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BY WOMAN'S WIT BY MRS. ALEXANDER.

IN ONE VOLUME.

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By the same Author,

A SECOND LIFE . . . . . 3 vols.

BY WOMAN'S WIT.

A NOVEL.

BY

MRS. ALEXANDER,
AUTHOR OF "A SECOND LIFE," ETC. ETC.

LEIPZIG
BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ
1886.

"Wit a diamond brought."

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BY WOMAN'S WIT.

CHAPTER I.

THE CURTAIN RISES.

A GLOWING September morning was pouring its golden light through the open window of a morning-room or study, in the eastern wing of a picturesque old house standing half-way up a hill-side in one of the Midland shires. A background of beech trees framed-in its mellow red-brick walls, and before it lay a wide, undulating plain, many coloured, and bounded by distant dim blue hills.

A pleasanter room could scarce be found, though the furniture was old-fashioned, the curtains and carpet faded. The bay-window opened on a terrace, below which were pleasure grounds; and in its recess stood a table, spread with dainty china and delicate silver —the remains of breakfast—and a vase of hot-house flowers, from a conservatory into which a glass door admitted.

The sole occupant was a gentleman, a slight, elegant-looking man of thirty or upwards, with silky, wavy dark hair and small moustaches, and an unmistakable air of distinction.

A pile of letters lay beside him, while he had pushed away his plate to make room for a book, which he was studying apparently with deep interest.

Presently he raised his eyes—"eyes of most unholy blue"—and looked upon the goodly landscape which lay before him. But his vision was evidently directed to some far distant object, and after a moment's thought, he took up a pencil and began to scribble calculations on the back of a letter.

"Yes," he murmured, "if it can be carried out, I shall be a free man." Then opening the letter on which he had been scrawling, he turned over a page or two covered with small firm writing, and read slowly:

"I shall do nothing about a second trustee, until after your festivities," ran the paragraph he had selected. "Besides everyone is away at this season. Need I say I have perfect confidence in you?"

He folded it up and put it under an elastic band, which held some other letters together, and tearing the envelope into minute fragments, threw them into the waste paper basket beside him.

As he did so, a soft indistinct sound from an adjoining room—the door into which stood open—caught his ear. He paused and listened. The faint rustling drew nearer, and a pleasant voice began to sing in a low tone, as if the singer thought in song. The listener seemed to recognise the music or the voice. His face brightened; he half rose from his seat, but resumed it as if he wished to hear more. The next moment a lady walked through the doorway and stopped opposite to him.

A young lady, tall and slight, though round and

graceful; she was simply dressed in a maize-coloured print and a pretty muslin and lace apron tied with brown ribbons, a sash of the same marked her shapely waist, and tan gauntlets hid her hands, one of which held a large garden hat adorned with a couple of pale pink chrysanthemums. The face it had shaded was fair and fresh, and lit by a couple of large dark grey eyes—eyes, lashes, eye-brows, all dark, compared to the light-brown hair that curled in a small fringe over her brow, and was gathered neatly back into a large knot.

She gazed for an instant in frank amazement at the gentleman, who rose to greet her—then a quick bright smile curved her red-lipped kindly mouth, and made a little coquettish interrogative dimple in one cheek, as she cried:

"Why how,—when did you come, Squire? We all fancied you were in Scotland."

"Well, you see I am not," he returned, advancing towards her with an outstretched hand, in which she placed hers. "And what are *you* doing, I should like to know, invading my premises in this burglarious fashion?"

"You know very well I always come to the library for any books I want, and 'by your leave,' too. You are such an absentee you ought not to be surprised if thieves *did* break through and steal."

"No, I am not in the least surprised," with emphasis.

"Well I was, a little, when I found the library window open," resumed the young lady, "but I thought Mrs. Storer was having a thorough cleaning, so walked in, and imagining she was in this room I——"

"Unearthed the master! I shall accept your coming as a good omen." His handsome, though somewhat worn, face was aglow with pleasure as he spoke; but her eyes were attracted to the pile of letters and the open book, and she did not notice him.

"I arrived quite unexpectedly last night, to the great disgust of my few faithful retainers," he went on. "Do you know, I have been planning great things? —things that will rejoice *you*, ma Belle Leonore."

"Pray don't give me my long name," she exclaimed, with a pretty impatient pout. "It always reminds me of that horrid raven tapping at the chamber door. What are your great things?"

"Dorrington and Isabel are coming to stay with me, and the Harveys, Algy Balfour, Mrs. Ruthven and a lot more, and I am going to give a big ball to the nobility, gentry, and even the cads, of the surrounding country."

"No, really!" with evident delight, "you are quite charming for thinking of such a thing."

"I am glad your estimate of me coincides with that of society in general."

"How awfully conceited you are, Squire, but I am glad Lady Dorrington is coming, and I shall be delighted to dance at your ball. Now I must go. How late you are! The breakfast things still on the table?" and glancing at the book as she walked to the window, "What are your studies? Chemistry? Who are you going to poison? I did not think you were scientific."

"Nor am I, I am only a student of human nature. But don't you want a book? Let us find one, and I will carry it home for you."

"You are too obliging! I want a volume of Pope. I had a dispute last night with Mr. Winton about a passage in the Rape of the Lock, and I want to prove myself right."

"Ah!" a long drawn "ah." "Is *he* here? Well, find your book, and I will escort you back."

He gathered up his papers, thrust them into a bureau, which he locked, and rang for his valet.

His visitor returned to the library, a large sombre apartment pervaded with a faint delightful odour of Russia leather, and from one of the well-filled shelves selected a book. Then putting on her hat, she passed through the glass door by which she had entered, and stood gazing at the wide landscape visible from the terrace.

"All this seems tame enough after Continental scenery," said the Squire, joining her.

"It has a great charm for me. There is a sense of life, and freedom, and cheerfulness in English landscape that you scarcely ever find elsewhere." She descended the steps to the gravelled path beneath as she spoke, her companion following, and coming up beside her.

"You have preserved a large amount of patriotism in spite of your long sojourn abroad."

"I have; yet I love Germany, too. I was very happy there."

"Were you ever *un*happy?" he asked, with a slightly contemptuous uplifting of his brows.

"Well, no, I do not think I ever was. I have been very, very sorry for the trouble of my friends, but not on my own account."

"Friends? Some unfortunate devils you refused, I suppose?"

"No, indeed! I never refused any one."

"I should have imagined you had shoals of bold barons and noble grafs at your feet."

She laughed merrily.

"You see I had not the reputation of being an heiress, and I was not so honoured."

"What a curse hangs over the impecunious!" he returned bitterly.

"I don't feel accursed, though the grafs and barons did not propose for me. You must admit, too, that the greatest improvements, the most successful careers, have been achieved by men who had scarce a penny to begin with."

"Your only fault, Nora, is being too reasonable. It is a serious one, if you will permit a kinsman to speak plainly."

"A kinsman too remote for the right of fault-finding," she interrupted, with a saucy little nod.

"Ah! I have found *you* a very distant cousin indeed."

So talking, they walked across the pleasure-grounds, and through a gate which admitted them to a wide, park-like stretch of pasture, bordered at one side by a strip of woodland into which the path led. Soon the ground began to slope steeply down to a shallow valley, at the bottom of which ran a small rapid river, chafing and murmuring among big, black, wet stones, and leaping gaily over an abrupt rocky barrier, some few hundred yards above, where they struck upon the stream. A narrow ivy-grown bridge spanned the fall, turning towards which they came in sight of a low

irregular house, or rather cottage, on the opposite side.

The ground immediately round it was level, and then fell suddenly to the river, while the light through the trees behind showed that it stood on the summit of the bank; a richly green, close-shaven lawn, with a few flower-beds near the house, a projecting window or two, a verandah with supports of unbarked wood, and a huge elm tree, surrounded by a seat, standing near the edge of the declivity, made a pleasant picture.

"How thoroughly English this looks," said the Squire. "It is quite Arcadian; but you will be awfully bored after a while, and the sight of your abode reminds me I have never asked for Mrs. L'Estrange."

"She is quite well, and will be very pleased to see you."

"And I shall be only too glad to trouble you with my presence; but not this morning. I have a pile of letters to answer, and an appalling amount of arrangements to make. In short, I ought not to have come so far afield with you."

"You are a voluntary truant," she returned, pausing on the bridge.

"That I acknowledge. Now I have seen you to the edge of your own territory, I will say good-bye. If I come and beg a cup of coffee about eight or nine this evening, I suppose I shall not be barred out?"

"If the door is locked we will let you in through the window."

He bowed, and raising his soft felt hat with easy grace, stood looking after her as she walked away with a smooth light step down the path which led towards the cottage.

He was unmistakably a "Squire of high degree." Above middle height, his well-proportioned figure had an air of picturesque dignity in his rough but well-cut shooting-coat; his long, fine, embrowned right hand grasped a light walking-stick, and as he walked quickly back towards home, he cut the heads from the tall reeds and grasses bordering his path with sharp, vindictive strokes, as if he laid some detested enemy prostrate at every stroke.

"This folly—madness rather—is a desperate complication, yet it is irresistible," he muttered to himself. "I have only to be bold enough and I shall succeed! After? Weariness, perhaps; but I shall have had an interval of life and joy, it will be something to know that, come what may, I *have* been blest."

He glanced round sharply and suspiciously, but the only living things near were a little brown squirrel that scampered in sudden fear up the rugged stem of an oak, and a snake rustling among the fallen leaves as it escaped to its hole.

He laughed to himself, a cynical laugh, very different from the soft, caressing smiles he bestowed on his fair visitor.

Clifford Marsden, the Squire of Evesleigh, was one of the fortunate individuals sometimes described as having been "born with a silver spoon in his mouth." He had succeeded his father while still a schoolboy; the savings of his minority enabled him to start clear of all encumbrances when he came of age, and the sixteen or seventeen years which had since elapsed had been diligently occupied by him in creating fresh ones.

He had lived with boundless extravagance and

self-indulgence. He had done everything, seen everything, exhausted everything possible for a gentleman whose character was still fair, whose popularity was undiminished. Bankers and City men knew that his lands were heavily mortgaged; but society, as yet, only admired his magnificence, without doubting his solvency.

Evesleigh had seen little of its master of late years, but in his boyish days, and for some time after attaining his majority, Marsden hunted and shot in due season at Evesleigh.

His near neighbour and relative was Colonel L'Estrange, of Brookdale, the cottage just described.

The beauty of the site had probably induced the builder of Evesleigh House to place that edifice on the verge of the estate, for the stream above-mentioned was its boundary on this side. The farm and residence of Brookdale had been purchased by the Squire's great-grandfather, who settled it on his only daughter. This lady had married a penniless soldier of good family. Colonel L'Estrange was her grandson.

He had married in India, and soon after his return home, his delicate wife died somewhat suddenly, leaving him a baby girl of about five years old. The Colonel, a grave, taciturn man, old for his years, and unsociable in habits, lived on in his humble home, finding consolation in sport, and looked up to by the young Squire of Evesleigh as a mighty hunter, an unerring shot.

When Leonora, or Nora L'Estrange, who was a pet and plaything with her cousin, had reached her tenth year, her father suddenly discovered she was too old

to be left entirely with her nurse. Of a boarding-school he would not hear, and, in short, the only solution to the difficulty which found favour in his eyes, was immediate marriage with a pretty, pale, timid girl, the orphan daughter of a former friend, whom he found in a dependent position, as companion to a rich old maiden lady, in the neighbouring cathedral town of Oldbridge.

The new Mrs. L'Estrange was barely twelve years older than her step-daughter, and the Oldbridge gossips prophesied that young lady would be too much for her father's wife.

But, by some mysterious influence of sympathy or mutual comprehension, they drew to each other. Indeed, the old nurse did not hesitate to say that her young lady was regularly bewitched, and, for her part, was free to confess that it seemed horrid unnatural for a child to be so taken up with her step-mother.

However, Colonel L'Estrange, having been ordered to some German baths for cure of rheumatism, brought on by standing knee-deep in the river, fishing, removed his family, now increased by another daughter, beyond the reach of Oldbridge gossip, and, for reasons best known to himself, let Brookdale for several years.

He was already half-forgotten, when the local papers announced his death at Dresden.

His widow continued to reside abroad till the term for which Brookdale had been let expired, and had only returned, with her own and her step-daughter, in the preceding spring.

The ladies of Brookdale had finished their mid-day meal, which was luncheon to their big neighbours,

and dinner to themselves. Little Beatrice, Nora's half sister, was teaching a depressed-looking Dachshund, with out-turned toes, to beg, when a neat parlour maid opened the door, and said:

"If you please, ma'am, Mr. Winton is in the drawing-room."

Mrs. L'Estrange rose from her seat as if to join him, but Nora cried:

"We had better ask him in here. He has been shooting, I suppose, and you may be sure he is hungry."

"I will go and fetch him!" exclaimed Bea, jumping up and letting the biscuit with which she had been bribing the Dachs fall on the carpet as she rushed away. She was a delicate little creature of seven or eight, with big dark eyes, and fair hair, an idle, clever, wilful monkey, with whom her mother strove in vain to be strict, and who imposed a good deal on her step-sister.

"Bea is quite excited," said Miss L'Estrange laughing, and before the mother could reply the child returned, leading by the hand a tall, large framed man of perhaps six-and-thirty or more, tanned by exposure to sun and wind, a deeper red brown than was becoming, with thick, short sandy hair, and light grey stern eyes. He wore a shooting jacket and knickerbockers.

"I feel I am an intruder," he said, shaking hands with Mrs. L'Estrange, and then with Nora. "I did not intend to be so early. I heard you were in town, this morning, and calculated on clearing your luncheon hour, but the birds are very wild, or I was less keen than usual, and got over the ground quicker."

"We will forgive you," returned Mrs. L'Estrange, with a friendly smile, "and I daresay, if you have not already lunched, you begin to feel the need of something to eat."

"Thanks, no, I had some sandwiches an hour ago."

"Still, a biscuit and a glass of sherry," suggested Nora insinuatingly.

"Are not to be despised," replied Winton, drawing a chair to the table, while one fair hostess poured out his wine, and another brought the biscuit tin.

"May I have some of the pretty brown feathers from those birds you left in the hall, for my doll's hat," asked Bea.

"I daresay your mama will give them to you; I brought the birds for her. Were you in Oldbridge, too, Miss L'Estrange?" he continued, looking up quickly as she offered him the biscuits.

"No, I have spent an idle, unprofitable morning, dreaming over the letters I was pretending to write."

"Dreaming! I thought you were far too practical to dream. What were you dreaming about?"

"The coming ball; the glories of Mrs. Ruthven and her jewels."

"Who is going to give a ball?" in a surprised tone.

"Clifford Marsden."

"Why he is, God knows where!"

"He is at Evesleigh. Come into the drawing-room and I will tell you all about it."

Here Miss Bea was carried off by her German governess, not without loud remonstrances and reproaches addressed to Winton, who was always on the side of authority.

"I walked up to the Hall this morning," resumed

Miss L'Estrange, when they had moved to the drawing-room, "to look for that passage of Pope, about which you are so mistaken, and there I found the Squire, eating his breakfast at ten o'clock."

Winton muttered something inarticulately.

"Then he told me that Mrs. Ruthven, Lord and Lady Dorrington and a lot of people were coming to stay, that he was going to give a grand ball to town and country folk, and to have great doings. So mind, Mr. Winton, you are not to run away shabbily, but stay, like a self-sacrificing Christian, and dance with *me*."

Winton glanced at her, a slow smile brightening his face.

"And when I have sacrificed myself," he said, "you will show me your card filled up with the names of the golden youths who hover about you?"

"That is a base libel! At all events, I shall have no court of Eton boys and ineligibles surrounding me *here*."

"Marsden is an extraordinary fellow," resumed Winton thoughtlessly. "The last time I saw him, early in July, he offered me the shooting here, while I was staying with my aunt and the Canon, and swore he hated the place, and would never see Evesleigh again if he could help it."

"How unaccountable!" cried Mrs. L'Estrange. "It is such a sweet old place, and looks so lovely in autumn?"

"Yes! Do you remember our nutting expeditions when I was at home thirteen years ago?"

"I do, indeed," said Mrs. L'Estrange with a quick sigh.

"Have you been thirteen years in India without

once coming home?" exclaimed Miss L'Estrange. "I wonder you have any skin left."

"I had nothing to come home for! When Marsden was in India tiger hunting, I saw a good deal of him. He was a prime favourite, in great request. They said that the rich Miss Guthrie was desperately annoyed not to have met him before she had pledged herself to his cousin. But as Marsden was only presented to her a couple of days before the wedding, even the charming Celia could not effect an exchange."

"Don't you like Mrs. Ruthven, that you speak so ill-naturedly?" said Miss L'Estrange, looking up from the complicated stitchery with which she was covering the pattern of a handkerchief. "I thought her nice and sympathetic, she was very kind to me."

"She is undoubtedly a charming woman. *I* may have the bad taste not to like her, that is nothing to the point."

"It is odd! I am afraid you have grown cynical," returned Mrs. L'Estrange gently.

"I don't think I have."

"Celia," repeated Nora, "what an unusual name."

"Yes; I wonder where old Guthrie found it! It could not have been her mother's, for *she* was a Portuguese half-caste."

"Yet Mrs. Ruthven is fair," urged Mrs. L'Estrange.

"A caprice of nature, she will darken as she grows older."

"How long has she been a widow?" asked Mrs. L'Estrange.

"About two years. She left India after poor Ruthven's death, and wandered on the Continent till she could doff her weeds. Marsden ought to marry

her, she has money enough to put him straight, if as some say he is a little dipped."

"He must know that, for he has something to do with her property, has he not?" said Mrs. L'Estrange.

"He is one of her trustees," returned Winton. "The other, an old friend of her father's, died last year. This projected visit and ball looks as if Marsden was not going to let so rich a prize slip through his fingers."

"I don't think the squire is mercenary," said Nora thoughtfully, letting her work drop into her lap.

"Perhaps not," replied Winton carelessly. "Are you going to spend this fine day in the house, Miss L'Estrange?"

"No! I am going to the village. I always give poor old Mrs. Sykes an hour or two in the week. She is the blacksmith's mother, and is quite blind."

"You have soon fallen into English country ways," said Winton, looking steadily at her. "Are you undertaking the part of Lady Bountiful?"

"*That* I cannot, for excellent reasons," she returned laughing; "and I am sorry to say I do not like visiting among the poor. I always feel I am intruding, and many of them so soon begin to take what you do as a right, or cringe and whine. Oh! it is so hard to know how best to help them; their lot *is* hard. I wonder they do not hate the rich more bitterly than they do; I should, I am sure. Life altogether is a terrible puzzle."

"Then don't go and read to this old woman in her stuffy room; come both of you and escort me back through Evesleigh Woods. They are looking their best."

Nora coloured slightly, but shook her head.

"I must not disappoint poor old Betsy. I really believe my reading is a pleasure to her, and *I* like it too; she is a woman of strong character and great intelligence. She and her son are Northumbrians, and he is a very stern, masterful sort of man; I should not like to be his wife."

"Do you intend to rule your future husband, Miss L'Estrange?"

"I have no distinct intentions respecting that great unknown; but I am quite sure that equality is the soul of love and friendship. Now," rising, "I must start. Where is yesterday's *Times*, Helen? My blind old friend prefers a newspaper to the Bible."

"If you will not escort me, I will escort you," said Winton.

"With or without my leave?" exclaimed Nora, holding up a finger warningly.

Winton laughed.

"If you are graciously pleased to permit me," he added.

"Very well, you may come," and she left the room.

Winton looked gravely after her for a moment, his brows slightly knit as if he were puzzled—not agreeably puzzled.

Then he turned to Mrs. L'Estrange and said abruptly:

"It is rather unusual to see stepmother and daughter on such good terms. They generally hate each other like poison. I suspect your nature sweetens the mixture; you were always a bit of an angel."

"You are too flattering, and you do not do Nora justice. She is the kindest girl that ever lived; most fortunately for us. Do you know that everything is

hers? She might turn us out penniless if she liked, to-morrow. I had no marriage settlement. Colonel L'Estrange was always *going* to alter his will—which left all he possessed to Nora—but died without having done so; and my poor Bea is quite unprovided for."

"What an infernal shame! They ought never to have allowed you to marry without a proper settlement."

"They? Who?" asked Mrs. L'Estrange with a tinge of bitterness. "I had few friends, and was not particularly self-helpful. *They* were too glad to find me provided for and off their hands, to raise any question that might delay the happy release. This was only natural! However, if Nora reaches one-and-twenty and is still a free agent, I am sure she will carry out her intention of making a provision for Bea."

"When does she come of age?"

"Next February."

"Hum! Time enough to marry and plague a man's heart out before that!"

"My dear Mark, what has put you out of humour with Nora? You must not dislike her unreasonably."

"Dislike her! she is not the sort of girl any man would dislike! But what a contrast between you two; I strongly suspect she bullies you! What hard lines you have had all your life; I sometimes think over old times and wonder how you pulled through."

He looked at her as he spoke, a wonderfully kind expression softening his eyes.

"I am very happy and tranquil now," returned Mrs. L'Estrange, "so let the past bury its dead."

"If I had been——" Winton was beginning, when Nora returned with her hat on—a very becoming hat.

"Are you not going to walk with us, Helen?"

"No, dear, I promised Bea to take her to see a foal and a baby peacock, at the Home Farm."

"Well, Mein Herr! I await you."

Winton rose, and shook hands with Mrs. L'Estrange.

"My aunt hopes you will come to luncheon to-morrow or on Friday, if you are in the town," he said.

"I will write to her. Good-bye for the present."

"Oh! I had almost forgotten," cried Nora, turning back at the door. "The Squire said he would come and ask for a cup of coffee this evening about eight."

"He shall have it," returned Mrs. L'Estrange.

Winton, who had paused behind Nora, turned a questioning look on Mrs. L'Estrange, then followed the young lady of Brookdale through the open entrance door into the sunlight beyond, and the sound of their footsteps on the freshly-raked gravel soon died away.

Mrs. L'Estrange stepped out on the verandah and looked after the retreating figures.

"He was always wise and kind," she murmured to herself.

"Mother," cried Beatrice from within, "I am quite ready."

CHAPTER II.

CONFEDERATES.

SOME ten days later the sun was striving to pierce the sultry haze of an autumnal day in London, and making the half-deserted streets oppressively warm.

Everyone was out of town, and the chief clubs

shops, and hotels, were being painted and renovated, during the breathing space between seasons.

A brougham stopped at the door of a well-known hotel in Bond Street, and attracted the attention of a waiter lounging on the steps. He descended to ascertain what the occupant wanted. She was a large, distinguished looking woman of more than a certain age, with almost white hair, and black eyes; whose travelling costume of dark grey serge and bonnet of grey straw and black ribbons had evidently been designed by a high-class modiste.

"Is Mrs. Ruthven here?"

"Yes, 'm."

"Is she at home?"

"I'll see, 'm."

The waiter disappeared, and soon returned.

"Mrs. Ruthven is in, ma'am."

"Open the door then." And the enquirer alighted.

"Who shall I say?"

"Lady Dorrington."

The waiter ushered the visitor upstairs to a handsomely furnished room, where, before a long glass between the windows, stood a small, slight figure, in an exquisite ball dress of pale gold satin with draperies of fine filmy white lace, caught up at one side with drooping bouquets of wonderfully natural violet, clematis, and ferns. Two women, one in a dainty cap, the other in a smart hat, were standing back as if they had just desisted from the task of arranging the beautiful costume.

"A thousand apologies, dear Lady Dorrington, for receiving you in this extraordinary apparel; but I would not keep you waiting, as I know you have only

a few hours in town!" cried the lady in the ball dress, advancing and shaking hands with her visitor very cordially.

"I am charmed to have a peep at your robe of triumph, as I am sure it will be. It is quite perfect. Don't let me interrupt you; don't postpone the important study of final touches, now that you are full of your subject."

"There is little more to be done. We were just hesitating whether to loop up the lace on the shoulders with small bouquets, or with ruby and diamond butterflies. What do you say, Lady Dorrington?"

"My dear Mrs. Ruthven, I am no judge. I never attempted to dress, I knew it was no use. I just wore solid, serious clothes."

"You have admirable taste, I am sure. I am inclined for the butterflies sparkling among the lace."

"I think, madam," said the dress-maker deferentially, "there would be an elegant simplicity in the bouquets."

"If madame permits me to speak," cried the maid in French, "I would say, the rubies and diamonds will be infinitely more *distingué*."

Mrs. Ruthven stood a moment gazing fixedly at herself in the glass, and then said decidedly:

"I will wear the butterflies. Bring me a Tea-gown, Virginie, and remember" (to the dress-maker) "I must have the dress complete by to-morrow; the changes you have to make might be done in an hour."

"Oh, Madam! not in an hour!"

"I will return immediately, Lady Dorrington," said Mrs. Ruthven, not heeding her, and sweeping away towards her bed-room, the door of which stood open.

"There is such a bad light in my room, I was obliged to come here to see how I looked."

Her attendants followed—and Lady Dorrington, taking up "The World," which lay on the sofa, chose a comfortable chair and settled herself.

She had scarcely read half what "The World says," when Mrs. Ruthven re-entered in a very becoming tea-gown—all creamy muslin and lace, lightened by tufty knots of soft crimson ribbon. She was an attractive looking woman, without regular beauty—a soft pale complexion, with a certain richness of tint—a very red-lipped mouth, somewhat pouting—a wide, low forehead, and large, dark, beseeching eyes. Her hair was profuse—of a peculiar yellow, golden tint—and worn in a careless, irregular fringe—which gave orderly and narrow-minded people an impression of untidiness.

"And, you do not go direct to Evesleigh?" said Mrs. Ruthven, placing herself on the sofa, and folding one foot under her, with Oriental suppleness.

"No. We leave at four o'clock for Bournemouth. Aunt Ilminster has been very unwell, and wishes to see me."

"Ah! the Duchess of Ilminster!" said Mrs. Ruthven, as if a little impressed. "But how will Mr. Marsden manage his preparations without you?"

"Perfectly well. He has excellent taste; he will order everything, regardless of cost, and leave the payment to Providence."

Mrs. Ruthven smiled, thoughtfully, with downcast eyes, as she opened and shut a large feather fan.

"You are a little hard on your brother! He has a right royal nature—and—a fine estate."

"Yes. An estate that—with a little prudence, and a little ready-money—would soon recover itself. I am always impatient with Clifford. He is quite old enough now to give up his follies and take to work, to ambition! There must be some dozen girls in the marriage-market with heaps of money, any one of whom would jump at Marsden of Evesleigh. Then Parliament, and a splendid career would be open to a man of his ability! I see him Ambassador, Secretary for Foreign Affairs—anything—in short," cried Lady Dorrington, laughing, "I am hard on my brother, because I know what he *could* do—and see how he wastes his life!"

Mrs. Ruthven made no reply; she looked at her fan, and a slight colour rose in her cheek.

"I see you have his last photograph," resumed Lady Dorrington. "Bad boy! He refused it to me! Well, dear Mrs. Ruthven, tell me—how are you? I was so sorry to hear you had sprained your ancle."

"It was only a severe twist, and it is all right again. I was foolish enough to let myself be persuaded to climb down some rocks at Ventnor, and suffered accordingly. One should always stick to one's principle!—and mine is to avoid unnecessary exertion, except riding. I now hope to dance at your brother's ball."

"He will be greatly disappointed if you do not. He looks to you to be queen of the *fête;* and I fancy the county is on-the-tip-toe of expectation respecting you also."

"Why! what can they possibly know about me?" asked Mrs. Ruthven, with a pleased smile.

"Oh! we are sad gossips in Blankshire, and

deeply interested in possibilities which may affect us socially."

"Does not that Miss L'Estrange, who was staying with you last spring, live near Evesleigh?" asked Mrs. Ruthven abruptly.

"Yes, close by. She has a little property bordering my brother's, and is a distant cousin."

"A *little* property! I was in hopes it was a big one; for I have an idea Mr. Marsden was a good deal taken in that quarter, nor am I surprised; Miss L'Estrange is a charming girl."

Lady Dorrington glanced at her keenly.

"Oh! very nice, indeed, but I should never forgive her if she married Clifford; and he could not be so insane. He would not marry her. Indeed, a mere inexperienced girl could never be so attractive to him as a woman of the world."

"It does not strike me that Miss L'Estrange is a mere *ingénue*. However, as her fortune is insignificant it does not matter," and the fair widow stifled a yawn. "When do you propose going to Evesleigh, then?"

"The day after to-morrow—and you?"

"I am invited for the 20th, and I propose to arrive that afternoon. The ball is fixed, I believe, for Wednesday."

"Is there anyone—any men, I mean—you would like Clifford to ask? I can send the invitations before I leave this afternoon."

"You are really too kind. I should not dream of exacting——"

"Oh! there is no obligation," interrupted Lady Dorrington. "We want a number of dancing men, and you may know some."

"The only person I can think of is Captain Shirley."

"Very well; what is his address, and who is he?"

"Mr. Marsden knows him already. He was in my husband's regiment. He is a good dancer and a presentable person. He has left the army, I believe, and his address is 'The Doric Club.'"

"Very well. Now tell me what you did and whom you saw at Cowes? How do you like English life so far, and have any of our brilliant youths impressed your widowed heart?"

Mrs. Ruthven laughed low and softly.

"Life in England is very livable so far as I have seen it. With a few ingredients it would be delightful, and these——"

"Captain Shirley!" said a waiter, throwing open the door.

"There is an end of our gossip, my dear," said Lady Dorrington, "and I cannot wait."

Mrs. Ruthven did not leave her seat. She held out a slim hand, which was somewhat darker in tint than her face and throat, and received the new comer's profoundly respectful greeting with a quiet smile.

"Lady Dorrington, let me present Captain Shirley to you."

"We have just been speaking of you, Captain Shirley," said her ladyship blandly. "My brother, Clifford Marsden, is gathering his forces for a ball on the 23rd, and if you are disengaged and inclined to spend a few days at Evesleigh, we—I speak as temporary mistress of the house—shall be delighted to see you. There is good shooting, some pleasant people, *and* Mrs. Ruthven."

"Such attractions are not to be resisted. I gladly accept," returned Shirley, with a low bow.

"You must take the Oldbridge and Anchester line," added Lady Dorrington. "We will send carriages to meet the six o'clock train on the 21st. Now I must run away, dear Mrs. Ruthven."

The ladies kissed and parted, Shirley escorting Lady Dorrington to her carriage.

When he returned Mrs. Ruthven had resumed her seat on the sofa, and did not speak for a moment. He stood looking at her in silence also.

Captain Shirley was below middle height, well but slightly made, with a dark keen face, the features small, and well cut, piercing black eyes, the expression of which was in general carefully guarded. He wore a small thick moustache, the rest of his face was clean shaven, the blue-black of a naturally strong beard showing clearly through the skin. From head to heel he was perfectly, freshly dressed, and had an air of extreme neatness.

"Well," said Mrs. Ruthven at last, raising her eyes slowly to his, "you see I look after your interests! I have managed this very pleasant invitation for you, and I imagine we shall meet a very good set at Mr. Marsden's."

"You are extremely good to me in all minor matters," said Shirley, drawing a chair near her sofa.

"With which you must be satisfied," she said calmly, adding after an instant's pause, "and thankful."

"I *am* thankful! I am very thankful for the little note in which you warned me you would be in Town for two or three days, and would talk over the sugges-

tion I made, instead of refusing it at once. How long do you remain?"

"Till Monday! I have not as yet such a circle of acquaintance, nor such a multiplicity of invitations as would enable me to fill up a spare day or two."

"I fancy you command society pretty much as you like."

"No, Shirley!" she returned with sudden earnestness, raising herself on her cushions as she spoke, "English society is a bigger thing than either of us imagined. I have a good start, that is all. The want of family connections is a serious matter. Then having been at school in Paris till I went out to join my father, is another drawback. If I had married sooner, a man of more importance than poor Charlie, and returned with him here, I should have made a place for myself; but I shall do it all the same, only it will take more time. I have no basis for my operations, except my late husband's relations."

Shirley made a slight gesture of assent. "I suppose," he said, "you believe that what you call a position in London society, is worth the trouble it will cost?"

"I do," thoughtfully. "I have, as you know, many other pastimes, but when I weary of them, this ambition always remains to occupy me!"

Shirley knocked the top of his cane softly and reflectively against his small white pointed teeth.

"I was a fool," he said somewhat abruptly, "to dream I could persuade you to marry me."

"Yes," she returned gently, with a slight smile, "I think you were."

