

# **The Perversity of Human Nature**

Ada Cambridge



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# The Perversity of Human Nature

**Ada Cambridge**

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## Chapter I.

Amongst the hundreds and thousands of pretty and cosy little villa houses that cluster round our Melbourne city, The Nest, at St. Kilda is one that seldom escapes the notice of the passer-by. It stands a little back from the street, at the top of a sloping lawn, a one storied, broad verandahed, rose embowered bungalow— as charming a nest as you would wish to see. Jupiter Pluvius twirls upon the velvet grass and the gorgeous flower borders, making a delicate liquid tinkle and patter with its spreading showers. The gravel path, sweeping in the form of a horse shoe from the front gate, has never a weed on its smooth face. The shrubs are glossy and bushy; the fern trees thrive as in their native forests; the dark pines that line the enclosure and guard the little dwelling and its exquisite garden from wind and dust and prying eyes are dense and shapely, without a ragged branch anywhere. And the house itself, retiring under its spreading eaves, is simply perfection in the finish of its simple appointments and the almost glittering cleanliness of every part of it.

The inside matches the outside. Persian carpets on the dark floors; Liberty stuffs at the windows; Morris chintzes on the chairs and sofas; good, though not rare, pictures on the walls, which are tinted on purpose to suit them; low book cases running like dados round the rooms, filled with books to read and not to look at, and bearing on the top shelf dainty bric-à-brac, of which every piece has been selected on its own merits, and not at the command of a vulgar fashion. A thoroughly refined and harmonious house, in short; such a house as could only belong to cultivated and enlightened people.

Three years ago— and it was then very much as it is now— these people were newly settled in it.

They were two only— a young Australian husband and his English wife, to whom he had been married about eighteen months. He had met her at the Grosvenor Gallery, a bright girl fresh from Girton, when he was himself enjoying a six months' trip to Europe. He was then, as now, partner in a flourishing firm of stock and station agents having offices in Collins-street west— Brown, Brown and Ponsonby. He was the second Brown— Brown the younger; the old one was his uncle. Until the memorable occasion when he met his wife, he had never travelled beyond the bounds of his native continent; and he went to England with the conviction that he knew as much as the old country could teach him and a little more— except on one point. He was prepared to own, and subsequently did own, that England could furnish more and better pictures than all he had seen in Australia. It was his one artistic taste. Goodness knows how he came by it, but there it was. From a child he had been fond of drawing and fond of pictures— of which, naturally, he considered himself a connoisseur— after his return from Europe, an infallible judge.

So he went to the Grosvenor Gallery. And so (for she was fond of pictures, too) he met Miss Alexandra Hay. She was an orphan, of five and twenty, independent of guardians and interfering relatives, entirely mistress of herself and of a safe little income of £200 a year. She lived— or had been living— with a fellow Girtonian in aesthetically furnished lodgings in Whitechapel, and made "slumming" her profession— scorning delights (except such as rush bottomed chairs and high art cups and saucers), and living laborious days, enjoying the very life for which, if she had not had it, she would have sighed and aspired as the highest and most satisfying that could fall to the lot of woman.

But at the time of this visit to the Grosvenor— for the East-End missionaries took their little artistic diversions in the West End occasionally, as a duty to themselves and to everybody— she was very unhappy. She and her dearest friend had quarrelled irrevocably (I am sorry to say they often did it), and life, that had been so rich and full, was now utterly blank and desolate. They had gone the length of selling their furniture and dividing the proceeds; and Alexandra Hay was alone in the world. A mutual acquaintance introduced Robert Brown to her at this juncture— he was a fine figure of a man, tall, broad shouldered, blue-eyed, with a handsome red beard— and she took his arm to walk through the crowd and look at the pictures with a sense that, after all, it was possible that men were more generous, more constant, and more to be depended on than women. But how she came to marry him, and that within six weeks of their first meeting, she declares to this very day that she never knew. My own notion is that she did it because she thought it would be nice, when her dear friend came to her to "make it up," and beg for a resumption of the old life, to be able to say "It is too late now." Or because the suddenness and strikingness of the enterprise was irresistible to her impulsive nature and dramatic imagination. But how can I

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tell? It is one of those things that no one is expected to understand. They were both lonely, and on the look out for sympathy; and Robert Brown, criticising the Grosvenor Gallery pictures, showed to the best advantage. She thought him a most cultivated person, with the true artist's soul. And time was short. Robert's passage was taken, and she had to make up her mind quickly. There were no parents to consult, and, of course, she, with her training, had nothing but scorn for conventional practices. So in six weeks they became man and wife, walking out to be married in their everyday clothes, and afterwards lunching tête-à-tête at an hotel. And thereafter they lived together, as she often bitterly expressed it, like a pair of convicts dragging their connecting leg-irons between them, and feeling the weight and pain of them at every step.

When they arrived in Australia they went to live in the Riverina, where Robert Brown had charge of a branch office and a good deal of country business. Here young Mrs. Brown, cut off from every interest she had in the world, and disappointed in her marriage, moped and moped until she nearly went melancholy mad. At the end of the first year her nervous state was such that the doctors ordered her change of scene and a change of life—declared that it was absolutely necessary to her mental health that she should have more cheerful surroundings. Thereupon her husband, anxious to do his best for her, exchanged posts with Mr. Ponsonby and transferred himself to the office in town. And they went to live at The Nest—that abode of love and peace, as it appeared to the uninitiated spectator out of doors—and made an attempt to start afresh and turn over a new leaf.

At St. Kilda Mrs. Brown grew stronger, and for a little time she was happier—for just so long as she was occupied in the fitting up of her new house and making it pretty, according to her own ideas.

When that was done, and she had nothing more to do, with her husband at business all day, and often at his club at night, and herself refusing to associate with the intellectually benighted persons amongst whom she had come to dwell, her solitude was as complete and depressing as before, and she became more miserable and more melancholy than ever.

On the evening of Christmas day three years ago she and her husband sat in their charming drawingroom together. Christmas in these parts is seldom a complete success, under the most favorable conditions; to them, as a reason of domestic festivity, it was the most dismal failure imaginable, and both were longing for the interminable hours to pass and bring the common days again.

Robert sat in one of the luxurious Morris chairs, sorely tempted to go away and smoke off the effects of the plum pudding, but feeling that it would be an impropriety to do so on such an occasion, which demanded that the head of the household should devote himself to his family; and, between the little dozes into which he lapsed at intervals, he gazed at his wife—who seemed, for her part, unconscious of his existence. She sat by an open window, leaning an elbow on the sill and her cheek in her hand, and stared at the sky with eyes that evidently saw nothing. They were very pretty, sad, dark eyes, with a kind of starry brilliance in them—strictly speaking, the only beauty of her face, which was nevertheless intelligent and interesting. She was picturesquely dressed in sage-tinted Liberty silk, draped Greek fashion in mysterious loose folds from her shoulders to her feet, and slightly held to her slender figure with a silk cord tasselled at the ends. The Philistines of the tight waists, whose acquaintance she would not condescend to, called her Mrs. Cimabue Brown, and scoffed at her eccentric garments, of which they caught a glimpse occasionally; but, all the same, she contrived to look very graceful in them. Her husband thought so to-night, as he studied her—sitting in the dying daylight—from his chair in the shadow of the room. She had been his choice, and he still believed in her as a most elegant and superior woman, bitterly as she had disappointed him.

"Lexie," he said, breaking a long silence, and speaking kindly and cheerfully, "don't look so utterly miserable."

She did not move her position, nor did her face lighten. "You needn't look at me," she said indifferently.

He felt repulsed, but made no verbal retort. With an impatient, ostentatious sigh, he kicked away a footstool, rose, and, taking a match box from his pocket, proceeded to light the gas under half a dozen tinted shades.

"It's a nice sort of Christmas," he grumbled presently, beginning to perambulate the room with his hands behind him. "A nice sort of home—after a man has done his best to make his wife comfortable and happy." She took no notice of this remark, and he added sharply, "If you don't shut that window you'll have the mosquitoes in."

She shut the window with an exasperating air of humble obedience, and turned into the room to seek another seat. As the soft pink light fell upon her face, and he saw how pale and worn it looked, another twinge of uxorious pity visited him.

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"I don't mean to find fault with you, my dear. But I wish you had a more occupied life, and enjoyed your home and did more to make yourself and me happy. You have everything that heart can wish— nothing to do but to amuse yourself— and a good husband, though I say it that shouldn't. It isn't every man that would make the sacrifices I have done to give his wife pleasure."

"What sacrifices?"

"Coming to town, when I was doing so well where I was."

"I am very sorry you came, if it involved a sacrifice. I am very sorry"— here her voice trembled— "that I ever came across your path, to be so much trouble to you."

"Now, Lexie, don't begin that."

"It was the most unlucky day in my whole life— the day that I married you," she declared recklessly.

"Well, at any rate, you did it of your own accord. You can't say I forced you," said Robert, with a grim smile.

"Are you going to insult me by implying that I threw myself at your head— that I ran after you?" she demanded, her woman's soul burning within her.

His grim smile relaxed, and there was a twinkle in his blue eyes. "Like Barkis, you were willin', Lexie.

You were very willin', my dear. You know you were, so don't pretend you weren't."

For a moment her rage and indignation at this deadly and unexpected outrage deprived her of the power of speech. She looked at him with her dark eyes blazing, her delicate nostrils quivering, her lips compressed, her hands clenched. Then she broke out wildly— addressing the walls and furniture— "O, it serves me right! It richly serves me right! I have brought it upon myself— I ought to have known better than to expose myself to the indignities and degradations of a married woman's lot! I ought to have listened to Emily Price!— she warned me of what I was doing, and how bitterly I should repent it when it was too late!" She raved with fluency and bitterness for full five minutes, and her husband only interrupted her once.

"It's all very well to talk about your dear Emily Price now; you know that when you were with her you quarrelled like cat and dog," said he. "You couldn't even live under the same roof."

"We never quarrelled," said Lexie, solemnly. "We did not always agree on the surface, but at bottom we understood each other thoroughly. We had one heart and mind in everything." And then she went off into harrowing reminiscences of her Girton and Whitechapel life with Emily, contrasting the noble freedom of that happy time with the present ignominious bondage. "I only wish," she concluded fervently, "that I were back in that old life now!"

"I'm sure I wish you were," said Robert, for his patience was exhausted. It was the first time he had expressed himself in those terms, and after he had done so he was rather sorry for it. Lexie looked as if he had struck her; she quite staggered as she stood. She thought nothing of telling him that she wished herself away from him; but that he should wish himself away from her was quite a different matter. She sat down silently, laid her arms upon a little table near and her face in her arms, and broke into a tempest of hysterical tears and sobs. She felt herself utterly desolate and abandoned now. Robert let her cry for a little, for he was angry, and he thought she deserved no pity. Then he reminded himself that she was only a woman and that her health was delicate, and made an attempt at consolation.

"You're just moped with having nothing to do," said he. "Why don't you get some needlework? Other women occupy themselves embroidering things and so on, but I never see you with a needle in your hand. Get some crewel work— or knit me some socks; that'll be better for you than always reading and thinking and idling about. You've no idea how charming a woman looks in a man's eyes when she's doing those feminine kind o' things— sitting by her fireside and stitching away——"

He laid his hand on her shoulder as he spoke, meaning the gesture for a caress. But she snatched herself from it with a shudder, as if it had been a toad or a snake. "O let me alone!" she cried sharply.

"Don't speak to me! Don't touch me!"

He drew himself up straight, and then turned away, deeply offended. "All right," he retorted roughly, "please yourself; I'll not meddle with you. You may go to the devil for what I care; I'm sick and tired of your tantrums."

And with that he went off to bed, banging the doors behind him.



## Chapter II.

Like many another woman, Lexie dearly loved a grievance, though she would never have forgiven the frank friend who dared to tell her so. And now she had one of sufficient importance to satisfy her.

Robert had told her he wished she was gone— had called her abusive names, sworn at her— treated her, in short, as no woman who respected herself could submit to be treated. Therefore, she determined not to speak to him again until he had suitably apologised, and nursed vague but desperate plans for the vindication of her honor and dignity.

Robert, for his part, thought it was high time for a husband of spirit to put his foot down. He had borne with her tantrums, because she was delicate and "only a woman," until he had completely spoilt her.

Therefore he resolved that, until she made amends for her conduct, he would withhold his pardon and favor. And so it came to pass that for many days they were not on speaking terms, except at meal times when the servants were in the room. Robert went off to his business after breakfast, returned to dinner, went off again to spend the evening at his club; and, when he came home at night and found his wife gone to bed and her door locked, retired peaceably to rest in his dressing room. And Lexie, her sense of injury deepening hour by hour with the continuance of this state of things, her nerves overwrought with the long strain upon them, became nearly frantic. In her husband's presence pride kept her severely calm and composed; but when he was out of the house, or she could hear him snoring in his bachelor bed on the other side of the locked door, as if nothing were the matter, she cried, and wrung her hands, and paced wildly about the floor, and declared that she could not and would not stand it.

Since she had come to St. Kilda her favorite and only amusement had been to look at the sea and the ships. In the hottest weather she would walk along the beach till she found a sufficiently lonely spot, and there sit down on a sand hummock, or a bit of driftwood, clasp her hands round her knees, and stare from under her lowered hat brim at the twinkling water and the arriving and departing vessels, for hours together. After dinner, when her husband was not at home, she would put a light wrap over her evening dress and walk down to the pier, and there sit till bed time without stirring, wistfully gazing at the clustering lights of Williamstown and Sandridge— the riding lights of the great ships resting in port between their ocean voyages. Frequently she went to the piers where those ships were berthed to have a nearer look at them— wandering up and down amongst the trucks and the smoke and the clatter, and watching the loading and unloading of cargo going on busily on both sides— to the surprise and curiosity of idle sailors and sweating stevedores, who could not make out what a lady, all by herself, could be wanting there. What she really wanted was to look at the fabric and the faces that had come direct from England and were going back there again— to get, in fact, as near to England itself as possible. She looked back to England now as the true believer looks forward to Heaven. There was the home of the elect— the city of satisfied desires— the haven where she would be.

One day, when loitering on the pier at Sandridge, she was astonished to hear her name called.

"Miss Hay— ahem!— Mrs. Brown— Lexie!"

It was the voice of a young sailor lad who leaned over the poop railing of a big clipper that she was slowly passing, her attention at the moment being absorbed by a still bigger steamer on the other side.

With a start she looked up, and recognised Joe Price— none other than her darling Emily's own cousin.

She had known of his going to sea, but had not known in what direction— in fact, had not cared. In those old days boys were of no interest to her whatever. Now she hurried to meet him as he ran down the gangway, and nearly threw herself into his arms.

"Joe! Joe!" she cried excitedly. "My dear, dear boy, how did you come here? Is this your ship? Oh, how glad I am to meet you again! And when did you see them last? How did you leave Emily? Oh, do tell me all about everything!"

"Come up on deck," said Joe. And up on deck they went accordingly. There was an awning over the poop, and the captain's wicker chair stood there. "Sit here," said Joe, "and I'll tell them to get you some lemonade or something." He was third mate, it appeared, and in charge of the ship. She was one of the few passenger sailing ships left on the line, but there were no passengers on her now, and, for a wonder, no cargo going in or out. It was

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very peaceful in contrast with the racket of the pier. Lexie sat down in the captain's chair, refreshed herself with lemonade, and had a long talk with her new found friend.

"No," said Joe. "She never seemed to care for anybody else after you were gone. She tried living with Miss Fothergill, but that didn't answer at all. They were ready to tear each other's hair off in a week."

"Bless her!" ejaculated Lexie fervently, with tears in her eyes.

"So she gave up slumming and went home and took to painting. She's regularly studying at it now— Royal Academy and all that sort of thing, you know. She's going to be a great gun someday, like Mrs.

Butler and the Montalbas— at least, so she says. For my part, I wish she'd take pattern by you, and get married and be comfortable, like other people."

"Oh, don't wish anything so cruel!" cried Lexie, with a tragical air. "Let her be as she is— free and happy, and using all her faculties. Believe me, she is far better off than she has any idea of."

Joe gave her a long look, feeling rather as if he had put his foot in it, and hastened to change the conversation. But Mrs. Brown did not want to talk upon the new topic; she went back to the old one lovingly.

"How well I remember the first day we became friends! It was at Girton, soon after I went there— dear Girton! I had to go out one afternoon, and it was cold, and I wanted my fire kept in; so I put a notice on my door, asking anyone who happened to pass to look in and see to it; and when I returned there was Emily on her knees blowing it up. She was wearing a terra-cotta cashmere— I can see it now! And then I put the kettle on, and we had tea together, and a long, long talk. That was the beginning, and from that day to this," said Lexie, without a falter or a blush, "there has never been a cloud between us."

Joe rounded his mouth to whistle, but forbore. "You certainly seemed to suit each other down to the ground," he said gravely. "She always said you were the only real friend she ever had."

"I was— I was," said Lexie, clasping her hands in her lap. "And she was my only one. Oh, if I could only be with her now— if we could only work together as we used to do!"

