what she had done; she did not quite see why reading her own husband's letter, or listening to a private conversation of his was a breach of honor. She thought but little at the time of what she had done; her heart was full of anger against Ronald and Valentine. She clasped her hands angrily after Mrs. Charteris had kissed her, crying out that she was false, and had lured Ronald from her. Any one passing her on the high-road would have thought her mad, seeing the white face, the dark, gleaming eyes, the rigid lips only opening for moans and cries that marred the sweet silence. He should keep his word; never—come what might never should he look upon her fair face again—the face he had caressed so often and thought so fair. She would go away—he was quite tired of her, and of her children, too. They would tease him and intrude upon him no more. Let him go to the fair, false woman, who had pretended to pity her.

The little nurse-maid, a simple peasant girl, looked on in mute amazement when her mistress entered the room where the children were.

"Maria," she said, "I am going home, over the seas to England. Will you come with me?"

The only thing poor Dora had learned during those quiet years was a moderate share of Italian. The young nurse looked up in wonder at the hard voice, usually soft as the cooing of a ring-dove.

"I will go," she replied, "if the signora will take me. I leave none behind that I love."

With trembling, passionate hands and white, stern face, Dora packed her trunks and boxes—the children's little wardrobe and her own, throwing far from her every present, either of dress or toys, that Valentine had brought.

She never delayed to look round and think of the happy hours spent in those pretty rooms. She never thought of the young lover who had given up all the world for her. All she remembered was the wrathful husband who never wished to see her more—who, in presence of another, had bitterly regretted having made her his wife. She could not weep—the burning brain and jealous, angry heart would have been better for that, but the dark eyes were bright and full of strange, angry light. The little ones, looking upon her, wept for fear. With eager, passionate love she caught them in her arms, crying the while that they should never remain to be despised as she was.

In the white-faced, angry woman, roused to the highest pitch of passion, there was no trace of pretty, blushing Dora. Rapidly were the boxes packed, corded, and addressed. Once during that brief time Maria asked, "Where are you going, signora?" And the hard voice answered, "To my father's—my own home in England."

When everything was ready, the wondering children dressed, and the little maid waiting, Dora sat down at her husband's desk and wrote the following lines. No tears fell upon them; her hand did not tremble, the words were clear and firmly written:

"I have not waited for you to send me away. Your eyes shall not be pained again by resting on the face where you read dishonor. I saw months ago that you were tired of me. I am going to my father's house, and my children I shall take with me—you care no more for them than for me. They are mine—not yours. I leave you with all you

Dora Thorne

love in the world. I take all I love with me. If you prayed for long years, I would never return to you nor speak to you again."

She folded the note and addressed it to her husband. She left no kiss warm from her lips upon it. As she passed forever from the little villa, she never turned for one last look at its vine-clad walls.

The gaunt, silent Italian servant who had lived with Dora since the first day she reached Florence came to her in wonder and alarm, barely recognizing her pretty, gentle mistress in the pale, determined woman who looked like one brought to bay. To her Dora spoke of the letter; it was to be given to her husband as soon as he returned. Not one word did she utter in reply to the woman's question. She hurried with the keen desperation of despair, lest Ronald should return and find her still there.

Soon after noon, and while Ronald lingered with some friends upon the steps of the Hotel d'Italia, his wife reached the busy railway station at Florence. She had money enough to take her home, but none to spare. She knew no rest; every moment seemed like an age to her, until the train was in motion, and fair, sunny Florence left far behind.

Without the stimulus of anger Dora would have shrunk in terror from the thought of a long journey alone—she who had never been without the escort of a kind and attentive husband. But no prospect daunted her now—the wide seas, the dangers of rail and road had no terror for her. She was flying in hot haste and anger from one who had said before her rival that he never wished to see her face again.

* * * * *

The sun shining so brightly on the waters of the Arno lingered almost lovingly on the fair, quiet English landscape. Far down in the fertile and beautiful county of Kent, where the broad channel washes the shore, stands the pretty, almost unknown village of Knutsford.

The world is full of beauty, every country has its share Switzerland its snow-clad mountains, Germany its dark woods and broad streams, France its sunny plains, Italy its "thousand charms of Nature and Art;" but for quiet, tranquil loveliness, for calm, fair beauty, looking always fresh from the mighty hand that created it, there is nothing like English scenery.

The white cliffs of Knutsford, like "grand giants," ran along the shore; there was a broad stretch of yellow sand, hidden when the tide was in, shining and firm when it ebbed. The top of the cliff was like a carpet of thick green grass and springing heather. Far away, in the blue distance, one could see, of a bright, sunny day, the outline of the French coast. The waves rolled in, and broke upon the yellow sands; the sea-birds flew by with busy wings, white sails gleamed in the sunshine. Occasionally a large steamer passed; there was no sound save the rich, never-changing music of Nature, the rush of wind and waves, the grand, solemn anthem that the sea never tires of singing.

Far down the cliff ran the zigzag path that led to the village; there was no sign of the sea on the other side of the white rocks. There the green fields and pretty hop-gardens stretched out far and wide, and the Farthinglow Woods formed a belt around them. In the midst of a green, fertile valley stood the lovely village of Knutsford. It had no regular street; there were a few cottages, a few farm houses, a few little villas, one grand mansion, three or four shops, and quiet homesteads with thatched roofs and eaves of straw.

The prettiest and most compact little farm in the village was the one where Stephen Thorne and his wife dwelt. It was called the elms, a long avenue of elms leading to the little house and skirting the broad green meadows. It was at a short distance from the village, so quiet, so tranquil, that, living there, one seemed out of the world.

Dora Thorne

Stephen Thorne and his wife were not rich. In spite of Lady Earle's bounty, it was hard for them at times to make both ends meet. Crops, even in that fair and fertile county, would fail, cattle would die, rain would fall when it should not, and the sun refuse to shine. But this year everything had gone on well; the hay stood in great ricks in the farm yard, the golden corn waved in the fields ripe and ready for the sickle, the cows and sheep fed tranquilly in the meadows, and all things had prospered with Stephen Thorne. One thing only weighed upon his heart—his wife would have it that Dora's letters grew more and more sad; she declared her child was unhappy, and he could not persuade her to the contrary.

It was a fair August evening. Ah! How weak and feeble are the words. Who could paint the golden flush of summer beauty that lay over the meadows and corn fields—the hedge rows filled with wild flowers, the long, thick grass studded with gay blossoms, the calm, sullen silence only broken by the singing of the birds, the lowing of cattle, the rustling of green leaves in the sweet soft air?

Stephen Thorne had gone with his guest and visitor, Ralph Holt, to fetch the cattle home. In Ralph's honor, good, motherly Mrs. Thorne had laid out a beautiful tea—golden honey that seemed just gathered from the flowers, ripe fruits, cream from the dairy everything was ready; yet the farmer and his guest seemed long in coming. She went to the door and looked across the meadows. The quiet summer beauty stole like a spell over her.

Suddenly, down in the meadows, Mrs. Thorne caught sight of a lady leading a little child by the hand. She was followed by a young maid carrying another. As the lady drew nearer, Mrs. Thorne stood transfixed and bewildered. Could the summer sun or the flickering shade be mocking her? Was she dreaming or awake? Far off still, through the summer haze, she saw a white, wan face; dark eyes, shadowed and veiled, as though by long weeping; lips, once rosy and smiling, rigid and firm. She saw what seemed to her the sorrowful ghost of the pretty, blooming child that had left her long ago. She tried to call out, but her voice failed her. She tried to run forward and meet the figure coming slowly through the meadows, but she was powerless to move. She never heard the footsteps of her husband and his guest. She only stirred when Stephen Thorne placed his hand upon her shoulder, and in a loud, cheery voice, asked what ailed her.

"Look," she said, hoarsely, "look down the meadow there and tell me—if that is Dora or Dora's ghost?"

She drew near more swiftly now, for she had seen the three figures at the door. The white face and wild eyes seemed aflame with anxiety.

"Dora, Dora!" cried Mrs. Thorne, "is it really you?"

"It is," said a faint, bitter voice. "I am come home, mother. My heart is broken and I long to die."

They crowded around her, and Ralph Holt, with his strong arms, carried the fragile, drooping figure into the house. They laid her upon the little couch, and drew the curling rings of dark hair back from her white face. Mrs. Thorne wept aloud, crying out for her pretty Dora, her poor, unhappy child. The two men stood watching her with grave, sad eyes. Ralph clenched his hand as he gazed upon her, the wreck of the simple, gentle girl he had loved so dearly.

"If he has wronged her," he said to Stephen Thorne, "if he has broken her heart, and sent her home to die, let him beware!"

"I knew it would never prosper," groaned her father; "such marriages never do."

When Dora opened her eyes, and saw the three anxious faces around her, for a moment she was bewildered. They knew when the torture of memory returned to her, for she clasped her hands with a low moan.

Dora Thorne

"Dora," said her mother, "what has happened? Trust us, dear child—we are your best friends. Where is your husband? And why have you left him?"

"Because he has grown tired of me," she cried, with passion and anger flaming again in her white, worn face. "I did something he thought wrong, and he prayed to Heaven to pardon him for making me his wife."

"What did you do?" asked her father, anxiously.

"Nothing that I thought wrong," she replied. "Ask me no questions, father. I would rather die any death than return to him or see him again. Yet do not think evil of him. It was all a mistake. I could not think his thoughts or live his life—we were quite different, and very unhappy. He never wishes to see me again, and I will suffer anything rather than see him."

The farmer and his wife looked at each other in silent dismay. This proud, angry woman and her passionate words frightened them. Could it be their Dora, who had ever been sunshine and music to them?

"If you do not like to take me home, father," she said, in a hard voice, "I can go elsewhere; nothing can surprise or grieve me now."

But kindly Mrs. Thorne had drawn the tired head to her.

"Do you not know, child," she said, gently, "that a mother's love never fails?"

Ralph had raised the little one in his arms, and was looking with wondering admiration at the proud, beautiful face of the little Beatrice, and the fair loveliness of Lillian. The children looked with frank, fearless eyes into his plain, honest face.

"This one with dark hair has the real Earle face," said Stephen Thorne, proudly; "that is just my lord's look—proud and quiet. And the little Lillian is something like Dora, when she was quite a child."

"Never say that!" cried the young mother. "Let them grow like any one else, but never like me!"

They soothed her with gentle, loving words. Her father said she should share his home with her children, and he would never give her up again. They bade her watch the little ones, who had forgotten their fears, and laughed over the ripe fruit and golden honey. They also drew aside the white curtain, and let her tired eyes fall upon the sweet summer beauty of earth and sky. Was not everything peaceful? The sun sinking in the west, the birds singing their evening song, the flowers closing their bright eyes, the wind whispering "good night" to the shimmering, graceful elms—all was peace, and the hot, angry heart grew calm and still. Bitter tears rose to the burning eyes—tears that fell like rain, and seemed to take away the sharpest sting of her pain.

With wise and tender thought they let Dora weep undisturbed. The bitter sobbing ceased at last. Dora said farewell to her love. She lay white and exhausted, but the anger and passion had died away.

"Let me live with you, father," she said, humbly. "I will serve you, and obey you. I am content, more than content, with my own home. But for my little children, let all be as it was years ago."

When the little ones, like the flowers, had gone to sleep, and Dora had gone into the pretty white room prepared for her, Ralph rose to take his leave.

"Surely," said Thorne, "you are not leaving us. You promised to stay a whole week."

Dora Thorne

"I know," said the young farmer; "but you have many to think for now, Mr. Thorne. The time will come when the poor, wearied girl sleeping above us will be Lady Earle. Her husband knew I loved her. No shadow even of suspicion must rest upon her. While your daughter remains under your roof, I shall not visit you again."

Dora's father knew the young man was right.

"Let me see the little ones sometimes," continued Ralph; "and if large parcels of toys and books find their way to the Elms, you will know who sent them. But I must not come in Dora's way; she is no loner Dora Thorne."

As Stephen watched the young man walking quickly through the long gray fields, he wished that Dora had never seen Ronald Earle.

Poor Dora's troubles were not yet ended. When the warm August sun peeped into her room on the following morning, she did not see it shine; when the children crept to her side and called for mamma, she was deaf to their little voices. The tired head tossed wearily to and fro, the burning eyes would not close. A raging fever had her in its fierce clutches. When Mrs. Thorne, alarmed by the children's cries, came in, Dora did not know her, but cried out loudly that she was a false woman, who had lured her husband from her.

They sent in all haste for aid; but the battle was long and fierce. During the hours of delirium, Mrs. Thorne gleaned sorrowfully some portions of her daughter's story. She cried out incessantly against a fair woman—one Valentine—whom Ronald loved—cried in scorn and anger. Frequently she was in a garden, behind some trees; then confronting some one with flaming eyes, sobbing that she did not believe it; then hiding her face and crying out:

"He has ceased to love me—let me die!"

But the time came when the fierce fever burned itself out, and Dora lay weak and helpless as a little child. She recovered slowly, but she was never the same again. Her youth, hope, love, and happiness were all dead. No smile or dimple, no pretty blush, came to the changed face; the old coy beauty was all gone.

Calm and quiet, with deep, earnest eyes, and lips that seldom smiled, Dora seemed to have found another self. Even with her children the sad restraint never wore off nor grew less. If they wanted to play, they sought the farmer in the fields, the good-natured nurse, or the indulgent grandmamma—never the sad, pale mother. If they were in trouble then they sought her.

Dora asked for work. She would have been dairy maid, house maid, or anything else, but her father said "No." A pretty little room was given to her, with woodbines and roses peeping in at the window. Here for long hours every day, while the children played in the meadows, she sat and sewed. There, too, Dora, for the first time, learned what Ronald, far away in sunny Italy, failed to teach her—how to think and read. Big boxes of books came from the town of Shorebeach. Stephen Thorne spared no trouble or expense in pleasing his daughter. Dora wondered that she had never cared for books, now that deeper and more solemn thoughts came to her. The pale face took a new beauty; no one could have believed that the thoughtful woman with the sweet voice and refined accent was the daughter of the blunt farmer Thorne and his homely wife.

A few weeks passed, and but for the little ones Dora would have believed the whole to have been but a long, dark dream. She would not think of Ronald; she would not remember his love, his sacrifices for her; she thought only of her wrongs and his cruel words.

The children grew and thrived. Dora had no care at present as to their education. From her they learned good English, and between herself and the faithful young nurse they could learn, she thought, tolerable Italian. She would not think of a future that might take these beloved children from her. She ignored Ronald's claim to

them—they were hers. He had tired of them when he tired of her. She never felt the days monotonous in that quiet farm house, as others might have done. A dead calm seemed to surround her; but it was destined soon to be broken.

Chapter XV

Ronald did not return in the evening to the pretty villa where he had once been so happy. In the warmth of his anger, he felt that he never could look again upon his wife. To his sensitive, refined nature there was something more repulsive in the dishonorable act she had committed than there would have been in a crime of deeper dye. He was shocked and startled—more so than if he awoke some fair summer morning to find Dora dead by his side. She was indeed dead to him in one sense. The ideal girl, all purity, gentleness, and truth, whom he had loved and married, had, it appeared, never really existed after all. He shrank from the idea of the angry, vehement words and foul calumnies. He shrank from the woman who had forgotten every rule of good breeding, every trace of good manners, in angry, fierce passion.

How was he ever to face Miss Charteris again? She would never mention one word of what had happened, but he could ill brook the shame Dora had brought upon him. He remembered the summer morning in the woods when he told Valentine the story of his love, and had pictured his pretty, artless Dora to her. Could the angry woman who had dared to insult him, and to calumniate the fairest and truest lady in all England, possibly be the same?

Ronald had never before been brought into close contact with dishonor. He had some faint recollection at college of having seen and known a young man, the son of a wealthy nobleman, scorned and despised, driven from all society, and he was told that it was because he had been detected in the act of listening at the principal's door. He remembered how old and young had shunned this young man as though he were plague-stricken; and now his own wife Dora had done the very same thing under circumstances that rendered the dishonor greater. He asked himself, with a cynical smile, what he could expect? He had married for love of a pretty, child-like face, never giving any thought to principle, mind, or intellect. The only wonder was that so wretched and unequal a match had not turned out ten times worse. His father's warning rang in his ears. How blind, how foolish he had been!

Every hope of his own life was wrecked, every hope and plan of his father's disappointed and dead. There seemed to him nothing left to care for. His wife—oh, he would not think of her! The name vexed him. He could not stand in Valentine's presence again, and for the first time he realized what she had been to him. Home, and consequently England, was closed to him; the grand mansion he had once believed his had faded from his mind.

Thinking of all these things, Ronald's love for his young wife seemed changed to dislike. Three days passed before he returned home; then he was somewhat startled to find her really gone. He had anticipated sullen temper, renewed quarrels, and then perhaps a separation, but he was startled to find her actually gone. The servant gave him the cold farewell letter, written without tears, without sorrow. He tore it into shreds and flung it from him.

"The last act in the farce," he said, bitterly. "If I had not been mad, I should have foreseen this."

The silent, deserted rooms did not remind him of the loving young wife parted from him forever. He was too angry, too annoyed, for any gentle thoughts to influence him. She had left him—so much the better; there could never again be peace between them. He thought with regret of the little ones—they were too young for him to undertake charge of them, so that they were best left with their mother for a time. He said to himself that he must make the best use he could of his life; everything seemed at an end. He felt very lonely and unhappy as he sat in his solitary home; and the more sorrow present upon him, the more bitter his thoughts grew, the deeper became his dislike to this unhappy young wife.

Ronald wrote to his mother, but said no word to her of the cause of their quarrel.

Dora Thorne

"Dora and I," he said, "will never live together again—perhaps never meet. She has gone home to her father; I am going to wander over the wide earth. Will you induce my father to receive my children at Earlescourt? And will you see Mr. Burt, and arrange that half of my small income is settled upon Dora?"

But to all his wife's entreaties Lord Earle turned a deaf ear. He declared that never during his life time should the children of Dora Thorne enter Earlescourt. His resolution was fixed and unalterable. How, he asked, was he to trust the man who had once deceived him? For aught he knew, the separation between Ronald and his wife might be a deeply laid scheme, and, the children once with him, there would be a grand reconciliation between the parents.

"I am not surprised," he said, "that the unhappy boy is weary of his pretty toy. It could not be otherwise; he must bear the consequences of his own folly. He had time for thought, he made his own choice—now let him abide by it. You have disregarded my wish, Lady Helena, in even naming the matter to me. Let all mention of it cease. I have no son. One thing remember—I am not hard upon you—you can go where you like, see whom you like, and spend what money you will, and as you will."

Lady Earle was not long in availing herself of the permission. There was great excitement at the Elms one morning, caused by the receipt of a letter from Lady Earle saying that she would be there on the same day to visit the son's wife and children.

The little ones looked up to her with wondering eyes. To them she was like a vision, with her noble face and distinguished air.

Stephen Thorne and his wife received the great lady not without some trepidation; yet they were in no way to blame. The fatal marriage had been as great a blow to them as to Lord and Lady Earle. With the quiet dignity and graceful ease that never deserted her, Lady Earle soon made them feel at home. She started in utter surprise, when a quiet, grave woman, on whose face sweetness and sullen humor were strangely mingled, entered the room. This could not be pretty, coy, blushing Dora! Where were the dimples and smiles? The large dark eyes raised so sadly to hers were full of strange, pathetic beauty. With sharp pain the thought struck Lady Earle, "What must not Dora have suffered to have changed her so greatly!" The sad eyes and worn face touched her as no beauty could have done. She clasped Dora in her arms and kissed her.

"You are my daughter now," she said, in that rich, musical voice which Dora remembered so well. "We will not mention the past; it is irrevocable. If you sinned against duty and obedience, your face tells me you have suffered. What has come between you and my son I do not seek to know. The shock must have been a great one which parted you, for he gave up all the world for you, Dora, years ago. We will not speak of Ronald. Our care must be the children. Of course you wish them to remain with you?"

"While it is possible," said Dora, wearily. "I shall never leave home again; but I can not hope to keep them here always."

"I should have liked to adopt them," said Lady Earle; "to take them home and educate them, but—"

"Lord Earle will not permit it," interrupted Dora, calmly. "I know—I do not wonder."

"You must let me do all I can for them here," continued Lady Earle; "I have made all plans and arrangements. We will give the children an education befitting their position, without removing them from you. Then we shall see what time will do. Let me see the little ones. I wish you had called one Helena, after me."

Dora remembered why she had not done so, and a flush of shame rose to her face.

Dora Thorne

They were beautiful children, and Dora brought them proudly to the stately lady waiting for them. Lady Earle took Beatrice in her arms.

"Why, Dora," she said admiringly, "she has the Earle face, with a novel charm all its own. The child will grow up into magnificent woman."

"She has the Earle spirit and pride," said the young mother; "I find it hard to manage her even now."

Then Lady Earle looked at the fair, spirituelle face and golden hair of little Lillian. The shy, dove-like eyes and sweet lips charmed her.

"There is a great contrast between them," she said, thoughtfully. "They will require careful training, Dora; and now we will speak of the matter which brought me here."

Dora noticed that, long as she remained, Lady Earle never let Beatrice leave her arms; occasionally she bent over Lillian and touched her soft golden curls, but the child with the "Earle face" was the one she loved best.

Together with Stephen Thorne and his wife, Lady Earle went over the Elms. The situation delighted her; nothing could be better or more healthy for the children, but the interior of the house must be altered. Then with delicate grace that could only charm, never wound, Lady Earle unfolded her plans. She wished a new suite of rooms to be built for Dora and the children, to be nicely furnished with everything that could be required. She would bear the expense. Immediately on her return she would send an efficient French maid for the little ones, and in the course of a year or two she would engage the services of an accomplished governess, who would undertake the education of Beatrice and Lillian without removing them from their mother's care.

"I shall send a good piano and harp," said Lady Earle, "it will be my pride and pleasure to select books, music, drawings, and everything else my grandchildren require. I should wish them always to be nicely dressed and carefully trained. To you, Dora, I must leave the highest and best training of all. Teach them to be good, and to do their duty. They have learned all when they have learned that."

For the first time in her life, the thought came home to Dora: How was she to teach what she had never learned and had failed to practice? That night, long after Lady Earle had gone away, and the children had fallen to sleep, Dora knelt in the moonlight and prayed that she might learn to teach her children to do their duty.

As Lady Earle wished, the old farm house was left intact, and a new group of buildings added to it. There was a pretty sitting room for Dora, and a larger one to serve as a study for the children, large sleeping rooms, and a bathroom, all replete with comfort. Two years passed before all was completed, and Lady Earle thought it time to send a governess to the Elms.

* * * * *

During those years little or nothing was heard from Ronald. After reading the cold letter Dora left for him, it seemed as though all love, all care, all interest died out of his heart. He sat for many long hours thinking of the blighted life "he could not lay down, yet cared little to hold."

He was only twenty-three—the age at which life opens to most men; yet he was worn, tired, weary of everything—the energies that once seemed boundless, the ambition once so fierce and proud, all gone. His whole nature recoiled from the shock. Had Dora, in the fury of her jealousy and rage, tried to kill him, he would have thought that but a small offense compared with the breach of honor in crouching behind the trees to listen. He thought of the quiet, grand beauty of Valentine's face while Dora was convulsed with passion. He remembered the utter wonder in Valentine's eyes when Dora's flamed upon them. He remembered the sickening sense of shame

that had cowed him as he listened to her angry, abusive words. And this untrained, ignorant, ill-bred woman was his wife! For her he had given up home, parents, position, wealth—all he had in life worth caring for. For her, and through her, he stood there alone in the world.

Those thoughts first maddened him, then drove him to despair. What had life left for him? He could not return to England; his father's doors were closed against him. There was no path open to him; without his father's help he could not get into Parliament. He could not work as an artist at home. He could not remain in Florence; never again, he said to himself, would he see Valentine Charteris—Valentine, who had been the witness of his humiliation and disgrace. Sooner anything than that. He would leave the villa and go somewhere—he cared little where. No quiet, no rest came to him. Had his misfortunes been accidental—had they been any other than they were, the result of his boyish folly and disobedience, he would have found them easier to bear; as it was, the recollection that it was all his own fault drove him mad.

Before morning he had written a farewell note to Lady Charteris, saying that he was leaving Florence at once, and would not be able to see her again. He wrote to Valentine, but the few stiff words expressed little of what he felt. He prayed her to forget the miserable scene that would haunt him to his dying day; to pardon the insults that had driven him nearly mad; to pardon the mad jealousy, the dishonor of Dora; to forget him and all belonging to him. When Miss Charteris read the letter she knew that all effort to restore peace would for a time be in vain. She heard the day following that the clever young artist, Mr. Earle, had left.

Countess Rosali loudly lamented Ronald's departure. It was so strange, she said; the dark-eyed little wife and her children had gone home to England, and the husband, after selling off his home, had gone with Mr. Charles Standon into the interior of Africa. What was he going to do there?

She lamented him for two days without ceasing, until Valentine was tired of her many conjectures. He was missed in the brilliant salons of Florence, but by none so much as by Valentine Charteris.

What the pretty, coquettish countess had said was true. After making many plans and forming many resolutions, Ronald met Mr. Standon, who was on the point of joining an exploring expedition in South Africa. He gladly consented to accompany him. There was but little preparation needed. Four days after the never-to-be-forgotten garden scene, Ronald Earle left Italy and became a wanderer upon the face of the earth.

Chapter XVI

Valentine Charteris never told the secret. She listened to the wonder and conjectures of all around her, but not even to her mother did she hint what had passed. She pitied Ronald profoundly. She knew the shock Dora had inflicted on his sensitive, honorable disposition. For Dora herself she felt nothing but compassion. Her calm, serene nature was incapable of such jealousies. Valentine could never be jealous or mean, but she could understand the torture that had made shy, gentle Dora both.

"Jealous of me, poor child!" said Valentine to herself. "Nothing but ignorance can excuse her. As though I, with half Florence at my feet, cared for her husband, except as a dear and true friend."

So the little villa was deserted; the gaunt, silent servant found a fresh place. Ronald's pictures were eagerly bought up; the pretty countess, after looking very sentimental and sad for some days, forgot her sorrow and its cause in the novelty of making the acquaintance of an impassive unimpressible American. Florence soon forgot one whom she had been proud to know and honor.

Two months afterward, as Miss Charteris sat alone in her favorite nook—the bower of trees where poor Dora's tragedy had been enacted—she was found by the Prince di Borgezi. Every one had said that sooner or later it

would come to this. Prince di Borgezi, the most fastidious of men, who had admired many women but loved none, whose verdict was the rule of fashion, loved Valentine Charteris. Her fair English face, with its calm, grand beauty, her graceful dignity, her noble mind and pure soul had captivated him. For many long weeks he hovered round Valentine, longing yet dreading to speak the words which would unite or part them for life.

Lately there had been rumors that Lady Charteris and her daughter intended to leave Florence; then Prince di Borgezi decided upon knowing his fate. He sought Valentine, and found her seated under the shade of her favorite trees.

"Miss Charteris," he said, after a few words of greeting, "I have come to ask you the greatest favor, the sweetest boon, you can confer on any man."

"What is it?" asked Valentine, calmly, anticipating some trifling request.

"Your permission to keep for my own the original 'Queen Guinevere'," he replied; "that picture is more to me than all that I possess. Only one thing is dearer, the original. May I ever hope to make that mine also?"

Valentine opened her magnificent eyes in wonder. It was an offer of marriage then that he was making.

"Have you no word for me, Miss Charteris?" he said. "I lay my life and my love at your feet. Have you no word for me?"

"I really do not know what to say," replied Valentine.

"You do not refuse me?" said her lover.

"Well, no," replied Valentine.

"And you do not accept me?" he continued.

"Decidedly not," she replied, more firmly.

"Then I shall consider there is some ground for hope," he said.

Valentine had recovered her self-possession. Her lover gazed anxiously at her beautiful face, its proud calm was unbroken.

"I will tell you how it is," resumed Valentine, after a short pause; "I like you better, perhaps, than any man I know, but I do not love you."

"You do not forbid me to try all I can to win your love?" asked the prince.

"No," was the calm reply. "I esteem you very highly, prince. I can not say more."

"But you will in time," he replied. "I would not change your quiet friendly liking, Miss Charteris, for the love of any other woman."

Under the bright sky the handsome Italian told the story of his love in words that were poetry itself—how he worshiped the fair calm girl so unlike the women of his own clime. As she listened, Valentine thought of that summer morning years ago when Ronald had told her the story of his love; and then Valentine owned to her own heart, that, if Ronald were in Prince di Borgezi's place, she would not listen so calmly nor reply so coolly.

Dora Thorne

"How cold and stately these English girls are!" thought her lover. "They are more like goddesses than women. Would any word of mine ever disturb the proud coldness of that perfect face?"

It did not then, but before morning ended Prince di Borgezi had obtained permission to visit England in the spring and ask again the same question. Valentine liked him. She admired his noble and generous character, his artistic tastes, his fastidious exclusiveness had a charm for her; she did not love him, but it seemed to her more than probable that the day would come when she would do so.

* * * * *

Lady Charteris and her daughter left Florence and returned to Greenoke. Lady Earle paid them a long visit, and heard all they had to tell of her idolized son. Lady Charteris spoke kindly of Dora; and Valentine, believing she could do something to restore peace, sent an affectionate greeting, and asked permission to visit the Elms.

Lady Earle saw she had made a mistake when she repeated Valentine's words to Dora. The young wife's face flushed burning red, and then grew white as death.

"Pray bring me no more messages from Miss Charteris," she replied. "I do not like her—she would only come to triumph over me; I decline to see her. I have no message to send her."

Then, for the first time, an inkling of the truth came to Lady Earle. Evidently Dora was bitterly jealous of Valentine. Had she any cause for it? Could it be that her unhappy son had learned to love Miss Charteris when it was all too late? From that day Lady Earle pitied her son with a deeper and more tender compassion; she translated Dora's curt words into civil English, and then wrote to Miss Charteris. Valentine quite understood upon reading them that she was not yet pardoned by Ronald Earle's wife.

Time passed on without any great changes, until the year came when Lady Earle thought her grandchildren should begin their education. She was long in selecting one to whom she could intrust them. At length she met with Mrs. Vyvian, the widow of an officer who had died in India, a lady qualified in every way for the task, accomplished, a good linguist, speaking French and Italian as fluently as English—an accomplished musician, an artist of no mean skill, and, what Lady Earle valued still more, a woman of sterling principles and earnest religious feeling

It was not a light task that Mrs. Vyvian undertook. The children had reached their fifth year, and for ten years she bound herself by promise to remain with them night and day, to teach and train them. It is true the reward promised was great. Lady Earle settled a handsome annuity upon her. Mrs. Vyvian was not dismayed by the lonely house, the complete isolation from all society, or the homely appearance of the farmer and his wife. A piano and a harp were sent to the Elms. Every week Lady Earle dispatched a large box of books, and the governess was quite content.

Mrs. Vyvian, to whom Lady Earle intrusted every detail of her son's marriage, was well pleased to find that Dora liked her and began to show some taste for study. Dora, who would dream of other things when Ronald read, now tried to learn herself. She was not ashamed to sit hour after hour at the piano trying to master some simple little air, or to ask questions when anything puzzled her in her reading. Mrs. Vyvian, so calm and wise, so gentle, yet so strong, taught her so cleverly that Dora never felt her own ignorance, nor did she grow disheartened as she had done with Ronald.

The time came when Dora could play pretty simple ballads, singing them in her own bird-like, clear voice, and when she could appreciate great writers, and speak of them without any mistake either as to their names or their works.

Dora Thorne

It was a simple, pleasant, happy life; the greater part of the day was spent by mother children in study. In the evening came long rambles through the green woods, where Dora seemed to know the name and history of every flower that grew; over the smiling meadows, where the kine stood knee-deep in the long, scented grass; over the rocks, and down by the sea shore, where the waves chanted their grand anthem, and broke in white foam drifts upon the sands.

No wonder the young girls imbibed a deep warm love for all that was beautiful in Nature. Dora never wearied of it—from the smallest blade of grass to the most stately of forest trees, she loved it all.

The little twin sisters grew in beauty both in body and mind; but the contrast between them was great; Beatrice was the more beautiful and brilliant; Lillian the more sweet and lovable. Beatrice was all fire and spirit; her sister was gentle and calm. Beatrice had great faults and great virtues; Lillian was simply good and charming. Yet, withal, Beatrice was the better loved. It was seldom that any one refused to gratify her wishes.

Dora loved both children tenderly; but the warmest love was certainly for the child who had the Earle face. She was imperious and willful, generous to a fault, impatient of all control; but her greatest fault, Mrs. Vyvian said, was a constant craving for excitement; a distaste for and dislike of quiet and retirement. She would ride the most restive horse, she would do anything to break the ennui and monotony of the long days.

Beautiful, daring, and restless, every day running a hundred risks, and loved the better for the dangers she ran, Beatrice was almost worshiped at the Elms. Nothing ever daunted her, nothing ever made her dull or sad. Lillian was gentle and quiet, with more depth of character, but little power of showing it; somewhat timid and diffident—a more charming ideal of an English girl could not have been found—spirituelle, graceful, and refined; so serene and fair that to look at her was a pleasure.

Lady Earle often visited the Elms; no mystery had been made to the girls—they were told their father was abroad and would not return for many years, and that at some distant day they might perhaps live with him in his own home. They did not ask many questions, satisfied to believe what was told them, not seeking to know more.

Lady Earle loved the young girls very dearly. Beatrice, so like her father, was undoubtedly the favorite. Lord Earle never inquired after them; when Lady Earle asked for a larger check than usual, he gave it to her with a smile, perfectly understanding its destination, but never betraying the knowledge.

So eleven years passed like a long tranquil dream. The sun rose and set, the tides ebbed and flowed, spring flowers bloomed, and died, the summer skies smiled, autumn leaves of golden hue withered on the ground; and winter snows fell; yet no change came to the quiet homestead in the Kentish meadows.

Beatrice and Lillian had reached their sixteenth year, and two fairer girls were seldom seen. Mrs. Vyvian's efforts had not been in vain; they were accomplished far beyond the ordinary run of young girls. Lillian inherited her father's talent for drawing. She was an excellent artist. Beatrice excelled in music. She had a magnificent contralto voice that had been carefully trained. Both were cultivated, graceful, elegant girls, and Lady Earle often sighed to think they should be living in such profound obscurity. She could do nothing; seventeen years had not changed Lord Earle's resolution. Time, far from softening, imbittered him the more against his son. Of Ronald Lady Earle heard but little. He was still in Africa; he wrote at rare intervals, but there was little comfort in his letters.

Lady Earle did what she could for her grandchildren, but it was a strange, unnatural life. They knew no other girls; they had never been twenty miles from Knutsford. All girlish pleasures and enjoyments were a sealed book to them. They had never been to a party, a picnic, or a ball; no life was ever more simple, more quiet, more devoid of all amusement than theirs. Lillian was satisfied and happy; her rich, teeming fancy, her artistic mind, and contented, sweet disposition would have rendered her happy under any circumstances—but it was different with brilliant, beautiful Beatrice. No wild bird in a cage ever pined for liberty or chafed under restraint more than she

did. She cried out loudly against the unnatural solitude, the isolation of such a life.

Eleven years had done much for Dora. The coy, girlish beauty that had won Ronald Earle's heart had given place to a sweet, patient womanhood. Constant association with one so elegant and refined as Mrs. Vyvian had done for her what nothing else could have achieved. Dora had caught the refined, high-bred accent, the graceful, cultivated manner, the easy dignity. She had become imbued with Mrs. Vyvian's noble thoughts and ideas.

Dora retained two peculiarities—one was a great dislike for Ronald, the other a sincere dread of all love and lovers for her children. From her they heard nothing but depreciation of men. All men were alike, false, insincere, fickle, cruel; all love was nonsense and folly. Mrs. Vyvian tried her best to counteract these ideas; they had this one evil consequence—that neither Lillian nor Beatrice would ever dream of even naming such subjects to their mother, who should have been their friend and confidante. If in the books Lady Earle sent there was any mention of this love their mother dreaded so, they went to Mrs. Vyvian or puzzled over it themselves. With these two exceptions Dora had become a thoughtful, gentle woman. As her mind became more cultivated she understood better the dishonor of the fault which had robbed her of Ronald's love. Her fair face grew crimson when she remembered what she had done.

It was a fair and tranquil womanhood; the dark eyes retained their wondrous light and beauty; the curling rings of dark hair were luxuriant as ever; the lips wore a patient, sweet expression. The clear, healthy country air had given a delicate bloom to the fair face. Dora looked more like the elder sister of the young girls than their mother.

The quiet, half-dreamy monotony was broken at last. Mrs. Vyvian was suddenly summoned home. Her mother, to whom she was warmly attached, was said to be dying, and she wished her last few days to be spent with her daughter. At the same time Lady Earle wrote to say that her husband was so ill that it was impossible for her to look for any lady to supply Mrs. Vyvian's place. The consequence was that, for the first time in their lives, the young girls were left for a few weeks without a companion and without surveillance.

Chapter XVII

One beautiful morning in May, Lillian went out alone to sketch. The beauty of the sky and sea tempted her; fleecy-white clouds floated gently over the blue heavens; the sun shone upon the water until, at times, it resembled a huge sea of rippling gold. Far off in the distance were the shining white sails of two boats; they looked in the golden haze like the brilliant wings of some bright bird. The sun upon the white sails struck her fancy, and she wanted to sketch the effect.

It was the kind of morning that makes life seem all beauty and gladness, even if the heart is weighed down with care. It was a luxury merely to live and breathe. The leaves were all springing in the woods; the meadows were green; wild flowers blossomed by the hedge-rows; the birds sang gayly of the coming summer; the white hawthorn threw its rich fragrance all around, and the yellow broom bloomed on the cliffs.

As she sat there, Lillian was indeed a fair picture herself on that May morning; the sweet, spirituelle face; the noble head with its crown of golden hair; the violet eyes, so full of thought; the sensitive lips, sweet yet firm; the white forehead, the throne of intellect. The little fingers that moved rapidly and gracefully over the drawing were white and shapely; there was a delicate rose-leaf flush in the pretty hand. She looked fair and tranquil as the morning itself.

The pure, sweet face had no touch of fire or passion; its serenity was all unmoved; the world had never breathed on the innocent, child-like mind. A white lily was not more pure and stainless than the young girl who sat amid the purple heather, sketching the white, far-off sails.

So intent was Lillian upon her drawing that she did not hear light, rapid steps coming near; she was not aroused until a rich musical voice called, "Lillian, if you have not changed into stone or statue, do speak." Then, looking up, she saw Beatrice by her side.

"Lay down your pencils and talk to me," said Beatrice, imperiously. "How unkind of you, the only human being in this place who can talk, to come here all by yourself! What do you think was to become of me?"

"I thought you were reading to mamma," said Lillian, quietly.

"Reading!" exclaimed Beatrice. "You know I am tired of reading, tired of writing, tired of sewing, tired of everything I have to do."

Lillian looked up in wonder at the beautiful, restless face.

"Do not look 'good' at me," said Beatrice, impatiently. "I am tired to death of it all. I want some change. Do you think any girls in the world lead such lives as we do—shut up in a rambling old farm house, studying from morn to night; shut in on one side by that tiresome sea, imprisoned on the other by fields and woods? How can you take it so quietly, Lillian? I am wearied to death."

"Something has disturbed you this morning," said Lillian, gently.

"That is like mamma," cried Beatrice; "just her very tone and words. She does not understand, you do not understand; mamma's life satisfies her, your life contents you; mine does not content me—it is all vague and empty. I should welcome anything that changed this monotony; even sorrow would be better than this dead level—one day so like another, I can never distinguish them."

"My dear Beatrice, think of what you are saying," said Lillian.

"I am tired of thinking," said Beatrice; "for the last ten years I have been told to 'think' and 'reflect.' I have thought all I can; I want a fresh subject."

"Think how beautiful those far-off white sails look," said Lillian—"how they gleam in the sunshine. See, that one looks like a mysterious hand raised to beckon us away."

"Such ideas are very well for you, Lillian," retorted Beatrice. "I see nothing in them. Look at the stories we read; how different those girls are from us! They have fathers, brothers, and friends; they have jewels and dresses; they have handsome admirers, who pay them homage; they dance, ride, and enjoy themselves. Now look at us, shut up here with old and serious people."