"You are charmingly candid! Well, Mrs. Ruthven, have you thought favourably of my proposition?"

"To appoint you my trustee in the place of my father's old ally, the late Mr. Burges? No, my dear friend! Not at present, at least."

"But you do not entirely reject me! You must feel sure no one could be so devoted to your interests as I am."

"I am quite sure no interest would come before mine, save one, and that is your own."

Shirley showed all his white teeth in a pleasant smile. "You are very keen, but you do me injustice," he said, "and believe me your interests need looking after; I have been making quiet inquiries in various quarters and I find your present and sole trustee, Clifford Marsden, has been in a very shaky condition, for some time, but has lately been evidently flush of cash—cash which I suspect is yours."

"Oh! nonsense," carelessly; "Marsden may be a spendthrift, which after all is only suspected, but he is a man of unblemished honour."

"I don't believe in unblemished honour," observed Shirley calmly.

"Probably not," she returned. "I am in no hurry, and I should like to consult Mr. Marsden as to a second trustee. It suits me to stand well and on confidential terms with my late husband's relatives."

"No doubt; and," with a keen glance, "should this especial relative become his successor, a delay in naming the second trustee might save trouble in case a new settlement is required."

"Precisely," said Mrs. Ruthven with much composure. "I should certainly accept Clifford Marsden, were he to ask me. The position as his wife would suit me exactly. But I do not think he will; unless,

indeed, he wants my money very much. He is not a bit in love with me, nor I with him; but it might do. Indeed, I am now old enough to feel that marriage is too important a matter to be confused with love! I was always accustomed to this view of the subject in my school days; but stupidly allowed a whim to blind me when I married poor Captain Ruthven, who was really very nice."

"Well, I wish all success to your platonic scheme! But at the same time, I should advise you to take every possible precaution as respects the trusteeship. I have generally observed that honour is blemished or unblemished very much in proportion to the degree of temptation to which it is exposed. You must remember that, save myself, you have few old original friends, if any, in England; and in all sincerity *I am* devoted to you."

"I am really inclined to believe you," said Mrs. Ruthven with a soft smile, and seductive up-turning of her eyes, "so I will try and do you a good turn. At Evesleigh you will probably meet a very charming girl—a cousin of the Marsdens; she has a small property (I will enquire into its value), and if worth the trouble you might win and marry her. I will give you all the help I can."

"You are very good. As an abstract idea, I am not a believer in marriage, but I am open to conviction. Since I left the service to live on my private fortune, I have not done so badly; what with a little luck on the Stock Exchange, and a little judgment in making a book——"

"Take care, all gambling is risky; but, as you do dabble in such matters, I wish you would give me an

idea how I can get more than three-and-a-half per cent.—that is all I receive for forty or fifty thousand pounds?"

"Fifteen hundred a year! Can your highly honourable trustee do no better for you than that? You *must* have a weak spot in your heart for him, or you would never stand it."

"There is no question of weakness," she returned scornfully. "Our relations, if any ever exist between us, will be purely a matter of calculation."

Shirley looked down with a slight incredulous smile, and Mrs. Ruthven watched him with a glance of fierce intense anger. Quickly recovering herself she added, with insolent indifference:

"Believe or not, as you choose."

"I much prefer believing," returned Shirley. "Now, what are you going to do during the rest of your exile here? Will you come down to Oxford with me to-morrow? It is one of the places you ought to be able to talk about!"

"If you will come back and dine with me at 7.30 to-day, I shall have made up my mind, and tell you."

"To hear is to obey. I shall be here punctually; and in the meantime I will think over the question of investments! Three-and-a-half per cent.! The God of Love himself *must* have blindfolded you before you submitted to such robbery."

"As you like," returned Mrs. Ruthven coldly and carelessly, "so good morning, and *au revoir*."

Shirley kissed her hand with an air of gallantry, and left the room.

When the door had closed on him Mrs. Ruthven sprang up with the quick feline grace of a tigress.

Darting to her writing-table she seized the photograph of Clifford Marsden, and stood for a moment intensely still, gazing at it. Then she murmured:

"Purely a matter of calculation," and laughed aloud. "Only a matter of calculation," she repeated. "Oh! my prince! my king!"

Kissing the picture passionately, she threw it from her on the table, and crouching again on the sofa, sat with clasped hands gazing at some imaginary picture as if lost in a dream.

* * * *

All Blankshire rejoiced that Evesleigh Manor was once more opened to the county, and to the severely clerical society of Oldbridge.

Though the present owner had been most popular with all sorts and conditions of men, his prolonged absence was beginning to tell against him, and whispers of his extravagance were raising serious doubts that he would again show himself among his provincial peers. The rumoured magnificence of his preparations gave the lie most agreeably to these ill-natured reports. Everyone welcomed the idea of such a neighbour living in their midst, and entertaining both great and small with the open-handed hospitality which characterised the Marsdens of old.

Enlivened by the gossip to which this unexpected event gave rise, time flew quickly, and the fingers of the local dress-makers worked nimbly, while almost every train which stopped at Oldbridge brought men or munitions of war destined for the Manor House.

Mrs. L'Estrange and her step-daughter took a natural and lively interest in the preparations. Marsden himself was frequently at the Cottage, always in the

most charming spirits, and boyishly full of anticipated success.

It was the day but one before the ball. Nora was sitting near one of the drawing-room windows which was open, while a bright wood fire crackled on the hearth. It was a soft, grey day, as if nature was tenderly mourning the departed summer, and the woods gave out a faint autumnal fragrance.

Nora sang softly in snatches as she plied her needle diligently, braiding a winter frock for Beatrice.

"May I come in through the window?" asked Winton, so suddenly from the verandah that Nora started and blushed vividly.

"I ought to send you round by the front door as a punishment for frightening me!" she said laughing, as she rose and gave him her hand. "But you shall be absolved, for I see you bring me 'Cornhill.'"

"Lie there and wait, good dog," cried Winton, when he had whistled his attendant pointer to heel, and the animal, of the beautiful red-brown Irish breed, obeyed at once.

"What a dear dog! We sorely need a watch-dog," said Nora. "You know this place is rather solitary at night. The Squire has promised me one of Queenie's pups as soon as it is old enough to leave its mother."

"If it is worthy of its race, you will have a treasure. The Evesleigh mastiffs are famous."

Winton had entered while they spoke, and instinctively walked to the fire-place, where he stood surveying the room and its occupant.

"What a pleasant room this is," he said abruptly, after a few moments' silence. "I never see anything

like it elsewhere. It is pretty, yet not too fine for use, and supremely home-like. You cannot fancy what a charm there is about everything home-like to an outsider like myself. Brookdale and its owners will be my most lasting memories of the old country hereafter."

"I am very glad you appreciate it, and glad, too, that you have come back in such a good humour. Had you good sport at Moatlands?"

"Very fair; nothing remarkably exciting."

"I suppose not, as you have returned so soon. I thought you were not to be back till to-morrow."

"I *was* rather bored. And how is Mrs. L'Estrange?"

"Very well. She has gone down to the village with Bea. I stayed at home because I rather expect my godmother, Lady Dorrington."

"Oh, she is your godmother, is she?" said Winton, settling himself in a corner of the sofa near his companion, who resumed her needlework. "When did she arrive?"

"On Saturday. She came earlier than was expected, so the Squire was out riding with me. I do not think she was pleased."

"Indeed! Are you fond of riding?"

"Yes; but I should have enjoyed it more, but for the want of practice all the time we were in Germany. The Squire says I don't sit badly, and that he will make a good horsewoman of me before the autumn is over."

"Ha! Is he going to stay here, then?"

"I suppose so; I hope so; he is very nice and kind. I was quite surprised to find him still so young. I used to think of him as being as old as my father.

I was accustomed to see them together when I was a child. He must have been quite a boy then."

"No; not quite. He is only a year younger than I am," returned Winton, gazing dreamily with a softened expression at her deft fingers and pretty pose.

"Is it possible?" cried Nora in frank, uncomplimentary surprise.

"I suppose, then, you consider me a sort of grandfather?" said he, with a grim smile.

"No, indeed!" lifting her eyes with a sweet look of apology to his, "only you are so much graver, and —and—more dignified, that——" she paused.

"A gracious translation of the first terms which suggested themselves, I suspect," said Winton, laughing good-humouredly. "Then *I* have been broiling for years under an Indian sun, in an up-country station, where my days have been occupied in dealing justice to a lot of ruffians, extracting taxes and hunting big game. You cannot wonder that I am a little rusty and unfitted to amble in a lady's chamber."

"You amble very gently in ours."

"That is, I do not absolutely smash the china toys every time I walk across the room! Do you know, I was half afraid I should find you tyrannized over my old friend, Helen Landell, but I do not believe you do, though I imagine there *is* a dash of the tyrant in you."

"But why?" asked Nora, turning her earnest eyes full on him. "What have I done——?" her sentence was never finished, for the door was dashed suddenly open, Bea, followed by her mother, ran into the room, and the pleasant *tête-à-tête* was over.

"Oh, Nora, poor Waldman was nearly killed!" cried Bea. "He could hardly get away fast enough from the wagonette, it was driving so fast to meet the train."

Mrs. L'Estrange was greeting Winton while she spoke.

"Yes," she said, "the Evesleigh guests are gathering fast. Mrs. Ruthven arrived yesterday, and Lord Alfred Harcourt, Captain Shirley and some other people, arrive to-day."

"Shirley!" repeated Winton. "Is *he* coming?"

"Do you know him?" asked Nora.

"Not personally; but I have heard some curious reports about him. He was in Ruthven's Regiment, and there was a story about his having done something queer about a cheque or a bill; but he paid up, I believe, and then retired. I never met him."

"I suppose gossip is as ill-natured in India as elsewhere," said Mrs. L'Estrange.

"Rather more so," returned Winton.

"Why, Nora, here are Lady Dorrington, and Mr. Marsden, and another lady and gentleman," cried Beatrice; "they are coming from the bridge."

"Yes," exclaimed Nora; "they are bringing Mrs. Ruthven and Lord Dorrington; I will go and meet them;" and she went into the hall.

"Well, dear, I have brought Mrs. Ruthven to see you," cried Lady Dorrington, kissing Nora's brow.

"And I am delighted to see Mrs. Ruthven," said Nora, with gracious self-possession, feeling on her own ground.

"You are very good," murmured that lady, who was most elaborately got up in a country costume, fit

for a society play at the Comédie Française, and was feeling dreadfully tired even after so short a walk in her "Louis Quinze" shoes.

"And how are you, my pretty maid?" asked Lord Dorrington—a jovial, redfaced country gentleman. "How do you like living in the wilds after your foreign training?"

"Exceedingly well; pray come in and sit down;" and she ushered them into the pleasant drawing-room, which had called forth Winton's eulogy.

"How goes it, fair cousin?" said Marsden, who was the last to enter. "It is quite thirty-six hours since I saw you; I suppose nothing strange has occurred in the interval? You shall have your puppy to-morrow. I told Stubbs to bring him over; do not feed him too well."

Mrs. Ruthven threw a keen glance round the entrance hall and drawing-room—quickly appraising the small value of the old-fashioned but well arranged furniture, and marvelling at the expression of refinement and prettiness produced by such scant materials. In her heart she wondered and chafed at the consideration accorded by such important persons as Marsden and the Dorringtons to a couple of poor relations, with nothing particular to recommend them, and who, on their part, treated their distinguished visitors with the easy politeness of perfect equals.

"You have made the house very pretty, dear Mrs. L'Estrange," cried Lady Dorrington, who filled a large easy chair to overflowing. "I was afraid you would find everything fearfully dilapidated after such a long absence."

"Our tenants seem to have taken very good care of

the place. There is but little mischief done." And the two elder ladies plunged into a domestic discussion, while Nora, having introduced Mrs. Ruthven to her stepmother, and placed her in a comfortable seat by the window, now presented Winton to Lord Dorrington.

"I think I had the pleasure of meeting you at Sir George Barry's," said the latter, and the two gentlemen spoke a little apart, while Marsden took up and examined some old Dresden on the mantel-piece.

"What a pretty place," said Mrs. Ruthven looking out on the lawn. "But the view is a little limited, is it not, Mr. Marsden? You must feel rather *triste*, my dear Miss L'Estrange, shut up here after the freedom of life abroad?"

"Life is much freer here, I assure you. I can go in and out as I like; and I find so much to do, the day is not long enough."

"When you are a little older, and ambition begins to wake," said Mrs. Ruthven, with a caressing smile, "you will sigh for a wider sphere—and, no doubt, find it."

"Ah!" exclaimed Nora, her heart overflowing with a vague, delicious, unaccountable sense of pleasure, "I believe I am incapable of ambition. Why should I trouble about anything beyond my present state? I have all I want, all I can possibly wish for; if I need a little change, I can travel awhile—but always with the delicious sense of having a home ready for me. I look upon myself as a very lucky girl!"

Mrs. Ruthven laughed lightly, with a tinge of mockery. "I have at least seen one contented individual," she said, throwing a languishing glance to Mars-

den, who came to her side. "I am glad to have been able to introduce you to a happy valley, which the princess, its possessor, does not pine to leave," he said.

"I should like to have a look at your gardens, Nora," remarked Lord Dorrington.

"By all means. Will you come, Mrs. Ruthven?" she asked. "And we shall have tea when we come in."

Mrs. Ruthven hesitated. She really felt tired; but she saw Marsden was going, and she did not like to stay behind. It bored her to be obliged to drag round the pleasure grounds and small kitchen-garden—to listen to Lord Dorrington's disquisition on espaliers and wall-fruit—and queries as to how the farm was managed. Then the cocks and hens and ducks were visited—even a neatly-kept pig, and a couple of sweet, patient-looking cows, whose heads Nora rubbed as though she had never been away from her country home.

Lord Dorrington quite enjoyed poking about—and even Marsden seemed unaccountably interested in the rubbishy details of the paltry little place. So Mrs. Ruthven determined to occupy herself with Mark Winton.

"I am afraid you do not remember me, Mr. Winton," she said, with a gentle smile, showing her pearly teeth.

"Oh, yes!" raising his hat; "I perfectly remember having had the pleasure of meeting you at Simla—when I was staying with Colonel Dacre and his wife."

"Ah, yes—to be sure," with a slight change of colour. "I forgot that I had seen you there. It was of the winter at Delhi, when my poor husband's regiment was quartered there, I spoke. But now you have mentioned the Dacres—what has become of them?"

"Mrs. Dacre is dead," said Winton, shortly; "and Dacre is married again."

"Ah!" she returned, with a sigh, "the dead are soon forgotten."

"And the living, often, not much considered," added Winton, drily.

"What a bright radiant creature that Miss L'Estrange looks!" said the fair widow, sweetly, after a moment's pause. "Is she really so contented with her secluded home as she seems?"

"I see no reason to doubt it."

"Then, depend upon it, her heart is filled and satisfied, in some way, or by some one," and she glanced at Marsden, who was stroking a little black kitten that Nora had picked up.

Winton's eyes followed hers, but he made no reply, and then the young proprietress suggested going in to tea, as she was sure Mrs. Ruthven looked tired.

A tempting tea-table was spread with toast and hot cakes, and the conversation grew lively, and even noisy, as the prospects of the ball were discussed. At last the evening began to darken, and Lady Dorrington proposed their returning.

"You look pale and weary," said Marsden, in a low voice, to Mrs. Ruthven; "stay here, and I will send the pony-carriage over for you."

"Oh, thank you! I shall manage to walk back."

Adieus exchanged, the party set forth, Nora and Bea accompanying them as far as the bridge. When half-way across, Marsden exclaimed:—"Excuse me a moment—I quite forgot a message for Mrs. L'Estrange," and he turned back quickly, overtaking Nora, who was alone.

"Be sure you send for what flowers you require, Nora," he said. "I told the gardener not to cut any till he knew what you wanted."

"You are really too good, Squire. Your guests will want them all. I have what I need at home!"

"Then I will select for you myself. See that you wear *mine*, if you prefer Winton's——!"

"Why, Mr. Winton would never dream of offering anyone flowers," said Nora, laughing. "I shall certainly wear yours, and try to look my best for your ball."

"Look yourself," said Marsden, adding in a different tone, "sweet cousin and queen!"

He laughed a rather forced laugh.

"Adieu, Sir Knight!" returned Nora, laughing; "go and take care of Mrs. Ruthven," and she ran away into the house, reaching it in time to say good-bye to Winton, who was about to start on his homeward walk to Oldbridge.

Mrs. Ruthven was very tired, she said, and therefore silent, but in reality she was asking herself, over and over again, what it was that Marsden went back for. She deeply distrusted Nora.

CHAPTER III.

THE BALL.

BOTH Mrs. L'Estrange and her step-daughter uttered exclamations of surprise and admiration as they entered the hall of Evesleigh Manor House on the night of the ball.

It was large and oblong, occupying the height of two storeys, with a double staircase at the back, curving gently to an arch, beneath which a door led to the rooms in the rear of the mansion. A gallery of carved oak surrounded it on three sides. Below were the reception and breakfast rooms, while the library, morning, and billiard rooms were in the wings. This hall was exquisitely decorated and brilliantly lighted. Figures in armour held lamps, banks of flowers filled in the bend of the staircase at either side; the doorway beneath, which was handsomely draped, showed the softly-lighted passage beyond, leading, between ferns and palms, to the refreshment room. Flowers wreathed the gallery, and groups of banners hung in the angles. Sofas and chairs stood in various positions, with Persian rugs, bear and tiger skins, lying before them on the highly polished oaken floor.

The ladies of Brookdale came early, they wished to see the rooms before the crowd assembled.

"Lady Dorrington is in the white drawing-room," said the butler, opening the first door on the left.

This was the smaller of the two drawing-rooms, and was as bright and beautiful as lights, flowers and groups of plants could make it.

Lady Dorrington, in velvet and diamonds, stood in the centre, with nearly all the house party, reinforced by several gentlemen Nora had not seen before, gathered round her.

Directly the butler announced "Mrs. and Miss L'Estrange," Marsden came forward, shook hands very cordially with Mrs. L'Estrange, and let her pass on to Lady Dorrington; then stopping Nora, to whom he showed a programme, said, "I have put down my

name for waltz No. 8," pointing out the word "Clifford," written in ink against that number; "you cannot alter it, you see."

"I shall not want to alter it," returned Nora, looking up with a smile. "I fancy you are the best dancer here."

She was struck with the expression of his eyes. They were fiercely bright, and had a certain indescribable look of intense resolution, while his face was white, and the veins in his forehead showed distinctly; otherwise he was strikingly handsome and distinguished. Evening dress suited him well.

"Mrs. and Miss Saunders, Captain Lethbridge, Mr. Winton," were announced in rapid succession. Lady Dorrington went forward to receive them.

"My severe duties are about to commence," said Marsden, who still held the programme, which he now put into Nora's hand, managing to catch and press it as he did so. "I look to *you* for my reward by-and-bye."

"I wonder," thought Nora, looking after him as he went to greet his guests, "if the Squire is ever in earnest?"

Her conjectures were interrupted by the appearance of Mrs. Ruthven, who came in from the room beyond. She looked radiant and fairy-like in soft satin and delicate lace, and absolutely ablaze with jewels. Diamond stars studded the firmament of her golden-red hair; a collar of superb rubies, set with brilliants, encircled her neck, and, in the estimation of some, seemed too overpowering for her small figure. Diamond and ruby butterflies glittered on her shoulders, where they caught up her scanty lace sleeves, and bracelets of rare gems clasped her arms.

"I never saw anything like her jewels," said Nora to Winton, who had taken his stand beside her.

"I should like to know their real value, and what they cost old Guthrie," he returned. "I fancy there are some curious stories attached to these fine things."

Here Mrs. Ruthven came straight to where they stood, followed by a neat, accurately-dressed, keen-eyed man.

"Ah! good evening, Miss L'Estrange. Isn't this a pretty room? Really, the decorations are in admirable taste. I must compliment *you* on your dress, if you will forgive me," she said, looking keenly at Nora from head to foot, with a comprehensive glance.

The dress was a pretty combination of cream satin, tulle powdered with pearl beads, and pearl fringe, bouquets of fresh green grass and wild foliage decorated the skirt, and a small coronet of similar leaves gave a becoming stateliness to her well-shaped head.

Mrs. Ruthven felt that she was a dangerous rival, or might be, if she knew how to use her advantages, but the honest steadiness and tranquillity of her large dark grey eyes, seemed to assure the dainty intriguante that she was more than a match for her unconscious antagonist.

"I am infinitely flattered, Mrs. Ruthven," exclaimed Nora, with a pleased smile and a slight blush; "your approbation is a compliment—as to *you*, you are quite too dazzling. I never saw anything like your rubies before. I confess I should like to see all your jewels one day."

"You shall, if you like. Meantime, here is Captain Shirley, waiting for the introduction I promised him. Captain Shirley—Miss L'Estrange."

"May I have the honour of the first dance, Miss L'Estrange?" he asked, with a low bow and air of repressed eagerness.

"With pleasure."

She handed him her card. Having inscribed his name, he hesitated, and said, with a smile of entreaty:

"Dare I ask for the second waltz?"

"Very well," returned Nora, with a little laugh at his imploring tone.

"I assure you Captain Shirley is a capital partner," put in Mrs. Ruthven.

Then addressing him, she added:

"The rooms are filling rapidly. Give me your arm, and I will join Lady Dorrington. He shall return directly, Miss L'Estrange."

"Well," said Winton, who had exchanged a nod of recognition with Shirley, "I think you might have given *me* the first quadrille, any idiot can walk through a quadrille!"

"You know I could not *ask* you," said Nora, glancing up into his eyes with a bright, amused sparkle in her own. "And as you said nothing about it, I never thought you would deign to dance."

"I don't suppose you ever gave me a thought, and you are right; I have stiffened too much and too soon into elderly ways, to be a fit partner for a creature like you."

"Mr. Winton," with an air half-mocking, half-kindly, "will you do me the honour of dancing the first quadrille?" and she handed him her programme, from which he perceived that the first dance was a waltz, the second a quadrille.

Mark Winton flushed through his sun-tanned skin, as he returned the correct reply:

"Most happy! Where shall I find you?" he added eagerly, as he saw Shirley returning.

"Here, I shall return to this room," and she was gone.

Mrs. Ruthven's triumph began with the dancing. Though some of the county grandees were present, the host opened the ball with her, and he had never before been so charming, or so devoted in his attentions; he explained with an amusing air of martyrdom the cruel necessity for his taking the Marchioness of Blankford, an immensely stout, talkative woman, with grey hair and moustache, to supper; but there was no escape. Mrs. Ruthven had never felt so secure, so elated. What wonderful luck hers was, to be ardently in love with the right man!

The sense of gratification gave a charm to her expression it did not always have, and the Blankshire squires were lost in admiration of the fascinating woman, who, besides bearing about with her the outward and visible signs of so much adorable wealth, might well have tempted a man to make a fool of himself, and marry her without it. Everyone sought for introductions and dances, at least all the men of social importance, except Winton. And in the midst of her success, Mrs. Ruthven noticed and resented his neglect.

She had, however, nothing to complain of. He was rigidly, properly polite, when she spoke to him, but he never sought her voluntarily; and she fancied that everyone would notice the avoidance of the only old acquaintance she had in the room, except Captain Shirley, and he was nobody. But of their former ac-

quaintance, or his neglect, no one was conscious save Shirley, who had the bad taste to comment on it.

Meantime, the guests poured in, and dancing had begun with great spirit.

"I feel as if I ought to look for you and offer you my arm," said Nora, as Winton rose to give her his seat beside Mrs. L'Estrange, when Shirley brought her back. "Having asked you to dance, I should act the *rôle* completely."

"I will excuse you."

"Why do you not dance, Helen?" she resumed. "Lord Dorrington tells me you refused him peremptorily."

"It would not be becoming in the *chaperone* of a great grown-up daughter to dance," returned Mrs. L'Estrange good-humouredly.

"You must give *me* a quadrille, Mrs. L'Estrange," said Winton, "for the sake of 'Auld Langsyne.' I don't think I have danced since the old Rectory days, when you used to be my partner—you remember?"

"I do, indeed!" A quick sigh caught Nora's ear, and she noticed the soft, sad look which stole over her step-mother's countenance.

Mrs. L'Estrange was a small, elegant, but somewhat colourless woman, with pale blue eyes, and pale brown hair, a pretty figure, and very soft, quiet manners; she could talk well when roused, but had always the air of preferring to be still and silent. "She has had a trying life!" thought Nora, while Winton said, "Well—I will come and look for you, presently." Then he gave Nora his arm, and they took their places.

"I think you must have danced more than you admit," said she, when the quadrille was over. "You made very few mistakes!"

"I watched my neighbours, and the evolutions are not difficult. No; don't go back yet; you will be snapt up by your next partner. Who is it, Lethbridge?"

"No, a friend of the Squire's, who introduced him, Lord Alfred Harcourt."

"I don't think he will amuse you! Have you been in the conservatory yet? It is really very pretty."

"No!" yielding to his movement in that direction.

Winton led her into the hall where numerous groups sat and stood about, down the passage before mentioned to the buffet, and then across the breakfast room as yet unoccupied, where card tables were set forth, into the conservatory.

This was dimly lighted by soft silvery lamps among the foliage, and freshened by the splash of a couple of fountains. The fragrance of the flowers, the cool stillness, after the noise and heat of the ball-room, were most welcome.

"This is lovely, indeed!" cried Nora, "none of the balls I was at in London were half so beautiful."

"How many did you go to?" asked Winton.

"Three," she replied, "you like accuracy."

"It is essential! What is this place at the end?"

"Let us explore," cried Nora.

A door which led out to the terrace had been replaced by a deep red velvet curtain, which, looped to one side, gave admittance to a Turkish tent, draped with rich, mellow coloured oriental stuffs, intermixed with gold. A divan with embroidered cushions occupied one side, and a stained glass lantern swung from the centre, while a long mirror opposite the door reproduced the charming effect of the interior. "This is admirably done," said Winton, looking round.

"It must have been taken out of the Arabian Nights, just as it is," exclaimed Nora. "One almost expects to see Schariar lying on those cushions, and waiting for the continuation of the story which Scheherazade promised him in 'her next.'"

"No one seems to have found it out. It is cunningly concealed."

"No doubt Mr. Marsden has had it done to please Mrs. Ruthven, and remind her of her Eastern life!"

"I don't suppose *that* would give her any particular pleasure," said Winton dryly.

"Are you sometimes taken with ill-natured fits?" asked Nora, looking up into his eyes.

"Never," he replied, emphatically, "I am always generous, just and reasonable! Will you not sit down, and allow me to enlarge a little further on my own admirable qualities? the cushions are soft and comfortable."

"I must not, however interesting the subject! My partner will be looking for me—and—"

Without a syllable of remonstrance, Winton gave her his arm, and they began to retrace their steps. "When the waltz is over we must bring Helen to see this beautiful tent," said Nora. "Tell me, Mr. Winton," she went on after a short pause, "was Helen ever young and merry, and thoughtless, like me for instance?"

"Never like you," quickly; "I wish she had been, for her own sake. She never had your buoyancy or vitality; but she was bright once, and full of feeling; she had hard lines for some time after her father's death. I often used to wonder how she was getting

on, poor dear little soul, and was glad to find her as happy as she is."

"Ah! Miss L'Estrange, where have you been hiding yourself?" cried Lord Alfred Harcourt, meeting them in the doorway of the refreshment-room, "I have been looking everywhere for you; this is our waltz."

Winton resigned her to the new claimant and was almost immediately button-holed by an old officer who had known him in India. It was some time before he got back into safe anchorage beside Mrs. L'Estrange; with Nora he did not get a word till later, as she only returned at intervals to be immediately carried off again by a fresh partner.

Mrs. Ruthven, bland, smiling, attentive to all with whom she came in contact, was nevertheless keenly watchful of her host and his doings. He had opened the ball with her, and then his duties kept them apart until the fifth or sixth dance, but during that time she had not seen him bestow the smallest notice on Miss L'Estrange. Instinct had made Mrs. Ruthven more cognisant than anyone else of the attraction Nora exercised over Marsden—the instinct of a strange unruly passion; and though nearly convinced that she was herself a sufficient counter attraction, and almost delivered from her dread of Nora as a formidable rival, she was not yet quite at ease, not quite free from a sense of the necessity for outmanœuvring Mrs. L'Estrange and her step-daughter, whom she firmly believed would move heaven and earth to compass so fine a match.

"At last!" exclaimed Marsden, coming up to the sofa where she sat talking to Lord Dorrington, who speedily effaced himself. "At last I have a moment's

liberty, and I hope you can give me the next. It is a waltz. I have watched you floating round the room with sundry incapables unable to do justice to the rhythm of your fairy feet, till I cursed in my heart, though obliged to give good words with my tongue! Let me see your card. 'Sir George Brocklehurst,' may I go and dispose of him? Yes, *do* let me promise and vow three, or thirty-three, things in your name. I *must* have this waltz with you!"

"I give you carte blanche," replied Mrs. Ruthven with downcast eyes, almost overpowered with an intoxicating sense of delight at his tone. "Here he comes."

"My dear fellow," cried Marsden addressing him, "will you do me a very great favour? I have only this one waltz free till nearly the end of the evening, will you resign your great privilege of dancing it with Mrs. Ruthven in exchange for—how many?—two dances after supper—may I say two, Mrs. Ruthven?"

Mrs. Ruthven bowed with a gracious smile, saying: "Perhaps Sir George has not so many disengaged."

"With Mrs. Ruthven's approval, I can refuse nothing to my good host," returned Sir George, a tall, thin, pompous man, with a profound belief in his own importance.

"A thousand thanks! now let me provide you with another partner."

"Thank you, no! I do not much care for dancing in the abstract."

A low bow. "The first and second dances after supper, then?" He wrote them solemnly on his card, and disappeared.

"There, there goes the Marshal Niel waltz! Don't

let us lose time. Come, *ma belle Nourmahal!* May I presume to call you so?" said Marsden in a low tone as he gave her his arm and they walked into the ball-room. "Certainly in your shining golden gown and flashing jewels, you suggest the Light of the Harem. But, dare I confess a heresy?"

"I think you may," smiling softly.

"This is a terrible one. I would rather see your fair neck without its overpowering load of gems, you may trust it to its own beauty. These ornaments are too heavy, too mundane for you; I feel as if I *must* hold you up all the closer, lest the weight of your jewels prove too much for your strength." He put his arm round her, and they whirled away into the crush of dancers.

"How pretty your young cousin, Miss L'Estrange, looks to-night," said Mrs. Ruthven, as soon as she took breath, when they paused after the first two or three turns. "Why has she such a fancy for that cold, hard, granitic Mr. Winton?"

"A fancy for Winton!" said Marsden, turning sharply to look at Nora, who was standing nearly opposite, her arm through her partner's, but her head half-turned and raised in a pretty attitude to speak to Winton, who stood behind. There was an indescribable expression of pleasure and liking in her pose, which somewhat justified Mrs. Ruthven's remark. "Oh no," continued Marsden, "she has better taste than to care for such a piece of petrifaction! Besides he is an old flame of the step-mother's, and is I fancy paying his court in that quarter. No matter, these refrigerated machines are not in *our* line, you and I are children

of the sun, though chance has made us English. Are you rested? Let us have another turn."

When next they stopped Marsden bent over her and said, with an air of tender interest:

"I am afraid you are fatigued, you tremble! Come, there is a charming retreat at the end of the conservatory, where you can rest and be quiet; you look pale. The waltz will not be over just yet, and I can bring you an ice there." Drawing her hand through his arm, Marsden led her out into the cool conservatory.

Mrs. Ruthven was unusually disturbed. Her prominent thought was: "He has made this opportunity to propose for me. To-morrow I shall be the mistress elect of Evesleigh Manor," so, leaning slightly towards her host, as if needing his support, she willingly accepted his guidance.

The dance finished, Nora, escorted by her partner, an officer of the regiment quartered at Oldbridge, mingled with the stream of guests thronging to the buffet, and while talking together over their ices and lemon squash with Mrs. L'Estrange and Winton, she noticed Marsden breaking away from a prosy master of fox-hounds, who had button-holed him.

"I really cannot stay," he said loudly and impatiently. "I want to take an ice to Mrs. Ruthven, who is feeling faint."

He went on to the buffet, and spoke to one of the waiters.

"No, I will take it myself," he replied to something the man said.

Nora thought he looked really anxious and disturbed.

"Is Mrs. Ruthven feeling unwell?" she asked, as Marsden passed.