"Oh, well," said Joe encouragingly, "I suppose you will be coming home some day. Then you can do things."

"Ah! what wouldn't I give!"

"You must talk to Mr. Brown. Tell him a change would do him good. Nothing like the sea, you know. You ought to come along with us."

"When are you leaving?"

"In about a month, I suppose. Come and have a look round." And he jumped up from the flag box on which he had been sitting. He was proud of his ship, of course, though in the matter of art and luxury she was not much to boast of in comparison with the great steam vessels which had rendered her nearly obsolete; and he showed his guest over her with a complacent and superior air. "Ever so much better than the mail boats, you know. No noise, no vibration, no coal dust, no smells fit to knock you backwards, no Red Sea, no dressing up and bothering yourself. There's no romance on those modern steamers— you might as well be in an hotel at once." Lexie let him ramble on, and said nothing in reply. He thought it was because she was so impressed and interested that she was so silent. But, in point of fact, she did not take in a word that he was saying. The great enterprise of her life was just then shaping itself in her brain.

"I will go," she was thinking to herself— the thought had been in her mind for days, but only now presented itself as a practicable idea. "I will run away to England and to Emily— I will get off secretly, so that Robert shall not find it out and stop me. He wants to get rid of me— he said so. He will be happy when I am gone." (This was what she persuaded herself to be the case, but what she knew in her inmost heart was that he would be miserable when she was gone; and therein lay the great merit of the scheme.)

"I am afraid you are not well," Joe said at last, when he saw that she was really inattentive, and looked perturbed and nervous.

"Yes, I am," she replied, mouth and hands trembling. "But I must be going now. I have a great deal to do."

He protested against this sudden hurry, and begged her to wait for lunch, which would be ready in half an hour; but she would not stay another minute. So he escorted her down the gang way, and they said good-bye, and she hastened up the pier to the station without having made any appointment for seeing him again. He looked after her with a gloomy face, wondering why she hadn't asked him to her house, when she must have known that he had no other friend in Melbourne, where he was going to kick his heels for a month or more. "She always was a queer girl," he soliloquised, as he returned to the deck.

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"And I fancy she's got a brute of a husband by the manner of her. She was afraid to stay any longer for fear he'd make a row."

### Chapter III.

Lexie went home in a fever of excitement. Minute by minute her desperate plan grew more distinct and looked more reasonable and more attractive. Minute by minute her determination to carry it out increased. It was full of difficulties, but the difficulties disappeared when she strenuously thought them out. She had the woman's quickness of imagination and readiness of resource. By the time she reached home the whole thing was arranged in her mind down to the most trifling detail. It was like an inspiration. It would set Robert free, who openly wished himself rid of her; and (only of course she didn't consider that) it would give her the most dramatic and magnificent revenge. "I will do it," she said, setting her teeth. And do it she did.

When she reached The Nest, hot, dusty, and tired, though not conscious that she was tired, she found her lunch ready for her in the cool and pretty diningroom. She sat down and tried to eat because the housemaid was there to wait upon her, but she had no appetite for food. She messed a plate or two, drank two tumblers of iced water, and then went to her bedroom, taking the morning newspaper with her. Locking the door, she sat down to read the shipping advertisements, and found that a mail steamer was to leave in two days. This was the ship she decided to go by, for she felt that if the thing was to be done it must be done quickly, before her courage could cool. Then she thought of her luggage. What should she take? She must not be seen packing and making arrangements, nor carrying boxes from the house. And yet she must have clothes and necessaries. Here was the chief difficulty of her undertaking.

She called for a cup of tea, and while it was being prepared went into the boxroom to look at the chests and portmanteaus stowed there to see if there was anything she could make use of. It was a vain search, as she knew it would be. On every article, hers as well as his, "Robert Brown" or "R.B."

was printed in staring letters (he had had it done when they were married without asking her leave); and she did not mean to take her passage under that name. Besides, she did not want to carry off anything that would be missed. Robert would eventually guess where she was gone, and probably would follow to fetch her back; but, considering what a husband's powers were, and that the telegraph and police might be used to supplement them, it was necessary to the success of her scheme that she should get as long a start as possible. She looked at the rows of lettered trunks with a curling lip. "A married woman has not even a name of her own," she said to herself bitterly. "The husband swallows us up. We have no longer any individuality whatever."

Then she returned to her bedroom, and Ellen brought her tea. Her servants were excellent of their kind, but she had only two in the house, cook and housemaid. A boy came for an hour or two in the early morning and a gardener twice a week. This was not the gardener's day, fortunately. Lexie looked at her watch and saw that it was past two.

"Ellen," she said carelessly, "when you have cleared away the lunch things you may go and see your mother, if you like."

Ellen's mother at Hawthorn was ill, and Ellen was a dutiful and affectionate daughter. She accepted her mistress's offer with a joyful heart, and hurried off to scamper through her work. And as soon as her back was turned Mrs. Brown resumed her bonnet, slipped unperceived from the house, caught a train that was just going out, and returned to Melbourne.

At Flinders-street she took a cab and had herself driven to the bank where the interest of her money (still funded in London) was periodically lodged, and drew out all she had. It amounted— for she had needed very little since her marriage— to over two hundred pounds. Then she went to the office of the company whose ship she had selected to go home by, and there applied for and obtained a second class passage (which seemed better for her purpose than a first), giving her name as Mrs. Smith. After that she hurried to an outfitter's— avoiding Collins-street lest she should encounter Robert — and bought a good sized leather mail trunk. This was stowed on the cab, and, when she had made a few other little purchases, she had herself driven home. As the cab turned into the street where she lived, she recognised that she had now to face one of the many risks of failure which no ingenuity could entirely provide against. If she were seen with the new trunk, curiosity would be aroused and all her elaborate plans would be defeated. Her nervous agitation almost deprived her of her presence of mind, but not quite. She was too desperately bent on success not to make a stout struggle for it. With a beating heart she ordered

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the cabman to pull up within a few yards of the gate, and looked round fearfully. The street was empty; the house was quiet, with all its blinds drawn down; Ellen would not be back from Hawthorn for a good hour. Everything depended on Sophia the cook.

"You need not carry it up," said Lexie, indicating the portmanteau, and opening her purse. "If you put it just inside the gate, that will do."

"All right 'm," said the man, not anxious to do more than he was obliged. And he put it down on the gravel, took his fare, touched his hat and departed. This was the point of greatest danger, but it was safely passed. There was no sign of Sophia. The moment the cab was gone, and after one more terrified look round, Lexie flung her little parcels on the grass, and, seizing the trunk, carried it into the shrubbery and hid it in a clump of laurel bushes. She had marked the place before going out, and intended to leave her purchase there until night time, when, under cover of the darkness, she might manage to smuggle it into the house.

However, when she went indoors and found Sophia peaceably cooking in the kitchen, whisking eggs that had not yet begun to froth, she saw that no time would be so good as the present; and she went back to the shrubbery and fetched in the portmanteau. Being empty, it was not very heavy; and in two minutes she had it in her bedroom, and was standing over it, holding her hand to her side and panting for breath, exhausted by her exploit, but triumphant at its success.

Where was she to put her trunk now she had got it? It could not go into the box room, which was liable to be invaded at any time, though very seldom entered; nor into her only private cupboard, which was too shallow; nor under the bed, where Ellen would see it when she was sweeping the floor. Lexie felt as if she had committed a murder and had the dead body on her hands, until she found a snug place for it in the wardrobe by drawing out two of the sliding shelves. Here, at considerable inconvenience to her clothes in general, the trunk reposed at last, and she could lock the door upon it, and no one could be any the wiser.

She had an hour to herself before she had to dress for dinner, and she turned it to good account.

Never, I venture to say, were preparations for a long voyage— at any rate, a lady's long voyage— made with such despatch. "I will take nothing but what is absolutely necessary," she said to herself. "I can get all I want in London." Her secret conviction was that Robert would soon be after her; but even if not, she could always send for her things. Moreover, she did not want her drawers and cupboards to look, when she had left them, as if they had been depleted. So she made her one trunk hold all her outfit, the greater part being composed of underclothes that no one in the house had seen— hygienic garments that Emily had sent out to her, and that had been lying unopened for months on a top shelf.

She left all her jewels in their cases: all her dresses (except two or three that she had not worn in Melbourne) hanging on their pegs; her bonnets and laces and trifles in their places in the wardrobe; her ivory-backed brushes on the dressing table. None of these things would she take— indeed, she had no place for them— though she relinquished them with regret.

She had done the greater part of her packing when Robert returned; she finished the rest before she went to bed. In the meantime she wondered how he could help noticing the change she was conscious of in herself— her ill-repressed excitement and restlessness. Evidently he did not notice it.

He was more indifferent to her than usual. Some little touch of compunction prompted her, for the first time since their quarrel on Christmas day, to address a few remarks to him; and he only answered in monosyllables, and thereafter became dull and silent as before. He had had some serious business worries, and his mind was full of them; but she thought it was pure "nastiness", and, of course, felt all the more justified in the course she had undertaken. The next morning she set herself to the task of getting her packed portmanteau out of the house. She did not feel that she could breathe freely till this difficulty had been safely surmounted. When Robert was gone, and the servants had cleared away the breakfast, she sent Sophia to the fishmonger's and Ellen to fruit shop; and then, the house being empty for a few minutes, ran out herself to call a cab, made the cabman fetch the trunk from her room, and drove with it to Spencer-street, where she deposited it, along with a bundle of wraps, in the cloak room. Again fortune favored her. No one who knew her saw what she had done. Returning by train, she then sat down to write a letter to her husband – a letter which she meant to leave behind her, for him to read when she was gone.

"My dear Robert," she wrote (at last, after tearing up several closely written sheets), "your words on Christmas day, when you told me you wished I was away from you, and that you were sick and tired of me, have

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haunted me ever since. I can't bear to feel that I am a disappointment and a burden to you, and I have made up my mind to set you free. Our marriage has been a sad mistake, but I am going to do the only thing I can to rectify it. I hope you will be happy, dear Robert, and think a little kindly of me when I am gone.

"Your loving, "LEXIE."

As fate would have it Robert did not return to dinner that night. He sent a telegram to say that he had an engagement, and would probably not be home till late. Lexie felt this terribly. That he should stay away — who so seldom stayed away— on her last night (as if he had known that it was her last night!) was a crowning grievance. "He is utterly tired of me," she thought. "He hates his home— he would rather be anywhere than where I am." And she was more than ever sure that she was doing the right thing in leaving him.

She did not dress for dinner, nor would she have dinner served for her. She had some more tea and bread and butter, and, putting on her hat and hanging a light shawl over her arm, went for a long ramble on the beach— nearly to the Red Bluff. She was very miserable, and she wept every now and then, as she thought of her great step, and of her desolation, and of her many troubles. But when she thought of how Robert would feel "to-morrow night at this time" she cheered up; and looking across the sea to the lights of Williamstown, braced herself to carry out her purpose to the bitter end.

She had long gone to bed when he came home, and he went straight to his dressing room, as a matter of course, though she had not locked her door. Later on, when she was wide awake and tossing from side to side, she heard him snoring comfortably in that little narrow bed that he seemed so fond of, as if she were miles away. "O! how can he?" she sobbed under her breath, burying her face in her lonely pillow. "How can he— when perhaps he may never see me again!"

In the morning, when she met him at breakfast, she was very pale, but composed. This was their last interview, and a sense of the tragic nature of the occasion lifted her to the level of the heroic. If he had only known it, a word from him would have broken her down and knocked all her grand scheme to pieces. It was unfortunate that he was still so preoccupied with his business affairs that he had no attention to spare for her. He ate his breakfast and read his newspaper at the same time, and when his meal was over prepared to depart as usual. Lexie felt as if she should choke when she saw him brushing his hat in the hall. She had had a natural wish to kiss him and bid him good-bye (and if she had done that the complexion of affairs would have been entirely altered); but it was hard to go up to him without some little encouragement. He did not even look at her, did not seem aware of her presence; and while she stood watching him, in an agony of indecision, he strode out of the house and through the garden to the street— and the golden opportunity was gone.

Lexie listened to the click of the gate and the sound of his quick footsteps dying away on the pavement, and, realising what had happened, ran to her room, threw herself on her bed, and cried wildly as if her heart would break. But only for two or three minutes. Very soon she sprang up, and bathed her eyes, and set her teeth. "That settles it," she said to herself sternly.

And that did settle it.

She put the shelves back in her wardrobe, and restored them to their usual order. Then she called Ellen to her and gave her a little brooch. "You are a good girl, Ellen," she said, rather tremulously, "and I would like to make you a little present. And here's something for Sophia. Give it to her presently, with my kindest wishes. Not now — by and bye. And you needn't get any lunch for me to-day, I am going out for a walk."

Robert might be dull— naturally he was so, being a man; but Ellen was as sharp as a needle, and saw at once that something was, as she described it, "up". She smiled, and thanked her mistress, and went into respectful raptures over her brooch, but was all the while keenly observant of the wavering eyes and fluttering manner that had escaped the husband's notice. Immediately she understood that Mrs.

Brown was going to "do something", and went off to tell Sophia about it. And it was while the two servants were gossiping in the kitchen, enlarging upon the mysterious and delightful topic, that Lexie left her home— neither of them seeing her go.

She tied on her bonnet and a black lace scarf, took a chuddah shawl, her favorite wrap, on her arm (she had two white chuddahs, but had accidentally left one at the Red Bluff the night before), and a small bag in her hand; and, having placed her letter in Robert's dressing room where he would find it when he went to bed, quietly walked out of the house, without taking leave of anybody. The gardener was at work in the garden and thought she was going for a morning stroll. She stopped a moment to speak to him, and ask him for some roses; and he

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remembered afterwards that she carried the white shawl, because a rose fell from her hand, and its thorny stem caught in the soft fabric, and he was afraid to disentangle it lest he should soil the creamy stuff with his earthy fingers. But he did not see the bag, which she carried on her arm under the shawl.

Tucking the roses into the front of her dress, she walked to the station, five minutes' distant from the house; took the train to town as she had done the previous day; drove from Flinders-street to Spencer-street, and got her portmanteau from the cloak room; had it carried round the station to the Williamstown platform, and by the half-past 10 train went down to the ship—horribly frightened at finding herself really on the way, but feeling that the die was cast—that it was too late to turn back now.

The train stopped at the pier station and a man wheeled her luggage to the steamer in a handcart. She went on board to see it stowed in her cabin, and then re-descended the gangway and walked to the end of the pier, where she could have a little cry without anyone seeing her. It was a lovely summer morning, and the great pool, encircled with that soft fringe of city, was full of limpid color, blue and green both, and so still that the masts and hulls of the many craft cruising about and at anchor all around were reflected in wavering shadows on the shining surface. A ship was coming in, with all her sails set—four tiers of them—looking as beautiful as only such an object can look, when the sun shines on the white cloths and makes them gleam like satin. In all her trouble and preoccupation she could not help seeing how fair a scene it was, and feeling an additional pang in consequence.

She turned round and sat down on the end of the pier by the Customs stairway, and looked at the great vessel which was to carry her off, remembering with what passionate longing she had looked at one just like it, berthed in the same place, not a week ago. As she watched the special train came down, and the decks and gangways were soon alive with embarking passengers—wives with husbands taking care of them, sisters embracing each other, happy people who were not alone in the world as she was. Then the post office boat came round with its sacks of mails, and the bell rang. With one last effort she rose, drew her veil over her face, and mounted the fatal ladder.

A few hours later she was lying in her second class bunk, dreadfully sick and unspeakably solitary, a poor, ill furnished, unconsidered woman, of no consequence to anybody—wishing with all her heart that she was either dead, at the bottom of the sea, or back at The Nest with Robert.

## Chapter IV.

Now, when Robert arrived at his office that morning he found letters which relieved his mind of its late mercantile anxieties; and, having leisure for the consideration of his more personal affairs, he came to the conclusion, in the course of the day, that his quarrel with his wife had lasted long enough. They were acting like a couple of children in making such a fuss about such a trifle. Lexie, with all her cultivation and intelligence, was wonderfully young and schoolgirlish in many ways, and he was just as bad as she was. It was high time for them to begin to behave themselves like reasonable beings.

And if she would not make the first advance, he must.

So he got away from business a little earlier than usual, and he went to Swanston-street and bought the most beautiful bouquet that could be had for money. Armed with this peace offering, he set off to St. Kilda, and pleased himself as he went along by thinking of the coming reconciliation— of the talk he would have with Lexie before dinner— of the cosy meal, at which, freed from all restraint, he would tell her the news of the town— of the friendly evening afterwards, when they would walk about the garden arm in arm together. Not the ghost of a misgiving as to the issue of his magnanimous project for a moment crossed his mind. For he had never found Lexie impracticable when he had humbled himself sufficiently. It was on those occasions that she showed him (for a little while) that she had a heart like other women.