"Hush, Beatrice," said Lillian; "mamma is not old."

"Not in years, perhaps," replied Beatrice; "but she seems to me old in sorrow. She is never gay nor light-hearted. Mrs. Vyvian is very kind, but she never laughs. Is every one sad and unhappy, I wonder? Oh, Lillian, I long to see the world—the bright, gay world—over the sea there. I long for it as an imprisoned bird longs for fresh air and green woods."

"You would not find it all happiness," said Lillian, sagely.

"Spare me all truism," cried Beatrice. "Ah, sister, I am tired of all this; for eleven years the sea has been singing the same songs; those waves rise and fall as they did a hundred years since; the birds sing the same story; the sun shines the same; even the shadow of the great elms fall over the meadow just as it did when we first played there."

I long to away from the sound of the sea and the rustling of the elm trees. I want to be where there are girls of my own age, and do as they do. It seems to me we shall go on reading and writing, sewing and drawing, and taking what mamma calls instructive rambles until our heads grow gray."

"It is not so bad as that, Beatrice," laughed Lillian. "Lady Earle says papa must return some day; then we shall all go to him."

"I never believe one word of it," said Beatrice, undauntedly. "At times I could almost declare papa himself was a myth. Why do we not live with him? Why does he never write? We never hear of or from him, save through Lady Earle; besides, Lillian, what do you think I heard Mrs. Vyvian say once to grandmamma? It was that we might not go to Earlescourt at all—that if papa did not return, or died young, all would go to a Mr. Lionel Dacre, and we should remain here. Imagine that fate—living a long life and dying at the Elms!"

"It is all conjecture," said her sister. "Try to be more contented, Beatrice. We do not make our own lives, we have not the control of our own destiny."

"I should like to control mine," sighed Beatrice.

"Try to be contented, darling," continued the sweet, pleading voice. "We all love and admire you. No one was ever loved more dearly or better than you are. The days are rather long at times, but there are all the wonders and beauties of Nature and art."

"Nature and Art are all very well," cried Beatrice; "but give me life."

She turned her beautiful, restless face from the smiling sea; the south wind dancing over the yellow gorse caught up the words uttered in that clear, musical voice and carried them over the cliff to one who was lying with half-closed eyes under the shade of a large tree—a young man with a dark, half-Spanish face handsome with a coarse kind of beauty. He was lying there, resting upon the turf, enjoying the beauty of the morning. As the musical voice reached him, and the strange words fell upon his ear, he smiled and raised his head to see who uttered them. He saw the young girls, but their faces were turned from him; those words rang in his ears—"Nature and Art are all very well, but give me life."

Who was it longed for life? He understood the longing; he resolved to wait there until the girls went away. Again he heard the same voice.

"I shall leave you to your sails, Lillian. I wish those same boats would come to carry us away—I wish I had wings and could fly over the sea and see the bright, grand world that lies beyond it. Goodbye; I am tired of the never-ending wash of those long, low waves."

He saw a young girl rise from the fragrant heather and turn to descend the cliff. Quick as thought he rushed down by another path, and, turning back, contrived to meet her half-way. Beatrice came singing down the cliff. Her humor, never the same ten minutes together, had suddenly changed. She remembered a new and beautiful song that Lady Earle had sent, and determined to go home and try it. There came no warning to her that bright summer morning. The south wind lifted the hair from her brow and wafted the fragrance of hawthorn buds and spring flowers to greet her, but it brought no warning message; the birds singing gayly, the sun shining so brightly could not tell her that the first link in a terrible chain was to be forged that morning.

Half-way down the cliff, where the path was steep and narrow, Beatrice suddenly met the stranger. A stranger was a rarity at the Elms. Only at rare intervals did an artist or a tourist seek shelter and hospitality at the old farm house. The stranger seemed to be a gentleman. For one moment both stood still; then, with a low bow, the gentleman stepped aside to let the young girl pass. As he did so, he noted the rare beauty of that brilliant face—he

remembered the longing words.

"No wonder," he thought; "it is a sin for such a face as that to be hidden here."

The beauty of those magnificent eyes startled him. Who was she? What could she be doing here? Beatrice turning again, saw the stranger looking eagerly after her, with profound admiration expressed in every feature of his face; and that admiring gaze, the first she had ever received in her life, sank deep into the vain, girlish heart.

He watched the graceful, slender figure until the turn of the road hid Beatrice from his view. He followed her at a safe distance, and saw her cross the long meadows that led to the Elms. Then Hugh Fernely waited with patience until one of the farm laborers came by. By judicious questioning he discovered much of the history of the beautiful young girl who longed for life. Her face haunted him—its brilliant, queenly beauty, the dark, radiant eyes. Come what might, Hugh Fernely said to himself, he must see her again.

On the following morning he saw the girls return to the cliff. Lillian finished her picture. Ever and anon he heard Beatrice singing, in a low, rich voice, a song that had charmed her with its weird beauty:

"For men must work, and women must weep; And the sooner it's over, the sooner to sleep And goodbye to the bar and its moaning."

"I like those words, Lillian," he heard her say. "I wonder how soon it will be 'over' for me. Shall I ever weep, as the song says? I have never wept yet."

This morning the golden-haired sister left the cliff first, and Beatrice sat reading until the noonday sun shone upon the sea. Her book charmed her; it was a story telling of the life she loved and longed for—of the gay, glad world. Unfortunately all the people in the book were noble, heroic, and ideal. The young girl, in her simplicity, believed that they who lived in the world she longed for were all like the people in her book.

When she left the path that led to the meadows, she saw by her side the stranger who had met her the day before. Again he bowed profoundly, and, with many well-expressed apologies, asked some trifling question about the road.

Beatrice replied briefly, but she could not help seeing the wonder of admiration in his face. Her own grew crimson under his gaze—he saw it, and his heart beat high with triumph. As Beatrice went through the meadows he walked by her side. She never quite remembered how it happened, but in a few minutes he was telling her how many years had passed since he had seen the spring in England. She forgot all restraint, all prudence, and raised her beautiful eyes to his.

"Ah, then," she cried, "you have seen the great world that lies over the wide sea."

"Yes," he replied, "I have seen it. I have been in strange, bright lands, so different from England that they seemed to belong to another world. I have seen many climes, bright skies, and glittering seas, where the spice islands lie."

As he spoke, in words that were full of wild, untutored eloquence, he saw the young girl's eyes riveted upon him. Sure of having roused her attention, he bowed, apologized for his intrusion, and left her.

Had Dora been like other mothers, Beatrice would have related this little adventure and told of the handsome young traveler who had been in strange climes. As it was, knowing her mother's utter dread of all men—her fear lest her children should ever love and marry—Beatrice never named the subject. She thought much of Hugh Fernely—not of him himself, but of the world he had spoken about—and she hoped it might happen to her to meet him again.

"If we had some one here who could talk in that way," she said to herself, "the Elms would not be quite so insupportable."

Two days afterward, Beatrice, wandering on the sands, met Hugh Fernely. She saw the startled look of delight on his face, and smiled at his pleasure.

"Pray forgive me," he said. "I—I can not pass you without one word. Time has seemed to me like one long night since I saw you last."

He held in his hand some beautiful lilies of the valley—every little white warm bell was perfect. He offered them to her with a low bow.

"This is the most beautiful flower I have seen for many years," he said. "May I be forgiven for begging permission to offer it to the most beautiful lady I have ever seen?"

Beatrice took it from him, blushing at his words. He walked by her side along the yellow sands, the waves rolling in and breaking at their feet. Again his eloquence charmed her. He told her his name, and how he was captain of a trading vessel. Instinctively he seemed to understand her character—her romantic, ideal way of looking at everything. He talked to her of the deep seas and their many wonders; of the ocean said to be fathomless; of the coral islands and of waters in whose depths the oyster containing the pale, gleaming pearl is found; of the quiet nights spent at sea, where the stars shine as they never seem to shine on land; of the strange hush that falls upon the heaving waters before a storm. He told of long days when they were becalmed upon the green deep, when the vessel seemed

"A painted ship upon a painted ocean."

With her marvelous fancy and quick imagination she followed him to the wondrous depth of silent waters where strange shapes, never seen by human eye, abound. She hung upon his words; he saw it, and rejoiced in his success. He did not startle her by any further compliment, but when their walk was ended he told her that morning would live in his memory as the happiest time of his life.

After a few days it seemed to become a settled thing that Beatrice should meet Hugh Fernely. Lillian wondered that her sister so often preferred lonely rambles, but she saw the beautiful face she loved so dearly grow brighter and happier, never dreaming the cause.

For many long days little thought of Hugh Fernely came to Beatrice. Her mind ran always upon what he had told her—upon his description of what he had seen and heard. He noted this, and waited with a patience born of love for the time when she should take an interest in him.

Words were weak in which to express the passionate love he felt for this beautiful and stately young girl. It seemed to him like a fairy tale. On the morning he first saw Beatrice he had been walking a long distance, and had lain down to rest on the cliffs. There the beautiful vision had dawned upon him. The first moment he gazed into that peerless face he loved Beatrice with a passion that frightened himself. He determined to win her at any cost.

At last and by slow degrees he began to speak of her and himself, slowly and carefully, his keen eyes noting every change upon her face; he began to offer her delicate compliments and flattery so well disguised that it did not seem to her flattery at all. He made her understand that he believed her to be the most beautiful girl he had ever beheld. He treated her always as though she were a queen, and he her humblest slave.

Slowly but surely the sweet poison worked its way; the day came when that graceful, subtle flattery was necessary to the very existence of Beatrice Earle. There was much to excuse her; the clever, artful man into whose hands she

had fallen was her first admirer—the first who seemed to remember she was no longer a child, and to treat her with deferential attention. Had she been, as other girls are, surrounded by friends, accustomed to society, properly trained, prepared by the tender wisdom of a loving mother, she would never have cast her proud eyes upon Hugh Fernely; she would never have courted the danger or run the risk.

As it was, while Dora preferred solitude, and nourished a keen dislike to her husband in her heart—while Ronald yielded to obstinate pride, and neglected every duty—while both preferred the indulgence of their own tempers, and neglected the children the Almighty intrusted to them, Beatrice went on to her fate.

It was so sad a story, the details so simple yet so pitiful. Every element of that impulsive, idealistic nature helped on the tragedy. Hugh Fernely understood Beatrice as perhaps no one else ever did. He idealized himself. To her at length he became a hero who had met with numberless adventures—a hero who had traveled and fought, brave and generous. After a time he spoke to her of love, at first never appearing to suppose that she could care for him, but telling her of his own passionate worship how her face haunted him, filled his dreams at night, and shone before him all day—how the very ground she stood upon was sacred to him—how he envied the flowers she touched—how he would give up everything to be the rose that died in her hands. It was all very pretty and poetical, and he knew how to find pretty, picturesque spots in the woods where the birds and the flowers helped him to tell his story.

Beatrice found it very pleasant to be worshiped like a queen; there was no more monotony for her. Every morning she looked forward to seeing Hugh—to learning more of those words that seemed to her like sweetest music. She knew that at some time or other during the day she would see him; he never tired of admiring her beauty. Blameworthy was the sad mother with her stern doctrines, blameworthy the proud, neglectful father, that she knew not how wrong all this was. He loved her; in a thousand eloquent ways he told her so. She was his loadstar, beautiful and peerless. It was far more pleasant to sit on the sea shore, or under the greenwood trees, listening to such words than to pass long, dreary hours indoors. And none of those intrusted with the care of the young girl ever dreamed of her danger.

So this was the love her mother dreaded so much. This was the love poets sung of and novelists wrote about. It was pleasant; but in after days, when Beatrice herself came to love, she knew that this had been but child's play.

It was the romance of the stolen meeting that charmed Beatrice. If Hugh had been admitted to the Elms she would have wearied of him in a week; but the concealment gave her something to think of. There was something to occupy her mind; every day she must arrange for a long ramble, so that she might meet Hugh. So, while the corn grew ripe in the fields, and the blossoms died away—while warm, luxurious summer ruled with his golden wand Ronald Earle's daughter went on to her fate.

Chapter XVIII

At length there came an interruption to Hugh Fernely's love dream. The time drew near when he must leave Seabay. The vessel he commanded was bound for China, and was to sail in a few days. The thought that he must leave the beautiful girl he loved so dearly and so deeply struck him with unendurable pain; he seemed only to have lived since he had met her, and he knew that life without her would be a burden too great for him to bear. He asked himself a hundred times over: "Does she love me?" He could not tell. He resolved to try. He dared not look that future in the face which should take her from him.

The time drew near; the day was settled on which the "Seagull" was to set sail, and yet Hugh Fernely had won no promise from Beatrice Earle.

One morning Hugh met her at the stile leading from the field into the meadow lane—the prettiest spot in

Knutsford. The ground was a perfectly beautiful carpet of flowers—wild hyacinths, purple foxgloves, pretty, pale strawberry blossoms all grew there. The hedges were one mass of wild roses and woodbine; the tall elm trees that ran along the lane met shadily overhead; the banks on either side were radiant in different colored mosses; huge ferns surrounded the roots of the trees.

Beatrice liked the quiet, pretty, green meadow lane. She often walked there, and on this eventful morning Hugh saw her sitting in the midst of the fern leaves. He was by her side in a minute, and his dark, handsome face lighted up with joy.

"How the sun shines!" he said. "I wonder the birds begin to sing and the flowers to bloom before you are out, Miss Earle."

"But I am not their sun," replied Beatrice with a smile.

"But you are mine," cried Hugh; and before she could reply he was kneeling at her feet, her hands clasped in his, while he told her of the love that was wearing his life away.

No one could listen to such words unmoved; they were true and eloquent, full of strange pathos. He told her how dark without her the future would be to him, how sad and weary his life; whereas if she would only love him, and let him claim her when he returned, he would make her as happy as a queen. He would take her to the bright sunny lands—would show her all the beauties and wonders she longed to see—would buy her jewels and dresses such as her beauty deserved—would be her humble, devoted slave, if she would only love him.

It was very pleasant—the bright morning, the picturesque glade, the warmth and brightness of summer all around. Beatrice looked at the handsome, pale face with emotion, she felt Hugh's warm lips pressed to her hand, she felt hot tears rain upon her fingers, and wondered at such love. Yes, this was the love she had read of and thought about.

"Beatrice," cried Hugh, "do not undo me with one word. Say you love me, my darling—say I may return and claim you as my own. Your whole life shall be like one long, bright summer's day."

She was carried away by the burning torrent of passionate words. With all her spirit and pride she felt weak and powerless before the mighty love of this strong man. Almost unconscious of what she did, Beatrice laid her white hands upon the dark, handsome head of her lover.

"Hush, Hugh," she said, "you frighten me. I do love you; see, you tears wet my hand."

It was not a very enthusiastic response, but it satisfied him. He clasped the young girl in his arms, and she did not resist; he kissed the proud lips and the flushed cheek. Beatrice Earle said no word; he was half frightened, half touched, and wholly subdued.

"Now you are mine," cried Hugh—"mine, my own peerless one; nothing shall part us but death!"

"Hush!" cried Beatrice, again shuddering as with cold fear. "That is a word I dislike and dread so much, Hugh—do not use it."

"I will not," he replied; and then Beatrice forgot her fears. He was so happy—he loved her so dearly—he was so proud of winning her. She listened through the long hours of that sunny morning. It was the fifteenth of July—he made her note the day and in two years he would return to take her forever from the quiet house where her beauty and grace alike were buried.

That was the view of the matter that had seized upon the girl's imagination. It was not so much love for Hugh—she liked him. His flattery—the excitement of meeting him—his love, had become necessary to her; but had any other means of escape from the monotony she hated presented itself, she would have availed herself of it quite as eagerly. Hugh was not so much a lover to her as a medium of escape from a life that daily became more and more unendurable.

She listened with bright smiles when he told her that in two years he should return to fetch her; and she, thinking much of the romance, and little of the dishonor of concealment, told him how her sad young mother hated and dreaded all mention of love and lovers.

"Then you must never tell her," he said—"leave that for me until I return. I shall have money then, and perhaps the command of a fine vessel. She will not refuse me when she knows how dearly I love you, and even should your father—the father you tell of—come home, you will be true to me, Beatrice, will you not?"

"Yes, I will be true," she replied—and, to do her justice, she meant it at the time. Her father's return seemed vague and uncertain; it might take place in ten or twenty years—it might never be. Hugh offered her freedom and liberty in two years.

"If others should seek your love," he said, "should praise your beauty, and offer you rank or wealth, you will say to yourself that you will be true to Hugh?"

"Yes," she said, firmly, "I will do so."

"Two years will soon pass away," said he. "Ah, Beatrice," he continued, "I shall leave you next Thursday; give me all the hours you can. Once away from you, all time will seem to me a long, dark night."

It so happened that the farmer and his men were at work in a field quite on the other side of Knutsford. Dora and Lillian were intent, the one upon a box of books newly arrived, the other upon a picture; so Beatrice had every day many hours at her disposal. She spent them all with Hugh, whose love seemed to increase with every moment.

Hugh was to leave Seabay on Thursday, and on Wednesday evening he lingered by her side as though he could not part with her. To do Hugh Fernely justice, he loved Beatrice for herself. Had she been a penniless beggar he would have loved her just the same. The only dark cloud in his sky was the knowledge that she was far above him. Still, he argued to himself, the story she told of her father was an impossible one. He did not believe that Ronald Earle would ever take his daughters home—he did not quite know what to think, but he had no fear on that score.

On the Wednesday evening they wandered down the cliff and sat upon the shore, watching the sun set over the waters. Hugh took from his pocket a little morocco case and placed it in Beatrice's hands. She opened it, and cried out with admiration; there lay the most exquisite ring she had ever seen, of pure pale gold, delicately and elaborately chased, and set with three gleaming opals of rare beauty.

"Look at the motto inside," said Hugh.

She held the ring in her dainty white fingers, and read: "Until death parts us."

"Oh, Hugh," she cried, that word again?" I dread it; why is it always coming before me?"

He smiled at her fears, and asked her to let him place the ring upon her finger.

"In two years," he said, "I shall place a plain gold ring on this beautiful hand. Until then wear this, Beatrice, for my sake; it is our betrothal ring."

"It shall not leave my finger," she said. "Mamma will not notice it, and every one else will think she has given it to me herself."

"And now," said Hugh, "promise me once more, Beatrice, you will be true to me—you will wait for me—that when I return you will let me claim you as my own?"

"I do promise," she said, looking at the sun shining on the opals.

Beatrice never forgot the hour that followed. Proud, impetuous, and imperial as she was, the young man's love and sorrow touched her as nothing had ever done. The sunbeams died away in the west, the glorious mass of tinted clouds fell like a veil over the evening sky, the waves came in rapidly, breaking into sheets of white, creamy foam in the gathering darkness, but still he could not leave her.

"I must go, Hugh," said Beatrice, at length; "mamma will miss me."

She never forgot the wistful eyes lingering upon her face.

"Once more, only once more," he said. "Beatrice, my love, when I return you will be my wife?"

"Yes," she replied, startled alike by his grief and his love.

"Never be false to me," he continued. "If you were—"

"What then?" she asked, with a smile, as he paused.

"I should either kill myself or you," he replied, "perhaps both. Do not make me say such terrible things. It could not be. The sun may fall from the heavens, the sea rolling there may become dry land. Nature—everything may prove false, but not you, the noblest, the truest of women. Say 'I love you, Hugh,' and let those be your last words to me. They will go with me over the wide ocean, and be my rest and stay."

"I love you, Hugh," she said, as he wished her.

Something like a deep, bitter sob came from his white lips. Death itself would have been far easier than leaving her. He raised her beautiful face to his—his tears and kisses seemed to burn it—and then he was gone.

Gone! The romance of the past few weeks, the engrossing interest, all suddenly collapsed. Tomorrow the old monotonous life must begin again, without flattery, praise, or love. He had gone; the whole romance was ended; nothing of it remained save the memory of his love and the ring upon her finger.

At first there fell upon Beatrice a dreadful blank. The monotony, the quiet, the simple occupations, were more unendurable than ever; but in a few days that feeling wore off, and then she began to wonder at what she had done. The glamour fell from before her eyes; the novelty and excitement, the romance of the stolen meetings, the pleasant homage of love and worship no longer blinded her. Ah, and before Hugh Fernely had been many days and nights upon the wide ocean, she ended by growing rather ashamed of the matter, and trying to think of it as little as she could! Once she half tried to tell Lillian; but the look of horror on the sweet, pure face startled her, and she turned the subject by some merry jest.

Then there came a letter from Mrs. Vyvian announcing her return. The girls were warmly attached to the lady, who had certainly devoted the ten best years of her life to them. She brought with her many novelties, new books, new music, amusing intelligence from the outer world. For some days there was no lack of excitement and amusement; then all fell again into the old routine.

Mrs. Vyvian saw a great change in Beatrice. Some of the old impetuosity had died away; she was as brilliant as ever, full of life and gayety, but in some way there was an indescribable change. At times a strange calm would come over the beautiful face, a far-off, dreamy expression steal into the dark, bright eyes. She had lost her old frankness. Time was when Mrs. Vyvian could read all her thoughts, and very rebellious thoughts they often were. But now there seemed to be a sealed chamber in the girl's heart. She never spoke of the future, and for the first time her watchful friend saw in her a nervous fear that distressed her. Carefully and cautiously the governess tried to ascertain the cause; she felt sure at last that, young as she was, carefully as she had been watched, Beatrice Earle had a secret in her life that she shared with no one else.

Chapter XIX

There were confusion and dismay in the stately home of the Earles. One sultry morning in August Lord Earle went out into the garden, paying no heed to the excessive heat. As he did not return to luncheon, the butler went in search of him and found his master lying as one dead on the ground. He was carried to his own room, doctors were summoned in hot haste from far and near; everything that science or love, skill or wisdom could suggest was done for him, but all in vain. The hour had come when he must leave home, rank, wealth, position—whatever he valued most—when he must answer for his life and what he had done with it—when he must account for wealth, talent, for the son given to him—when human likings, human passions, would seem so infinitely little.

But while Lord Earle lay upon the bed, pale and unconscious, Lady Earle, who knelt by him and never left him, felt sure that his mind and heart were both active. He could not speak; he did not seem to understand. Who knows what passes in those dread moments of silence, when the light of eternity shows so clearly all that we have done in the past? It may be that while he lay there, hovering as it were between two worlds, the remembrance of his son struck him like a two-edged sword—his son, his only child given to him to train, not only for earth but for heaven—the boy he had loved and idolized, then cast off, and allowed to become a wanderer on the face of the earth. It may be that his stern, sullen pride, his imperious self-will, his resolute trampling upon the voice of nature and duty, confronted him in the new light shining upon him. Perhaps his own words returned to him, that until he lay dead Ronald should never see Earlescourt again; for suddenly the voice they thought hushed forever sounded strangely in the silence of that death chamber.

"My son!" cried the dying man, clasping his hands—"my son!"

Those who saw it never forgot the blank, awful terror that came upon the dying face as he uttered his last words.

They bore the weeping wife from the room. Lady Earle, strong, and resolute though she was, could not drive that scene from her mind. She was ill for many days, and so it happened that the lord of Earlescourt was laid in the family vault long ere the family at the Elms knew of the change awaiting them.

Ronald was summoned home in all haste; but months passed ere letters reached him, and many more before he returned to England.

Lord Earle's will was brief, there was no mention of his son's name. There was a handsome provision for Lady Earle, the pretty little estate of Roslyn was settled upon her; the servants received numerous legacies; Sir Harry Laurence and Sir Hugh Charteris were each to receive a magnificent mourning ring; but there was no mention of the once-loved son and heir.

Dora Thorne

As the heir at law, everything was Ronald's—the large amount of money the late lord had saved, title, estates, everything reverted to him. But Ronald would have exchanged all for one line of forgiveness, one word of pardon from the father he had never ceased to love.

It was arranged that until Ronald's return his mother should continue to reside at Earlescourt, and the management of the estates was intrusted to Mr. Burt, the family solicitor.

Lady Earle resolved to go to the Elms herself; great changes must be made there. Ronald's wife and children must take their places in the world; and she felt a proud satisfaction in thinking that, thanks to her sensible and judicious management, Dora would fill her future position with credit. She anticipated Ronald's delight when he should see his beautiful and accomplished daughters. Despite her great sorrow, the lady of Earlescourt felt some degree of hope for the future. She wrote to the Elms, telling Dora of her husband's death, and announcing her own coming; then the little household understood that their quiet and solitude had ended forever.

The first thing was to provide handsome mourning. Dora was strangely quiet and sad through it all. The girls asked a hundred questions about their father, whom they longed to see. They knew he had left home in consequence of some quarrel with his father—so much Lady Earle told them—but they never dreamed that his marriage had caused the fatal disagreement; they never knew that, for their mother's sake, Lady Earle carefully concealed all knowledge of it from them.

Lady Earle reached the Elms one evening in the beginning of September. She asked first to see Dora alone.

During the long years Dora had grown to love the stately, gentle lady who was Ronald's mother. She could not resist her sweet, gracious dignity and winning manners. So, when Lady Earle, before seeing her granddaughters, went to Dora's room, wishing for a long consultation with her, Dora received her with gentle, reverential affection.

"I wish to see you first," said Lady Helena Earle, "so that we may arrange our plans before the children know anything of them. Ronald will return to England in a few months. Dora, what course shall you adopt?"

"None," she replied. "Your son's return has nothing whatever to do with me."

"But, surely," said lady Helena, "for the children's sake you will not refuse at least an outward show of reconciliation?"

"Mr. Earle has not asked it," said Dora—"he never will do so, Lady Helena. It is as far from his thoughts as from mine."

Lady Earle sat for some moments too much astounded for speech.

"I never inquired the cause of your separation, Dora," she said, gently, "and I never wish to know it. My son told me you could live together no longer. I loved my own husband; I was a devoted and affectionate wife to him. I bore with his faults and loved his virtues, so that I can not imagine what I should do were I in your place. I say to you what I should say to Ronald—they are solemn words—"What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.' Now let me tell you my opinion. It is this, that nothing can justify such a separation as yours—nothing but the most outrageous offenses or the most barbarous cruelty. Take the right course, Dora; submit to your husband. Believe me, woman's rights are all fancy and nonsense; loving, gentle submission is the fairest ornament of woman. Even should Ronald be in the wrong, trample upon all pride and temper, and make the first advances to him."

"I can not," said Dora gravely.

"Ronald was always generous and chivalrous," continued Lady Earle. "Oh, Dora, have you forgotten how my son gave up all the world for you?"

"No," she replied, bitterly; "nor has he forgotten it, Lady Earle."

The remembrance of what she thought her wrongs rose visibly before her. She saw again the magnificent face of Valentine Charteris, with its calm, high-bred wonder. She saw her husband's white, angry, indignant countenance—gestures full of unutterable contempt. Ah, no, never again! Nothing could heal that quarrel.

"You must take your place in the world," continued Lady Earle. "You are no longer simply Mrs. Earle of the Elms; you are Lady Earle, of Earlescourt, wife of its lord, the mother of his children. You have duties too numerous for me to mention, and you must not shrink from them."

"I refuse all," she replied, calmly; "I refuse to share your son's titles, his wealth, his position, his duties; I refuse to make any advances toward a reconciliation; I refuse to be reconciled."

"And why?" asked Lady Helena, gravely.

A proud flush rose to Dora's face—hot anger stirred in her heart.

"Because your son said words to me that I never can and never will forget," she cried. "I did wrong—Lady Helena, I was mad, jealous, blind—I did wrong—I did what I now know to be dishonorable and degrading. I knew no better, and he might have pardoned me, remembering that. But before the woman I believe to be my rival he bitterly regretted having made me his wife."

"They were hard words," said Lady Earle.

"Very hard," replied Dora; "they broke my heart—they slew me in my youth; I have never lived since then."

"Can you never forgive and forget them, Dora?" asked Lady Helena.

"Never," she replied; "they are burned into my heart and on my brain. I shall never forget them; your son and I must be strangers, Lady Earle, while we live."

"I can say no more," sighed Lady Earle. "Perhaps a mightier voice will call to you, Dora, and then you will obey."

A deep silence fell upon them. Lady Helena was more grieved and disconcerted than she cared to own. She had thought of taking her son's wife and children home in triumph, but it was not to be.

"Shall we speak of the children now?" she asked at length. "Some arrangements must be made for them."

"Yes," said Dora, "their father has claims upon them. I am ready to yield to them. I do not believe he will ever love them or care for them, because they are mine. At the same time, I give them up to him and to you, Lady Earle. The sweetest and best years of their lives have been spent with me; I must therefore not repine. I have but one stipulation to make, and it is that my children shall never hear one word against me."

"You know little of me," said Lady Helena, "if you think such a thing is possible. You would rather part with your children than accompany them?"

"Far rather," she replied. "I know you will allow them to visit me, Lady Earle. I have known for many years that such a time must come, and I am prepared for it."

"But, my dear Dora," said Lady Earle, warmly, "have you considered what parting with your children implies—the solitude, the desolation?"

"I know it all," replied Dora. "It will be hard, but not so hard nor so bitter as living under the same roof with their father."

Carefully and quietly Dora listened to Lady Earle's plans and arrangements—how her children were to go to Earlescourt and take the position belonging to them. Mrs. Vyvian was to go with them and remain until Lord Earle returned. Until then they were not to be introduced into society; it would take some time to accustom them to so great a change. When Lord Earl returned he could pursue what course he would.

"He will be so proud of them!" said Lady Earle. "I have never seen a girl so spirited and beautiful as Beatrice, nor one so fair and gentle as Lillian. Oh, Dora, I should be happy if you were going with us."

Never once during the few days of busy preparation did Dora's proud courage give way. The girls at first refused to leave her; they exhausted themselves in conjectures as to her continued residence at the Elms, and were forced to be satisfied with Lady Earle's off-hand declaration that their mother could not endure any but a private life.

"Mamma has a title now," said Beatrice, wonderingly; "why will she not assume it?"

"Your mother's tastes are simple and plain," replied Lady Earle. "Her wishes must be treated with respect."

Dora did not give way until the two fair faces that had brightened her house vanished. When they were gone, and a strange, hushed silence fell upon the place, pride and courage gave way. In that hour the very bitterness of death seemed to be upon her.

Chapter XX

It was a proud moment for Lady Earle when she led the two young girls through the long line of servants assembled to receive them. They were both silent from sheer wonder. They had left Florence at so early an age that they had not the faintest remembrance of the pretty villa on the banks of the Arno. All their ideas were centered in the Elms—they had never seen any other home.

Lady Earle watched the different effect produced upon them by the glimpse of Earlescourt. Lillian grew pale; she trembled, and her wondering eyes filled with tears. Beatrice, on the contrary, seemed instantly to take in the spirit of the place. Her face flushed; a proud light came into her glorious eyes; her haughty head was carried more regally than ever. There was no timidity, no shyly expressed wonder, no sensitive shrinking from new and unaccustomed splendor.

They were deeply impressed with the magnificence of their new home. For many long days Lady Earle employed herself in showing the numerous treasures of art and vertu the house contained. The picture gallery pleased Beatrice most; she gloried in the portraits of the grand old ancestors, "each with a story to his name." One morning she stood before Lady Helena's portrait, admiring the striking likeness. Suddenly turning to the stately lady by her side, she said: "All the Ladies Earle are here; where is my own mamma? Her face is sweet and fair as any of these. Why is there no portrait of her?"

"There will be one some day," said Lady Helena. "When your father returns all these things will be seen to."

"We have no brother," continued Beatrice. "Every baron here seems to have been succeeded by his son—who will succeed my father?"

"His next of kin," replied Lady Earle, sadly—"Lionel Dacre; he is a third cousin of Lord Earle. He will have both title and estate."

She signed deeply; it was a real trouble to Lady Helena that she should never see her son's son, never love and nurse, never bless the heir of Earlescourt.

Lillian delighted most in the magnificent gardens, the thickly wild wooded park, where every dell was filled with flowers and ferns, every knoll crowned with noble trees. The lake, with white lilies sleeping on its tranquil bosom and weeping willows touching its clear surface, pleased her most of all. As they stood on its banks, Beatrice, looking into the transparent depths, shuddered, and turned quickly away.

"I am tired of water," she said; "nothing wearied me so much at Knutsford as the wide, restless sea. I must have been born with a natural antipathy to water."

Many days passed before they were familiar with Earlescourt. Every day brought its new wonders.

A pretty suite of rooms had been prepared for each sister; they were in the western wing, and communicated with each other. The Italian nurse who had come with them from Florence had preferred remaining with Dora. Lady Earle had engaged two fashionable ladies' maids, had also ordered for each a wardrobe suitable to the daughters of Lord Earle.

Mrs. Vyvian had two rooms near her charges. Knowing that some months might elapse before Ronald returned, Lady Helena settled upon a course of action. The young girls were to be kept in seclusion, and not to be introduced to the gay world, seeing only a few old friends of the family; they were to continue to study for a few hours every morning, to drive or walk with Lady Earle after luncheon, to join her at the seven o'clock dinner, and to pass the evening in the drawing room.

It was a new and delightful life. Beatrice reveled in the luxury and grandeur that surrounded her. She amused Lady Earle by her vivacious description of the quiet home at the Elms.

"I feel at home here," she said, "and I never did there. At times I wake up, half dreading to hear the rustling of the tall elm trees, and old Mrs. Thorne's voice asking about the cows. Poor mamma! I can not understand her taste."

When they became more accustomed to the new life, the strange incongruity in their family struck them both. On one side a grand old race, intermarried with some of the noblest families in England—a stately house, title, wealth, rank, and position; on the other a simple farmer and his homely wife, the plain old homestead, and complete isolation from all they considered society.

How could it be? How came it that their father was lord of Earlescourt and their mother the daughter of a plain country farmer? For the first time it struck them both that there was some mystery in the life of their parents. Both grew more shy of speaking of the Elms, feeling with the keen instinct peculiar to youth that there was something unnatural in their position.

Visitors came occasionally to Earlescourt. Sir Harry and Lady Laurence of Holtham often called; Lady Charteris came from Greenoke, and all warmly admired the lovely daughters of Lord Earle.

Beatrice, with her brilliant beauty, her magnificent voice, and gay, graceful manner, was certainly the favorite. Sir Harry declared she was the finest rider in the county.

There was an unusual stir of preparation once when Lady Earle told them that the daughter of her devoted friend, Lady Charteris, was coming to spend a few days at Earlescourt. Then, for the first time, they saw the beautiful and

stately lady whose fate was so strangely interwoven with theirs.

Valentine Charteris was no longer "the queen of the county." Prince di Bergezi had won the beautiful English woman. He had followed her to Greenoke and repeated his question. There was neither coquetry nor affectation in Valentine—she had thought the matter over, and decided that she was never likely to meet with any one else she liked and respected so much as her Italian lover. He had the virtues, without the faults, of the children of the South; a lavishly generous, princely disposition; well-cultivated artistic tastes; good principles and a chivalrous sense of honor. Perhaps the thing that touched her most was his great love for her. In many respects he resembled Ronald Earle more nearly than any one else she had ever met.

To the intense delight of both parents, Miss Charteris accepted him. For her sake the prince consented to spend every alternate year in England.

Three times had the whole country side welcomed the stately Italian and his beautiful wife. This was their fourth visit to England, and, when the princess heard from Lady Charteris that Ronald's two daughters, whom she remembered as little babes, were at Earlescourt, nothing would satisfy her but a visit there.

The young girls looked in admiring wonder at the lady. They had never seen any one so dazzling or so bright. The calm, grand, Grecian face had gained in beauty; the magnificent head, with its wealth of golden hair, the tall, stately figure, charmed them. And when Valentine took them in her arms and kissed them her thoughts went back to the white, wild face in the garden and the dark eyes that had flamed in hot anger upon her.

"I knew your mother years ago," she said; "has she never mentioned my name? I used to nurse you both in the little villa at Florence. I was one of your father's oldest friends."

No, they had never heard her name; and Beatrice wondered that her mother could have known and forgotten one so beautiful as the princess.

The week she remained passed like a long, bright dream. Beatrice almost worshiped Valentine; this was what she had dreamed of long ago; this was one of the ideal ladies living in the bright, gay world she was learning to understand.

When the prince and princess left Earlescourt they made Lady Helena promise that Beatrice and Lillian should visit them at Florence. They spoke of the fair and coquettish Countess Rosali, still a reigning belle, and said how warmly she would welcome them for their father's sake.

"You talk so much of Italy," said Valentine to Beatrice. "It is just the land for the romance you love. You shall see blue skies and sunny seas, vines, and myrtles, and orange trees in bloom; you shall see such luxuriance and beauty that you will never wish to return to this cold, dreary England."

It was thus arranged that, when Lord Earle returned, the visit should be paid. The evening after their guests' departure seemed long and triste.

"I will write to mamma," said Beatrice; "it is strange she never told us anything of her friend. I must tell her all about the visit."

Not daring to ask the girls to keep any secret from Dora, Lady Earle was obliged to let the letter go. The passionate, lonely heart brooded over every word. Beatrice dwelt with loving admiration on the calm, grand beauty of the princess, her sweet and gracious manner, her kindly recollection of Dora, and her urgent invitation to them. Dora read it through calmly, each word stabbing her with cruel pain. The old, fierce jealousy rose in her heart, crushing every gentle thought. She tore the letter, so full of Valentine, into a thousand shreds.

"She drew my husband from me," she cried, "with the miserable beauty of her fair face, and now she will win my children."

Then across the fierce tempest of jealous anger came one thought like a ray of light. Valentine was married; she had married the wealthy, powerful prince who had been Ronald's patron; so that, after all, even if she had lured Ronald from her, he had not cared for her, or she had soon ceased to care for him.

Beatrice thought it still more strange when her mother's reply to that long, enthusiastic letter came. Dora said simply that she had never named the Princess di Borgesi because she was a person whom she did not care to remember.

Fifteen months passed, and at length came a letter from Lord Earle, saying that he hoped to reach England before Christmas, and in any case would be with them by Christmas day. It was a short letter, written in the hurry of traveling; the words that touched his children most, were "I am glad you have the girls at Earlescourt; I am anxious to see what they are like. Make them happy, mother; let them have all they want; and, if it be possible, after my long neglect, teach them to love me."

The letter contained no mention of their mother; no allusion was made to her. The girls marked the weeks go by in some little trepidation. What if, after all, this father, whom they did not remember, should not like them: Beatrice did not think such a thing very probable, but Lillian passed many an hour in nervous, fanciful alarm.

It was strange how completely all the old life had died away. Both had felt a kind of affection for the homely farmer and his wife—they sent many presents to them—but Beatrice would curl her proud lip in scorn when she read aloud that "Mr. And Mrs. Thorne desired their humble duty to Lady Earle."

Lady Earle felt no anxiety about her son's return; looking at his daughters, she saw no fault in them. Beautiful, accomplished, and graceful, what more could he desire? She inwardly thanked Providence that neither of them bore the least resemblance to the Thornes. Beatrice looked like one of the Ladies Earle just stepped out from a picture; Lillian, in her fair, dove-like loveliness, was quite as charming. What would Lady Earle—so truthful, so honorable—have thought or said had she known that their bright favorite with the Earle face had plighted her troth, unknown to any one, to the captain of a trading vessel, who was to claim her in two years for his wife?

Lady Earle had formed her own plans for Beatrice; she hoped the time would come when she would be Lady Earle of Earlescourt. Nothing could be more delightful, nothing easier, provided Beatrice would marry the young heir, Lionel Dacre.

One morning, as the sisters sat in Lillian's room, Lady Earle entered with an unusual expression of emotion on her fair, high-bred face. She held an open letter in her hand.

"My dear children," she said, "you must each look your very best this evening. I have a note here—your father will be home tonight."

The calm, proud voice faltered then, and the stately mistress of Earlescourt wept at the thought of her son's return as she had never wept since he left her.