He shook his head, with a smiling glance towards the bore from whom he had just escaped, as if to intimate it was an excuse for leaving his guest, and went on quickly into the next room.

Winton looked after him.

"The rooms are not hot enough for fainting," he said. "You have not seen the tent yet, Mrs. L'Estrange; come and inspect it."

He offered her his arm, Nora and Lord Alfred Harcourt followed. As soon as they entered the morning room, they saw a group of men round the door leading into the conservatory.

Next to it stood Marsden, a look of puzzled surprise on his face.

"The lock must have shot of itself," Captain Lethbridge was saying, as Mrs. L'Estrange and Winton drew near. "It is unaccountable."

"What is the matter?" asked the latter.

"The door is mysteriously locked, though I passed through only just now," said Marsden, shaking it violently.

"It looks as if the fair widow did not want you back," cried Lord Alfred with a foolish laugh.

Marsden gave him an angry look.

"See if the key is in the door."

"Break it open."

"Cut out a pane," were some of the suggestions rapidly offered.

"Is there not some other way into the conservatory?" asked Winton.

"Yes, of course; through the east corridor," cried Marsden. He rushed away.

In another moment they saw him pass the door and disappear, only to return more rapidly, and burst into the room, exclaiming: "Where is Lady Dorrington? Mrs. L'Estrange, come for God's sake! The key is gone, and Mrs. Ruthven is lying insensible! Call her maid! Look for Lady Dorrington," he cried to the servants who were about. "Bring some water. Come, Mrs. L'Estrange," and in evident agitation he led the way, through a part of the house not thrown open to the general company, through the conservatory to the tent.

Winton, Nora, and one or two of the others followed to see if they could be of any use.

Mrs. Ruthven lay apparently lifeless, stretched on the divan, one arm hanging down inertly, her deadly pallor contrasting with her splendid dress and gay surroundings.

"Is she dead? Oh, is she dead?" whispered Nora, in awe and terror.

"No, no," returned Mrs. L'Estrange, taking the hand which hung so helplessly, "she is not cold—she breathes—give me your fan—she must have air—do not come too close—send for Doctor Weldon, I saw him just now."

"I will go for him," said Winton, "but look, Marsden, her jewels are gone."

"What can have happened?" cried Marsden. "Has she been robbed? Good God! and perhaps injured! Call Weldon."

Turning towards the door, he met Lady Dorrington

coming in, and with her the chief doctor of Oldbridge, one of the guests.

"Well, well; what's the matter? Hot rooms; too much dancing?" exclaimed Dr. Weldon, a short, stout, authoritative man. "Pooh, pooh! don't look so frightened," to Nora, as he took Mrs. L'Estrange's place. "That's right; all she wants is air," he laid his hand on her side. "Heart beats; it's just a swoon; keep fanning, please—can you get her clothes loosened?—all fasten at the back?—um—irrational! You had better get out, gentlemen. Are *you* her maid?" to a smart little Frenchwoman, who came in, followed by the butler carrying a caraffe of water and a goblet.

"Oh, *mon dieu!* I never saw madame so bad before," cried the maid.

"Then is she subject to these attacks?"

"Yes, sare—a leetle—not often."

"Try and loosen her dress. Here, give me the water! Stand back, Mr. Marsden."

"I cannot leave till I see her revive," cried Marsden. "There is something mysterious in this seizure. She may be hurt. As her host, I feel responsible for her."

"Ha! she is coming to," said the doctor as a deep sigh parted the lips they watched so anxiously. "Get some brandy—don't let anyone come in here, there are too many already."

"Let us go, then," whispered Mrs. L'Estrange to Nora, adding to Lady Dorrington, "I shall be in the conservatory should you want me."

Another long shivering sigh broke from Mrs. Ruthven, she slowly opened her eyes, which met those of Lady Dorrington, who was bending over her.

For a minute or two she did not seem to recognise

anyone, then an expression of piteous alarm came into her face, as she feebly stretched out her arms and exclaimed in gasps:

"Save me! don't leave me!"

"Dear Mrs. Ruthven, you are perfectly safe; no harm shall come to you," said Marsden, coming forward.

"There—there; don't agitate her. You drink this, my dear madam," cried the Doctor, offering her some brandy and water. "You are all right now."

"Oh! no, no," cried Mrs. Ruthven, raising herself with an effort and throwing herself into Lady Dorrington's arms; "that dreadful man will kill me."

She burst into a violent fit of crying.

"That's right," said the Doctor complacently; "that will do her good."

"I wish we could get her to her own room," exclaimed Lady Dorrington. "But what has become of her necklace—her jewels? Did Mrs. L'Estrange take it off to relieve her?"

"No, it was gone when we came in," returned Marsden.

Hearing the words Mrs. Ruthven felt her neck and arms.

"They are all taken," she said. "No matter, he spared my life!"

"Who spared your life, dear?" asked Lady Dorrington.

"Now don't ask any questions. Get her to bed," urged the Doctor.

"Look here, Marsden," said Mark Winton, who had been examining the floor and sides of the tent. "Here is a long rent in the hangings, and the canvas,"

putting his head through, "is cut away on the outside also."

"Some one must have got through here," said Marsden, going over to examine the opening.

"Yes," faltered Mrs. Ruthven, who was now fast recovering, though her voice was broken by hysterical sobs. "He came from that side. I was putting my hair right when I thought I heard a rustle; I turned and found a dreadful figure in a cloak, a large hat and a mask close to me. Before I could draw a breath or scream, he seized me and smothered my face with something. I tried to push him away, for I felt I was losing my senses, as if I should die; then I knew no more till I saw dear Lady Dorrington. Oh! I shall never feel safe again."

"Great Heavens! while we were hesitating about that locked door, the scoundrel made his escape! Why I could scarcely have been ten minutes away. Can you ever forgive me for leaving you?" cried Marsden with emotion.

"Can you walk, or shall we carry you up-stairs?" asked the Doctor.

"I would rather walk," replied Mrs. Ruthven, who was still shivering and trembling.

"Get a shawl or something to wrap round her, Clifford," said his sister. Marsden went quickly to the cloak-room and returned with a wrap. Mrs. Ruthven gave him a look of tender recognition, and Lady Dorrington passing her arm round her, the Doctor assisting at the other side, she managed to reach her own room, murmuring entreaties that she should not be left alone as she went.

CHAPTER IV.

PERPLEXITY.

DURING this disturbance, of which few were aware, Captain Shirley was neither in the dancing or the refreshment rooms; but soon after, strolling through the Hall, he encountered Lord Dorrington.

"Well," said that genial peer, "I hope Mrs. Ruthven is all right again." He took it for granted that Shirley, her particular friend, knew of her indisposition, and had no idea himself that it had been anything more than an attack of faintness, due to heat and, possibly, tight-lacing.

"Has Mrs. Ruthven been ill?" exclaimed Shirley. "I was not aware. Where is she?"

"Oh, very likely in the ball-room by this time. Lady Dorrington was sent for, and I was told to say nothing about it."

"This is most extraordinary," said Shirley, who was apparently much, even painfully, surprised. His small, black eyes glittered eagerly, and he pressed his white teeth on his lower lip. "I have been outside at the door smoking a cigarette; the rooms are overpoweringly hot. I must ascertain how she is. I never saw her look better than this evening."

"Here is Marsden," returned Lord Dorrington. "He will tell us all about her. How is Mrs. Ruthven? Here is Captain Shirley anxious for tidings."

"A little better, calmer, I hope," said Marsden, who looked pale and anxious himself. "Lady Dorrington and the doctor are with her;" then, lowering

his voice, he added, "It has been a fearful affair altogether. Come into the library. I don't want a row made about it now."

As soon as they had closed the door of the library, where Winton awaited them, Marsden rapidly related the extraordinary robbery which had taken place, to the surprise and dismay of the listeners.

"By George!" cried Lord Dorrington, "I never heard of such daring villainy! What's to be done?"

"Her jewels all gone!" cried Shirley. "Why, they must be worth sixty or seventy thousand, at least. This is a deep laid scheme, she has been dogged by some of the swell-mob."

"But how did they know of her jewels?" asked Winton.

"She had them looked at or valued for some reason when she was in Paris on her way home," said Shirley; "very foolish of her, but she told me so."

"Ha! I thought you might give us some hint from your more intimate acquaintance with Mrs. Ruthven; any assistance you can give——"

"Is entirely at your service," returned Shirley, drawing a long breath.

Here Doctor Weldon entered, and without speaking sat down to the writing-table, and proceeded to write rapidly. Winton, in a low tone, described the position of the opening cut in the side of the tent.

"Will you despatch one of your grooms with this prescription to my assistant, Mr. Marsden?" said the Doctor, without looking up. "Mrs. Ruthven will hardly get any sleep without a composing draught."

"Certainly, doctor. I have already ordered a horse to be saddled, as I shall send a report of this extra-

ordinary occurrence to the head of the police at Oldbridge. The local men must have the mangling of the matter in the first instance. I will write a brief message, and then we will examine the terrace and grounds."

"Where, I fear, we'll find but little," said Winton.

"Given a quarter of an hour's start, and it will be almost impossible to catch the ruffian," observed Shirley.

"The only chance is that some accomplice may split. A thundering big reward is the thing," said Lord Dorrington.

"On such a night, with numbers of people going about, any stranger would pass unnoticed," returned Shirley.

The entrance of the butler interrupted.

"The man and horse are ready, sir."

"Wait," said Marsden.

"There is my note," added Dr. Weldon. "Tell your messenger to keep ringing the night-bell till someone comes. He knows my house?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

Then Marsden rose and gave full directions as to giving his missive into the hands of the inspector at Oldbridge.

"Who are you sending?"

"Tom Harris, sir, on Brown Robin."

"Good. Tell him to ride like the devil; then bring me a lantern in the conservatory. Quick. We will see if there are any tracks."

"It is almost incredible that in such a place, with crowds of people at hand, such an outrage could have been committed," said Shirley, who seemed dazed by his astonishment and concern.

"It is done, however, and very effectually. I am utterly confounded! It seems a sort of personal disgrace that such an outrage should have been perpetrated on a guest at Evesleigh."

"Come on," said Winton impatiently.

"Dorrington," said his host, pausing, "I wish you would take Lady Blankford in to supper and keep the people going. If the truth is known there will be such an infernal row. Everyone will be panic-struck, and I want them to get their supper in peace. Tell the marchioness what you like. Say I am looking after Mrs. Ruthven. Tell Mrs. L'Estrange and Nora not to talk about the theft."

"Very well," said Lord Dorrington obediently, and hurried away to do his brother-in-law's bidding.

Winton's cool head and practised intelligence made him the natural guide in such an investigation.

The gravel on the terrace without was hard and dry, and, save two faint, scarcely-perceptible impressions which might be foot-prints, there was no sign that the robber had lain in wait there.

Near the spot where Winton and his host stood was a short flight of steps leading to the pleasure-ground beneath, which here ended in a thick growth of evergreens, through which a walk led to a gate opening on the high road to Oldbridge. This gate was usually locked, but was a favourite means of egress to pedestrians going to and fro the town.

"Let us have a look along here," said Winton. "Hold the lantern lower."

Seeking carefully as they went, they examined every inch of ground at either side of the path, and had proceeded about a hundred yards when Winton

uttered an exclamation, and snatched the lantern from the bewildered butler.

"What's this?" he cried, stooping to drag a dark bundle from under the low-growing branches of some thick laurels.

Marsden eagerly assisted, and they quickly unrolled a short, wide, foreign-looking black cloak, from which fell a mask and a long knife, something like a bowie-knife.

"The scoundrel cast his skin here!" said Marsden, "making sure there would be no pursuit till the conservatory door was opened, and his victim recovered. Good God! that poor woman had a narrow escape. If fright and chloroform together had not made her insensible, he would have murdered her."

"Professional thieves in Europe seldom shed blood, I believe," returned Winton. "Let us break a couple of branches to mark the spot where we made the find."

"We had better go on to the gate, it is not more than half-a-mile," said Marsden.

"I will go, and perhaps Doctor Weldon will accompany me!" replied Winton, "but your prolonged absence will be remarked. You had better show yourself."

"I am with you!" cried the Doctor, who had tied a large silk pocket-handkerchief over his head as a measure of precaution. "And you, Captain Shirley?"

"I shall return to the house. It seems hopeless and fruitless to search further. My impression is, that the jewels are irreparably lost. They will be out of their settings by to-morrow and can never be identified."

"Still we must do our best," said Marsden. "Come, we'll get a glass of champagne, and hear how Mrs. Ruthven is."

* * * *

The announcement of supper gave everyone sufficient and agreeable occupation, so the absence of the host was but little remarked. Lady Blankford, an immensely stout personage, with gossiping propensities worthy of any washerwoman in Oldbridge, was pleased to be jocose about Marsden's evident devotion to Mrs. Ruthven, and said it was altogether a very pleasant outlook for the county. "We really all suffer from the closing of Evesleigh Manor. It was always a social rallying point. Pray tell me, was not the late Mr. Ruthven a cousin of the Marsdens?" and a long, genealogical talk ensued.

Meantime Mrs. L'Estrange and Nora had gone upstairs to Lady Dorrington's room to gain news of Mrs. Ruthven's condition, and to keep out of the way, as the nerves of both had been a good deal shaken.

"She is a good deal quieter," said Lady Dorrington, coming to join them. "She had another fit of hysterical crying, which has relieved her. My maid and her own will sit by her all night in turns, so she will never find herself alone. I have just seen Clifford, who was going to wash and brush away the traces of his search in the shrubbery. They found a mask, a cloak and a long sharp knife."

"A knife!" echoed Nora and her stepmother with a shudder. "What an escape she has had!"

"We had better go downstairs. They have gone in to supper, and I must say I feel to want something dreadfully. I am quite exhausted, and so infinitely

distressed about this horrid business; do come, Mrs. L'Estrange."

In the hall they met Winton, who had just returned with Doctor Weldon. They had found the Oldbridge gate securely locked, and no traces of footsteps. The daring robber seemed to have vanished as mysteriously as he came.

"That is not to be wondered at, considering the number of persons moving about on such a night," continued Winton. "The scoundrel had only to be cool and leisurely and he might have walked through the whole array of guests and servants."

"It gives one a frightful feeling of insecurity," said Mrs. L'Estrange.

"There is no cause for fear now," said Winton. "The robber has secured his booty. He will keep his distance. You look so scared that I would advise supper and champagne."

"And I am glad to confirm Mr. Winton's advice," said Dr. Weldon. "Come, my dear madam," offering his arm to Mrs. L'Estrange.

"Permit me, Lady Dorrington," said Winton, following his example, "and Miss L'Estrange."

"I can take care of you, Nora," interrupted Marsden, who came up at that moment, and he drew her hand through his arm. "Why, what pale cheeks! I thought you were a plucky girl!"

"You are pale enough yourself, Squire, and no wonder! Imagine if that dreadful man had used his knife!"

"Oh, well, he did not! I suspect he only had it to cut his way into the tent. I hope there are a lot of accomplices, that is our only chance of recovering

the jewels, otherwise Winton fears there is very little prospect of doing so." Here he stopped suddenly, and drew his companion behind a group of palms close to the door of the supper-room, as the Marchioness of Blankford came forth in earnest conversation with Lord Dorrington.

"I am not going to be caught," he whispered, as he again pressed on to the supper-room, "until you have given me that waltz I have been looking forward to through all this unfortunate business. Come what may after, I am determined to snatch one bit of enjoyment. Give me some champagne," he cried to one of his own servants, who were stationed at the principal table, where the older and weightier guests were to be feasted; he held out a tumbler which he emptied at a draught, to Nora's surprise, then he insisted on her taking some, and pressed her to eat, with great solicitude.

"It seems rather heartless to go and dance, after seeing poor Mrs. Ruthven in such a state, her beautiful jewels torn away from her!"

"Nonsense," returned Marsden abruptly, "she is rich enough to buy others. A true woman, I mean a true *hearted* woman, which is another thing, would not be inconsolable for the loss of a hundred such baubles. It would not injure health or reputation or affections. *You* would not care if you lost all the diamonds of Golconda provided those you love were left you, that is if you loved anyone?"

"But I do love a good many people," she said a little indignantly. "Why do you always talk to me as if I were a heartless simpleton."

"You are no simpleton, sweet cousin, but you have

not the faintest idea what love is," said Marsden, looking down into her eyes with a dark, peculiar expression in his own. "I wonder who will teach you! You must learn the lesson some day."

His words struck a hidden electric chain of thought, that brought Winton's grave strong face before her, and a vivid blush overspread her own, from her throat to the little curls that clustered on her brow. She turned aside to avoid his glance, and affected to steal a deep red geranium from a vase near her. "Theft is the order of the night," she said laughing. "Is this permitted, Squire?"

He did not reply at once. Then, with a quick, deep sigh, he roused himself.

"Take what you like!—take everything!" he said; and again calling for wine, drank a third large tumblerful.

"They are dancing," he exclaimed; "don't let us lose time! By the way, why don't you call me Clifford? Squire is ridiculous. It sounds as if I were a gouty, grey-haired, superannuated bovine Methusaleh."

"But I am used to call you 'Squire,' all my life," she returned. "And I think of you as the 'Squire'. Clifford, sounds too familiar."

"Familiar! Imagine *your* being too familiar! And, as to thinking of the Squire! I fancy he seldom troubles your thoughts."

"Oh, yes! I do think of you sometimes. Even before we came back, before I had met you in London, I used to see you with my father—riding, or out shooting—in my mind-pictures."

"And since?"

"Yes—very often—especially since this ball was talked of," she said, with a frank laugh.

"I believe you are a finished coquette!" exclaimed Marsden, trying to assume his usual light tone. "Come, let us start. I feel that I must have this waltz, if the smash-up of all things were at the end of it!"

Nora looked at him with a vague feeling of alarm. His white face and flashing eyes struck her as unusual. She had been accustomed to look upon him as a near kinsman, a contemporary of her father's, the friendly head of her house. Now, a sudden revelation flashed upon her that, although considerably her senior in years, he was as young, as full to the lips with life, as herself—that he was something to be guarded against —why, she did not know, nay, she would have indignantly denied the existence of such an instinct, had she been accused of it. So she put her hand on his arm, and glided away with him, to the undulating music of the Manolo Waltz.

Presently she said, "Stop—stop!" and Marsden brought her up, skilfully, near the recess of a window.

"What is the matter?—Are you tired?"

"No, but I do not want to dance any more! I was sure you were taking too much champagne, Squire!" looking straight at him. "Do you know you held me so tight, it was quite uncomfortable?"

"Did I?" exclaimed Marsden, laughing. "I am sure I beg you a thousand pardons! It was, of course, *quite* unconsciously!"

"I dare say, but I am sure you ought not to dance any more!"

"Why? My dear cousin, do you think I cannot stand a few tumblers of champagne? Do you suppose

I would take more than I could manage! You are positively insulting! Come, I shall never forgive you, if you don't finish the waltz with me."

"I really would rather not—I am not in the humour for dancing. I should prefer going home—and you are not quite as—as steady as you ought to be. You are not a bit like yourself. Don't be angry with me, I should be so sorry to vex you, particularly to-night."

"Then take another round. No, I will not let you off!"

"Well, Squire, I see Helen at the other side of the room. I will go so far with you, then I will go home."

"Say 'Clifford,' or—I shall do something dreadful."

"Very well! Please, Clifford, be very steady."

Marsden tried to pass Mrs. L'Estrange, but Nora made a stout resistance, and they presently bade Lady Dorrington good night.

"Shall I see you home?" asked Winton. "I do not think either of you look particularly brave or comfortable."

"Yes, do come!" ejaculated Mrs. L'Estrange. "I shall see to all our bars and bolts before I sleep to-night."

"I will just tell Marsden I shall return to hear if there is any message from the inspector, and will be with you directly."

"So Winton is going to escort you home?" said Marsden, coming out with Nora to the carriage. "Are you sure he is sober enough for such a task?"

"Mr. Winton? Oh, yes—he is never anything else but sober!"

Marsden laughed, not pleasantly.

By this time the story of the robbery had got afloat, and great was the excitement and hubbub. A thousand fantastic additions were made to a history strange enough in itself, and Marsden was almost mobbed by his guests, eager for information.

But the idea of continuing the festivity was quite given up; the company gathered in groups to discuss the extraordinary outrage committed almost in their midst, and gradually dispersed to their homes at a much earlier hour than was anticipated.

And so the grand Evesleigh ball, which was remembered for many a year, came to an end.

CHAPTER V.

A TANGLED WEB.

THE day succeeding the ball was one of intense excitement to Marsden's somewhat scratch household. For although, during a short visit to his old home in the early summer, his establishment had been put on such a footing as would enable him to come down for occasional visits with a few friends, in the shooting season, all descriptions of auxiliaries had to be hastily engaged to carry on the extensive service required for such a party as he had invited for his sudden outbreak of hospitality.

It was many a day since the Oldbridge police had risen to such importance, and they made the most of it.

Evesleigh House was pervaded by stalwart guardians of the public peace. They rummaged the rooms, sent the high-minded housemaids into hysterics by examin-

ing their boxes; they tramped to and fro in the grounds, every now and then carefully following foot-prints which had been made by their fellows. They nearly took the Italian confectioner, sent down by the great London house which furnished the more sublime portions of the supper, into custody; they examined the men and were "sauced" by the women; but they discovered—nothing, and they impressed Marsden with a conviction of their incompetence. He therefore despatched a telegram to his solicitor, requesting him to obtain the assistance of a detective from Scotland Yard.

When Nora walked over to enquire for Mrs. Ruthven on the afternoon following the search, she was a little surprised by being admitted to the presence of that lady, who rose from her writing-table to greet her with a smile.

She looked pale, and the shadows beneath her eyes were dark, as if she were exhausted by the excitement she had gone through.

"Thank you, my dear Miss L'Estrange, for coming to see me! Captain Shirley tells me you were so good as to be very frightened about me last night. I assure you, I am grateful; I fancy few care much for me!"

"Oh, everyone likes you! everyone *must* like you," cried Nora, touched by her caressing manner and soft voice, "I *was* awfully frightened! you looked like death! I wonder you are as well as you seem."

"I feel very shaky, however. Was there ever so audacious a crime? and that awful long knife! I must have been near death for a moment."

"Don't think of it," said Nora, shuddering; "and they have found no clue as yet to the thief?"

"None—not the faintest. The cloak, hat, and mask, were all rolled up together, with the knife, I am told; and are none of them of English make; they are no help. Captain Shirley says, no doubt the robber had other clothes or covering to put on, and probably walked away coolly and openly, as a guest who was enjoying the freshness outside after warmth within."

"But he will be discovered? Surely he will not escape?" said Nora.

"Not if money and perseverance can trap him," said Mrs. Ruthven, in a low, resolute tone, that struck Nora as having a touch of cruelty. "What an ending to a charming ball!" she continued; "though it did not quite end—did it? I believe you had a few dances after."

"Yes," returned Nora; "all the people did not know for some time what had happened, so the band played on, but by halfpast two all was ended."

Something kept her back from saying that she and Marsden had danced.

"Oh, of course!" said Mrs. Ruthven, slowly raising her eyes, till they rested on her companion's. "There was no reason why two or three hundred strangers should 'cease their funning,' because an outsider was robbed. And who did you dance with?"

"With the Squire; you know he always said, I should have one dance with him, if he ever gave a ball."

"Very natural, indeed," said Mrs. Ruthven, sweetly; "you have known him, I believe, all your life?"

"Oh, yes; when I was quite a baby, he was so much with my father, I used to think him a second

one; so when I met him again, I was quite astonished to find him so young."

"And not at all fatherly? I understand. How long was it since you had met?"

"Nine or ten years; but he was just the same as ever; so good natured and pleasant, though he treats me like a great baby, and never speaks a reasonable word to me," said Nora, smiling, and colouring at the tone in which Mrs. Ruthven had uttered her last words.

"Well, he must be a charming relative," remarked Mrs. Ruthven, with a slight sigh, and for a short while they talked pleasantly of Evesleigh and country life; the various places both had visited on the Continent, and the delights of the past season in London.

"It was rather ominous, was it not, that you should express such a wish last night to see *all* my jewels?" said Mrs. Ruthven. "If you like I will show you what is left of them. Unfortunately I put on the best I possessed to do honour to the Evesleigh revels."

"Thank you very much. I am exceedingly fond of seeing pretty things."

"Come, then," said Mrs. Ruthven, and led the way into her bed-room, where her maid was kneeling beside a huge dress-basket which she was packing. Various garments were scattered about, and the beautiful ball-dress of the previous night lay over a sofa.

"Are you going away, then?" exclaimed Nora, seeing these preparations.

"Yes; I leave to-morrow. I feel I cannot shake off the nervous terror which oppresses me while I stay here; besides, I want to be in London. Give me my jewel-case, Virginie, and you need not wait."

Mrs. Ruthven walked across to the bay-window, in

which a long, low, cushioned seat gave room both for herself and her visitor, and drawing a work-table near her, placed the large square case upon it.

"My poor lost rubies and diamonds had a case of their own," she said, as she unlocked the one before her with a little golden key which hung round her neck.

"These are mere whims and oddities," she continued, as she displayed a variety of costly artistic trifles on the first tray, and then proceeded to lift the others, containing opals and diamonds, pearls, turquoises, quaint, richly barbaric pieces of Indian jewellery, enough for two greedy women.

"If you have all these left, you are not so much to be pitied," said Nora laughing.

"My dear Miss L'Estrange, my rubies are worth more than all these put together. Besides, my poor father collected them for me, and had them set for a wedding-present. I well remember Mr. Marsden (he was at my wedding, you know, my husband was a relation of his) telling me that the Queen had scarcely anything to surpass them. It is a dreadful blow losing them, I assure you."

"Yes, I can quite understand it," said Nora, "and I think you bear the loss with wonderful equanimity."

Mrs. Ruthven smiled, and looked dreamily out of the window.

Marsden's ardent sympathy, his eagerness to accompany her to London, to comfort her in every possible way, had been an immense consolation. As she did not speak for a moment or two, Nora rose and went to look at the ball-dress.

"What a lovely gown! You were like a picture as you came into the ball-room. Why, Mrs. Ruthven,"

stooping and gently moving the lace drapery on the body with her fingers, "you drop your abundant jewels about like the possessors of a fairy mine! Here is a diamond among your lace."

She held it out as she spoke.

Mrs. Ruthven came forward with an air of surprise, and stood gazing at it as if stupefied.

"How could it have come there?" she exclaimed, and stopped short.

"It is a stud! Is it not like one Captain Shirley, or some one, wore last night?" asked Nora.

"Shirley!" repeated Mrs. Ruthven slowly. "He never had a stone like that." She paused again, then, taking and placing it in her jewel-case, she added: "It is mine. It is the centre of one of my ear-rings, which takes out to form a stud. It belongs to some I seldom wear. Virginie is really too careless. She must have dropped it. By the way," shutting her jewel-case sharply, "the only part of my parure that wretch spared were the butterflies on my sleeves. I suspect he had not time to tear them off." She shivered. "Is it not a horrible thought? That wretch stooping over me, touching me while I was insensible! Pray ring the bell, dear Miss L'Estrange. I do so want a cup of tea. You will stay and have one with me, will you not? You cheer me."

"I shall be very glad."

"Come into the next room then," said Mrs. Ruthven, adding, "I shall not scold Virginie before you, it might hurt her feelings, and she is a clever maid, but she must have been handling my things carelessly to let that diamond drop."

"I am glad I am not your maid, to have the care of such precious gems," said Nora smiling.

"My dear Miss L'Estrange! What an idea! When you marry and have jewels of your own, you will know how to take care of them. Bring tea, Virginie; bring it quickly."

And Mrs. Ruthven applied herself to put the papers and letters lying on the table together with considerable method.

"What a charming view!" said Nora, strolling to the window. "Do you know I never was in these rooms before. They were Mrs. Marsden's, and used not to be opened, at least, when I was here as a child."

Mrs. Ruthven looked down thoughtfully. "These rooms are over the library, are they not?" she asked, "on the same side as the conservatory? I would rather look out in any other direction. I shall not soon get over the impression of last night's terror."

Here Virginie brought in the tea, and Mrs. Ruthven, settling herself in a large arm chair, asked Nora to pour it out.

"None of them will tell me any particulars about how I was found, or what happened," resumed Mrs. Ruthven. "I fancy that gruff old doctor ordered me to be kept from speaking of it. But *you* will not be so unkind! Besides, I am *not* to be kept from thinking of my misadventure by *his* dictum. Tell me, dear Miss L'Estrange, were you there when Mr. Marsden first found me?"

"Yes! I was in the refreshment room when he was trying to break away from an old gentleman who would keep talking to him, and I heard him say he wanted to take you an ice."

"And then?"

"Oh! then Mr. Winton proposed we should go and look at the tent; but when we came to the conservatory, the door was shut and locked. Mr. Marsden was looking angry and bewildered. Then he suddenly remembered the way by the corridor, and we saw him go past and return immediately to call for help. So Helen, Mrs. L'Estrange, and I went in. She raised your arm, you lying like a dead creature, and began to fan you."

"And who lifted me from the divan?" looking hard at Nora.

"No one; at least, not while I was there."

"Not Mr. Marsden?"

"Oh, no! He looked so white, so dreadfully distressed. He stood behind Helen, and kept begging her to see if you were hurt. Then the doctor came and sent every one away except the Squire and Lady Dorrington."

"Yes! Hers was the first face I recognised, and then Lady Dorrington and the doctor helped me upstairs? It is strange, I cannot quite account for it."

"For what, Mrs. Ruthven?"

"Oh, nothing; only a curious impression that some one had lifted me up—some effect of returning consciousness, I suppose!"

She fell into a fit of musing.

From this she roused herself to ask a good many questions about Winton and his old friendship with Mrs. L'Estrange, giving Nora a sensation of being gently but thoroughly sifted. Moreover, one or two significant looks and words conveyed the alarming idea that the clear-sighted widow suspected Winton of ad-

miring Nora, or Nora of admiring Winton, which made that saucy young lady vexed and uneasy.

"Well, I suppose I must let you go," said Mrs. Ruthven, as Nora rose to escape further cross-examination. "It is so good of you to come and sit with me. In truth, I was glad to get rid even of dear Lady Dorrington, as no one would talk naturally, or let me speak of what is uppermost in my mind."

"I shall come and say good-bye to you, to-morrow," returned Nora. "I earnestly hope you will soon shake off your nervousness, though you are wonderfully brave and composed."

Mrs. Ruthven went with her to the door, and then again sank into the fauteuil, where she remained for some time in deepest thought.

Nora L'Estrange attracted her curiously, her evident admiration and liking soothed the little lady's inordinate vanity, while it overpassed her comprehension; she was too keen an observer to believe it was altogether put on, still she occasionally doubted her sincerity, so contrary was a woman's honest appreciation of another woman, to all her previous experience.

Nora's pleasant, varying voice and frank looks had a certain charm for her, even while she feared their effect on Marsden. They gave the hard, selfish, fiery, material creature glimpses of possible sweetness that would never cloy, of restful affection free from all dross of passion or self-interest. But, perhaps, the strangest sensation excited by Nora, was resentful envy, not of the girl's fresh, youthful good looks, but of her free, untrammelled spirit; every word, every attitude, was unstudied, spontaneous; she wanted so little, her simple, poverty-stricken life, as Mrs. Ruthven con-

sidered it, seemed so joyous and satisfying, she appeared to have no craving for rank or riches or jewels. Life, pure, healthy existence, was enough; she had nothing to strive after, or scheme for, or want from others, at least, so she seemed—ay, *seemed*—but who could tell what lurked under the seeming? She *must* have her cravings, her hidden passions, which she dared not show the world. What was *she?* what difference was there between her human flesh and that of other women? No, she was as yet but half developed, and how often childish simplicity was but the outer garb of cunning?

There was something in Nora L'Estrange that puzzled and disturbed Mrs. Ruthven. If she could have found her guilty of any vicious folly, she might have liked her better than she ever liked anything except a lover. As it was, the balance trembled between liking and hatred.

"She does not care for Marsden," thought Mrs. Ruthven, her supple form crouched together, her chin resting in one palm, her elbow on her knee, "she has some unaccountable fancy for that cold, scornful, insolent Winton. But Marsden, himself? I am not so sure about him. He has not often encountered indifference. It *may* be attractive. However, if she cares for Winton—ah! my difficulties are growing complicated. I must think. If the faint, vile suspicions that have come to me prove correct, how shall I act? Oh, I will punish, punish bitterly! But I will secure my object too!"