Entering the house with his latchkey, he looked around with a benignant and a complacent air. What a pretty little nest it was! How dainty, how tasteful, how orderly, how different from the houses of his friends, whose wives were only ordinary persons and not delicate and fastidious creatures like Lexie.

It is true that he often wished her more like Mrs. Ponsonby, who had roses on her drawingroom carpet and a hair-cloth suite in the diningroom; but, nevertheless, he was proud of her unlikeness to that excellent wife and mother— of the very qualities which unfitted her for the life he desired her to lead.

His eager face grew dull, and his sprightly step began to lag, as he went from room to room and failed to find her. He ventured to tap again and again at the door of her bedchamber, and at last to turn the handle and gently open it. Finally he went to the kitchen, and Ellen told him that Mrs. Brown had gone out.

This was not at all what he had expected, and he was sorry he had been in such a hurry to get home.

He put his bouquet in one of her artistic pots, had a bath and changed his clothes, and then sat down with a magazine to wait for her. Seven o'clock— dinner time— came, and she was still absent. The master of the house, who has been at his business all day, never likes to be kept waiting for his dinner; and as the minutes went by Robert began to fume, and to forget all about his intention to humble himself to his wife. He opened and shut his watch, he paced up and down the verandah and to and from the gate; he grew more and more angry, and further and further from the point of reconciliation to which he had been so near. At 20 minutes past 7 he shouted for Ellen. "Where is Mrs. Brown gone to?" he demanded peremptorily.

"I don't know, sir," said Ellen, who looked very alert and conscious. "She merely said she was going for a walk."

"When did she go?"

"Well, sir, it couldn't have been much after half-past 9."

"And she has not been home since?"

"No, sir."

"Does she often go away for all day like this?" "She has been away a good deal lately," said Ellen. "She often misses her lunch. Yesterday she wouldn't have any dinner. She wouldn't even let me lay the cloth."

"But yesterday I was out. That was quite another thing. She would not care to sit down by herself. She knew I should be at home as usual to-night. Have you no idea where she is gone?"

"None, sir, at all. She didn't tell me, nor Sophia either. But I think she mostly goes on to the beach. I notice the bottoms of her dresses full of sand when I brush them."

Ellen looked as if she would like to say more, but was afraid to venture. Robert glanced again at his watch and ordered dinner to be served.

He ate his solitary meal without enjoyment and with a gloomy face; and then, having given orders that



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something was to be kept hot for Mrs. Brown, took his pipe and coffee to the verandah and there stretched himself upon a long cane chair and resumed his watch. He felt quite sure that she was doing this to avoid and to annoy him, but did not doubt that he should see her return when the necessity for joining him at the table was past. When she came he was determined not to make it up with her as he had intended, but to give her "a piece of his mind" instead. There was reason in all things, and not to be in her place at dinner time was going a trifle too far. He would have to show her that he was master in his own house, and not to be disregarded as if he were a child.

However, when 9 o'clock came he began to feel very uneasy— to forget his personal wrongs in anxiety for her safety. Many a time he had begged and commanded her not to be out at night alone, and she was continually disobeying him (on principle, she said— because she had as much right to liberty of action as he had). He was always in fear of some accident befalling her on such occasions— that she should be molested by casual drunkards or villains, or lose her way in the dark. Visions of those possible disasters began to disturb him now, and he fetched his hat and went out to look for her. For an hour he hurried up and down the Esplanade and up and down the pier, peering into strangers'

faces; he investigated dark objects on the sands; he looked into shop windows; he went to the station and waited for two trains to come in. Then he persuaded himself that she must have returned in his absence, and went home again. As he entered his garden he saw a female form on the verandah, and his heart leaped for joy. He was in no mood for scolding her now; he would reproach her tenderly for making him so anxious, and then beg her to kiss him, and to let bygones be bygones, and not to be cold and cross any more.

"That you, Lexie?" he called, eagerly.

"No, sir," answered Ellen; and he saw Ellen's white cap in the dusk, and the shock quite staggered him.

"It's only me, sir. Here's something for you, sir."

He hurried into the gas lit hall and snatched from her hand a letter— the letter Lexie had written yesterday.

"I was turning down the bed in your dressingroom, sir," explained Ellen, in a hurried, excited voice, "and I took up your nightgown that was lying on the pillow, and the letter was wrapped up in it and it fell out.

O, sir, I hope there's nothing the matter! Mrs. Brown was very strange this morning. She was crying before she went out, and she said good-bye to Sophia and me. At least, she didn't exactly say good-bye, but she gave us both a present, and spoke as if she were going to do something. I didn't like to tell you before, but Sophia and me both thought the same— that she seemed like as if she was going away and not coming back any more."

Robert stared at the girl for some seconds as if in a trance, his ruddy face blanched to a sickly grey, and there was a look of dread and horror in his eyes. Then he turned into the drawingroom, shutting and locking the door behind him. And Ellen crept on tip toe to the kitchen, where Sophia was breathlessly awaiting her.

"I always knew how it would be," said she, oracularly. "They've done nothing but quarrel, quarrel, quarrel— they thought I didn't notice, but I've got eyes like other people— and something was bound to happen. You mark my words, Sophia— she's gone off with somebody else."

"No doubt," said Sophia. "I suspected it all along. Ladies don't go out alone, morning, noon and night, the moment their husbands' backs are turned, neglecting their meals and everything, without it's to meet somebody. Of course not."

This was their instant interpretation of the mystery. Needless to say, it was not Robert's. He knew Lexie better. She was not so partial to men as all that. But he was quite as wide of the mark in his conjectures. When he read her farewell letter, his strong frame trembling as with a sudden ague, his honest heart bursting with grief, one only explanation of her disappearance presented itself to his mind; and it took permanent root there— nothing occurring to displace it. "I have made up my mind to set you free. Our marriage has been a sad mistake, but I am going to do the only thing I can to rectify it. Think a little kindly of me when I am gone." Lexie, in her haste and agitation, had not weighed her words properly, and had had no thought of suggesting such a meaning as they seemed obviously to bear to her husband. How, he naturally asked himself, could a marriage be annulled (where the legal process of divorce was out of the question), except by death? How else could such a mistake— if it were a mistake— be rectified? It was to him as clear as day that in writing thus Lexie had contemplated putting an end to her life. He remembered how the doctors up-country had warned him that her mental state was inclined to be morbid, and that she needed cheerful surroundings to prevent the development of disease in that direction; and he thought of the miserable life they had had together of late— how, while he had had his resources and distractions in office and club, she had had unbroken silence and solitude in which to eat her heart and wear her nerves to

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pieces; and he cursed himself for a blind dolt and a heartless villain, believing himself to be wholly responsible for the catastrophe. He felt as if he had murdered her, and was almost inclined to go and cut his own throat in his remorse and grief.

Of course the house was searched, on the bare chance that some circumstance might be discovered tending to disprove this dreadful theory; but Lexie's anxiety not to be immediately followed had led her "to cover her tracks" so well as to baffle their investigations. The trunks in the box room were counted, and were all found to be in their place; her pretty bedroom was rummaged over, and apparently nothing was missing. Robert had no idea how many nightgowns and petticoats his wife was supposed to have; nor had the servants, who had only lived with her during the few weeks of her sojourn in Melbourne; and when they saw the layers of linen in the drawers, and the familiar dresses hanging on their pegs, and the last new bonnet lying on the wardrobe shelf, even Ellen and Sophia were convinced that their early judgment of the case had been a mistaken one, and that there was only one explanation possible. The sight of the brushes and bottles and scraps of jewellery scattered about the toilet table, of the dressing gown hung over a chair and the little slippers by the bedside, just as they had been used in the morning and ready for use at night: these, more than anything, quenched hope utterly. When they were pointed out to Robert he broke down altogether. The servants went away to cry in the kitchen; and old Stephen Brown, who had been sent for, hurried off to tell the police that his nephew's wife, who was rather weak in her mind (if Lexie had only heard that!), had, to the best of their belief, committed suicide, and to institute an immediate search for the body.

There was a sort of fatality about it. The search was made, and the white shawl was discovered lying on the sand near the Red Bluff. Sophia and Ellen both swore their most solemn oaths that it had belonged to their mistress, and the gardener also declared himself ready to pledge his soul that she had taken it with her when she left the house for the last time. He had seen it with his own eyes, and he should know it again anywhere. Was not that conclusive? None of them, not Robert himself, knew that Lexie had two white Rampore chuddahs— one of her own purchasing when she was a girl, and the other a wedding present. For days and weeks the distracted husband hunted round the bay, on land and on water, for the corpse of his drowned wife, offered rewards in all directions for its recovery— of course in vain. At last Uncle Stephen urged him to give it up, to put a black band on his hat, and submit like a man to the will of Providence. "The place swarms with sharks," said the old man. "You may depend they've got her, or she'd have been washed up before now."

That was how they settled it— that Lexie had found a grave in a shark's stomach. Not a doubt of her death, nor of the manner of it, remained in anybody's mind.

"If she'd been anywhere else, she'd have been found by this time," said Uncle Stephen, when a weak wild hope would dare to lift its voice. "If she was alive, somebody would know it, and then we should know, for the newspapers have been full of it for weeks, and everybody reads the newspapers.

Besides, she'd have come back herself, when she saw what trouble she'd made, if she'd been able to."

This statement of the case seemed quite unanswerable. And yet, as we know, it was altogether erroneous. Lexie was alive, and nobody did know it— nobody who was of any use in discovering her existence and whereabouts. The Melbourne cabman who had driven her and the empty portmanteau to St. Kilda had never known the name of his fare, nor the name of the house to which she directed him, nor had he given a thought to either; and the St. Kilda cabman who drove her and the full portmanteau to Spencer-street chanced to fall ill of a brain fever the day afterwards, and subsequently died unconscious. She was an utter stranger to the outfitter from whom she had bought her trunk, and also to the clerks at the shipping office, who supposed her to be Mrs. Smith. Young Joe Price, when he read of the affair in the newspapers, brushed himself up and went to call on Robert, to tell him of her visit to the ship at Sandridge Pier; but his history of that little incident did not seem to throw any light upon the case. Owing to the short time she had lived in Melbourne, and to her social exclusiveness, her face was little known in public; and neither on her way to Williamstown nor on board the steamer had she met anybody who was acquainted with it. And when she arrived in England, although constantly on the lookout for letters (knowing that her husband was familiar with her London haunts, and supposing he would certainly guess that she had returned to them), always expecting to be followed or sent for, she never thought of looking at a colonial paper. In Australia she had ignored the local literature when delivered at her own doors and scattered about her own tables; in London she did not even remember that it existed.

And the only thing Robert ought to have done he did not do, and that was to take action as administrator of her

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little estate. Had he looked into her money affairs he would have discovered something that he would have been very glad to know, and that would have set him looking for her in other places than where the surf flung the sea's rubbish on the shore. But he knew what were the difficulties and delays incident to taking over property left as Lexie was supposed to have left hers; and her possessions were too little, and his own by comparison too large, to make the matter of any consequence to him. He did not care to think of it. "I will wait for a year or two, at least, before I do anything," he said to his uncle, when the old man, who had a frugal mind, showed a natural anxiety on the subject. "The money is quite safe. I could not get it, if I tried. And I'm sure I don't want it."

## Chapter V.

And so Robert Brown believed himself, and was believed by others, to be a widower— which was a result of her machinations that Lexie certainly had never bargained for; and a very disconsolate widower he was. Even her obdurate heart would have melted at the spectacle of his grief. In spite of their quarrels— in spite of his conviction, which equalled hers, that they were not suited to each other — he had always admired and been proud of her; and, mixed with his man's love of domestic domination, he had the true man's tenderness for the thing that he protected, and that seemed to depend upon his strength and benevolence. Then, when people are dead their faults are forgotten, while their virtues are remembered and made the most of. He thought and spoke of Lexie now as if there never had been such a woman in the world before. Her personal distinction and refinement, her intellectual superiority, her fine taste, her artistic culture— these topics became quite wearisome to Aunt Stephen and Mrs. Ponsonby, who were conscious of appearing but ordinary creatures by comparison; and not a word did they hear of her selfishness, her waywardness, her ingratitude, her general unwifeliness, though as to these shortcomings it is not to be supposed that they had not opinions of their own. Had she been the best of wives, and had she really died and been buried in the orthodox way, he could not have mourned for her in a more exemplary manner.

By and bye, however, he began to adapt himself to circumstances, as was to be expected. He could not bear, he said, the loneliness of his house, haunted as it was by the ghost of its departed mistress. Every time that he went into it its pretty things reminded him of her in a thousand ways. When he sat down to his solitary dinner the thought of the graceful figure, in its picturesque aesthetic garments, that used to face him at the opposite end of the table, robbed him of his appetite; and when he went to bed he was so surrounded by associations of her former presence that he could not sleep.

Ellen got married, and Sophia would not stay with the new housemaid; servants came and went, and robbed him and bothered him, and the beautiful order of the establishment became a thing of the past.

So he determined to cease from single-handed housekeeping and to return to bachelor life and lodgings; and he carried out his intention in an active spirit that testified to a reviving interest in himself and in things in general.

The St. Kilda property was his own, and he would not sell it; nor would he part with Lexie's curtains and carpets and Morris chintzed chairs and sofas, which she had made him buy in London and on which she had set such store; so, having packed her wardrobe and special treasures in boxes, and stuffed his newly acquired rooms with all the pictures and bric-à-brac that they would hold, he advertised The Nest to be let furnished, and looked out for suitable tenants who should have no boys in family. The most suitable of all possible tenants turned up in the person of a well to do widow who had not even one small child— a Mrs. Penrose, well known in Melbourne society. She called one morning at the office, and asked to see him, and for permission to see the house; and he made an appointment to meet her at The Nest on the afternoon of the same day. Escorting her out into the street again, he found a neat pony phaeton standing by the pavement, and in it a handsome young lady, holding the reins.

"My daughter, Mr. Brown," said Mrs. Penrose graciously; and the girl bowed to him with a charming smile.

She had fair skin and golden hair and a rather full and remarkably "fine" figure— well set off by a smart tailor made gown, fitting like a glove, and her face was animated and her whole air expressive of style and fashion. She was as unlike Lexie as one young woman could be unlike another, but Robert admired her excessively. I think I have already mentioned that he, too, was a very personable fellow.

There was a great deal of him, and bigness in his sex is always the chief element of beauty, and he had a pleasant open countenance, fresh and ruddy and handsomely bearded, and an assured manner, as of a man accustomed to success and a good place generally. So Miss Penrose approved of him almost as much as he did of her.

They met at The Nest in the afternoon. Robert went down early, with a bag of cakes in his pocket, and instructed the caretaker in charge of the house to light a fire in the drawingroom, and to bring tea there when the ladies arrived. This was an attention he had not previously shown to any potential tenant. He made a careful inspection of the rooms, putting little things in order with his own hands; and, being in Lexie's bedroom, surveyed

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himself at full length in her cheval glass, and hoped rather anxiously that he was not going to grow stout. Did he think of Lexie then, standing amongst all the sweetest and saddest memories of their intimate life together? I am very much afraid he didn't. She had been some months away from him now, and he was a man like other men, and not like the transcendental heroes of romance, who, of course, care only for one woman and remain faithful to her for ever, alive or dead.

Miss Penrose appeared with her mother at four o'clock, looking more handsome than before in another and richer dress, and he certainly gave her his entire attention after that, though he did not forget the outward observance due from him to the elder lady. The fire was bright, the tea was good, his guests were charmed with everything— not least with him. Between themselves they thought the colors of the Liberty stuffs rather dingy, and the patterns of the Morris chintzes (ye gods!) old fashioned; but they did not breathe a word of this to Robert, and it was the only fault they had to find.

The widow was a woman of business, and before discussing terms made a thorough examination of the entire premises, missing no hole or corner anywhere. In this proceeding she associated herself with the old caretaker, and the young people, restrained by a proper modesty from sharing in her investigations, remained in the drawingroom and entertained each other. Miss Penrose sauntered round the pretty apartment, and praised everything in it indiscriminately.

"What a lovely picture!" she exclaimed, stopping in front of a painting that represented a reach of the Thames, and that hung over the piano.

"Well now, Miss Penrose," replied Robert, authoritatively, "I am sorry to contradict you, but that really is not a good picture. It's about the only poor one that I have in my whole collection. I flatter myself that I am a pretty good judge, and I shouldn't like anyone to run away with the idea that I don't know good work from bad because I tolerate a thing like that."

"I did not say it was good work," rejoined Miss Penrose, coloring slightly. "It was the subject I admired."

"Of course, of course. It was for the sake of that it was hung up here. It always was an eyesore to me, but my poor wife liked it because it was a landscape she knew— she was English, you know, and had a passion for everything English— and she wouldn't give it up. She bought it herself before we were married, and she didn't know much about pictures, though she was so clever in everything else. Of course you see what meretricious work it is" (he pointed out several technical defects), "and if you like I will have it taken down and put away and hang a good one in its place."

"O no, no!" said the young lady earnestly, making a protesting gesture with her white hand. "If poor Mrs. Brown liked to have it there, there it shall stay. Ah!" she added softly, after a sympathetic pause, "what a terrible trial that must have been! I can't tell you how my heart bled for you when I heard of it, though I did not know you. I could not get it out of my head."