Chapter XXI

Once more Ronald Earle stood upon English shores; once again he heard his mother tongue spoken all around him, once again he felt the charm of quiet, sweet English scenery. Seventeen years had passed since he had taken Dora's hand in his and told her he cared nothing for all he was leaving behind him, nothing for any one in the

world save herself—seventeen years, and his love—dream had lasted but two! Then came the cruel shock that blinded him with anger and shame; then came the rude awakening from his dream when, looking his life bravely in the face, he found it nothing but a burden—hope and ambition gone—the grand political mission he had once believed to be his own impossible nothing left to him of his glorious dreams but existence—and all for what? For the mad, foolish love of a pretty face. He hated himself for his weakness and folly. For that—for the fair, foolish woman who had shamed him so sorely—he had half broken his mother's heart, and had embittered his father's life. For that he had made himself an exile, old in his youth, worn and weary, when life should have been all smiling around him.

These thoughts flashed through his mind as the express train whirled through the quiet English landscape. Winter snows had fallen, the great bare branches of the tall trees were gaunt and snow-laden, the fields were one vast expanse of snow, the frost had hardened the icicles hanging from hedges and trees. The scene seemed strange to him after so many years of the tropical sun. Yet every breath of the sharp, frosty air invigorated him and brought him new life and energy.

At length the little station was reached, and he saw the carriage with his liveried servants awaiting him. A warm flush rose to Lord Earle's face; for a moment he felt almost ashamed of meeting his old domestics. They must all know now why he had left home. His own valet, Morton, was there. Lord Earle had kept him, and the man had asked permission to go and meet his old master.

Ronald was pleased to see him; there were a few words of courteous greeting from Lord Earle to all around, and a few still kinder words to Morton.

Once again Ronald saw the old trees of which he had dreamed so often, the stately cedars, the grand spreading oaks, the tall aspens, the lady beeches, the groves of poplars—every spot was familiar to him. In the distance he saw the lake shining through the trees; he drove past the extensive gardens, the orchards now bare and empty. He was not ashamed of the tears that rushed warmly to his eyes when the towers and turrets of Earlescourt came in sight.

A sharp sense of pain filled his heart—keen regret, bitter remorse, a longing for power to undo all that was done, to recall the lost miserable years—the best of his life. He might return; he might do his best to atone for his error; but neither repentance nor atonement would give him back the father whose pride he had humbled in the dust.

As the carriage rolled up the broad drive, a hundred instances of his father's love and indulgence flashed across him—he had never refused any request save one. He wisely and tenderly tried to dissuade him from the false step that could never be retraced but all in vain.

He remembered his father's face on that morning when, with outstretched hands, he bade him leave his presence and never seek it more—when he told him that whenever he looked upon his dead face he was to remember that death itself was less bitter than the hour in which he had been deceived.

Sad, bitter memories filled his heart when the carriage stopped at the door and Ronald caught sight of the old familiar faces, some in smiles, some in tears.

The library door was thrown open. Hardly knowing whither he went, Lord Earle entered, and it was closed behind him. His eyes, dimmed with tears, saw a tall, stately lady, who advanced to meet him with open arms.

The face he remembered so fair and calm bore deep marks of sorrow; the proud, tender eyes were shadowed; the glossy hair was threaded with silver; but it was his mother's voice that cried to him, "My son, my son, thank Heaven you have returned!"

Dora Thorne

He never remembered how long his mother held him clasped in her arms. Earth has no love like a mother's love—none so tender, so true, so full of sweet wisdom, so replete with pity and pardon. It was her own son whom Lady Earle held in her arms. She forgot that he was a man who had incurred just displeasure. He was her boy, her own treasure, and so it was that her words of greeting were all of loving welcome.

"How changed you are," she said, drawing him nearer to the fast-fading light. "Your face is quite bronzed, and you look so many years older—so sad, so worn! Oh, Ronald, I must teach you to grow young and happy again!"

He sighed deeply, and his mother's heart grew sad as she watched his restless face.

"Old-fashioned copy-books say, mother, that 'to be happy one must be good.' I have not been good," he said with a slight smile, "and I shall never be happy."

In the faint waning light, through which the snow gleamed strangely, mother and son sat talking. Lady Earle told Ronald of his father's death—of the last yearning cry when all the pent-up love of years seemed to rush forth and overpower him with its force. It was some comfort to him, after all, that his father's last thoughts and last words had been of him.

His heart was strangely softened; a new hope came to him. Granted that the best part of his life was wasted, he would do his best with the remainder.

"And my children," he said, "my poor little girls! I will not see them until I am calm and refreshed. I know they are well and happy with you."

Then, taking advantage of his mood, Lady Helena said what she had been longing to say.

"Ronald," she began, "I have had much to suffer. You will never know how my heart has been torn between my husband and my son. Let my last few years be spent in peace."

"They shall, mother," he said. "Your happiness shall be my study."

"There can be no rest for me," continued his mother, "unless all division in our family ends. Ronald, I, who never asked you a favor before, ask one now. Seek Dora and bring her home reconciled and happy."

A dark angry frown such as she had never seen there before came into Lord Earle's face.

"Anything but that," he replied, hastily; "I can not do it, mother. I could not, if I lay upon my death bed."

"And why?" asked Lady Helena, simply, as she had asked Dora.

"For a hundred reasons, the first and greatest of which is that she has outraged all my notions of honor, shamed and disgraced me in the presence of one whom I esteemed and revered; she has—But no, I will not speak of my wife's errors, it were unmanly. I can not forgive her, mother. I wish her no harm; let her have every luxury my wealth can procure, but do not name her to me. I should be utterly devoid of all pride if I could pardon her."

"Pride on your side," said Lady Earle, sadly, "and temper on hers! Oh, Ronald, how will it end? Be wise in time; the most honest and noble man is he who conquers himself. Conquer yourself, my son, and pardon Dora."

"I could more easily die," he replied, bitterly.

"Then," said Lady Earle, sorrowfully, "I must say to you as I said to Dora—beware; pride and temper must bend and break. Be warned in time."

"Mother," interrupted Ronald, bending over the pale face so full of emotion, "let this be the last time. You distress yourself and me; do not renew the subject. I may forgive her in the hour of death—not before."

Lady Helena's last hope died away; she had thought that in the first hour of his return, when old memories had softened his heart, she would prevail on him to seek his wife whom he had ceased to love, and for their children's sake bring her home. She little dreamed that the coming home, the recollection of his father, the ghost of his lost youth and blasted hopes rising every instant, had hardened him against the one for whom he had lost all.

"You will like to see the children now," said Lady Helena. "I will ring for lights. You will be charmed with both. Beatrice is much like you—she has the Earle face, and, unless I am mistaken, the Earle spirit, too."

"Beatrice," said Lillian, as they descended the broad staircase, "I am frightened. I wish I could remember something of papa his voice or his smile; it is like going to see a stranger. And suppose, after all, he does not like us!"

"Suppose what is of greater importance," said Beatrice proudly "that we do not like him!"

But, for all her high spirits and hauteur, Beatrice almost trembled as the library door opened and Lady Earle came forward to meet them. Beatrice raised her eyes dauntlessly and saw before her a tall, stately gentleman with a handsome face, the saddest and noblest she had ever seen—clear, keen eyes that seemed to pierce through all disguise and read all thoughts.

"There is Beatrice," said Lady Helena, as she took her hand gently; and Ronald looked in startled wonder at the superb beauty of the face and figure before him.

"Beatrice," he said, kissing the proud, bright face, "can it be possible? When I saw you last you were a little, helpless child."

"I am not helpless now," she replied, with a smile; "and I hope you are going to love me very much, papa. You have to make up for fifteen years of absence. I think it will not be very difficult to love you."

He seemed dazzled by her beauty—her frank, high spirit and fearless words. Then he saw a golden head, with sweet, dove-like eyes, raised to his.

"I am Lillian, papa," said a clear, musical voice. "Look at me, please—and love me too."

He did both, charmed with the gentle grace of her manner, and the fair, pure face. Then Lord Earle took both his children in his arms.

"I wish," he said, in a broken voice and with tears in his eyes, "that I had seen you before. They told me my little twin children had grown into beautiful girls, but I did not realize it."

And again, when she saw his proud happiness, Lady Helena longed to plead for the mother of his children, that she might also share in his love; but she dared not. His words haunted her. Dora would be forgiven only in the hour of death.

Chapter XXII

The evening of his return was one of the happiest of Lord Earle's life. He was charmed with his daughters. Lady Helena thought, with a smile, that it was difficult to realize the relationship between them. Although her son looked sad and care-worn, he seemed more like an elder brother than the father of the two young girls.

There was some little restraint between them at first. Lord Earle seemed at a loss what to talk about; then Lady Helena's gracious tact came into play. She would not have dinner in the large dining room, she ordered it to be served in the pretty morning room, where the fire burned cheerfully and the lamps gave a flow of mellow light. It was a picture of warm, cozy English comfort, and Lord Earle looked pleased when he saw it.

Then, when dinner was over, she asked Beatrice to sing, and she, only pleased to show Lord Earle the extent of her accomplishments, obeyed. Her superb voice, with its clear, ringing tones, amazed him. Beatrice sang song after song with a passion and fire that told how deep the music lay in her soul.

Then Lady Helena bade Lillian bring out her folio of drawings, and again Lord Earle was pleased and surprised by the skill and talent he had not looked for. He praised the drawings highly. One especially attracted his attention—it was the pretty scene Lillian had sketched on the May day now so long passed—the sun shining upon the distant white sails, and the broad, beautiful sweep of sea at Knutsford.

"That is an excellent picture," he said; "it ought to be framed. It is too good to be hidden in a folio. You have just caught the right coloring, Lillian; one can almost see the sun sparkling on the water. Where is this sea-view taken from?"

"Do you not know it?" she asked, looking at him with wonder in her eyes. "It is from Knutsford—mamma's home."

Ronald looked up in sudden, pained surprise.

"Mamma's home!" The words smote him like a blow. He remembered Dora's offense—her cold letter, her hurried flight, his own firm resolve never to receive her in his home again—but he had not remembered that the children must love her—that she was part of their lives. He could not drive her memory from their minds. There before him lay the pretty picture of "mamma's home."

"This," said Lillian, "is the Elms. See those grand old trees, papa! This is the window of Mamma's room, and this was our study."

He looked with wonder. This, then, was Dora's home—the pretty, quaint homestead standing in the midst of the green meadows. As he gazed, he half wondered what the Dora who for fifteen years had lived there could be like. Did the curling rings of black hair fall as gracefully as ever? Had the blushing dimpled face grown pale and still? And then, chasing away all softened thought, came the remembrance of that hateful garden scene. Ah, no, he could never forgive—he could not speak of her even to these, her children! The two pictures were laid aside, and no more was said of framing them.

Lord Earle said to himself, after his daughters had retired, that both were charming; but, though he hardly owned it to himself, if he had a preference, it was for brilliant, beautiful Beatrice. He had never seen any one to surpass her. After Lady Helena had left him, he sat by the fire dreaming, as his father long years ago had done before him.

It was not too late yet, he thought, to retrieve the fatal mistake of his life. He would begin at once. He would first give all his attention to his estate; it should be a model for all others. He would interest himself in social duties;

people who lamented his foolish, wasted youth should speak with warm admiration of his manhood; above all matters he dreamed of great things for his daughters, especially Beatrice. With her beauty and grace, her magnificent voice, her frank, fearless spirit, and piquant, charming wit, she would be a queen of society; through his daughter his early error would be redeemed. Beatrice was sure to marry well; she would bring fresh honors to the grand old race he had shamed. When the annals of the family told, in years to come, the story of his mistaken marriage, it would be amply redeemed by the grand alliance Beatrice would be sure to contract.

His hopes rested upon her and centered in her. As he sat watching the glowing embers, there came to him the thought that what Beatrice was to him he had once been to the father he was never more to see. Ah! If his daughter should be like himself if she should ruin his hopes, throw down the air castle he had built—should love unworthily, marry beneath her, deceive and disappoint him! But no, it should not be—he would watch over her. Lord Earle shuddered at the thought.

During breakfast on the morning following his return Lady Helena asked what his plans were for the day—whether he intended driving the girls over to Holte.

"No," said Lord Earle. "I wish to have a long conversation with my daughters. We shall be engaged during the morning. After luncheon we will go to Holte."

Ronald, Lord Earle, had made up his mind. In the place where his father had warned him, and made the strongest impression upon him, he would warn his children, and in the same way; so he took them to the picture gallery, where he had last stood with his father.

With gentle firmness he said: "I have brought you here as I have something to say to you which is best said here. Years ago, children, my father brought me, as I bring you, to warn and advise me—I warn and advise you. We are, though so closely related, almost strangers. I am ready to love you and do love you. I intend to make your happiness my chief study. But there is one thing I must have—that is, perfect openness, one thing I must forbid—that is, deceit of any kind, on any subject. If either of you have in your short lives a secret, tell it to me now; if either of you love any one, even though it be one unworthy, tell me now. I will pardon any imprudence, any folly, any want of caution—everything save deceit. Trust me, and I will be gentle as a tender woman; deceive me, and I will never forgive you."

Both fair faces had grown pale—Beatrice's from sudden and deadly fear; Lillian's from strong emotion.

"The men of our race," said Lord Earle, "have erred at times, the women never. You belong to a long line of noble, pure, and high-bred woman; there must be nothing in your lives less high, and less noble than in theirs; but if there had been—if, from want of vigilance, of training, and of caution there should be anything in this short past, tell it to me now, and I will forget it."

Neither spoke to him one word, and a strange pathos came into his voice.

"I committed one act of deceit in my life," continued Lord Earle; "it drove me from home, and it made me an exile during the best years of my life. It matters little what it was—you will never know; but it has made me merciless to all deceit. I will never spare it; it has made me harsh and bitter. You will both find in me the truest, the best of friends; if in everything you are straightforward and honorable; but, children, dearly as I love you, I will never pardon a lie or an act of deceit."

"I never told a lie in my life," said Lillian, proudly. "My mother taught us to love the truth."

"And you, my Beatrice?" he asked, gently as he turned to the beautiful face half averted from him.

"I can say with my sister," was the haughty reply, "I have never told a lie."

Even as she spoke her lips grew pale with fear, as she remembered the fatal secret of her engagement to Hugh Fernely.

"I believe it," replied Lord Earle. "I can read truth in each face. Now tell me—have no fear—have you any secret in that past life? Remember, no matter what you may have done, I shall freely pardon it. If you should be in any trouble or difficulty, as young people are at times, I will help you. I will do anything for you, if you will trust me."

And again Lillian raised her sweet face to his.

"I have no secret," she said, simply. "I do not think I know a secret, or anything like one. My past life is an open book, papa, and you can read every page in it."

"Thank Heaven!" said Lord Earle, as he placed his hand caressingly upon the fair head.

It was strange, and he remembered the omission afterward, that he did not repeat the question to Beatrice—he seemed to consider that Lillian's answer included her. He did not know her heart was beating high with fear.

"I know," he continued, gently, "that some young girls have their little love secrets. You tell me you have none. I believe you. I have but one word more to say. You will be out in the great world soon, and you will doubtless both have plenty of admirers. Then will come the time of trial and temptation; remember my words—there is no curse so great as a clandestine love, no error so great or degrading. One of our race was so cursed, and his punishment was great. No matter whom you love and who loves you, let all be fair, honorable, and open as the day. Trust me, do not deceive me. Let me in justice say I will never oppose any reasonable marriage, but I will never pardon a clandestine attachment.

"However dearly I might love the one who so transgressed," continued Lord Earle, "even if it broke my heart to part from her, I should send her from me at once; she should never more be a child of mine. Do not think me harsh or unkind; I have weighty reasons for every word I have uttered. I am half ashamed to speak of such things to you, but it must be done. You are smiling, Lillian, what is it?"

"I should laugh, papa," she replied, "if you did not look so very grave. We must see people in order to love them. Beatrice, how many do we know in the world? Farmer Leigh, the doctor at Seabay, Doctor Goode, who came to the Elms when mamma was ill, two farm laborers, and the shepherd—that was the extent of our acquaintance until we came to Earlescourt. I may now add Sir Henry Holt and Prince Borgesi to my list. You forget, papa, we have lived out of the world."

Lord Earle remembered with pleasure that it was true. "You will soon be in the midst of a new world," he said, "and before you enter society I thought it better to give you this warning. I place no control over your affections; the only thing I forbid, detest, and will never pardon, is any underhand, clandestine love affair. You know not what they would cost."

He remembered afterward how strangely silent Beatrice was, and how her beautiful, proud face was turned from him.

"It is a disagreeable subject," said Lord Earle, "and I am pleased to have finished with it—it need never be renewed. Now I have one more thing to say—I shall never control or force your affections, but in my heart there is one great wish."

Lord Earle paused for a few minutes; he was looking at the face of Lady Alicia Earle, whom Beatrice strongly resembled.

"I have no son," he continued, "and you, my daughters, will not inherit title or estate—both go to Lionel Dacre. If ever the time should come when Lionel asks either of you to be his wife, my dearest wish will be accomplished. And now, as my long lecture is finished, and the bell has rung, we will prepare for a visit to Sir Harry and Lady Laurence."

There was not much time for thought during the rest of the day; but when night came, and Beatrice was alone, she looked the secret of her life in the face.

She had been strongly tempted, when Lord Earle had spoken so kindly, to tell him all. She now wished she had done so; all would have been over. He would perhaps have chided her simple, girlish folly, and have forgiven her. He would never forgive her now that she had deliberately concealed the fact; the time for forgiveness was past. A few words, and all might have been told; it was too late now to utter them. Proud of her and fond of her as she saw Lord Earle was, there would be no indulgence for her if her secret was discovered.

She would have to leave the magnificent and luxurious home, the splendor that delighted her, the glorious prospects opening to her, and return to the Elms, perhaps never to leave it again. Ah, no! The secret must be kept! She did not feel much alarmed; many things might happen. Perhaps the "Seagull" might be lost she thought, without pain or sorrow, of the possible death of the man who loved her as few love.

Even if he returned, he might have forgotten her or never find her. She did not feel very unhappy or ill at ease—the chances, she thought, were many in her favor. She had but one thing to do to keep all knowledge of her secret from Lord Earle.

Chapter XXIII

As time passed on all constraint between Lord Earle and his daughters wore away; Ronald even wondered himself at the force of his own love for them. He had made many improvements since his return. He did wonders upon the estate; model cottages seemed to rise by magic in place of the wretched tenements inhabited by poor tenants; schools, almshouses, churches, all testified to his zeal for improvement. People began to speak with warm admiration of the Earlescourt estate and of their master.

Nor did he neglect social duties; old friends were invited to Earlescourt; neighbors were hospitably entertained. His name was mentioned with respect and esteem; the tide of popularity turned in his favor. As the spring drew near, Lord Earle became anxious for his daughters to make their debut in the great world. They could have no better chaperone than his own mother. Lady Helena was speaking to him one morning of their proposed journey, when Lord Earle suddenly interrupted her.

"Mother," he said, "where are all your jewels? I never see you wearing any."

"I put them all away," said Lady Earle, "when your father died. I shall never wear them again. The Earle jewels are always worn by the wife of the reigning lord, not by the widow of his predecessor. Those jewels are not mine."

"Shall we look them over?" asked Ronald. "Some of them might be reset for Beatrice and Lillian."

Lady Helena rang for her maid, and the heavy cases of jewelry were brought down. Beatrice was in raptures with them, and her sister smiled at her admiration.

Dora Thorne

The jewels might have sufficed for a king's ransom; the diamonds were of the first water; the rubies flashed crimson; delicate pearls gleamed palely upon their velvet beds; there were emeralds of priceless value. One of the most beautiful and costly jewels was an entire suite of opals intermixed with small diamonds.

"These," said Lord Earle, raising the precious stones in his hands, "are of immense value. Some of the finest opals ever seen are in this necklace; they were taken from the crown of an Indian prince and bequeathed to one of our ancestors. So much is said about the unlucky stone—the pierre du malheur, as the French call the opal—that I did not care so much for them."

"Give me the opals, papa," said Beatrice, laughing; "I have no superstitious fears about them. Bright and beautiful jewels always seemed to me one of the necessities of life. I prefer diamonds, but these opals are magnificent."

She held out her hands, and for the first time Lord Earle saw the opal ring upon her finger. He caught the pretty white hand in his own.

"That is a beautiful ring," he said. "These opals are splendid. Who gave it to you, Beatrice?"

The question came upon her suddenly like a deadly shock; she had forgotten all about the ring, and wore it only from habit.

For a moment her heart seemed to stand still and her senses to desert her. Then with a self-possession worthy of a better cause, Beatrice looked up into her father's face with a smile.

"It was given to me at the Elms," she said, so simply that the same thought crossed the minds of her three listeners—that it had been given by Dora and her daughter did not like to say so.

Lord Earle looked on in proud delight while his beautiful daughters chose the jewels they liked best. The difference in taste struck and amused him. Beatrice chose diamonds, fiery rubies, purple amethysts; Lillian cared for nothing but the pretty pale pearls and bright emeralds.

"Some of those settings are very old-fashioned," said Lord Earle. "We will have new designs from Hunt and Boskell. They must be reset before you go to London."

The first thing Beatrice did was to take off the opal ring and lock it away. She trembled still from the shock of her father's question. The fatal secret vexed her. How foolish she had been to risk so much for a few stolen hours of happiness—for praise and flattery—she could not say for love.

* * * * *

The time so anxiously looked for came at last. Lord Earle took possession of his town mansion, and his daughters prepared for their debut. It was in every respect a successful one. People were in raptures with the beautiful sisters, both so charming yet so unlike. Beatrice, brilliant and glowing, her magnificent face haunted those who saw it like a beautiful dream—Lillian, fair and graceful, as unlike her sister as a lily to a rose.

They soon became the fashion. No ball or soiree, no dance or concert was considered complete without them. Artists sketched them together as "Lily and Rose," "Night and Morning," "Sunlight and Moonlight." Poets indited sonnets to them; friends and admirers thronged around them. As Beatrice said, with a deep-drawn sigh of perfect contentment, "This is life"—and she reveled in it.

That same year the Earl of Airlie attained his majority, and became the center of all fashionable interest. Whether he would marry and whom he would be likely to marry were two questions that interested every mother and

daughter in Belgravia. There had not been such an eligible parti for many years. The savings of a long minority alone amounted to a splendid fortune.

The young earl had vast estates in Scotland. Lynnton Hall and Craig Castle, two of the finest seats in England, were his. His mansion in Belgravia was the envy of all who saw it.

Young, almost fabulously wealthy, singularly generous and amiable, the young Earl of Airlie was the center of at least half a hundred of matrimonial plots; but he was not easily managed. Mammas with blooming daughters found him a difficult subject. He laughed, talked, danced, walked, and rode, as society wished him to do; but no one had touched his heart, or even his fancy. Lord Airlie was heart-whole, and there seemed no prospect of his ever being anything else. Lady Constance Tachbrook, the prettiest, daintiest coquette in London, brought all her artillery of fascination into play, but without success. The beautiful brunette, Flora Cranbourne, had laid a wager that, in the course of two waltzes, she would extract three compliments from him, but she failed in the attempt. Lord Airlie was pronounced incorrigible.

The fact was that his lordship had been sensibly brought up. He intended to marry when he could find some one to love him for himself, and not for his fortune. This ideal of all that was beautiful, noble, and true in woman the earl was always searching for, but as yet had not found.

On all sides he had heard of the beauty of Lord Earle's daughters, but it did not interest him. He had been hearing of, seeing, and feeling disappointed in beautiful women for some years. Many people made the point of meeting the "new beauties," but he gave himself no particular trouble. They were like every one else, he supposed.

One morning, having nothing else to do, Lord Airlie went to a fete given in the beautiful grounds of Lady Downham. He went early, intending to remain only a short time. He found but a few guests had arrived. After paying the proper amount of homage to Lady Downham, the young earl wandered off into the grounds.

It was all very pretty and pleasant, but he had seen the same before, and was rather tired of it. The day was more Italian than English, bright and sunny, the sky blue, the air clear and filled with fragrance, the birds singing as they do sing under bright, warm skies.

Flags were flying from numerous tents, bands of music were stationed in different parts of the grounds, the fountains played merrily in the sunlit air. Lord Airlie walked mechanically on, bowing in reply to the salutations he received.

A pretty little bower, a perfect thicket of roses, caught his attention. From it one could see all over the lake, with its gay pleasure boats. Lord Airlie sat down, believing himself to be quite alone; but before he had removed a large bough that interfered with the full perfection of the view he heard voices on the other side of the thick, sheltering rose bower.

He listened involuntarily, for one of the voices was clear and pure, the other more richly musical than any he had ever heard at times sweet as the murmur of the cushat dove, and again ringing joyously and brightly.

"I hope we shall not have to wait here long, Lillian," the blithe voice was saying. "Lady Helena promised to take us on the lake."

"It is very pleasant," was the reply; "but you always like to be in the very center of gayety."

"Yes," said Beatrice; "I have had enough solitude and quiet to last me for life. Ah, Lillian, this is all delightful. You think so, but do not admit it honestly as I do."

There was a faint, musical laugh, and then the sweet voice resumed:

"I am charmed, Lillian, with this London life; this is worth calling life—every moment is a golden one. If there is a drawback, it consists in not being able to speak one's mind."

"What do you mean?" asked Lillian.

"Do you not understand?" was the reply. "Lady Helena is always talking to me about cultivating what she calls 'elegant repose.' Poor, dear grandmamma! Her perfect idea of good manners seems to me to be a simple absence—in society, at least—of all emotion and all feeling. I, for one, do not admire the nil admirari system."

"I am sure Lady Helena admires you, Bee," said her sister.

"Yes," was the careless reply. "Only imagine, Lillian, yesterday, when Lady Cairn told me some story about a favorite young friend of hers the tears came to my eyes. I could not help it, although the drawing room was full. Lady Helena told me I should repress all outward emotion. Soon after, when Lord Dolchester told me a ridiculous story about Lady Everton, I laughed—heartily, I must confess, though not loudly—and she looked at me. I shall never accomplish 'elegant repose.'"

"You would not be half so charming if you did," replied her sister.

"Then it is so tempting to say at times what one really thinks! I can not resist it. When Lady Everton tells me, with that tiresome simper of hers, that she really wonders at herself, I long to tell her other people do the same thing. I should enjoy, for once, the luxury of telling Mrs. St. John that people flatter her, and then laugh at her affectation. It is a luxury to speak the truth at all times, is it not, Lily? I detest everything false, even a false word; therefore I fear Lady Helena will never quite approve of my manner."

"You are so frank and fearless! At the Elms, do you remember how every one seemed to feel that you would say just the right thing at the right time?" asked Lillian.

"Do not mention that place," replied Beatrice; "this life is so different. I like it so much, Lily—all the brightness and gayety. I feel good and contented now. I was always restless and longing for life; now I have all I wish for."

There was a pause then, and Lord Airlie longed to see who the speakers were—who the girl was that spoke such frank, bright words—that loved truth, and hated all things false—what kind of face accompanied that voice. Suddenly the young earl remembered that he was listening, and he started in horror from his seat. He pushed aside the clustering roses. At first he saw nothing but the golden blossoms of a drooping laburnum; then, a little further on, he saw a fair head bending over some fragrant flowers; then a face so beautiful, so perfect, that something like a cry of surprise came from Lord Airlie's lips.

He had seen many beauties, but nothing like this queenly young girl. Her dark, bright eyes were full of fire and light; the long lashes swept her cheek, the proud, beautiful lips, so haughty in repose, so sweet when smiling, were perfect in shape. From the noble brow a waving mass of dark hair rippled over a white neck and shapely shoulders. It was a face to think and dream of, peerless in its vivid, exquisite coloring and charmingly molded features. He hardly noticed the fair-haired girl.

"Who can she be?" thought Lord Airlie. "I believed that I had seen every beautiful woman in London."

Satisfied with having seen what kind of face accompanied the voice, the young earl left the pretty rose thicket. His friends must have thought him slightly deranged. He went about asking every one, "Who is here today?" Among others, he saluted Lord Dolchester with that question.

"I can scarcely tell you," replied his lordship. "I am somewhat in a puzzle. If you want to know who is the queen of the fete, I can tell you. It is Lord Earle's daughter, Miss Beatrice Earle. She is over there, see with Lady Downham."

Looking in the direction indicated, Lord Airlee saw the face that haunted him.

"Yes," said Lord Dolchester, with a gay laugh; "and if I were young and unfettered, she would not be Miss Earle much longer."

Chapter XXIV

Lord Airlee gazed long and earnestly at the beautiful girl who looked so utterly unconscious of the admiration she excited.

"I must ask Lady Downham to introduce me," he said to himself, wondering whether the proud face would smile upon him, and, if she carried into practice her favorite theory of saying what she thought, what she would say to him.

Lady Downham smiled when the young earl made his request.

"I have been besieged by gentlemen requesting introductions to Miss Earle," she said. "Contrary to your general rule, Lord Airlee, you go with the crowd."

He would have gone anywhere for one word from those perfect lips. Lady Downham led him to the spot where Beatrice stood, and in a few courteous words introduced him to her.

Lord Airlee was celebrated for his amiable, pleasing manner. He always knew what to say and how to say it, but when those magnificent eyes looked into his own, the young earl stood silent and abashed. In vain he tried confusedly to utter a few words; his face flushed, and Beatrice looked at him in wonder.—Could this man gazing so ardently at her be the impenetrable Lord Airlee?

He managed at length to say something about the beauty of the grounds and the brightness of the day. Plainly as eyes could speak, hers asked: Had he nothing to say?

He lingered by her side, charmed and fascinated by her grace; she talked to Lillian and to Lady Helena; she received the homage offered to her so unconscious of his presence and his regard that Lord Airlee was piqued. He was not accustomed to being overlooked.

"Do you never grow tired of flowers and fetes, Miss Earle?" he asked at length.

"No," replied Beatrice, "I could never grow tired of flowers—who could? As for fetes, I have seen few, and have liked each one better than the last."

"Perhaps your life has not been, like mine, spent among them," he said.

"I have lived among flowers," she replied, "but not among fetes; they have all the charm of novelty for me."

"I should like to enjoy them as you do," he said. "I wish you would teach me, Miss Earle."

She laughed gayly, and the sound of that laugh, like a sweet, silvery chime, charmed Lord Airlee still more.

He found out the prettiest pleasure boat, and persuaded Beatrice to let him row her across the lake. He gathered a beautiful water lily for her. When they landed, he found out a seat in the prettiest spot and placed her there.

Her simple, gay manner delighted him. He had never met any one like her. She did not blush, or look conscious, or receive his attentions with the half-fluttered sentimental air common to most young ladies of his acquaintance.

She never appeared to remember that he was Lord Airlie, nor sought by any artifice to keep him near her. The bright, sunny hours seemed to pass rapidly as a dream. Long before the day ended, the young earl said to himself that he had met his fate; that if it took years to win her he would count them well spent that in all the wide world she was the wife for him.

Lord Earle was somewhat amused by the solicitude the young nobleman showed in making his acquaintance and consulting his tastes. After Lady Downham's fete he called regularly at the house. Lady Helena liked him, but could hardly decide which of her grandchildren it was that attracted him.

The fastidious young earl, who had smiled at the idea of love and had disappointed half the fashionable mothers in Belgravia, found himself a victim at last.

He was diffident of his own powers, hardly daring to hope that he should succeed in winning the most beautiful and gifted girl in London. He was timid in her presence, and took refuge with Lillian.

All fashionable London was taken by surprise when Lord Airlie threw open his magnificent house, and, under the gracious auspices of his aunt, Lady Lecomte, issued invitations for a grand ball.

Many were the conjectures, and great was the excitement. Lord Earle smiled as he showed Lady Helena the cards of invitation.

"Of course you will go," he said. "We have no engagement for that day. See that the girls look their best, mother."

He felt very proud of his daughters—Lillian, looking so fair and sweet in her white silk dress and favorite pearls! Beatrice, like a queen, in a cloud of white lace, with coquettish dashes of crimson. The Earle diamonds shone in her dark hair, clasped the fair white throat, and encircled the beautiful arms. A magnificent pomegranate blossom lay in the bodice of her dress, and she carried a bouquet of white lilies mixed with scarlet verbenas.

The excitement as to the ball had been great. It seemed like a step in the right direction at last. The great question was, with whom would Lord Airlie open the ball? Every girl was on the qui vive.

The question was soon decided. When Beatrice Earle entered the room, Lord Airlie went straight to meet her and solicited her hand for the first dance. She did not know how much was meant by that one action.

He wondered, as he looked upon her, the queen of the most brilliant ball of the season, whether she would ever love him if it was within the bounds of possibility that she should ever care for him. That evening, for the first time, he touched the proud heart of Beatrice Earle. On all sides she had heard nothing but praises of Lord Airlie his wealth, his talents, his handsome person and chivalrous manner. The ladies were eloquent in praise of their young host. She looked at him, and for the first time remarked the noble, dignified carriage, the tall, erect figure, the clear-cut patrician face—not handsome according to the rules of beauty, but from the truth and honor written there in nature's plainest hand.

Then she saw—and it struck her with surprise how Lord Airlie, so courted and run after, sought her out. She saw smiles on friendly faces, and heard her name mingled with his.

"My dear Miss Earle," said Lady Everton, "you have accomplished wonders—conquered the unconquerable. I believe every eligible young lady in London has smiled upon Lord Airlie, and all in vain. What charm have you used to bring him to your feet?"

"I did not know that he was at my feet," replied Beatrice. "You like figurative language, Lady Everton."

"You will find I am right," returned lady Everton. "Remember I was the first to congratulate you."

Beatrice wondered, in a sweet, vague way, if there could be anything in it. She looked again at Lord Airlie. Surely any one might be proud of the love of such a man. He caught her glance, and her face flushed. In a moment he was by her side.

"Miss Earle," he said, eagerly, "you told me the other day you liked flowers. If you have not been in the conservatory, may I escort you there?"

She silently accepted his arm, and they went through the magnificent suite of rooms into the cool, fragrant conservatory.

The pretty fountain in the midst rippled musically, and the lamps gleamed like pale stars among masses of gorgeous color.

Beatrice was almost bewildered by the profusion of beautiful plants. Tier upon tier of superb flowers rose until the eye was dazzled by the varied hues and brightness—delicate white heaths of rare perfection, flaming azaleas, fuchsias that looked like showers of purple—red wine. The plant that charmed Beatrice most was one from far-off Indian climes—delicate, perfumed blossoms, hanging like golden bells from thick, sheltering green leaves. Miss Earle stood before it, silent in sheer admiration.

"You like that flower?" said Lord Airlie.

"It is one of the prettiest I ever saw," she replied.

In a moment he gathered the fairest sprays from the precious tree. She cried out in dismay at the destruction.

"Nay," said Lord Airlie, "if every flower here could be compressed into one blossom, it would hardly be a fitting offering to you."

She smiled at the very French compliment, and he continued—"I shall always have a great affection for that tree."

"Why?" she asked, unconsciously.

"Because it has pleased you," he replied.

They stood by the pretty plant, Beatrice touching the golden bells softly with her fingers. Something of the magic of the scene touched her. She did not know why the fountain rippled so musically, why the flowers seemed doubly fair as her young lover talked to her. She had been loved. She had heard much of love, but she herself had never known what it really meant. She did not know why, after a time, her proud, bright eyes drooped, and had never met Lord Airlie's gaze, why her face flushed and grew pale, why his words woke a new, strange, beautiful music in her heart—music that never died until—

"I ask for one spray—only one—to keep in memory of this pleasant hour," said Lord Airlie, after a pause.

She gave him a spray of the delicate golden bells.

"I should like to be curious and rude," he said, "and ask if you ever gave any one a flower before?"

"No," she replied.

"Then I shall prize this doubly," he assured her.

That evening Lord Airlie placed the golden blossom carefully away. The time came when he would have parted with any treasure on earth rather than that.

But his question had suddenly disturbed Beatrice. For a moment her thoughts flew to the sea shore at Knutsford. The present faded from her; she saw Hugh Fernely's face as it looked when he offered her the beautiful lily. The very remembrance of it made her shudder as though seized with deathly cold—and Lord Airlie saw it.

"You are cold," he said; "how careless I am to keep you standing here!" He helped her to draw the costly lace shawl around her shoulders, and Beatrice was quickly herself again, and they returned to the ball room; but Lord Airlie lingered by Miss Earle.

"You have enjoyed the ball, Beatrice," said Lord Earle, as he bade his daughters good night.

"I have, indeed, papa," she replied. "This has been the happiest evening of my life."

"I can guess why," thought Lord Earle, as he kissed the bright face upraised to him; "there will be no wretched underhand love business there."

He was not much surprised on the day following when Lord Airlie was the first morning caller, and the last to leave, not going until Lady Helena told him that they should all be at the opera that evening and should perhaps see him there. He regretted that he had promised Lady Morton his box for the night, when Lady Earle felt herself bound to ask him to join them in theirs.

All night Beatrice had dreamed of the true, noble face which began to haunt her. She, usually so regardless of all flattery, remembered every word Lord Airlie had spoken. Could it be true, as Lady Everton had said, that he cared for her?

Her lover would have been spared many anxious hours could he have seen how the golden blossoms were tended and cared for. Long afterward they were found with the little treasures which young girls guard so carefully.

When Lord Airlie had taken his departure and Lord Earle found himself alone with his mother, he turned to her with the happiest look she had ever seen upon his face.

"That seems to me a settled affair," he said. "Beatrice will make a grand countess—Lady Airlie of Lynnton. He is the finest young fellow and the best match in England. Ah, mother, my folly might have been punished more severely. There will no mesalliance there."

"No," said Lady Earle, "I have no fears for Beatrice; she is too proud ever to do wrong."

Chapter XXV

It was a pretty love story, although told in crowded London ball rooms instead of under the shade of green trees.

Beatrice Earle began by wondering if Lord Airlie cared for her; she ended by loving him herself.

It was no child's play this time. With Beatrice, to love once was to love forever, with fervor and intensity which cold and worldly natures can not even understand.

The time came when Lord Airlie stood out distinct from all the world, when the sound of his name was like music, when she saw no other face, heard no other voice, thought of nothing else save him. He began to think there might be some hope for him; the proud, beautiful face softened and brightened for him as it did for no other, and the glorious dark eyes never met his own, the frank, bright words died away in his presence. Seeing all these things, Lord Airlie felt some little hope.

For the first time he felt proud and pleased with the noble fortune and high rank that were his by birthright. He had not cared much for them before; now he rejoiced that he could lavish wealth and luxury upon one so fair and worthy as Beatrice Earle.

Lord Airlie was not a confident lover. There were times when he felt uncertain as to whether he should succeed. Perhaps true and reverential love is always timid. Lord Earle had smiled to himself many long weeks at the "pretty play" enacted before him, and Lady Helena had wondered when the young man would "speak out" long before Lord Airlie himself presumed to think that the fairest and proudest girl in London would accept him.

No day ever passed during which he did not manage to see her. He was indefatigable in finding out the balls, soirees, and operas she would attend. He was her constant shadow, never happy out of her sight, thinking of her all day, dreaming of her all night, yet half afraid to risk all and ask her to be his wife, lest he should lose her.

To uninterested speculators Lord Airlie was a handsome, kindly, honorable young man. Intellectual, somewhat fastidious, lavishly generous, a great patron of fine arts; to Beatrice Earle he was the ideal of all that was noble and to be admired. He was a prince among men. The proud heart was conquered. She loved him and said to herself that she would rather love him as a neglected wife than be the worshiped wife of any other man.

She had many admirers; "the beautiful Miss Earle" was the belle of the season. Had she been inclined to coquetry or flirtation she would not have been so eagerly sought after. The gentlemen were quite as much charmed by her utter indifference and haughty acceptance of their homage as by her marvelous beauty.

At times Beatrice felt sure that Lord Airlie loved her; then a sudden fit of timidity would seize her young lover, and again she would doubt it. One thing she never doubted—her own love for him. If her dreams were all false, and he never asked her to be his wife, she said to herself that she would never be the wife of any other man.

The remembrance of Hugh Fernely crossed her mind at times—not very often, and never with any great fear or apprehension. It seemed to her more like a dark, disagreeable dream than a reality. Could it be possible that she, Beatrice Earle, the daughter of that proud, noble father, so sternly truthful, so honorable, could ever have been so mad or so foolish? The very remembrance of it made the beautiful face flush crimson. She could not endure the thought, and always drove it hastily from her.

The fifteenth of July was drawing near; the two years had nearly passed, yet she was not afraid. He might never return, he might forget her, although, remembering his looks and words, that, she feared, could not be.