Then she sprang up and rang for her maid.

"Take away the tea things. Ask if Captain Shirley is in the house; if so, ask him to come to me."

"Captain Shirley has not returned, madame. Mr. Marsden had just asked to see you, but Miss L'Estrange was going out and he went out with her."

"Mr. Marsden asked for me?"

"Yes, madame; he said he would be back directly."

"Take away those things, then," returned her mistress in a sharp voice. "And I will dress, I shall go down to dinner. It does me no good to be shut up here."

Half-an-hour after the lamps in the boudoir were lit, and Mrs. Ruthven, in black silk and jet, wrapped in a soft Indian mantle of blue and gold, beneath which she shivered occasionally, was sitting by the fire. She had scarce taken her place, when Virginie ushered in Captain Shirley.

"Excuse my dusty boots," he said, coming quickly to her. "Hearing you wished to see me, I came at once. I am glad to see you are looking better than I expected."

"Yes; I am nearly myself," she returned, smiling graciously, and motioning him to sit down. "When do you return to town?"

"By an early train to-morrow."

"And I, in the afternoon. Shall I see you on my arrival?"

"If you need my services, yes; but I had intended running over to Ostend to see my sister, who has been seriously ill. I ought to have gone before."

"To Ostend?" repeated Mrs. Ruthven, as if to herself.

"But if I can be of any use——"

"Yes, you can," she interrupted abruptly. "Do you remember a wonderful detective, who was employed

by Lady Dartrey to obtain evidence against her husband in that famous case?"

"I do, at least I recollect hearing of him." Shirley rose as he spoke, and rested his arm on the mantelpiece, his face in deep shadow, as the lamp was behind him.

"If you will get me this man's address, I should be glad."

"I have not the faintest idea where to find him."

"Lady Dartrey's solicitors would tell you. He is a private detective, you know, and I do not want any creature to know that I am employing one on my own account. You must undertake this for me, Shirley."

"I will, if you are so anxious for it. But I must warn you, that he will be a costly machine, and, unfortunately, you have not the faintest clue to guide him; wait until——"

"Until all chance of discovery has passed by? No, Captain Shirley, I have too much common sense. Find me this man, or I shall do it myself."

"I will look for him and bring him to you, Mrs. Ruthven."

"I shall be quite content with his address."

"You will hear what the police detective Marsden has sent for has to say?"

"I shall follow my own line. No matter! But hush, I will speak to you later." The door opened to admit Lady Dorrington and her brother.

"I have sent for one of the best detectives in their employment to Scotland Yard," said Marsden to Mrs. Ruthven, after they had exchanged a few words. "And I must beg you not to leave, until you have given him your own version of the story and shown him the

position in which the thief surprised you. The tent remains as it is until he comes; we will keep his coming dark, as the thief, or thieves, will be less on their guard, if they think the local Dogberries only are concerned."

"But, Mr. Marsden, I really do not think I could bear to enter that horrible tent again! You do not know——"

"I can well imagine your condition of mind. Yet, my dear Mrs. Ruthven, you must not shrink from anything which may tend to discover the scoundrel who not only robbed you, but endangered your life. Let me entreat you to stay a couple of days longer. I expect the detective officer to-night. I ought to tell you, that in the road outside the Oldbridge gate—you know it?"—to Lady Dorrington—"there was a slight mark, as if a two-wheeled conveyance had turned sharply round; but on such a night, when vehicles of all kinds were coming and going, it proves nothing."

"You really must not go, Mrs. Ruthven!" said Lady Dorrington, impressively.

"I will not oppose you, then," said the fair widow. "Though I begin to fear it is but lost labour, the search for my jewels."

"No, no. I do not give up hope yet," cried Shirley. "Detectives do wonderful things."

"There goes the gong. I must run away and dress. You will join us at dinner, will you not, Mrs. Ruthven?"

"Thank you, I will."

Lady Dorrington and Shirley went off to their respective rooms, and Marsden, pushing a low ottoman close to Mrs. Ruthven, sat down, almost at her feet.

"You are a shade less pallid than you were," he

said, taking her hand. "Let me see if your pulse is steadier," and he proceeded deliberately to manipulate her wrist. "I cannot say how awfully cut up I am about this frightful business! If I were a millionaire, and could replace the gems you have lost!"

"Even if you were, you could not," interrupted Mrs. Ruthven, leaving her hand in his. "There are associations——" she paused.

"I know," said Marsden—"Poor Charlie——"

"Charlie!" she repeated, in a peculiar tone——

"At any rate, you will not leave until I can accompany you," he continued. "I must stay and see this detective myself."

"Very well," and she tried to withdraw her hand; Marsden kissed and let it go.

"Did you see Miss L'Estrange safely home?" she asked.

"Nora?—No. Fortunately Winton turned up, and I gave her over to him; it was too dark to let her go alone."

There was a pause, then Mrs. Ruthven asked, dreamily, as if speaking out of her thoughts:

"What did the jeweller in Paris say that man who was collecting rubies for a Russian prince was willing to give for mine?"

"I don't remember," said Marsden. "When? When you were last in Paris?"

"Yes. Don't you remember, the clasp of the necklace did not seem secure, and I gave it to the jeweller that Count Henri de Meudon recommended? Or, was it before you met me there in June?"

"Before, I think. I should not have forgotten, had I heard, though my mind was full of a different

matter." An expressive glance gave point to his words.

Mrs. Ruthven looked down with a thoughtful smile.

"Well, I believe this agent, or jewel merchant, offered something like 1,500,000 francs!"

"That was a large sum! I suppose it is worth it?"

"I have always been told so. It is too much to lose!"

"It certainly is! I must bestir myself, and find some good investment for that money of yours, which is lying fallow in the the 'Three Per Cents.'"

"I shall not invest in jewels, at all events! The sense of insecurity will never leave me." And she shivered.

"You ought never to be *alone* again," said Marsden, in a low voice. "Well, you will endure this ill-omened house till Monday, at least, then I will escort you to town. Is that understood?"

"So be it," she returned.

"And you will come down to dinner? You must not allow yourself to despair! These detectives do wonders, sometimes."

"No doubt. But I see the difficulty of recovering my rubies is enormous. Once out of their setting (and Mr. Winton says, thieves always take them out), how can I swear to them? How can I identify them?"

"Let us hope the best. Now, I have barely left myself ten minutes to dress. I shall find you in the drawing-room, shall I not?"

He took and pressed her hand once more before he went hastily away.

Mrs. Ruthven looked after him with anxious eyes, then she clasped her hands together and walked once

to and fro. Finally she went to her toilette-table and touched her lower eye-lids with Khol, delicately, artistically; took up a shell containing rose-coloured powder, but laid it aside again, divided the thick, curly fringe on her forehead to show her fine eyebrows, and fastening a bouquet of deep red geraniums among the black lace of her corsage, wrapped her cloak closer round her, and descended to the drawing-room.

* * * * * *

The well-known astute London detective, however, had no more success than the less experienced rural police.

He made a careful search through the rooms, insisted on Mrs. Ruthven reproducing her position in the tent and minutely describing the circumstances of the robbery, and enquired the length of time Marsden was absent. Finally he hinted darkly that he had an idea as to the guilty party.

"I don't say it's more than a suspicion," he said to Mrs. Ruthven and Marsden; "but it seems to me it's not impossible that some trained hand might have got in among the confectioner's men, and watched his opportunity. You see, if he had the pluck to go straight back to his post, with the jewels in his pocket, and just kept at his work, he'd be as safe as a church. There is no tracing the cloak and hat to anyone. I have spoken with the men who were here, and they seem all right; but two have gone away. I'll find out all about them when I go back to town. If one or other is a stranger taken on a job, I'll have to track him."

"It seems impossible that any man would have the

daring to such a deed and then return to his duties in the supper-room!" cried Mrs. Ruthven.

"You can have no notion, ma'am, what a high-class swell-mobsman would dare and do. It's possible the jewels have gone that way. Anyhow, there is no more to be done here. We must hunt up the thief in London, and specially in the big Dutch towns. There are a lot of Jew precious stone merchants abroad, as would give a long price for such gems and no questions asked. Of course, if they had a clear idea the goods *were* stolen, they would give notice fast enough, but they would not be too keen to act even on a shrewd suspicion."

"You will give notice to all the principal jewellers at home and abroad, and in the Colonies, in case the lost gems are offered for sale?" cried Marsden.

"Yes, of course; but *there* comes in the difficulty of identification. Anyway, I'll do my best for my own character's sake, and the lady's sake; but we'll say nothing of the handsome reward you mentioned, sir, that is against my principles; but *if*, when I have done my 'dooty,' you like to make me a compliment, that's another pair of shoes."

"You may trust me," said Marsden.

"And me, too," added Mrs. Ruthven, with a sweet smile, whereupon, after enjoining the strictest secresy on his hearers regarding his suggestions as to the possible thief, the highly-intelligent officer departed.

"I don't think much of your celebrated detective," said Mrs. Ruthven. "He is by no means the monosyllabic inscrutable man one reads of in novels. I have no faith in detectives who talk so much."

"I fancy the inscrutable men only exist in fiction,"

returned Marsden, smiling. "This person has, however, done some remarkable things. I believe he is considered a very valuable officer."

The day after Mrs. Ruthven and her host went up to town, the party broke up; the great house was closed, and impenetrable darkness still wrapped the great jewel robbery.

Meantime, the extraordinary story was spread abroad. The newspapers, thankful for such subject matter in the dead season, had paragraphs each day on this exciting topic, and when they had exhausted conjecture, short leading articles, moral, religious, jocose, philosophic, philological, antiquarian, filled up convenient portions of their space.

The Thunderer remarked shortly, that the crimes of a period bore the stamp of its intellectual characteristics. Extreme ingenuity and logical precision were essential to project and execute so daring, so original a robbery as that which had lately startled society at Evesleigh Manor; that probably when statistics, mathematics and registration had been perfected and properly applied, we should find that only in the first decade of the last quarter of the nineteenth century—only at this precise epoch—could this special outrage have been committed.

The Banner traced this remarkable and heinous act to one fruitful source of evil, moral, social and religious, neglect of due instruction in the Church Catechism and of committing the Ten Commandments to memory—and apropos, drew a pathetic picture of a grey-haired rector standing beneath the east window of the village Church, through which the light streamed in many-tinted rays on the rosy, chubby reverent

urchins, who repeated in awe-struck tones after their beloved Pastor, "Thou shalt not steal!"

The Daily Instructor proved incontrovertibly from certain racial indications, that so base and infernal a plot could only be conceived by an American-Irishman, with a dash of Russian blood from, say a great-uncle, or perhaps a strain of Malay on the mother's side; while *The Delirium Tremens* grew hysterical over an appalling list of robberies, with and without bloodshed, battery, torture and murder, from the earliest date to the present crime, which, from certain characteristics, might be considered the most audaciously wicked of all.

The Universe, in its usual lively style, hinted that among the better informed of those present at the Evesleigh festivities, whispers were circulated that the overstrained enthusiasm of a ritualistic and self-subduing curate, whose taste for ecclesiastical magnificence was in the inverse ratio to his regard for personal cleanliness, had been so carried away by visions—the result of overfasting and meditation—that he had annexed the lost rubies for the decoration of a favourite image of the Virgin in the new and splendid church of St. Withold the Wool-gatherer Within, and that Mrs. Ruthven, with the generous sympathy and delicate tact which distinguished her, was arranging for the substitution of an admirable imitation, modelled at her own expense, of the lost rubies and diamonds, so as to save the pious young man's taste and feelings; and to this project the delay in the progress of justice was due.

To this dastardly attack the *Churchman's Friend* replied with vigorous indignation, and much fine writ-

ing ensued, till a fresh trail presented itself, and for awhile public interest was diverted from the Evesleigh robbery.

CHAPTER VI.

REACTION.

THE sudden burst of life and gaiety in the long deserted Manor House, made its quickly succeeding silence and gloom more marked and depressing. Lady Dorrington tried to persuade Nora to accompany her to Scotland, where Lord Dorrington had shootings, but the young lady said she could not think of leaving Mrs. L'Estrange, and Mrs. L'Estrange would not leave her little girl; so everything returned to the same condition of stillness and tranquillity which Marsden's unexpected appearance and outburst of hospitality had broken up.

But this stillness was no longer restful.

The curious circumstances of the robbery had left behind an impression of insecurity, and Mrs. L'Estrange, whose natural timidity had been confirmed by long attendance upon an invalid and irritable husband, immediately made arrangements with the gardener to sleep in the house instead of in the lodge, and Waldmann the pet Dachshund was allowed to lie at the foot of the stairs, while Nora herself inspected the bolting and barring of doors and windows every night.

"I assure you, you are alarming yourselves unnecessarily," said Winton, who had ridden over, as he often did, to share the evening meal at Brookdale, and was

now leaning against the chimney piece while Nora was playing some of Bea's favourite airs before the little one went off to bed with her German "Kindergärtnerin," who was patiently waiting for her. It was a chill, wild night, the wind sighing in sudden gusts through the trees surrounding the cottage, the occasional dash of the rain against the windows making the bright fire of wood and coal peculiarly acceptable. Winton looked round him with a delightful sense of comfort—of being at home.

The refined simplicity of the pretty drawing-room, the soft light of well trimmed lamps—Mrs. L'Estrange in her demi-toilette of black silk and lace, her work basket filled with bright coloured wools beside her, her small fingers deftly covering a square of dull green cloth with flowers and foliage—Nora at the piano, her graceful shoulders draped in dainty muslin gathered to her pliant waist by a band of black velvet —all had grown familiar to him. He had had a hard life all through his boyhood; an orphan with barely enough means to supply him education, brought up by an uncle who was cold though just, and bitterly disliked by his uncle's wife, because his strong will and steady application always kept him ahead of her own handsome, clever, agreeable, "ne'er do-weel" of a son, with whom he was educated and who bore the same name, of home life he knew nothing; and when his resolute efforts to rise were crowned with success, success banished him to comparative solitude, while the few opportunities afforded him of social experience only showed him how infinitely his accomplished cousin was preferred before him, especially by women, of whom indeed he had not the highest opinion. He

had found them insincere, shallow, selfish, and though of late rather flatteringly attentive to himself, his grim appreciation of his unattractiveness led him to place it to the credit of his position rather than of himself.

Nevertheless, the familiarity to which bygone comradeship with Mrs. L'Estrange entitled him, was very delicious. He had never been on such terms of intimacy with women before, and he was quick to perceive that they were perfectly natural and unaffectedly cordial, that his comings and goings caused no disturbance, that he had fallen into the march of their quiet lives, and felt that to part with them would be the keenest grief he had ever known. Them—or one? For awhile he scarcely knew.

"You are alarming yourself unnecessarily," he had been saying, when this digression began. "There is small chance of any professional thief visiting this part of the world for some time to come, but I suppose it is not easy to throw off the impression such a scene as you witnessed must have created."

"Good night," cried Bea, holding up a rosy mouth to be kissed. "Will you bring me a new spade to-morrow?"

"Not to-morrow—the day after. Good night, Miss Beatrix—sleep well. Good night, Fräulein."

Nora rose from the piano, and drew a low chair by the fire.

"There is no use in arguing the matter," she said. "Helen cannot resist her nervousness. I myself, though I feel quite brave in the daylight, begin to be a little uncomfortable as night draws in, and I see Helen look up with a startled, restless look at any sudden sound, and really, after seeing what a daring

thief *can* do, one's faith in chains, bars and bolts dies away."

"Our chief safeguard is the absence of valuables," said Mrs. L'Estrange.

"Do you not think," resumed Nora, "that it would be well to go up to town for a couple of months, just in the dead of the winter? We should throw off these disagreeable impressions and be our noble selves again."

"I believe it would be the best thing you could do," said Winton. "It is a capital idea. Of course, I am speaking selfishly. I must be in London a great part of November, and your nervousness may transfer itself to *me* if I find myself lonely and friendless in that vast wilderness."

Nora laughed.

"I don't fancy your nerves trouble you much. But it would be rather nice to go to the theatre and concerts, sometimes."

"And you would be a capital escort," said Mrs. L'Estrange, "though, perhaps, you do not care for such things?"

"When I find acting that can make me forget it *is* acting, I am deeply interested, but a concert bores me, though I am very fond of certain kinds of music."

"If," began Mrs. L'Estrange, going back to the subject uppermost in her mind, "if I had not seen that dreadful knife, I should feel less creepy."

"Don't think about it, dear Helen," cried Nora. "Go, play a game of chess with Mr. Winton, that will effectually divert your thoughts."

"I will, if you would like it, Mark—I mean," smiling and colouring, "Mr. Winton."

"Yes, let us have a trial of strength, by all means."

"My strength is of the broken reed order," said Mrs. L'Estrange, smiling. "I will go and see Bea tucked up, and then do my best."

"I wonder," began Nora, as Mrs. L'Estrange left the room, "I wonder what they are doing in London. If they have discovered anything!" She clasped her hands on her knee, and sat looking dreamily into the fire. "Mrs. Ruthven promised to write to me, but she has not."

"There has scarcely been time," said Winton, as he brought over the chess-table, and began to set forth the pieces. "And I fear there is small chance of discovery. It is unlucky for Marsden, too, for I suppose the best thing he can do is to marry the charming widow, they would suit each other admirably. Now, I should not be surprised if the notion that he is *un*lucky to her, should take possession of her mind." Winton watched Nora's face as he spoke.

"Poor Squire, I hope not, it would be a shame. He is so nice, and so is she. If he is fond of her, I do hope she will marry him."

"If? Then you do not agree with everyone, that he is devoted to her?" And while he spoke, Winton thought, "Is this acting or real indifference?"

"I am not sure. I have scarcely seen them together. But I like her, she is very nice to me. Why don't you like her, Mr. Winton?"

"Why do you think I do not?"

"I know it, because—oh! I can hardly tell. By the tone of your voice, by the expression of your eyes."

"Hum! so my eyes can express *dis*like at any rate?"

"Oh! they can express liking, too. I mean," blushing quickly at the glance he gave her, "I mean they can look kindly; but am I not right, you do *not* like Mrs. Ruthven?"

"The reason why I cannot tell. But I do *not* like the widow, ma belle!" said Winton.

"Oh! Bravo!" cried Nora, laughing. "I did not suspect you were capable of improvising."

"I dare say I am capable of more than you imagine. I suppose I ought to assure you that I have no reason for disliking Mrs. Ruthven—it is an instinct."

"I thought these instincts of liking and disliking were characteristic of women, that men built up their preferences on a solid foundation of reason."

"We ought, and, at least, I try to be just."

"I am afraid you are a little hard."

"I daresay I am, or have been; at present, I may, for all I know, be learning to be too soft." He looked down as he spoke these words thoughtfully. "But in the battle of life we can rarely afford to lay aside our armour."

"What a dreadful idea of life," said Nora with a sigh. Winton did not reply, he paused, his hand on a rook, and looked intently at his companion, whose eyes were fixed on the fire.

"Now, Mr. Winton, I shall do my best to conquer," said Mrs. L'Estrange, returning. Winton brought her a chair.

"Do you never care to learn?" he said to Nora as he took his place.

"I have tried. I used to try and play with my father, but I never could learn, I never could be in-

terested; there is some deficiency I suppose in me, for I never care if I win or lose at any game."

"Which shows an unmathematical, unpractical turn of mind," said Winton smiling. "I wait your attack," to Mrs. L'Estrange.

For awhile, Nora read the newspaper; then she rose and leaning on the back of her step-mother's chair looked on at the game, as if watching an opportunity of speaking.

"Check to your king," said Mrs. L'Estrange at last. "You are not playing your best, Mr. Winton; is it negligence or politeness? No, you cannot move there, you are still in check, nor there either."

"It is check-mate!" replied Winton; "well and quickly done, too."

"Then I may speak!" cried Nora. "There is a paragraph in the paper about the robbery. I will read it. 'The mystery which enshrouds the great jewel robbery is still unsolved; but, although we must on no account betray the secrets of the police, it is perhaps permissible to state that a faint clue has at length been found, which in the experienced hands of a certain famous officer may, indeed will, probably, lead to the detection of the villain or villains whose dastardly attack almost cost its object a serious illness. We are happy to state that Mrs. Ruthven has very nearly recovered the effects of the shock to her system, and is about to proceed to Italy for change of air and scene.'"

"Which means," said Winton, rising, "that the penny-a-liner knows nothing, and has no chance of knowing anything. When these fellows are most profoundly ignorant, they assume the greatest knowing-

ness. But it is late! If you will allow me, I will say good-night, and make my way to the stables. I can be my own groom."

"Oh! Roberts is in, I am sure, having a talk in the kitchen. He is our body-guard now; he will bring your horse round." Mrs. L'Estrange rang as she spoke, and ordered Mr. Winton's horse.

"What a dreadfully dark night!" said Nora, going to the open door a few minutes after, while Winton said good-bye to Mrs. L'Estrange. "It is raining, too. I am afraid you will get very wet!"

There was genuine kindly interest in the eyes raised to his.

"If you care whether I am wet or dry, alive or dead, I shall be obliged to lay aside my armour," said Winton smiling, as his hand closed on hers with a lingering pressure, so close, so warm, that it sent an electric thrill of surprise through her heart. "I shall come to-morrow to report myself, and bring you the history of Blankshire we were speaking of. Good night!" and the sound of his horse's tread soon died away.

"I have such a headache, Helen. I think I shall go to bed—do you mind?"

"No; by no means. I would rather sleep, than listen to that moaning wind. I hope we may have news of some kind from Lady Dorrington or Clifford Marsden to-morrow. The world seems to have left us stranded here."

They bid each other good-night and separated.

But Nora sat long pondering, her elbows on her dressing-table, her head on her hands, thinking with a startled, suddenly awakened, sense of alarm of the

curious influence Mark Winton, without the smallest apparent effort on his part, had gained over her.

From the first hour they had met, he had attracted her unaccountably. He was not good looking, or particularly agreeable or flattering. He was, on the contrary, silent, slightly abrupt, and decidedly uncompromising; yet to Nora there was veiled pathos in his grave eyes, and an utter unconsciousness of himself, that gave dignified simplicity to his manner. She was always wondering what he thought and how this or that would strike him. Then, when he gradually came to talk to her of books, and topics off the dusty beaten track of conventional chatter, the sincerity of his opinions, the tone of calm clear common sense which pervaded his conversation, delighted and refreshed her. Strange to say, despite her recognition of his strength and self-sufficiency, Mrs. L'Estrange's story of his lonely youth—his resolute struggle for fortune—had touched a chord of tender pity in her heart; and in short, before she was aware that he was more than an interesting acquaintance, Nora was in love with him.

His voice—the clinging grasp of his hand that evening—had broken open the flood-gates of her consciousness, and with mingled shame and fear, Nora saw that she loved this grave, self-contained man, with all the force of her young warm nature. It was suddenly revealed to her how heavenly it would be to know that he loved *her*, to hear him call her by her name, to feel that she could make him happy, and give him tenderness and sympathy such as his rugged life had never known. But, oh! would he thank her for it? Was it not shameful of her to think thus—to

long to offer her heart to a man who had never sought it, who had never shown her any lover-like attention, who simply liked to talk with her, probably because she liked to listen? And even that evening, there was nothing worth thinking twice about in his words or hand pressure, only a friendly acknowledgment of her anxiety—perhaps too boldly expressed! How contemptibly weak and ill-regulated she was, to allow the idea of a man who probably did not care for her, to take possession of her imagination! How was it she had come to love him so dearly? and she did love him! The distress of her conviction seemed to confer a sudden maturity of womanliness on her girlish nature. What sorrow she was storing up for herself, to let any man possess such mastery over her? How was she to regain her self-respect? Only by a steady consistent effort to stamp out the fire that had been smouldering unperceived in her heart, till the flames began to make their painful burning felt; only by assuming a tone of the calmest friendship to the man she loved and dreaded, for he did not care for her, it was not likely. He needed an older, riper, more highly educated companion, than herself! She must be careful to guard her secret—already she had been, must have been, foolishly demonstrative, or Mrs. Ruthven would not have hinted at any understanding between herself and Winton! Oh! the shame of being suspected of loving one who did not love her would be insupportable. Cost what it would, she would so guide herself as to escape such humiliation!

She braided up her long hair, prayed fervently for strength and help, and, with tear-bedewed lashes, fell

asleep, Winton's last words echoing sweetly in her ears, despite her stern resolution.

* * * *

In London, though Mrs. Ruthven neglected to write to her friends at Brookdale, she was by no means idle.

On her arrival at the hotel where she usually put up, she was astonished, and slightly indignant, to find no Shirley awaiting her; nor were these feelings lessened by the receipt of a note late in the evening, informing her that he had called on the detective, whose address he had succeeded in procuring and now enclosed, but the man was away from home, and his wife was not sure when he would return. "I am exceedingly sorry not to see for myself how you have borne your journey," he added, "but a telegram from my sister this afternoon obliges me to start for Ostend to-night. I hope to return speedily, and to be of any use you like to put me to."

Mrs. Ruthven crushed up the note, and thought profoundly for a few minutes, with knitted brows and a look of pain; then she smoothed out the paper, and, having copied the address in her tablets, tore Shirley's missive to pieces, and threw them in the fire.

It was altogether a miserable evening; Marsden had promised to look in, if there was time after an interview with the police officials charged with the care of the "Evesleigh case," and a dinner with one of the attachés of the Austrian embassy; but the hours wore on, and he did not come. Mrs. Ruthven was still unhinged and unwell from the result of fright, but she was gathering strength and composure. In truth, though so slender and fragile in appearance, her

nervous system was by no means weak; nor did trifles, whether of fact or fancy, produce much effect upon her; still she was glad to ring for her maid, and retire to rest, with a reading-lamp beside her, and a French novel of the strongest description in her hand.

But her own doubts, hopes, fears, were of deeper interest. She did not put implicit faith in Shirley's assertions; faith was not either her strength or her weakness; after a careful examination of her position on all sides, she made up her mind to enquire personally into the whereabouts of the man she wished to employ. She stretched out her hands for her tablets, which lay on the little table by her bed, and read over the address: "Mr. John Waite, 11 Maryland Villas, Camden Road, N.W." Where was Camden Road? A map would soon tell. She would drive there to-morrow morning.

Mrs. Ruthven had none of the helplessness of a genuine fine lady; no shrinking from unaccustomed roughness, if it suited her purpose to encounter it.

Nor had she any fear of what her servants might say or think. To her they were merely machines, more or less well constructed to do her service, and to be kept in working order they must be properly oiled, *i.e.* fed and lodged; of their independent existence, she never thought. Yes; she would endeavour to ascertain all about this man herself; she wished Shirley had not gone away so quickly. He surely was not feeling his feet firm enough to try standing alone? Besides, his sudden anxiety about his sister was curious. That he had a sister, Mrs. Ruthven was aware, but that was all; she did not know she was in Europe. "Well, patience and perseverance will discover most

things—even my rubies—perhaps," was her last distinct thought.

As soon as Mrs. Ruthven had had her coffee and roll next day, she dressed very plainly and warmly, for it was a chill misty morning, and informed Virginie, her maid, that she was going to hold a consultation with her dressmaker. To carry out the idea, she directed that certain pieces of lace and Indian embroidery should be made up into a packet, that she might take it to the distinguished artiste she employed.

Then a cab was called, and having given audible directions where to drive, she alighted at the well-known establishment, dismissed her cab, deposited her parcel, with a verbal message that Mrs. Ruthven would call that afternoon or next day, walked to a little distance, and hailing a hansom, drove to the address which she gave the driver.

Maryland Villas was a row of neat, two-storied twin houses, with gardens, gates, high steps, and side entrances; possibly, they had in the first stage of their existence a country view, but now a range of small shops, with a large assortment of the wares dispensed within, hanging about the doors, replaced the green fields of yore.

No. 11 was perhaps the most severely accurate in its cleanliness and air of propriety of all the villas. Mrs. Ruthven desired her driver to wait, and rang the bell.

The door was opened by a pretty little dark-eyed woman, well dressed in black, with a pretty white apron, and a becoming cap, not quite like an English woman, yet scarcely foreign.

"Yes," Mr. Waite was at home, she said in reply to Mrs. Ruthven's inquiries, and would no doubt see the lady, if she could sit down for awhile.

Mrs. Ruthven could; she paid for and dismissed the cab, and followed the dark-eyed little woman into a nice front parlour with a bay window, well shrouded by lace curtains, and filled with good furniture, a little too big for its dimensions.

"The truth is," said the little woman with a smile, "my husband is asleep. He came home, after a long journey, about six this morning, and I have not yet called him."

"I am sorry to disturb him, but I need his help, and that soon."

"I will bring you the *Times*, madame, and my husband will come as quickly as he can."

It seemed nevertheless a long weary hour before the door opened to admit Mr. Waite himself.

He was well and carefully dressed, a man of middle height, rather broad, but broad from bone, not flesh, his yellow-pale complexion, thin light hair, wide flat face, and very quiet inexpressive light eyes, were redeemed from ugliness by a pleasant smile and a well-cut chin.

"You wish to speak to me, madam?"

"I do," said Mrs. Ruthven gazing at him as she thought that Nature had framed him for his work; he was thoroughly unremarkable, not a salient point of any kind on which memory was likely to catch. His voice, too, was even to monotony, yet not unpleasant. "When I tell you," she resumed, after scanning him calmly, "that I am Mrs. Ruthven, whose rubies were stolen at Evesleigh, you will know what I want."

"I understand," he said. "I partly expected to be sent for, and I am glad you came early, for," taking a card from the chimney-piece, "this gentleman expects to hear from me."

"Is the name Shirley?"

"Why do you ask, Madame?"

Mrs. Ruthven smiled at his caution.

"Because if it is, the gentleman came on my behalf."

Waite handed her the card.

"I thought so. Well, Captain Shirley has been called away, and I shall explain everything myself."

"Thank you; it is a remarkable case, even as reported in the papers, and there is a good deal generally behind what they get at. Will you allow me?" he drew a chair to the table and took out a large note book.

Mrs. Ruthven then gave a brief, but clear, account of the circumstances under which the robbery was effected. Waite listened with downcast eyes and immovable attention, but did not break silence until she ceased to speak.

"It is a curious case, very," he then said. "There seems no clue whatever; but you," raising his eyes and letting them rest on hers in a peculiar, impressive way, "you have a suspicion?"

"How do you know?"

"I think you have. I hear it in your voice. Now, will you please tell me, have you any notion if the value of your rubies was known outside your immediate friends?"

"I should think not. I really do not know; except that when in Paris last spring, having occasion to send

my necklace to a jeweller's, a large offer was made for it by a man who was collecting rubies for some millionaire."

"Do you remember the name of the jeweller?"

"Yes; Sergier et Moppert, Rue de la Paix."

Waite wrote it down.

"Have you ever mentioned this before? Your maid, for instance—or anyone else?"

"I cannot now remember."

"Have you any idea what time elapsed between Mr. Marsden's departure and the appearance of the robber?"

"Not very distinctly. I certainly sat quiet for some minutes, for I was tired; then I thought I would see if my hair was disturbed by the dancing, and I got up to look in the glass—perhaps it was ten minutes. In fact I cannot tell."

"Mr. Marsden was the first to find you insensible? Who came in with him?"

"Some ladies, relatives of his, and a Mr. Winton, a man in the Civil Service, whom I knew slightly in India."

"Did he know anything of your rubies—of the offer for them?"

"I am almost sure he did not. Besides," smiling, "it would be absurd to suspect such a man—a thorough gentleman."

"Very elegant gentlemen do queer things sometimes under the pressure of necessity. You say Captain Shirley was at the ball; was he among those who came to your assistance?"

"No; I did not see him till the next day."

"He was dancing, I suppose?"

"I really do not know. I have an idea he was smoking a cigarette outside."

Waite sat silent for a moment or two.

"Do you know if your maid had a lover?"

"I do not, indeed!"

"It seems to me that someone within the house must have given information to the robber. How did he know of this tent? Knowing of it, he must have lurked in the conservatory till he saw you were alone, locked the conservatory door to secure a few minutes uninterrupted, and then overpowered you with rare promptness. It is the boldest thing I ever heard of. I suppose even a slight cry might have been heard?"

"I am not sure. The tent was thickly draped, and there was no opening into the house, except the door, which was locked. Had anyone been in the conservatory—but then, a waltz was going on, and everyone was dancing."

"How many doors were there in this conservatory?"

"Two into the house, and two into the grounds, one of which formed the entrance to the tent."