"You are awfully good," said Robert gratefully. "Yes, it was a dreadful thing. Never to have found her, you know— and such a death! We feel sure she must have gone out of her mind suddenly. She was so delicately organised, so peculiarly sensitive— not like ordinary people; and I am afraid I left her too much alone."

"Oh, I am sure you can have nothing to reproach yourself with," Miss Penrose quite fiercely affirmed.

"One has only to look round at the home you provided for her"— suiting the action to the word— "to see how you considered her every wish and want."

This was very soothing to Robert's feelings, and inclined him still more to his companion. "I suppose you never happened to see my poor wife?" he murmured, as they came back to the fireside.

"Never," she answered in the same low tone. "Never that I know of. I should like— but no, I won't ask — it would be too painful— never mind!"

But already Robert was rummaging in an inner pocket for the little leather case that he now always carried there. Drawing it forth, he opened it and handed it to Miss Penrose, who took it with silent reverence and gazed at it as if she could never leave off gazing. There was Lexie, slim and fragile, with her starry eyes and her pale, pathetic face— robed in her favorite chiton, with gold fillets in her hair; a beautiful London photograph, and an excellent likeness in the opinion of those who knew the original. "The very living image of her, poor girl," said Robert, taking out his handkerchief and blowing his nose elaborately.

"What a sweet, sweet face!" whispered Miss Penrose. "What lovely eyes! Oh, I cannot have seen her; if I had I should never have forgotten her." After a long pause she added, necessarily, "And what a charming fancy dress!"

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What was the character?"

"It is not a fancy dress," said Robert, a little hurt by the mistake. "It is Greek. She used to wear it of an evening quite commonly; and it suited her too, though any other woman would have looked ridiculous in it. She was so— so different from ordinary people."

Miss Penrose shut up the case at last and gave it back to him. "Thank you so much for letting me see it," she said, earnestly. "I shall never forget that face." (Nevertheless, when she met the original, not so very long afterwards, no resemblance to the photograph was suggested to her mind.) Then Robert pocketed his treasure, and they sat by the fire and talked of Lexie as if they had known each other for years.

By—and—bye Mrs. Penrose returned in a hurry lest she and her daughter should be home late for dinner.

She had satisfied herself that house and grounds were in perfect repair, and was ready to come to terms forthwith; and, as Robert was very easy to deal with (not as a rule, but in this particular instance), a bargain was soon concluded.

"And when we are settled," said the widow, giving him her hand at the gate, "I hope you will sometimes drop in and see us, Mr. Brown— as a friend, you know, not as a landlord." She was very gracious and confiding, considering she had never spoken to him until to-day; but then everybody knew Brown, Brown and Ponsonby— there was no sounder business house in Melbourne. And everybody knew, also, that eligible young men were not so plentiful as charming girls, and, when found, were to be made much of.

Of course he braced himself to bear the painfulness of the sight of Lexie's home in the occupation of strangers; and went to call on Mrs. and Miss Penrose when they were settled. Of course he went again and again— oftener and oftener— until scarcely a day passed that he did not present himself.

And of course he fell in love with the charming young lady of the golden hair and the magnificent figure, who made so much more of him than Lexie had ever done— and, not knowing of any just cause or impediment to prevent him, proposed to her. What else was to be expected?

## Chapter VI.

Meanwhile Lexie was in London, wondering why her husband had abandoned her in this heartless manner. She never could have believed that she was so worthless in his eyes that he did not even care to inquire after her health and welfare. She had never anticipated that he would be so relentlessly unforgiving.

The intelligent reader will hardly need be told that neither London nor Emily had fulfilled her expectations. She could not enjoy intellectual satisfactions when her mind was always racked with anxiety and suspense on account of the postman; and the charms of independence were not what they once had been. As for Emily— her friend had altogether disappointed her. Emily had welcomed her on her arrival as warmly as she could have desired, and had applauded the womanly spirit and courage that had prompted her to separate herself from a tyrant and a brute; but in a week or two it became to Lexie sadly evident that her beloved one had changed. In fact they were not on speaking terms after the first month. Perhaps it was not altogether Emily's fault. I don't think it was. I am afraid our dear Lexie was so inconsistent as to give herself a few little airs with her old friend, on the score of being a married woman; and this was naturally very aggravating to Miss Price, who was not only a spinster getting on in years, but prided herself above all things— and certainly not without some justification— on the advantageousness of her condition. However that may be, Lexie was quite as unhappy in England as she had been in Australia, and quite as lonely— indeed, rather more so.

One day— it was in May, more than a year after her return— she left her lodgings to spend an hour or two at the Royal Academy. Alone she went up the wide, soft-carpeted stairs, a slender little figure in a close-clinging gown and a queer felt bonnet, and speedily lost herself in the fast filling rooms. As had become her custom, she paid rather less attention to the pictures, artist as she called herself, than to the strange faces around her— especially the faces with red beards to them; and several people, noticing the seeking look in her eyes, assumed that she was hunting for a lover who had failed to keep his appointment. She did not expect to see anyone she cared to see— she looked about her from mere force of habit; and so she was intensely surprised when presently she encountered the sunbrowned visage of young Joe Price, which she had last seen on the pier at Sandridge. Her surprise, however, was nothing to his. He positively jumped when he recognised her. His jaw dropped, his eyes stared, he seemed struck dumb with astonishment. As soon as he could articulate, he exclaimed with profound solemnity, "Good Lord!"

"Well," said Lexie, laughing, "that's a nice way to greet an old friend! What's the matter with me?" She looked up and down her clothes.

"Why, Lexie," he cried, still in great excitement, "why, I thought you were dead."

"Dead!" retorted she. "No, indeed; I'm no more dead than you are. What could have put such an idea into your head?"

"But where have you been, then?" he persisted eagerly.

"In this world, where I have always been. In London, if you wish to know the exact locality."

"Ever since you left St. Kilda last year?"

"Ever since." The color came into her face. "Didn't Emily condescend to speak of my return? I went to her the first thing."

"I have been at sea nearly all the time, and I haven't seen Emily, and she never writes to her own relations. Look here, Lexie, did you come away straight when you left St. Kilda?" "Quite straight, Joe"— speaking rather tremulously. "There was a mail steamer starting, and— and I was home sick, and I thought a change would do me good."

"And didn't you write to tell your husband?"

She lifted her little head and stiffened herself. "You ask too many questions," she said, trying to be cold and haughty, though the beating of her heart was sinking her whole frame. "Suppose you tell me something about yourself now. When did you arrive from Australia?"

"Look here, Lexie"— he laid a huge paw on her slender arm and dragged her to a seat, unconscious of the liberty he was taking with her, which she was too perturbed to resent— "does he know where you are? Tell me now, without any nonsense."

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"Of course, he does," she replied with bitterness. "He knows perfectly well there is no other place I would think of going to, of my own free will."

"You have had no communication with him all this time?"

"Joe Price," she burst out, "you are an impertinent boy. What business have you to meddle with my private affairs?"

"And you didn't try to make him think you were dead?"

She rose majestically, but dropped back on her seat, trembling.

"What do you mean?" she demanded, suddenly frightened by his manner.

"I mean," said Joe solemnly and deliberately, "that Mr. Brown believed you left him to go and kill yourself, and he believes you dead at this moment— that is, if you haven't told him to the contrary."

"Nonsense!" she ejaculated; but she was as white as a sheet. "How could he be so— so idiotic?"

"Well, anybody would have done the same in his place. You left him a letter telling him you were going to put an end to yourself—— "

"I'm sure I did nothing of the sort. I told him I was going away and bade him good-bye."

"You said you were going to set him free, and that there was only one way of doing it. No more there is. Only death sets married people free, unless— unless things happen that didn't happen in your case.

And there was no sign of your having taken anything with you—— "

"That was because I did not want them to follow me at once— that was nothing. He might have made inquiries. He might have written to Emily. People are easily found now—a-days when people want to find them."

"Well, he tried hard enough to find you. Only of course he looked for your dead body and not your live one. They found your shawl out on the beach, and the gardener said you had it on your arm when you went away. That and your letter, and nothing being taken out of the house, and nobody turning up to give any information about you, seemed to settle the thing beyond a doubt. The police and the newspapers and everybody put you down as dead— drowned in the bay and your body washed away or eaten up by sharks. I never had a doubt about it till this afternoon, and when I caught sight of you I couldn't believe my senses. I never had such a start in all my life. You might have knocked me down with a crowbar." Lexie was very much agitated by these unexpected disclosures. "How came you to know so much?"

she asked him, in a feeble voice, seeing what she had done and trying not to believe it. "You are not inventing, are you, Joe?"

"Inventing? Good heavens, no! I was there all through it, and the whole place was ringing with it.

Newspapers full of it. Besides, I went to your house and saw Mr. Brown; terribly cut up he was, poor fellow. How on earth you managed not to hear of it is what puzzles me. You haven't been in a nunnery for 12 months, have you?"

"I have not seen any papers; no one told me," she said faintly. "I'm sure Emily didn't know. And I never thought of such a thing. Was — was my husband in a great way, Joe?"

"He was in a devil of a way I can tell you— pretty near distracted. He just lived on the sea, hunting the shore all round to find you— that is, to find your body. I tell you what it is, Lexie, you played him a confounded shabby trick, even if you didn't mean it to turn out so bad as it has done, and I couldn't have believed it of you."

She did not fire up at this plain speaking, though it was merely a boy who had taken upon himself to reprove her; she was too much overwhelmed by the contemplation of what she had done. Indeed, she was on the verge of hysterics. "Take me out," she whispered hurriedly, her face working and her limbs trembling. "I feel ill." It was evident that she did.

He jumped up and gave her his arm, and she walked so uncertainly and looked so faint that the crowd made way for her. Out in the air she felt better, and by the time she reached her lodgings had collected her faculties and was ready for any heroism.

Joe had an engagement to dine with his mother that night and to take her to his Devonshire home next morning; so he could not stay by Lexie to help her as he would have liked. But before he left he gave her a glass of wine and some excellent advice. "You telegraph to Mr. Brown at once," said he, "and he'll come and fetch you. Or else go home by the very next mail. By the way, there's one leaving the day after to-morrow."

"I'll take it," said Lexie, rising to the occasion. "I got ready in two days before, and I can do it again. Poor Robert, I owe it to him, after making him suffer so! But I never dreamt that he would think that."



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"Be sure you don't forget to telegraph," Joe specially insisted, over and over again. At the gate he turned back to still further [insist on?] the necessity for this important duty being immediately discharged. "If you give me the [message?], I'll do it for you now, Lexie. You oughtn't to lose an hour in letting him know."

She thanked him and told him she would see to it herself, and he went away. And when he was gone, and she had calculated her resources, she found that she really could not afford the cost of an Australian telegram. She had barely enough money for the expenses of her journey. Moreover, she did not like the idea of employing the wire for a first communication with her husband after so long a silence. She could not frame a message in a few words that would convey what she wanted to say, and she felt that the dramatic effect of her return and reconciliation with him would be spoiled if she sent one. So she decided not to send one, and, of course, she did not write, since a letter could not reach him sooner than she would.

Two days later she was on board ship again, a first class passenger this time and answering to her proper name— feeling herself already restored to her place in the world and prepared to appreciate its advantages. She was full of good resolutions. No more would she give way to her personal feeling.

Robert's feelings should be of paramount consideration. Poor Robert! The picture of his distress and despair when he thought she was dead— of his many days' search round the Bay for her drowned body – touched her heart, which was not, after all, a stony one. By her want of thought he had been made to suffer far beyond his deserts, and it was her bounden duty to atone for her mistake.

Henceforth she would patiently bear with his man's perversities, with his neglect, his dullness, his domineering temper; and she would do her best to accommodate herself to the uncongenial surroundings of her Australian home. In short there was no sacrifice that she was not ready to make to prove herself the superior woman she had always believed herself to be.

In this exemplary frame of mind she neared the end of a pleasant voyage. At Adelaide she was tempted to send her husband a telegram to announce her approach, for she thought it would be nice to see his tall form on the Williamstown pier, and to have somebody to take care of her and her luggage once more. But she resisted the temptation, for she said to herself that, under the peculiar circumstances, it was her part to go to him and not to summon him to her. She had to make amends for treating him badly, and she determined to do it thoroughly.

The day was well advanced before the ship came in sight of her anchorage. The lights of Williamstown were already shining through the early winter dusk as the huge vessel drew up to the pier, where the usual crowd awaited her; and it was dark night before the gangways were out and a train ready to take the passengers to town. Lexie hurried away like a smuggler trying to evade the Customs, only that she went quite empty handed, leaving everything until she and Robert should return together in the morning. At Spencer-street she sprang with a light step to the platform, pushed her way hastily through the crowded wicket and out into the street, hailed the nearest cab, and was soon running up and down the stairs of the other station, hurrying to catch her St. Kilda train, just as if she had been doing a day's shopping and made herself late for dinner. How familiar it all seemed! Her flight and the interregnum were like a dream when one awaketh. She could not believe that it was a year and a half since she had gone into town last.

But when she reached St. Kilda she began to feel terribly nervous. For the first time she wondered whether Robert was alive and well— whether he was here or miles away in the bush— whether she was going to realise her anticipations or be disappointed after all? The crisis seemed rather overwhelming now that she was so near to it. She wished she had sent the telegram. Refusing all offers of cabs, and pulling her veil down lest she should be recognised returning to her home in this unattended and ignominious manner, she walked out of the station into the quiet, lamplit streets. Her knees trembled under her, her heart thumped in her breast, and the speeches she had prepared for the occasion went wholly out of her head. She felt sure now that all the "effect" was going to be spoiled — that she should disgrace herself by falling headlong into Robert's arms and then into a fit of hysterics.

However, she did nothing of this kind. The first sight of The Nest, which should have been the signal for giving way altogether, brought her spirit back to her. Instead of looking dark and sad, as it behoved a house to look whose mistress was mourned as dead, all its windows were ablaze as if for some high festivity. The ruddy glow streamed out upon the rose-wreathed verandah, and the glistening laurels, and the velvet lawn, and it made the little place look a perfect picture of comfort and brightness to the spectator in the street; but I cannot describe how its gala aspect offended Lexie. What! Had Robert so completely forgotten her already (as if she had left him only the day before yesterday) that he could entertain company and enjoy himself? This, she told herself, was the

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last thing she had expected—that she should find her home given up to a dinner party on the very night of her return.

She felt it to be a tragic accident, a bitter blow— little dreaming what much worse shocks were about to befall her.

For some minutes she hesitated at the gate, not liking to risk an encounter with strangers before she could have a word with Robert, and feeling keenly what an undignified figure she would cut in any eyes but his, coming in alone out of the dark night from nobody knew where. But it was too late to return to the ship, and she could not go to an hotel, destitute as she was, without so much as a nightgown to sleep in. The "effect" was indeed spoiled with a vengeance, but there was nothing for it but to go on and make the best of it. She opened and shut the gate softly, and stole as noiselessly as she could over the gravel path to the front door, hoping that Ellen would answer her knock and help her to escape to her own room unnoticed. Her own room! Little she guessed how far it was from being her own room now.

She knocked, and after some delay a servant came to the door— a smart young woman with pink ribbons in her cap. It was not Ellen, but a stranger.

"Is Mr. Brown at home?" inquired Lexie. Her consciousness of the disadvantages of her position at this moment stung her to pride and anger, and she spoke with great peremptoriness.

"Yes, but you can't see him now," replied the maid, in much the same tone. "We've a dinner party, and he's engaged." And she made a movement to shut the door.

"But I must see him now," cried Lexie, taking a step forward. "Be good enough to show me into a room.

I will send him a message." She could not bring herself to tell this impudent girl that she was the mistress of the house and not to be parleyed with in this manner, but she burned to do it. She could hear on her right hand the cheery rumble of men's voices in the dining room, and on her left the lighter tones of women in the drawing room. And here was she standing on the door mat outside, denied admittance as if she were a beggar. It was intolerable.

The girl gave way before her, though with an ill grace. "O very well," she muttered, with a toss of her head. "If you must, I suppose you must. Come in here"— showing her into a little breakfast room at the back, her favorite morning sitting room in the old days— "and tell me your message. I'll give it to Mr. Brown when he leaves the table."

Lexie took out her pocket book and wrote on a blank leaf in pencil, "I have come back and I want to see you. L." This she folded into a tight note and desired the servant to give it to her master immediately.