If he went to Seabay—if he went to the Elms, it was not probable that he would ever discover her whereabouts, or follow her to claim the fulfillment of her absurd promise. At the very worst, if he discovered that she was Lord Earle's daughter, she believed that her rank and position would dazzle and frighten him. Rarely as those thoughts came to her, and speedily as she thrust them from her, she considered them a dear price for the little novelty and excitement that had broken the dead level calm of life at the Elms.

Lord Airle, debating within himself whether he should risk, during the whirl and turmoil of the London season, the question upon which the happiness of his life depended, decided that he would wait until Lord Earle returned to Earlescourt, and follow him there.

The summer began to grow warm; the hawthorn and apple blossoms had all died away; the corn waved in the fields, ripe and golden; the hay was all gathered in; the orchards were all filled with fruit. The fifteenth of July—the day that in her heart Beatrice Earle had half feared—was past and gone. She had been nervous and half frightened when it came, starting and turning deathly pale at the sound of the bell or of rapid footsteps. She laughed at herself when the day ended. How was it likely he would find her? What was there in common between the beautiful daughter of Lord Earle and Hugh Fernely, the captain of a trading vessel? Nothing, save folly and a foolish promise rashly asked and rashly given.

Three days before Lord Earle left London, he went by appointment to meet some friends at Brookes's. While there, a gentleman entered the room who attracted his attention, most forcibly—a young man of tall and stately figure, with a noble head, magnificently set upon broad shoulders; a fine, manly face, with proud, mobile features—at times all fire and light, the eyes clear and glowing, again, gentle as the face of a smiling woman. Lord Earle looked at him attentively; there seemed to be something familiar in the outline of the head and face, the haughty yet graceful carriage.

"Who is that?" he inquired of his friend, Captain Langdon. "I have seen that gentleman before, or have dreamed of him."

"Is it possible that you do not know him?" cried the captain. "That is Lionel Dacre, 'your next of kin,' if I am not mistaken."

Pleasure and pain struggled in Lord Earle's heart. He remembered Lionel many years ago, long before he committed the foolish act that had cost him so much. Lionel had spent some time with him at Earlescourt; he remembered a handsome and high-spirited boy, proud and impetuous, brave to rashness, generous to a fault; a fierce hater of everything mean and underhand; truthful and honorable—his greatest failing, want of cool, calm thought.

Lionel Dacre was poor in those days; now he was heir to Earlescourt, heir to the title that, with all his strange political notions, Ronald Earle ever held in high honor; heir to the grand old mansion and fair domain his father had prized so highly. Pleasure and pain were strangely intermingled in his heart when he remembered that no son of his would ever succeed him, that he should never train his successor. The handsome boy that had grown into so fine a man must take his place one day.

Lord Earle crossed the room, and going up to the young man, laid one hand gently upon his shoulder.

"Lionel," he said, "it is many years since we met. Have you no remembrance of me?"

The frank, clear eyes looked straight into his. Lord Earle's heart warmed as he gazed at the honest, handsome face.

"Not the least in the world," replied Mr. Dacre, slowly. "I do not remember ever to have seen you before."

"Then I must have changed," said Lord Earle. "when I saw you last, Lionel, you were not much more than twelve years old, and I gave you a 'tip' the day you went back to Eton. Charlie Villiers was with you."

"Then you are Lord Earle," returned Lionel. "I came to London purposely to see you," and his frank face flushed, and he held out his hand in greeting.

"I have been anxious to see you," said Lord Earle; "but I have not been long in England. We must be better acquainted; you are my heir at law."

"Your what?" said Mr. Dacre, wonderingly.

"My heir," replied Lord Earle. "I have no son; my estates are entailed, and you are my next of kin."

"I thought you had half a dozen heirs and heiresses," said Lionel. "I remember some story of a romantic marriage. Today I hear of nothing but the beautiful Miss Earle."

"I have no son," interrupted Lord Earle, sadly. "I wrote to you last week, asking you to visit me. Have you any settled home?"

"No," replied the young man gayly. "My mother is at Cowes, and I have been staying with her."

"Where are you now?" asked Lord Earle.

"I am with Captain Poyntz, at his chambers; I promised to spend some days with him," replied Lionel, who began to look slightly bewildered.

"I must not ask you to break an engagement," said Lord Earle, "but will you dine with us this evening, and, when you leave Captain Poyntz, come to us?"

"I shall be very pleased," said Lionel, and the two gentlemen left Brookes's together.

"I must introduce you to Lady Earle and my daughters," said Ronald, as they walked along. "I have been so long absent from home and friends that it seems strange to claim relationship with any one."

"I could never understand your fancy for broiling in Africa, when you might have been happier at home," said Lionel.

"Did you not know? Have you not heard why I went abroad?" asked Lord Earle, gravely.

"No," replied Lionel. "Your father never invited me to Earlescourt after you left."

In a few words Lord Earle told his heir that he had married against his father's wish, and in consequence had never been pardoned.

"And you gave up everything," said Lionel Dacre—"home, friends, and position, for the love of a woman. She must have been well worth loving."

Lord Earle grew pale, as with sudden pain. Had Dora been so well worth loving? Had she been worth the heavy price?

"You are my heir," he said gravely—"one of my own race; before you enter our circle, Lionel, and take your place there, I must tell you that my wife and I parted years ago, never to meet again. Do not mention her to me—it pains me."

Lionel looked at the sad face; he could understand the shadows there now.

"I will not," he said. "She must have been—"

"Not one word more," interrupted Lord Earle. "In your thoughts lay no unjust blame on her. She left me of her own free will. My mother lives with me; she will be pleased to see you. Remember—seven sharp."

"I shall not forget," said Lionel, pained at the sad words and the sad voice.

As Lord Earle went home for the first time during the long years, a softer and more gentle thought of Dora came to him. "She must have been—" What—what did Lionel suspect of her? Could it be that, seeing their divided lives, people judged as his young kinsman had judged—that they thought Dora to blame—criminal, perhaps? And she had never in her whole life given one thought to any other than himself; nay, her very errors—the deed he could not pardon—sprung from her great affection for him. Poor Dora! The pretty, blushing face, with its sweet, shy eyes, and rosy lips, came before him—the artless, girlish love, the tender worship. If it had been anything else, any other fault, Ronald must have forgiven her in that hour. But his whole heart recoiled again as the hated scene rose before him.

"No," he said, "I can not forgive it. I can not forget it. Men shall respect Dora; no one must misjudge her; but I can not take her to my heart or my home again. In the hour of death," he murmured, "I will forgive her."

Chapter XXVI

Lady Earle thought her son looked graver and sadder that day than she had ever seen him. She had not the clew to his reflections; she did not know how he was haunted by the thought of the handsome, gallant young man who must be his heir—how he regretted that no son of his would ever succeed him—how proud he would have been of a son like Lionel. He had but two children, and they must some day leave Earlescourt for homes of their own. The grand old house, the fair domain, must all pass into the hands of strangers unless Lionel married one of the beautiful girls he loved so dearly.

Lady Helena understood a little of what was passing in his mind when he told her that he had met Lionel Dacre, who was coming to dine with him that day.

"I used to hope Beatrice might like him," said Lady Earle; "but that will never be—Lord Airlie has been too quick. I hope he will not fall in love with her; it would only end in disappointment."

"He may like Lillian," said Lord Earle.

"Yes," assented Lady Helena. "Sweet Lily—she seems almost too pure and fair for this dull earth of ours."

"If they both marry, mother," said Ronald, sadly, "we shall be quite alone."

"Yes," she returned, "quite alone," and the words smote her with pain. She looked at the handsome face, with its sad, worn expression. Was life indeed all over for her son—at the age, too, when other men sunned themselves in happiness, when a loving wife should have graced his home, cheered and consoled him, shared his sorrows, crowned his life with love? In the midst of his wealth and prosperity, how lonely he was! Could it be possible that one act of disobedience should have entailed such sad consequences? Ah, if years ago Ronald had listened to reason, to wise and tender counsel—if he had but given up Dora and married Valentine Charteris, how different his life would have been, how replete with blessings and happiness, how free from care!

Lady Earle's eyes grew dim with tears as these thoughts passed through her mind. She went up to him and laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"Ronald," she said, "I will do my best to make home happy after our bonny birds are caged. For your sake, I wish

things had been different."

"Hush, mother," he replied gently. "Words are all useless. I must reap as I have sown; the fruits of disobedience and deceit could never beget happiness. I shall always believe that evil deeds bring their own punishment. Do not pity me—it unnerves me. I can bear my fate."

Lady Helena was pleased to see Lionel again. She had always liked him, and rejoiced now in his glorious manhood. He stood before the two sisters, half dazzled by their beauty. The fair faces smiled upon him; pretty, white hands were outstretched to meet his own.

"I am bewildered by my good fortune," he said. "I shall be the envy of every man in London; people will no longer call me Lionel Dacre. I shall be known as the cousin of 'Les Demoiselles Earle.' I have neither brother nor sister of my own. Fancy the happiness of falling into the midst of such a family group."

"And being made welcome there!" interrupted Beatrice. Lionel bowed profoundly. At first he fancied he preferred this brilliant, beautiful girl to her fair, gentle sister. Her frank, fearless talk delighted him. After the general run of young ladies—all fashioned, he thought, after one model—it was refreshing to meet her. Her ideas were so original.

Lord Airlie joined the little dinner party, and then Lionel Dacre read the secret which Beatrice hardly owned even to herself.

"I shall not be shipwrecked on that rock," he said to himself. "When Beatrice Earle speaks to me her eyes meet mine; she smiles, and does not seem afraid of me; but when Lord Airlie speaks she turns from him, and her beautiful eyes droop. She evidently cares more for him than for all the world besides."

But after a time the fair, spirituelle loveliness of Lillian stole into his heart. There was a marked difference between the two sisters. Beatrice took one by storm, so to speak; her magnificent beauty and queenly grace dazzled and charmed one. With Lillian it was different. Eclipsed at first sight by her more brilliant sister, her fair beauty grew upon one by degrees. The sweet face, the thoughtful brow, the deep dreamy eyes, the golden ripples of hair, the ethereal expression on the calm features, seemed gradually to reveal their charm. Many who at first overlooked Lillian, thinking only of her brilliant sister, ended by believing her to be the more beautiful of the two.

They stood together that evening, the two sisters, in the presence of Lord Airlie and Lionel Dacre. Beatrice had been singing, and the air seemed still to vibrate with the music of her passionate voice.

"You sing like a siren," said Mr. Dacre; he felt no diffidence in offering so old a compliment to his kins-woman.

"No," replied Beatrice; "I may sing well—in fact, I believe I do. My heart is full of music, and it overflows on my lips; but I am no siren, Mr. Dacre. No one ever heard of a siren with dusky hair and dark brows like mine."

"I should have said you sing like an enchantress," interposed Lord Airlie, hoping that he was apter in his compliments.

"You have been equally wrong, my lord," she replied, but she did not laugh at him as she had done at Lionel. "If I were an enchantress," she continued, "I should just wave my wand, and that vase of flowers would come to me; as it is, I must go to it. Who can have arranged those flowers? They have been troubling me for the last half hour." She crossed the room, and took from a small side table an exquisite vase filled with blossoms.

"See," she cried, turning to Lionel, "white heath, white roses, white lilies, intermixed with these pale gray flowers! There is no contrast in such an arrangement. Watch the difference which a glowing pomegranate blossom or a

scarlet verbena will make."

"You do not like such quiet harmony?" said Lionel, smiling, thinking how characteristic the little incident was.

"No," she replied; "give me striking contrasts. For many years the web of my life was gray-colored, and I longed for a dash of scarlet in its threads."

"You have it now," said Mr. Dacre, quietly.

"Yes," she said, as she turned her beautiful, bright face to him; "I have it now, never to lose it again."

Lord Airlie, looking on and listening, drinking in every word that fell from her lips, wondered whether love was the scarlet thread interwoven with her life. He sighed deeply as he said to himself that it would not be; this brilliant girl could never care for him. Beatrice heard the sigh and turned to him.

"Does your taste resemble mine, Lord Airlie?"

"I," interrupted Lord Airlie—"I like whatever you like, Miss Earle."

"Yourself best of all," whispered Lionel to Beatrice with a smile.

* * * * *

As Mr. Dacre walked home that evening, he thought long and anxiously about the two young girls, his kins-women. What was the mystery? he asked himself—what skeleton was locked away in the gay mansion? Where was Lord Earle's wife—the lady who ought to have been at the head of his table—the mother of his children? Where was she? Why was her place empty? Why was her husband's face shadowed and lined with care?

"Lillian Earle is the fairest and sweetest girl I have ever met," he said to himself. "I know there is danger for me in those sweet, true eyes, but if there be anything wrong—if the mother is blameworthy—I will fly from the danger. I believe in hereditary virtue and in hereditary vice. Before I fall in love with Lillian, I must know her mother's story."

So he said, and he meant it. There was no means of arriving at the knowledge. The girls spoke at times of their mother, and it was always with deep love and respect. Lady Helena mentioned her, but her name never passed the lips of Lord Earle. Lionel Dacre saw no way of obtaining information in the matter.

There was no concealment as to Dora's abode. Once, by special privilege, he was invited into the pretty room where the ladies sat in the morning—a cozy, cheerful room, into which visitors never penetrated. There, upon the wall, he saw a picture framed a beautiful landscape, a quiet homestead in the midst of rich, green meadows; and Lillian told him, with a smile, that was the Elms, at Knutsford, "where mamma lived."

Lionel was too true a gentleman to ask why she lived there; he praised the painting, and then turned the subject.

As Lady Earle foresaw, the time had arrived when Dora's children partly understood there was a division in the family, a breach never to be healed. "Mamma was quite different from papa," they said to each other; and Lady Helena told them their mother did not like fashion and gayety, that she had been simply brought up, used always to quietness and solitude, so that in all probability she would never come to Earlescourt.

But as time went on, and Beatrice began to understand more of the great world, she had an instinctive idea of the truth. It came to her by slow degrees. Her father had married beneath him, and her mother had no home in the

stately hall of Earlescourt. At first violent indignation seized her; then calmer reflection told her she could not judge correctly. She did not know whether Lord Earle had left his wife, or whether her mother had refused to live with him.

It was the first cloud that shadowed the life of Lord Earle's beautiful daughter. The discovery did not diminish her love for the quiet, sad mother, whose youth and beauty had faded so soon. If possible, she loved her more; there was a pitying tenderness in her affection.

"Poor mamma!" thought the young girl—"poor, gentle mamma! I must be doubly kind to her, and love her better than ever."

Dora did not understand how it happened that her beautiful Beatrice wrote so constantly and so fondly to her—how it happened that week after week costly presents found their way to the Elms.

"The child must spend all her pocket money on me," she said to herself. "How well and dearly she loves me—my beautiful Beatrice!"

Lady Helena remembered the depth of her mother's love. She pitied the lonely, unloved wife, deprived of husband and children. She did all in her power to console her. She wrote long letters, telling Dora how greatly her children were admired, and how she would like their mother to witness their triumph. She told how many conquests Beatrice had made; how the proud and exclusive Lord Airlie was always near her, and that Beatrice, of her own fancy, liked him better than any one else.

"Neither Lord Earle nor myself could wish a more brilliant future for Beatrice," wrote Lady Helena. "As Lady Airlie of Lynnton, she will be placed as her birth and beauty deserve."

But even Lady Helena was startled when she read Dora's reply. It was a wild prayer that her child should be saved—spared the deadly perils of love and marriage—left to enjoy her innocent youth.

"There is no happy love," wrote poor Dora, "and never can be. Men can not be patient, gentle, and true. It is ever self they worship—self-reflected in the woman they love. Oh, Lady Helena, let my child be spared! Let no so-called love come near her! Love found me out in my humble home, and wrecked all my life. Do not let my bright, beautiful Beatrice suffer as I have done. I would rather fold my darlings in my arms and lie down with them to die than live to see them pass through the cruel mockery of love and sorrow which I have endured. Lady Helena, do not laugh; your letter distressed me. I dreamed last night, after reading it, that I placed a wedding veil on my darling's head, when, as it fell round her, it changed suddenly into a shroud. A mother's love is true, and mine tells me that Beatrice is in danger."

Chapter XXVII

"I have been abroad long enough," said Lord Earle, in reply to some remark made by Lady Helena. "The girls do not care for the sea—Beatrice dislikes it even; so I think we can not do better than to return to Earlescourt. It may not be quite fashionable, but it will be very pleasant."

"Yes," said Lady Earle; "there is no place I love so well as home. We owe our neighbors something, too. I am almost ashamed when I remember how noted Earlescourt once was for its gay and pleasant hospitality. We must introduce the girls to our neighbors. I can foresee quite a cheerful winter."

"Let us get over the summer and autumn," said Ronald with a smile, "then we will look the winter bravely in the face. I suppose, mother, you can guess who has managed to procure an invitation to Earlescourt!"

"Lord Airlie?" asked Lady Helena.

"Yes," was the laughing reply. "It did me good, mother—it made me feel young and happy again to see and hear him. His handsome, frank face clouded when I told him we were going; then he sighed said London would be like a desert—declared he could not go to Lynnton, the place was full of work—people. He did not like Scotland, and was as homeless as a wealthy young peer with several estates could well be. I allowed him to bewilder himself with confused excuses and blunders, and then asked him to join us at Earlescourt. He almost 'jumped for joy,' as the children say. He will follow us in a week or ten days. Lionel will come with us."

"I am very pleased," said Lady Earle. "Next to you, Ronald, I love Lionel Dacre; his frank, proud, fearless disposition has a great charm for me. He is certainly like Beatrice. How he detests everything false, just as she does!"

"Yes," said Ronald, gravely; "I am proud of my children. There is no taint of untruth or deceit there, mother; they are worthy of their race. I consider Beatrice the noblest girl I have ever known; and I love my sweet Lily just as well."

"You would not like to part with them now?" said Lady Earle.

"I would sooner part with my life!" he replied. "I am not given to strong expressions, mother, but even you could never guess how my life is bound up in theirs."

"Then let me say one word, Ronald," said his mother; "remember Dora loves them as dearly and as deeply as you do. Just think for a moment what it has cost her to give them up to you! She must see them soon, with your full consent and permission. They can go to her if you will."

"You are right, mother," he said, after a few minutes. "They are Dora's children, and she ought to see them; but they must not return to that farm house—I can not bear the thought of it. Surely they can meet on neutral ground—at your house, say, or in London; and let it be at Christmas."

"It had better be in London," said Lady Helena. "I will write to Dora, and tell her. The very anticipation of it will make her happy until the time arrives—she loves the children so dearly."

And again a softened thought of Dora came to her husband. Of course she loved them. The little villa at Florence rose before him; he saw vividly, as though he had left it but yesterday, the pretty vine-shaded room where Dora used to sit nursing the little ones. He remembered her sweet patience, her never-failing, gentle love. Had he done right to wound that sad heart afresh by taking those children from her? Was it a just and fitting reward for the watchful love and care of those lonely years?

He would fain have pardoned her, but he could not; and he said to himself again: "In the hour of death! I will forgive her then."

* * * * *

The glowing August, so hot and dusty in London, was like a dream of beauty at Earlescourt. The tall trees gave grateful shelter, baffling the sun's warm rays; the golden corn stood in the broad fields ready for the sickle; the hedge-rows were filled with flowers. The beech trees in the park were in full perfection. Fruit hung ripe and heavy in the orchards. It was no longer the blossoming promise of spring, but the perfect glory of summer.

For many long years Earlescourt had not been so gay. The whole country-side rang with fashionable intelligence. The house was filled with visitors, Lord Airlie heading the list. Lionel Dacre, thinking but little of the time when

the grand old place would be his own, was full of life and spirits.

Long arrears of hospitalities and festivities had to be repaid to the neighborhood. Beatrice and Lillian had to make their debut there. Lady Helena decided upon commencing the programme with a grand dinner party, to be followed by a ball in the evening. Ronald said something about the weather being warm for dancing.

"We danced in London, papa," said Beatrice, "when the heat was so great that I should not have felt any surprise if the whole roomful of people had dissolved. Here we have space—large, cool rooms, fresh air, a conservatory as large as a London house; it will be child's play in comparison with what we have gone through."

"Miss Earle is quite right," said Lord Airlie. "A ball during the season in London is a toil; here it would be nothing but a pleasure."

"Then a ball let it be," said Lord Earle. "Lillian, make out a list of invitations, and head it with Sir Harry and Lady Laurence of Holtham Hall. That reminds me, their eldest son, Gaspar, came home yesterday from Germany; do not forget to include him."

"Little Gaspar," cried Lady Helena—"has he returned? I should like to see him."

"Little Gaspar," said Lord Earle, laughing, "is six feet high now, mother. You forget how time flies; he is taller than Lionel, and a fine, handsome young fellow he is. He will be quite an acquisition."

Lord Earle was too much engrossed to remark the uneasiness his few words had caused. Lord Airlie winced at the idea of a rival a handsome man, and sentimental, too, as all those people educated in Germany are!

"I can not understand what possesses English people to send their sons abroad for education," he said to Beatrice—"and to Germany of all places in the world."

"Why should they not?" she asked.

"The people are so absurdly sentimental," he replied. "Whenever I see a man with long hair and dreamy eyes, I know he is a German."

"You are unjust," said Beatrice, as she left him to join Lillian.

"You are jealous," said Lionel, who had overheard the conversation. "Look out for a rival in the lists, my lord."

"I wish this tiresome ball were over," sighed Lord Airlie. "I shall have no chance of speaking while it is on the tapis."

But he soon forgot his chagrin. The formidable Gaspar appeared that very morning, and, although Lord Airlie could perceive that he was at once smitten with Beatrice's charms, he also saw that she paid no heed whatever to the new-comer; indeed, after a few words of courteous greeting, she returned to the point under discussion—what flowers would look best in the ball room.

"If we have flowers at all," she said, imperiously, "let them be a gorgeous mass of bloom—something worth looking at; not a few pale blossoms standing here and there like 'white sentinels'; let us have flowers full of life and fragrance. Lillian, you know what I mean; you remember Lady Manton's flowers—tier after tier of magnificent color."

"You like to do everything en reine, Beatrice," said Lady Helena, with a well-pleased smile.

"If you have not flowers sufficient, Miss Earle," said Lord Airlie, "I will send to Lynnton. My gardener considers himself a past master of his art."

"My dear Lord Airlie," said Lady Earle, "we have flowers in profusion. You have not been through the conservatories. It would while away the morning pleasantly for you all. Beatrice, select what flowers you will, and have them arranged as you like."

"See," said the triumphant beauty, "what a grand thing a strong will is! Imagine papa's saying he thought thirty or forty plants in full flower would be sufficient! We will surprise him. If the gardener loses his reason, as Lady Earle seems to think probable, he must be taken care of."

Lord Airlie loved Beatrice best in such moods; imperious and piquant, melting suddenly into little gleams of tenderness, then taking refuge in icy coldness and sunny laughter. Beautiful, dazzling, capricious, changing almost every minute, yet charming as she changed, he would not have bartered one of her proudest smiles or least words for anything on earth.

He never forgot that morning spent among the flowers. It was a glimpse of elysium to him. The way in which Beatrice contrived to do as she liked amused him; her face looked fairer than ever among the blooming flowers.

"There is the bell for lunch," she said at last. "We have been here nearly three hours."

"Most of your attendants look slightly deranged," said Lionel. "I am sure I saw poor Donald weeping over his favorite plants. He told me confidentially they would be fit for nothing after the heat of the ball room."

"I shall invent some means of consolation for him," she replied. "I like dancing among the bright flowers. Why should we not have everything gay and bright and beautiful, if we can?"

"Why not?" said Lionel, gravely. "Ah, Miss Earle, why are we not always young and beautiful and happy? Why must flowers die, beauty fade, love grow old? Ask a philosopher—do not ask me. I know the answer, but let some one else give it to you."

"Philosophy does not interest me at present," she said. "I like flowers, music, and dancing better. I hope I shall never tire of them; sometimes—but that is only when I am serious or tired—I feel that I shall never live to grow old. I can not imagine my eyes dim or my hair gray. I can not imagine my heart beating slowly. I can not realize a day when the warmth and beauty of life will have changed into cold and dullness."

Even as she spoke a gentle arm stole round her, a fair, spirituelle face, eyes full of clear, saintly light looked into hers, and a soft voice whispered to her of something not earthly, not of flowers and music, not of life and gayety, something far beyond these, and the proud eyes for a moment grew dim with tears.

"Lily," she said, "I am not so good as you, but I will endeavor to be. Let me enjoy myself first, just for a short time; I will be good, dear."

Her mood changed then, and Lord Airlie thought her more entrancing than ever.

"That is the kind of wife I want," thought Lionel Dacre to himself, looking at Lillian—"some one to guide me, to teach me. Ah, if women only understood their mission! That girl looked as I can imagine only guardian angels look—I wish she would be mine."

Lord Airlie left the conservatory, with its thousand flowers, more in love than ever.

He would wait, he said to himself, until the ball was over; then he would ask Beatrice Earle to be his wife. If she refused him, he would go far away where no one knew him; if she accepted him, he would be her devoted slave. She should be a queen, and he would be her knight.

Ah! What thanks would he return to Heaven if so great a blessing should be his.

Chapter XXVIII

Lord Airlie muttered something that was not a benediction when, on the morning following, Gaspar Laurence made his appearance at Earlescourt.

"We can not receive visitors this morning," said Beatrice, half impatiently. "Mr. Laurence must have forgotten the ball tonight."

But Mr. Laurence had forgotten nothing of the kind. It was a delicious morning, the sun shining brightly and clearly, the westerly breeze blowing fresh and cool. He had thought it likely that the young ladies would spend the morning out-of-doors, and begged permission to join them.

Lady Earle was pleased with the idea. Lord Airlie mentioned something about fatigue, but he was overruled.

"Stroll in the grounds," said Lady Helena; "go down by the lake; I will join you there afterward. A few hours in the fresh air will be the best preparation for the ball."

They went together. Gaspar's preference soon became apparent he would not leave Beatrice, and Lord Airlie devotedly wished him at the antipodes.

They sat down under the shade of a tall lady-birch, the deep, sunlit lake shining through the trees. Then Gaspar, taking a little book in his hands, asked:

"Have you read 'Undine,' Miss Earle—Fonque's 'Undine?'"

"No," she replied; "I am half ashamed to say so."

"It is the sweetest, saddest story ever written," he continued. "This is just the morning for it. May I read it to you?"

There was a general and pleased murmur of assent. Lord Airlie muttered to himself that he knew the fellow would air his German sentiment—at their expense.

Still it was very pleasant. There was a gentle ripple on the deep lake, the water washed among the tall reeds, and splashed with a faint, musical murmur on the stones; the thick leafy branches rustled in the wind; the birds sang in the trees.

Gaspar Laurence read well; his voice was clear and distinct; not a word of the beautiful story was lost.

Beatrice listened like one in a dream. Her proud, bright face softened, her magnificent eyes grew tender and half sad. Gaspar read on—of the fair and lovely maiden, of the handsome young knight and his love, of the water sprite, grim old Kuhlehorn, and the cottage where Undine dwelt, of the knight's marriage, and then of proud, beautiful Bertha.

The rippling of the lake and the singing of the birds seemed like an accompaniment to the words, so full of pathos.

Then Gaspar came to Bertha's love for the knight—their journey on the river to the huge hand rising and snatching the jewel from Undine's soft fingers, while the knight's love grew cold.

Even the waters of the lake seemed to sob and sigh as Gaspar read on of sweet, sad Undine and of her unhappy love, of Bertha's proud triumph, her marriage with the knight, and the last, most beautiful scene of all—Undine rising from the unsealed fountain and going to claim her love.

"How exquisite!" said Beatrice, drawing a long, deep breath. "I did not know there was such a story in the world. That is indeed a creation of genius. I shall never forget Undine."

Her eyes wandered to the sweet spirituelle face and fair golden hair of her sister. Lionel Dacre's glance followed hers.

"I know what you are thinking of," he said—"Miss Lillian is a perfect Undine. I can fancy her, with clasped hands and sad eyes, standing between the knight and Bertha, or rising with shadowy robes from the open fountain."

"It is a beautiful creation," said Beatrice, gently. "Lillian would be an ideal Undine—she is just as gentle, as fair, as true. I am like Bertha, I suppose; at least I know I prefer my own way and my own will."

"You should give some good artist a commission to paint a picture," said Lord Airlie. "Choose the scene in the boat Undine bending over the water, a dreamy expression on her fair face; Bertha sitting by the knight, proud, bright, and half scornful of her companion. Imagine the transparent water Undine's little hand half lost in it, and the giant fingers clasping hers. I wonder that an artist has never painted that scene."

"Who would do for the knight?" said Beatrice. "Lillian and I will never dispute over a knight."

"Artists would find some difficulty in that picture," said Lillian. "How could one clothe a beautiful ideal like Undine? Sweeping robes and waving plumes might suit Bertha; but how could one depict Undine?"

"The knight is the difficulty," laughed Lionel.

"Why should we not go out on the lake now?" said Gaspar; "I will row."

"I have been wishing for the last ten minutes," replied Beatrice, "to be upon the lake. I want to put my hand in the water and see what comes."

Gaspar was not long in getting a pleasure boat out of the boat house. Lionel managed to secure a seat near his Undine, and Lord Airlie by his Beatrice.

It was even more pleasant on the water than on the land; the boat moved easily along, the fresh, clear breeze helping it.

"Steer for those pretty water lilies," said Beatrice, "they look so fresh and shining in the sun."

And as they floated over the water, her thoughts went back to that May morning when Lillian sat upon the cliffs and sketched the white far-off sails. How distant it seemed! She longed then for life. Now every sweet gift which life could bestow was here, crowned with love. Yet she sighed as Hugh Fernely's face rose before her. If she could but forget it! After all it had been on her side but a mockery of love. Yet another sigh broke from her lips, and then Lord Airlie looked anxiously at her.

"Does anything trouble you, Miss Earle?" he asked. "I never remember to have seen you so serious before."

She looked for a moment wistfully into his face. Ah, if he could help her, if he could drive this haunting memory from her, if ever it could be that she might tell him of this her trouble and ask him to save her from Hugh Fernely! But that was impossible. Almost as though in answer to her thought, Gaspar Laurence began to tell them of an incident that had impressed him. A gentleman, a friend of his, after making unheard-of sacrifices to marry a lady who was both beautiful and accomplished, left her suddenly, and never saw her again, the reason being that he discovered that she had deceived him by telling him a willful lie before her marriage. Gaspar seemed to think she had been hardly used. Lord Airlie and Lionel differed from him.

"I am quite sure," said Lord Airlie, "that I could pardon anything sooner than a lie; all that is mean, despicable, and revolting to me is expressed in the one word, 'liar.' Sudden anger, passion, hot revenge—anything is more easily forgiven. When once I discover that a man or woman has told me a lie, I never care to see their face again."

"I agree with you," said Lionel; "perhaps I even go further. I would never pardon an air of deceit; those I love must be straightforward, honest, and sincere always."

"Such a weight of truth might sink the boat," said Beatrice, carelessly; but Lord Airlie's words had gone straight to her heart. If he only knew. But he never would. And again she wished that in reply to her father's question she had answered truthfully.

The time came when Lillian remembered Mr. Dacre's words, and knew they had not been spoken in vain.

Beatrice had taken off her glove, and drew her hand through the cool, deep water; thinking intently of the story she had just heard—of Undine and the water-sprites—she leaned over the boat's side and gazed into the depths. The blue sky and white fleecy clouds, the tall green trees and broad leaves, were all reflected there. There was a strange, weird fascination in the placid water—what went on in the depths beneath? What lay beneath the ripples? Suddenly she drew back with a startled cry a cry that rang out in the clear summer air, and haunted Lord Airlie while he lived. He looked at her; her face had grown white, even to the very lips, and a nameless, awful dread lay in her dark eyes.

"What is it?" he asked, breathlessly. She recovered herself with a violent effort, and tried to smile.

"How foolish I am!" she said; "and what is worse you will all laugh at me. It was sheer fancy and nonsense, I know; but I declare that looking down into the water, I saw my own face there with such a wicked, mocking smile that it frightened me."

"It was the simple reflection," said Lionel Dacre. "I can see mine. Look again, Miss Earle."

"No," she replied, with a shudder; "it is only nonsense, I know, but it startled me. The face seemed to rise from the depths and smile—oh, oh, such a smile! When shall I forget it?"

"It was only the rippling of the water which distorted the reflection," said Lord Airlie.

Beatrice made no reply, but drew her lace shawl around her as though she were cold.

"I do not like the water," she said presently; "it always frightens me. Let us land, Mr. Laurence, please. I will never go on the lake again."

Gaspar laughed, and Mr. Dacre declared Beatrice had had too strong a dose of Undine and the water-sprites. Lord Airlie felt her hand tremble as he helped her to leave the boat. He tried to make her forget the incident by talking of the ball and the pleasure it would bring. She talked gayly, but every now and then he saw that she shuddered as though icily cold.

When they were entering the house she turned round, and, in her charming, imperious way, said:

"None of you must tell papa about my fright. I should not like him to think that an Earle could be either fanciful or a coward. I am brave enough on land."

The heat had tried both girls, and Lady Helena said they must rest before dinner. She made Beatrice lie down upon the cosy little couch in her dressing room. She watched the dark eyes close, and thought how beautiful the young face looked in repose.

But the girl's sleep was troubled. Lady Earle, bending over her, heard her sigh deeply and murmur something about the "deep water." She awoke, crying out that she saw her own face, and Lady Earle saw great drops of perspiration standing in beads upon her brow.

"What have you been dreaming of, child?" she asked. "Young girls like you ought to sleep like flowers."

"Flowers never quite close their eyes," said Beatrice, with a smile. "I shut mine, but my brain is active, it seems, even in sleep. I was dreaming of the lake, Lady Helena. Dreams are very wonderful; do they ever come true?"

"I knew one that did," replied Lady Earle. "When I was young, I had a friend whom I loved very dearly—Laura Reardon. A gentleman, a Captain Lemuel, paid great attention to her. She loved him—my poor Laura—as I hope few people love. For many months he did everything but make an offer—saw her ever day, sent her flowers, books, and music, won her heart by a thousand sweet words and gentle deeds. She believed he was in earnest, and never suspected him of being a male flirt. He left London, suddenly, saying goodbye to her in the ordinary way, and speaking of his return in a few weeks.

"She came to me one morning and told me a strange dream. She dreamed she was dead, and lay buried in the center aisle of an old country church. At the same time, and in the usual vague manner of dreams, she was conscious of an unusual stir. She heard carriages drive up to the church door; she heard the rustling of dresses, the sound of footsteps above her head, the confused murmur of a crowd of people; then she became aware that a marriage was going on. She heard the minister ask:

"George Victor Lemuel, will you have this woman for your lawful wedded wife?"

"The voice she knew and loved best in the world replied:

"I will."

"Alice Ferrars, will you take this man for your lawful wedded husband?"

"I will," replied the clear, low voice.

"She heard the service finished, the wedding bells peal, the carriages drive away. I laughed at her, Beatrice; but the strange thing is, Captain George Lemuel was married on the very day Laura dreamed the dream. He married a young lady, Alice Ferrars, and Laura had never heard of the name before she dreamed it. The marriage took place in an old country church. That dream came true, Beatrice; I never heard of another dream like it."

"Did your friend die?" she asked.

"No," replied Lady Helena; "she did not die, but her life was spoiled by her unhappy love."

"I should have died had it been my disappointment," said Beatrice; "the loss of what one loves must be more bitter than death."

* * * * *

Far and near nothing was spoken of but the ball at Earlescourt. Anything so brilliant or on so grand a scale had not been given in the county for many years.

Lord Earle felt proud of the arrangements as he looked through the ball room and saw the gorgeous array of flowers, tier upon tier of magnificent bloom, a sight well worth coming many miles to see. Here and there a marble statue stood amid the flowers. Little fountains of scented water rippled musically. He stopped for a few moments looking at the blossoms and thinking of his beautiful child.

"How she loves everything bright and gay!" he said to himself. "She will be queen of the ball tonight."

As Lord Earle stood alone in his library that evening, where he had been reading, stealing a quiet half hour, there came a gentle knock at the door.

"Come in," he said, and there stood before him something that he thought must be a vision.

"Grandmamma sent me," said Beatrice, blushing, "to see if I should do. You are to notice my diamonds, papa, and tell me if you approve of the setting."

As he looked at the radiant figure a sense of wonder stole over him. Could this magnificent beauty really be Dora's daughter—Dora who had stained her pretty hand with strawberry juice so many years ago?

He knew nothing of the details of the dress, he saw only the beautiful face and glorious eyes, the crowns of waving hair, the white, stately neck and exquisite arms. Before him was a gleam of pale pink satin, shrouded with lace so fine and delicate that it looked like a fairy web; and the Earle diamonds were not brighter than the dark eyes. They became the wearer well. They would have eclipsed a fair, faded beauty; they added radiance to Beatrice's.

"Where is Lillian?" he asked; and she knew from the tone of his voice how proud and satisfied he was.

"I am here, papa," said a gentle voice. "I wanted you to see Beatrice first."

Lord Earle hardly knew which to admire the more. Lillian looked so fair and graceful; the pure, spiritual face and tender eyes had new beauty; the slender, girlish figure contrasted well with the stately dignity of Beatrice.

"I hope it will be a happy evening for you both," he said.

"I feel sure it will for me," said Beatrice, with a smile. "I am thoroughly happy, and am looking forward to the ball with delight."

Lord Earle smiled half sadly as he gazed at her bright face, wondering whether, in years to come, it would be clouded or shadowed.

"Will you dance, papa?" asked Beatrice, with a gleam of mischief in her dark eyes.

"I think not," he replied; and Ronald Earle's thoughts went back to the last time he had ever danced—with Valentine Charteris. He remembered it well. Ah, no! All those pleasant, happy days were over for him.

Chapter XXIX

The dinner party was over, and carriage after carriage rolled up to the Hall; the rooms began to fill; there was a faint sound of music, a murmur of conversation and laughter.

"You have not forgotten your promise to me, Miss Earle?" said Lord Airlie. "I am to have the first dance and the last, certainly, and as many more as you can spare."

"I have not forgotten," replied Beatrice. She was never quite at her ease with him, although she loved him better than any one else on earth. There was ever present with her the consciousness that she did so love him, and the wonder whether he cared for her.

They opened the ball, and many significant comments were made upon the fact. Gaspar Laurence was present. He was deeply engaged for more than two hours in making up his mind whether he should ask Beatrice to dance with him or not—she looked so beautiful, so far above him. Gaspar could not help loving her—that was impossible; the first moment he saw her he was entranced. But his was a humble, hopeless kind of adoration. He would sooner have dreamed of wooing and winning a royal princess than of ever asking Beatrice to be his wife.

At length he summoned up courage, and was rewarded by a bright smile and kind words. Poor Gaspar! When the beautiful face was near him, and her hand rested on his shoulder, he thought he must be dreaming.

"There," he said, when the dance was over; "I shall not dance again. I should not like to lose the memory of that waltz."

"Why not?" she asked, wonderingly.

"I must be candid with you," said Gaspar, sadly. "Perhaps my confession is a vain one; but I love you, Miss Earle—so dearly that the ground on which you stand is sacred to me."

"That is not a very timid declaration," said Beatrice with a smile. "You are courageous, Mr. Laurence. I have only seen you three times."

"It would make no difference," said Gaspar, "whether I had seen you only once, or whether I met you every day. I am not going to pain you, Miss Earle. Think kindly of me—I do not ask more; only remember that living in this world there is one who would stand between you and all peril—who would sacrifice his life for you. You will not forget?"

"I will not," said Beatrice, firmly. "Never could I forget such words. I am willing to be your friend—I know how to value you."

"I shall be happier with your friendship than with the love of any other woman," said Gaspar, gratefully.

Just then Lord Earle came and took Mr. Laurence away. Beatrice stood where he had left her, half screened from sight by the luxuriant foliage and magnificent flowers of a rare American plant. There was a thoughtful, tender expression on her face that softened it into wondrous beauty. She liked Gaspar, and was both pleased and sorry that he loved her. Very pleasant was this delicious homage of love—pleasant was it to know that strong, brave, gifted men laid all they had in the world at her feet—to know that her looks, smiles, and words moved them as nothing else could.