"It might have been some swindler in league with your maid; generally the integrity of young women is about in proportion to that of their lovers. At present I can see no light in this mysterious business, unless, indeed, you can give me a leading idea. I should like to see this conservatory. How far is Evesleigh?"

"About four hours—but I would rather no one at Evesleigh knew you were employed in the matter."

"No one need know, there are plenty of ways to see the place without giving a reason. It will not take me more than a day, and I can make a few inquiries

at Oldbridge at the same time. This gentleman," touching the card, "has been called away, you tell me —do you know where he is gone?"

"To Ostend."

"Ostend? Ah! Now, madame, will you so far confide in me as to say what your chief object is, to recover your lost property, to punish the thief, or to get to the bottom of the mystery?"

"I suppose one includes all three. I think I most desire the *power* to punish."

The detective looked at her again with the peculiar steady, immovable expression, as before.

"I will do my best. In fact I shall put my whole experience and powers of observation into my work, for it is no common task you have set me."

"I know it," said Mrs. Ruthven, and paused abruptly, as if she arrested the words which were on her lips. "Must you go to Evesleigh?"

"Yes! I shall know my ground better if I do."

Then she asked his terms. He named a fair remuneration for his time, besides travelling expenses, and all out-goings.

"But should I succeed?" he added, and paused expressively.

"I shall reward you as you will deserve," said Mrs. Ruthven with emphasis.

"It may be a long and fruitless undertaking, unless indeed you can give me some help," returned Waite, looking down and softly tapping the table with his large, square-topped fingers.

"If I can I will, most assuredly," she said in clear, resolute tones, "but I cannot stay longer now; make your inspection of Evesleigh, then come to me, I am

visible between nine and eleven. Always send up a note—not your name—and you shall be admitted."

"I thank you, Madame. I should like also to see this gentleman," touching the card.

"You shall, Mr. Waite, that I promise," returned Mrs. Ruthven readily. "Now send for a cab, I must not stay longer."

Mr. Waite despatched a neat little servant-girl for a conveyance, and Mrs. Ruthven returned to her hotel, breaking her journey as before.

CHAPTER VII.

TWISTING THE STRANDS.

Lady Dorrington was exceedingly anxious that both Mrs. Ruthven and her brother should visit her at the shooting lodge which Lord Dorrington rented in Scotland. She feared the effect of her heavy loss on the wealthy widow's mind, and she was anxious that her brother should not lose his chance. She could not understand why Clifford did not strike home and win the prize. The keen worldly woman had a very soft spot in her heart for the brother who so often angered her. To see him and the family estate free from debt would fulfil her heart's desire, and she thought Mrs. Ruthven a charming little woman, well fitted to be Lady of the Manor. Lady Dorrington's geese were apt to become swan-like in proportion to their utility. "As to her having a dash of the tar-brush—it is all nonsense," she would say to those detractors who urged this objection, "both her father and

mother were Europeans; some far-away grandfather was an Indian prince—*that* is no disadvantage in my opinion."

But no amount of pressing could induce Mrs. Ruthven to quit the murky metropolis. She had heard of a charming villa on the river at Twickenham, and she was anxious to purchase it. This, and her dread of the Northern climate, compelled her to refuse her dear Lady Dorrington.

Marsden, having called twice without having been admitted, had not again presented himself, yet Mrs. Ruthven did not find time hang heavily on her hands. She went more than once to see her man of business respecting the purchase she wished to make, for she was keenly interested in financial matters and eager to get the full worth of her money, and she had a long and exceedingly confidential interview with Waite after his return from Evesleigh.

At the end of a fortnight from the date of the robbery Shirley announced his return, after, he said, having seen his sister start for the Riviera, for Mrs. Ruthven had really been out when he called.

It was a dull but dry morning, and Mrs. Ruthven was sitting in a low chair beside the fire, talking to Waite, who had been reading over some memoranda to her.

"I think I have formed a distinct plan now," he said, after a pause, "by which I hope at least to unravel the plot. I must dog the suspected culprit by day and by night."

"You must," she returned.

"It will be costly, madame."

"I cannot help that; only find out the truth."

There was another pause.

"You are not an Englishman?" said Mrs. Ruthven suddenly.

"A naturalised Englishman. My mother was English."

"And your father?"

"A Pole. I resided both in Germany and France in my youth, and am able to speak several languages, which I find very useful."

"I expect Captain Shirley here immediately. We must deal cautiously with him," Mrs. Ruthven resumed. "He is very shrewd and suspicious, and will, I know, disapprove of my applying to you without his interposition."

"Then he should not have run off to Ostend when he might have been wanted," said Waite grimly. "Time in such matters is valuable, as I daresay he knows, and we have lost a good deal."

"Now, Mr. Waite, after you and Captain Shirley have seen each other, I should like to test your power of disguising yourself."

"I am ready to submit to any test you choose, madame."

"Good. I shall arrange for Captain Shirley to call upon me to-morrow, and you shall appear in a different character. Will you venture so much?"

"Certainly."

"It might answer another purpose also," she resumed thoughtfully. "At all events, you must appear to go abroad."

"That might answer, though there are enough hiding-places in London to shelter most rogues, and the less a secret is fenced with precautions the safer it often is."

Here Mrs. Ruthven's courier brought her a card.

"Oh! Captain Shirley. Yes, I will see him. Be with me here at seven this evening," she said, low and hurriedly. "I will give you some important directions."

Waite bowed as "Captain Shirley" was announced.

"So you really have come back? I thought you had deserted me," said Mrs. Ruthven, with languid graciousness, as she stretched out her hand.

"My absence was, you may be sure, unavoidable," he returned, with a quick inquisitive glance at the detective.

"This," said Mrs. Ruthven, "is the celebrated Mr. Waite."

"Oh! indeed." His brows knit themselves for a moment. "Then you have found him for yourself."

"I have. When in doubt, play a trump, and my trump has always been self-help."

"No one can help themselves better. And what have you done?"

"As yet, but very little. Eh? Mr. Waite?"

"It is a difficult case, very. I have, however, formed some idea."

"Indeed!" cried Shirley eagerly. "And that is?——"

"Not to be talked about at present. I shall only say that my suspicions point to a foreigner, whom I shall have to follow. Perhaps, sir, you would be so good as to tell me what you remember of the ball—I mean the night Mrs. Ruthven's rubies were stolen?"

"Oh! my recollections are of little use. I was not dancing, but finding the heat oppressive, I went outside, and, seeing one of the servants, asked him to bring me a case of cigarettes from the smoking-room,

which were remarkably good. So I missed being of any use at the first discovery of the outrage."

"Pray, was this servant one who waited on you?"

"No, he was a sort of under butler."

"Was he English?"

"I think not."

"There were various strange servants engaged for a short time," put in Mrs. Ruthven, "as the party was got up suddenly."

"Have you any idea if this man was French or Dutch?"

"Not the least."

"Or if he were in any way connected with Mrs. Ruthven's maid?"

"How the devil should I know?" cried Shirley angrily. "I never spoke to Mrs. Ruthven's maid in my life."

"Of course not, of course not," said the detective soothingly. "Pray who told you of the robbery?"

"Lord Dorrington. No! I now remember, he only said Mrs. Ruthven was faint. It was Mr. Marsden himself who told me, and I assisted in the search he made in the shrubbery."

"What was your impression?"

"Oh it was and is that the jewels are irreparably lost. I fear there is no chance of their recovery."

"Have you any idea of their value?"

"No, that is I am of course aware they are very valuable, but their exact worth I do not think I have ever heard."

"I thought you must have known, because they were so much talked about when I was married, and

you were in the regiment," said Mrs. Ruthven with an air of unconscious simplicity.

"Well I do not remember if I did," he returned.

"I have trespassed too long on your time," said Waite bowing deferentially. "If nothing fresh turns up, I shall start for the Continent to-morrow, and your address, madame, will be——"

"Oh, I am not sure. I think of staying a while at Folkestone; it would be easy to see you there if you want to consult me, and London is too intolerable. Meantime address to the care of my solicitors."

Waite bowed again and retired.

"He does not strike me as anything very wonderful!" said Shirley, changing his place to one nearer hers, "and I had hoped to have spoken to him first myself. You are hardly fit to deal with such gentry. I had hoped you had confidence in me."

"My dear Shirley, this is nonsense," she interrupted coolly. "Time was too valuable to be wasted, waiting while you were running after your sister! As to confidence," looking straight into his eyes, "you ought to know me by this time! I give my full confidence to *no* one; we can be useful to each other, but sentimental nonsense would neutralise all that. Now I am resolved, in this matter of the rubies, to have nothing to do with anyone but Waite. When I have anything of importance to tell and choose to tell it to you I will. You may be offended with me or not, as you like, I am ready to remain your friend, but I in no way fear you as an enemy. I will spare nothing and *no one* to get to the bottom of this mysterious affair."

"You are an extraordinary woman, you always

were," said Shirley, looking at her earnestly, distrustfully. "You wound me in every way, yet I cannot break with you."

"It is wiser not, nor is it necessary; you have no reason to quarrel with me."

Shirley resumed after a moment's silence; "I suppose Marsden is in town. Does he know you have secured this treasure of a detective?"

"No!" sharply. "I thought I told you I did not wish anyone to know I was employing anyone except those rusty creatures the regular police. Pray be silent respecting Waite."

"Certainly, if you wish it."

Here Mrs. Ruthven's servant brought several letters on a salver. She opened and glanced at some, closing them up again carefully, then she said, with a half smile:

"Do you remember an English engineer, a Mr. Colville, who was employed on the railway, near Umballa? A better sort of man, who had a very pretty wife?"

"I cannot say I do. I was a good deal away that year."

"Well, the pretty wife died when their baby was born, and everyone was very much concerned. I was godmother to the little girl. He went home, and I lost sight of him; now he applies to me for help to keep his daughter at school."

"I hope you are not going to throw away your money without enquiry into the case?" said Shirley.

"No, I am not quite so impulsive. I shall tell him to call and let me hear all he has to tell. And now I am going to treat you without ceremony, and send

you away, as I want to write some letters. Are you disengaged to-morrow?"

"Yes; quite disengaged."

"Then, if you come here at two or half-past, I will drive you down to have a look at the Twickenham villa."

"A thousand thanks. I shall be here punctually."

When he was gone Mrs. Ruthven reopened one of her notes and read: "You are really too hard in your refusal to see me!"—'He has not been so very persevering,' she murmured, interrupting herself—"I beg you will permit me to enter your enchanted and enchanting presence this evening, as I am tempted to believe I might find some trace of your lost jewels among the Jew dealers in Amsterdam. A friend of mine, an artist, was telling me yesterday of an old Father Abraham, who lives in an obscure lane, yet has marvels of brilliancy and beauty in his stores, and is by no means particular as to the sources from which he collects them. Now I propose to visit the patriarch myself, but should like to have some talk with you first. If I may come, let me have a word in reply. I do not propose to be long away, after, my plans are—— well, you shall make them for me if you will.

"Yours devotedly,

"CLIFFORD MARSDEN."

Mrs. Ruthven's face changed more than once as she read this. It softened, and then she flushed, while her eyes gleamed angrily.

"I cannot see him to-night; that is out of the question, and he shall not go without seeing me. Where has he been? I wonder if he has been at

Evesleigh, riding with Nora L'Estrange? I will write to her; I shall not ask *him*." She seized her pen and wrote rapidly:

"Not this evening, dear Mr. Marsden. I am engaged: but come to luncheon with me to morrow at one. I have much to say to you, and by no means approve your wasting your time in a fruitless attempt to recover my lost jewels.

"Ever yours,
"CELIA RUTHVEN."

* * * * *

Marsden, however, had not been down to Evesleigh and Nora L'Estrange. He had found occupation in London, and time had not hung heavy on his hands. Mrs. Ruthven's invitation was far from acceptable, he was eager to start on his voyage of discovery, but he felt it would be more prudent to accept.

"I must keep her in good humour for some time longer," he thought, as he penned a pleasantly worded reply. "She is a vindictive little animal, and I must be clear of this trusteeship before I can venture to show my hand. What a rich harvest I deserve for my patience and diplomacy! Shall I reap it? Yes, it's worth trying for."

Mrs. Ruthven was unusually particular in ordering luncheon, though at no time was she indifferent as to what she ate and drank, and as to what she put on. A very becoming costume of dark blue plush and cashmere, made her fairly content with herself, while her thick, shining, auburn-gold hair was crowned by a dainty little lace cap, with pale blue ribbons.

Marsden was delightfully punctual, and, in his ad-

mirably-cut frock coat, with a delicate button-hole bouquet, his high-bred face and beautiful soft, sleepy blue eyes, looked so handsome and distinguished that Mrs. Ruthven thought a woman might be excused for making a fool of herself about him.

"And how are you, dear Mrs. Ruthven, after these long days? What sin did I commit that you forbid me your presence?" exclaimed Marsden, holding her hand tenderly, a moment longer than was quite conventional, and looking into her eyes.

"Forbid you my presence?" she repeated, laughing. "Once when you called I was really out, and once—I was really engaged!"

"Do you mean that is the beggarly account of all my attempts to see you? Why, I was here four, five, six times, at least——"

"Then they omitted to tell me! Do not let us quarrel about the exact number, Mr. Marsden; tell me some Evesleigh news. How are your charming relatives at Brookdale?"

"I really do not know. I have never heard of them since we left my ill-fated house. Do you know, I cannot bear the idea of going there, and I had intended to hunt Blankshire this winter."

"You must not allow yourself to grow morbid; I shall regret the loss of my pretty rubies more than ever! Come, luncheon is ready in the next room."

While the servants were in the room they talked of ordinary subjects, but Mrs. Ruthven soon managed to get rid of them, and resisting the temptation of listening to Marsden's charming voice and flattering speeches, she took the direction of the conversation into her own hands.

"You must not be long away," she said. "I shall want a tolerably large sum of money soon," and proceeded to tell him of the opportunity which offered of purchasing the desirable villa at Twickenham; after enlarging on its merits, she continued:

"I always wished for a place of that sort. It is so nice for *fêtes* and pretty *recherché* parties. Besides, I may as well lay out some of that money which is lying idle in the Three-per-Cents, so you must come back in time to pay it."

She looked up suddenly with a smile and a keen glance, and Marsden met it with his usual lazy, good-humoured expression.

"Very well," he said, "the cash shall be ready when and where you will. What are you going to give for this new toy?"

"Thirty-three thousand five hundred."

"That is a long price, my dear Mrs. Ruthven."

"Not too long, I think; there are some fields attached which ensure privacy at present, and are worth a good deal as building-land. Then there is a good deal of handsome old-fashioned furniture in the house."

"Oh! if your solicitors are satisfied, I have nothing to say against it. My business faculties are of the lowest order. I fear, however, that I cannot return before Saturday-week. You will be sorry to hear that my friend de Meudon has been dangerously ill. I will try to return by Paris, and have a look at him."

"Yes, I am sorry," said Mrs. Ruthven.

"Then, I may only get on the track of your jewels, and have to go further a-field to discover them. By the way, have you any note of their size and weight?"

"Only of some—a few. But I wish you would

not go off on such a wild goose chase. As for me, I am weary of the subject, and inclined to let them go! The whole affair has depressed and exhausted me. I feel pursued by an evil fate—as if everything was insecure—I never feel safe!"

"Merely morbid feeling, such as you accused me of indulging, and proves that you ought *never* to be left alone! Why do you think of going to so heathenish a place as Folkestone? My sister will only be too delighted, if you will go to Chedworth, Dorrington's place in H——shire. They will be there in about a fortnight, and get some pleasant people to meet you."

"You are very kind! But, at present, I want to be quiet—and——"

"Captain Shirley," announced a waiter.

Marsden elevated his eye-brows interrogatively, and Mrs. Ruthven replied with a smile:

"I beg a thousand pardons," said Shirley, a sullen look of annoyance clouding his face, "I thought you were alone."

"I assure you I am very glad to see you," cried Mrs. Ruthven, gaily. "I have been trying to feed my inexorable trustee, here, into good humour, to get his consent to my new purchase. Come and help me; and pray take some luncheon."

"I have already lunched, thank you."

"A glass of burgundy, then? This, I assure you, is not to be despised."

Shirley condescended to take a glass—and began to thaw.

"Come into the next room," said Mrs. Ruthven, leading the way; and, nestling into the corner of a

large sofa, she proceeded to coquette with both her visitors.

"Mr. Marsden is going all the way to Amsterdam, on the chance of finding my poor rubies," she remarked, after a little discursive chatter. "Is it not good of him?"

"We would all go further than Amsterdam, if we thought we could find them," said Shirley, gallantly.

"If? Yes, that is just it. But it is too far for a mere chance. By-the-way, how far is Amsterdam from Ostend?" asked Mrs. Ruthven, in a curious mocking tone.

"I really do not know," returned Shirley, gravely, and looking very straight at her, his face darkening. "Why do you ask?"

Mrs. Ruthven was saved the difficulty of answering, as her courier came in before she could reply, and handing a card to his mistress, asked:

"Will you receive the gentleman, madame?"

"Oh, yes, show him up." Then, with a little confidential nod to Shirley, she added:

"This is my engineer!"

"He has lost no time," he returned.

"I shall not let him stay long. I will tell you all about him afterwards,"—to Marsden.

Shirley looked sharply at the door; but Marsden seemed too much occupied with his own thoughts to heed what was going on.

In a few minutes a middle-aged man, of average height, with iron-grey moustaches and whiskers, his right arm in a sling, came into the room, and made a deferential, though clumsy, bow.

"Good-morning, Mr. Colville," said Mrs. Ruthven,

who had risen, and was standing beside a table near one of the windows. "You have lost no time in answering my note."

"I was anxious to thank you for your kindness in writing," he returned in a low, hoarse voice.

"And how is your little girl?" continued Mrs. Ruthven. "Let me see, she must be nearly eight?"

"No, ma'am, she is nearly seven, and looks less. She is a delicate, weakly little creature, that's why I am anxious to keep her away in the country."

"Very naturally. I am sorry I cannot attend to you to-day, Mr. Colville," graciously, "you see I am engaged with this gentleman, and Captain Shirley," bending her head in the direction of the latter. "But if you will call to-morrow, I can give you half-an-hour; do not be later than twelve."

"I shall be punctual, and I thank you."

"Wait for a moment," said Mrs. Ruthven. "I have a little gift here for my god-daughter." She went to her writing table, and took from a drawer a small packet tied with ribbon, which she placed in his hands.

"You are very good, madam," he said, as with another clumsy bow and a look at each gentleman, he left the room.

"Do you not remember him at all?" asked Mrs. Ruthven.

"No," returned Shirley. "I never saw him before, and I cannot say he looks the sort of man I should be inclined to trust."

"You are too suspicious. The poor fellow has been unlucky, his arm was broken in some machinery, and he is out of work."

"I have a fellow-feeling with the unlucky," said

Marsden, rousing himself. "I've not had much good-luck myself."

"Why you seem to me a remarkably lucky man," said Shirley.

"By the way, Captain Shirley," began Mrs. Ruthven, in a languid tone. "I hope you will excuse me for breaking my engagement; but my head is quite too bad to drive down to Twickenham. It would not be worth while going in a closed carriage, and with my neuralgia an open one is not to be thought of."

"Pray do not dream of incommoding yourself on my account," said Shirley, turning white. "But as you do not need me, I have business to attend to in the City, and will bid you good morning." He bowed to Marsden and went away quickly.

"How cross he is," said Mrs. Ruthven, as the door closed on him.

"Yes, poor devil," returned Marsden carelessly, "you treat him rather badly."

"Why does he court bad treatment? I do not want him to come here."

"There is a strong dash of cruelty in you, charming though you are."

"Do you think so?" looking down and speaking softly. "Yes, I am capable of taking my revenge, believe me," her lips quivered as she spoke.

"I am quite sure these pretty velvetty little hands could strike unflinchingly; but they could caress tenderly too."

"Clifford!" she exclaimed with sudden emotion, then, correcting herself—"I mean Mr. Marsden."

"No, no," he said, smiling on her, "you have broken the ice, and I will not have the colder appellation."

"Not yet," she said softly, withdrawing her hand which he had taken. "I may call you Clifford one day—but not now. Tell me, when do you go on this rather wild-goose chase to Amsterdam?"

"To night. I cross to Calais, and shall get to Amsterdam some time to-morrow. I shall not write, as I hope to see you so soon again. I trust you will go and amuse yourself somewhere. I can't bear to think of your moping in an hotel at Folkestone; do go to my sister."

"Well, perhaps I may, but I am anxious to settle about this place."

"We must also arrange about a second trustee; I feel my responsibilities too heavy."

"Oh! we can see all about that when you come back."

"Good-by then, my dear Mrs. Ruthven. Wish me success."

He pressed her hand, and was gone.

Mrs. Ruthven grew very pale, as she stood for a moment in thought, and pressed her handkerchief to her eyes, then she looked in the glass, smiling at her own image.

"I should never be alone," she murmured. "Does he mean to be my constant companion? I am to select another trustee. Ah! Marsden, if you but loved me, I could forgive anything. Sometimes I almost believe you do. Be that as it may, you are bound to me—for love or for revenge—I will never let you go.

CHAPTER VIII.

A REVELATION.

THE result of Miss L'Estrange's self-commune was very perceptible, at least, to herself. The careful watch she established over her own words and manner, however, was too delicately exercised to be in any way remarkable. She was bright and frank as ever, but she slid easily away from any approach to sentimental subjects, though talking readily on other topics. The chief change was an increase of animation and a tendency to mock at what used to touch her. Mrs. L'Estrange only noticed that Nora was in remarkably good spirits.

Winton sometimes looked a little surprised, and bestowed more of his conversation on his older acquaintance than he used.

The quiet weeks went by swiftly, their monotony broken by occasional dinners at the houses of the Cathedral dignitaries at Oldbridge, where Nora's songs and lively talk, and Mrs. L'Estrange's gentle tact and sympathetic "listening," made both welcome guests.

October was more than half over, and hunting had begun — a congenial amusement which interfered a good deal with Winton's frequent visits to Brookdale. The rapid falling of the leaves, and a succession of stormy nights, made Mrs. L'Estrange think seriously of spending November and December in town—a proposition which Nora originally urged.

Mrs. Ruthven wrote at length, very amiably:

She was detained in town by business, she said. She was in treaty for a pretty villa on the Thames, and would be delighted to have Miss L'Estrange's counsel and assistance when she set about furnishing.

Mr. Marsden had been *so* good in trying to find her jewels, and had gone to Amsterdam in search of them, but all in vain. Was he at Evesleigh? for no one seemed to know what had become of him.

"Do you know I think it would be very nice to help Mrs. Ruthven in choosing her furniture? Shall I tell her we are thinking of going up to town? Perhaps she would take rooms for us," said Nora, when she had read this letter aloud at breakfast.

"My dear Nora! she would not care for the trouble; and what a price she would agree to give for rooms! We must be very prudent; my little savings during the latter part of our stay in Germany, will not go far."

"Oh, yes! I forgot. You are really a wonderful woman, Helen; I shall never be such an economist; but as to not caring for the trouble, I do not think you quite do Mrs. Ruthven justice; you and Mr. Winton are always of the same opinion, and I think you have caught his prejudice against her."

"I am not as much fascinated as you are; and I must say, I *am* a good deal influenced by Mark Winton; when I look back"—she stopped abruptly. Nora, who longed to hear her reminiscences, gazed earnestly at her, and Mrs. L'Estrange, raising her eyes suddenly, encountered those of her step-daughter fixed upon her, and coloured through her delicate pale skin, to Nora's great surprise. "Some day," said Mrs. L'Estrange, quickly, and with some confusion, "I must tell you my

little history; every one has some touch of romance in their lives, even so prosaic a person as I am."

"Do, dear; tell it to me *now*."

"Now? Oh, no, I must interview cook, and plan the dinner; the romance of the past must give way to the needs of the present, vulgar though they be; some evening, by the fire-light, I will prose about days gone by. It is fine and calm to-day; let us give Bea a holiday, and walk across the Park. The meet is at Crowland Gate, and we will see the hounds throw off."

"By all means; I feel as if I wanted to be in the open air."

Mrs. L'Estrange went away to her household duties, Nora sauntered into the drawing-room and sat down at the piano, but she did not begin to play for some moments. Was it possible that her quiet, unselfish step-mother had had thrilling experiences? She was so reasonable, so wise in a simple way, that Nora could never imagine the irregularities and redundance which constitute romance gathering round her. How good she had always been! even from her first entrance into the family. How she had stood between every one and her husband's hasty irritation; how much Nora herself owed to her justice and generosity. What a good influence she had been, how much she had endured from her selfish, unsympathetic husband, who looked upon her as a slave whom he had bought, and who had no rights, no title to consideration, whom he had married to be an upper servant. What a life of suppression, of careful conscientious sick-nursing she had had, without the reward of gratitude or recognition! From how much she had saved Nora herself! How strong and patient she had been.

"If *I* can reward her, I will," thought Nora. "I do hope Bea will be a good, loving child; she is like my father, but no woman would be as selfish and troublesome as he was! perhaps his bad health made him worse. I must take care *I* do not grow hard and selfish myself. I wish I were busier! my life is too easy; it leaves me too much time to think; I must not think."

And she applied herself diligently to a piece of Chopin's, bristling with accidentals and crabbed passages, till Bea, with a radiant face, came to tell her it was time to get ready.

The walk through Evesleigh Woods and across the Park was delightful. It was a soft autumnal morning, slightly leaden in colouring, like one of Wouverman's landscapes, as if Nature gently mourned her departed youth, the pines and larches gave out their aromatic odours, the ground was thickly strewn with red, withered leaves from the beech trees, for which Evesleigh was famous, and when the trio reached Crowland Gate, which opened on a wide common, where the woods ended and an undergrowth of brushwood and furze afforded abundant cover, a tolerable field had assembled, but not many spectators. The rector's daughters on horseback, the curate's little children, with their governess, on foot, the banker's wife from Oldbridge, in her smart carriage, with a couple of visitors from London.

Everyone knew everyone else, and greetings were exchanged. Winton, who rode a powerful chesnut, with the temper that colour is usually supposed to entail, managed to keep the fiery creature still for a moment beside Mrs. L'Estrange.

"Very glad to have caught a glimpse of you. I am going off to-morrow to Devonshire, an old Indian chum of mine has asked me to share his hunting quarters in a splendid country. I hope I shall find you in town next month. You'll let me know your movements?"

"Yes; certainly. We shall miss you very much."

"I hope you will, unlikely though it seems. We must do some plays when we meet. Good-bye, Miss L'Estrange!" He stretched out his hand to Nora, who had taken a vantage post on a stile, pressing his horse with heel and knee to make it approach, but the animal kicked and resisted, glancing round with wild, wicked eyes.

"Consider yourself shaken hands with," said Nora, laughing and shrinking, "I am afraid of your horse."

At that instant the hounds gave tongue. "They've found; they're away," cried every one. Winton's horse, wildly excited, tried to bolt, and strove by every device that could enter into the heart of a horse to unseat his rider, rearing straight up, buck-jumping, lashing out with his heels, in vain. A hand of iron controlled him, and the firm grip of the knees was not to be shaken. At last he darted off in the direction his rider chose, like a bolt from a catapult. During this struggle, Mrs. L'Estrange covered her eyes, but Nora could not remove hers. She turned deadly white, for at one moment it seemed as if the horse would have fallen back, *then* she knew how little all her self-control had done to uproot Mark Winton from her heart. How splendidly he sat. She had not observed before what a fine figure he had. Would he come back safe after a run on such a vicious brute?

"I really thought Mr. Winton would have been killed," said the eldest of the rector's daughters. "How wonderfully he rides! My brother says he is a great 'shekary.' In fact, he cares for nothing else but sport. You were frightened, too, Miss L'Estrange?"

"I have not been used to horses for years," stammered Nora.

"You ought to ride now. I remember you managing your little sheltie capitally, long ago. Won't you come back to luncheon at the Rectory? Mother would be charmed to see you and Mrs. L'Estrange. Mrs. Gardner and her friends are coming."

Mrs. L'Estrange preferred returning with her little daughter, but Nora was glad to divert her thoughts by accepting the invitation, and was one of the most animated of the party. She could not, however, be persuaded to stay till the eldest son of the house, an officer on leave from his regiment in India, returned with a report of the run.

"I suppose Mrs. Ruthven has heard nothing of her jewels?" said Mrs. Gardner, as Nora was saying goodbye.

"Nothing whatever. She seems to despair of recovering them."

"It was a frightful business altogether!" exclaimed Mary Damer, the rector's second daughter, "Do you remember a Captain Shirley who was at the ball. You danced with him several times. He danced very well."

Nora did remember.

"George says there were queer reports about him in India. He was in the same regiment as Mr. or Major Ruthven. People said, too, that Mrs. Ruthven was—well not too particular."

"I only know she is particularly nice," returned Nora. "Do not believe half the ill-natured things you hear."

"I wish," said Miss Damer, "that Mr. Marsden had not been frightened away by the worry of this unlucky robbery. How nice it would be to have Evesleigh open once more."

"Do tell me, Miss L'Estrange," cried the younger sister, "is the Squire engaged to Mrs. Ruthven?"

"Indeed, I do not know; but I am sure she would make a very pleasant mistress for the Manor house! Now, I must not stay, it will be dusk before I get back."

"I think you are quite heartless, not to stay and hear if poor Mr. Winton came alive out of the hunt, and he is such a *great* friend of yours."

"Oh! he can take care of himself," said Nora, and with a few more words she escaped, her heart beating with annoyance at the tone of Miss Damer's last remark. She would certainly persuade Helen to come up to town next week, or as soon as possible, and then she would take singing lessons, and amuse herself, and forget the folly and weakness into which she had fallen. "How ill-natured people are," she thought, "and ready to spread ill-natured stories." She did not believe that Captain Shirley ever did anything disgraceful, though she had not been favourably impressed by him, and was disposed, in an instinctive and unreasoning way, to dislike and distrust him.

Large drops of rain made her hurry on to gain shelter before the threatened storm burst; but as she crossed the carriage drive of Evesleigh Manor, on her homeward way, she noticed fresh traces of wheels and

horses' feet. The Steward had no doubt been up at the house. She caught a glimpse of it before she passed through the gate leading into the wood opposite her own home. How mournful it looked with its closed shutters, and the one thin thread of smoke rising from its wide stack of chimneys! She was quite glad to be safe at home, in her own comfortable bed-room, changing her dress for her indoor garments. She had grown stupidly nervous of late. One folly brings on another, she thought.

In the drawing-room Bea was dressing her doll, while her mother read aloud some of Grimm's fairy tales.

"How late you are, Nora; did you get wet?"

"No; at least very little."

"Had George Damer come back? How did the hunt go off? I should be glad to know if Mark Winton is safe."

"I did not wait. I think the fox must have headed for Anchester downs. Do let me have a cup of tea! I feel so tired."

No more was said; but when the time came for shutting up the house, Mrs. L'Estrange sent to ask if Roberts had heard of any accident at the hunt. Roberts reported that young Mr. Gardner had been thrown, and had broken his collar-bone, and that as he (Roberts) had been leaving Oldbridge that evening, where he had gone to fetch oats, he had met Mr. Winton and the Rector's son, riding back, all covered with mud and "tired like."

"I am really quite relieved," said Mrs. L'Estrange. "I was rather uneasy."

Nora did not reply, and the rest of the evening

was spent in making their plans for a visit to London, and writing to an ex-cook and housekeeper, who had taken a lodging-house in one of the streets on the Tyburnian side of Hyde Park, and to whom all Evesleigh folk applied when they needed temporary quarters in the great city.

The next morning broke bright and crisp after a night of rain, and after their mid-day meal, Mrs. L'Estrange drove away in the pony carriage, with her little girl, to do various errands in the town. Nora, relieved by the absence of Winton, whose presence was of late always a restraint, put on thick boots, and set forth to visit the blind woman whom she had rather neglected of late. She accused herself of selfishness, and many minor crimes and misdemeanours, as she donned her walking attire, and bullied herself considerably on the score of being better off than she deserved, and leading a self-indulgent life. Still, she did not see how she could do otherwise. At any rate, she would never sink into a weak sentimentalist, a faded flower, pining under the weight of an unrequited attachment. No, in a month or two she would have thrown off this dead, aching, steady pain in her heart, and be able to smile at it.

With this brave determination she started on her walk to the blind woman's cottage, seeing as she went, in spite of all her resolutions, the picture of Winton contending with his horse, as it was stamped on her mental retina the day before.

Walking across the bridge which connected her own little domain with Evesleigh, she turned sharply into the path leading to the moorland higher up, and

nearly ran against the lord of the manor coming in an opposite direction.