For several minutes she walked up and down, trembling with wrath— trying in vain to compose herself to meet her husband. The purpose of her home coming was quite put in the shade by the circumstances attending it, which were so utterly unlike what she had anticipated. Gazing round the familiar room, lighted by one small jet of gas, she saw fresh evidences of the fact that her memory had not been respected as it ought to have been. Her beautiful high-art curtains had been replaced by lace ones, of which Robert knew she had an abhorrence; and hideous velvet draperies, bordered with lustra-painted swans and water lilies, fell from the mantel-shelf to the floor, hiding the pure simplicity of the tiled hearth and the sweetest pair of brass dogs that ever were seen. It did not strike her that these changes, and especially the lustra painting, could only mean one thing— that another woman had control of the establishment; they only added to the sense of neglect and injury that was burning through and through her. How dared they make her house common and vulgar? How dared they meddle with her things? She was almost as angry with Robert now as she had been 18 months ago, and was as far as possible from feeling ready to fall into his arms when at last she heard the diningroom door open and his voice and step in the hall.

"Hey? What?" he exclaimed carelessly, between two hearty laughs at some joke a guest was making.

She heard the pert maidservant explaining that "a woman wanted to see him," and, holding her breath and straining her ears to listen, heard the faint rustle of her note in his fingers.

"Anything the matter?" a strange voice then inquired in a gruff undertone. There seemed no answer to this question, but the men did not laugh and talk so loudly, and in a few minutes they all streamed into the drawingroom. There was a brief silence in the hall, during which Lexie put back her veil. Then the door of the breakfast room opened and Robert came in.

## Chapter VII.

Alas! a dreadful thing had happened. Not only had Robert proposed to Miss Penrose— he had married her! married her months ago, in the innocence of his heart and in the full blaze of publicity, with all due legal and ecclesiastical sanctions. He had taken her to New Zealand for her wedding trip, and brought her back to settle at The Nest, of which he had resumed possession. Mrs. Penrose, after proudly assisting at several dinner parties to celebrate their return, and having now disposed of all her daughters, had betaken herself to England on a visit to elder children from whom she had long been separated; and Mr. and the new Mrs. Robert Brown were enjoying a life of tranquil domesticity— or had been, poor things, up to this moment.

Little did Lexie imagine such a tragic consequence of her foolish escapade. The possibility of it, which should have been obvious to anybody, had never entered her head. And yet in the first moments of her interview with her husband, and almost before a word had been uttered in explanation, the truth flashed upon her— not gradually, but all at once; and immediately she understood the situation so clearly that she felt as if she must have foreseen it all along. His appearance when he came in, literally staggering, and staring wildly at her, warned her at once of complications. A sense of shock subdued her irritation, and at the same time braced her nerves; she was conscious of confronting an emergency that demanded heroism. Also, the sight of his shattered self—command roused her to coolness and courage – roused that subtle vanity to which we give so many grand names; impelling her to distinguish herself should she be given the opportunity. Though she saw that his surprise was not the kind of surprise she had expected, it was still clear to her delicate feminine apprehension that his dismay did not mean disappointment. It did not repulse her. And a sudden admiration for his stalwart beauty and a great pity for him, to whom she had been so hard, rushed over her. She was ready, now, not to fall into his arms, but to take him into hers and comfort him.

"Robert," she murmured, in the tenderest tone he had ever heard her use, hovering towards him, with her hands outstretched. "Oh, what is the matter, dear? Are you not glad to see me back?"

Simultaneously there was a rustle of silk and a series of neat taps on the other side of the door, and another voice called to him.

"Robert— Robert darling!"

"Go away," he shouted savagely. "Don't come here. I am busy."

The silk rustled stealthily about the door for a few seconds and then trailed away; and he turned to Lexie again, staggering towards her as if he were intoxicated, and fell heavily upon her neck, dropping his head on her shoulder. In this position he began to sob under his breath— deep sobs, such as only grown men utter— while she put out her arms to support him with all her strength.

"O Lexie," he whispered in a passion of reproach that shook her heart, "you don't know what you have done."

"Yes," she replied steadily, "I think I know."

She piloted him to a chair, into which he sank, slipping his arms to her waist and his head to her bosom; and she stood over him, smoothing his hair with her little white hand, and felt herself to be, not only the greatest martyr, but the greatest heroine that the world had ever seen. All her life she had longed to do some great and striking thing, to make some tremendous and glorious sacrifice; and here was a chance which, if taken, would lift her to heights of moral grandeur calculated to put Joan of Arc herself into the shade. She seized the sublime opportunity there and then, and her pride in herself was so supporting that she felt able, not only to bear her own share of the calamity that had so unexpectedly befallen her, but to bear Robert's share also. She knew that he had married again— put another woman in her place, which she had only left so recently— and already she had forgiven him. (Whether she would have forgiven him if he had answered that summons from the hall in another tone of voice I don't know:

I am inclined to think she wouldn't.) In a steady, brave voice, she told him where she had been, what she had done, how she had generally sinned against him; and confessed that these dreadful consequences were only what she richly deserved.

"Of course you found another to love— it was only natural— when I had left you so sad and lonely— when I had never given you any comfort," said she, in her new born passion of magnanimity. "And if you love her better

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than ever you loved me, how can I blame you, dear? I am sure she deserves it more than I do."

"I don't," protested Robert, still with his head on her breast, and a stray tear oozing from his closed eyes.

"If you do, and I am sure you must, it is only right. And I want you to be happy, my poor boy. I have done nothing but make you unhappy, but I haven't come back to do still worse. No, I shall help you, Robert, and not be a hindrance and a danger to you. I will go away again, and change my name, and hide myself, so that no one shall know that I am alive. If I could be so lost when I did not try to lose myself——"

"O no, no," broke in Robert, clinging closer to her waist. "You mustn't go away again. You are my lawful wife, Lexie, and it wasn't my fault— everybody knows that. We must manage it somehow. But oh, poor Mabel! What will she do? What an awful thing it will be for her!" And he lifted himself up and looked at Lexie with miserable eyes full of grief and pity, an appeal to her heroism that she was in no mood to resist.

"Now look here," she said with great solemnity, "Mabel— is that her name?— is never to know a word about it. She married you in good faith, and she is not to be thrown upon the world as if she were a bad woman. It is my fault, all my fault, that she fell into such a mistake; I must take care that she does not suffer for it. The punishment is justly for me, not for her. I have forfeited my right to be your wife, dear Robert— when I had my privileges I did not value them; now Mabel must be your wife, and you must let me go away, and forget that I ever came back from the grave, imagine that my bones are still at the bottom of the Bay," catching her breath with a little hysterical laugh and sob.

"No, no," protested Robert again, drawing her back to him. He felt that he had never known till now how immensely superior she was— how "different from other people"— and he had never loved her so much. In the old days she had not been "nice" to him, as she was now, and he had not been allowed to lay his head on her breast and to hold her with his arms round her waist like this. And— and he had been married to Mabel Penrose long enough to find out her little faults and to grow tired of her affectionate exactions. She was suspicious in her devotion, consumed with curiosity about his out door life and private affairs, allowing him no liberty; and his sweet Lexie, with all her faults, had never oppressed or interfered with him. He had got her back, and he wanted to keep her. "No, don't go— don't go," he pleaded, with the unreasoning persistence of a child; and Lexie, letting him cling to her, and even holding him close with her soft outspread palms, felt in her heart, and in despite of heroic resolutions, that it would be very hard to go.

Even at this moment, however, the necessity for her immediate departure, for a time, at any rate, was forced upon them both. They heard the sound of carriage wheels on the gravel, and the rustle of silk outside the door. Again came the neat volley of little taps on the panel— louder this time than before; and the voice of Mabel, with a sharp edge to it, called him peremptorily. "Robert— Robert, what are you doing? Don't you know it is 10 o'clock, and Mrs. Morgan is going."

Robert had sprung to his feet like a surprised conspirator. Truth compels me to state that he looked terribly frightened. Then he seemed to remember that the door was locked, and calmed himself. "Ask Mrs. Morgan to wait two minutes," he replied loudly. "I will be with you directly." Then he took hurried counsel with Lexie as to what was best to be done. It ended in his softly opening the French window of the breakfast room, and leading her by way of a back gate into the street.

Hatless, in his evening dress, he walked with her till he found a cab, into which he put her tenderly— feeling himself the most unmitigated brute, poor fellow, though indeed he was doing his best for her.

"To think of your being turned out into the street at night like this!" he murmured, in a broken, indignant voice. "And after your voyage too! Lexie, think better of it— let me take you to Uncle Stephen's, won't you?"

"No, no," she replied, still strung up to her high purpose. "They would only abuse me, and I shall be all right. Don't let anyone get a suspicion that I am alive. She is not to be punished for my fault."

"I am ready to take what comes, for my part," said he.

"But you are bound to consider her. The mischief is done, Robert, and it can't be undone. It is my fault, and I must take the penalty. It is only what I deserve."

"My darling, you never meant to do it. And I ought to have made more sure. I might have waited——"

But she would not let him blame himself. She protested that he had done quite right to fill her place— that she had forced him into it. And then she reminded him of Mrs. Morgan, and he drew his head out of the cab.

"Go to that corner," he said to the driver, pointing in the direction of his house, "and wait there with this lady till I come back. I may be half an hour," he added, to Lexie, "but you may depend on my being as quick as I can."

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And I will bring you some things, love, and take you to the hotel, and see you made as comfortable as possible."

"O Robert, hadn't you better let me go alone?" she whispered anxiously. "Won't she be angry if you come out again?"

"What do I care?" he returned, in a rough voice that warmed her heart. "It's not likely that I am going to let you muddle for yourself. Wait for me here—I will be as quick as possible. Lean back, and try and rest in the meantime. And don't fret when you are alone. We are in an awful mess, no doubt, but we must talk it over presently and see if we can't find some way out of it."

"There is only one way out of it," said Lexie, solemnly.

"We will see," he repeated. And then he hurried away.

Robert was a long time—considerably over an hour—before he came back, running, with a Gladstone bag in his hand. "The Esplanade Hotel," he shouted breathlessly to the cabman, who had been having his own thoughts as to the relations between the lady and gentleman; and then he jumped in by Lexie's side, flinging the bag upon the opposite seat, and put his arms around her.

"My darling, I have kept you waiting so long. But I could not help it. Those confounded people—I could have wrung their necks. And I had such difficulty in getting anything for you—I'm afraid you'll be very short, but to-morrow you shall have all you want, if you can manage for to-night. Are you very tired, love? Are you cold? What an idiot I was not to bring a fur rug for you. Lean against me, let me keep you warm."

It was very sweet to Lexie to be cared for like this, after her experience of Emily's callous and selfish indifference to her wants and welfare, and her lonely travels and struggles. Theoretically she believed that women could take better care of themselves than any man could take of them, but practically she owned the natural (or shall we say the acquired?) dependence of her sex upon the strong arm and the strong will. She leaned against him, when he asked her, with a womanly abandonment of herself to his protection that went straight to his heart. O dear, dear! If only she had been like this in the old days!

In a few minutes the cab drew up on the Esplanade, and, jumping down, he lifted her out of it and led her into the lighted vestibule of the hotel. He ordered a bedroom and sittingroom, supper and a good fire, champagne and tea—all he could think of to refresh and cheer her; and he stayed with her, coaxing her to eat and drink and talking of their mutual trouble and embarrassment, till past 1 o'clock in the morning. What the people of the hotel thought of it (like the cabman, they knew him, but did not know her) the sagacious reader will readily divine; but, of course, it was none of their business.

"The more I think of it the more I see that there is nothing for it but for me to efface myself," said Lexie, when she was warmed and fed and exhilarated afresh by half a tumbler of champagne. "I need not be entirely buried from you, Robert; indeed, I could not bear to be where I could not know that you were alive and well and things going on all right; but I am sure I could keep the secret from other people. And that must be done. You see what would result from the truth being discovered now? That poor woman, who has no father, no brother—her whole life would be blighted and ruined if she found that her marriage had been illegal. Robert, you shall not do it—for my sake you shall not do it. It is by my fault that she married you, and if—if I could turn her out now, and go coolly back myself, I should feel eternally disgraced. The whole world would cry shame on me."

This, she felt, was not to be borne—especially when she could compel the homage of the world by a sublime self-sacrifice (which, if not known in her life time, would perhaps shed immortal glory on her after death). She presented her point of view so effectively, impressed him so strongly with the uncommonness of her mind and understanding, that he submitted to let the matter remain undecided for a little while. Certainly it would be very terrible to have to confess to Mabel—to have to turn that poor woman upon the world, a ruined outcast, whom he had sworn to keep and cherish and who relied on him to do it.

"But, oh Lexie," he said, for the 20th time, "you must not go quite away again! Anything but that! I could not bear it. If you did, I should leave Mabel and everything to go after you and find you."

"I will not," replied Lexie solemnly, her bosom glowing and her eyes sparkling. "I must, of course, give up thinking of myself as your wife—and you must give up thinking of it, too, Robert—but I will not abandon you. No, I will be like your sister—I will help you all I can. I will go away, but not far away, not where you cannot find me when you want me; and when you are in trouble you must come to me, Robert—and when I can do anything for you you must let me know."

The pathos of this imaginary arrangement overcame her as she described it, and she wept a little.

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Robert kissed away her tears. "My noble girl," he murmured fondly. And she felt that she was indeed noble— if she had never been so before.

One o'clock struck, and they told each other it was time to part. Again Robert made his protest against her plan— said he must have her back in her own place, to which she had every legal and natural right, at whatever cost; and again she resisted and overcame him. "Well, we won't decide off hand.

We must talk of it again to-morrow," he said, sighing heavily. And he took her into his arms for the last time. "Good night— if it must be. O my Lexie, how can I go away and leave you— now that I have got you back?"

"You must," she replied. But she put her arms round his neck and raised her face to his. Never, when they had been free to embrace as much as they liked, had they particularly cared to do it; but now that they were separated— was it because they were separated?— they held each other long and close, and kissed as if they could not leave off. Such is the perversity of women— and men.

When he was gone, and she was alone in her strange bedroom, her fortitude deserted her, and she cried bitterly over her woes. She was tired; she was nervous; she felt unspeakably desolate; she began to doubt her strength to bear what lay before her. And the thought of that little warm Nest, to which she had flown back with so much hope and confidence, and of that usurping cuckoo whose hateful presence profaned it (thus she regarded her rival in the silence of her own thoughts), was almost unendurable. More and more she felt that she was the most hardly used woman— specially singled out by fate for misfortune— that ever was born into this unhappy world. She grew wildly restless with thinking of her wrongs— thinking how Robert had left her to go back to that creature who had not a shadow of right to him— until the room seemed too small to hold her bursting heart.

Sleep and rest were out of the question, though she was worn out with excitement and fatigue.

Towards morning she opened the window and looked down upon the quiet bay— the scene she knew so well, yet which now seemed so new and strange— and that soothed her a little, though it rather enhanced the sentimental misery that consumed her. The moonlight flooded the placid surface of the sea, across which she had passed a few hours ago, little thinking how the day was going to end; and the familiar constellations that denoted the ports of Williamstown and Sandridge reminded her of the ship which had brought her so far, to meet such a cruel disappointment. There it was, amongst those clustering lights— she felt for it as for a humble but faithful friend to whose merits she had not done justice— and last night at this time she lay cradled in her little bunk within it, as happy as a child, dreaming of the home she was hastening to, that was to cast her out. She gazed, and wept, and gazed again, until she found her teeth chattering in the cold air. Then at last she turned into the room and dejectedly went to bed.

## Chapter VIII.

Meanwhile Robert went home to experience the first results of her scheme for settling the difficulties she had occasioned. It was nearer 2 than 1 o'clock when he let himself into his house with his latch key, and he found Mabel sitting up for him. She came into the hall to meet him, looking very handsome in her trailing pale-blue gown, with her golden hair flowing over her shoulders; and as he elaborately wiped his shoes, that were perfectly clean, upon the doormat and tried to think of an excuse for his proceedings in case he should be called upon to account for them, she flung herself upon his shoulder impulsively. "O, Robert, I ne—ever thought you would tre—eat me like this!" she wailed with a burst of tears.

He stiffened himself and his face grew set. He did not offer to kiss away her tears, nor to respond to an embrace which, under the circumstances, certainly deserved acknowledgment. He merely growled forth the familiar marital inquiry, "What's the matter now?"

"Whatever you did out of doors, and men will be men, I know," sobbed poor Mabel, "I didn't think you would bring a— a— an abandoned woman into the house, under the same roof with your wife——— "

"She is no more an abandoned woman than you are," he replied angrily. "She is a lady, who— who— whom I won't allow to be insulted by such suggestions."

"Lady," said Mabel sarcastically— her whimpering voice was now hard like his, and she had a flush on her fair cheek— "ladies don't come alone to pay calls on gentlemen late at night— don't push their way into decent houses by main force——— "

"Who says she did that?"

"Alice says so. Alice, very properly, tried to shut the door in her face— and she pushed Alice backwards and forced her way in, as if the house belonged to her. Of course, she knew you would back her up, whatever she did."

"I certainly should," said Robert quietly. "And you'll oblige me by giving Alice a month's wages and sending her off about her business. If that's the way she behaves to— to my friends when they come to see me she's not fit for her place, and I won't have her here. No, not another day. Mind that."