Yet she was sorry for Gaspar. It must be sad to give all one's love and expect no return. She would be his friend,

but she could never be anything more. She could give him her sincere admiration and esteem, but not her love.

The proud, beautiful lips quivered, and the bright eyes grew dim with tears. No, not her love—that was given, and could never be recalled; in all the wide world, from among all men's, Lord Airlie's face stood out clear and distinct. Living or dying, Lord Earle's daughter knew she could care for no other man.

She had taken in her hand one of the crimson flowers of the plant above her, and seemed lost in contemplating it. She saw neither the blossom nor the leaves. She was thinking of Lord Airlie's face, and the last words he had said to her, when suddenly a shadow fell before her, and looking up hastily, she saw him by her side. He appeared unlike himself, pale and anxious.

"Beatrice," said he, "I must speak with you. Pray come with me, away from all these people. I can bear this suspense no longer."

She looked at him, and would have refused; but she saw in his face that which compelled obedience. For Lord Airlie had watched Gaspar Laurence—he had watched the dance and the interview that followed it. He saw the softened look on her face, and it half maddened him. For the first time in his life Lord Airlie was fiercely jealous. He detested this fair-haired Gaspar, with his fund of German romance and poetry.

Could it be that he would win the prize he himself would have died to secure? What was he saying to her that softened the expression on her face? What had he said that left her standing there with a tender light in her dark eyes which he had never seen before? He could not bear the suspense; perhaps a ball room might not be the most appropriate place for an offer of marriage, but he must know his fate, let it be what it might. He went up to her and made his request.

"Where are you going?" asked Beatrice, suddenly, for Lord Airlie had walked rapidly through the suite of rooms, crowded with people, and through the long conservatory.

"We are not alone," he replied. "See, Lady Laurence and Mr. Gresham prefer the rose garden here to those warm rooms. I must speak with you, Miss Earle. Let me speak now."

They stood in the pretty garden, where roses of varied hues hung in rich profusion; the air was heavy with perfume. The moon shone brightly in the evening sky; its beams fell upon the flowers, bathing them in floods of silver light.

A little rustic garden seat stood among the sleeping roses; and there Beatrice sat, wondering at the strong emotion she read in her lover's face.

"Beatrice," he said, "I can bear it no longer. Why did Gaspar Laurence bend over you? What was he saying? My darling, do you not know how I love you—so dearly and so deeply that I could not live without you? Do you not know that I have loved you from the first moment I ever beheld you? Beatrice, my words are weak. Look at me—read the love in my face that my lips know not how to utter."

But she never raised her eyes to him; the glorious golden light of love that had fallen upon her dazzled her.

"You must not send me from you, Beatrice," he said, clasping her hands in his. "I am a strong man, not given to weakness; but, believe me, if you send me from you, it will kill me. Every hope of my life is centered in you. Beatrice, will you try to care for me?"

She turned her face to his—the moonlight showed clearly the bright tears in her dark eyes. For answer she said, simply:

"Do not leave me—I care for you now; my love—my love—did you not know it?"

The sweet face and quivering lips were so near him that Lord Airlie kissed the tears away; he also kissed the white hands that clasped his own.

"You are mine—my own," he whispered, "until death; say so, Beatrice."

"I am yours," she said, "even in death."

It was a stolen half hour, but so full of happiness that it could never fade from memory.

"I must go," said Beatrice, at length, unclasping the firm hand that held her own. "Oh, Lord Airlie, how am I to meet all my friends? Why did you not wait until tomorrow?"

"I could not," he said; "and you perhaps would not then have been so kind."

He loved her all the more for her simplicity. As they left the garden, Lord Airlie gathered a white rose and gave it to Beatrice. Long afterward, when the leaves had become yellow and dry, the rose was found.

They remained in the conservatory a few minutes, and then went back to the ball room.

"Every waltz must be mine now," said Lord Airlie. "And, Beatrice, I shall speak to Lord Earle tonight. Are you willing?"

Yes, she was willing. It was very pleasant to be taken possession of so completely. It was pleasant to find a will stronger than her own. She did not care how soon all the world knew that she loved him. The only thing she wondered at was why he should be so unspeakably happy.

Chapter XXX

Beatrice never recollected how the ball ended; to her it was one long trance of happiness. She heard the music, the murmur of voices, as though in a dream. There were times when everything seemed brighter than usual—that was when Lord Airlie stood by her side. Her heart was filled with unutterable joy.

It was strange, but in that hour of happiness she never even thought of Hugh Fernely; the remembrance of him never once crossed her mind. Nothing marred the fullness of her content.

She stood by Lord Earle's side as guest after guest came up to say adieu. She saw Lord Airlie waiting for her father.

"Lord Earle will be engaged for some time, I fear," he said; "I must see him tonight. Beatrice, promise me you will not go to rest until your father has given us his consent."

She could not oppose him. When girls like Beatrice Earle once learn to love, there is something remarkable in the complete abandonment of their will. She would fain have told him, with gay, teasing words, that he had won concession enough for one night; as it was, she simply promised to do as he wished.

Lord Earle received the parting compliments of his guests, wondering at the same time why Lord Airlie kept near him and seemed unwilling to lose sight of him. The happy moment arrived when the last carriage rolled away, and the family at Earlescourt were left alone. Lady Earle asked the two young girls to go into her room for half an

hour to "talk over the ball." Lionel, sorry the evening was over, retired to his room; then Hubert Airlie went to Lord Earle and asked if he might speak with him for ten minutes.

"Will it not do tomorrow?" inquired Ronald, smiling, as he held up his watch. "See, it is past three o'clock."

"No," replied Lord Airlie; "I could not pass another night in suspense."

"Come with me, then," said the master of Earlescourt, as he led the way to the library, where the lamps were still alight.

"Now, what is it?" he asked, good-humoredly, turning to the excited, anxious lover.

"Perhaps I ought to study my words," said Lord Airlie; "but I can not. Lord Earle, I love your daughter Beatrice. Will you give her to me to be my wife?"

"Sooner than to any one else in the world," replied Ronald. "Is she willing?"

"I think so," was the answer, Lord Airlie's heart thrilling with happiness as he remembered her words.

"Let us see," said Lord Earle. He rang the bell, and sent for his daughter.

Lord Airlie never forgot the beautiful, blushing face half turned from him as Beatrice entered the room.

"Beatrice," said her father, clasping her in his arms, "is this true? Am I to give you to Lord Airlie?"

"If you please, papa," she whispered.

"I do please," he cried. "Hubert, I give you a treasure beyond all price. You may judge of my daughter's love from her own word. I know it has never been given to any one but you. You are my daughter's first lover, and her first love. You may take her to your heart, well satisfied that she has never cared for any one else. It is true, Beatrice, is it not?"

"Yes," she said, faltering for a moment as, for the first time, she remembered Hugh.

"Tomorrow," continued Lord Earle, "we will talk of the future; we are all tired tonight. You will sleep in peace, Airlie, I suppose?"

"If I sleep at all," he replied.

"Well, you understand clearly that, had the choice rested with me I should have selected you from all others to take charge of my Beatrice," said Lord Earle. "Do not wait to thank me. I have a faint idea of how much a grateful lover has to say. Good night."

* * * * *

"What is it, Beatrice?" asked Lillian, as the two sisters stood alone in the bright little dressing room.

"I can hardly tell you in sober words," she replied. "Lord Airlie has asked me to be his wife—his wife; and oh, Lily, I love him so dearly!"

Pride and dignity all broke down; the beautiful face was laid upon Lillian's shoulder, and Beatrice wept happy tears.

"I love him so, Lily," she went on; "but I never thought he cared for me. What have I ever done that I should be so happy?"

The moonbeams never fell upon a sweeter picture than these fair young sisters; Lillian's pure, spirituelle face bent over Beatrice.

"I love him, Lily," she continued, "for himself. He is a king among men. Who is so brave, so generous, so noble? If he were a beggar, I should care just as much for him."

Lillian listened and sympathized until the bright, dark eyes seemed to grow weary; then she bade her sister goodnight, and went to her own room.

Beatrice Earle was alone at last—alone with her happiness and love. It seemed impossible that her heart and brain could ever grow calm or quiet again. It was all in vain she tried to sleep. Lord Airlie's face, his voice, his words haunted her.

She rose, and put on a pretty pink dressing gown. The fresh air, she thought, would make her sleep, so she opened the long window gently, and looked out.

The night was still and clear; the moon hung over the dark trees; floods of silvery light bathed the far-off lake, the sleeping flowers, and the green grass. There was a gentle stir amid the branches; the leaves rustled in the wind; the blue, silent heavens above bright and calm. The solemn beauty of the starlit sky and the hushed murmur appealed to her. Into the proud, passionate heart there came some better, nobler thoughts. Ah, in the future that lay so brilliant and beautiful before her she would strive to be good, she would be true and steadfast, she would think more of what Lily loved and spoke about at times. Then her thoughts went back to her lover, and that happy half hour in the rose garden. From her window she could see it—the moon shone full upon it. The moonlight was a fair type of her life that was to be, bright, clear, unshadowed. Even as the thought shaped itself in her mind, a shadow fell among the trees. She looked, and saw the figure of a tall man walking down the path that divided the little garden from the shrubbery. He stood still there, gazing long and earnestly at the windows of the house, and then went out into the park, and disappeared.

She was not startled. A passing wonder as to who it might be struck her. Perhaps it was one of the gamekeepers or gardeners, but she did not think much about it. A shadow in the moonlight did not frighten her.

Soon the cool, fresh air did its work; the bright, dark eyes grew tired in real earnest, and at length Beatrice retired to rest.

The sun was shining brightly when she awoke. By her side lay a fragrant bouquet of flowers, the dew-drops still glistening upon them, and in their midst a little note which said:

"Beatrice, will you come into the garden for a few minutes before breakfast, just to tell me all that happened last night was not a dream?"

She rose quickly. Over her pretty morning-dress she threw a light shawl, and went down to meet Lord Airlie.

"It was no dream," she said, simply, holding out her hand in greeting to him.

"Dear Beatrice, how very good of you!" replied Lord Airlie; adding presently: "we have twenty minutes before the breakfast bell will ring; let us make the best of them."

The morning was fresh, fair, and calm, a soft haze hanging round the trees.

"Beatrice," said Lord Airlie, "you see the sun shining there in the high heavens. Three weeks ago I should have thought it easier for that same sun to fall than for me to win you. I can scarcely believe that my highest ideal of woman is realized. It was always my ambition to marry some young girl who had never loved any one before me. You never have. No man ever held your hand as I hold it now, no man ever kissed your face as I kissed it last night."

As he spoke, a burning flush covered her face. She remembered Hugh Fernely. He loved her better for the blush, thinking how pure and guileless she was.

"I fear I shall be a very jealous lover," he continued. "I shall envy everything those beautiful eyes rest upon. Will you ride with me this morning? I want to talk to you about Lynnton—my home, you know. You will be Lady Airlie of Lynnton, and no king will be so proud as I shall."

The breakfast bell rang at last. When Beatrice entered the room, Lady Earle went up to her.

"Your papa has told me the news," she said. "Heaven bless you, and make you happy, dear child!"

Lionel Dacre guessed the state of affairs, and said but little. The chief topic of conversation was the ball, interspersed by many conjectures on the part of Lord Earle as to why the post-bag was so late.

It did not arrive until breakfast was ended. Lord Earle distributed the letters; there were three for Lord Airlie, one to Lady Earle from Dora, two for Lionel, none for Lillian. Lord Earle held in his hand a large common blue envelope.

"Miss Beatrice Earle," he said; "from Brookfield. What large writing! The name was evidently intended to be seen."

Beatrice took the letter carelessly from him; the handwriting was quite unknown to her; she knew no one in Brookfield, which was the nearest post-town—it was probably some circular, some petition for charity, she thought. Lord Airlie crossed the room to speak to her, and she placed the letter carelessly in the pocket of her dress, and in a few minutes forgot all about it.

Lord Airlie was waiting; the horses had been ordered for an early hour. Beatrice ran upstairs to put on her riding habit, and never gave a thought to the letter.

It was a pleasant ride; in the after-days she looked back upon it as one of the brightest hours she had ever known. Lord Airlie told her all about Lynnton, his beautiful home—a grand old castle, where every room had a legend, every tree almost a tradition.

For he intended to work wonders; a new and magnificent wing should be built, and on one room therein art, skill, and money should be lavished without stint.

"Her boudoir" he said, "should be fit for a queen and for a fairy."

So they rode through the pleasant, sunlit air. A sudden thought struck Beatrice.

"I wonder," she said, "what mamma will think? You must go to see her, Hubert. She dreaded love and marriage so much. Poor mamma!"

She asked herself, with wondering love, what could have happened that her mother should dread what she found so pleasant? Lord Airlie entered warmly into all her plans and wishes. Near the grand suite of rooms that were to be prepared for his beautiful young wife, Lord Airlie spoke of rooms for Dora, if she would consent to live with them.

"I must write and tell mamma today," said Beatrice. "I should not like her to hear it from any one but myself."

"Perhaps you will allow me to inclose a note," suggested Lord Airlie, "asking her to tolerate me."

"I do not think that will be very difficult," laughingly replied his companion.

Their ride was a long one. On their return Beatrice was slightly tired, and went straight to her own room. She wrote a long letter to Dora, who must have smiled at her description of Lord Airlie. He was everything that was true, noble, chivalrous, and grand. The world did not hold such another. When the letter was finished it was time to dress for dinner.

"Which dress will you wear, miss?" asked the attentive maid.

"The prettiest I have," said the young girl, her bright face glowing with the words she had just written.

What dress could be pretty enough for him? One was found at last that pleased her—a rich, white crepe. But she would wear no jewels—nothing but crimson roses. One lay in the thick coils of her dark hair, another nestled against her white neck, others looped up the flowing skirt.

Beatrice's toilet satisfied her—this, too, with her lover's fastidious taste to please. She stood before the large mirror, and a pleased smile overspread her face as she saw herself reflected therein.

Suddenly she remembered the letter. The morning—dress still hung upon a chair. She took the envelope from the pocket.

"Shall you want me again, Miss Earle?" asked her maid.

"No," replied Beatrice, breaking the seal; "I am ready now."

The girl quitted the room, and Beatrice, standing before the mirror, drew out a long, closely written letter, turning presently, in amazement, to the signature, wondering who could be the writer.

Chapter XXXI

The sun shone brightly upon the roses that gleamed in her hair and nestled against the white neck. Could it be lingering in cruel mockery upon the pale face and the dark eyes so full of wild horror? As Beatrice Earle read that letter, the color left even her lips, her heart seemed to stand still, a vague, nameless dread took hold of her, the paper fell from her hands, and with a long, low cry she fell upon her knees, hiding her face in her hands.

It had fallen at last—the cruel blow that even in her dreams and thoughts she had considered impossible. Hugh Fernely had found her out, and claimed her as his own!

This letter, which had stricken joy and beauty from the proud face and left it white and cold almost as the face of the dead was from him; and the words it contained were full of such passionate love that they terrified her. The letter ran as follows:

"My own Beatrice,—From peril by sea and land I have returned to claim you. Since we parted I have stood face to face with death in its most terrible form. Each time I conquered because I felt I must see you again. It is a trite saying that death is immortal. Death itself would not part me from you—nay, if I were buried, and you came to my grave and whispered my name, it seems to me I must hear you.

"Beatrice, you promised to be my wife—you will not fail me? Ah, no, it can not be that the blue heavens above will look on quietly and witness my death blow! You will come to me, and give me a word, a smile to show how true you have been.

"Last evening I wandered round the grounds, wondering which were the windows of my love's chamber, and asking myself whether she was dreaming of me. Life has changed for you since we sat upon the cliffs at Knutsford and you promised to be my wife. I heard at the farm all about the great change, and how the young girl who wandered with me through the bonny green woods is the daughter of Lord Earle. Your home, doubtless, is a stately one. Rank and position like yours might frighten some lovers—they do not daunt me. You will not let them stand between us. You can not, after the promises you uttered.

"Beatrice, my voyage has been a successful one; I am not a rich man, but I have enough to gratify every wish to your heart. I will take you away to sunny lands over the sea where life shall be so full of happiness that you will wish it never to end.

"I wait your commands. Rumor tells me Lord Earl is a strange, disappointed man. I will not yet call upon you at your own home; I shall await your reply at Brookfield. Write at once, Beatrice, and tell me how and when I may meet you. I will go anywhere, at any time. Do not delay—my heart hungers and thirsts for one glance of your peerless face. Appoint an hour soon. How shall I live until it comes? Until then think of me as

"Your devoted lover, Hugh Fernely.

"Address Post Office, Brookfield."

She read every word carefully and then slowly turned the letter over and read it again. Her white lips quivered with indignant passion. How dared he presume so far? His love! Ah, if Hubert Airlie could have read those words! Fernely's love! She loathed him; she hated, with fierce, hot hatred, the very sound of his name. Why must this most wretched folly of her youth rise up against her now? What must she do? Where could she turn for help and counsel?

Could it be possible that this man she hated so fiercely had touched her face and covered her hands with kisses and tears? She struck the little white hands which held the letter against the marble stand, and where Hugh Fernely's tears had fallen a dark bruise purpled the fair skin; white hard, fierce words came from the beautiful lips.

"Was I blind, foolish, mad?" she cried. "Dear Heaven, save me from the fruits of my own folly!"

Then hot anger yielded to despair. What should she do? Look which way she might, there was no hope. If Lord Earle once discovered that she had dealt falsely with him, she would be driven from the home she had learned to love. He would never pardon such concealment, deceit, and folly as hers. She knew that. If Lord Airlie ever discovered that any other man had called her his love, had kissed her face, and claimed her as his own, she would lose his affection. Of that she was also quite sure.

If she would remain at Earlescourt, if she would retain her father's affection and Lord Airlie's love, they must never hear of Hugh Fernely. There could be no doubt on that head.

What should she do with him? Could she buy him off? Would money purchase her freedom? Remembering his pride and his love, she thought not. Should she appeal to his pity—tell him all her heart and life were centered in Lord Airlie? Should she appeal to his love for pity's sake?

Remembering his passionate words, she knew it would be useless. Had she but been married before he returned—were she but Lady Airlie of Lynnton—he could not have harmed her. Was the man mad to think he could win her—she who had had some of the most noble-born men in England at her feet? Did he think she would exchange her grand old name for his obscure one—her magnificence for his poverty.

There was no more time for thought; the dinner bell had sounded for the last time, and she must descend. She thrust the letter hastily into a drawer, and locked it, and then turned to her mirror. She was startled at the change. Surely that pale face, with its quivering lips and shadowed eyes could not be hers. What should she do to drive away the startled fear, the vague dread, the deadly pallor? The roses she wore were but a ghastly contrast.

"I must bear it better," she said to herself. "such a face as this will betray my secret. Let me feel that I do not care that it will all come right in the end."

She said the words aloud, but the voice was changed and hoarse.

"Women have faced more deadly peril than this," she continued, "and have won. Is there any peril I would not brave for Hubert Airlie's sake?"

Beatrice Earle left the room. She swept, with her beautiful head erect, through the wide corridors and down the broad staircase. She took her seat at the sumptuous table, whereon gold and silver shone, whereon everything recherche and magnificent was displayed. But she had with her a companion she was never again to lose, a haunting fear, a skeleton that was never more to quit her side, a miserable consciousness of folly that was bringing sore wretchedness upon her. Never again was she to feel free from fear and care.

"Beatrice," said Lady Earle when dinner was over, "you will never learn prudence."

She started, and the beautiful bloom just beginning to return, vanished again.

"Do not look alarmed, my dear," continued Lady Helena; "I am not angry. I fear you were out too long today. Lord Airlie must take more care of you; the sun was very hot, and you look quite ill. I never saw you look as you do tonight."

"We had very little sun," replied Beatrice, with a laugh as she tried to make a gay one; "we rode under the shade in the park. I am tired, but not with my ride."

It was a pleasant evening, and when the gentlemen joined the ladies in the drawing room, the sunbeams still lingered on flower and tree. The long windows were all open, and the soft summer wind that came in was laden with the sweet breath of the flowers.

Lord Airlie asked Beatrice to sing. It was a relief to her; she could not have talked; all the love and sorrow, all the fear and despair that tortured her, could find vent in music. So she sat in the evening gloaming, and Lord Airlie, listening to the superb voice, wondered at the pathos and sadness that seemed to ring in every note.

"What weird music, Beatrice!" he said, at length. "You are singing of love, but the love is all sorrow. Your songs are generally so bright and happy. What has come over you?"

"Nothing," was the reply, but he, bending over her, saw the dark eyes were dim with tears.

"There," cried Lord Airlie, "you see I am right. You have positively sung yourself to tears."

He drew her from the piano, and led her to the large bay window where the roses peeped in. He held her face up to the mellow evening light, and looked gravely into her beautiful eyes.

"Tell me," he said, simply, "what has saddened you, Beatrice you have no secrets from me. What were you thinking of just now when you sang that dreamy 'Lebenwold?' Every note was like a long sigh."

"Shall you laugh if I tell you?" she asked.

"No," he replied; "I can not promise to sigh, but I will not smile."

"I was thinking what I should do if—if anything happened to part us."

"But nothing ever will happen," he said; "nothing can part us but death. I know what would happen to me if I lost you, Beatrice."

"What?" she asked, looking up into the handsome, kindly face.

"I should not kill myself," he said, "for I hold life to be a sacred gift; but I should go where the face of no other woman would smile upon me. Why do you talk so dolefully, Beatrice? Let us change the subject. Tell me where you would like to go when we are married—shall it be France, Italy, or Spain?"

"Would nothing ever make you love me less, Hubert?" she asked. "Neither poverty nor sickness?"

"No," he replied; "nothing you can think of or invent."

"Nor disgrace?" she continued; but he interrupted her half angrily.

"Hush!" he said, "I do not like such a word upon your lips; never say it again. What disgrace can touch you? You are too pure, too good."

She turned from him, and he fancied a low moan came from her trembling lips.

"You are tired, and—pray forgive me, Beatrice—nervous too," said Lord Airlie; "I will be your doctor. You shall lie down here upon this couch. I will place it where you can see the sun set in the west, and I will read to you something that will drive all fear away. I thought during dinner that you looked ill and worn."

Gently enough he drew the couch to the window, Lady Earle watching him the while with smiling face. He induced Beatrice to lie down, and then turned her face to the garden where the setting sun was pleasantly gilding the flowers.

"Now, you have something pleasant to look at," said Lord Airlie, "and you shall have something pleasant to listen to. I am going to read some of Schiller's 'Marie Stuart.'"

He sat at her feet, and held her white hands in his. He read the grand, stirring words that at times seemed like the ring of martial music, and again like the dirge of a soul in despair.

His clear, rich voice sounded pleasantly in the evening calm. Beatrice's eyes lingered on the western sky all aflame, but her thoughts were with Hugh Fernely.

What could she do? If she could but temporize with him, if she could but pacify him, for a time, until she was married, all would be safe. He would not dare to talk of claiming Lady Airlie it would be vain if he did. Besides, she would persuade Lord Airlie to go abroad; and, seeing all pursuit useless, Hugh would surely give her up. Even at the very worst, if Hubert and she were once married, she would not fear; if she confessed all to him, he would forgive her. He might be very angry, but he would pardon his wife. If he knew all about it before marriage, there was no hope for her.

She must temporize with Fernely—write in a style that would convey nothing, and tell him that he must wait. He could not refuse. She would write that evening a letter that should give him no hope, nor yet drive him to despair.

"That is a grand scene, is it not?" said Lord Airlie suddenly; then he saw by Beatrice's startled look that she had not listened.

"I plead guilty at once," she replied. "I was thinking—do not be angry—I was thinking of something that relates to yourself. I heard nothing of what you read, Hubert. Will you read it again?"

"Certainly not," he said, with a laugh of quiet amusement. "Reading does not answer; we will try conversation. Let us resume the subject you ran away from before—where shall we go for our wedding trip?"

Only three days since she would have suggested twenty different places; she would have smiled and blushed, her dark eyes growing brighter at every word. Now she listened to her lover's plans as if a ghostly hand had clutched her heart and benumbed her with fear.

* * * * *

That evening it seemed to Beatrice Earle as though she would never be left alone. In the drawing room stood a dainty little escritoire used by the ladies of Earlescourt. Here she dared not write lest Lord Airlie should, as he often did, linger by her, pretending to assist her. If she went into the library, Lord Earle would be sure to ask to whom she was writing. There was nothing to be done but to wait until she retired to her own room.

First came Lady Earle, solicitous about her health, recommending a long rest and a quiet sleep; then Lillian, full of anxiety, half longing to ask Beatrice if she thought Lionel Dacre handsomer and kinder than any one else; then the maid Suzette, who seemed to linger as though she would never go.

At length she was alone, the door locked upon the outer world. She was soon seated at her little desk, where she speedily wrote the following cold letter, that almost drove Hugh Fernely mad:

"My dear Hugh,—Have you really returned? I thought you were lost in the Chinese Seas, or had forgotten the little episode at Knutsford. I can not see you just yet. As you have heard, Lord Earle has peculiar notions—I must humor them. I will write again soon, and say when and where I can see you. Yours sincerely, Beatrice Earle."

She folded the letter and addressed it as he wished; then she left her room and went down into the hall, where the post-bag lay open upon the table. She placed the missive inside, knowing that no one would take the trouble to look at the letters; then she returned, as she had come, silently.

The letter reached Brookfield at noon the following day. When Hugh Fernely opened it he bit his lips with rage. Cold, heartless lines! Not one word was there of welcome. Not one of sorrow for his supposed death; no mention of love, truth, or fidelity; no promise that she would be his. What could such a letter mean?

He almost hated the girl whom he had loved so well. Yet he could not, would not, believe anything except that perhaps during his long absence she had grown to think less kindly of him. She had promised to be his wife, and let come what might, he would make her keep her word.

So he said, and Hugh Fernely meant it. His whole life was centered in her and he would not tamely give her up.

The letter dispatched, Beatrice awaited the reply with a suspense no words can describe. A dull wonder came over her at times why she must suffer so keenly. Other girls had done what she had done—nay, fifty times worse—and no Nemesis haunted them. Why was this specter of fear and shame to stand by her side every moment and distress her?

It was true it had been very wrong of her to meet this tiresome Hugh Fernely in the pleasant woods and on the sea shore; but it had broken the monotony that had seemed to be killing her. His passionate love had been delicious flattery; still she had not intended anything serious. It had only been a novelty and an amusement to her, although to him perhaps it had been a matter of life or death. But she had deceived Lord Earle. If, when he had questioned her, and sought with such tender wisdom to win her confidence, if she had told him her story then, he would have saved her from further persecution and from the effects of her own folly; if she had told him then, it would not have mattered there would have been no obstacle to her love for Lord Airlie.

It was different now. If she were to tell Lord Earle, after his deliberate and emphatic words, she could expect no mercy; yet, she said to herself, other girls have done even worse, and punishment had not overtaken them so swiftly.

At last she slept, distressed and worn out with thought.

Chapter XXXII

For the first time in her life, when the bright sun shone into her room, Beatrice turned her face to the wall and dreaded the sight of day. The post-bag would leave the hall at nine in the morning—Hugh would have the letter at noon. Until then she was safe.

Noon came and went, but the length of the summer's day brought nothing save fresh misery. At every unusual stir, every loud peal of the bell, every quick footstep, she turned pale, and her heart seemed to die within her.

Lady Earle watched her with anxious eyes. She could not understand the change that had come over the brilliant young girl who had used to be the life of the house. Every now and then she broke out into wild feverish gayety. Lillian saw that something ailed her sister—she could not tell what.

For the fiftieth time that day, when the hall door bell sounded, Beatrice looked up with trembling lips she vainly tried to still. At last Lady Earle took the burning hands in her own.

"My dear child," she said, "you will have a nervous fever if you go on in this way. What makes you start at every noise? You look as though you were waiting for something dreadful to happen."

"No one ever called me nervous," replied Beatrice, with a smile, controlling herself with an effort; "mamma's chief complaint against me was that I had no nerves;" adding presently to herself: "This can not last. I would

rather die at once than live in this agony."

The weary day came to a close, however, and it was well for Beatrice that Lord Airlie had not spent it with her. The gentlemen at Earlescourt had all gone to a bachelor's dinner, given by old Squire Newton of the Grange. It was late when they returned, and Lord Airlie did not notice anything unusual in Beatrice.

"I call this a day wasted," he said, as he bade her goodnight; "for it has been a day spent away from you. I thought it would never come to an end."

She sighed, remembering what a dreary day it had been to her. Could she live through such another? Half the night she lay awake, wondering if Hugh's answer to her letter would come by the first post, and whether Lord Earle would say anything if he noticed another letter from Brookfield. Fortune favored her. In the morning Lord Earle was deeply engrossed by a story Lionel was telling, and asked Beatrice to open the bag for him. She again saw a hated blue envelope bearing her own name. When all the other letters were distributed, she slipped hers into the pocket of her dress, without any one perceiving the action.

Breakfast was over at last; and leaving Lord Airlie talking to Lillian, Beatrice hastened to read the letter. None of Hugh's anger was there set down; but if she had cared for him her heart must have ached at the pathos of his simple words. He had received her note, he said—the note so unworthy of her—and hastened to tell her that he was obliged to go to London on some important business connected with his ship, and that he should be absent three weeks. He would write to her at once on his return, and he should insist upon seeing her then, as well as exact the fulfillment of her promise.

It was a respite; much might happen in three weeks. She tore the letter into shreds, and felt as though relieved of a deadly weight. If time could but be gained, she thought—if something could happen to urge on her marriage with Hubert Airlie before Hugh returned! At any rate, for the moment she was free.

She looked like herself again when Lord Airlie came to ask her if she would ride or walk. The beautiful bloom had returned to her face and the light to her eyes. All day she was in brilliant spirits. There was no need now to tremble at a loud ring or a rapid step. Three weeks was a long time—much might happen. "Oh, if Lord Airlie would but force me to marry him soon!"

That very evening Lord Airlie asked her if she would go out with him. He wanted to talk to her alone, for he was going away on the morrow, and had much to say to her.

"Where are you going?" she asked with sad, wondering eyes, her chance of escaping seeming rapidly to diminish.

"I am going to Lynnton," he replied, "to see about plans for the new buildings. They should be begun at once. For even if we remain abroad a whole year they will then be hardly finished. I shall be away ten days or a fortnight. When I return, Beatrice, I shall ask you a question. Can you guess what it will be?"

There was no answering smile on her face. Perhaps he would be absent three weeks. What chance of escape had she now?

"I shall ask you when you will fulfill your promise," he continued—"when you will let me make you in deed and in word my wife. You must not be cruel to me, Beatrice. I have waited long enough. You will think about it while I am gone, will you not?"

Lord Earle smiled as he noted his daughter's face. Airlie was going away, and therefore she was dull—that was just as it should be. He was delighted that she cared so much for him. He told Lady Helena that he had not thought Beatrice capable of such deep affection. Lady Helena told him she had never known any one who could love so

well or hate so thoroughly as Beatrice.

The morning came, and Lord Airlie lingered so long over his farewell that Lady Helena began to think he would alter his mind and remain where he was. He started at last, however, promising to write every day to Beatrice, and followed by the good wishes of the whole household.

He was gone, and Hugh was gone; for three weeks she had nothing to fear, nothing to hope, and a settled melancholy calm fell upon her. Her father and Lady Helena thought she was dull because her lover was away; the musical laugh that used to gladden Lord Earle's heart was hushed; she became unusually silent; the beautiful face grew pale and sad. They smiled and thought it natural. Lillian, who knew every expression of her sister's face, grew anxious, fearing there was some ailment either of body or mind of which none of them were aware.

They believed she was thinking of her absent lover and feeling dull without him. In reality her thoughts were centered upon one idea—what could she do to get rid of Hugh Fernely? Morning, noon, and night that one question was always before her. She talked when others did, she laughed with them; but if there came an interval of silence the beautiful face assumed a far-off dreamy expression Lillian had never seen there before. Beatrice was generally on her guard, watchful and careful, but there were times when the mask she wore so bravely fell off, and Lillian, looking at her then, knew all was not well with her sister.

What was to be done to get free from Hugh? Every hour in the day fresh plans came to her—some so absurd as to provoke feverish, unnatural laughter, but none that were feasible. With all her daring wit, her quick thought, her vivid fancy—with all her resource of mind and intellect, she could do nothing. Day and night the one question was still there—what could she do to get free from Hugh Fernely?

Chapter XXXIII

A whole week passed, and the "something" Beatrice longed for had not happened. Life went on quietly and smoothly. Her father and Lady Earle busied themselves in talking of preparations for the marriage. Lionel Dacre and Lillian slowly drifted into the fairyland of hope, Lord Airlie wrote every day. No one dreamed of the dark secret that hung over Earlescourt.

Every morning Beatrice, with the sanguine hopefulness of youth, said to herself, "Something will happen today;" every night she thought, "Something must happen tomorrow;" but days and nights went on calmly, unbroken by any event or incident such as she wished.

The time of reprieve was rapidly passing. What should she do if, at the end of three weeks, Lord Airlie returned and Hugh Fernely came back to Earlescourt? Through the long sunny hours that question tortured her—the suspense made her sick at heart. There were times when she thought it better to die at once than pass through this lingering agony of fear.

But she was young, and youth is ever sanguine; she was brave, and the brave rarely despair. She did not realize the difficulties of her position, and she did not think it possible that anything could happen to take her from Hubert Airlie.

Only one person noted the change in Beatrice, and that was her sister, Lillian Earle. Lillian missed the high spirits, the brilliant repartee, the gay words that had made home so bright; over and over again she said to herself all was not well with her sister.

Lillian had her own secret—one she had as yet hardly whispered to herself. From her earliest childhood she had been accustomed to give way to Beatrice. Not that there was any partiality displayed, but the willful young beauty

generally contrived to have her own way. By her engaging manners and high spirits she secured every one's attention; and thus Lillian was in part overlooked.

She was very fair and gentle, this golden-haired daughter of Ronald Earle. Her face was so pure and spirituelle that one might have sketched it for the face of a seraph; the tender violet eyes were full of eloquence, the white brow full of thought. Her beauty never dazzled, never took any one by storm; it won by slow degrees a place in one's heart.

She was of a thoughtful, unobtrusive nature; nothing could have made her worldly, nothing could have made her proud.

Sweet, calm, serene, ignorant alike of all the height of happiness and the depths of despair—gifted, too with a singularly patient disposition and amiable temper, no one had ever seen Lillian Earle angry or hasty; her very presence seemed full of rest and peace.

Nature had richly endowed her. She had a quick, vivid fancy, a rare and graceful imagination; and perhaps her grandest gift was a strong and deep love for things not of this world. Not that Lillian was given to "preaching," or being disagreeably "goody," but high and holy thoughts came naturally to her. When Lord Earle wanted amusement, he sent for Beatrice—no one could while away long hours as she could; when he wanted comfort, advice, or sympathy, he sought Lillian. Every one loved her, much as one loves the sunbeams that bring bright light and warmth.

Lionel Dacre loved her best of all. His only wonder was that any one could even look at Beatrice when Lillian was near. He wondered sometimes whether she had not been made expressly for him—she was so strong where he was weak, her calm serene patience controlled his impetuosity, her gentle thoughtfulness balanced his recklessness, her sweet, graceful humility corrected his pride.

She influenced him more than he knew—one word from her did wonders with him. He loved her for her fair beauty, but most of all for the pure, guileless heart that knew no shadow of evil upon which the world had never even breathed.

Lionel Dacre had peculiar ideas about women. His mother, who had been a belle in her day, was essentially worldly. The only lessons she had ever taught him were how to keep up appearance, how to study fashionable life and keep pace with it.

She had been a lady of fashion, struggling always with narrow means; and there were times when her son's heart grew sick, remembering the falseness, the meanness, the petty cunning maneuvers she had been obliged to practice.

As he grew older and began to look around the world, he was not favorably impressed. The ladies of his mother's circle were all striving together to get the foremost place. He heard of envy, jealousy, scandal, untruth, until he wondered if all women were alike.

He himself was of a singularly truthful, honorable nature—all deceit, all false appearances were hateful to him. He had formed to himself an ideal of a wife, and he resolved to live and die unmarried unless he could find some one to realize it.

Lillian Earle did. He watched her keenly; she was truthful and open as the day. He never heard a false word from her not even one of the trifling excuses that pass current in society for truth. He said to himself, if any one was all but perfect, surely she was. To use his own expression, he let his heart's desire rest in her; all he had ever hoped for or dreamed of was centered in her. He set to work deliberately and with all the ardor of his impetuous nature

to win her love.

At first she did not understand him; then by degrees he watched the pure young heart awaken to consciousness. It was as pretty a development of love as ever was witnessed. At the sound of his footsteps or his voice the faint color flushed into her face, light came into her eyes; and when he stood by her side, bending his handsome head to read her secret, she would speak a word or two, and then hurry away from him. If he wished to join her in her walks or rides, she begged to be excused with trembling lips and drooping eyes.

She hardly knew herself what had come to her—why the world seemed suddenly to have grown so fair—what made fresh luster in the sky above. A vague, delicious happiness stirred in the gentle heart. She longed for, yet half dreaded, Lionel's presence. When he was near her, the little hands trembled and the sweet face grew warm and flushed. Yet the measure of her content and happiness seemed full.

Lionel saw it all, and he wondered why such a precious treasure as the love of this pure, innocent girl should be his. What had he ever done to deserve it? Through her he began to respect all other women, through her he began to value the high and holy teachings he had hitherto overlooked. She was his ideal realized. If ever the time should come for him to be disappointed in her, then he would believe all things false—but it never could be.

How should he tell her of his love? It would be like trying to cage a startled, timid bird. He stood abashed before her sweet innocence.

But the time came when he resolved to woo and win her—when he felt that his life would be unbearable without her; and he said to himself that sweet Lillian Earle should be his wife, or he would never look upon a woman's face again.

Lionel felt some slight jealousy of Beatrice; he paid dearly enough for it in the dark after-days. He fancied that she eclipsed Lillian. He thought that if he spoke to Lord Earle of his love, he would insist upon both marriages taking place on one day; and then his fair gentle love would, as usual, be second to her brilliant sister.

"That shall never be," he said to himself. "Lillian shall have a wedding day of her own, the honors unshared. She shall be the one center of attraction."

He determined to say nothing to Lord Earle until Beatrice was married; surely her wedding must take place soon—Lord Airlie seemed unable to exist out of her presence. When they were married and gone, Lillian should have her turn of admiration and love. It was nothing but proud, jealous care for her that made him delay.

And Lillian discovered her own secret at last. She knew she loved Lionel. He was unlike every one else. Who was so handsome, so brave, so good? She liked to look shyly at the frank, proud face and the careless wave of hair thrown back from his brow; his voice made music in her heart, and she wondered whether he really cared for her.

In her rare sweet humility she never saw how far she was above him; she never dreamed that he looked up to her as a captain to his queen. He was always by her side, he paid her a thousand graceful attentions, he sought her advice and sympathy, some unspoken words seemed ever on his lips. Lillian Earle asked herself over and over again whether he loved her.

She was soon to know. From some careless words of Lord Earle's, Lionel gathered that Beatrice's marriage would take place in November. Then he decided, if he could win her consent, that Lillian's wedding should be when the spring flowers were blooming.

August, with its sunny days, was at an end. Early in September Lillian stood alone on the shore of the deep, clear lake. Lionel saw her there, and hastened to join her, wondering at the grave expression on her face.

"What are you thinking of, Lillian?" he asked. "You look sad and anxious."

"I was thinking of Beatrice," she replied. "She seems so changed, so different. I can not understand it."

"I can," said Lionel. "You forget that she will soon leave the old life far behind her. She is going into a new world; a change so great may well make one thoughtful."

"She loves Lord Airlie," returned Lillian—she could hear even then the musical voice saying, "I love him so dearly, Lily"—"she can not be unhappy."

"I do not mean that," he replied; "thought and silence are not always caused by unhappiness. Ah, Lily," he cried, "I wonder if you guess ever so faintly at the thoughts that fill my heart! I wonder if you know how dearly I love you. Nay, do not turn from me, do not look frightened. To me you are the truest, noblest, and fairest woman in the world. I love you so dearly, Lily, that I have not a thought or wish away from you. I am not worthy to win you, I know—you are as far above me as the sun shining overhead but, if you would try, you might make me what you would. Could you like me?"