"This is luck!" cried Marsden. "In another moment you would have passed, and I should have only found Mrs. L'Estrange."

"Not Mrs. L'Estrange either," said Nora, returning his cordial greeting. "She is gone into Oldbridge for the afternoon."

"Then, if you will allow me, I'll be your escort."

"Oh! yes, do come," returned Nora, heartily glad of his company. "When did you arrive, and where did you come from?"

"I came last night, that is to say, last afternoon, and I came from Paris."

"Mrs. Ruthven, when she wrote, did not seem to know what had become of you."

Marsden turned, and walked beside her.

"Oh! yes, to be sure. I went away to a place near Fontainebleau, to see an old chum of mine, de Meudon, who has been very ill, and so a letter or two of hers miscarried; but I saw her the day before yesterday in town. She is in a fidget to complete the purchase of a damp villa at Twickenham, which she could not do without me; but I have settled everything to her satisfaction."

"And are you going to stay here?"

"No—yes," replied Marsden, with a quick sigh, and he looked earnestly into her eyes, a curious, wistful, strained expression in his own. "I am a rolling stone, you see, Nora—I presume your high mightiness will permit me to use your baptismal appellation—and I am rather at a loss what to do with myself. I shall be hard up for another year or two; but then the pro-

perty will be pretty clear—*then* I will settle in the halls of my fathers, and live cleanly and like a gentleman."

"I hope you will, Squire," said Nora, kindly and seriously.

"What! Do you think I have been such a scamp?" asked Marsden, laughing.

"You know I did not mean that," she returned, the colour rising in her cheek. "I hope you will *live* at Evesleigh."

"And be your neighbour? Thank you, sweet cousin."

"Yes, it would be very nice to have you at the Manor House. It looks ghostly when shut up."

"Your kindness is killing. Do you understand why?"

"No; there is something not quite like yourself about you to-day. You are looking white and thin. Have you been ill, Clifford?"

"You darling! How graciously you have granted my prayer, and brought out the name I want you to call me, with just the sweetest little hesitation in the world."

He laughed as he spoke, carrying off the ardour of his words with a mocking air.

"Nonsense!" returned Nora, a little piqued. "I did not hesitate at all. You seem to forget I am not a child."

"I am deeply conscious you are a woman; a——" He pulled himself up short, and added: "A most serious young woman."

"And I suppose there is no chance of finding the lost jewels?" said Nora, to change the subject, for there was an indefinable something in Marsden's tone which she neither liked nor understood.

"I fear not. I thought I might have tracked them to the den of an old Dutch receiver of stolen goods, and went myself to Amsterdam, to see what I could do—all in vain. Don't talk of them; you don't know what an infernal blow that unfortunate business has been to me. That *my* guest should have been robbed almost under my eyes! It's a sort of blot on me and my house."

"That is quite a morbid idea. How could any reasonable being blame you? I am sure Mrs. Ruthven——"

"Mrs. Ruthven has behaved very well, but she is desperately cut up, and I do not wonder at it," interrupted Marsden.

"She is very nice, and so pretty—attractive-looking, rather."

Marsden glanced sharply at her before he answered,

"Yes, she is a piquante little devil, but she ought not to be so heavy with her paint-brush about the lips; that sort of art may be overdone."

"Squire!" in a shocked tone, "how can you be such a traitor? I thought you were fond of Mrs. Ruthven—that you were her best friend."

Marsden laughed.

"So I am, but I am not, therefore, blind. All the world (except *you*) can see she paints—her lips."

"*I* did not, and it is not nice or loyal of you to tell me."

"I am rebuked. You are an awful piece of perfection, Nora."

"Do not be sarcastic. I know my own shortcomings well enough; but I am not false to my friends. I shall not confide my weakness to *you*."

"Do you fancy I would betray you? You little

understand me. Why, you are my own——" he hesitated—"my own kinswoman."

Nora shook her head, and they walked on silently for a few moments. Then she said:

"Helen and I are thinking of going up to town for a couple of months. It is rather melancholy and uncomfortable to be so far from everyone in the winter. Helen has been so nervous ever since that robbery."

"You are quite right—it is an excellent idea," cried Marsden, with hearty approbation. "Where do you think of staying—at the Langham?"

"The Langham!" laughing. "Why, the Langham would swallow up all our money in ten days. No, no; we think of going to Mrs. May, if she can take us in. Do you remember Mrs. May?"

"Well, yes, I seem to have heard the name."

"She was cook at Evesleigh when you were a boy, I believe. Oh! years ago."

"Exactly; before I grew old and decrepit."

"She has a house near Hyde Park, and we shall take rooms there."

"You'll be awfully uncomfortable, you'll get nothing to eat but scorched mutton and watery rice-pudding, and you'll never move without carrying off a knitted chair-cover on your back, or hung to a button."

"You are quite wrong! We stayed a week there, on our way back from Germany, and it was very comfortable. I do not think there is a knitted antimacassar, if that is what you mean, in the house."

Talking lightly, with occasional silence on Marsden's part, they reached the blind-woman's cottage.

"How long shall you stay here?"

"I do not know, but you need not trouble about me."

"If I choose to trouble, you cannot prevent me. I am going to look for one of the game keepers about a mile further on, and I shall wait for you outside, when I return."

"Oh, no! pray do not mind, I——"

"Do I bore you?" very gravely.

"How can you say so, Clifford?"

"Would you rather not walk with me?"

"Nonsense!"

"Very well, I will wait for you, and if you give me the slip, deep will be my wrath."

"I have no such intention," and she vanished into the cottage.

Marsden walked on in deep thought, his brows knit, his handsome face firmly set, all the smiling softness of his ordinary aspect gone and replaced by a stern haggard look, that made him seem years older.

When Nora had read the better part of a newspaper to her old *protégée*, and discussed some of its contents, she perceived the odour of tobacco wafted through the open window, and guessing that the Squire was waiting, she bade the blind-woman good-bye and went to join him.

"Will you tell me," he said, throwing away his cigar, when they had gone a few paces, "what is the pleasure of going into a stuffy cottage, to read to a stupid old woman, who would probably prefer being left to sleep?"

"It is not a very great pleasure certainly, but I assure you I like reading to old Betty, she is very shrewd, and, though I don't profess to be an angel, we ought to help each other sometimes. It is not much to do for a poor soul; think how lonely she

must be. We should be rather worthless, if we did only what we like."

"Hum! That has been the only rule *I* have ever followed."

"I do not believe you. People would not like you so well, if you cared for nothing but self; you must have some heart."

"I begin to fear I have," said Marsden, as if to himself. "I assure you," he went on, "it is impossible to me to do what I do *not* like, and equally impossible to resist snatching at what I desire, ay! and getting it, too, by some means or other."

"What a bad character!" cried Nora. "If anyone else spoke of you in that way, I should have been quite angry."

"And would you have defended me?"

"Yes, of course! you are my kinsman and good friend."

"And you are a very pearl of a cousin."

They were silent till they reached a turn in the path, from which the dull red towers of Oldbridge were visible; the sight of them perhaps prompted the abrupt question:

"What has become of Winton? Is he here still?"

"No; he is gone to Devonshire, I think."

"Ha! and how has he been prospering?"

"Prospering? How? In what way?"

"With your step-mother. I expected to hear that their engagement had been announced when I came back. Why has he let the grass grow under his feet?"

Nora was too amazed to reply at once; but memory swiftly unrolled her picture of the past few

months, and showed a hundred important nothings which corroborated Marsden's startling assertion.

"I suppose I am very stupid," she exclaimed, as soon as she could speak, "but I never suspected this. Helen, too, is so frank, she would surely have told me."

"I am not so sure of that! Pray, what do you think kept a man like Winton in such a dull hole as Oldbridge, and brought him day after day to Brookdale? Yourself, eh? A very natural supposition! You are sufficiently magnetic, sweet cousin."

"Indeed—indeed," began Nora eagerly, but Marsden went on smiling, and shaking his finger at her:

"It is soothing to so imperfect a fellow as myself to find out a little weakness—a tinge of vanity in such an admirable 'human' as you are! I don't doubt that Winton, like many another, would have fallen to your spear; but, you see, he was Mrs. L'Estrange's lover in bygone ages—when they were boy and girl, and after —I know all about it. I fancy Winton when he first came home from India, was not too anxious to take Helen Landels back with him. I remember her, a sad-eyed, timid creature, under the thumb—I should say thumb-screw—of old Miss Webster. She was a soft, taking little thing then, she is a very charming woman now, and Winton is well off. It would be a comfortable settlement for her and her little girl, for they are, I think, quite dependent on you."

At the end of this long speech, during which Marsden watched his companion's face, Nora was quite prepared to reply.

"If they are fond of each other, I shall be very pleased. Helen has been a real mother to me, and I like Mr. Winton immensely. You don't know what a

hard life Helen has had. If Mr. Winton will be kind and make her happy—and now you have opened my eyes, I think he *is* fond of her—I *shall* be glad. But, as to her dependence on me, if I die before I am twenty-one, of course all I possess will go to Beatrice, and as soon as ever I am of age, I will settle half my fortune on Helen, to go to Bea after her."

"But, Nora! you must not be Quixotic; make some provision for your father's widow, but not the half of your fortune," cried Marsden, looking at her with surprise.

"Oh! if Helen is married, well, I shall make the settlement on Bea only. I have always considered it an oversight on my father's part not providing for her, an oversight I am bound to make good."

Her tone was perfectly easy and natural; nor did it express the slightest consciousness of doing more than a simple act of justice.

Marsden walked on in silence for a few paces.

"You are right, I think," said he. "It is a horrid nuisance to know that people belonging to you want for anything; but, at the same time, you are acting with unusual liberality. When shall you be of age? if I dare ask such a question!"

"The fifteenth of February next, I shall be twenty-one."

"And suppose you marry some stingy fellow before that date?"

Nora laughed merrily.

"I do not fancy I shall run away with anyone between this and February, and if I marry soberly, conventionally, the lawyers can devise the means of carrying out my wishes, or, if the suitor likes my poor little

money better than myself, why, he may go," she waved her hand with an expressive gesture.

"I wonder what sort of a woman you will develope into, Nora?" said Marsden his eyes fixed upon her as if brooding over some sombre thought.

"Am I not developed already, Squire?"

"You have heaps to learn! for one thing, your own power! but why do you go back to that patriarchal appellation? Promise to call me Clifford, always Clifford."

"I will try," returned Nora smiling. "Now Clifford, here we are at the bridge, and before we part, promise me first to consider all I have said a profound secret between us two; next not to tease Helen about Mr. Winton; she is a shy creature, and I do not think he has absolutely proposed for her yet, so it would annoy her dreadfully if you said anything on the subject."

"Trust me, I shall be most discreet! But, Nora, suppose this marriage takes place they will go to India. What shall you do?"

"Stay behind and educate Bea, or marry that stingy man you seem to have found for me."

"Will you promise to marry the man *I* shall find for you?" cried Marsden eagerly.

"Yes! If he is pleasant and handsome, and rich, and accomplished, and ready to love, honour, and obey *me*," returned Nora with mock solemnity. "It will take you a long time to find such a *rara avis*, undertake nothing rashly, so good-bye!"

"Are you going to dismiss me? What have I done?"

"Helen is out and I—I am going to be busy; but

if you will dine with us at seven, we will not oblige you to eat scorched mutton."

"Thanks, many thanks. It is," looking at his watch, "three-twenty. May I present myself at half-past six?"

"Yes, certainly; Helen will be delighted to see you." She bent her head with an arch smile and turning away walked quickly towards the Cottage.

Marsden leaned his arms on the parapet of the bridge and looked after her so long as she was in sight, then he pursued his way home in profound thought.

Nora went quietly to her own room, to cogitate the wonderful information imparted by Marsden.

She was glad, very glad, not only for Helen, but for herself. This knowledge would fortify her to resist her own folly, to uproot the ridiculous fancy which had mastered her. The man who was to be Helen's husband ought to be, could be, nothing to her. Her cure was certain. But oh! what a weak conceited fool she had been, to take for granted that she herself and she only was the attraction that drew Winton so constantly to Brookdale, to be so blind to the gentle charm of her step-mother's looks and voice and manner. She saw it all now. How quietly tender Winton always was in speaking to Helen, and how much more notice he took of her than of her step-daughter. Yet across this conviction would shoot puzzling gleams of memory, recalling significant looks and words which might have been interpreted as indicative of a strong liking for herself; this no doubt was but the exaggeration of her own vain unhealthy imagination. How she thanked Heaven that none could read her thoughts.

She was tolerably safe, no one save Mrs. Ruthven had ever hinted at any possible *tendresse* between herself and Winton, and *that* suspicion would soon be dispelled by the announcement of his engagement to Mrs. L'Estrange.

At any rate, for the moment, Nora thought herself quite cured. She made some changes in her dress and re-arranged her hair so as to be ready for the evening. Then she descended to the drawing-room, and set herself diligently to answer some long-neglected letters.

Before she had finished Mrs. L'Estrange returned, and there were parcels to be opened, purchases to be looked at and put away, and Bea's report of all she had seen and heard to be listened to.

Mrs. L'Estrange was surprised and pleased to hear that Marsden was to be their guest. He was a great favourite with her, and showed her much kindly consideration.

On this evening he conversed chiefly with her, but she was too observant, too warmly interested in her step-daughter, not to perceive that he was aware of Nora's every movement, even her slightest gesture. She had already suspected that the lord of Evesleigh had lost his heart to his young kinswoman, and she was not a little puzzled by Nora's evident unconsciousness. She had very little idea, however, of the overpowering intensity of the passion Nora had inspired.

From motives, which need not now be revealed, Marsden masked his batteries cleverly; until the right moment came to open fire, he was merely a pleasant, playful, admiring relative. To-night, however, she was

struck by some slight though distinct indications, which escaped his resolute self-control.

Marsden had never denied himself anything, nor thought any price too high for the pleasure of the moment. He had had endless love affairs, but none of any depth, and when he met his young cousin, he was unaccountably fascinated by her. Her delicate freshness, her simplicity and shrewdness, her quick spirit and keen self-respect, her moments of softness, suggestive of delicious possibilities, of responsive tenderness, which was not to be lightly won, made, to him, an irresistible combination.

Clifford Marsden was a man of infinite taste; taste so true, that it all but made him enamoured of goodness, if only for its harmony. Alas! what a chasm that "but" covered! He could be generous too, though he was quite capable of sacrificing all and everything to the gratification of self, yet, at times, that self took an amiable form. At present he was determined Nora L'Estrange should be his wife. She was the first woman he had ever wished to marry, and nothing should stand between him and the accomplishment of his wishes.

In such a passion, there is a tinge of cruelty. Marsden would rather kill her with his own hand, than give her up to another.

Meantime, the wild animal within him slumbered in the sunshine of its own hopes. Marsden talked well, Nora, who had more colour than usual, was charmingly bright. Winton was never mentioned, and all went merrily.

CHAPTER IX.

"ON THE TRAIL."

THE last week of October saw nearly all the personages in this true history assembled in town.

Nora L'Estrange was almost ashamed of the eager pleasure with which she hailed their removal to London. The change of scene, the various objects of interest, the different occupations of town, contrasted with those of the country, roused and diverted her.

Beatrice and her attendant Fräulein were left with Winton's aunt, Mrs. Atherley, who had invited them to stay with her in Oldbridge, in order that the young lady might have music lessons from the organist of the Cathedral, and be preserved from the disorganisation of life in a London lodging, where she was to join her mother before Christmas.

Winton, as was expected, soon made his appearance, and then Marsden; both bestowing a good deal of their spare time on the ladies of Brookdale. So the days went speedily and pleasantly, with the help of galleries and concerts by day, and theatres in the evening. Nora flattered herself that by the careful cultivation of more frank friendliness of manner towards Winton, she was killing out warmer feelings in her heart, and at any rate successfully masking the true state of affairs in that weak citadel.

Mrs. Ruthven, however, put in her claim for a good deal of her trustee's time and attention. She also found it expedient to take up her abode in the

capital. The police gave her little hope of recovering her lost property, but the preliminaries of her new purchases made her presence requisite.

"Have you seen Miss L'Estrange?" asked Mrs. Ruthven, one morning when Shirley had been admitted before luncheon.

"No, I thought of calling, but did not see what business I had to do so."

"I wish you would! Why should you not?"

"I do not know. Mrs. L'Estrange is rather stand off."

"Pooh!" she returned with an expression of contempt. "Mrs. L'Estrange is nobody! They called here yesterday, but I was out. Shirley, I wish you would make love to Nora! It would not be a bad marriage for you, and you need not marry her if you do not like."

"What is the real reason of your regard for my interests?"

"I want you to cut out Winton."

"I do not think there is anything to interfere with in that direction. The running at present is all on Marsden's side."

Mrs. Ruthven stooped to pick up her pocket handkerchief before she replied, "Well, cut Marsden out. Why should you not? You have been something of a favourite with women, more experienced women than Nora L'Estrange, before this."

"I am flattered," said Shirley with a self-satisfied smile. "Still I imagine——."

"Oh! I would give anything to see you safely married to Nora L'Estrange," she interrupted, clasping her hands together with a fervent air. "What a dé-

nouement the whole thing would be!" and she laughed—a cruel, mocking laugh.

"What whole thing?" asked Shirley with an angry look.

"My good friend, I am thinking of complications which do not enter your mind."

"I do not see how they can when I am in ignorance."

Here Mrs. Ruthven's courier entered with a note, which she took and glanced at.

"Let him come up," she said, and sat a moment in silence, twisting it with her small, pointed fingers.

"Am I in the way?" asked Shirley with some stiffness.

"No! no! you can stay," said Mrs. Ruthven carelessly, and as she spoke the detective Waite was shown in.

"So! you are back again?" she said. "Have you anything fresh?"

"Something, I——." he hesitated, and glanced at Shirley.

"Oh, you may speak! This gentleman, Captain Shirley," with a slight emphasis on the name, "was, you remember, at the ball when I was robbed, and knows all about it."

Waite bowed gravely.

"I have just come from Brussels," he said. "A report I heard at, no matter where, induced me to visit a merchant there, who it was said had some fine rubies for sale. They were certainly very fine, and were, I find, bought from a respectable looking young man, of small stature and very dark complexion, who said he was a native of India. He spoke French very

imperfectly. He had, he said, inherited the stones from an uncle. He stated he was a native of Pondicherry, and had offered the gems in Paris, but could not get his price. This surprised the jeweller, as he asked less than their value, which the purchaser, Vandersluys, Rue de la Montagne, gave him. After much trouble, I traced this man back to Ostend, and ascertained that a passenger answering to his description embarked on board the Dover steamboat about three weeks ago, and there I lose all trace!"

"But you must find it again," exclaimed Mrs. Ruthven, who had listened intently. "You know the reward I offered for the jewels themselves. I will double it, if you enable me to punish the robber! Do you not think I am right?" she added with sudden startling vehemence to Shirley, who hesitated an instant and then replied, "Certainly, Mrs. Ruthven, certainly. Such a miscreant deserves no mercy."

"From Pondicherry, did he say? Did he give any name?"

"No! I fancy the jeweller was too glad to get such a bargain, to make many inquiries."

"You do not intend to give up?" cried Mrs. Ruthven, eagerly.

"Certainly not, madam. These are the first tracks." He paused and gave a quick questioning glance at Mrs. Ruthven, who slightly bent her head. "Yes," he went on, "the first tracks I have hit on, and I am determined not to give up till I have done all man can do to find the rascal and his accomplices, if he has any."

"I should imagine he had," said Shirley, who had risen, and going over to the fire, stirred it into a blaze.

"A man would hardly attempt so bold a stroke single-handed."

"It would be a good deal safer alone."

"Then what do you propose to do next?"

"I have not yet quite decided, Sir," replied the detective drily. "Moreover, I never speak of my plans. As there is no time to be lost in trying to find the trail, I shall wish you good morning, Madame, and keep you informed of my movements."

"A shrewd fellow," said Shirley, "but I fear his chances are but scanty, of tracking this darkie."

"He will do it yet," returned Mrs. Ruthven, with gloomy conviction, and fell into such persistent silence, that, finding it impossible to rouse her, Shirley, himself irritated and uneasy, bid her good morning.

The next afternoon Marsden, who had been gratifying his lawyer by detailing the particulars of a successful speculation he had made on the Paris bourse through the guidance of a friend, drove away to Southwick Street, having sent some flowers to keep Mrs. Ruthven quiet.

Somewhat to his discomfiture—for he always suspected that Shirley was more or less a spy—that gentleman was in the act of leaving his card as he went up the steps.

The ladies were "out, driving, with Mr. Winton," said the highly respectable ex-butler, who opened the door.

"When do you expect them in?" asked Marsden.

"Can't say, sir. Not till late, any way."

Marsden then left his card, and, turning, walked a few paces with Shirley.

"So Lady Dorrington is in Town," said the latter, after their first exchange of greetings.

"Indeed! I have not heard from her."

"I don't think I was mistaken. I saw her drive up to Mrs Ruthven's hotel as I left this morning."

"I did not think she would be up just yet. How is Mrs Ruthven to-day?"

"No great things," said Shirley. "This unfortunate business has taken such a hold on her. I believe she suspects every soul that comes near her. She ought to get away, among new scenes and people. It is a pity she has bought this villa."

"It is not a bad investment. She might sell it any day for a thousand or so more than she gave. The owner was very hard up for ready money."

"Ah! that's always the way—those that have, to them shall be given. And our charming friend has a keen appreciation of a bargain!"

"Of course—it is in her blood," said Marsden, laughing. "Now I must go and look after this sister of mine. Shall you see Mrs. Ruthven to-day?"

"I hope to do so. She fancies she has some faint clue to the ruffian that robbed her. I don't believe it myself. It seems there is some suspicion about a half-caste, from Pondicherry, I scarce know what," and Shirley pulled himself up. "I avoid the subject with her now."

"We cannot wonder if she *is* a little morbid! I shall call at any rate—early to-morrow." They interchanged "good mornings" and parted.

"I wonder the bereaved window did not send for me?" mused Marsden. "Why does she hang on to that cad?" he walked slowly towards his club. "I don't fancy she cares for him, not now at least, I wish she did—or, for anyone except myself! She might

have him for a trustee—she may have whom she likes. *I* am well out of my difficulties, and I'll take deuced good care to keep clear of any more. The fact is I am very simple in my tastes, only I fell in with an extravagant set! I wish Mrs. Ruthven would take her departure—anywhere, even to another world. Has she made a will? Who has she left her money to? She has no relations? Suppose she made me her residuary legatee? That would be too comic! I wonder why she is so civil to Nora? She is always watching her. She is such a keen devil, she suspects I am in love with my charming cousin. Aye! but she little knows how deeply! That girl has given me fresh youth and force, and invention. Nothing shall part us. But I must be cautious for a little longer—then—then——"

So, with head erect, a delicious sense of success uplifting his spirit Marsden strolled down Park Lane and along Piccadilly. Reaching his club, he found a note from his sister, commanding—rather than inviting—him to dinner that day. Marsden felt bound to obey—much to his annoyance.

Lady Dorrington was exceedingly formidable to him just then. She knew something of his life and embarrassments—and she suspected more. She had no hesitation in questioning him, in the coolest and most embarrassing manner, moreover, it was exceedingly difficult to mislead her.

Marsden, however, prepared himself for the ordeal, and "came up smiling" at seven-thirty, with his pleasantest, frankest manner.

"Well, Clifford, and what have you been doing

with yourself since we parted?" asked Lady Dorrington, when dinner was over and they were left alone.

"A great many things. It has been a beastly time altogether. I was over in Amsterdam, as you know, after these unlucky jewels. I was in great hopes of finding a clue there, but it's no use, Mrs. Ruthven will never see them again. Then I went to Paris, to see de Meudon. He was awfully ill, poor fellow—gastric fever or some such thing. I spent a few days with him at his villa, and had a talk with some of the principal jewellers in Paris, but could find nothing. One of them suggested the stones might have gone to New York or Sydney. Then I came over here to attend to Mrs. Ruthven's business—she was in such a violent hurry about that villa."

"Is the affair finished, and the money paid down?" sharply.

"Yes," returned Marsden, looking up surprised. "Why do you ask?"

"Thank God!" said Lady Dorrington emphatically. "You know I never mince matters, and I can tell you I was in a horrid fright about this purchase, lest—well, lest the money for it should not be forthcoming in time."

"My dear sister, I am immensely flattered by your high opinion of your only brother," bowing ironically.

"That is all very well, Clifford, but I know you, and I know what temptation a large sum of money absolutely at your disposal must be. I dreaded the appointment of a new trustee and the discoveries he might make, that was one reason why I was so eager to press your marriage with Mrs. Ruthven. I am still anxious for it, but not for its immediate celebration."

"Isabelle," said Marsden quietly, but in tone of feeling, while he looked straight at her, his soft, dark blue eyes grave and reproachful, "I have been reckless, extravagant, everything I ought not to be, but to rob a woman too, of whom I am, in a sense, the guardian—that is an infamy of which I am incapable." He was evidently a good deal moved. "I do not deserve such suspicions from you."

"Well, I am sure I hope not," cried Lady Dorrington, with a searching look, "I beg your pardon; but I confess I have been terribly uneasy since you paid off that mortgage of Greenwood's, in May."

"Ah! yes. I was wonderfully lucky last spring. I won a few thousands at Monaco, and de Meudon's broker managed to double them several times over, in short, I never had such a chance before, so I was able to clear Greenwood and one or two other small things. You may well beg my pardon. If you believed me to be such a blackguard, how could you care enough about me to wish me married to any woman—to wish to sacrifice any woman to me?"

"Clifford," cried Lady Dorrington, "I know that you have very little principle, yet I *am* fond of you. I have seen you grow up. You have always been nice and kind to me, and you are the last of our family. I want to see you well married and free from the awful temptation of money difficulties. If I have done you injustice I am very sorry."

"I can afford to forgive you, Isabelle, but if you knew how much I value your good opinion you would not have wounded me as you have done."

Lady Dorrington, quite melted, held out her hand, and Marsden rose, took it, and kissed her brow.

"Now," she resumed cheerfully, after a moment's silence, "let us talk seriously of your marriage."

"Must I marry?"

"Why, yes; of course. It is a special intervention of Providence that sent Mrs. Ruthven in your way — and such an attractive woman too."

"Yes, she does her best in that line."

"And to judge by your conduct, especially the night of that unlucky ball, she is eminently successful. You really must not play fast and loose with a woman's affections."

"Affections! You don't mean to say you believe Mrs. Ruthven has any affections. She has vanity if you like, and gratifies it unscrupulously; they used to tell funny stories of her up in the Hills."

"Still, Clifford, I do think she is sincerely attached to you; and just consider what her money would do for you and your estate!"

"I don't think you show much true friendship for her by trying to marry her to an impecunious country gentleman."

"Nonsense! You only want a little ready money to put you straight again, and the estates would soon recover themselves."

"Give her another chance," pursued Marsden. "Ask one or two matrimonially disposed peers to meet her, and see if my fascinations would counterbalance a coronet."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," cried Lady Dorrington impatiently. "I daresay you are talking in this strain just to worry me. I daresay you have made up your mind to marry her all the time. If so, do not be too sure of your game—beware of that Captain

Shirley. He is is a rival, a masked rival; he is always hanging about, and acting as if he were her best friend."

"He is decidedly objectionable; but I do not fear him."

"You are wrong, Clifford! He is not to be despised! I am going to persuade Mrs. Ruthven to come down with me to Chedworth. It will draw her away from her perpetual fretting about those jewels; they are a perfect craze; and I think those horrid detectives are playing upon her credulity; it is a game that pays them well."

"I don't believe she is the sort of woman to waste her money in any direction. But she is a little gone off about this unlucky robbery. Do you know she seemed disposed to suspect Shirley himself!"

"Is it possible? Well, she knows him better than we do. I do not like his countenance!"

"Nevertheless, I do not suppose his being objectionable to you, is any proof that he would be guilty of felony," said Marsden laughing.

"Of course not! I am not so silly as to think any such nonsense! But, seriously, Clifford, I want you to come down to Chedworth and help me to cheer up poor dear Mrs. Ruthven—there is very good shooting, you know how strictly Dorrington preserves his game —and if you *do* make up your mind to marry Mrs. Ruthven—which I hope and pray you will—everything might be settled, and the ceremony could take place early in the new year!"

"Not so fast, my dear sister. I will do my best to oblige you; but I make no positive promise. Do not be too sure of your little game! However, I will

so far oblige you, as to bestow the delights of my society on you for a few days; then I may be called away, for I have some business in hand which requires my personal attention. So I will leave the final cheering up of our fair friend to you."

More than this he would not promise. Lady Dorrington was therefore forced to be content. "I hear Mrs. L'Estrange and Nora are in town? What in the world are they doing here? Wasting their money?"

"I suppose they got bored and nervous at Brookdale. Why should they not be comfortable and happy? It can cost next to nothing, living as they do."

"Oh! *you* think people are strictly economical when they don't drive four-in-hand and sit down to truffles, pineapples and *pâté de foie gras* every day. However, they have a right to please themselves. I wish Winton would make haste to marry Nora, it is time she were settled."

"Are you sure he intends to marry Nora?"

"He is behaving very badly if he does not. Why he almost lived in her house all the summer, they tell me."

"Is it not just possible he may marry Mrs. L'Estrange, who was his flame long ago? It looks to me very like a case of returning to his first love."

"Ah!" cried Lady Dorrington. "Is it possible? That *never* struck me. I don't see why it might not turn out very well, and then Nora need not make any provision for her little sister; besides, I have often thought, what a nice match she would be for Dorrington's nephew, Charlie Dyson. You know Charlie? a very good fellow, and getting on very well indeed at the Bar. He would be the very thing for Nora. If Mrs.

L'Estrange goes to India, we must marry Nora to someone, she cannot live alone."

"Certainly not, we must marry her to someone," agreed Marsden, with cheerful alacrity.

"I will ask them all down to Chedworth for Christmas. It would be quite exciting if the triple event came off at my house!"

"It would, indeed. Now," added Marsden, filling and swallowing a large glass of sherry, "I must leave you, I have one or two people to see before I retire to rest; so good-night, sister mine, try and believe your brother is not a felon!"

"My dear Clifford, how can you say such things? Be sure you do not lose money at cards or anything of that kind. Let me see you to-morrow, and remember, you have promised to come down next week to Chedworth."

* * * *

The morning after Lady Dorrington and her brother had dined together, Mrs. Ruthven received a second visit from Waite. He was got up in a style of the severest respectability, and might from his appearance have been the secretary of a benevolent institution. He paused in the middle of the room, and made a low bow. Mrs. Ruthven looked at him steadily before speaking, then a smile crept round her lips.

"I think we have successfully disarmed any suspicions or fears Captain Shirley may have had," she said. "I can afford to wait. You have done your work well, it only remains to give you your reward."

She opened her cash-box, which stood on a table beside her, and counted out some notes. The man's eyes sparkled as he watched her. When she stretched

out the notes, which she held loosely, he again bowed low.

"It has been a difficult business," he said, taking them; "perhaps the most difficult I ever undertook, nor could any one have succeeded, but for the clue you possessed. You have rewarded me generously, and you will always find me ready to do your service."

"I shall be more generous," said Mrs. Ruthven eagerly. "If a year passes without a whisper, a suspicion of the truth getting abroad, you shall have twenty-five pounds. If two years, fifty, after that all will be safe. But no other creature beyond *you* and *me*, has the faintest inkling of the fact, therefore should it become known, it will be through you. *But*," she dwelt on the word, and then paused, "should I be disposed to open the case, to punish the—the felon——" her small hand, which lay on the table, clenched itself tightly, "your evidence will be forthcoming?" Waite bowed. "Have you brought me the papers?—your written account of your search?"

"I have." He drew a long, well-filled envelope from his breast-pocket, and gave it to her.

"That is well." She grasped it eagerly. "Of course," she continued, in a changed voice, "of course my object is to get back my jewels. If I can do that, I do not wish to destroy anyone. That would do me no good."

"Certainly not, madame, if it gave you no particular gratification."

"You have a wide experience, Mr. Waite. I suppose human nature does not seem very estimable to you."

"We know nothing better, and certainly nothing

worse," he returned philosophically. "At any rate, this especial culprit has been fortunate. Had you left him to the regular police, nothing would have saved him from public trial; but, even with your help, I doubt if they would ever have tracked him. Englishmen are clumsy in such matters, and I found my nationality, my familiarity with my father's language, of important assistance in my researches. As I said, it is well for——"

"Captain Shirley!" cried a waiter, throwing open the door to its fullest extent.