Then Mabel flew out at him— as what wife would not? "I will not send Alice away. That girl only did her duty— she tried to protect her mistress from outrage and insult— and if she goes out of the house for that I will go out of it, too. Your friends indeed! Friends— I like that? Oh! I know the kind of friend she is. Coming here to find you, with a thick veil over her face— defying me and everybody, shaming me before Mrs. Morgan and all those people, who kept looking at each other, bursting with curiosity. Oh! I saw them, though I had to pretend I didn't. And then you go and shut yourself up with her in a back room, locking the door without a thought for your guests, or me, or the credit of the house. And then you steal away with her through the window and a back yard gate, showing you are ashamed to have her here, to have anyone see her. And then, Robert, you may swear to the contrary till you are black in the face, but I know you went back to her as soon as the people were gone, and that you have been with her ever since. And you imagine you can impose on me with that nonsense about friends and ladies! Do you think I am a baby born yesterday? Do you think I am a perfect fool?"

"I think you are an insufferable woman," said Robert. And with that he walked into the breakfast room, where he had had his interview with Lexie (it offered the nearest shelter from the storm), and shutting the door behind him, locked it.

Mabel could not continue her tirade without risk of drawing the attention of the servants to it, and she went away to her bedroom. Robert sat down in the dark, and laid his head on his arms and tried to think, but found himself utterly bewildered by the complication of difficulties and responsibilities that hemmed him round. What should he do? He did not know which way to turn. It seemed more clear than ever that Lexie's plan was a miserable mischievous device for making bad worse in every kind of way, and yet there were reasons which seemed to make the disclosure of the truth— for a time, at any rate — impossible. A circumstance, known to him, but unknown to her, was the only valid excuse for the proceeding which seemed to her to have so much to recommend it; and the importance of this circumstance grew upon him now that he had a moment to think things over. Surely an innocent and well-meaning man was never in such a fix before, he thought, as he wrestled ineffectually with the tough facts of the case. "What shall I do?" he cried dumbly from the depths of his perplexity

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and despair. "What shall I do?"

What he did was to drop asleep, with his head on the table. Nature refused to be bothered after 3 o'clock in the morning. His thoughts grew vague and slipped away from him; dreams came in their stead; he began to breathe heavily; then he began to snore. Between 3 and 4 there came a tap at the door, and a tearful voice called to him—"Robert! Robert, darling!" It seemed to him that he and Lexie were locked up together, continuing their conversation as if it had never been interrupted, and he muttered to the disturber of their peace—imagining that he was shouting at the top of his voice—"go away. Don't come here. I'm busy." But as the knocking continued he awoke slowly to the fact that the room was dark, that Lexie was not there, and that Mabel was standing outside in the hall, wanting to make peace with him after their quarrel. He rose heavily, groped his way to the door, and unlocked it.

There she was in her blue dressing gown, her pretty hair tumbled and tangled and the bloom washed out of her cheeks, red-eyed and red-nosed—a picture of woe. His man's heart smote him as he looked at her.

"My dear, why are you not in bed?" he said kindly. "Why don't you take more care of yourself?"

"O, Robert, how can I rest when you are cross with me? I came to ask you to forgive me for making you angry——"

She fell again upon his shoulder, and this time he did not repulse her. He put his arm round her waist and laid his hand on her head.

"Poor little woman!" he murmured, pressing her to him for a moment. "I wish I could help making you unhappy—I wish to God I could! There, don't cry—don't upset yourself. You know how bad it is for you. Go back to bed, and try to sleep, and don't get up to breakfast."

"Aren't you coming, Robert?"

He hesitated and looked at his watch. "Well, it seems hardly worth while for me. I wanted to get up early, and it's past 4 o'clock now. I'll put out the gas and lie on the sofa for an hour, and then I'll have a bath and change my things. But you go—go at once now, or you'll be ill. And be sure you don't get up till lunch time."

So Mabel went to bed, quite unshaken in her belief as to what her husband's friend was. She had an easy going tolerance for men "who would be men" (though of course an unmitigated horror and hatred of the women who were associated with those virile characters); and she thought Robert was sorry for the insult that had been put upon her, and would take care that it was not repeated. "I don't suppose it was his fault," she said to herself as she got into bed, yawning. "He couldn't help it if that creature insisted on forcing herself in, and I suppose he was obliged to take her away and pacify her." She forgot how Robert had spoken of the creature, and how the devoted Alice had been treated, and went to sleep with an easy mind.

Robert did not sleep again. He returned to the breakfast room and threw himself upon the sofa, where he lay and thought of Lexie until he grew afraid of his servants finding him; then he took off his shoes and stole to his dressing room. At half-past 5 he had a bath and changed his clothes, and went out to walk down to the beach to have a look at the Esplanade Hotel, which stood silent, with its blinds down, scarcely awake yet, in the morning twilight. He wandered to the end of the pier, and sat down where he could keep one eye on the window he imagined to be his wife's and another on the sea, which was very beautiful at this hour, clearing and gleaming in the sunrise, with shining sails and little clouds of grey smoke growing and fading on the horizon. Then he shivered with cold and want of sleep, and for half an hour walked briskly up and down to rouse and warm himself. At half-past 7 he returned to The Nest, and encountered Alice as he entered the hall. He did not then and there call that young woman to account for her impertinence to Lexie, as he was tempted to do, but he spoke to her in freezing accents.

"Alice, take in your mistress's breakfast when she wakes; she is not going to get up this morning.

Listen at her door, and don't knock till you hear her moving. The party last night tired her, and I wish her to rest."

"Very well, sir," replied the girl demurely, with a sidelong look at him that made him redden in spite of himself.

"And tell the cook she needn't get anything for me. I have an early engagement. I can't wait for breakfast. I shall breakfast in town."

"Very well, sir."

And then, after walking about the house for a little with an elaborate air of leisure, but not going near Mabel's



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room, lest she should be awake and call him, he went out suddenly when no one was looking, and returned at a brisk pace to the esplanade.

Ascending to Lexie's sitting room, he found a servant lighting the fire, and the table was not yet laid.

The lady was not up, he was told. Her bedroom was only next door, and the natural thing would have been for him to go in and see if she were awake and ask her how she felt; but in the present horrible state of affairs he felt that he must deny himself this privilege. He ordered tea and hot water to be taken to her, and then occupied himself with the *ménu* of the breakfast, standing on the rug with his back to the fire, until she made her appearance.

When she came in, looking delicate but refreshed, and prettier, Robert thought, than she had ever been, she too was evidently conscious of the embarrassments of their false position. He took a quick step to meet her, and, no servant being present at the moment, drew her into his arms and kissed her. She made a slight effort to free herself, and, blushing deeply, suggested that they ought not to kiss each other any more.

"O my dear," he said in a weary tone— he had lost his night's rest and was naturally dispirited— "don't let us be greater hypocrites than we can help." Then he added, with rather a bitter laugh, "even brothers and sisters may kiss each other, you know. And you said you were going to be my sister."

"I'm afraid it was rather a farce my saying that."

"I'm afraid it was indeed, Lexie. What's in a name? You can call me your father if you like, but that won't make me feel paternal. There's only one relationship for us, my dear— that or none."

"It will have to be none, then. I must go away and lose myself again."

"No, you mustn't. We have trouble enough and to spare as it is. It won't improve things to add another to them— heavier than all the rest of them put together."

"Would it be so very heavy, Robert?"

"Speaking for myself," he returned promptly, "it would just kill me – strong as I am." "My darling," she murmured, leaning towards him. And she kissed him voluntarily, without seeking to excuse herself. The waiter coming in with the hot dishes nearly caught her at it.

"Now sit down and eat a good breakfast," said Robert. He spoke cheerily, and gently forced her into a chair. "I am going to breakfast with you. I've a fancy for a cup of tea of your pouring out. Do you remember that I don't take sugar?"

"Of course I remember."

"And I remember that you like sweetbread, you see. Will you have some? or fish first?"

"Sweetbread, please. Only a tiny bit. I'm not hungry."

"But you must eat— we must both eat, to fortify ourselves. I shall give you a little fish, and the sweetbread after. Yes, you must eat both— to please me. Doesn't it seem," he added, when they were left alone, "like our honeymoon over again?"

"Oh," she cried piteously. "How can you joke about it?"

"Well, it isn't a joking matter, I'll allow. But we must keep our hearts up, Lexie; if we don't we shall never pull through. However, it's no use crying over spilt milk. How's the fish? Let me give you some butter.

We must take things as they come, one at a time; and the first thing we must do is to see about your luggage. Shall we go down to the ship together as soon as we have done breakfast?"

"Do you think it would be safe?" she asked anxiously, thinking how lovely such an excursion would be.

"I'm ready to risk it if you are. If anybody finds us out, why, we can't help it. What will be will be." In his heart he felt he should be thankful for such an accident, so long as he was not responsible for it and for the dire consequences that would ensue.

"We must not be found out," said she, earnestly.

"And you must not go by yourself, without a man to help you. And there's only me."

"I have done without a man to help me for a long time."

"Well, you won't do it now. I can take care of you, at any rate, if I can't do any more. Put a thick veil on, and it will be all right."

So she put a thick veil on, and they set off together. They did not take the train to town, because Robert knew it would be full of business men who knew him, but engaged a hansom at the station and had themselves driven to Spencer-street. They were bumped over that abominable road that we all know so well, and were smothered in

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dust, but that they did not mind. They held each other's hands, and were— comparatively speaking— happy. At Spencer-street they had to wait some time for their train, and they paced up and down the quiet Williamstown platform and talked to each other— not perfunctorily as they used to talk when they were declared husband and wife— but without reserve, and with a tender and implicit confidence that was quite enchanting to them both. At the ship and at the Custom House Robert managed her business with that ease and promptness which she had to acknowledge was more usual with men than women; and she stood by him looking on and having none of the trouble, delighting in the sensation of being taken care of. The few of her late associates whom she saw did not seem to recognise her in her gossamer mask— at any rate, they did not accost her; and, altogether, she enjoyed herself. She did not know it, but such was the fact. "Now I am afraid I must go to the office," said Robert reluctantly, when the luggage had been made over to the carriers to be taken to the Esplanade Hotel (where he decided that she should stay for the present, until they could think of a better arrangement). "Can you manage to find your way back alone, Lexie? I'll come to you again this afternoon, my darling, and bring you some money, and see how you are getting on. But they'll be wondering where I am, and perhaps sending to look for me, if I don't turn up."

"Oh yes, dear; go, go," she replied earnestly. She was not affronted by being asked whether she could take care of herself, nor by the offer of his money, which was a most significant sign of the change that had been wrought in her. "I shall be all right. I have something to do in town."

"Take care of yourself, anyhow," he said anxiously. "And don't get tired." He called a cab and put her into it, and, diving into his pockets, drew out a handful of gold and silver, which he poured into her lap.

"Take it— take it," he urged almost angrily, as she made a little gesture of reluctance. "Don't be petty— you should be above that" (an argument which was wonderfully effective). "Where do you want to go?"

"To Gaunt's," she said, slipping the money into her pocket.

"What do you want to go to Gaunt's for?"

"Never mind. I'll tell you this afternoon."

"To Gaunt's," he called to the cabman. "And wait for this lady, and take her where—ever she wants to go. Mind, Lexie, you are not to walk."

"All right, dear. I won't if you don't wish it," she responded with meek obedience; and then she was driven off, and Robert went to his office— wondering how many hundred years had passed since he left it yesterday.

Lexie's errand to Gaunt's was to buy a pair of smoked glasses— those large grey spectacles with wire sides to them that are so useful to weak eyes in summer and so hideous at all times; and these, when she had selected and paid for them, she put on under her veil. It was not summer now, and her eyes were not weak (though she told the shopmen they were), and, moreover, they were too pretty to hide— those starry eyes that were her special beauty. She bought the glasses for a disguise, rightly judging that her best friends would not know her when she had so disfigured herself. Was she not a heroine? Joan of Arc was indeed nothing to her, for Joan must have known that she was fine to look at as she sat on her war horse at the head of her troops, and that every man of them admired her.

Leaving Gaunt's, she had herself driven to Buckley and Nunn's. There she bought some widow's caps, a widow's bonnet, with crape streaming behind it almost to the ground, a widow's mantle, also covered with crape, together with lawn weepers, black gloves, all the trappings of deepest woe. She ordered a crape covered dress, which had to be made, and went into a little cupboard to have herself measured, and made an appointment to be fitted next day. It is needless for me to say that, with her principles, she would never have worn weeds for a husband actually defunct— no, not for her (now)

beloved Robert himself. An enlightened woman, as she was, knew better than to insult reason and good taste by such outward show and sham, to pander to hypocritical convention and an absurd fashion that branded her sex as still, for the most part, the undeveloped and childish creatures that men believed them. But she intended to wear weeds now because they would, she imagined, effectually cloak her identity, and enable her with safety to remain in her husband's neighbourhood. They would be a convenience and a protection. At any rate, while she wore them (with a crape veil over her face as well as hanging down her back) no one would have the indelicacy to ask questions about her private life. And if no one asked questions she would be relieved from the necessity of telling stories.

And that was a great point. For she had the utmost horror of a lie. Thus she prepared herself for years of

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martyrdom and self effacement, little thinking in what a few days her grand schemes would be blown into the [?].

## Chapter IX.

Robert, who came to the Esplanade Hotel twice a day at the least, did not think much of the widow's dress. The notion seemed a little trivial to his masculine mind, and to savor of unnecessary hypocrisy; though (being one of the Philistine majority, only slightly modified by the influence of his cultured wife)

the wearing of weeds under the legitimate circumstances was a custom that he approved of as he approved of other established customs. But he would not hurt his little Lexie's feelings by expressing his dissatisfaction. He betrayed it clearly to her quick apprehension, and she was only flattered by it.

She did not suppose he would like a thing that so significantly suggested his loss of her.

"But I really am a widow, Robert," she said, when she wore her crape dress for the first time and saw the unspoken antipathy in his eyes.

"You are nothing of the sort," he answered with gruff impatience.

"Yes, darling," pensively shaking her head, "I am. I have lost you even more entirely, more utterly, than if you were in your grave."

"Nonsense," he retorted. "Should I be sitting here with you if you had?"

From the moment when she discovered that her husband had married again she had a burning desire to behold the woman of his choice. This desire grew in feverish intensity from day to day; until at last she felt that she must gratify it at all costs. As she could never see the mistress of The Nest passing in or out of the house, or walking in the garden, she determined to find a pretext for calling upon her, trusting to her widow's dress and veil to baffle the penetration of the sharp-eyed parlor maid.

She said nothing to Robert of this intention. Robert did not like talking about Mabel. He grew very red and gloomy if she was only distantly alluded to; and Lexie had a dim feeling that he would regard the projected interview as a great indelicacy. He might even forbid it, or make it a reason for divulging the secret which, it was evident, oppressed him heavily. She therefore resolved to do it first and tell him afterwards.

It was extremely difficult to find an excuse for presenting herself at The Nest. But she was a woman of resource, as the reader knows, and she did find one after a little trouble. She boldly turned into the garden one fine afternoon—it was not much more than a week after her first, or rather her last, visit—and marched up to the front door, carrying a neat parcel, like a roll of music, in her hand.

"Is Mrs. Brown at home?" she inquired of Alice, who came to the door, and stared at her with great intentness.

"What name if you please?" demanded Alice. She held a little brass tray; and on it Lexie laid a card on which she had written "Mrs. Smith".

"If you'll walk in I'll see whether she can see you," said the maid, still trying to make out the face of the visitor through the crape mask and spectacles, for Lexie had thought it wise to guard herself with both for this encounter. "I'm not sure, for this is not her day, and she's lying down."

"Tell her I won't detain her a minute," said Lexie, making a great effort to speak low and softly. And she was shown into the drawing room.

Her own drawing room, the little room upon which she had expended such taste and pains! She looked round her with a swelling heart, at first almost overcome with the pathos of the dear associations, and then sharply resentful of the changes that the new mistress had made—the general and hideous subversion of her own perfect arrangements which she saw on every side. Lace curtains were here too, ruining the effect of the soft toned woollen stuffs that overlapped them; and the beautiful Morris chintzes were gone altogether, chairs and sofas being now upholstered in gorgeous tapestry with crimson velvet borderings—exactly like all the chairs and sofas in the windows of all the furniture shops. There was a disgusting little gipsy table with gaudy needlework of natural flowers wreathed around it, and things tied up with ribbon bows, and painted plaques that made her ill to look at them.

Every bit of furniture was in the wrong place, and the subtle harmony that used to be—the delicate blending of beauty and comfort that was like music to cultivated senses—had turned to discord that set one's teeth on edge. No doubt it suited Mabel, to whom the Queen was probably the highest authority on matters of taste; but how Robert could bear to see his house so hopelessly vulgarised passed Lexie's comprehension.

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It troubled and irritated her for the time that she was kept waiting alone, with nothing to do but to look about her. But when the lady of the house appeared she thought no more about it. Mabel came in, walking languidly, dressed in a loose tea gown of satin and lace; and at sight of her Lexie received a shock that almost deprived her of her self-command. The woman was very handsome, undeniably— even now, under the least favorable conditions, and in the style that Lexie, as an artistic person, slight and dark herself, most admired and envied. A large and copious figure, that would be classic and grand in its normal state, a complexion like milk and blush roses, and yellow hair with a tinge of Titian red in it— these were beauties that she knew the value of as well as anybody. It will be readily imagined what a bitter blow it was to find them in her rival's possession. But this was not the worst.