The sweet flushed face was raised to his; he read the happiness shining in the clear eyes. But she could not speak to him; words seemed to die upon her lips. Lionel took the little white hands and clasped them in his own.

"I knew I should frighten you, Lily," he said, gently. "Forgive me if I have spoken too abruptly. I do not wish you to decide at once. Take me on trial—see if you can learn to love me weeks, months, or years hence. I am willing to wait a whole life time for you, my darling, and should think the time well spent. Will it be possible for you ever to like me?"

"I like you now," she said, simply.

"Then promise to endeavor to love me," he persisted; "will you, Lily? I will do anything you wish me; I will try my best to be half as good as you are. Promise me, darling—my life hangs on your answer."

"I promise," she said; and he knew how much the words meant.

On the little hand that rested in his own he saw a pretty ring; it was a large pearl set in gold. Lionel drew it from her finger.

"I shall take this, Lily," he said; "and, when Beatrice is married and gone, I shall go to Lord Earle and ask him to give you to me. I will not go now; we will keep our secret for a short time. Two love affairs at once would be too much. You will learn to love me, and when the spring time comes, perhaps you will make me happy as Beatrice will by then have made Lord Airlie. I shall keep the ring. Lillian, you are my pearl, and this will remind me of you. Just to make me very happy, say you are pleased."

"I will say more than that," she replied, a happy smile rippling over her face; "I have more than half learned my lesson."

He kissed the pretty hand, and looked at the fair, flushed face he dared not touch with his lips.

"I can not thank you," he said, his voice full of emotion. "I will live for you, Lily, and my life shall prove my gratitude. I begin to wish the spring were nearer. I wonder if you will have learned your lesson then."

Chapter XXXIV

Lord Airlie's return to Earlescourt had been delayed. The changes to take place at Lynnton involved more than he thought. It was quite three weeks before he could leave the Hall and seek again the presence he loved best on earth.

Three weeks, yet nothing had happened. Beatrice had watched each day begin and end until her heart grew faint with fear; she was as far as ever from finding herself freed from Hugh Fernely.

Lord Airlie, on his arrival, was startled by the change in her brilliant face. Yet he was flattered by it. He thought how intensely she must love him if his absence could affect her so strongly. He kissed her pale face over and over again, declaring that he would not leave her any more—no one else knew how to take care of her.

They were all pleased to welcome him for every one liked Lord Airlie, and the family circle did not seem complete without him. That very night he had an interview with Lord Earle and besought him to allow the marriage to take place as soon as possible. He had been miserable away from Beatrice, he declared, and he thought she looked pale and grave. Would Lord Earle be willing to say November, or perhaps the latter end of October?

"My daughter must arrange the time herself" said Lord Earle; "whatever day she chooses will meet with my approval."

Lord Airlie went to the drawing room where he had left Beatrice, and told her Lord Earle's answer; she smiled, but he saw the white lips quiver as she did so.

Only one month since his passionate, loving words would have made the sweetest music to her; she listened and tried to look like herself, but her heart was cold with vague, unutterable dread.

"The fourteenth of October"—clever Lord Airlie, by some system of calculation known only to himself, persuaded Beatrice that that was the "latter end of the month."

"Not another word," he said, gayly. "I will go and tell Lord Earle. Do not say afterward that you have changed your mind, as many ladies do. Beatrice, say to me, 'Hubert, I promise to marry you on the fourteenth of October.'"

She repeated the words after him.

"It will be almost winter," he added; "the flowers will have faded, the leaves will have fallen from the trees; yet no summer day will ever be so bright to me as that."

She watched him quit the room, and a long, low cry came from her lips. Would it ever be? She went to the window and looked at the trees. When the green leaves lay dead she would be Lord Airlie's wife, or would the dark cloud of shame and sorrow have fallen, hiding her forever from his sight?

Ah, if she had been more prudent! How tame and foolish, how distasteful the romance she had once thought delightful seemed now! If she had but told all to Lord Earle!

It was too late now! Yet, despite the deadly fear that lay at her heart, Beatrice still felt something like hope. Hope is the last thing to die in the human breast—it was not yet dead in hers.

At least for that one evening—the first after Lord Airlie's return—she would be happy. She would throw the dark

shadow away from her, forget it, and enjoy her lover's society. He could see smiles on her face, and hear bright words such as he loved. Let the morrow bring what it would, she would be happy that night. And she kept her word.

Lord Airlie looked back afterward on that evening as one of the pleasantest of his life. There was no shadow upon the beautiful face he loved so well. Beatrice was all life and animation; her gay, sweet words charmed every one who heard them. Even Lionel forgot to be jealous, and admired her more than he ever had before.

Lord Earle smiled as he remarked to Lady Helena that all her fears for her grandchild's health were vain—the true physician was come at last.

When Lord Airlie bade Beatrice good night, he bent low over the white, jeweled hand.

"I forget all time when with you," he said; "it does not seem an hour since I came to Earlescourt."

The morrow brought the letter she had dreaded yet expected to see.

It was not filled with loving, passionate words, as was the first Hugh had written. He said the time had come when he must have an answer—when he must know from her own lips at what period he might claim the fulfillment of her promise—when she would be his wife.

He would wait no longer. If it was to be war, let the war begin he should win. If peace, so much the better. In any case he was tired of suspense, and must know at once what she intended to do. He would trust to no more promises; that very night he would be at Earlescourt, and must see her. Still, though he intended to enforce his rights, he would not wantonly cause her pain. He would not seek the presence of her father until she had seen him and they had settled upon some plan of action.

"I know the grounds around Earlescourt well," he wrote. "I wandered through them for many nights three weeks ago. A narrow path runs from the gardens to the shrubbery—meet me there at nine; it will be dark then, and you need not fear being seen. Remember, Beatrice, at nine tonight I shall be there; and if you do not come, I must seek you in the house, for see you I will."

The letter fell from her hands; cold drops of fear and shame stood upon her brow; hatred and disgust filled her heart. Oh, that she should ever have placed herself in the power of such a man!

The blow had fallen at last. She stood face to face with her shame and fear. How could she meet Hugh Fernely? What should she say to him? How must such a meeting end? It would but anger him the more. He should not even touch her hand in greeting, she said to herself; and how would he endure her contempt?

She would not see him. She dared not. How could she find time? Lord Airlie never left her side. She could not meet Hugh. The web seemed closing round her, but she would break through it.

She would send him a letter saying she was ill, and begging him to wait yet a little longer. Despite his firm words, she knew he would not refuse it if she wrote kindly. Again came the old hope something might happen in a few days. If not, she must run away; if everything failed and she could not free herself from him, then she would leave home; in any case she would not fall into his hands—rather death than that.

More than once she thought of Gaspar's words. He was so true, so brave—he would have died for her. Ah, if he could but help her, if she could but call him to her aid! In this, the dark hour of her life by her own deed she had placed herself beyond the reach of all human help.

She would write—upon that she was determined; but who would take the letter? Who could she ask to stand at the shrubby gate and give to the stranger a missive from herself? If she asked such a favor from a servant, she would part with her secret to one who might hold it as a rod of iron over her. She was too proud for that. There was only one in the world who could help her, and that was her sister Lillian.

She shrank with unutterable shame from telling her. She remembered how long ago at Knutsford she had said something that had shocked her sister, and the scared, startled expression of her face was with her still. It was a humiliation beyond all words. Yet, if she could undergo it, there would be comfort in Lillian's sympathy. Lillian would take the letter, she would see Hugh, and tell him she was ill. Ill she felt in very truth. Hugh would be pacified for a time if he saw Lillian. She could think of no other arrangement. That evening she would tell her sister—there was rest even in the thought.

Long before dinner Lady Helena came in search of Beatrice—it was high time, she said, that orders should be sent to London for her trousseau, and the list must be made out at once.

She sat calmly in Lady Helena's room, writing in obedience to her words, thinking all the time how she should tell Lillian, how best make her understand the deadly error committed, yet save herself as much as she could. Lady Earle talked of laces and embroidery, of morning dresses and jewels, while Beatrice went over in her mind every word of her confession.

"That will do," said Lady Earle, with a smile; "I have been very explicit, but I fear it has been in vain. Have you heard anything I have said, Beatrice?"

She blushed, and looked so confused that Lady Helena said, laughingly:

"You may go—do not be ashamed. Many years ago I was just as much in love myself, and just as unable to think of anything else as you are now."

There was some difficulty in finding Lillian; she was discovered at last in the library, looking over some fine old engravings with Mr. Dacre. He looked up hastily when Beatrice asked her sister to spare her half an hour.

"Do not go, Lily," he said, jestingly; "it is only some nonsense about wedding dresses. Let us finish this folio."

But Beatrice had no gay repartee for him. She looked grave, although she tried to force a smile.

"I can not understand that girl," he said to himself, as the library door closed behind the two sisters. "I could almost fancy that something was distressing her."

"Lily," said Beatrice, "I want you very much. I am sorry to take you from Lionel; you like being with him, I think."

The fair face of her sister flushed warmly.

"But I want you, dear," said Beatrice. "Oh, Lily, I am in bitter trouble! No one can help me but you."

They went together into the little boudoir Beatrice called her own. She placed her sister in the easy lounging chair drawn near the window, and then half knelt, half sat at her feet.

"I am in such trouble, Lily!" she cried. "Think how great it is when I know not how to tell you."

The sweet, gentle eyes looked wonderingly into her own. Beatrice clasped her sister's hands.

"You must not judge me harshly," she said, "I am not good like you, Lily; I never could be patient and gentle like you. Do you remember, long ago, at Knutsford, how I found you one morning upon the cliffs, and told you that I hated my life? I did hate it, Lillian," she continued. "You can never tell how much; its quiet monotony was killing me. I have done wrong; but surely they are to blame who made my life what it was then—who shut me out from the world, instead of giving me my rightful share of its pleasures. I can not tell you what I did, Lily."

She laid her beautiful, sad face on her sister's hands. Lillian bent over her, and whispered how dearly she loved her, and how she would do anything to help her.

"That very morning," she said, never raising her eyes to her sister's face—"that morning, Lily, I met a stranger—a gentleman he seemed to me—and he watched me with admiring eyes. I met him again, and he spoke to me. He walked by my side through the long meadows, and told me strange stories of foreign lands he had visited—such stories! I forgot that he was a stranger, and talked to him as I am talking to you now. I met him again and again. Nay, do not turn from me; I shall die if you shrink away."

The gentle arms clasped her more closely.

"I am not turning from you," replied Lillian. "I can not love you more than I do now."

"I met him" continued Beatrice, "every day, unknown to every one about me. He praised my beauty, and I was filled with joy; then he talked to me of love, and I listened without anger. I swear to you," she said, "that I did it all without thought; it was the novelty, the flattery, the admiration that pleased me, not he himself, I believe Lily. I rarely thought of him. He interested me; he had eloquent words at his command, and seeing how I loved romance, he told me stories of adventure that held me enchanted and breathless. I lost sight of him in thinking of the wonders he related. They are to blame, Lily, who shut me out from the living world. Had I been in my proper place here at home, where I could have seen and judged people rightly, it would not have happened. At first it was but a pleasant break in a life dreary beyond words; then I looked for the daily meed of flattery and homage. I could not do without it. Lily, will you hold me to have been mad when I tell you the time came when I allowed that man to hold my hands as you are doing, to kiss my face, and win from me a promise that I would be his wife?"

Beatrice looked up then and saw the fair, pitying face almost as white as snow.

"Is it worse than you thought?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," said Lillian; "terrible, irretrievable, I fear!"

Chapter XXXV

There was unbroken silence for some minutes; then Lillian bent over her sister, and said:

"Tell me all, darling; perhaps I can help you."

"I promised to be his wife, Lily," continued Beatrice. "I am sure I did not mean it. I was but a child. I did not realize all that the words meant. He kissed my face, and said he should come to claim me. Believe me, Lily, I never thought of marriage. Brilliant pictures of foreign lands filled my mind; I looked upon Hugh Fernely only as a means of escape from a life I detested. He promised to take me to places the names of which filled me with wonder. I never thought of leaving you or mamma—I never thought of the man himself as of a lover."

"You did not care for him, then, as you do for Lord Airle?" interposed Lillian.

"Do not pain me!" begged Beatrice. "I love Hubert with the love that comes but once in life; that man was nothing to me except that his flattery, and the excitement of contriving to meet him, made my life more endurable. He gave me a ring, and said in two years' time he should return to claim me. He was going on a long voyage. Lily, I felt relieved when he was gone—the novelty was over—I had grown tired. Besides, when the glamour fell from my eyes, I was ashamed of what I had done. I tried to forget all about him; every time the remembrance of him came to my mind I drove it from me. I did not think it possible he would ever return. It was but a summer's pastime. That summer has darkened my life. Looking back, I own I did very wrong. There is great blame attaching to me, but surely they who shut me out from the living world were blameworthy also."

"Remember all through my story, darling, that I am not so good, not so patient and gentle as you. I was restless at the Elms, like a bird in a cage; you were content. I was vain, foolish, and willful; but, looking back at the impetuous, imperious child, full of romance, untrained, longing for the strife of life, longing for change, for excitement, for gayety, chafing under restraint, I think there was some little excuse for me. There was no excuse for what followed. When papa spoke to us—you remember it, Lily—and asked so gently if we had either of us a secret in our lives—when he promised to pardon anything, provided we kept nothing from him—I ought to have told him then. There is no excuse for that error. I was ashamed. Looking round upon the noble faces hanging on the wall, looking at him, so proud, so dignified, I could not tell him what his child had done. Oh, Lily, if I had told him, I should not be kneeling here at your feet now."

Lillian made no reply, but pressed the proud, drooping figure more closely to her side.

"I can hardly tell the rest," said Beatrice; "the words frighten me as I utter them. This man, who has been the bane of my life, was going away for two years. He was to claim me when he returned. I never thought he would return; I was so happy, I could not believe it." Here sobs choked her utterance.

Presently she continued: "Lily, he is here; he claims me, and also the fulfillment of my promise to be his wife."

A look of unutterable dread came over the listener's fair, pitying face.

"He wrote to me three weeks since; I tried to put him off. He wrote again this morning, and swears he will see me. He will be here tonight at nine o'clock. Oh, Lily, save me, save me, or I shall die!"

Bitter sobs broke from the proud lips.

"I never knelt to any one before," Beatrice said; "I kneel to you, my sister. No one else can help me. You must see him for me, give him a letter from me, and tell him I am very ill. It is no untruth, Lily. I am ill, my brain burns, and my heart is cold with fear. Will you do this for me?"

"I would rather almost give you my life," said Lillian gently.

"Oh, do not say that, Lily! Do you know what there is at stake? Do you remember papa's words—that, if ever he found one of us guilty of any deceit, or involved in any clandestine love affair, even if it broke his heart he would send the guilty one from him and never see her again? Think, darling, what it would be for me to leave Earlescourt—to leave all the magnificence I love so dearly, and drag out a weary life at the Elms. Do you think I could brook Lord Earle's angry scorn and Lady Helena's pained wonder? Knowing our father as you know him, do you believe he would pardon me?"

"I do not," replied Lily, sadly.

"That is not all," continued Beatrice. "I might bear anger, scorn, and privation, but, Lily, if this miserable secret is discovered, Lord Airlie will cease to love me. He might have forgiven me if I had told him at first; he would not

know that I had lied to him and deceived him. I can not lose him—I can not give him up. For our mother's sake, for my sake, help me, Lily. Do what I have asked!"

"If I do it," said Lillian, "it will give you but a few days' reprieve; it will avail nothing; he will be here again."

"I shall think of some means of escape in a few days," answered Beatrice wistfully. "Something must happen, Lily, fortune could not be so cruel to me; it could not rob me of my love. If I can not free myself, I shall run away. I would rather suffer anything than face Lord Airlie or my father. Say you will help me for my love's sake! Do not let me lose my love!"

"I will help you," said Lillian; "it is against my better judgment—against my idea of right—but I can not refuse you. I will see the man, and give him your letter. Beatrice, let me persuade you. You can not free yourself. I see no way—running away is all nonsense—but to tell Lord Earle and your lover; anything would be better than to live as you do, a drawn sword hanging over your heart. Tell them, and trust to their kindness; at least you will have peace of mind then. They will prevent him from annoying you."

"I can not," she said, and the breath came gasping from her lips. "Lillian, you do not know what Lord Airlie is to me. I could never meet his anger. If ever you love any one you will understand better. He is everything to me. I would suffer any sorrow, even death, rather than see his face turned coldly from me."

She loosened her grasp of Lillian's hands and fell upon the floor, weeping bitterly and passionately. Her sister, bending over her, heard the pitiful words—"My love, my love! I can not lose my love!"

The passionate weeping ceased, and the proud, sad face grew calm and still.

"You can not tell what I have suffered, Lily," she said, humbly. "See, my pride is all beaten down, only those who have had a secret, eating heart and life away, can tell what I have endured. A few more days of agony like this, and I shall be free forever from Hugh Fernely."

Her sister tried to soothe her with gentle words, but they brought no comfort.

"He will be here at nine," she said; "it is six now. I will write my letter. He will be at the shrubbery gate. I will manage so that you shall have time. Give him the note I will write, speak to him for me, tell him I am ill and can not see him. Shall you be frightened?"

"Yes," replied Lillian, gently; "but that will not matter. I must think of you, not of myself."

"You need not fear him," said Beatrice. "Poor Hugh, I could pity him if I did not hate him. Lily, I will thank you when my agony is over; I can not now."

She wrote but a few words, saying she was ill and unable to see him; he must be satisfied, and willing to wait yet a little longer.

She gave the letter to her sister. Lillian's heart ached as she noted the trembling hands and quivering lips.

"I have not asked you to keep my secret, Lily," said Beatrice, sorrowfully.

"There is no need," was the simple reply.

* * * * *

Sir Harry and Lady Laurence dined that day at Earlescourt, and it was nearly nine before the gentlemen, who did not sit long over their wine, came into the drawing room. The evening was somewhat chilly; a bright fire burned in the grate, and the lamps were lighted. Sir Harry sat down to his favorite game of chess with Lady Helena; Lord Earle challenged Lady Laurence to a game at ecarte. The young people were left to themselves.

"In twenty years' time," said Lionel to Lillian, "we may seek refuge in cards; at present music and moonlight are preferable, Lily. You never sing to me; come to the piano now."

But she remembered the dreaded hour was drawing near.

"Pray excuse me," she begged; "I will sing for you presently."

He looked surprised; it was the first time she had ever refused him a favor.

"Shall we finish the folio of engravings?" he asked.

Knowing that, when once she was seated by his side, it would be impossible to get away, she again declined; but this time the fair face flushed, and the sweet eyes drooped.

"How guilty you look," he said. "Is there any mystery on hand? Are you tired of me? Or is there to be another important consultation over the wedding dresses?"

"I have something to attend to," she replied, evasively. "Get the folio ready—I shall not be long."

Beatrice, who had listened to the brief dialogue in feverish suspense, now came to the rescue, asking Lionel to give them the benefit of his clear, ringing tenor in a trio of Mendelssohn's.

"My 'clear, ringing tenor' is quite at your service," he said with a smile. "Lily is very unkind to me tonight."

They went to the piano, where Lord Airlie awaited them; and Lillian, looking at her small, jeweled watch—Lord Earle's present—saw that it wanted three minutes to nine.

She at once quitted the room, unobserved, as she thought; but Lionel saw her go.

No words can tell how distasteful and repugnant was the task she had undertaken. She would have suffered anything almost to have evaded it. She, who never had a secret; she, whose every word and action were open as the day; she, who shrank from all deceit and untruth as from a deadly plague, to be mixed up with a wretched clandestine love affair like this! She, to steal out of her father's house at night, to meet a stranger, and plead her sister's cause with him! The thought horrified her; but the beautiful face in its wild sorrow, the sad voice in its passionate anguish, urged her on.

Lillian went hastily to her own room. She took a large black shawl and drew it closely round her, hiding the pretty evening dress and the rich pearls. Then, with the letter in her hand, she went down the staircase that led from her rooms to the garden.

The night was dark; heavy clouds sailed swiftly across the sky, the wind moaned fitfully, bending the tall trees as it were in anger, then whispering round them as though suing for pardon. Lillian had never been out at night alone before, and her first sensation was one of fear. She crossed the gardens where the autumn flowers were fading; the lights shone gayly from the Hall windows; the shrubbery looked dark and mysterious. She was frightened at the silence and darkness, but went bravely on. He was there. By the gate she saw a tall figure wrapped in a traveling cloak; as she crossed the path, he stepped hastily forward, crying with a voice she never forgot:

"Beatrice, at last you have come!"

"It is not Beatrice," she said, shrinking from the outstretched arms. "I am Lillian Earle. My sister is ill, and has sent you this."

Chapter XXXVI

Hugh Fernely took the letter from Lillian's hands, and read it with a muttered imprecation of disappointment. The moon, which had been struggling for the last hour with a mass of clouds, shone out faintly; by its light Lillian saw a tall man with a dark, handsome face browned with the sun of warm climes, dark eyes that had in them a wistful sadness, and firm lips. He did not look like the gentlemen she was accustomed to. He was polite and respectful. When he heard her name, he took off his hat, and stood uncovered during the interview.

"Wait!" he cried. "Ah, must I wait yet longer? Tell your sister I have waited until my yearning wish to see her is wearing my life away."

"She is really ill," returned Lillian. "I am alarmed for her. Do not be angry with me if I say she is ill through anxiety and fear."

"Has she sent you to excuse her?" he asked, gloomily. "It is of no use. Your sister is my promised wife, Miss Lillian, and see her I will."

"You must wait at least until she is willing," said Lillian, and her calm, dignified manner influenced him even more than her words, as she looked earnestly into Hugh Fernely's face.

It was not a bad face, she thought; there was no cruelty or meanness there. She read love so fierce and violent in it that it startled her. He did not look like one who would wantonly and willfully make her sister wretched for life. Hope grew in her heart as she gazed. She resolved to plead with him for Beatrice, to ask him to forget a childish, foolish promise—a childish error.

"My sister is very unhappy," she said, bravely; "so unhappy that I do not think she can bear much more; it will kill her or drive her mad."

"It is killing me," he interrupted.

"You do not look cruel, Mr. Fernely," continued Lillian. "Your face is good and true—I would trust you. Release my sister. She was but a foolish, impetuous child when she made you that promise. If she keeps it, all her life will be wretched. Be generous and release her."

"Did she bid you ask me?" he interrogated.

"No," she replied; "but do you know what the keeping of the promise will cost her? Lord Earle will never forgive her. She will have to leave home, sister, friends—all she loves and values most. Judge whether she could ever care for you, if you brought this upon her."

"I can not help it," he said gloomily. "She promised to be my wife, Miss Lillian—Heaven knows I am speaking truthfully—and I have lived on her words. You do not know what the strong love of a true man is. I love her so that if she chose to place her little foot upon me, and trample the life out of me, I would not say her nay. I must see her—the hungry, yearning love that fills my heart must be satisfied." Great tears shone in his eyes, and deep sobs shook his strong frame.

"I will not harm her," he said, "but I must see her. Once, and once only, her beautiful face lay on my breast—that beautiful, proud face! No mother ever yearned to see her child again more than I long to see her. Let her come to me, Miss Lillian; let me kneel at her feet as I did before,—If she sends me from her, there will be pity in death; but she can not. There is not a woman in the world who could send such love as mine away! You can not understand," he continued. "It is more than two years since I left her; night and day her face has been before me. I have lived upon my love; it is my life—my everything. I could no more drive it from my breast than I could tear my heart from my body and still live on."

"Even if my sister cared for you," said Lillian, gently—for his passionate words touched her—"you must know that Lord Earle would never allow her to keep such a promise as she made."

"She knew nothing of Lord Earle when it was made," he replied, "nor did I. She was a beautiful child, pining away like a bright bird shut up in a cage. I promised her freedom and liberty; she promised me her love. Where was Lord Earle then? She was safe with me. I loved her. I was kinder to her than her own father; I took care of her—he did not."

"It is all changed now," said Lillian.

"But I can not change," he answered. "If fortune had made me a king, should I have loved your sister less! Is a man's heart a plaything? Can I call back my love? It has caused me woe enough."

Lillian knew not what to say in the presence of this mighty love; her gentle efforts at mediation were bootless. She pitied him she pitied Beatrice.

"I am sure you can be generous," she said, after a short silence. "Great, true, noble love is never selfish. My sister can never be happy with you; then release her. If you force her, or rather try to force her, to keep this rash promise, think how she will dislike you. If you are generous, and release her, think how she will esteem you."

"Does she not love me?" he asked; and his voice was hoarse with pain.

"No," replied Lillian, gently; "it is better for you to know the truth. She does not love you—she never will."

"I do not believe it," he cried. "I will never believe it from any lips but her own! Not love me! Great Heaven! Do you know you are speaking of the woman who promised to be my wife? If she tells me so, I will believe her."

"She will tell you," said Lillian, "and you must not blame her. Come again when she is well."

"No," returned Hugh Fernely; "I have waited long enough. I am here to see her, and I swear I will not leave until she has spoken to me."

He drew a pencil case from his pocket, and wrote a few lines on the envelope which Beatrice had sent.

"Give that to your sister," he said, softly; "and, Miss Lillian, I thank you for coming to me. You have been very kind and gentle. You have a fair, true face. Never break a man's heart for pastime, or because the long sunny hours hang heavy upon your hands."

"I wish I could say something to comfort you," she said. He held out his hand and she could not refuse hers.

"Goodbye, Miss Lillian! Heaven bless you for your sympathy."

"Goodbye," she returned, looking at the dark, passionate face she was never more to see.

Dora Thorne

The moon was hidden behind a dense mass of thick clouds. Hugh Fernely walked quickly down the path. Lillian, taking the folded paper, hastened across the gardens. But neither of them saw a tall, erect figure, or a pale, stricken face; neither of them heard Lionel Dacre utter a low cry as the shawl fell from Lillian's golden head.

He had tried over the trio, but it did not please him; he did not want music—he wanted Lillian. Beatrice played badly, too, as though she did not know what she was doing. Plainly enough Lord Airlie wanted him out of the way.

"Where are you going?" asked Beatrice, as he placed the music on the piano.

"To look for a good cigar," he replied. "Neither Airlie nor you need pretend to be polite, Bee, and say you hope I will not leave you." He quitted the drawing room, and went to his own room, where a box of cigars awaited him. He selected one, and went out into the garden to enjoy it. Was it chance that led him to the path by the shrubbery? The wind swayed the tall branches, but there came a lull, and then he heard a murmur of voices. Looking over the hedge, he saw the tall figure of a man, and the slight figure of a young girl shrouded in a black shawl.

"A maid and her sweetheart," said Lionel to himself. "Now that is not precisely the kind of thing Lord Earle would like; still, it is no business of mine."

But the man's voice struck him—it was full of the dignity of true passion. He wondered who he was. He saw the young girl place her hand in his for a moment, and then hasten rapidly away.

He thought himself stricken mad when the black shawl fell and showed in the faint moonlight the fair face and golden hair of Lillian Earle.

* * * * *

When Lillian re-entered the drawing room, the pretty ormolu clock was chiming half past nine. The chess and card tables were just as she had left them. Beatrice and Lord Airlie were still at the piano. Lionel was nowhere to be seen. She went up to Beatrice and smilingly asked Lord Airlie if he could spare her sister for five minutes.

"Ten, if you wish it," he replied, "but no longer;" and the two sisters walked through the long drawing room into the little boudoir.

"Quick, Lillian," cried Beatrice, "have you seen him? What does he say?"

"I have seen him," she replied; "there is no time now to tell all he said. He sent this note," and Lillian gave the folded paper into her sister's hand, and then clasped both hands in her own.

"Let me tell you, Beatrice darling, before you read it," she said, "that I tried to soften his heart; and I think, if you will see him yourself, and ask for your freedom, you will not ask in vain."

A light that was dazzling as sunshine came into the beautiful face.

"Oh, Lily," she cried, "can it be true? Do not mock me with false hopes; my life seems to tremble in the balance."

"He is not cruel," said Lillian. "I am sorry for him. If you see him I feel sure he will release you. See what he says."

Beatrice opened the letter; it contained but a few penciled lines. She did not give them to Lillian to read.

"Beatrice," wrote Hugh Fernely, "you must tell me with your own lips that you do not love me. You must tell me yourself that every sweet hope you gave me was a false lie. I will not leave Earlescourt again without seeing you. On Thursday night, at ten o'clock, I will be at the same place—meet me, and tell me if you want your freedom. Hugh."

"I shall win!" she cried. "Lily, hold my hands—they tremble with happiness. See, I can not hold the paper. He will release me, and I shall not lose my love—my love, who is all the world to me. How must I thank you? This is Tuesday; how shall I live until Thursday? I feel as though a load, a burden, the weight of which no words can tell, were taken from me. Lily, I shall be Lord Airlie's wife, and you will have saved me."

"Beatrice," said Lord Earle, as the sisters, in returning, passed by the chess table, "our game is finished, will you give us a song?"

Never had the magnificent voice rung out so joyously, never had the beautiful face looked so bright. She sang something that was like an air of triumph—no under current of sadness marred its passionate sweetness. Lord Airlie bent over her chair enraptured.

"You sing like one inspired, Beatrice," he said.

"I was thinking of you," she replied; and he saw by the dreamy, rapt expression of her face that she meant what she had said.

Presently Lord Airlie was summoned to Lady Helena's assistance in some little argument over cards, and Beatrice, while her fingers strayed mechanically over the keys, arrived at her decision. She would see Hugh. She could not avert that; and she must meet him as bravely as she could. After all, as Lillian had said, he was not cruel, and he did love her. The proud lip curled in scornful triumph as she thought how dearly he loved her. She would appeal to his love, and beseech him to release her.

She would beseech him with such urgency that he could not refuse. Who ever refused her? Could she not move men's hearts as the wind moves the leaves? He would be angry at first, perhaps fierce and passionate, but in the end she would prevail. As she sat there, dreamy, tender melodies stealing, as it were, from her fingers, she went in fancy through the whole scene. She knew how silent the sleeping woods would be—how dark and still the night. She could imagine Hugh's face, browned by the sun and travel. Poor Hugh! In the overflow of her happiness she felt more kindly toward him.

She wished him well. He might marry some nice girl in his own station of life, and be a prosperous, happy man, and she would be a good friend to him if he would let her. No one would ever know her secret. Lillian would keep it faithfully, and down the fair vista of years she saw herself Lord Airlie's beloved wife, the error of her youth repaired and forgotten.

The picture was so pleasant that it was no wonder her songs grew more triumphant. Those who listened to the music that night never forgot it.

Chapter XXXVII

Lionel Dacre stood for some minutes stunned with the shock and surprise. He could not be mistaken; unless his senses played him false, it was Lillian Earle whom he had mistaken for a maid meeting her lover. It was Lillian he had believed so pure and guileless who had stolen from her father's home under the cover of night's darkness and silence—who had met in her father's grounds one whom she dared not meet in the light of day.

If his dearest friend had sworn this to Lionel he would not have believed it. His own senses he could not doubt. The faint, feeble moonlight had as surely fallen on the fair face and golden hair of Lillian Earle as the sun shone by day in the sky.

He threw away his cigar, and ground his teeth with rage. Had the skies fallen at his feet he could not have been more startled and amazed. Then, after all, all women were alike. There was in them no truth; no goodness; the whole world was alike. Yet he had believed in her so implicitly—in her guileless purity, her truth, her freedom from every taint of the world. That fair, spirituelle form had seemed to him only as a beautiful casket hiding a precious gem. Nay, still more, though knowing and loving her, he had begun to care for everything good and pure that interested her. Now all was false and hateful.

There was no truth in the world, he said to himself. This girl, whom he had believed to be the fairest and sweetest among women, was but a more skillful deceiver than the rest. His mother's little deceptions, hiding narrow means and straitened circumstances, were as nothing compared with Lillian's deceit.

And he had loved her so! Looking into those tender eyes, he had believed love and truth shone there; the dear face that had blushed and smiled for him had looked so pure and guileless.

How long was it since he had held her little hands clasped within his own, and, abashed before her sweet innocence, had not dared to touch her lips, even when she had promised to love him? How he had been duped and deceived! How she must have laughed at his blind folly!

Who was the man? Some one she must have known years before. There was no gentleman in Lord Earle's circle who would have stolen into his grounds like a thief by night. Why had he not followed him, and thrashed him within an inch of his life? Why had he let him escape?

The strong hands were clinched tightly. It was well for Hugh Fernely that he was not at that moment in Lionel's power. Then the fierce, hot anger died away, and a passion of despair seized him. A long, low cry came from his lips, a bitter sob shook his frame. He had lost his fair, sweet love. The ideal he had worshiped lay stricken; falsehood and deceit marked its fair form.

While the first smart of pain was upon him, he would not return to the house; he would wait until he was calm and cool. Then he would see how she dared to meet him.

His hands ceased to tremble; the strong, angry pulsating of his heart grew calmer. He went back to the drawing room; and, except that the handsome face was pale even to the lips, and that a strange, angry light gleamed in the frank, kindly eyes, there was little difference in Lionel Dacre.

She was there, bending over the large folio he had asked her to show him; the golden hair fell upon the leaves. She looked up as he entered; her face was calm and serene; there was a faint pink flush on the cheeks, and a bright smile trembled on her features.

"Here are the drawings," she said; "will you look over them?"

He remembered how he had asked her to sing to him, and she refused, looking confused and uneasy the while. He understood now the reason why.

He took a chair by her side; the folio lay upon a table placed in a large room, lighted by a silver lamp. They were as much alone there as though they had been in another room. She took out a drawing, and laid it before him. He neither saw it nor heard what she remarked.

"Lillian," he said, suddenly, "if you were asked what was the most deadly sin a woman could commit, what should you reply?"

"That is a strange question," she answered. "I do not know, Lionel. I think I hate all sin alike."

"Then I will tell you," he said bitterly; "it is false, foul deceit—black, heartless treachery."

She looked up in amazement at his angry tone; then there was for some moments unbroken silence.

"I can not see the drawings," he said; "take them away. Lillian Earle, raise your eyes to mine; look me straight in the face. How long is it since I asked you to be my wife?"

Her gentle eyes never wavered, they were fixed half in wonder on his, but at his question the faint flush on her cheeks grew deeper.

"Not very long," she replied; "a few days."

"You said you loved me," he continued.

"I do," she said.

"Now, answer me again. Have you ever loved or cared for any one else, as you say you do for me?"

"Never," was the quiet reply.

"Pray pardon the question—have you received the attentions of any lover before receiving mine?"

"Certainly not," she said, wondering still more.

"I have all your affection, your confidence, your trust; you have never duped or deceived me; you have been open, truthful, and honest with me?"

"You forget yourself, Lionel," she said, with gentle dignity; "you should not use such words to me."

"Answer!" he returned. "You have to do with a desperate man. Have you deceived me?"

"Never," she replied, "In thought, word, or deed."

"Merciful Heaven!" he cried. "That one can be so fair and so false!"

There was nothing but wonder in the face that was raised to his.

"Lillian," he said, "I have loved you as the ideal of all that was pure and noble in woman. In you I saw everything good and holy. May Heaven pardon you that my faith has died a violent death."

"I can not understand you," she said, slowly. "Why do you speak to me so?"

"I will use plainer words," he replied—"so plain that you can not mistake them. I, your betrothed husband, the man you love and trust, ask you, Lillian Earle, who was it you met tonight in your father's grounds?"

He saw the question strike her as lightning sometimes strikes a fair tree. The color faded from her lips; a cloud came over the clear, dove-like eyes; she tried to answer, but the words died away in a faint murmur.

"Do you deny that you were there?" he asked. "Remember, I saw you, and I saw him. Do you deny it?"

"No," she replied.

"Who was it?" he cried; and his eyes flamed so angrily upon her that she was afraid. "Tell me who it was. I will follow him to the world's end. Tell me."

"I can not, Lionel," she whispered; "I can not. For pity's sake, keep my secret!"

"You need not be afraid," he said, haughtily. "I shall not betray you to Lord Earle. Let him find out for himself what you are, as I have done. I could curse myself for my own trust. Who is he?"

"I can not tell you," she stammered, and he saw her little white hands wrung together in agony. "Oh, Lionel, trust me—do not be angry with me."

"You can not expect me," he said, although he was softened by the sight of her sorrow, "to know of such an action and not to speak of it, Lillian. If you can explain it, do so. If the man was an old lover of yours, tell me so; in time I may forget the deceit, if you are frank with me now. If there be any circumstance that extenuates or explains what you did, tell it to me now."

"I can not," she said, and her fair face drooped sadly away from him.

"That I quite believe," he continued, bitterly. "You can not and will not. You know the alternative, I suppose?"

The gentle eyes were raised to his in mute, appealing sorrow, but she spoke not.

"Tell me now," he said, "whom it was you stole out of the house to meet—why you met him? Be frank with me; and, if it was but girlish nonsense, in time I may pardon you. If you refuse to tell me, I shall leave Earlescourt, and never look upon your false, fair face again."

She buried her face in her hands, and he heard a low moan of sorrow come from her white lips.

"Will you tell me, Lillian?" he asked again—and he never forgot the deadly anguish of the face turned toward him.

"I can not," she replied; her voice died away, and he thought she was falling from her chair.

"That is your final decision; you refuse to tell me what, as your accepted lover, I have a right to know?"

"Trust me, Lionel," she implored. "Try, for the love you bear me, to trust me!"

"I will never believe in any one again," he said. "Take back your promise, Lillian Earle; you have broken a true and honest heart, you have blighted a whole life. Heaven knows what I shall become, drifted from you. I care not. You have deceived me. Take back your ring. I will say goodbye to you. I shall not care to look upon your false, fair face again."

"Oh, Lionel, wait!" she cried. "Give me time—do not leave me so!"

"Time will make little difference," he answered; "I shall not leave the Hall until tomorrow morning; you can write to me if you wish me to remain."

He laid the ring upon the table, refusing to notice the trembling, outstretched hand. He could not refrain from looking back at her as he quitted the room. He saw the gentle face, so full of deadly sorrow, with its white quivering lips; and yet he thought to himself, although she looked stricken with anguish, there was no guilt on the clear, fair brow.

He turned back from the door and went straight to Lord Earle.

"I shall leave Earlescourt tomorrow," he said, abruptly. "I must go, Lord Earle; do not press to stay."

"Come and go as you will, Lionel," said Ronald, surprised at the brusqueness of his manner; "we are always pleased to see you and sorry to lose you. You will return soon, perhaps?"

"I will write to you in a few days," he replied. "I must say goodbye to Lady Earle."

She was astounded. Beatrice and Lord Airlie came up to him there was a general expression of surprise and regret. He, unlike himself, was brusque, and almost haughty.

Sir Harry and Lady Laurence had gone home. Beatrice, with a vague fear that something had gone wrong, said she was tired; Lord Airlie said goodnight; and in a few minutes Lady Helena and her son were left alone.

"What has come over Lionel?" asked Ronald. "Why, mother, how mistaken I am! Do you know that I quite believed he was falling in love with Lillian?"

"He did that long ago," replied Lady Helena, with a smile. "Say nothing about it. Lionel is very proud and impetuous. I fancy he and Lillian have had some little dispute. Matters of that kind are best left alone—interference always does harm. He will come back in a few days; and all be right again. Ronald, there is one question I have been wishing to ask you—do not be angry if I pain you, my son. Beatrice will be married soon—do you not intend her mother to be present at the wedding?"

Lord Earle rose from his chair, and began, as he always did in time of anxiety, to pace up and down the room.

"I had forgotten her claim," he said. "I can not tell what to do, mother. It would be a cruel, unmerited slight to pass her over, but I do not wish to see her. I have fought a hard battle with my feelings, but I can not bring myself to see her."

"Yet you loved her very much once," said Lady Helena.

"I did," he replied, gently. "Poor Dora."

"It is an awful thing to live at enmity with any one," said Lady Helena—"but with one's own wife! I can not understand it, Ronald."

"You mistake, mother," he said, eagerly; "I am not at enmity with Dora. She offended me—she hurt my honor—she pained me in a way I can never forget."