Mrs. Ruthven and Waite exchanged a look, and a slight smile passed over the lips of the latter, while Mrs. Ruthven rapidly thrust the packet she had just received into her cash-box and locked it, before she rose to receive the new-comer with a sweet smile of welcome.

Waite stood back with an air of extreme deference.

"Very glad to find you are looking so much better," said Shirley, who was neater, fresher, keener than ever.

"I am almost myself again," she replied; then turning to Waite she said graciously: "I need not detain you longer."

"I wish you good-morning, madame, and deeply regret I could not do you better service."

"I am quite sure you have done your best. I have your address if I need your assistance further. Good morning."

Shirley looked after him.

"Then he has given up, has he?" he asked quickly.

"For the present, yes. There, don't let us talk any more about my misfortunes. I am going to take

your advice, throw the load off my mind, and try what change of scene will do for me. I have promised dear Lady Dorrington to go down and stay with her for a week or two. She says she will get a few pleasant people together to meet me. It will be much better than going away by myself."

"No doubt," returned Shirley, drawing a chair near the table, beside which Mrs. Ruthven sat. "You look cheered up already."

He glanced at the cash-box.

"Well, if I do, it is no ordinary proof of resignation. I have just had the satisfaction of paying heavily for my agent's failure."

"Oh! that's what brought Waite here? What a villainous countenance the fellow has."

"I do not think so. In fact, the advantage of his face is that it is absolutely expressionless; only I fear if *he* has not succeeded, no one else will."

"I suppose you will have Lady Dorrington's count of a brother at—what do you call her place?"

"Chedworth? Yes, it is highly probable."

"I am not important enough to be asked," said Captain Shirley in an injured tone.

"Nonsense, my dear friend. But if you are, I am going to beg you not to accept."

"Why? I am sure you would not let *me* or anyone interfere with you."

"Certainly not," said Mrs. Ruthven, with sweet composure. "My reason for asking this favour is that I want you to tell me what goes on in town."

"Oh! I have to play the honourable part of spy, have I?"

"You can do exactly as you like. If you

choose to disoblige me, and break with me, you can. Only——"

An expressive pause.

"You know very well I don't want to do anything of the sort. I confess to get out of temper when I see you determined to throw yourself away on such a fellow as Marsden, when you might do so much better."

"I am not so sure I could. Mr. Marsden is evidently not the spendthrift you made out. The money you insinuated he had made away with for his own purposes, was forthcoming when I needed it. I prefer, too, being high up among the landed gentry, to being the wife of some new-made, insignificant peer."

"Why not an old important one?"

"Because at this moment there is scarce one available. The Peerage gives valuable information."

"And because the fascinating master of Evesleigh happens to please your fancy!"

"What is it to you if he does?" she cried, with sudden fierceness.

"It is a great deal to me. I hate the idea," returned Shirley bitterly.

"You don't really mean to say you still care who or what I like?" she exclaimed with a slight, not unfriendly, smile, "that is too foolish. A strict alliance for our mutual benefit is wise and reasonable, but I think we have exhausted sentiment. The fact is you hate Marsden. *I* can see your enmity curling round the corners of your mouth, and gleaming through the glances you cannot veil. How can I trust you to tell me what goes on, without exaggeration or prejudice? You may have nothing to report. Marsden may ask me to marry him during this visit. I fancy Lady Dor-

rington expects it. If so, I fear nothing, for I do believe that if I were richer than I am—rich as Crœsus —he would not tie himself to me or to any woman unless she could give him pleasure! It will probably be but a short-lived passion. I suspect he is constant only to inconstancy—still, temporarily, he likes me. Now if, as I have sometimes thought, he is taken with Nora L'Estrange, he will be gadding to and fro, and spending a lot of time at their miserable lodgings. I want you to keep me informed of this. I am *not going to let that girl interfere with my plans*, cost what it may to cut her out!" She spoke with strong emphasis.

"I understand," said Shirley, who had listened sulkily to this long speech. "If you have set your mind on Marsden or Evesleigh, everything must give way. It is a poor marriage for you, and there can be only one explanation for it. Still, Marsden cannot be as heavily embarrassed as I was led to believe. I was rather surprised to find he was ready with the money for your new purchase."

"What!" cried Mrs. Ruthven. "You imagine Clifford Marsden would be faithless to his trust? What a base suspicion."

"I see nothing to elevate him above it," said Shirley with a sneer. "However, I will endeavour to carry out your wishes, as I have always done, but not for nothing."

Mrs. Ruthven looked at him—a curious searching look.

"You shall have your pay," she said, "in any way you like except one."

"You need not have mentioned the exception, I am well aware of it."

There was a pause. Then Mrs. Ruthven said in an altered tone:

"Lady Dorrington goes down to Chedworth to-day and I follow to-morrow."

"And how long do you remain?"

"Ten days, possibly a fortnight. Now my dear Shirley, I am going to be rather busy, and must bid you good morning."

"I understand" he said, "and obey."

* * * *

Lady Dorrington had written a few lines to her god-daughter, excusing herself for not having called on or sent for her. Time was too short, she said. It was of the utmost importance to get poor dear Mrs. Ruthven away to a totally new scene, and among fresh faces.

Mrs. L'Estrange smiled as she read the note.

"I fancy Clifford Marsden will be her best comforter," she said.

"Do you know," returned Nora in a wise reflective tone, "I begin to doubt if Clifford cares as much for her as I thought he did."

"Do you?" said Mrs. L'Estrange. "I never quite shared your opinion on that subject, though I think it likely enough they will marry. Mark Winton was saying yesterday that there was an idea at one time among her late husband's brother officers that Mrs. Ruthven would marry Captain Shirley. It is curious that he should still be so much with her. When a man is rejected, communications are generally broken off."

"It was mere gossip, probably—the report, I mean.

Why should not men and women be dear friends and nothing more?"

"I am sure I do not know; but you don't often see it."

"As education and common-sense increase, friendship between men and women will, I suppose, be more frequent."

"Perhaps so," said Mrs. L'Estrange doubtfully. "Mr. Winton was talking of returning to India, yesterday. His leave of absence has not expired yet, but he seems anxious to get back to his work. He says he feels he is wasting his time here, and that, for a man of his disposition, the only charm life possesses is work."

"That is rather a dreary doctrine, is it not?"

"I told him so. He was very nice and pleasant yesterday, but I fancied there was an undertone of depression in all he said."

"Why, Mr. Winton is the last man I should suspect of sentimental melancholy," cried Nora. "Perhaps he has lost some money."

"I don't think you do Mark Winton justice, Nora. I have known him since he was a lad of seventeen, and, believe me, he has a good, true heart."

"If you say so, I am quite willing to believe it," then, breaking off suddenly, she exclaimed: "Listen to this, Helen. 'The enterprising manager of Drury Lane has in preparation one of the most brilliant pantomimes ever presented to a London audience. The scenic effects will be of an original and extraordinary character, and the ballet one of the most gorgeous ever seen.' That is something for Bea! It will be such fun going with her! What raptures she will be in! By the bye, Helen, don't you think we can take in Fräulein

Schrader at Christmas time? She is not happy at the school, and as she has given notice she is going to leave, they will be cross and disagreeable."

"Yes, I have no doubt we can manage it. Bea, too, might come to us early in December."

And the conversation turned on domestic matters.

Mrs. L'Estrange, who was far from strong, had taken cold, and was easily persuaded to keep in-doors. The day being dry and crisp, Nora took their maid, Watson, an elderly, staid personage, who had been in Mrs. L'Estrange's service ever since she was married, to bear her company, and walked across the Park to enquire for Mrs. Ruthven and bid her good-bye.

CHAPTER X.

MISUNDERSTANDING.

WHEN they reached the hotel, Mrs. Ruthven was out, and Nora prolonged her walk to Harvey & Nichols', where she and her attendant spent a delightful hour, and several pounds.

By the time she reached her temporary home, Nora felt refreshed and invigorated by air and exercise. The shades of evening had begun to gather, and she planned to herself that she would read aloud to Helen after dinner, to atone for her long absence.

The gas had not been lit, and going up stairs in semi-darkness, she ran against someone on the first landing.

"I beg your pardon," said Winton, whose voice she instantly recognised, "it is so dark."

"Yes, the evenings draw in so soon now," she replied, with some confusion.

"I am glad to have an opportunity of wishing you good-bye. I am going out of town to-morrow for a few weeks; by the time I come back, I shall have made up my mind whether I shall return to India at once or stay to the full extent of my leave."

"Has the old country so little attraction for you, Mr. Winton, that you are ready to leave it?"

"Plenty of attraction; but—I need not trouble you with my reasons. Good-bye for the present. I hope

to see you again before long, either here or at Brookdale."

He held her hand for a moment and was gone.

Nora ascended slowly, thoughtfully, to the drawing-room, where she found Mrs. L'Estrange leaning back in an easy chair, her handkerchief to her eyes, beside a bright fire.

"Why, Helen!" cried Nora, as she advanced towards her. Mrs. L'Estrange started and uncovered her face; the strong light of the flames showed that she had been and was weeping. "Dear Helen, what is the matter?"

"Do not ask me now. I will tell you all one day, but not now," said Mrs. L'Estrange. Rising, she came quickly towards her step-daughter, pressed her lips for an instant to Nora's cheek, and left the room.

"Good Heavens!" ejaculated Nora to herself, "she has refused him. But why?" Overcome with surprise, she sat down, all dressed as she was, to ponder this unexpected outcome of their pleasant intimacy with Winton. He, too, seemed depressed and unlike himself. Why—why had Helen rejected him? especially as she had evidently felt doing so very keenly.

Could it have been because she knew that she and her little girl were unprovided for, and that she did not like being a burden on a husband? Winton was fairly well off, and not likely to let such an obstacle stand in the way of his own or her happiness. Could it be any hesitation about leaving her (Nora) alone, with some mere hired stranger for a companion? No; Helen was too sensible for such an overstrained sense of duty or friendship. Then, as she gazed into the red mass which glowed in the grate, memory un-

rolled her long record of past benefits and generous acts. The quiet, steady kindliness, which had won her childish heart, in spite of her natural prejudice against a step-mother, the perpetual shield she interposed between the irritable, exacting, tyrannical father and his daughter. Now that Nora was a woman—a thoughtful, observant woman—how many instances of her step-mother's patience, her care for everyone's comfort, her entire self-forgetfulness, came back to her mind from dim, by-gone days. Her own vague wonder that Helen never wanted to go anywhere, never sought release from the wearying attendance on her querulous, suspicious, invalid husband, her undefined impression that somehow life was over for her young step-mother—that she had nothing left but endurance and kindly thought for others. What would she herself have been, had she been reduced to a single-handed struggle with such difficulties—as existence would have presented itself without Helen? How much of youth would she have enjoyed? How much of education, or pleasure, or freedom from the stunting effect of care too heavy for her years? Yes! She saw it all clearly. Helen had been more than a mother to her, for she had no claim to such tender, discriminating care. "And if I can repay her I *will*," thought Nora, her heart glowing warm and strong. "Nothing shall stand between me and a woman to whom I owe so much. Thank God! she is brighter and stronger now than I ever remember her. I do hope Bea will grow up a tender, loving daughter! She has a dash of my father's temper! But why—why did Helen send Mark Winton away? I can fancy their whole story—growing into love with each other, almost from their school

days—then his going away to seek his fortune, some misunderstanding separating them probably. Helen, left a penniless orphan, with no hope in the future, tempted by the chance of a settled home with my father. It is a sad enough story and I suppose a common one. Well! she shall have peace now if I can secure it. But—why did she send Mark Winton away? I am sure she did; I must not ask her; I must not seem intrusive. Will she ever tell me?"

That evening Nora was more than usually kind and cheerful; she insisted on Mrs. L'Estrange lying down where her eyes were shaded from the light, and she read aloud from a picturesque book of travels.

When bed-time came and they parted for the night, Mrs. L'Estrange put her arm round Nora, and kissing her gently, said:

"You are a good, dear daughter, or I should say younger sister, to me; you make my life happier than I ever expected it to be." She went quickly up-stairs, leaving Nora touched and surprised, for neither were demonstrative women and rarely exchanged caresses.

The days went by, however, and Mrs. L'Estrange did not show any inclination to tell Nora the story she had promised; still, her step-daughter waited with loyally suppressed curiosity, and tidings reached them that Winton had gone as far as Florence with some Indian friends outward bound to Bombay, and had passed through London without calling to see them.

Meantime, Lady Dorrington flattered herself that her plans were maturing successfully. The day after Mrs. Ruthven had been installed in the principal guest-chamber at Chedworth, Marsden arrived from town, and made himself charmingly agreeable to everyone,

especially to Mrs. Ruthven. The pretty little widow visibly revived after his arrival, and lost something of the pained, strained look in her eyes, which had given Lady Dorrington such uneasiness.

"You ought to go out more, my dear Mrs. Ruthven," she said, as that lady was bidding her hostess good-night. "There are lots of pretty drives about, and I have a capital pair of ponies."

"To say nothing of an excellent charioteer, in the shape of an unworthy brother. Pray allow *me* to show you the neighbourhood. I am duly qualified for the task of cicerone," said Marsden.

"Thank you," and Mrs. Ruthven raised her eyes to his with a long, searching look. "If you really don't mind losing a day's hunting! It is a tremendous sacrifice!"

"Sacrifice!" cried Marsden, laughing. "If sacrifice and penance always took such a form, what a penitent I'd be! Then, if fine, we will take our first tour of inspection immediately after luncheon."

The weather was all that could be desired, more like late September than early November, and the excursion was so successful that another was arranged for the following day.

"I have been thinking, my dear Mrs. Ruthven," said Marsden, as he pulled in the ponies to make them walk quietly up a long hill. "I have been thinking that Dorrington would not make a bad trustee for you. He is really an excellent old fellow, and not at all a bad man of business, though a bovine air hangs round him still."

"He might not like the trouble, and I am really in no hurry."

"But it is quite necessary that you should have another trustee. I begin to feel the responsibility rather too much for me. I should prefer a colleague, because—Oh! for several reasons."

"Does he wish this matter to be settled before he offers himself to me?" thought Mrs. Ruthven, looking into the dark blue eyes admiringly fixed upon her; and smiling responsively, she said: "If you think well, pray ask Lord Dorrington."

"It would come better from yourself. You know my brother-in-law is one of your many devoted admirers. He will be flattered by the request."

"As I shall be if he accepts."

"Which, of course, he will. I often wish I were a better man of business, for your sake. I am, or have been, too great a lover of pleasure. I suppose I must turn to gravity and ambition some day."

"Were I a man, I should certainty be ambitious. I should not like to be second to anyone."

"What an awful vista of toil and trouble you conjure up; still, you make me ashamed of myself. If I had someone near to inspire me, I might do something. I begin to think I have drifted about long enough."

"Is it coming?" thought Mrs. Ruthven for the twentieth time, as she twisted the tassel of her parasol round its handle in painful anxiety.

"Will you drive with me to-morrow?" resumed Marsden earnestly. "I want you to trust yourself to me for a longer expedition than usual; to a charming village about ten or twelve miles off. Let us start early, and have luncheon at a primitive little hostelry called 'The Three Pigeons.' We'll let the ponies rest, and be back in time for afternoon tea."

To this arrangement Mrs. Ruthven agreed, and, after a pause, said suddenly, as if speaking out of her thoughts:

"Do you remember that evening, six years ago, when we were all in the verandah of my father's bungalow, and my husband brought you in, and said, 'This will be a cousin of yours to-morrow.'"

"Yes, I do—well. What a lucky beggar I thought poor Charlie."

"And do you remember my father showing my ruby and diamond necklace and earrings, and saying it would puzzle any jeweller in London or Paris to show the like?"

"I do, indeed. They were superb."

"He little thought," she said, with an hysterical laugh, "that I should bring them to Christian, law-abiding, well-ordered England, only to be robbed of them. Ah! Mr. Marsden, there is little to choose between the idolatrous East and the truth-telling, spiritually-minded West."

"Too true! So I have always thought. But, dear Mrs. Ruthven, if you knew how painful the very mention of those unfortunate jewels is to me, I am sure you would avoid the subject. If you had not put them on with the gracious intention of doing honour to *my* ball, they would be now safely reposing in your jewel case."

"Perhaps so, though I am inclined to think that so ingenious and daring a thief would have got at them anywhere."

"He might. Now try and adopt my philosophy, 'let the dead past bury its dead,' and enjoy in the living present. I think we shall have a fine day to-

morrow, and, for my part, I look forward to our little expedition with the keenest pleasure."

Mrs. Ruthven smiled graciously, and they talked and laughed gaily for the remainder of their drive.

The morrow rose bright and clear, but the projected excursion never came off. A telegram from his lawyer arrived in the forenoon for Marsden, and when he ought to have been entertaining Mrs. Ruthven at a *tête-à-tête* luncheon, he was steaming away to London.

* * * *

Marsden's summons was peremptory. He could only send a message of farewell to Mrs. Ruthven, who usually breakfasted in her own room, and assure his sister that he should return the first moment he could. With this glimmer of hope she was forced to be content.

"If he finds anything more interesting or amusing in or near London, we shall see no more of him, for many a day. I know what Clifford is," said Lady Dorrington to her husband. "I begin to suspect he does not intend to marry Mrs. Ruthven, or matters would not drag as they do."

"Then he is a bit of a blackguard, though he *is* your brother; every one believes he is paying his addresses to her; I do not see how they could think otherwise; and he is bound to give her her option; indeed—"

"Nonsense, Lord Dorrington; my brother is no worse than other men; tried by your standard, there are few who, at one time or another, do not deserve the very coarse appellation you are pleased to confer on Clifford. Still, I wish he had more sense and

taste; Mrs. Ruthven is a very charming woman in my opinion."

"And in mine, too; why, it is extraordinary luck to find money and fascination joined together. The man who gets Mrs. Ruthven, will be a lucky beggar—a deuced lucky beggar!"

"Why, Dorrington! I believe you are capable of giving me a cup of 'cold poison,' and trying your own luck in that quarter!" cried his wife, laughing. "However, all I care for is, to see her safely married to my brother."

"Yes; it would be a capital thing for him. I am not so sure how it would answer for her. Marsden would never be constant to any woman."

"You judge him severely; at any rate, Mrs. Ruthven is a woman of the world, and accustomed to men who are not saints; she has too much sense to be ferociously jealous."

"Don't be too sure; I fancy she is about as far gone after your brother as a woman can be. I saw that long ago; and I am a tolerably shrewd observer."

"You dear old thing! you are not blinder than your neighbours, certainly; I shall write every day to Clifford, till I make him return."

"Well, you can try."

The evening of the day on which Lord and Lady Dorrington held this conversation, Mrs. L'Estrange and Nora had settled themselves, one to her needlework, the other to a new book. The day had been wet and stormy, in spite of which they had been obliged to go through a long afternoon of shopping, chiefly commissions for friends at Oldbridge, and both were glad to rest.

Mrs. L'Estrange had quite recovered the fit of depression which had exercised Nora's imagination a week before, and had, indeed, been more quietly cheerful than was her wont, since she had had a letter with a foreign stamp, which Nora shrewdly suspected came from Winton. She was a little dreamy that evening, and found it difficult to fix her mind on what she was reading. "I suppose we shall have rain and fogs, now that the fine weather has broken up. I really think I should prefer country to town, in rain and storm," she said, laying down her book. "I feel quite tired out."

"Yes," returned Mrs. L'Estrange, when she had counted some stitches, "but then there are fewer resources than in town. Here one can turn into a picture gallery, and find summer or autumnal sunshine for a shilling; besides——"

"Mr. Marsden," announced the ex-butler in his best style.

"I thought you were at Chedworth!" "Oh! I am so glad to see you!" were the exclamations which greeted him.

"Obliged to come up to town on business," was his vague explanation. "Arrived yesterday. Have been torn to pieces by lawyers all day, and am come to lay my mangled remains at your feet." He drew a chair to the cosy fire-side as he spoke.

"And do you go back to-morrow?" asked Nora, who was roused and pleased by his sudden appearance.

"To-morrow? Nor to-morrow, nor to-morrow!" cried Marsden. "It it dull at Chedworth, desperately dull. The hunting no great things, the shooting better;

but the house is crammed with bucolic chums of that excellent fellow Dorrington, and, in short, here I am and here I shall stay."

"Lady Dorrington will be very vexed. I had a letter from her yesterday, saying how much better everything went since *you* had joined them."

"I am glad she knows my value."

"And how is Mrs. Ruthven?" returned Nora.

"Oh! quite well and blooming. She is fast recovering her misfortunes."

"Captain Shirley was here on Sunday," remarked Mrs. L'Estrange, "and was saying he had never seen her look so ill and depressed since he had known her."

"Shirley? How did that fellow come to call upon you?" asked Marsden. "I don't know why it is, but I can't stand Shirley," he added thoughtfully. "And Winton, where is he?"

"In Florence."

"Florence? He is not the sort of man I should imagine would like Florence."

"I don't think he does," said Nora. "He went there to set some Indian friends so far on their way."

"I did not think he would have been so ready to leave London just now," and he gave an expressive glance to Mrs. L'Estrange which she did not see, but Nora did.

Then he asked for Bea, and talked of the child in terms that delighted the mother.

Nora thought Marsden had never seemed so nice and sympathetic. He was quieter and graver than usual, and she felt the relief his presence brought to the monotony of her thoughts most welcome. At length, with apologies for having kept them up so

late, he bid them good-night, and drove straight back to his hotel without even an attempt to find if there was anyone at his club to play a game of cards or billiards with him. His spirit's lord sat lightly on his throne. Marsden was little given to think, or trouble himself about the future, but with all his airy carelessness the last year had been one of irritating anxiety, now he had contrived to clear himself. He could defy Mrs. Ruthven, her lynx-eyed solicitors, and her watchful led-captain, Shirley. He owed her nothing. A little love-making, more or less, did not count with so experienced a coquette. He was perfectly free to shake her off if he chose, and he did choose. Good Heavens! Compare her with the fresh, natural, girlish elegance of Nora L'Estrange! The arch, delicate animation of the one, the studied graces, the veiled yet perceptible passion of the other. And Nora had been unaffectedly glad to see him. How sweet the candid welcome of her eyes; how unconscious her frank, gracious pleasure. Yes, it would be his delightful lot to waken her from the slumber of childhood to the fulness of womanhood—the power of loving! Yet there was a certain strength and individuality about his young kinswoman, that warned him she was no mere waxen doll, to be bent as he chose according to his will. She had ideas of her own—tolerably clear and defined. This would but give piquancy and variety to their intercourse. Heavens! how lovely those eyes of hers would be with the light of love beaming from their hazel depths. Then she would be content to wait, with him, till the Evesleigh estates were free from all encumbrances before they launched into the costly, heavy style of existence suited to his

position. And before the fever of anticipation let him sleep, Marsden made more good resolutions than he had ever formed in his life before. Only give him this fair, fresh, delicate darling, and he would be a new man, with hopes and aspirations higher and better than had ever before dawned upon his mind.

* * * *

"I have done my best to carry out your directions," wrote Shirley to his suzerain, Mrs. Ruthven, "and have even arrived at the distinction of being admitted to the drawing-room of Miss L'Estrange at afternoon tea-time. This enables me to assure you that Marsden almost lives in what you term the 'shabby lodgings' of his relatives. I have not met him there certainly; but I can trace that he has always been there last night, and is expected this evening. Evesleigh I find, too, is to be let for a term of years—five, I think. Old Shepherd, of Calcutta—you remember the firm, desperately rich people—is looking for a country place, and it has been offered to his solicitor. It seems to me that this indicates intentions widely different from anything you anticipated, and points more to a marriage for love, than one for, let us say, money *and* love. I have met Marsden more than once lounging in Pall Mall and Regent Street as if he had nothing on earth to do, which certainly does not look like the urgent business he asserted called him to town. However, you, no doubt, have information which may throw a totally different light on these ambiguous proceedings. I can only give you the result of my observations. Take it at what it is worth."

This letter was the last pebble on the cairn of

hopes and fears, desires, doubts, and silent, stinging anger, which had been gradually accumulating over the bright anticipations of a few months ago; a continued state of agitation and disappointment had strained endurance beyond the utmost, and the passionate, self-willed woman gave way under it. A cold, caught during a long drive with Lord Dorrington in the east wind, obliged Mrs. Ruthven to keep her room. After a day or two of anxious attendance on the part of the local doctor, high fever set in, and it was evident that Mrs. Ruthven was dangerously ill. A great physician and a couple of trained nurses were summoned from London, all the pomp and circumstance of serious sickness were established in Lady Dorrington's pleasant house, and for the time sporting men and dancing women knew it no more.

CHAPTER XI.

"TO BE OR NOT TO BE."

It was some little time before the evil tidings reached Mrs. L'Estrange and Nora, as their correspondence with Lady Dorrington was not frequent, and she was too much taken up, and too angry with him, to continue her diurnal letters to her brother.

Meanwhile Nora and her stepmother went on the even tenour of their way.

Mrs. L'Estrange had gone to Norwood to luncheon with an old lady, a distant cousin of her mother, who had only remembered her existence after she had made what was considered a good marriage, and had more than once invited her. Mrs. L'Estrange always found it hard to say no, and, somewhat to Nora's indignation, had consented; but went alone, as her step-daughter refused to accompany her.

It was dusk when she returned, for her hostess had indulged herself in endless inquiries and fault-finding respecting their mutual relations. Mrs. L'Estrange was wearied, and longed to see Nora's kind bright face, to describe the peculiarities of her testy kinswoman while enjoying a cup of fresh, warm tea.

Nora was sitting on a footstool by the fire-light when her step-mother came in, and the little tea-table was drawn near the hearth, the tea-pot simmering under its cosy, a plateful of thin bread and butter, temptingly delicate, beside it.

"How late you are, Helen," cried Nora, starting up and coming over to assist in taking off her cloak. "What has kept you so long?" Something in her tone struck Mrs. L'Estrange; it was not impatience exactly, it was a sort of subdued excitement.

"It was not the charms of my hostess, nor the delights of my visit, I assure you," and she proceeded to describe the bitterness of her entertainer with much quiet drollery, while Nora poured out the tea.

"You don't want the lamp yet?" she asked, after laughing at her step-mother's account. "It is so nice to sit by the fire."

"It is," said Mrs. L'Estrange, and there was a pause; then Nora said suddenly:

"Helen, Clifford Marsden called here to-day!"

"Yes. He said something about coming last night."

"But Helen! He—he—asked me to marry him! I was so amazed!"

"Well, Nora, I am surprised too, though not so amazed as you are. I have seen that he was fond of you, but I did not think he would marry without money. How did you answer him, dear?"

"I scarcely know, except that I certainly did not say 'yes'."

"It *is* curious," said Mrs. L'Estrange, as if to herself. "I never thought Clifford Marsden would tie himself to any woman, unless for a large money bribe. He knows exactly how you are situated, and I think the better of him! He must love you very much!"

"He says he does, I believe he does!" said Nora, sitting down on her footstool again and clasping her hands round her knee in a thoughtful pose. "In fact, I am half frightened at the idea of his caring so much

about me, though that is weak and silly. I never thought the Squire could be so intensely in earnest about anything. I feel somehow to blame, for, Helen, I am not one bit in love with him. I told him so, and he said he knew it."

"My dear child, you do not know whether you are or not! Clifford Marsden is a man who might teach any woman to love him; and why should he not win *you?* He shows that he is sincerely, disinterestedly attached to you. I must say I am entirely on his side."

"Are you?" said Nora dreamily. "I suppose so." She sighed.

"It is a marriage that would have given your father the keenest pleasure." Nora was silent. "Did you then reject him?" asked Mrs. L'Estrange.

"He would not accept rejection," said Nora, with a grave smile. "He said I must hear him; that I *must* marry him; he seemed rather angry and excited, but we parted good friends. I promised to think of all he had said, and speak to you, who would be his friend he was sure. I am astonished he should care for me so much! He has seen such quantities of charming, beautiful people—but he does! Oh! Helen. He is wonderfully fond of me! I could hear it in his voice. I am very ungrateful. I wish he were not. I am afraid even if I were to marry him he would be disappointed to find I could not love him enough. It is—I mean it must be—so wretched not to receive as much as one gives."

"My dear, you could not fail to love him heartily! You are perfectly heart-whole, and yours is a kindly nature, not likely to harden itself against the tenderness of a true lover."

"No; perhaps not. I wish I did love him. How happy and light-hearted I should be! Now I am uncertain and miserable. I am so impatient, Helen! I cannot rest if I am unhappy. I must get light and freedom, or I should beat myself to pieces against my prison bars! *You* are ever so much braver and nobler."

"You have never come in contact with a real necessity, Nora. You cannot conceive how inexorably submission is forced upon one sometimes."

There was a short pause.

"I should be glad, I confess," resumed Mrs. L'Estrange, "to see you well and happily married. You would, I am sure, be always a kind sister to my poor little Bea; as to myself, it is not impossible that I may——" she stopped.

"Certainly not; why should you not?" put in Nora eagerly. "You are young and fair enough to marry some good, delightful person."

"My dear Nora!" interrupting in her turn. "What can have suggested so absurd an idea? I was about to touch on a very different topic, but I will not now. Tell me, did Mr. Marsden say he would come again?"

"Yes—no. I am not sure what he said. But I think he will most probably."

"Well; we can say no more at present. I will go and change my dress. I trust you will be wise, and not reject such an offer for a whim."

"I only want to do what is right," cried Nora standing up, and letting her clasped hands fall to the length of her arms. "I do wish I loved Clifford, as he deserves me to love him; but—it is very odd—I don't think I like him as well as I did yesterday. I

used to be quite glad to see him—and now I rather dread his coming."

"That is natural enough, Nora. There will be a little awkwardness in meeting him at first. I do not quite understand your indifference to so very attractive a man as Clifford Marsden! Tell me! you know I would not intrude on your confidence, I only ask, because you are dear to me as my own sister! Have you any preference for some one else to steel your heart?"

"Why! who has ever made love to me?" cried Nora indignantly, colouring crimson as she spoke, "and am I the sort of girl to bestow my heart or fancy when neither are sought?"

"Pardon me," said Mrs. L'Estrange, smiling, "the heart, even in the strongest minded young ladies, is strangely illogical and unaccountable."

"Well, I really am not very silly. Now I have kept you too long, perhaps your dress is damp, and you know you must not be imprudent."

"I know it, but I have been under cover all day."

She took up her cloak and was leaving the room, when Nora exclaimed:

"How selfish I am! I quite forgot to tell you I had a few lines from Lady Dorrington, she says Mrs. Ruthven is seriously ill, with fever, nervous fever, and they are quite uneasy about her."

"Indeed! I am sorry, very sorry. I never liked Mrs. Ruthven as well as you do, but I think she looked dreadfully worried of late."

"Did you, do you think she was very much taken with the Squire?"

"Oh, I don't imagine she cares seriously for any-

one, she likes the most distinguished man present," returned Mrs. L'Estrange.

"I should be so sorry to interfere with her. It must be dreadful to be cut out if you are really fond of anyone."

"Do not distress yourself on that score; I fancy Mr. Marsden's flirtation with Mrs. Ruthven was of the very lightest order. Did you answer Lady Dorrington's letter?"

"Yes, at once, and begged her to let us know how the patient was going on."

Mrs. L'Estrange was fascinated by the idea of Nora's marriage with Marsden. She had always liked him, and, living out of the world, had never heard the various reports respecting his wild extravagance, his generally reckless life. Even if she had, she would, like a simple good woman, have fully believed in the power of a pure attachment to elevate and reform the most determined rake. Besides, though truly and warmly attached to her step-daughter, she was keenly alive to the fact that her own precious child was utterly dependent on her half-sister. She never doubted that Nora, if left to herself, would be both just and generous, but if Nora married before attaining her majority, Beatrice would be really dependent on some mere stranger, and men are so strange and hard about money matters. Then a husband's power and influence are so great; the poor lonely widow, though she blushed for herself, earnestly hoped Nora would not marry until she was twenty-one. If Nora married Marsden, she felt sure he would be kind and generous. He was peculiarly sympathetic. It was this that gave him more than half his attraction. He always conveyed the idea

that he was really glad to help anyone. His detestation of everything unpleasant or painful gave him an air of kindness, that imposed even on himself.