She instantly comprehended— what Robert, strange to say, had not given her an idea of— that Mabel was about to become a mother. This discovery ought to have filled her woman's heart with compassion considering all the circumstances of the case, but it did not. It filled it with grief indeed, but also with a wild rage that almost choked her. All that she had gone through— all her previous wrongs and sorrows put together— were nothing to this. She was speechless with consternation and fury.

Mabel's voice, speaking easily and politely, broke the rather long silence in which they gazed at each other. "You wished to see me, I think?" And, as her visitor did not answer, she added, in the same pleasant interrogative tone, "I don't think I have the pleasure of knowing you, Mrs. Smith."

Lexie felt the necessity for making an effort to control herself, and did it wonderfully. But she was far from acting her part as she had meant to do. Unrolling her parcel with trembling hands, she opened out a long strip of embroidery, a beautiful piece of Kensington needlework that she had intended to mount on a screen to stand behind her husband's chair, to protect him from a draught that he used to complain of. As she displayed this treasure, and despite of the tumult of passion that surged within her, she thought of the pearls and the swine, and grudged the waste she was about to risk. "I want to raise a little money for— for a charitable purpose," she said, and she was enraged to find her voice shaking like her hands, "and I took the liberty of calling on you to see if you would buy this."

Mabel glanced at the outspread panel. "It is very pretty," she said dubiously. "But I don't think I am in want of anything of that sort just now. What is the price of it?"

"Ten pounds," replied Lexie promptly. She had intended to ask five, which was its fair value, but suddenly made up her mind that it was too precious to be thrown away on a person who could not appreciate it.

"Oh! that is a great deal. I could not afford to buy anything so expensive. I'm afraid you won't get so much as that for it," said Mabel. She spoke kindly, partly out of deference to the widow's weeds, and partly in consideration of the stranger's evident nervousness, which she attributed to her being unused to this sort of business.

The kind tone, the easy manner, added fuel to the flame of Lexie's wrath and anguish. She felt that she could not contain herself much longer, and was now more eager to get out of the house than she had been to get into it. She ought to have shown some anxiety to negotiate, some real desire to assist that charitable object of which she had spoken; but she did not think of her part now. She hastily bundled up her wares and turned towards the door. "Never mind, it doesn't matter," she said. "I shall dispose of it somewhere else I have no doubt. I— won't detain you." "If you would like to leave it till to-morrow, so that my husband can see it, he is rather fond of things of that kind——— "

"O no, no!" cried Lexie, to whom this was a most horrible idea, that she should seem to want to make money out of Robert. "It is of no consequence, it doesn't matter in the least. Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon. I'm sorry I cannot help you," returned Mabel; and she rang the bell for Alice, who opened the front door for the departing visitor. As the black figure hurried down the garden to the gate, mistress and maid, who had been on confidential terms of late, looked after it with eager curiosity.

"That's a very strange person," the former remarked. "I wonder what she came for? Not for what she pretended, I'm sure. I wonder if she is quite right? Have you ever seen her before, Alice?"

"Well 'm, I won't be positive," said Alice. "But I'm as certain as that I'm standing here that it's the woman who came the other night, when we had our dinner party."

"What? Nonsense!"

"She wasn't in widow's black then; she had a greeny-blue woollen dress and a long cloak. But I believe she's

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put on that crape just so as we mayn't know her again. I thought I knew the voice as soon as she spoke, but I couldn't remember where I'd heard it before. And then, after I'd shown her in, I was puzzling over her wearing those goggles under that crape veil. Thinks I to myself, 'She can't possibly see properly with her eyes covered up like that— she must have some reason for not wanting to show her face.' And then I remembered that that woman the other night had a thick veil on — double gossamer it was— she didn't even lift it up to write the note she sent in to master; and, thinking of her voice again, I made sure it was the same person. She's just the height and size, and she walks the same. It's her, I'll take my oath."

"Wretch!" ejaculated Mabel, with all the ferocity of the outraged wife; her fair face flushed, her hands clenched, her languid form alert and active. "How dare she set her foot in this house again! Oh, I knew there was some mystery about it, by the manner of her. I saw at once she was an impostor. It's the same woman, you may depend on it. Oh, if only I could get hold of her— if only I knew where to find her ——— "

"As to that," said Alice mildly, "I know where to find her if she is the same person."

"Where?"

"At the Esplanade Hotel."

"How do you know she is there?"

The girl cast down her eyes and affected to hesitate. "Well 'm, I don't like to say it, but that's where master goes every day. I've seen him. And I know they've a widow lady there. I've seen her too— in the distance."

"O, indeed!" ?panted Mabel, with concentrated fierceness. "Then, if my husband won't protect me, I must take steps to protect myself. Get me out my cashmere dress, Alice, and my sealskin——— "

"Oh, m'm, don't you go and worry yourself now," pleaded Alice. "You know you're not fit for it. I daresay she's not the same person at all, and most likely master only goes to the hotel to play billiards.

You must look on the bright side. It will make you ill if you fret." "Oh, don't talk nonsense. You can't deceive me. You know how it is as well as I do. Go and get out my things and then call a cab for me."

"Oh, m'm, you'd better not— you know you're not fit for it."

"Hold your tongue and do as I tell you." Like Lexie, poor Mabel had a deal of human nature in her, and it was not to be denied.

The object of her pursuing vengeance had reached home, replaced her widow's bonnet with the widow's cap, and was pacing up and down her sitting room in imaginary security (without her glasses on), fuming and quivering with angry excitement, when, to her amazement, the door opened, and her rival and enemy appeared. Without any previous announcement the servant said, "A lady to see you, ma'am," and ushered her in. Almost before the door was closed behind her, and before Lexie could collect her wits to speak, Mabel burst forth with her denunciations.

"You— you shameless creature!" she cried, literally glaring at the slight and elegant woman to whom, had she been cooler, she must have seen that the epithet was quite inappropriate, "for the second time you have forced your way into my house in pursuit of my husband; but I have come to tell you that if you do such a thing again it will be the worse for you. I— I will have the police informed of it. How dare you — a person of your character— pollute the home of a respectable married woman? It is bad enough to have one's husband persecuted out of doors— men will be men, and this is the sort of thing they must expect if they are so foolish; but let me tell you that Mr. Brown is the very last man to allow his wife to be insulted with impunity. You dress yourself up and think I don't know who you are; but I am not quite a baby to be so easily imposed upon, and my servant recognised you in spite of your disguise."

Now Lexie was a woman first and a heroine afterwards, and at hearing this language addressed to her she threw her heroism to the winds at once. "And do you know who I am?" she asked with quiet menace, white to the lips with passion, and her slender figure drawn to its full height.

"I know you are an abandoned creature, and a disgrace to your sex —— "

"I beg your pardon. I am Mr. Brown's lawful wife. Alexandra Hay was my maiden name— you may have heard it perhaps. I went home for a trip rather more than a year and a half ago, and by some unfortunate mistake he thought I was dead. You may have heard of that too. But I was not dead, and I returned last week. And you are quite right in saying that Mr. Brown is the last man to allow his wife to be insulted with impunity. It was his earnest desire that I should declare myself at once and take my proper place, and I have only delayed to do so, greatly against his wish and judgment, out of consideration for you."

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"You brazen huzzy, how dare you----- "

But here poor Mabel's voice broke, she gasped and choked and clutched her throat. In an instant she saw the resemblance to the photograph, and knew that Lexie spoke the truth. "O my God!" she wailed, with a faint shriek that died away in a quivering gurgle; and her eyes grew dim and her head swam round. Lexie, with a cry of remorse, sprang towards her, but was too late to break her fall. She fell on the floor in a heap, and there lay like a stone, without breath or consciousness.

## Chapter X.

Almost at the same moment Robert, who had been home to The Nest, and, on inquiring of Alice where her mistress was, had learned that she had gone to the Esplanade Hotel, was bounding up the stairs to Lexie's room, fully prepared for a catastrophe. Flinging open the door, he saw his two wives together — one of them prostrate on the floor, and the other kneeling beside her and supporting her head— and he knew in a moment what had happened.

Lexie looked up as he entered, with a terror stricken face. Tears were streaming from her eyes. "O Robert," she cried wildly, "I have killed her! I have killed her!"

He dropped on his knees beside the unconscious Mabel, and began hastily to untie her bonnet and loosen her clothes. "Did you tell her?" he asked in a low tone.

"Yes. I did not mean to— but she called me names— she said such dreadful things to me that I could not help it— I didn't stop to think. Oh, look at her! She's dead!"

"No, she isn't. She has fainted, that's all. Ring the bell— no, go yourself and get some brandy. Be as quick as you can. Give me that pillow first."

They laid the heavy head, unbonneted now, upon a sofa cushion, and Lexie flew down stairs for brandy. In a few minutes she returned with it, and then got water and sponge and eau de cologne from her bedroom, and she and Robert bent all their energies to the task of restoring life to the inanimate form. Lexie was sobbing bitterly over her handiwork; in the reaction she felt that all her future happiness depended on Mabel's recovery.

"I ought to have gone away at once," she said, again and again. "I ought not to have come near her— or near either of you. I had done mischief enough— without this."

"It had to come," said Robert. "I have been expecting it every day. I am only sorry we did not do it in the beginning, Lexie. Then we might have broken it to her gently."

"O yes! I was not gentle— I was a perfect fiend. I forgot how dreadful it would be for her— I forgot the state she was in. I feel like a murderess, Robert, and if she dies I shall be one. But I hope— O I hope she will get over it. She looks so strong— as if she could bear a good deal. And I will atone to her for it. As soon as ever she comes round I will tell her that I shall go away again and not disturb her — that nobody but ourselves shall know that she is not your wife."

"No," said Robert gravely— almost sternly. "We'll have no more of that. Now that the truth is out we must stand by it."

"But it would kill her, Robert! And then how could we ever be happy together again?"

"I don't fancy it will make much difference now. Look, she is opening her eyes. My poor girl," he murmured, in a tone that pierced Lexie's heart, bending his tall head low, "do you feel better? Do you know me, Mab?"

She gazed at him in a dim, half-conscious way, then smiled a faint recognition, then looked at Lexie, and immediately began again to choke and cry— straightway falling back into the faint or fit from which she had begun to emerge. In a minute she was "gone off" as completely as before.

"Ring the bell," cried Robert sharply. Lexie flew to obey him, and to the servant who answered the summons he gave orders that a doctor was to be fetched immediately. "And I think," he added, when the door closed again, "you had better see about having a bed got ready for her, Lexie. I don't believe we shall be able to move her home."

"Put her into mine," said Lexie. "It is the nearest, and the room is large and airy, with a fireplace. I will tell them to light a fire now."

She ran off to speak to the chambermaid, whom she found in a group of listening men and women on a landing close by; and, returning quickly, she again knelt down to chafe Mabel's hands, and to sponge her face, and to wipe the brandy and water that she could not swallow from the corners of her mouth.

Lexie had left off crying and was feeling quite stony with despair at what she had done, which momentarily became more dreadful to contemplate; but she had her wits about her, and was passionately determined that nothing should be wanting to give Mabel her utmost chance— that she would devote herself to that unfortunate victim, and nurse her night and day, if they would let her. It was the only poor scrap of comfort that she had left.



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The doctor came before the patient had rallied from her second swoon, and looked very grave over the case. "She has had some sudden shock," he said at once. "What was it?"

"It was this," said Robert promptly. "My wife— my first wife, whose disappearance you will remember hearing about— is not dead, as we all supposed; and last week she returned, not knowing that I had married again. Like a noble woman, she wanted, Enoch Arden fashion, not to disturb this poor girl, but — well, somehow the discovery was made just now— I can't enter into particulars, and this is the result. It will go hard with her, I'm afraid, won't it?"

The doctor was silent in utter amazement. Lexie stood, with her hands over her face, and imagining the look of stern reproach that she supposed he cast upon her. It was balm to her stricken heart to hear Robert call her a noble woman, for she had been fearing the most dreadful things during the last half hour; but nevertheless she was feeling the shame of what she had done, of the mistakes and miseries she had caused, so keenly that she tingled from head to foot.

"Well," said the doctor at last, "it's as pretty a mess, take it altogether, as ever I came across in my life.

Hold her up a little, Mr. Brown— there, that will do. And did— did Mrs. Brown marry again also?"

"O no, no! She put on a widow's dress, thinking it would be a disguise and prevent this poor girl from recognising her. But there's no more need for it now. Go and take it off, Lexie."

Lexie rushed to her room, where the chambermaid was putting fresh linen on the bed, and tore off her cap and her crape gown without any regard for that wondering young person's presence, a dim sensation of triumph making itself felt through all her shame and trouble; and she threw on the "greeny-blue woollen dress" that Alice had taken note of, feeling herself Robert's wife again before the world, whatever happened. It did not take her five minutes to effect the transformation, but when she returned to the sitting room it seemed full of the women of the house, and Mabel, nearly undressed, and moaning heavily, was being lifted from the floor by the arms of the two men.

"Is the bed ready, Lexie?" called Robert anxiously.

"Yes," she replied, hurrying forward. "O Robert, how is she now? Is she very ill?"

"I think, my dear lady, it will be better for you to keep a little out of the way for the present," said the doctor, backing her off with an outstretched hand. "If Mrs.— if our patient sees you near her, we may have all our labor over again."

Lexie, thus repulsed, and flushing to the roots of her hair, stood still, feeling very badly. A glance at the faces turned to stare at her showed her that the secret was to all intents and purposes public property. Robert had determined that there should be no more concealments, and had taken advantage of her absence to make a brief and general explanation, rightly concluding that it would save trouble in the long run to set the news afloat at once. The dreadful apprehension that "all the world would cry shame on her" overwhelmed her for the moment. But, in spite of his pressing solicitude for the greater sufferer, he did not forget to note and understand her misery, and to protect and encourage her as far as he was able.

"Don't go away, dear— we shall want you; there will be plenty for you to do," he said, as he passed her with his burden. The kind tones, heard by all, gave her a little heart again, and his words took her thoughts from herself to the consideration of Mabel's danger. For the first time she guessed what was going to happen before that poor woman could be moved from the house again.

They all passed into the next room, leaving the one lonely little figure to sit by the fireside and wait. She laid her arms on her knees and her face on her arms, and wondered how she could ever bear to live after what she had done. She heard people moving about, opening and shutting doors and calling to one another. A woman talking in the passage said, loud enough for her to hear, "It's a pity she took so long 'bout 'coming 'back." Another woman said, a little later, "Perhaps it'll be the best thing for her if she does, poor soul, for otherwise I don't see what's to become of her." And Lexie knew what they both meant. By—and—bye Robert came out of the bedroom. "I have sent for the nurse," he said, in a low, hurried tone. "And now I must go and get some things from home."

"Let me go," she cried, jumping up. "O Robert, for Heaven's sake do let me do something, or I shall simply go raving mad. Let me go and fetch the things— I know what you want, and the servants will show me where they are. Then you need not leave her— and you must not leave her. You must not let her want you and find you gone, and think you have deserted her."

Reluctantly he let her go, and in half an hour she was standing in Mabel's bedroom, that had been her own,

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with the bewildered and astounded Alice (who had already been communicated with) collecting in wild haste all the various necessaries.

Lexie returned to the hotel in a cab loaded with the tin box and a quantity of loose bundles— everything she could lay her hands on that she thought might be useful in the present emergency.

Some women were at the door waiting for her, and they pounced upon the luggage and bore it off almost before she had time to settle with the cabman. They volunteered no report of the state of things upstairs, and she asked for none. It was growing dark, and they were lighting up the house. She thought that if she could do no more and was to be considered *de trop* amongst Mabel's caretakers, she would wrap herself in a fur cloak and go and sit on the pier, and ask Robert to send her word when the crisis was over. She mounted the stairs slowly and opened the door of the sitting room.

There he stood on the hearthrug, with his back to the fire; and there beside him sat Uncle and Aunt Stephen, clamorously discussing the family affairs. At sight of the old people Lexie shrank back, anticipating the scourge, but in a moment recovered courage and marched boldly in. Uncle Stephen, who was an irascible old gentleman, jumped up from his chair and flew at her.

"Well, Miss, here you are, are you? And what have you got to say for yourself, I should like to know?"

What do you mean by playing a trick like this on an honest man, who was a better husband to you than ever you deserved. A pretty mess you have made of it, upon my word! And now——— "

But here Robert stopped him. "Let her alone," he said sternly. "I won't have her scolded. She has suffered quite enough for her mistake, and she'll have plenty more to bear before we've done."

Moreover, the fault is mine— not hers. I drove her away— I was unkind to her. And I had no business to marry again when I had no proof of her death. Blame me if you like, you shall not blame her. Don't mind him, Lexie."