"You must forgive her some day," replied Lady Earle; "why not now?"

"No," he said, sadly. "I know myself—I know what I can do and what I can not do. I could take my wife in my arms, and kiss her face—I could not live with her. I shall forgive her, mother, when all that is human is dying away from me. I shall forgive her in the hour of death."

Chapter XXXVIII

Lillian Earle was no tragedy queen. She never talked about sacrifice or dying, but there was in her calm, gentle nature a depth of endurance rarely equaled. She had never owned, even to herself, how dearly she loved Lionel Dacre—how completely every thought and hope was centered in him. Since she had first learned to care for him, she had never looked her life in the face and imagined what it would be without him.

It never entered her mind to save herself at the expense of her sister; the secret had been intrusted to her, and she could not conceive the idea of disclosing it. If the choice had been offered her between death and betraying Beatrice, she would have chosen death, with a simple consciousness that she was but doing her duty.

So, when Lionel uttered those terrible words—when she found that he had seen her—she never dreamed of freeing herself from blame, and telling the story of her sister's fault. His words were bitterly cruel; they stung her with sharp pain. She had never seen contempt or scorn before on that kindly, honest face; now, she read both. Yet, what could she do? Her sister's life lay in her hands, and she must guard it.

Therefore, she bore the cruel taunts, and only once when the fear of losing him tortured her, cried out for pity and trust. But he had no trust; he stabbed her gentle heart with his fierce words, he seared her with his hot anger; she might, at the expense of another, have explained all, and stood higher than ever in his esteem, but she would not do it.

She was almost stunned by the sorrow that had fallen upon her. She saw him, with haughty, erect bearing, quit the drawing room, and she knew that unless Beatrice permitted her to tell the truth, she would never see his face again. She went straight to her sister's room and waited for her.

The pale face grew calm and still; her sister could not refuse her request when she had told her all; then she would write to Lionel and explain. He would not leave Earlescourt; he would only love her the better for her steadfast truth.

"Send Suzette away," she whispered to Beatrice, when she entered; "I must see you alone at once."

Beatrice dismissed her maid, and then turned to her sister.

"What is it, Lily?" she asked. "Your face is deathly pale. What has happened?"

"Beatrice," said Lillian, "will you let me tell your secret to Lionel Dacre? It will be quite sacred with him."

"To Lionel Dacre!" she cried. "No, a thousand times over! How can you ask me, Lily? He is Lord Airle's friend and could not keep it from him. Why do you ask me such an extraordinary question?"

"He saw me tonight," she replied; "he was out in the grounds, and saw me speaking to Hugh Fernely."

"Have you told him anything?" she asked; and for a moment Beatrice looked despairing.

"Not a word," said Lily. "How could I, when you trusted me?"

"That is right," returned her sister, a look of relief coming over her face; "his opinion does not matter much. What did he say?"

"He thought I had been to meet some one I knew," replied Lillian, her face growing crimson with shame.

"And was dreadfully shocked, no doubt," supplemented Beatrice. "Well, never mind, darling. I am very sorry it happened, but it will not matter. I am so near freedom and happiness, I can not grieve over it. He will not surely tell? He is too honorable for that."

"No," said Lillian, dreamily, "he will not tell."

"Then do not look so scared, Lily; nothing else matters."

"You forget what he must think of me," said Lillian. "Knowing his upright, truthful character, what must he think of me?"

That view of the question had not struck Beatrice. She looked grave and anxious. It was not right for her sister to be misjudged.

"Oh, I am so sorry," she began, but Lillian interrupted her, she came close to her, and lowered her pale face over her sister's arm.

"Beatrice," she said, slowly, "you must let me tell him. He cares for me. He loves me; I promised to be his wife, and I love him—just as you do Lord Airlie."

Under the shock of those words Beatrice Earle sat silent and motionless.

"I love him," continued Lillian. "I did not tell you. He said it was not to be mentioned until you were married. I love him so dearly, Beatrice—and when he asked me who it was I had been to meet, I could not answer him. He was very angry; he said sharp, cruel words to me, and I could not tell him how false they were. He will leave Earlescourt; he will never look upon my face again unless I tell him all. He has said so, and he will keep his word. Beatrice, must I lose my love?"

"It would be only for a time," she replied. "I hate myself for being so selfish, but I dare not trust Lionel Dacre. He is so impetuous, so hasty, he would betray me, as surely as he knew it. Do you not remember his saying the other day that it was well for him he had no secrets, for he could not manage to keep them!"

"He would keep this," pleaded Lillian—"for your sake and mine."

"He would not," said Beatrice; "and I am so near freedom, so near happiness. Oh, Lily, you have saved me once—save me again! My darling, keep my secret until I am married; then I swear to you I will tell Lionel every word honorably myself, and he will love you doubly. Could you do this for me?"

"It is not fair to him—he has a right to my confidence—it is not fair to myself, Beatrice."

"One of us must be sacrificed," returned her sister. "If myself, the sacrifice will last my life—will cause my death; if you, it will last, at the most, only three or four weeks. I will write to Lionel on my wedding day."

"Why trust him then and not now?" asked Lillian.

"Because, once married to Lord Airlie, I shall have no fear. Three or four weeks of happiness are not so much to give up for your own sister, Lily. I will say no more. I leave it for you to decide."

"Nay, do not do that," said Lillian, in great distress. "I could not clear myself at your expense"—a fact which Beatrice understood perfectly well.

"Then let the matter rest," said her sister; "some day I shall be able to thank you for all you have done for me—I can not now. On my wedding day I will tell Lionel Dacre that the girl he loves is the truest, the noblest, the dearest in the world."

"It is against my better judgment," returned Lillian.

"It is against my conscience, judgment, love, everything," added Beatrice; "but it will save me from cruel ruin and sorrow; and it shall not hurt you, Lily—it shall bring you good, not harm. Now, try to forget it. He will not know how to atone to you for this. Think of your happiness when he returns."

She drew the golden head down upon her shoulder, and with the charm that never failed, she talked and caressed her sister until she had overcome all objections.

But during the long hours of that night a fair head tossed wearily to and fro on its pillow—a fair face was stained with bitter tears. Lionel Dacre lingered, half hoping that even at the last she would come and bid him stay because she wished to tell him all.

But the last moment came, and no messenger from Lillian brought the longed-for words. He passed out from the Hall. He could not refrain from looking once at the window of her room, but the blind was closely drawn. He little knew or dreamed how and why he would return.

Thursday morning dawned bright and beautiful, as though autumn wished to surpass the glories of summer. Beatrice had not told Lillian when she was going to meet Hugh, partly because she dreaded her sister's anxiety, partly because she did not wish any one to know how long she might be with him; for Beatrice anticipated a painful interview, although she felt sure of triumph in the end.

Lillian was ill and unable to rise; unused to emotion, the strain upon her mind had been too great. When Lady Helena listened to her maid's remarks and went up to see her granddaughter, she forbade her to get up, and Lillian, suffering intensely, was only too pleased to obey.

The breakfast party was a very small one. Lord Earle was absent; he had gone to Holte. Lady Helena hurried away to sit with Lillian. Lord Airlie had been smiling very happily over a mysterious little packet that had come by post. He asked Beatrice if she would go out with him—he had something to show her. They went out into the park, intending to return in time for luncheon.

The morning was bright and calm. Something of the warmth and beauty of the summer lingered still, although the ground was strewn with fallen leaves.

Lord Airlie and Beatrice sat at the foot of the grand old cedar tree whence they would see the distant glimmer of the deep, still lake. The birds sang around them, and the sun shone brightly. On the beautiful face of Beatrice Earle her lover read nothing but happiness and love.

"I have something here for you, Beatrice," said Lord Airlie, showing her a little packet—"a surprise. You must thank me by saying that what it contains will be more precious to you than anything else on earth."

She opened the pretty case; within it there lay a fine gold chain of exquisite fashion and a locket of marvelous beauty.

She uttered a little cry of surprise, and raised the present in her hands.

"Now, thank me," said Lord Airlie, "in the way I asked."

"What it contains is more precious to me than anything on earth," she said. "You know that, Hubert; why do you make me repeat it?"

"Because I like to hear it," he answered. "I like to see my proud love looking humble for a few minutes; I like to know that I have caged a bright, wild bird that no one else could tame."

"I am not caged yet," she objected.

"Beatrice," said Lord Airlie, "make me a promise. Let me fasten this locket around your neck, and tell me that you will not part with it night or day for one moment until our wedding day."

"I can easily promise that," she said. She bent her beautiful head, and Lord Airlie fastened the chain round her throat.

He little knew what he had done. When Lord Airlie fastened the chain round the neck of the girl he loved, he bound her to him in life and in death.

"It looks charming," he said. "How everything beautiful becomes you, Beatrice! You were born to be a queen—who am I that I should have won you? Tell me over again—I never grow tired of hearing it—do you love me?"

She told him again, her face glowing with happiness. He bent over her and kissed the sweet face; he kissed the little white hands and the rings of dark hair the wind blew carelessly near him.

"When the leaves are green, and the fair spring is come," he said, "you will be my wife, Beatrice—Lady Airlie of Lynnton. I love my name and title when I remember that you will share them. And you shall be the happiest Lady Airlie that ever lived—the happiest bride, the happiest wife the sun ever shone upon. You will never part with my locket, Beatrice?"

"No," she replied; "never. I will keep it always."

They sat through the long bright hours under the shade of the old cedar tree, while Lillian lay with head and heart aching, wondering in her gentle way why this sorrow should have fallen upon her.

She did not know, as she lay like a pale broken lily, that years ago her father, in the reckless heyday of youth, had wilfully deceived his father, and married against his wish and commands; she did not know how that unhappy marriage had ended in pride, passion, and sullen, jealous temper—while those who should have foreborne went each their own road—the proud, irritated husband abroad, away from every tie of home and duty, the jealous, angry wife secluding herself in the bitterness of her heart—both neglecting the children intrusted to them. She knew how one of those children had gone wrong; she knew the deceit, the misery, the sorrow that wrong had entailed. She was the chief victim, yet the sin had not been hers.

There were no fierce, rebellious feelings in her gentle heart, no angry warring with the mighty Hand that sends crosses and blessings alike. The flower bent by the wind was not more pliant. Where her sorrow and love had cast

her she lay, silently enduring her suffering, while Lionel traveled without intermission, wishing only to find himself far away from the young girl he declared he had ceased to love yet could not forget.

Chapter XXXIX

Thursday evening, and the hand of the ormolu clock pointed to a quarter to ten. Lord Earle sat reading, Lady Helena had left Lillian asleep, and had taken up a book near him. Lord Airlie had been sketching for Beatrice a plan of a new wing at Lynnton. Looking up suddenly she saw the time. At ten Hugh Fernely would be at the shrubbery gate. She had not a moment to lose. Saying she was feeling tired, she rose and went to bid Lord Earle goodnight.

He remembered afterward how he had raised the beautiful face in his hands and gazed at it in loving admiration, whispering something the while about "Lady Airlie of Lynnton." He remembered how she, so little given to caressing, had laid her hand upon his shoulder, clasping her arms around his neck, kissing his face, and calling him, "her own dear papa." He remembered the soft, wistful light in her beautiful eyes, the sweet voice that lingered in his ears. Yet no warning came to him, nothing told him the fair child he loved so dearly stood in the shadow of deadly peril.

If he had known, how those strong arms would have been raised to shield her—how the stout, brave heart would have sheltered her! As it was, she left him with jesting words on his lips, and he did not even gaze after her as she quitted the room. If he had only known where and how he should see that face again!

Beatrice went up to Lady Helena, who smiled without raising her eyes from her book. Beatrice bent down and touched the kind, stately face with her lips.

"Good night, grandmamma," she said. "How studious you are!"

"Good night—bless you, my child," returned Lady Helena; and the fair face turned from her with a smile.

"You have left me until last," said Lord Airlie; "goodnight, my Beatrice. Never mind papa—he is not looking at us, give me one kiss."

She raised her face to his, and he kissed the proud, sweet lips.

He touched the golden locket.

"You will never part with it," he said; and he smiled as she answered:

"No, never!"

Then she passed out of his sight, and he who would have laid down his life for her saw her leave him without the faintest suspicion of the shadow that hung over her.

The smile still lingered on her as she stood in her own room. A few hours more—one more trial—she said to herself; then she would be free, and might enjoy her happiness to its full extent. How dearly Hubert loved her—how unutterably happy she would be when Hugh released her! And he would—she never doubted it.

"I shall not want you again," she said to her maid. "And do not call me in the morning. I am tired."

The door of Lillian's room was not closed; she went in. The night lamp was shaded, and the blinds closely drawn,

so that the bright moonlight could not intrude. She went gently to the side of the bed where her sister lay. Poor, gentle, loving Lillian! The pale, sad face, with its wistful wearied expression, was turned to the wall. There were some traces of tears, and even in sleep deep sighs passed the quivering lips. Sorrow and woe were impressed on the fair face. Yet, as Beatrice kissed the clear, calm brow, she would gladly have changed places with her.

"I will soon make it up to her," she said, gazing long and earnestly on the sleeping face. "In a few weeks she shall be happier than she has ever been. I will make Master Lionel go on his knees to her."

She left the room, and Lillian never knew who had bent so lovingly over her.

Beatrice took from her wardrobe, a thick, warm shawl. She drew it over her head, and so half hid her face. Then she went noiselessly down the staircase that led from her suite of rooms to the garden.

How fair and beautiful the night was—not cold, although it was September, and the moon shining as she had rarely seen it shine before.

It seemed to sail triumphantly in the dark-blue sky. It poured a flood of silvery light on the sleeping flowers and trees.

She had not lingered to look round the pretty dressing room as she left it. Her eyes had not dwelt on the luxurious chamber and the white bed, wherein she ought to have been sleeping, but, now that she stood outside the Hall, she looked up at the windows with a sense of loneliness and fear. There was a light in Lady Helena's room and one in Lord Airlie's. She shrank back. What would he think if he saw her now?

Deeply she felt the humiliation of leaving her father's house at that hour of the night; she felt the whole shame of what she was going to do; but the thought of Lord Airlie nerved her. Let this one night pass, and a life time of happiness lay before her.

The night wind moaned fitfully among the trees; the branches of the tall lime trees swayed over her head; the fallen leaves twirled round her feet. She crossed the gardens; the moon cast strange shadows upon the broad paths. At length she saw the shrubbery gate, and, by it, erect and motionless, gazing on the bending trees in the park, was Hugh Fernely. He did not hear her light footsteps—the wind among the lime trees drowned them. She went up to him and touched his arm gently.

"Hugh," she said, "I am here."

Before she could prevent him, he was kneeling at her feet. He had clasped her hands in his own, and was covering them with hot kisses and burning tears.

"My darling," he said, "my own Beatrice, I knew you would come!"

He rose then, and, before she could stop him, he took the shawl from her head and raised the beautiful face so that the moonlight fell clearly upon it.

"I have hungered and thirsted," he said, "for another look at that face. I shall see it always now—its light will ever leave me more. Look at me, Beatrice," he cried, "let me see those dark eyes again."

But the glance she gave him had nothing in it but coldness and dread. In the excitement of his joy he did not notice it.

"Words are so weak," he said, "I can not tell you how I have longed for this hour. I have gone over it in fancy a thousand times; yet no dream was ever so bright and sweet as this reality. No man in the wide world ever loved any one as I love you, Beatrice."

She could not resist the passionate torrent of words—they must have touched the heart of one less proud. She stood perfectly still, while the calm night seemed to thrill with the eloquent voice of the speaker.

"Speak to me," he said, at length. "How coldly you listen! Beatrice, there is no love, no joy in your face. Tell me you are pleased to see me—tell me you have remembered me. Say anything let me hear your voice."

"Hugh," she answered, gently, drawing her hands from his strong grasp, "this is all a mistake. You have not given me time to speak. I am pleased to see you well and safe. I am pleased that you have escaped the dangers of the deep; but I can not say more. I—I do not love you as you love me."

His hands dropped nervously, and he turned his despairing face from her.

"You must be reasonable," she continued, in her musical, pitiless voice. "Hugh, I was only a dreaming, innocent, ignorant child when I first met you. It was not love I thought of. You talked to me as no one else ever had—it was like reading a strange, wonderful story; my head was filled with romance, my heart was not filled with love."

"But," he said, hoarsely, "you promised to be my wife."

"I remember," she acknowledged. "I do not deny it; but, Hugh, I did not know what I was saying. I spoke without thought. I no more realized what the words meant than I can understand now what the wind is saying."

A long, low moan came from his lips; the awful despair in his face startled her.

"So I have returned for this!" he cried. "I have braved untold perils; I have escaped the dangers of the seas, the death that lurks in heaving waters, to be slain by cruel words from the girl I loved and trusted."

He turned from her, unable to check the bitter sob that rose to his lips.

"Hush, Hugh," she said, gently, "you grieve me."

"Do you think of my grief?" he cried. "I came here tonight, with my heart on fire with love, my brain dizzy with happiness. You have killed me, Beatrice Earle, as surely as ever man was slain."

Far off, among the trees, she saw the glimmer of the light in Lord Airlie's room. It struck her with a sensation of fear, as though he were watching her.

"Let us walk on," she said; "I do not like standing here."

They went through the shrubbery, through the broad, green glades of the park, where the dew drops shone upon fern leaves and thick grass, past the long avenue of chestnut trees, where the wind moaned like a human being in deadly pain; on to the shore of the deep, calm lake, where the green reeds bent and swayed and the moonlight shone on the rippling waters. All this while Hugh had not spoken a word, but had walked in silence by her side. He turned to her at length, and she heard the rising passion in his voice.

"You promised me," he said, "and you must keep your promise. You said you would be my wife. No other man must dare to speak to you of love," he cried, grasping her arm. "In the sight of Heaven you are mine, Beatrice Earle."

"I am not," she answered proudly; "and I never will be; no man would, or could take advantage of a promise obtained from a willful, foolish child."

"I will appeal to Lord Earle," he said; I will lay my claim before him."

"You may do so," she replied; "and, although he will never look upon me again, he will protect me from you."

She saw the angry light flame in his eyes; she heard his breath come in quick, short gasps, and the danger of quarreling with him struck her. She laid her hand upon his arm, and he trembled at the gentle touch.

"Hugh," she said, "do not be angry. You are a brave man; I know that in all your life you never shrank from danger or feared peril. The brave are always generous, always noble; think of what I am going to say. Suppose that, by the exercise of any power, you could really compel me to be your wife, what would it benefit you? I should not love you, I tell you candidly. I should detest you for spoiling my life—I would never see you. What would you gain by forcing me to keep my promise?"

He made no reply. The wind bent the reeds, and the water came up the bank with a long, low wash.

"I appeal to your generosity," she said—"your nobility of character. Release me from a promise I made in ignorance; I appeal to your very love for me—release me, that I may be happy. Those who love truly," she continued, receiving no reply, "never love selfishly. If I cared for any one as you do for me, I should consider my own happiness last or all. If you love me, release me, Hugh. I can never be happy with you."

"Why not?" he asked, tightening his grasp upon her arm.

"Not from mercenary motives," she replied, earnestly; "not because my father is wealthy, my home magnificent, and you belong to another grade of society—not for that, but because I do not love you. I never did love you as a girl should love the man she means to marry."

"You are very candid," said he, bitterly; "pray, is there any one else you love in this way?"

"That is beside the question," she replied, haughtily; "I am speaking of you and myself. Hugh, if you will give me my freedom if you will agree to forget the foolish promise of a foolish child—I will respect and esteem you while I live; I shall bless you every day; your name will be a sacred one enshrined in my heart, your memory will be a source of pleasure to me. You shall be my friend, Hugh, and I will be a true friend to you."

"Beatrice," he cried, "do not tempt me!"

"Yes, be tempted," she said; "let me urge you to be generous, to be noble! See, Hugh, I have never prayed to any man—I pray to you; I would kneel here at your feet and beseech you to release me from a promise I never meant to give."

Her words touched him. She saw the softened look upon his face, the flaming anger die out of his eyes.

"Hugh," she said, softly, "I, Beatrice Earle, pray you, by the love you bear me, to release me from all claim, and leave me in peace.

"Let me think," he replied; "give me a few minutes; no man could part so hastily with the dearest treasure he has. Let me think what I lose in giving you up."

Chapter XL

They stood for some time in perfect silence; they had wandered down to the very edge of the lake. The water rippled in the moonlight, and while Hugh Fernely thought, Beatrice looked into the clear depths. How near she was to her triumph! A few minutes more and he would turn to her and tell her she was free. His face was growing calm and gentle. She would dismiss him with grateful thanks; she would hasten home. How calm would be that night's sleep! When she saw Lord Airlie in the morning, all her sorrow and shame would have passed by. Her heart beat high as she thought of this.

"I think it must be so," said Hugh Fernely, at last; "I think I must give you up, Beatrice. I could not bear to make you miserable. Look up, my darling; let me see your face once more before I say goodbye."

She stood before him, and the thick dark shawl fell from her shoulders upon the grass; she did not miss it in the blinding joy that had fallen upon her. Hugh Fernely's gaze lingered upon the peerless features.

"I can give you up," he said, gently; "for your own happiness, but not to another, Beatrice. Tell me that you have not learned to love another since I left you."

She made no reply—not to have saved her life a thousand times would she have denied her love for Lord Airlie. His kiss was still warm on her lips—those same lips should never deny him.

"You do not speak," he added, gloomily. "By Heaven, Beatrice, if I thought you had learned to love another man—if I thought you wanted to be free from me to marry another—I should go mad mad with jealous rage! Is it so? Answer me."

She saw a lurid light in his eyes, and shrank from him. He tightened his grasp upon her arm.

"Answer me!" he cried, hoarsely. "I will know."

Not far from her slept the lover who would have shielded her with his strong arm—the lover to whom every hair upon her dear head was more precious than gold or jewels. Not far from her slept the kind, loving father, who was prouder and fonder of her than of any one on earth. Gaspar Laurence, who would have died for her, lay at that moment not far away, awake and thinking of her. Yet in the hour of her deadly peril, when she stood on the shore of the deep lake, in the fierce grasp of a half-maddened man, there was no one near to help her or raise a hand in her defense. But she was no coward, and all the high spirit of her race rose within her.

"Loosen your grasp, Hugh," she said, calmly; "you pain me."

"Answer me!" he cried. "Where is the ring I gave you?"

He seized both her hands and looked at them; they were firm and cool—they did not tremble. As his fierce, angry eyes glanced over them, not a feature of her beautiful face quivered.

"Where is my ring?" he asked. "Answer me, Beatrice."

"I have not worn it lately," she replied. "Hugh, you forget yourself. Gentlemen do not speak and act in this way."

"I believe I am going mad," he said, gloomily. "I could relinquish my claim to you, Beatrice for your own sake, but I will never give you up to be the wife of any other man. Tell me it is not so. Tell me you have not been so doubly false as to love another, and I will try to do all you wish."

"Am I to live all my life unloved and unmarried?" she answered, controlling her angry indignation by a strong effort, "because when I was a lonely and neglected girl, I fell into your power? I do not ask such a sacrifice from you. I hope you will love and marry, and be happy."

"I shall not care," he said, "what happens after I am gone—it will not hurt my jealous, angry heart then, Beatrice; but I should not like to think that while you were my promised wife and I was giving you my every thought, you were loving some one else. I should like to believe you were true to me while you were my own."

She made no answer, fearing to irritate him if she told the truth, and scorning to deny the love that was the crowning blessing of her life. His anger grew in her silence. Again the dark flush arose in his face, and his eyes flamed with fierce light.

Suddenly he caught sight of the gold locket she wore round her neck, fastened by the slender chain.

"What is this thing you wear?" he asked, quickly. "You threw aside my ring. What is this? Whose portrait have you there? Let me see it."

"You forget yourself again," she said, drawing herself haughtily away. "I have no account to render to you of my friends."

"I will see who is there!" he cried, beside himself with angry rage. "Perhaps I shall know then why you wish to be freed from me. Whose face is lying near your heart? Let me see. If it is that of any one who has outwitted me, I will throw it into the depths of the lake."

"You shall not see it," she said, raising her hand, and clasping the little locket tightly. "I am not afraid, Hugh Fernely. You will never use violence to me."

But the hot anger leaped up in his heart; he was mad with cruel jealousy and rage, and tried to snatch the locket from her. She defended it, holding it tightly clasped in one hand, while with the other she tried to free herself from his grasp.

It will never be known how that fatal accident happened. Men will never know whether the hapless girl fell, or whether Hugh Fernely, in his mad rage, flung her into the lake. There was a startled scream that rang through the clear air, a heavy fall, a splash amid the waters of the lake! There was one awful, despairing glance from a pale, horror-stricken face, and then the waters closed, the ripples spread over the broad surface, and the sleeping lilies trembled for a few minutes, and then lay still again! Once, and once only, a woman's white hand, thrown up, as it were, in agonizing supplication, cleft the dark water, and then all was over; the wind blew the ripples more strongly; they washed upon the grass, and the stir of the deep waters subsided!

Hugh Fernely did not plunge into the lake after Beatrice—it was too late to save her; still, he might have tried. The cry that rang through the sleeping woods, seemed to paralyze him—he stood like one bereft of reason, sense and life. Perhaps the very suddenness of the event overpowered him. Heaven only knows what passed in his dull, crazed mind while the girl he loved sank without help. Was it that he would not save her for another that in his cruel love he preferred to know her dead, beneath the cold waters, rather than the living, happy wife of another man? Or was it that in the sudden shock and terror he never thought of trying to save her?

He stood for hours—it seemed to him as years—watching the spot where the pale, agonized face had vanished—watching the eddying ripples and the green reeds. Yet he never sought to save her—never plunged into the deep waters whence he might have rescued her had he wished. He never moved. He felt no fatigue. The first thing that roused him was a gleam of gray light in the eastern sky, and the sweet, faint song of a little bird.

Then he saw that the day had broken. He said to himself, with a wild horrible laugh, that he had watched all night by her grave.

He turned and fled. One meeting him, with fierce, wild eyes full of the fire of madness, with pale, haggard face full of despair, would have shunned him. He fled through the green park, out on the high-road, away through the deep woods—he knew not whither never looking back; crying out at times, with a hollow, awful voice that he had been all night by her grave; falling at times on his face with wild, woeful weeping, praying the heavens to fall upon him and hide him forever from his fellow men.

He crept into a field where the hedge-rows were bright with autumn's tints. He threw himself down, and tried to close his hot, dazed eyes, but the sky above him looked blood-red, the air seemed filled with flames. Turn where he would, the pale, despairing face that had looked up to him as the waters opened was before him. He arose with a great cry, and wandered on. He came to a little cottage, where rosy children were at play, talking and laughing in the bright sunshine.

Great Heaven! How long was it since the dead girl, now sleeping under the deep waters, was happy and bright as they?

He fled again. This time the piercing cry filled his ears; it seemed to deaden his brain. He fell in the field near the cottage. Hours afterward the children out at play found him lying in the dank grass that fringed the pond under the alder trees.

* * * * *

The first faint flush of dawn, a rosy light, broke in the eastern sky, a tremulous, golden shimmer was on the lake as the sunbeams touched it. The forest birds awoke and began to sing; they flew from branch to branch; the flowers began to open their "dewy eyes," the stately swans came out upon the lake, bending their arched necks, sailing round the water lilies and the green sedges.

The sun shone out at length in his majesty, warming and brightening the fair face of nature—it was full and perfect day. The gardeners came through the park to commence their work; the cows out in the pasture land stood to be milked, the busy world began to rouse itself; but the fatal secret hidden beneath the cold, dark water remained still untold.

Chapter XLI

The sun shone bright and warm in the breakfast room at Earlescourt. The rays fell upon the calm, stately face of Lady Helena, upon the grave countenance of her son, upon the bright, handsome features of Lord Airlie. They sparkled on the delicate silver, and showed off the pretty china to perfection. The breakfast was upon the table, but the three occupants of the room had been waiting. Lady Helena took her seat.

"It seems strange," she said to Lord Earle, "to breakfast without either of the girls. I would not allow Lillian to rise; and from some caprice Beatrice forbade her maid to call her, saying she was tired."

Lord Earle made some laughing reply, but Lady Helena was not quite pleased. Punctuality with her had always been a favorite virtue. In case of real illness, allowance was of course to be made; but she herself had never considered a little extra fatigue as sufficient reason for absenting herself from table.

The two gentlemen talked gayly during breakfast. Lord Earle asked Hubert if he would go with him to Holte, and Lord Airlie said he had promised to drive Beatrice to Langton Priory.

Hearing that, Lady Helena thought it time to send some little warning to her grandchild. She rang for Suzette, the maid who waited upon Beatrice, and told her to call her young mistress.

She stood at her writing table, arranging some letters, when the maid returned. Lady Helena looked at her in utter wonder—the girl's face was pale and scared.

"My lady," she said, "will you please come here? You are wanted very particularly."

Lady Helena, without speaking to either of the gentlemen, went to the door where the girl stood.

"What is it, Suzette?" she asked. "What is the matter?"

"For mercy's sake, my lady," replied the maid, "come upstairs. I I can not find Miss Beatrice—she is not in her room;" and the girl trembled violently or Lady Helena would have smiled at her terror.

"She is probably with Miss Lillian," she said. "Why make such a mystery, Suzette?"

"She is not there, my lady; I can not find her," was the answer.

"She may have gone out into the garden or the grounds," said Lady Helena.

"My lady," Suzette whispered, and her frightened face grew deathly pale, "her bed has not been slept in; nothing is touched in her room; she has not been in it all night."

A shock of unutterable dread seized Lady Earle; a sharp spasm seemed to dart through her heart.

"There must be some mistake," she said, gently; "I will go upstairs with you."

The rooms were without occupant; no disarray of jewels, flowers, or dresses, no little slippers; no single trace of Beatrice's presence was there.

The pretty white bed was untouched—no one had slept in it; the blinds were drawn, and the sunlight struggled to enter the room. Lady Helena walked mechanically to the window, and drew aside the lace curtains; then she looked round.

"She has not slept here," she said; "she must have slept with Miss Lillian. You have frightened me, Suzette; I will go and see myself."

Lady Helena went through the pretty sitting room where the books Beatrice had been reading lay upon the table, on to Lillian's chamber.

The young girl was awake, looking pale and languid, yet better than she had looked the night before. Lady Earle controlled all emotion, and went quietly to her.

"Have you seen Beatrice this morning?" she asked. "I want her."

"No," replied Lillian; "I have not seen her since just before dinner last evening."

"She did not sleep with you, then?" said Lady Earle.

"No, she did not sleep here," responded the young girl.

Lady Helena kissed Lillian's face, and quitted the room; a deadly, horrible fear was turning her faint and cold. From the suite of rooms Lord Earle had prepared and arranged for his daughters a staircase ran which led into the garden. He had thought at the time how pleasant it would be for them. As Lady Helena entered, Suzette stood upon the stairs with a bow of pink ribbon in her hand.

"My lady," she said, "I fastened the outer door of the staircase last night myself. I locked it, and shot the bolts. It is unfastened now, and I have found this lying by it. Miss Earle wore it last evening on her dress."

"Something terrible must have happened," exclaimed Lady Helena. "Suzette, ask Lord Earle to come to me. Do not say a word to any one."

He stood by her side in a few minutes, looking in mute wonder at her pale, scared face.

"Ronald," she said, "Beatrice has not slept in her room all night. We can not find her."

He smiled at first, thinking, as she had done, that there must be some mistake, and that his mother was fanciful and nervous; but, when Lady Helena, in quick, hurried words, told him of the unfastened door and the ribbon, his face grew serious. He took the ribbon from the maid's hand—it seemed a living part of his daughter. He remembered that he had seen it the night before on her dress, when he had held up the beautiful face to kiss it. He had touched that same ribbon with his face.

"She may have gone out into the grounds, and have been taken ill," he said. "Do not frighten Airlie, mother; I will look round myself."

He went through every room of the house one by one, but there was no trace of her. Still Lord Earle had no fear; it seemed so utterly impossible that any harm could have happened to her.

Then he went out into the grounds, half expecting the beautiful face to smile upon him from under the shade of her favorite trees. He called aloud, "Beatrice!" The wind rustled through the trees, the birds sang, but there came no answer to his cry. Neither in the grounds nor in the garden could he discover any trace of her. He returned to Lady Helena, a vague fear coming over him.

"I can not find her," he said. "Mother, I do not understand this. She can not have left us. She was not unhappy—my beautiful child."

There was no slip of paper, no letter, no clew to her absence. Mother and son looked blankly at each other.

"Ronald," she cried, "where is she? Where is the poor child?"

He tried to comfort her, but fear was rapidly mastering him.

"Let me see if Airlie can suggest anything," he said.

They went down to the breakfast room where Lord Airlie still waited for the young girl he was never more to meet alive. He turned round with a smile, and asked if Beatrice were coming. The smile died from his lips when he saw the pale, anxious faces of mother and son.

"Hubert," said Lord Earle, "we are alarmed—let us hope without cause. Beatrice can not be found. My mother is frightened." Lady Helena had sunk, pale and trembling, upon a couch. Lord Airlie looked bewildered. Lord Earle told him briefly how they had missed her, and what had been done.

"She must be trying to frighten us," he said; "she must have hidden herself. There can not be anything wrong." Even as he spoke he felt how impossible it was that his dignified Beatrice should have done anything wrong.

He could throw no light upon the subject. He had not seen her since he had kissed her when bidding her goodnight. Her maid was the last person to whom she had spoken. Suzette had left her in her own room, and since then nothing had been seen or heard of Beatrice Earle.

Father and lover went out together. Lord Airlie suggested that she had perhaps gone out into the gardens and had met with some accident there. They went carefully over every part—there was no trace of Beatrice. They went through the shrubbery out into the park, where the quiet lake shone amid the green trees.

Suddenly, like the thrust of a sharp sword, the remembrance of the morning spent upon the water came to Lord Airlie. He called to mind Beatrice's fear—the cold shudder that seized her when she declared that her own face with a mocking smile was looking up at her from the depths of the water.

He walked hurriedly toward the lake. It was calm and clear—the tall trees and green sedges swaying in the wind, the white lilies rising and falling with the ripples. The blue sky and green trees were reflected in the water, the pleasure boat was fastened to the boat house. How was he to know the horrible secret of the lake?

"Come away, Airlie!" cried Lord Earle. "I shall go mad! I will call all the servants, and have a regular search."

In a few minutes the wildest confusion and dismay reigned in the Hall; women wept aloud, and men's faces grew pale with fear. Their beautiful, brilliant young mistress had disappeared, and none knew her fate. They searched garden, park, and grounds; men in hot haste went hither and thither; while Lady Earle lay half dead with fear, and Lillian rested calmly, knowing nothing of what had happened.

It was Lord Airlie who first suggested that the lake should be dragged. The sun rode high in the heavens then, and shone gloriously over water and land.

They found the drags, and Hewson, the butler, with Lee and Patson, two gardeners, got into the boat. Father and lover stood side by side on the bank. The boat glided softly over the water; the men had been once round the lake, but without any result. Hope was rising again in Lord Airlie's heart, when he saw those in the boat look at each other, then at him.

"My lord," said Cowden, Lord Earle's valet, coming up to Hubert, "pray take my master home; they have found something at the bottom of the lake. Take him home; and please keep Lady Earle and the women all out of the way."

"What is it?" cried Lord Earle. "Speak to me, Airlie. What is it?"

"Come away," said Lord Airlie. "The men will not work while we are here."

They had found something beneath the water; the drags had caught in a woman's dress; and the men in the boat stood motionless until Lord Earle was out of sight.

Through the depths of water they saw the gleam of a white, dead face, and a floating mass of dark hair. They raised the body with reverent hands. Strong men wept aloud as they did so. One covered the quiet face, and another wrung the dripping water from the long hair. The sun shone on, as though in mockery, while they carried the drowned girl home.

Slowly and with halting steps they carried her through the warm, sunny park where she was never more to tread, through the bright, sunlit gardens, through the hall and up the broad staircase, the water dripping from her hair and falling in large drops, into the pretty chamber she had so lately quitted full of life and hope. They laid her on the white bed wherefrom her eyes would never more open to the morning light, and went away.

"Drowned, drowned! Drowned and dead!" was the cry that went from lip to lip, till it reached Lord Earle where he sat, trying to soothe his weeping mother. "Drowned! Quite dead!" was the cry that reached Lillian, in her sick room, and brought her down pale and trembling. "Drowned and dead hours ago," were the words that drove Lord Airlie mad with the bitterness of his woe.

They could not realize it. How had it happened? What had taken her in the dead of the night to the lake?

They sent messengers right and left to summon doctors in hot haste, as though human skill could avail her now.

"I must see her," said Lord Airlie. "If you do not wish to kill me, let me see her."

They allowed him to enter, and Lord Earle and his mother went with him. None in that room ever forgot his cry—the piercing cry of the strong man in his agony—as he threw himself by the dead girl's side.

"Beatrice, my love, my darling, why could I not have died for you?"

And then with tears of sympathy they showed him how even in death the white cold hand grasped his locket, holding it so tightly that no ordinary foe could remove it.

"In life and in death!" she had said, and she had kept her word.

Chapter XLII

While the weeping group still stood there, doctors came; they looked at the quiet face, so beautiful in death, and said she had been dead for hours. The words struck those who heard them with unutterable horror. Dead, while those who loved her so dearly, who would have given their lives for her, had lain sleeping near her, unconscious of her doom—dead, while her lover had waited for her, and her father had been intently thinking of her approaching wedding.

What had she suffered during the night? What awful storm of agony had driven her to the lake? Had she gone thither purposely? Had she wandered to the edge and fallen in, or was there a deeper mystery? Had foul wrong been done to Lord Earle's daughter while he was so near her, and yet knew nothing of it?

She still wore her pretty pink evening dress. What a mockery it looked! The delicate laces were wet and spoiled; the pink blossoms she had twined in her hair clung to it still; the diamond arrow Lord Airlie had given her fastened them, a diamond brooch was in the bodice of her dress, and a costly bracelet encircled the white, cold arm. She had not, then, removed her jewels or changed her dress. What could have taken her down to the lake? Why was Lord Airlie's locket so tightly clinched in her hand?

Lord Airlie, when he was calm enough to speak, suggested that she might have fallen asleep, tired, before undressing—that in her sleep she might have walked out, gone to the edge of the lake, and fallen in.

That version spread among the servants. From them it spread like wildfire around the whole country-side; the country papers were filled with it, and the London papers afterward told how "the beautiful Miss Earle" had been drowned while walking in her sleep.

But Lord Airlie's suggestion did not satisfy Ronald Earle; he would not leave the darkened chamber. Women's gentle hands removed the bright jewels and the evening dress. Lady Helena, with tears that fell like rain, dried the long, waving hair, and drew it back from the placid brow. She closed the eyes, but she could not cross the white hands on the cold breast. One held the locket in the firm, tight clasp of death, and it could not be moved.

Ronald would not leave the room. Gentle hands finished their task. Beatrice lay in the awful beauty of death—no pain, no sorrow moving the serene loveliness of her placid brow. He knelt by her side. It was his little Beatrice, this strange, cold, marble statue—his little baby Beatrice, who had leaped in his arms years ago, who had cried and laughed, who had learned in pretty accents to lisp his name—his beautiful child, his proud, bright daughter, who had kissed him the previous night while he spoke jesting words to her about her lover. And he had never heard her voice since—never would hear it again. Had she called him when the dark waters closed over her bright head?

Cold, motionless, no gleam of life or light—and this was Dora's little child! He uttered a great cry as the thought struck him: "What would Dora say?" He loved Beatrice; yet for all the long years of her childhood he had been absent from her. How must Dora love the child who had slept on her bosom, and who was now parted from her forever.

And then his thoughts went back to the old subject: "How had it happened? What had taken her to the lake?"

One knelt near who might have told him, but a numb, awful dread had seized upon Lillian. Already weak and ill, she was unable to think, unable to shape her ideas, unable to tell right from wrong.

She alone held the clew to the mystery, and she knelt by that death bed with pale, parted lips and eyes full of terror. Her face startled those who saw it. Her sorrow found no vent in tears; the gentle eyes seemed changed into balls of fire; she could not realize that it was Beatrice who lay there, so calm and still—Beatrice, who had knelt at her feet and prayed that she would save her—Beatrice, who had believed herself so near the climax of her happiness.

Could she have met Hugh, and had he murdered her? Look where she would, Lillian saw that question written in fiery letters. What ought she to do? Must she tell Lord Earle, or did the promise she had made bind her in death as well as in life. Nothing could restore her sister. Ought she to tell all she knew, and to stain in death the name that was honored and loved?

One of the doctors called in saw the face of Lillian Earle. He went at once to Lady Helena, and told her that if the young lady was not removed from that room, and kept quiet she would be in danger of her life.

"If ever I saw a face denoting that the brain was disturbed," he said, "that is one."

Lillian was taken back to her room, and left with careful nurses. But the doctor's warning proved true. While Lord Earle wept over the dead child, Lady Helena mourned over the living one, whose life hung by a thread.

The day wore on; the gloom of sorrow and mourning had settled on the Hall. Servants spoke with hushed voices and moved with gentle tread. Lady Helena sat in the darkened room where Lillian lay. Lord Airlie had shut himself up alone, and Ronald Earle knelt all day by his dead child. In vain they entreated him to move, to take food or wine, to go to his own room. He remained by her, trying to glean from that silent face the secret of her death.

And when night fell again, he sunk exhausted. Feverish slumbers came to him, filled with a haunted dream of Beatrice sinking in the dark water and calling upon him for help. Kindly faces watched over him, kindly hands tended him. The morning sun found him still there.

Lady Helena brought him some tea and besought him to drink it. The parched, dried lips almost refused their office. It was an hour afterward that Hewson entered the room, bearing a letter in his hand. It was brought, he said by Thomas Ginns, who lived at the cottage past Fair Glenn hills. It had been written by a man who lay dying there, and who had prayed him to take it at once without delay.

"I ventured to bring it to you, my lord," said the butler; "the man seemed to think it a matter of life or death."

Lord Earle took the letter from his hands—he tried to open it, but the trembling fingers seemed powerless. He signed to Hewson to leave the room, and, placing the letter upon the table, resumed his melancholy watch. But in some strange way his thoughts wandered to the missive. What might it not contain, brought to him, too, in the solemn death chamber? He opened it, and found many sheets of closely covered paper. On the first was written "The Confession of Hugh Fernely."

The name told him nothing. Suddenly an idea came to him—could this confession have anything to do with the fate of the beloved child who lay before him? Kneeling by the dead child's side, he turned over the leaf and read as follows:

"Lord Earle, I am dying—the hand tracing this will soon be cold. Before I die I must confess my crime. Even now, perhaps, you are kneeling by the side of the child lost to you for all time. My lord, I killed her.

"I met her first nearly three years ago, at Knutsford; she was out alone, and I saw her. I loved her then as I love her now. By mere accident I heard her deplore the lonely, isolated life she led, and that in such terms that I pitied her. She was young, beautiful, full of life and spirits; she was pining away in that remote home, shut out from the living world she longed for with a longing I can not put into words. I spoke to her—do not blame her, she was a beautiful, ignorant child—I spoke to her, asking some questions about the road, and she replied. Looking at her face, I swore that I would release her from the life she hated, and take her where she would be happy.

"I met her again and again. Heaven pardon me if I did my best to awake an interest in her girlish heart! I told her stories of travel and adventure that stirred all the romance in her nature. With the keen instinct of love I understood her character, and played upon its weakness while I worshiped its strength.

"She told me of a sad, patient young mother who never smiled, of a father who was abroad and would not return for many years. Pardon me, my lord, if, in common with many others, I believed this story to be one to appease her. Pardon me, if I doubted as many others did—whether the sad young mother was your wife.

"I imagined that I was going to rescue her from a false position when I asked her to be my wife. She said her mother dreaded all mention of love and lovers, and I prayed her to keep my love a secret from all the world.

"I make no excuses for myself; she was young and innocent as a dreaming child. I ought to have looked on her beautiful face and left her. My lord, am I altogether to blame? The lonely young girl at Knutsford pined for what I could give her—happiness and pleasure did not seem so far removed from me. Had she been in her proper place I could never have addressed her.

"Not to you can I tell the details of my love story—how I worshiped with passionate love the beautiful, innocent child who smiled into my face and drank in my words. I asked her to be my wife, and she promised. My lord, I never for a moment dreamed that she would ever have a home with you—it did not seem to me possible. I intended to return and marry her, firmly believing that in some respects my rank and condition in life were better than her own. She promised to be true to me, to love no one else, to wait for me, and to marry me when I returned.

"I believe now that she never loved me. My love and devotion were but a pleasant interruption in the monotony of her life. They were to blame also who allowed her no pleasures—who forced her to resort to this stolen one.

"My lord, I placed a ring upon your daughter's finger, and pledged my faith to her. I can not tell you what my love was like; it was a fierce fire that consumed me night and day.

"I was to return and claim her in two years. Absence made me love her more. I came back, rich in gold, my heart full of happiness, hope making everything bright and beautiful. I went straight to Knutsford—alas! she was no longer there! And then I heard that the girl I loved so deeply and so dearly was Lord Earle's daughter.

"I did not dream of losing her; birth, title, and position seemed as nothing beside my mighty, passionate love. I thought nothing of your consent, but only of her; and I went to Earlescourt. My lord, I wrote to her, and my heart was in every line. She sent me a cold reply. I wrote again; I swore I would see her. She sent her sister to me with the reply. Then I grew desperate, and vowed I would lay my claim before you. I asked her to meet me out in the grounds, at night, unseen and unknown. She consented, and on Thursday night I met her near the shrubbery.

"How I remember her pretty pleading words, her beautiful proud face! She asked me to release her. She said that it had all been child's play—a foolish mistake—and that if I would give her her freedom from a foolish promise she would always be my friend. At first I would not hear of it; but who could have refused her? If she had told me to lie down at her feet and let her trample the life out of me, I should have submitted.

"I promised to think of her request, and we walked on to the border of the lake. Every hair upon her head was sacred to me; the pretty, proud ways that tormented me delighted me, too. I promised I would release her, and give her the freedom she asked, if she told me I was not giving her up to another. She would not. Some few words drove me mad with jealous rage—yes, mad; the blood seemed to boil in my veins. Suddenly I caught sight of a golden locket on her neck, and I asked her whose portrait it contained. She refused to tell me. In the madness of my rage I tried to snatch it from her. She caught it in her hands, and, shrinking back from me, fell into the lake.

"I swear it was a sheer accident—I would not have hurt a hair of her head; but, oh! My lord, pardon me—pardon me, for Heaven's sake—I might have saved her and I did not; I might have plunged in after her and brought her back, but jealousy whispered to me, 'Do not save her for another—let her die.' I stood upon the bank, and saw the water close over her head. I saw the white hand thrown up in wild appeal, and never moved or stirred. I stood by the lake—side all night, and fled when the morning dawned in the sky.

"I killed her. I might have saved her, but did not. Anger of yours can add nothing to my torture; think what it has been. I was a strong man two days since; when the sun sets I shall be numbered with the dead. I do not wish to screen myself from justice. I have to meet the wrath of Heaven, and that appalls me as the anger of man never could. Send the officers of the law for me. If I am not dead, let them take me; if I am, let them bury me as they would a dog. I ask no mercy, no compassion nor forgiveness; I do not merit it.

"If by any torture, any death, I could undo what I have done, and save her, I would suffer the extremity of pain; but I can not. My deed will be judged in eternity.

"My lord, I write this confession partly to ease my own conscience, partly to shield others from unjust blame. Do not curse me because, through my mad jealousy, my miserable revenge, as fair and pure a child as father ever loved has gone to her rest."

So the strange letter concluded. Lord Earle read every word, looking over and anon at the quiet, dead face that had kept the secret hidden. Every word seemed burned in upon his brain; every word seemed to rise before him like an accusing spirit.

He stood face to face at last with the sin of his youth; it had found him out. The willful, wanton disobedience, the marriage that had broken his father's heart, and struck Ronald himself from the roll of useful men; the willful, cruel neglect of duty; the throwing off of all ties; the indulgence in proud, unforgiving temper, the abandonment

of wife and children—all ended there. But for his sins and errors, that white, still figure might now have been radiant with life and beauty.

The thought stung him with cruel pain. It was his own fault. Beatrice might have erred in meeting Hugh Fernely; Fernely had done wrong in trying to win that young child-like heart for his own; but he who left his children to strange hands, who neglected all duties of parentage, had surely done the greatest wrong.

For the first time his utter neglect of duty came home to him. He had thought himself rather a modern hero, but now he caught a glimpse of himself as he was in reality. He saw that he was not even a brave man; for a brave man neglects no duty. It was pitiful to see how sorrow bent his stately figure and lined his proud face. He leaned over his dead child, and cried to her to pardon him, for it was all his fault. Lady Helena, seeking him in the gloom of that solemn death chamber, found him weeping as strong men seldom weep.

He did not give her the letter, nor tell her aught of Hugh Fernely's confession. He turned to her with as sad a face as man ever wore.

"Mother," he said, "I want my kinsman, Lionel Dacre. Let him be sent for, and ask him to come without delay."

In this, the crowning sorrow of his life, he could not stand alone. He must have some one to think and to plan for him, some one to help him bear the burden that seemed too heavy for him to carry. Some one must see the unhappy man who had written that letter, and it should be a kinsman of his own.

Not the brave, sad young lover, fighting alone with his sorrow he must never know the tragedy of that brief life, to him her memory must be sacred and untarnished, unmarred by the knowledge of her folly.

Lady Helena was not long in discovering Lionel Dacre's whereabouts. One of the footmen who had attended him to the station remembered the name of the place for which he had taken a ticket. Lady Helena knew that Sir William Greston lived close by, and she sent at once to his house.

Fortunately the messenger found him. Startled and horrified by the news, Lionel lost no time in returning. He could not realize that his beautiful young cousin was really dead. Her face, in its smiling brightness, haunted him. Her voice seemed to mingle with the wild clang of the iron wheels. She was dead, and he was going to console her father.

No particulars of her death had reached him; he now only knew that she had walked out in her sleep, and had fallen into the lake.

Twenty-four hours had not elapsed since Lord Earle cried out in grief for his young kinsman, yet already he stood by his side.

"Persuade him to leave that room," said Lady Helena. "Since our darling was carried there he has never left her side."

Lionel did as requested. He went straight to the library, and sent for Lord Earle, saying that he could not at present look upon the sad sight in the gloomy death chamber.

While waiting there, he heard of Lillian's dangerous illness. Lady Helena told him how she had changed before her sister's death; and, despite the young man's anger, his heart was sore and heavy.

He hardly recognized Lord Earle in the aged, altered man who soon stood before him. The long watch, the bitter remorse, the miserable consciousness of his own folly and errors had written strange lines upon his face.

"I sent for you, Lionel," he said, "because I am in trouble—so great that I can no longer bear it alone. You must think and work for me; I can do neither for myself."

Looking into his kinsman's face, Lionel felt that more than the death of his child weighed upon the heart and mind of Ronald Earle.

"There are secrets in every family," said Ronald; "henceforth there will be one in mine—and it will be the true story of my daughter's death. While I knelt yesterday by her side, this letter was brought to me. Read it, Lionel; then act for me."

He read it slowly, tears gathering fast in his eyes, his lips quivering, and his hands tightly clinched.

"My poor Beatrice!" he exclaimed; and then the strength of his young manhood gave way, and Lionel Dacre wept as he had never wept before. "The mean, pitiful scoundrel!" he cried, angry indignation rising as he thought of her cruel death. "The wretched villain—to stand by while she died!"

"Hush!" said Lord Earle. "He has gone to his account. What have you to say to me, Lionel? Because I had a miserable quarrel with my wife I abandoned my children. I never cared to see them from the time they were babes until they were women grown. How guilty am I? That man believed he was about to raise Beatrice in the social scale when he asked her to be his wife, or as he says, he would never have dreamed of proposing to marry my daughter. If he merits blame, what do I deserve?"

"It was a false position, certainly," replied Lionel Dacre.

"This secret must be kept inviolate," said Lord Earle. "Lord Airlie must never know it—it would kill Lady Helena, I believe. One thing puzzles me, Lionel—Fernely says Lillian met him. I do not think that is true."

"It is!" cried Lionel, a sudden light breaking in upon him. "I saw her with him. Oh, Lord Earle, you may be proud of Lillian! She is the noblest, truest girl that ever lived. Why, she sacrificed her own love, her own happiness, for her sister! She loved me; and when this wedding, which will never now take place, was over, I intended to ask you to give me Lillian. One night, quite accidentally, while I was wandering in the grounds with a cigar, I saw her speaking to a stranger, her fair sweet face full of pity and compassion, which I mistook for love. Shame to me that I was base enough to doubt her—that I spoke to her the words I uttered! I demanded to know who it was she had met, and why she had met him. She asked me to trust her, saying she could not tell me. I stabbed her with cruel words, and left her vowing that I would never see her again. Her sister must have trusted her with her secret, and she would not divulge it."

"We can not ask her now," said Lord Earle; "my mother tells me she is very ill."

"I must see her," cried Lionel, "and ask her to pardon me if she can. What am I to do for you, Lord Earle? Command me as though I were your own son."

"I want you to go to the cottage," said Ronald, "and see if the man is living or dead. You will know how to act. I need not ask a kinsman and a gentleman to keep my secret."

In a few minutes Lionel Dacre was on his way to the cottage, riding as though it were for dear life. Death had been still more swift. Hugh Fernely lay dead.

The cottager's wife told Lionel how the children out at play had found a man lying in the dank grass near the pond, and how her husband, in his own strong arms, had brought him to their abode. He lay still for many hours, and then asked for pen and ink. He was writing, she said, nearly all night, and afterward prayed her husband to

take the letter to Lord Earle. The man refused any nourishment. Two hours later they went in to persuade him to take some food, and found him lying dead, his face turned to the morning sky.

Lionel Dacre entered the room. The hot anger died out of his heart as he saw the anguish death had marked upon the white countenance. What torture must the man have suffered, what hours of untold agony, to have destroyed him in so short a time! The dark, handsome face appeared to indicate that the man had been dying for years.

Lionel turned reverently away. Man is weak and powerless before death. In a few words he told the woman that she should be amply rewarded for her kindness, and that he himself would defray all expenses.

"He was perhaps an old servant of my lord's?" she said.

"No," was the reply; "Lord Earle did not know him—had never seen him; but the poor man was well known to one of Lord Earle's friends."

Thanks to Lionel's words, the faintest shadow of suspicion was never raised. Of the two deaths, that of Miss Earle excited all attention and aroused all sympathy. No one spoke of Hugh Fernely, or connected him with the occurrence at the Hall.

There was an inquest, and men decided that he had "died by the visitation of God." No one knew the agony that had cast him prostrate in the thick, dank grass, no one knew the unendurable anguish that had shortened his life.

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When Lionel returned to the Hall, he went straight to Lord Earle.

"I was too late," he said; "the man had been dead some hours."

His name was not mentioned between them again. Lord Earle never inquired where he was buried—he never knew.

The gloom had deepened at the Hall. Lillian Earle lay nigh unto death. Many believed that the master of Earlescourt would soon be a childless man. He could not realize it. They told him how she lay with the cruel raging fever sapping her life, but he seemed to forget the living child in mourning for the one that lay dead.

In compliance with Lionel's prayer, Lady Helena took him into the sick room where Lillian lay. She did not know him; the gentle, tender eyes were full of dread and fear; the fair, pure face was burning with the flush of fever; the hot, dry lips were never still. She talked incessantly—at times of Knutsford and Beatrice—then prayed in her sweet, sad voice that Lionel would trust her—only trust her; when Beatrice was married she would tell him all.

He turned away; her eyes had lingered on his face, but no gleam of recognition came into them.

"You do not think she will die?" he asked of Lady Helena; and she never forgot his voice or his manner.

"We hope not," she said; "life and death are in higher hands than ours. If you wish to help her, pray for her."

In after years Lionel Dacre like to remember that the best and most fervent prayers of his life had been offered for gentle, innocent Lillian Earle.

As he turned to quit the chamber he heard her crying for her mother. She wanted her mother—why was she not there? He looked at Lady Helena; she understood him.

"I have written," she said. "I sent for Dora yesterday; she will be here soon."

Chapter XLIII

On the second day succeeding that on which Dora had been sent for, Beatrice Earle was to be laid in her grave. The servants of the household, who had dearly loved their beautiful young mistress, had taken their last look at her face. Lady Helena had shed her last tears over it. Lord Airlie had asked to be alone for a time with his dead love. They had humored him, and for three long hours he had knelt by her, bidding her a sorrowful farewell, taking his last look at the face that would never again smile on earth for him.

They respected the bitterness of his uncontrollable sorrow; no idle words of sympathy were offered to him; men passed him by with an averted face—women with tearful eyes.

Lord Earle was alone with his dead child. In a little while nothing would remain of his beautiful, brilliant daughter but a memory and a name. He did not weep; his sorrow lay too deep for tears. In his heart he was asking pardon for the sins and follies of his youth; his face was buried in his hands, his head bowed over the silent form of his loved child; and when the door opened gently, he never raised his eyes—he was only conscious that some one entered the room, and walked swiftly up the gloomy, darkened chamber to the bedside. Then a passionate wailing that chilled his very blood filled the rooms.

"My Beatrice, my darling! Why could I not have died for you?"

Some one bent over the quiet figure, clasping it in tender arms, calling with a thousand loving words upon the dear one who lay there—some one whose voice fell like a strain of long-forgotten music upon his ears. Who but a mother could weep as he did? Who but a mother forget everything else in the abandonment of her sorrow, and remember only the dead?

Before he looked up, he knew it was Dora—the mother bereft of her child—the mother clasping in her loving arms the child she had nursed, watched, and loved for so many years. She gazed at him, and he never forgot the woeful, weeping face.

"Ronald," she cried, "I trusted my darling to you; what has happened to her?"

The first words for many long years—the first since he had turned round upon her in his contempt, hoping he might be forgiven for having made her his wife.

She seemed to forget him then, and laid her head down upon the quiet heart; but Ronald went round to her. He raised her in his arms, he laid the weeping face on his breast, he kissed away the blinding tears, and she cried to him:

"Forgive me, Ronald—forgive me! You can not refuse in the hour of death."

How the words smote him. They were his own recoiling upon him. How often he had refused his mother's pleading—hardened his own heart, saying to himself and to her that he could not pardon her yet—he would forgive her in the hour of death, when either he or she stood on the threshold of eternity!

Heaven had not willed it so. The pardon he had refused was wrung from him now; and, looking at his child, he felt that she was sacrificed to his blind, willful pride.

"You will forgive me, Ronald," pleaded the gentle voice, "for the love of my dead child? Do not send me from

Dora Thorne

you again. I have been very unhappy all these long years; let me stay with you now. Dear, I was beside myself with jealousy when I acted as I did."

"I forgive you," he said, gently, "can you pardon me as easily, Dora? I have spoiled your life—I have done you cruel wrong; can you forget all, and love me as you did years ago?"

All pride, restraint, and anger were dead. He whispered loving words to his weeping wife, such as she had not heard for years; and he could have fancied, as he did so, that a happy smile lingered on the fair face of the dead.

No, it was but the light of a wax taper flickering over it; the strange, solemn beauty of that serene brow and those quiet lips were unstirred.

Half an hour afterward Lady Helena, trembling from the result of her experiment, entered the room. She saw Ronald's arms clasped round Dora, while they knelt side by side.

"Mother," said Lord Earle, "my wife has pardoned me. She is my own again—my comfort in sorrow."

Lady Earle touched Dora's face with her lips, and told what her errand was. They must leave the room now—the beautiful face of Beatrice Earle was to be hidden forever from the sight of men.

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That evening was long remembered at Earlescourt; for Lady Dora thenceforward took her rightful position. She fell at once into the spirit of the place, attending to every one and thinking of every one's comfort.

Lillian was fighting hard for her young life. She seemed in some vague way to understand that her mother was near. Lady Dora's hand soothed and calmed her, her gentle motherly ways brought comfort and rest; but many long days passed before Lillian knew those around her, or woke from her troubled, feverish dream. When she did so, her sister had been laid to rest in her long, last home.

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People said afterward that no fairer day had ever been than that on which Beatrice Earle was buried. The sun shone bright and warm, the birds were singing, the autumn flowers were in bloom, as the long procession wound its way through the trees in the park; the leaves fell from the trees, while the long grass rustled under the tread of many feet.

Lord Earle and Hubert Airlie were together. Kindly hearts knew not which to pity the more—the father whose heart seemed broken by his sorrow, or the young lover so suddenly bereft of all he loved best. From far and near friends and strangers gathered to that mournful ceremony; from one to another the story flew how beautiful she was, and how dearly the young lord had loved her, how she had wandered out of the house in her sleep and fallen into the lake.

They laid her to rest in the green church-yard at the foot of the hill—the burial place of the Earles.

* * * * *

The death bell had ceased ringing; the long white blinds of the Hall windows were drawn up; the sunshine played once more in the rooms; the carriages of sorrowing friends were gone; the funeral was over. Of the beautiful, brilliant Beatrice Earle there remained but a memory.

Dora Thorne

They told afterward how Gaspar Laurence watched the funeral procession, and how he had lingered last of all in the little church-yard. He never forgot Beatrice; he never looked into the face of another woman with love on his own.

It was all over, and on the evening of that same day a quiet, deep sleep came to Lillian Earle. It saved her life; the wearied brain found rest. When she awoke, the lurid light of fever died out of her eyes, and they looked in gratified amazement upon Lady Dora who sat by her side.

"Mamma," she whispered, "am I at home at Knutsford?"

Dora soothed her, almost dreading the time when memory should awaken in full force. It seemed partly to return then, for Lillian gave vent to a wearied sigh, and closed her eyes.

Then Dora saw a little of wild alarm cross her face. She sprang up crying:

"Mamma, is it true? Is Beatrice dead?"

"It is true, my darling," whispered her mother, gently. "Dead, but not lost to us—only gone before."

The young girl recovered very slowly. The skillful doctor in attendance upon her sad that, as soon as it was possible to remove her, she should be carried direct from her room to a traveling carriage, taken from home, and not allowed to return to the Hall until she was stronger and better.

They waited until that day came, and meanwhile Lady Dora Earle learned to esteem Lord Airlie very dearly. He seemed to find more comfort with her than with any one else. They spoke but of one subject—the loved, lost Beatrice.

Her secret was never known. Lord Earle and Lionel Dacre kept it faithfully. No allusion to it ever crossed their lips. To Lord Airlie, while he lived, the memory of the girl he had loved so well was pure and untarnished as the falling snow. Not even to her mother was the story told. Dora believed, as did every one else, that Beatrice had fallen accidentally into the lake.

When Lillian grew stronger—better able to bear the mention of her sister's name—Lord Earle went to her room one day, and, gently enough, tried to win her to speak to him of what she knew.

She told him all—of her sister's sorrow, remorse, and tears; her longing to be free from the wretched snare in which she was caught; how she pleaded with her to interfere. She told him of her short interview with the unhappy man, and its sad consequences for her.

Then the subject dropped forever. Lord Earle said nothing to her of Lionel, thinking it would be better for the young lover to plead his own cause.

One morning, when she was able to rise and sit up for a time, Lionel asked permission to see her. Lady Dora, who knew nothing of what had passed between them, unhesitatingly consented.

She was alarmed when, as he entered the room, she saw her daughter's gentle face grow deathly pale.

"I have done wrong," she said. "Lillian is not strong enough to see visitors yet."

"Dear Lady Dora," explained Lionel, taking her hand, "I love Lillian; and she loved me before I was so unhappy as to offend her. I have come to beg her pardon. Will you trust her with me for a few minutes?"

Lady Dora assented, and went away, leaving them together.

"Lillian," said Lionel, "I do not know in what words to beg your forgiveness. I am ashamed and humbled. I know your sister's story, and all that you did to save her. When one was to be sacrificed, you were the victim. Can you ever forgive me?"

"I forgive you freely," she gently answered. "I have been in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and all human resentment and unkindness seem as nothing to me."

"And may I be to you as I was before?" he asked.

"That is another question," she said. "I can not answer it now. You did not trust me, Lionel."

Those were the only words of reproach she ever uttered to him. He did not annoy her with protestation; he trusted that time would do for him what he saw just then he could not do for himself.

He sat down upon the couch by her side, and began to speak to her of the tour she was about to make; of the places she should visit carefully avoiding all reference to the troubled past.

Three days afterward Lillian started on her journey to the south of France insisted upon by the doctor. Lord Earle and his wife took charge of their child; Lord Airlie, declaring he could not yet endure Lynnton, went with them. Lady Helena and Lionel Dacre remained at home, in charge of the Hall and the estate.

One thing the latter had resolved upon—that, before the travelers returned, the lake should be filled up, and green trees planted over the spot where its waters now glistened in the sun.

No matter how great the expense and trouble, he was resolved that it should be done.

"Earlescourt would be wretched," he said, "if that fatal lake remained."

The day after the family left Earlescourt, he had workmen engaged. No one was sorry at his determination. Lady Helena highly approved of it. The water was drained off, the deep basin filled with earth, and tall saplings planted where once the water had glistened in the sun. The boat house was pulled down, and all vestige of the lake was done away with.

Lionel Dacre came home one evening from the works in very low spirits. Imbedded in the bottom of the lake they had found a little slipper—the fellow to it was locked away in Dora's drawer. He saved it to give it to her when she returned.

Chapter XLIV

Two years passed away, and the travelers thought of returning. Lillian had recovered health and strength, and, Lord Earle said, longed for home.

One bright June day they were expected back. Lionel Dacre had driven to the station. Lady Earle had laid aside her mourning dress, and sat anxiously awaiting her son. She wished the homecoming were over, and that they had all settled down to the new life.

Her wish was soon gratified. Once again she gazed upon the face of her only and beloved son. He was little changed—somewhat sunburned, it was true; but there was less of the old pride and sternness, a kindly smile

playing round his lips. There was, too, a shade of sadness that plainly would never leave him; Lord Earle could never forget his lost child.

Lady Helena looked anxiously at Dora, but there was no cause for fear. The rosy, dimpled beauty of youth had passed away, but a staid dignity had taken its place. She looked a graceful amiable woman, with eyes of wondrous beauty thickly veiled by long lashes, and a wealth of rippling black hair. Lady Helena thought her far more beautiful now than when the coy smiles and dimples had been the chief charm. She admired, too, the perfect and easy grace with which Dora fell at once into her proper place as mistress of that vast establishment.

The pretty, musical voice was trained and softened; the delicate, refined accent retained no trace of provincialism. Everything about Dora pleased the eye and gratified the taste; the girlish figure had grown matronly and dignified; the sweet face had in it a tinge of sadness one may often see in the face of a mother who has lost a child. Lady Helena, fastidious and critical, could find no fault with her son's wife.

She welcomed her warmly, giving up to her, in her own graceful way, all rule and authority. Helping her if in any way she required it, but never interfering, she made Dora respected by the love and esteem she always evinced for her.

But it was on Lillian's face that Lady Helena gazed most earnestly. The pallor of sickness had given way to a rosy and exquisite bloom. The fair, sweet face in its calm loveliness seemed to her perfect, the violet eyes were full of light. Looking at her, Lady Helena believed there were years of life in store for Ronald's only child.

There was much to talk about. Lord Earle told his mother how Hubert Airlie had gone home to Lynnton, unable to endure the sight of Earlescourt. He had never regained his spirits. In the long years to come it was possible, added Ronald, that Lord Airlie might marry, for the sake of his name; but if ever the heart of living man lay buried in a woman's grave, his was with the loved, lost Beatrice.

Lionel Dacre knew he had done wisely and well to have the bed of the lake filled up. In the morning he saw how each member of the family shrank from going out into the grounds. He asked Lord Earle to accompany him, and then the master of Earlescourt saw that the deep, cruel water no longer shimmered amid the trees.

Lionel let him bring his wife and daughter to see what had been done; and they turned to the author of it with grateful eyes, thanking him for the kind thought which had spared their feelings. Green trees flourished now on the spot where the water had glistened in the sun; birds sang in their branches, green grass and ferns grew round their roots.

Yet among the superstitious, strange stories were told. They said that the wind, when it rustled among those trees, wailed with a cry like that of one drowning, that the leaves shivered and trembled as they did on no other branches; that the stirring of them resembled deep-drawn sighs. They said flowers would never grow in the thick grass, and that the antlered deer shunned the spot.

As much as possible the interior arrangements of Earlescourt had been altered. Lillian had rooms prepared for her in the other wing; those that had belonged to her hapless sister were left undisturbed. Lady Dora kept the key; it was known when she had been visiting them; the dark eyes bore traces of weeping.

Beatrice had not been forgotten and never would be. Her name was on Lillian's lips a hundred times each day. They had been twin sisters, and it always seemed to her that part of herself lay in the church yard at the foot of the hill.

Gaspar Laurence had gone abroad—he could not endure the sight or name of home. Lady Laurence hoped that time would heal a wound that nothing else could touch. When, after some years, he did return, it was seen that his

sorrow would last for life. He never married—he never cared for the name of any woman save that of Beatrice Earle.

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A week after their return, Lillian Earle stood one evening watching from the deep oriel window the sun's last rays upon the flowers. Lionel joined her, and she knew from his face that he had come to ask the question she had declined to answer before.

"I have done penance, Lillian," he said, "if ever man has. For two years I have devoted time, care, and thought to those you love, for your sake; for two years I have tried night and day to learn, for your sake, to become a better man. Do not visit my fault too heavily upon me. I am hasty and passionate—I doubted you who were true and pure; but, Lillian, in the loneliness and sorrow of these two years I have suffered bitterly for my sin. I know you are above all coquetry. Tell me, Lillian, will you be my wife?"

She gave him the answer he longed to hear, and Lionel Dacre went straight to Lord Earle. He was delighted—it was the very marriage upon which he had set his heart years before. Lady Dora was delighted, too; she smiled more brightly over it than she had smiled since the early days of her married life. Lady Helena rejoiced when they told her, although it was not unexpected news to her, for she had been Lionel's confidante during Lillian's illness.

There was no reason why the marriage should be delayed; the June roses were blooming then, and it was arranged that it should take place in the month of August.

There were to be no grand festivities—no one had heart for them; the wedding was to be quiet, attended only by a few friends; and Lord Earle succeeded in obtaining a promise from Lionel which completely set his heart at rest. It was that he would never seek another home—that he and Lillian would consent to live at Earlescourt. Her father could not endure the thought of parting with her.

"It will be your home, Lionel," he said, "in the course of after— years. Make it so now. We shall be one family, and I think a happy one."

So it was arranged, much to everybody's delight. A few days before the wedding took place, a letter came which seemed to puzzle Lord Earle very much. He folded it without speaking, but, when breakfast was over, he drew his wife's hand within his own.

"Dora," he said, "there will never be any secrets between us for the future. I want you to read this letter—it is from Valentine Charteris that was, Princess Borgezi that is. She is in England, at Greenoke, and asks permission to come to Lillian's wedding; the answer must rest with you, dear."

She took the letter from him and read it through; the noble heart of the woman spoke in every line, yet in some vague way Dora dreaded to look again upon the calm, grand beauty of Valentine's face.

"Have no fear, Dora, in saying just what you think," said her husband; "I would not have our present happiness clouded for the world. One word will suffice—if you do not quite like the thought, I will write to her and ask her to defer the visit."

But Dora would not be outdone in magnanimity. With resolute force, she cast from her every unworthy thought.

"Let her come, Ronald," she said, raising her clear, dark eyes to his. "I shall be pleased to see her. I owe her some amends."

Dora Thorne

He was unfeignedly pleased, and so was every one else. Lady Helena alone felt some little doubts as to Dora's capability of controlling herself.

The Princess Borgezi was to come alone; she had not said at what hour they might expect her.

Lady Dora had hardly understood why her thoughts went back so constantly to her lost child. Beatrice had loved the beautiful, gracious woman who was coming to visit them. It may have been that which prompted her, on the day before Lillian's marriage, when the house was alive with the bustle and turmoil of preparation, to go to the silent, solitary rooms where her daughter's voice had once made sweetest music.

She was there alone for some time; it was Lord Earle who found her, and tried to still her bitter weeping.

"It is useless, Ronald," she cried; "I can not help asking why my bright, beautiful darling should be lying there. It is only two years since a wedding wreath was made for her."

Nothing would comfort her but a visit to her daughter's grave. It was a long walk, but she preferred taking it alone. She said she should feel better after it. They yielded to her wish. Before she had quitted the house many minutes, the Princess Borgezi arrived.

There was no restraint in Ronald's greeting. He was heartily glad to see her—glad to look once more on the lovely Grecian face that had seemed to him, years ago, the only model for Queen Guinivere. They talked for a few minutes; then Valentine, turning to him, said:

"Now let me see Lady Dora. My visit is really to her."

They told her whither she had gone; and Lady Helena whispered something to her with brought tears to Valentine's eyes.

"Yes," she said; "I will follow her. I will ask her to kiss me over her daughter's grave."

Some one went with her to point out the way, but Valentine entered the church yard alone.

Through the thick green foliage she saw the shining of the white marble cross, and the dark dress of Dora, who knelt by the grave.

She went up to her. Her footsteps, falling noiselessly on the soft grass, were unheard by the weeping mother.

Valentine knelt by her side. Dora, looking up, saw the calm face beaming down upon her, ineffable tenderness in the clear eyes. She felt the clasp of Valentine's arms, and heard a sweet voice whisper:

"Dora, I have followed you here to ask you to try to love me, and to pardon me for my share in your unhappy past. For the love of your dead, who loved me, bury here all difference and dislike."

She could not refuse. For the first time, Lord Earle's wife laid her head upon that noble woman's shoulder and wept away her sorrow, while Valentine soothed her with loving words.

Over the grave of a child the two women were reconciled—all dislike, jealousy, and envy died away forever. Peace and love took their place.

In the after-time there was something remarkable in Dora's reverential love for Valentine. Lord Earle often said that in his turn he was jealous of her. His wife had no higher ideal, no truer friend than the Princess Borgezi.

Dora Thorne

The wedding day dawned at last; and for a time all trace of sadness was hidden away. Lord Earle would have it so. He said that that which should be the happiest day of Lillian's life must not be clouded. Such sad thoughts of the lost Beatrice as came into the minds of those who had loved her remained unspoken.

The summer sun never shone upon a more lovely bride, nor upon a fairer scene than that wedding. The pretty country church was decorated with flowers and crowded with spectators.

Side by side at the altar stood Lady Dora Earle and Valentine. People said afterward they could not decide whom they admired most—Lady Helena's stately magnificence, Dora's sweet, simple elegance, or the Princess Borgezi's statuesque Grecian beauty.

Lord Earle had prepared a surprise for Dora. When the little wedding party returned from the church, the first to greet them was Stephen Thorne, now a white-headed old man, and his wife. The first to show them all honor and respect were Lord Earle and his mother. Valentine was charmed with their homely simplicity.

For months after they returned to Knutsford the old people talked of "the lady with the beautiful face, who had been so kind and gracious to them."

Lord Airle did not attend the wedding, but he had urged Lionel to spend his honeymoon at Lynnton Hall, and Lillian had willingly consented.

So they drove away when the wedding breakfast was over. A hundred wishes for their happiness following them, loving words ringing after them. Relatives, friends, and servants had crowded round them; and Lillian's courage gave way at last. She turned to Lionel, as though praying him to shorten their time of parting.

"Heaven bless you, my darling!" whispered Dora to her child. "And mind, never—come what may—never be jealous of your husband."

"Goodbye, Lionel," said Lord Earle, clasping the true, honest hand in his; "and, if ever my little darling here tries you, be patient with her."

The story of a life time was told in these two behests.

Chapter XLV

3

Ten years had passed since the wedding bells chimed for the marriage of Lillian Earle. New life had come to Earlescourt. Children's happy voices made music there; the pattering of little feet sounded in the large, stately rooms, pretty, rosy faces made light and sunshine.

The years had passed as swiftly and peacefully as a happy dream. One event had happened which had saddened Lord Earle for a few days—the death of the pretty, coquettish Countess Rosali. She had not forgotten him; there came to him from her sorrowing husband a ring which she had asked might be given to him.

Gaspar Laurence was still abroad, and there was apparently no likelihood of his return. The Princess Borgezi with her husband and children, had paid several visits to the Hall. Valentine had one pretty little daughter, upon whom Lionel's son was supposed to look with most affection. She had other daughters—the eldest, a tall, graceful girl, inherited her father's Italian face and dark, dreamy eyes. Strange to say, she was not unlike Beatrice. It may have been that circumstance which first directed Lord Airle's attention to her. He met her at Earlescourt, and paid her

Dora Thorne

more attention than he had paid to any one since he had loved so unhappily years before.

No one was much surprised when he married her. And Helena Borgezi made a good wife. She knew his story, and how much of his heart lay in the grave of his lost love. He was kind, gentle, and affectionate to her, and Helena valued his thoughtful, faithful attachment more than she would have valued the deepest and most passionate love of another man.

One room at Lynnton was never unlocked; strange feet never entered it; curious eyes never looked round it. It was the pretty boudoir built, but never furnished, for Hubert Airlie's first love.

Time softened his sorrow; his fair, gentle wife was devoted to him, blooming children smiled around him; but he never forgot Beatrice. In his dreams, at times, Helena heard her name on his lips; but she was not jealous of the dead. No year passed in which she did not visit the grave where Beatrice Earle slept her last long sleep.

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Dora seemed to grow young again with Lillian's children. She nursed and tended them. Lady Helena, with zealous eyes, looked after Bertrand, the future lord of Earlescourt, a brave, noble boy, his father's pride and Lillian's torment and delight, who often said he was richer than any other lad in the country, for he had three mothers, while others had but one.

* * * * *

The sun was setting over the fair broad lands of Earlescourt, the western sky was all aflame; the flowers were thirsting for the soft dew which had just begun to fall.

Out in the rose garden, where long ago a love story had been told, were standing a group that an artist would have been delighted to sketch.

Lionel had some choice roses in bloom, and after dinner the whole party had gone out to see them. Lady Helena Earle was seated on the garden chair whereon Beatrice had once sat listening to the words which had gladdened her brief life. A number of fair children played around her.

Looking on them with pleased eyes was a gentle, graceful lady. Her calm, sweet face had a story in it, the wondrous dark eyes had in them a shadow as of some sorrow not yet lived down. Lady Dora Earle was happy; the black clouds had passed away. She was her husband's best friend, his truest counselor; and Ronald had forgotten that she was ever spoken of as "lowly born." The dignity of her character, acquired by long years of stern discipline, asserted itself; no one in the whole country side was more loved or respected than Lady Dora Earle.

Ronald, Lord Earle, was lying on the grass at his wife's feet. He looked older, and the luxuriant hair was threaded with silver; but there was peace and calm in his face.

He laughed at Lillian and her husband conversing so anxiously over the roses.

"They are lovers yet," he said to Dora; and she glanced smilingly at them.

The words were true. Ten years married, they were lovers yet. There was gentle forbearance on one side, an earnest wish to do right on the other. Lillian Dacre never troubled her head about "woman's rights;" she had no idea of trying to fill her husband's place; if her opinion on voting was asked, the chances were that she would smile and say, "Lionel manages all those matters." Yet in her own kingdom she reigned supreme; her actions were full of wisdom, her words were full of kindly thought. The quiet, serene beauty of her youth had developed into

that of magnificent womanhood. The fair, spirituelle face was peerless in her husband's eyes. There was no night or day during which Lionel Dacre did not thank Heaven for that crown of all great gifts, a good and gentle wife.

There was a stir among the children; a tall, dark gentleman was seen crossing the lawn, and Lionel cried: "Here is Gaspar Laurence with his arms full of toys—those children will be completely spoiled!"

The little ones rushed forward, and Bertrand, in his hurry, fell over a pretty child with large dark eyes and dark hair. Lord Earle jumped up and caught her in his arms.

"Bertie, my boy," he said, "always be kind to little Beatrice!" The child clasped her arms round his neck. He kissed the dark eyes and murmured to himself, "Poor little Beatrice!"

The summer wind that played among the roses, lifting the golden, rippling hair from Lillian's forehead and tossing her little girl's curls into Lord Earle's face, was singing a sweet, low requiem among the trees that shaded the grave of Beatrice Earle.