"Stuff and nonsense!" shouted Uncle Stephen. "You were only too good for her, and she just makes a fool of you. Pah! It's sickening to think of; that a family that has always held its head up should be dragged in the mud like this." "Be quiet," cried Robert fiercely. "Do you forget that there's a sick woman on the other side of the wall?"

"O no, I don't forget. And I'm glad you don't. I'm glad you remember her existence. I'll tell you what it is, Miss," glaring at Lexie again, "if that poor creature dies over this, as she's like enough to do— she'll be a wonder of a woman if she doesn't— it'll just be murder, and neither more nor less."

Here Aunt Stephen put in her word. "Don't ask me to be the one to break it to Mrs. Penrose, that's all," said she, with a snuffle and a jerk of her old head. "One of the first families in the colony! And all the other daughters married so well."

Feeling powerless to stem the torrent of abuse, Robert took Lexie's hand, and led her out of the room.

He took her to a snug chamber a few doors off, and, entering it with her, lighted the gas. "I have had this room got ready for you," he said kindly; "stay here and rest till those old wretches are gone. Don't fret, Lexie; we must give them a little time to get over it. They don't know everything, as we do."

In her misery she flung herself into his arms, and clung to him. He was her only shelter. "Oh, how you must hate me," she moaned.

"I don't, Lexie. I was never further from it, believe me. Don't trouble your poor little head with any thoughts of that kind. Keep up your heart, love, and help me to keep up mine. We shall want all the courage we can muster between us."

"I have been such a beast!" she cried passionately. "And you— you are an angel, Robert."

"O Lexie, I'm afraid not. But it's sweet to hear you say so, my dear. I wish— I wish to heaven you had thought as kindly of me a couple of years ago."

"Uncle Stephen is right— I was never worthy of you."

"Uncle Stephen knows nothing about it. He's an old villain, and I am just going to pack him off home again. I will come and tell you when they have both gone."

"How is she, Robert?"

"Well, she's very bad, I am afraid."

"O Robert, what will you do when— when she gets well again?"

"God knows, my dear. I don't. I haven't had time to think yet. As far as I remember," he added, with a

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melancholy touch of humor, "there's no precedent to guide us. I don't think that quite the same thing can ever have happened before."

"I had better go straight down to the pier and drown myself," she cried, wringing her hands.

"No, you hadn't. You had better stick to me. And, after all, it's a comfort to feel that everybody knows — we needn't hide ourselves any more. Poor Mab has been leading me a devil of a life these last few days about you. It was getting beyond everything. I'm glad it is all out, aren't you?"

"It seems so wicked to feel glad about anything now!"

"No. That is a conventional sentiment that is unworthy of you. Be glad whenever you can. You won't get the chance often— for the present, at any rate." "Oh, I know that!"

He left her for a little while, and she occupied herself in hanging up on pegs and laying in drawers the clothes that had been carried out of the bedroom she had vacated. She wondered at herself that she could attend to such a trivial matter, but she was growing accustomed to the terrible circumstances into which that day had plunged her. Her nerves were getting numbed to the strain of the situation. We find it so in all such crises; otherwise we should none of us die of old age. She was left alone so long that she took off her dress, washed, and did her hair afresh. She found a little yellow lace fichu amongst her stores (Robert had bought it for her in Malta when they were first married) and she twisted it round her throat. It made a pretty harmony with the greeny-blue gown. Having nothing else to do, it was reasonable that she should use her leisure to make herself look nice. It might be wicked to be glad of anything at that sad and shocking juncture, but there was one thing she could not help feeling very, very glad of, and that was to have done with the widow's cap and crape. She bundled them into a box together, and pushed them far under the bed; she could not look at them now without a shudder.

It was 8 o'clock before anyone came to her, and then the knock that her heart leaped to hear proved not to be Robert's. She flung open the door (conscious of her improved costume and freshly dressed hair), only to see a chambermaid standing in the passage, holding a tray containing wine, a plate of chicken and ham, and other materials for a modest meal.

"Mr. Brown told me to bring you this, ma'am," said the woman, marching in, "and to say he hoped you would try and eat something."

"And are Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Brown here still?" inquired Lexie with a sinking heart.

"No'm. They left some time ago. Mrs. Stephen is gone to The Nest to keep house, I believe."

"Who is here then? What are they doing?"

"The doctor has come back'm, that's all. He went home for a little while, but they sent for him again. I heard that the lady was took worse."

"Oh," cried Lexie, clasping her hands, "Do go and ask Mr. Brown to come and speak to me for a minute."

The woman hesitated, but took the message, and presently Robert came hurrying down the passage.

He looked haggard and agitated, and there was a smudge like a half-dried tear on his cheek.

"What is it?" cried Lexie imploringly.

"Nothing more than we knew before," he answered in a shaky voice. "But you had better not come back, Lexie. Undress and go to bed when you have had some supper, and try and sleep, if you can."

"Sleep!" she echoed. "How do you think I can sleep, any more than you? If I ever sleep again it will be a wonder. Why mustn't I come and sit with you, Robert? I might be some little help." She could not bear to be shut out, as if she were of no consequence to anybody.

"No, no, you can't help. Everything is being done that can be done, though I wish to God we had her mother with her, poor girl. It's too dreadful— I won't have you near. You stay where you are, and I'll come and tell you when there's anything to tell."

At 10 o'clock she had had no further report from the sick room, and she caught her chambermaid again and sent her to find somebody who could tell her what was going on. After a long delay the news came in a whisper that a baby had just arrived— a fine little girl, quite well grown and strong, nothing at all the matter with her.

"Listen," said the bearer of the joyful tidings, "you can hear her little voice all down the passage."

Lexie put her head out of the door, and heard it faintly but clearly— a little hoarse voice, small but vigorous, uttering quick cries; and it thrilled through her like an electric shock. She thanked and dismissed the servant, who would have liked to stay and gossip over this latest development of the situation; and then stood, trembling with excitement, waiting for Robert to come, as he had promised, to tell her what had happened.

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But Robert did not come. Eleven o'clock struck; half-past eleven, twelve; and there was no sign of him.

As the minutes passed Lexie's excitement went down and down, and a cold despair took possession of her.

"Oh, I know how it is!" she cried, flinging herself upon the bed. "He only thinks of her now, I am forgotten! He always fretted because he had no child, and now that she has given him one he will care more for her than he does for me!" And in this case, she declared to herself that she certainly would go down to the pier and drown herself.

But in the midst of this paroxysm of jealousy and desperation her husband's step, heavy and slow, echoed along the passage. She did not hurry to answer his knock, to get off her bed and go to him— until she heard his voice. Something in the way he called her gave her a sudden fright, and she jumped up to let him in.

"Oh, what?" she exclaimed, looking in wild fear at his grey and haggard face.

"It is all over," he said. "They could not save her. She died at 12 o'clock."

## Chapter XI.

Thus was the difficulty solved— very fortunately for everybody, except for the poor innocent one who paid the penalty for the guilty. To the credit of our heroine, and of human nature in general, let it be said that she was sorry enough for it. If the event had not set herself and Robert free to resume their interrupted wedded life, but had been an altogether immitigable disaster, she could not have been more prostrated by it. Indeed, she suffered so much that even Uncle Stephen felt that justice was done, and that his services were not required to bring the sense of her sin home to her. While the gossips and scandal-mongers were tearing her character to pieces, while the Penrose connection were raging over the fate of their relative, while Robert was going through the fires of public criticism and curiosity, the doer of all the mischief lay ill in her bed at the Esplanade Hotel, and at one point it looked rather as if she might die too. I am sure she would have felt it a great satisfaction to have done so, when her agonising repentance and remorse were fresh.

But the reader quite well understands that we are dealing, not with the supernaturally perfect creatures who usually, in the character of hero and heroine, move through the pages of fiction, but with beings like ourselves, who (as, alas, we know) are very, very human. And he will not be surprised to learn that the time came when Lexie and Robert both felt (though, of course, they did not own to it) that, given a misfortune for which there was no remedy, things had happened for the best.

And it was not long in coming either. Only a few days after the dead mother had been taken away and disposed of, Robert's anguish of pity subsided into a regret that did not much interfere with his satisfaction in having his Lexie for his own again; and that young woman began to feel once more that, with all its drawbacks, life was worth living.

The first thing that roused her interest in it was the baby. Rumor came to her that the Penroses wanted to take the little waif that was supposed to belong to nobody, and she immediately insisted on getting up from her sick bed to defend it from these robbers.

"You don't mean to say," she demanded of her husband, with flashing eyes and trembling frame, "that you will let them have it?— that you will part with your own child, and especially that child, to anybody?"

"I should be very sorry to part with it," replied Robert sincerely. "But they are very anxious to take care of it, for our poor girl's sake, and I thought— I thought perhaps it would be painful to you——— "

"O Robert, how could you— how could you think such a thing? I never thought you could be so unjust to me! Why, if I am ever to have any comfort again it can only be by doing everything I can for her. And I want to devote myself to that precious child, to give my life to it —— "

"I want you to give your life to me now, Lexie."

"O no, no! I must think of her first. And I made up my mind from the first moment that I would be a mother to her baby— and so I will. It shall not go to those Penrose people. O Robert, surely you have the first right to it?— you will not give it up?"

"You are sure you would like to keep it?" he asked anxiously.

"Like! I simply must have it, Robert. Nobody can ever care for it as I shall."

"Then we will keep it," said Robert gladly. "And you are a noble woman, Lexie."

"I noble! Don't mock me. I am the most wicked creature that ever lived." "I don't think so. We are none of us perfect, and accidents will happen. You never meant to do any harm. Are you sure you feel able to get up, my darling."

"Yes— O yes; I must get up to see after that sweet child. I will put on my dressing gown only. And, Robert dear, let us have an early tea together to-night, shall we? we and the baby. If I can't sit up at table I can lie on a sofa beside you."

He hurried off to get everything ready. He engaged a new sitting room, one that had no associations, and had a sofa drawn to the fireside, and ordered all the delicacies of the season for the evening meal.

An hour later Lexie was lying there, propped up with pillows, and Mabel's baby was lying on her arm, wrapped in the fatal Rampore chuddah shawl, and she was looking at it with fond eyes, as if it had been her own. Robert thought he had never seen a prettier picture, and could do nothing but gaze at them.

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That day they began to be happy again. The idea of making atonement to Mabel by devotion to her child soothed Lexie, as did the child itself; and Robert, feeling the relief and convenience of having but one wife at a time, and she the one he loved best, was charmed to see her reviving from her despair, and showing an appetite for life once more. He fed her with tit-bits, and coddled her, and made love to her with real (though decorously subdued) enjoyment to them both; and she talked with animation of the superior education that little Mab should have— how she should never wear stays, and should go to Girton, and become the woman of the future generally. The doctor came in the evening, and reported a great improvement in his patient, and when she was put back to bed, taking the baby with her (the nurse being accommodated with a stretcher in her room), he had a long conversation with her husband.

"The best thing you can do," said he, "before resuming home life on the original basis— which would come as rather a shock, don't you see, so soon after what has happened— is to take Mrs. Brown away for a few months. Take her to England, or anywhere, just till the thing has blown over and she has had time to get strong again."

"I want to go to England," said Robert gravely. "I want to see Mrs. Penrose."

"Very well. Go, and take your wife, as soon as ever you can get off. I wouldn't advise you to put her in the way of Mrs. Penrose, but you can easily manage to avoid that. Things are at a deadlock now, and something must be done. You are neither married nor unmarried— the position is awkward and embarrassing for everybody, and as soon as she is able to get about Mrs. Brown will feel it acutely. So just clear out altogether, and don't come back till people have had time to forget you. It won't take long."

Robert thought this was very good advice, and next morning he communicated it to his wife. Lexie jumped at the chance of escape from the very hot place that she had got herself into, and, though she had seemed to have had enough of England and the sea, she was charmed at the idea of getting back to both— seeing that she would go in her husband's company. "It will be very different this time," she said, as she busied herself over the packing of her own and the baby's wardrobe. And indeed, if it had not been for the manner in which this arrangement had been brought about and her accusing conscience, she would have been wildly happy now. Perhaps it is not too much to say that she was more happy than she had ever been in her life. Human nature is human nature, and it is not very difficult to forget what we wish to forget; and so she was able after a time to stifle the voice that cried from Mabel's grave, and to persuade herself that things had not gone so very wrong after all. She had her fits of depression, of course, paroxysms of memory and remorse; but these generally occurred when the machinery of her domestic life was a little out of gear, and Robert did not allow that to happen often.

By the very same ship that brought her out alone she and her husband went back together. "Mr. and Mrs. Robert Brown, infant and nurse," the party was designated in the passenger list, and there were people on board who never guessed that Lexie was not the baby's mother. In fact, Robert himself almost forgot it sometimes. When he saw her washing and dressing it, or carrying it up and down the deck (while the nurse amused herself with a novel) cuddling the little golden head upon her breast and beaming with content as long as it was happy, he used to have a little dimness about the eyes that was not caused by any harrowing recollections of the past. "I always said," he would remark to himself, "that all that Lexie wanted was a baby."

A more attached family it would be impossible to see— so the passengers said. They had the usual board-ship squabbles amongst themselves, but I don't think Lexie quarrelled with her husband once during the whole voyage. She hurried to him when he called her; she was content to sit with him tête-à-tête in retired corners, while the committee of amusement appealed to her in vain; and the great red-bearded Australian cared neither for whist nor tobacco so long as he could make himself of use to his little mistress. He even courted the smile of ridicule, which a man fears more than the cannon's mouth, by occasionally showing himself in public with the baby's bottle in his hand. And when they got to London and to privacy— far away from the cupboard that held the skeleton— it may be imagined how they enjoyed themselves; how they went to the picture galleries together, and how Lexie discovered that Robert really had been born an artist, and Robert convinced himself that Lexie had developed into a first rate connoisseur; and how they met Emily Price one day, and Mrs. Brown, leaning on her handsome husband's arm, enjoyed the exquisite satisfaction of cutting her old friend dead. It was indeed a lovely time, "the real honeymoon," said Robert, "compared with which the first one was a delusion and a snare." Poor Mabel, cut off in her youth and beauty, mouldered to dust in the St. Kilda cemetery, abandoned and forgotten, her own child scarcely allowed to be hers; and those two whose happiness was built upon her grave had no scruple about taking it and making the most of it— not after a little while. An interview with Mrs. Penrose made them sad for a day,

## The Perversity of Human Nature

but the day after, having got that over, they enjoyed themselves more than ever. Alas! such is life, and it is no use to pretend it isn't.

They stayed but a short time in England, after all. Lexie could not go about much, because she would not leave the baby to servants. She would not go over to the Continent, because she did not believe that any city in the length and breadth of Europe was in such a sanitary condition as would make it a fit place for that dear child to be taken to. The drains of St. Kilda were under a British board of health, no matter how abominably they stank, but the sewers of France and Switzerland and Italy, not being subject to that essential guardianship, were not to be thought of in the case of a person so precious as little Mab. And, when October fogs began to rise and November winds to blow, the pseudo-mother was thrown into a state of wild alarm lest the baby should catch bronchitis, and declared that the idea of exposing those infant lungs to the rigors of an English winter was utterly out of the question.

"What shall we do then?" asked Robert, anxious to do anything to please her.

"Let us go home," she replied, leaning towards him and resting her head on his breast (they were sitting by their fireside one night after dinner, the child asleep in its cradle in a corner of the room). "Let us go back to our own little Nest, Robert. Oh, you can't think how I am longing to be there again."

"It is rather soon, isn't it?"

"What does it matter? It is nobody's business but our own. If people talk, let them, it won't hurt us. We shall have each other, Robert, and that's all we shall care about."

"My darling, if you are willing to go back, I am. It will be a happy day for me when I see you in your own place again. I don't think you will leave it any more Lexie."

They started back to Australia very shortly after this, and reached home a few days before Christmas.

Mrs. Brown in her own house was like a banished queen restored to her kingdom. Down came the lace curtains; away went lustra painting and crewel work; in no time all trace of the usurper's government had disappeared. Lexie did not wish to show any disrespect to the memory of the poor woman whom her husband had honored, but, as she explained to Robert, when he looked a little dubious about it, it was a sort of matter of religion not to allow the divine instinct of beauty to be insulted and profaned. By Christmas day the whole establishment was put in order— furniture in its right place, colors harmoniously blended, as of yore; and when she sat down to her Christmas dinner, robed in gold tinted Liberty silk, her starry eyes glowing with joy and her delicate cheek with health, she felt that the mistakes of the past had been rectified; while Robert, her husband, looking at her and at the general surroundings, gave pious thanks to Providence, which (as far as they two were concerned) had done all things well.

"Do you remember our last Christmas together?" she murmured, a few hours later, as she reclined in his arms in the unlighted drawing room.

"Don't speak of it," he answered, kissing her. "Let the dead past bury its dead. We must never quarrel again, my darling."

"Never, Robert, never! We are like the hero and heroine of the novels, who have got their troubles over.

We will live happy ever after, now."