Yes, if Nora would consent, Bea's future was secure, and why should she not? A better, or indeed a happier, marriage could not be found. Why Nora was not already in love with her suitor, Mrs. L'Estrange could not understand, and set it down to one of the inscrutable mysteries of a young undeveloped nature.

Nora, too, was thoughtful, and the evening passed almost in silence; occasionally each spoke a few words, and then fell into a fit of musing. The spell, however, was broken by the entrance of the servant with a note for Mrs. L'Estrange.

"The messenger waits, 'm."

"I will ring in a minute or two," said Mrs. L'Estrange, opening the envelope.

"It is from Mr. Marsden, Nora," she exclaimed. "He wants to see me alone to-morrow morning."

"Indeed!"

"I suppose"—smiling—"he wants to secure my vote and interest."

"They are his already." A pause. "What shall I say, Nora?"

"Whatever you choose."

"Then I shall see him."

She rose, went to the writing table and penned a few lines, and sent them to Marsden's messenger.

"I imagine that Mr. Marsden will not be easily turned from his purpose. And I hope, Nora, you will not too thoughtlessly refuse so sincere and disinterested a lover."

"Oh! I know all that can be urged in his favour,"

said Nora, rather impatiently; "and he *is* very nice—only—I think I should like to be Nora L'Estrange for some time longer. I have seen so little! How could I manage a great establishment like Evesleigh House? I am half afraid of that awful housekeeper. And the Squire himself likes everything to be so perfect—so elegant—he might regret his own haste in wanting to marry such a half-fledged creature as I am."

"My dear Nora! this humility is a new development!"

"I know what I am fit for, and I am *not* humble, but I do not want to attempt what is likely to be too much for me. There, don't let us talk about Clifford any more—at least till you have seen him to-morrow."

"Promise me not to refuse him, without due reflection."

"No. I am too undecided to do that.—But it is rather awful to think that, having once said 'yes,' one cannot unsay it."

Mrs. L'Estrange need scarcely have recommended Nora to reflect on Marsden's offer. She was haunted by the recollection of his words, his voice, his eyes. It is true that he kept himself well in hand, and kept back many a passionate expression that rushed to his lips. Nevertheless, he had impressed Nora very deeply with the conviction that she was very essential to him. It rather weighed her down with a vague sense of alarm. What was she to do with this tremendous gift of love?—so strong that his voice trembled in spite of his efforts to be steady, when he described it, and his heart throbbed fast and hard when he pressed her hand for a moment against it. Ought she to condemn one who was so tenderly attached to her to suffer the

pangs of disappointment and rejection, because she had a morbid fancy for another who did not care for her? And with the thought came a suggestion that sent thrills of pain quivering through her veins. Had the same words and tones and looks been Winton's, how differently she would have responded! Perhaps, by cultivating gratitude to Marsden, and giving herself up to his efforts to please and win her, she would succeed in loving him; and then she would make him happy and be happy herself. What a solution of all difficulties that would be! Perhaps it would be the right thing to do. How hard it was to know what *was* right. Finally, the tears welled up, as she thought with regretful compassion of the strong emotion Marsden had displayed—surely such affection constituted a claim upon any kindly heart! Yet she ardently wished he had not taken such a fancy to her! So, after struggling with contradictory thoughts for half the night, she fell asleep towards morning, with a half-uttered prayer to be directed aright upon her lips.

Mrs. L'Estrange received Marsden cordially and cheerfully. She did not doubt for a moment that Nora, having recovered her first startled surprise at his unexpected proposal, would marry him willingly, as it was natural she should; and she was anxious he should see how very heartily she was on his side.

"I feel sure I have a friend in you," were almost his first words, after he had shaken hands warmly with her, "we were always allies since your first appearance at Brookdale."

"Yes, Mr. Marsden, you were always welcome to my husband and to me."

"Nora has told you of the start I gave her," inter-

rupted Marsden, who was absorbed in his own projects. "I feel I have been too abrupt. In short, having been pretty far gone about her nearly ever since we met last spring, I fancied she must see it, and to be candid, her blindness suggests that she may be preoccupied by some luckier fellow than myself. Am I right?"

"You ought to ask her, Mr. Marsden."

"And seem a conceited jackanapes by implying that only a previous attachment would have prevented her falling in love with me?"

Mrs. L'Estrange smiled.

"I do not think Nora is disposed to fall in love very readily. Then there was no one for her to fall in love with."

"Some women might fancy Winton."

"I do not think Nora did. Indeed, they never seemed to take much to each other, especially of late."

"Well, Mrs. L'Estrange, you will back me up? I may depend on you?"

"You may. How did you and Nora part?"

"Oh, she was very anxious to get rid of me; I could see that, but I told her I would not take her first 'No,' nor her second either! Mrs. L'Estrange, I am determined that Nora shall be my wife."

"Not against her will?"

"No; that would be too ungallant," returning to his usual light tone; "but with her will."

"Take my advice; wait a few days before repeating your offer. Let me tell her you will give her time to think, and, meanwhile, that she must let you come as a friend and kinsman."

"Very well. I shall be guided by you, but I can't

stand this uncertainty long. Why does she not like me? for she doesn't."

"It is impossible to say; she is not a commonplace girl."

"Thank you for the implied compliment."

"You have caught me up too soon. Will you write what I have suggested, or shall I speak to Nora?"

"I will write," he said, and speedily traced a few lines. "There," he continued handing the note to Mrs. L'Estrange, "I am very grateful for your help, and believe me if I become your stepson-in-law, I will care for your interests, and those of my little friend, Bea, as if they were my own."

"You are very good," said Mrs. L'Estrange, softly.

"Now," continued Marsden, "what shall we do? It is an awful time in London; I almost wish I had not come up. There is shooting, or hunting, or something to be done in the country. Have you been to Windsor? It is a tolerably fine day. Let us go down and lunch there, and walk about after? Just settle it with Nora."

"Very well," said Mrs. L'Estrange, and left the room.

She was some little time absent, during which Marsden walked to and fro, picked up and put down books and papers which lay about, and occasionally looked at the clock. He was impatient, but not uneasy; he did not doubt his ultimate success, and was not altogether displeased with Nora's hesitation. It was the sense of difficulty which was her crowning charm.

He had seen many lovelier and more fascinating women; but none had ever charmed and vanquished him as this unworldly, natural, young cousin.

What fair round arms she had! What a sweet mouth, half sad, half haughty. Would she ever press it fondly to his? What would he not dare, what villainy would he not commit, to secure her for himself safe away from every one? And would the day ever come when she would be to him as other women, graceful and pleasant enough, but nothing remarkable? Well, not for a long time. There would be a spell of heaven first. Here he threw himself into an arm-chair and took up a book of photographs; it opened at the portrait of Mrs. Ruthven. Was that an evil omen? He hated her, yet, when they had met early that year in Paris, before he had seen Nora, he was rather taken with her. Her veiled admiration for himself flattered and amused him. He even thought of appropriating her wealth in exchange for his name. Now! Pah, how he wished she would die and take herself out of his world, where she was not wanted! The telegram that morning was about as bad as it could be; perhaps luck would still be on his side, for he had a vague, uncomfortable impression that Mrs. Ruthven would work him evil.

Here Mrs. L'Estrange returned, and handed him a little twisted note, which he eagerly opened, and read: "You are very kind and considerate, I accept your suggestion." This was simply signed "Nora."

"I think you ought to be content," said Mrs. L'Estrange smiling.

"I am—and our expedition to day?"

"We will be ready to accompany you in an hour. Nora made no objection."

The meeting, under such trying circumstances, was less awkward than Nora expected. She could not

help admiring Marsden's tact and cool self-possession. If anything, he was more attentive to Mrs. L'Estrange than to herself. The weather was fine, the conversation light and animated. Marsden spoke of Mrs. Ruthven with much good-feeling, and the day was far more agreeable than Nora anticipated, nor did Marsden leave them without making some plans for the morrow which would bring them together.

* * * *

A week passed swift yet slow; for Nora watched the days, with a dim sense that she was committing herself deeper and deeper.

The accounts from Chedworth were worse and better alternately, and, considering his relations with the sufferer, Marsden felt bound to go down to his sister's for a day, at least, to show proper interest in Mrs. Ruthven.

His short absence was of use, for Nora missed him, and recognised what a charming companion he could be. There was, in short, not one reasonable reason for refusing to be his wife, and, no doubt, as soon as she had pledged herself to him, other hopes and new duties would help her to forget a folly she ought to have surmounted long ago.

A letter from him to Mrs. L'Estrange gave a greatly improved account of Mrs. Ruthven. She had really taken that turn for the better for which her attendants had so eagerly watched. Marsden himself would come up by the night train, and see them next day.

"Now be sure you receive him well, Nora," said her step-mother smiling, "I think you have tried him enough."

"If you only knew how hard it is to make up my mind on such a tremendous 'to be or not to be.'"

"Still, you cannot keep Mr. Marsden waiting. It is as tremendous a question to him too! Will you write to Bea while I am out, and give Fräulein minute and clear directions as to their journey on the 10th? You know if she can make a mistake she will. I promised to be with Madame Kennett at half-past eleven, and it is eleven now. If I miss my appointment I do not know when I shall get my dress," and she left the room.

During her brief absence some notes and letters by the second post were brought up; an invitation or two, a hasty letter from Nora's German friend respecting an engagement just offered to her, and another letter with a foreign stamp for Mrs. L'Estrange—Nora felt almost sure it was from Mark Winton.

While she looked, Mrs. L'Estrange returned. Nora took up the letter and handed it to her.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, opening it hastily and glancing through the contents gravely. Then looking through the window she exclaimed: "The cab is waiting; there, dear, you can read it." Leaving the letter in Nora's hand she went quickly downstairs.

"Dear Mrs. L'Estrange," ran the lines, "I am much obliged for yours, but sorry to find Lady Dorrington has so serious a case on her hands. I was afraid Mrs. Ruthven would feel the effect of such a shock as she has had; but after two months it is curious she has not thrown it off. I trust she will pull through; she always struck me as a tough little woman, in spite of her fragile airs.

"I have been extremely uncertain as to my own plans. I am tempted to start off with my friends back to India next week. On the whole, my long-expected holiday has been a disappointment. However, after mature reflection, I have decided to return to London; whether I stay out the full time of my leave, or cut it short and start at once, will altogether depend on what I find there. I suppose you understand this? Has Bea joined you yet? Perhaps I may have the pleasure of seeing her at the pantomime. If I do, what a jolly pantomime it will be to me!

"Remember me to Miss L'Estrange and believe me,

"Yours most sincerely,

"MARK WINTON."

"Oh! yes; it is clear enough. Helen, like myself, has hesitated, and he is returning for her final decision. I wonder if she has taken this method of informing me? It is rather well done. Probably my engagement would facilitate matters, and we might both live happy ever after! Why not? Helen and Mark Winton deserve it. How constant and true he has been. That is his character, though. What perfect trust one could have in him. How good he will be to his little step-daughter. What a funny jumble of relationships. Shall I be his step-daughter too? No, no; neither in fact or fiction can I ever be anything to him, nor does it matter much. Oh! no, nor could I have any pleasanter, more disinterested partner for life than Clifford Marsden. I ought to be thankful for so fair a lot. I shall soon grow to love him. I love him already—a little. I wish he would come; I

shall not tease him any more. I will be very good—very good—he deserves it. Perhaps, when Helen goes to India, she will leave Beatrice with me, she is too old to go out just now. I do hope she will; I shall then have a little bit of the old home to cling to. Oh! how happy, how happy the last year has been, till my blind eyes were opened. What a foolish, conceited girl I have been. Yes, I will marry Clifford—dear Clifford; he will be very dear to me soon, and then I shall be happy again. How intolerable unhappiness is. If I could but throw it off!"

She wiped away the tears which would spring to her eyes; she put away Winton's letter, and setting out her writing things, resolutely fastened her attention on the directions she had promised to send Bea's little Kindergärtnerin.

When about half through her task, the door was opened by the clerical-looking master of the house, who solemnly announced "Mr.Marsden." Nora sprang up with a movement of genuine pleasure.

Marsden was looking better and brighter than when he left. He had more colour, his fine blue eyes looked darker than usual, his distinguished figure admirably arrayed, his easy grace, his whole style and appearance were fit for an ideal lover.

"By Heaven! Nora," he exclaimed with delight, as he clasped her outstretched hand in both his own, "you are glad to see me?"

"Yes, very!" returned Nora, with a little nervous laugh, and leaving her hand in his.

He drew her to the light, and gazed into her face with longing tenderness, while a slight knitting of the brows showed how intently he tried to read her thoughts.

"My darling!" he said, in a low tone, "there are tears in your eyes? What has grieved you—tell me?"

"Oh! nothing. What could I have to cry for? Yet the tears did come; I don't know why."

Clifford felt in some vague way flattered by her tears.

"Then you have thought of me, Nora? Can you decide? Will you try to love me, and be my wife?"

"Yes," she returned, quietly and distinctly. "I am sure I shall love you as you deserve. I am growing fond of you already. I missed you so much yesterday and the day before, and looked forward to seeing you, and now I am quite happy you have come—that is love, I suppose?" smiling archly and frankly.

"Dearest," returned Marsden with a quick sigh, kissing her hand before he released it. "For God's sake spare me such arguments! You only prove how much you have to learn! However, your promise to be mine is all I ask now; assure me once more that you will be my wife?"

Touched by the eager, pained pleading of his eyes, Nora gave him her hand again, and said softly, solemnly; "I do, indeed, promise to be your wife and to love you."

"Sweetest, kindest!" cried Marsden, his face aglow with joy. "One word more—when? There is no need for useless delays. When, Nora?"

"I will not marry before the fifteenth of next February," she said with decision.

"But, Nora, that is more than two months off?"

"Very little more than two."

"And why not before?"

"On the fifteenth of February I shall be twenty-

one, and I want to settle part of what I possess on Helen and Bea. Did I not tell you once?"

"Yes; yes of course; and quite right too; but your marriage need not prevent that? I shall assist you in making this settlement."

"Yes; but I would prefer making it while I am my own mistress."

"Your own mistress! Why, you will always be your own mistress! But do not let us quarrel over details, all that will arrange itself. Now, let me put this ring on your finger. It is my signet, and I fancy it seems more like taking possession when you wear the crest of my house."

"That is a curious fancy," said Nora, as she let him slip his onyx seal-ring on her slender finger. "Your best title is my free consent."

"It is free?" he asked. "You don't know how I have longed and schemed for this moment! I never felt so doubtful of success before. I never could make sure of you! Even now, Nora, you do not love as I want to be loved. I feel that keenly. But I have your promise, and you cannot hold back your affection from one who hungers and thirsts for it as I do! You are the one supreme good of life to me, and I have waited patiently."

"Not very long!" said Nora, who was touched and moved by the intense feeling in his voice. "Why, Clifford, we only met at Lady Dorrington's dance in June! At that time I was a mere child!"

"Nearly six months ago! It is an age! Do you remember the night of that infernal ball of mine when you accused me of taking too much champagne? I knew then that I could not bear to exist without you,

and pressed you to my heart in the waltz. I would have done so if death had been the penalty. *Then* I felt I wanted to carry you away from every one—to be mine—mine alone."

"And why—why do you care for me so much?" cried Nora uneasily; his vehemence displeased her, she scarce knew why.

"How can I tell?" he returned more calmly. "Some witchery I could neither resist nor explain!" There was a pause, and Nora went to the writing table, and began to look over her letter. "I wonder what can have detained Helen," she said; "she ought to have returned by this time."

"She has, probably," observed Marsden smiling. "I told the servant to let her know I was here, and she has perhaps kept away."

"Then let me go and find her; she will be pleased."

"Yes!" interrupted Marsden. "She is a nice charming creature, and my good friend! but do not seek her yet, I have a thousand things to say. Must you finish that letter?"

"Yes, indeed! I shall only be a very few minutes; it is about Bea and her travels; she comes up with Fräulein in a few days."

While she wrote, Marsden leant over a high-backed chair and gazed at her, and then they glided into talk of the future. He was full of pleasant projects, of travelling, of spending a few months at Vienna, of a cruise in the Mediterranean, of everything save residing at sweet Evesleigh.

"Now I really will look for Helen!" cried Nora, moving towards the door. Marsden interposed between her and it.

"Once more," he exclaimed, "before this heavenly hour is ended, tell me you *will* love me—that nothing shall separate us."

"I do promise," said Nora, moved by a strange feeling of compassion.

"Then give me one unstinted kiss," he cried passionately; "I want more than mere words."

"Oh, yes! I will indeed—to-morrow," she said, feeling curiously averse to yield, yet not liking to refuse.

"Good God! to-morrow! Was ever such answer given to a lover? No; now—now, or I will think you only mock me!"

He caught her in his arms, and, holding her head against his shoulder, pressed his lips to hers, in an intense passionate kiss, while she felt the wild throbbing of his heart against her own; but, long before he was willing to release her, she struggled so vehemently to get free, that he let her go.

"Clifford! Cousin!" she exclaimed, standing at a little distance, with crimson cheeks and heaving bosom, "you frighten me!"

"If you loved as I do, Nora! But you will! you will one day come and kiss me freely, voluntarily. Why, Nora! have I offended you so deeply?"

She made no reply, but burst into tears and fled from the room.

CHAPTER XII.

"TOO LATE!"

THE days of Mrs. Ruthven's dangerous illness were the worst and most distressful Lady Dorrington had ever known. She was really anxious about the sufferer, and she was infinitely annoyed by Marsden's unfeeling indifference. Except for the one hurried visit, he was content with a formal daily bulletin; nor did he seem much concerned if, by any accident, that was delayed. It was disgracefully heartless as an abstract fact, and it would have a fatal effect upon Marsden's chances when it came to the knowledge of Mrs. Ruthven.

What was Clifford thinking of? Had he discovered a mine? or had the reports which had reached Lady Dorrington, and been believed by her, as to his extravagance and embarrassment been exaggerated? He was too trying! What was keeping him in London at such a time? Could there be any truth in the absurd idea that Nora L'Estrange was the attraction?—a mere nobody—slenderly dowered, and nothing remarkable in the way of beauty.

However, as time went by, Mrs. Ruthven held her ground. There was more tenacity in the fragile-looking, slender little woman than people thought, and at length she was able to sit up for a few hours, to listen to Lady Dorrington when she read the more interesting paragraphs of the newspapers aloud, and finally to

read her own letters. But still, there was no intention on the part of Marsden, apparently, of coming to offer his congratulations in person. He wrote kindly and cordially, but in a strictly friendly tone, explaining that he was busy arranging his somewhat entangled affairs, and the preliminaries necessary for letting Evesleigh on a lease of several years.

This letter was in itself a severe blow. It was, however, as nothing compared to one received next day from the watchful Captain Shirley. After expressing his delight at hearing of her progress towards recovery, his regret at not being on such terms with Lord and Lady Dorrington that he might venture to run down and see her, he informed his esteemed correspondent he could now assure her that Marsden was positively engaged to Miss L'Estrange. He was with her and her step-mother every day, and all day. Finally he (Shirley) had been in a celebrated jeweller's shop in Bond Street, where his attention was caught by an unusually fine ring, the design being two hearts united—one of rubies, the other of diamonds. The shopman said it was, he fancied, an engagement ring, and made to order. He had scarcely finished examining it when Marsden came in, and after exchanging a word or two with him, went to the counter and asked if his order had been executed, whereupon this very ring was handed to him.

The next day Shirley had called on Mrs. L'Estrange, and was admitted, when he saw the identical ring on Miss L'Estrange's left third finger. There was but one inference to be drawn.

When Mrs. Ruthven read these lines she felt as if something snapped in her brain. Her heart beat to

suffocation, and her imagination presented her with a confused, broken, shadowy mass of pictures from the past.

Was this the result of all Marsden's implied tenderness and admiration? Had he blinded her keen eyes, and deceived her sharp observation? He should pay dear—dear! And that careless, candid girl, whose easy indifference was absolutely insolent, whose comparative poverty and obscurity ought to have been a barrier to her advancement, was preferred before her wealth and beauty, and carefully cultivated grace. It was too maddening. If she could destroy both, she would.

And how everyone would talk! She had been so sure of becoming Mrs. Clifford Marsden, of Evesleigh Manor—everyone knew that the marriage was expected—and now to be deceived, cheated, deserted, for a mere insignificant, half-developed creature! Mrs. Ruthven felt murderous. Her head was dizzy, she passed a terrible night, and next day the doctor was sent for in hot haste, as his patient showed every symptom of a relapse, and before twelve hours were over, she was rambling incoherently in a high fever.

She must have sustained a mental shock of some description, the doctor said, but no one could surmise what had caused it. Mrs. Ruthven had had sufficient foresight, feeling terribly ill, to tear the letter into minute fragments, and burn them, and from her speech little could be gathered save that she repeatedly accused Shirley and others of stealing her jewels.

This relapse was a great additional trouble to Lady Dorrington, who was at her wits' end to discover its origin.

"Some of those horrible letters, no doubt," she confided to her husband. "I wish she never had had them; at such a time the absence of some confidential attendant is very awkward. You see, we know nothing of her former life and connections."

Still the wealthy widow held on surprisingly, but after this second attack, recovery was very slow, and the doctors complained of want of vitality.

All this time, in grey foggy London, Marsden's wooing prospered, and Nora grew quite accustomed to his daily presence.

He was himself cautious and self-restrained, He took care not again to startle her by such a passionate outburst as had disturbed her on the day she had accepted him. He watched with infinite care and tact his opportunity for winning a caress, and flattered himself he was daily advancing in her affection, and becoming more necessary, yet there came at intervals torturing spasms of doubt, when it was borne in upon him that he was only liked, endured, and slightly feared; such moments made him savage, exacting, unreasonable. He strove hard to resist these moods, knowing well how much of what he had built up with infinite care, they undid.

Through all, Nora was so sweet, so patient, so compliant, that he grew more passionately fond of her day by day, even while he longed for her to show him some caprices, some little tyrannies indicative of pleasure in her sense of power over him. She did not love him yet—not yet—but she would be true to him, and love would come.

On one point Nora was steady, she would not marry till she had attained her twenty-first year, and

on this Marsden was obliged to give way. As their marriage was not to take place immediately, he was anxious it should not be talked about, There was no use in bringing a storm of congratulations and questions upon them before the time, but he promised to speak to Lady Dorrington on the subject, as soon as he could intrude on her duties to her sick guest.

"You *ought* to tell her before anyone else, Clifford," urged Nora.

A fortnight had slipped away, and as yet no whisper of Marden's engagement had got abroad.

There was no one in town, and Mrs. and Miss L'Estrange were scarcely known in Marsden's world.

Mrs. L'Estrange was much and most agreeably occupied with her little daughter, and pleased with her surroundings, making quietly the meanwhile preparations for the anticipated event, and had little time to notice how pale and thin Nora had grown, that her face looked all eyes, that she started nervously if suddenly spoken to, and that her hands held nothing very steadily. All seemed to promise fair and well. In the midst of this contentment Winton arrived from Florence, graver and gaunter than ever.

It happened that the day he first called, Marsden had received from his sister an earnest request to go to her at once, and he had started, intending to visit Evesleigh on his way back. Mrs. L'Estrange had been a little puzzled by Marden's wish to let Evesleigh, she had no idea that retrenchment was so necessary to him. Still, neither she nor her step-daughter saw anything to object to in the proposition. Indeed, Nora thought she would prefer travelling with him to settling down in the country; she was moreover most anxious

that he should clear his estate and retrieve his fortunes.

It seemed to her, she knew not why, fortunate that Clifford should have been called away as Mark Winton came. She longed to hear him talk with her stepmother, once—just once—in the old, quiet, sensible way, without interruption. When Marsden was present she was never quite at ease; she felt he was watching her, that he was ever on the look-out for her notice or her avoidance. She dreaded slighting him, and feared the passionate delight which any little show of kindness on her part excited. To be still and tranquil for an evening or two was very charming; though she was distressed to find what pleasure it gave her to hear Winton's deep, somewhat harsh, voice, to listen even to his most trifling remarks. When—when would he speak to Helen, and put another final barrier between them? The all-absorbing topic of her own engagement had prevented any animadversion on Winton's letter; moreover, as Helen did not make any remark respecting it, Nora did not like to broach the subject.

It was late, and Bea was beginning to say goodnight—a process which usually lasted some time—when Winton appeared. He had only arrived that evening, and apologised for intruding so late.

Beatrice, of course, greeted him rapturously, and her departure to the realms of sleep was postponed. When she had disappeared, and they were quiet, Winton looked round the room and said:

"It is almost like being at Brookdale, only I miss some of the furniture and ornaments."

"And the room is smaller," added Mrs. L'Estrange.

"Have you been ill?" were his next words, addressed to Nora, with an earnest look.

"No! Why do you ask? Do I look ill?"

"I think you do. London does not agree with you!"

"I have a slight cold, scarce worth mentioning," she returned.

Winton slowly withdrew his eyes from her; and, after looking down for a minute in silence, began to talk of Mrs. Ruthven and her illness, her relapse and her final recovery. Then he spoke of going to see his uncle, in Yorkshire; and they glided easily from one subject to another.

On rising to say good-night, he asked Mrs. L'Estrange at what hour he should find her next day.

"I don't think I shall be in much before four. I have a dreadful business before me in a visit to the dentist with poor little Bea, and we are to ransack Cremer's for some reward to encourage her drooping spirits! But, about four, you will find us at tea."

"Very well," he returned, and bid them good night.

"I do not think you are looking so ill, Nora," said Mrs. L'Estrange, when he had gone.

"Oh, no! It was only Mr. Winton's fancy. There is nothing really the matter with me."

As soon as Mrs. L'Estrange with Bea and her governess had departed, after an early luncheon, Nora took a book and a comfortable corner of the sofa, determined to think only of the story, which was interesting and well told. She felt unaccountably weary, and was not at all surprised that Winton should have

thought her looking ill. What an ungrateful, unaccountable creature she was! How happy most girls would be, in her place! But she was going to read, and not think about herself. So, with an effort, she fixed her attention on the page before her. She had not read long, when the unexpected announcement of "Mr. Winton" made her heart stand still. Why—why had he come so early? She started up in haste, and went to meet him, reading in his observant eyes the same questioning expression which had struck her the evening before.

"I am afraid Helen will not be in just yet," said Nora, with a friendly smile.

"Yes, I know I am rather early, but, if I don't interrupt you, I will wait," returned Winton, speaking more rapidly than usual. He drew a chair near her sofa, laying his hat on the floor, but still holding his stick, with which he seemed to trace the pattern of the carpet. "How is your cold—better?"

"Yes, thank you."

"When do you return to Brookdale?"

"Our plans are very uncertain," returned Nora, colouring, for she knew it was Marsden's wish they should remain in town and have a very quiet wedding.

How she wished some one would tell him she was engaged to Clifford! There was a pause, while Nora sought in vain for something to say.

"Did Mrs. L'Estrange tell you I was inclined to go off straight to India with Colonel and Mrs. Romer?"

"Yes, she did."

"But I felt I could not go without trying my luck in London. May I tell you why?"

"He is going to confide in me," thought Nora.

"Certainly, Mr. Winton," she said very kindly. "Perhaps I have some idea why already."

Winton looked at her steadily, with surprise.

"You *may* have, though I doubt it." Another pause, then with an evident effort Winton began, growing more composed and collected as he went on. "You may think me a presumptuous ass, but I will not lose the faintest chance for any false pride. Miss L'Estrange, though we have always been good friends, especially when I first knew you, I acknowledge you have never given me any hope that you would ever let me be more than a friend. And lately I have imagined, or rather felt, that you were changed in some way, perhaps *that* ought to have been enough to silence me, but, you see, when a man's whole future hangs on 'Yes' or 'No,' it is hard to be content with uncertainty, and there is a degree of sympathy between us on some subjects. In short, I cannot leave without asking if there is any hope for me, for," looking straight at her with solemnity, "I love you well."

"Me!" exclaimed Nora, who had listened in increasing amazement. "Are you sure you mean me?"

"Who else could I mean?"

"Mr. Winton," rising to her feet in the agony of that terrible moment, and white even to her lips, "I have promised to marry Clifford Marsden in February."

Winton also rose and stood before her, a grim, dark expression gathering in his face.

"I never anticipated this,"—he broke off abruptly. "Then I have only to apologise, which I do most humbly, for having intruded myself and my feelings on you. I shall trouble you no more."

There was a moment's silence.

"I am grieved to grieve you," said Nora, in a voice so low and trembling that she scarce heard herself.

"I believe it, you have a kind true heart. I was presumptuous in hoping to win it. God grant Marsden may make you happy! None can wish you all possible prosperity more warmly than I do. Pray forget that I have momentarily distressed you." He paused, and looked at her intently. "Nora, are you faint? You tremble, you can hardly stand."

He made a movement as if to catch and support her.

"No, no!" she exclaimed. "You must go—you must leave me!"

"I must, indeed," returned Winton. He took and gently kissed her hand, said softly "I will never intrude on you again. Good-bye, dear, good-bye!" seized his hat, and was gone. Then Nora sank upon the sofa and buried her face in her hands, her heart filled with the blackest despair. If he had come but three weeks, even a fortnight ago! What was to become of her? Was there no escape? Could she bring him no comfort? The pain in his voice still vibrated on her ear. Even if she could break with Clifford—*he*, too, loved her well, and she would not willingly hurt him; but oh! how her heart ached for Mark Winton! There was no music in his voice, but what a ring of truth and sincerity! His words were few and simple compared to Clifford's eloquence; but what earnestness they expressed! How did she come to believe so implicitly in Winton's attachment to Helen? Surely Clifford Marsden, who knew both before Helen was married, he ought to know the real facts.

Could Mark Winton have forsaken Helen for her? No; that was impossible! And various important trifles, indicative of his interest in herself from the very beginning of their acquaintance, recurred to her painfully-excited memory. Why—why did she allow herself to be so easily misled? How did Clifford come to be so deceived? Did he indeed believe what he asserted? Was she not base, to suspect her affianced husband of trickery because she was miserable herself? And if, as she believed only yesterday, Helen was attached to Winton, the round of wretchedness would be complete! Why had she been so precipitate? Turn which way she would, she was hemmed in by the misery she had caused others. How was she to bear her life? She must let Winton believe in her indifference to him, her love for Marsden. After all, her duty and consideration ought to be for the man she had promised to marry, when she thought another was preferred by the man she loved! Where could she turn for counsel or comfort? None could give it to her. Her wisest, justest course, would be strictest silence as to Winton's amazing avowal. Then there would be no disturbance. Helen would remain on the same friendly terms with Winton, perhaps he might learn to love her. At any rate, she had always heard that men never suffered long from such disappointments.

It was all too, too cruel! To think that through a mistake so slight, so easy to have avoided, she had missed the road that led to happiness—happiness full, complete, soul-satisfying—and made him she loved so well suffer as bitterly as she did herself!

It was an hour of intense, blackest despair, a night

of anguish to which there would be no succeeding dawn. To the sorrows, as to the joys, of youth there are no to-morrows. In grief it indignantly rejects the idea of consolation, of being so heartless as to forget, while the suggestion of prudence in pleasure, lest dark days may come, is resisted with scornful certainty of permanent bliss. To Nora the only possible mood that could succeed her present suffering would be the numbness and indifference of mental death! In the bitterness of her remorse for her own hasty action, she wrung her hands, and the splendid engagement-ring, which Marsden had placed upon her hand in addition to the signet he still wished her to wear, fell to the ground unnoticed.

At length she tried to think what she had better do to hide herself from the kindly enquiring eyes of her step-mother. She could think of nothing more original than the inexhaustible excuse—headache; but it would not do to lie down in the safe solitude of her own room. No; she dared not so indulge herself. She would go out and shop. There was plenty to do in that way. She rang, and called for the ever ready Watson, and explained that she thought the air would do her good, and sallied forth, leaving a message for Mrs. L'Estrange to the effect that Mr. Winton had called and could not come to tea.

It was dusk when she returned, feeling utterly worn out.

"My dear Nora," cried her step-mother, "here is a letter from Mr. Marsden. I wonder what he would say if he knew that you had let the beautiful ring he gave you drop, and had not taken the trouble to pick it up?"

"Did I?" with a bewildered look.

"Yes! Bea trod on it as she came in. It is fortunate she is so light."

"Ah! my Fräulein, it is not a good omen!" cried the little German governess.

"Oh! we must not talk of omens! How did Bea behave at the dentist's, Helen?"

"Like a little heroine!" cried Mrs. L'Estrange proudly, "and she has chosen a proportionate reward —a monstrous Noah's ark, with the most accurately correct animals ever made out of wool, and fur, and *papier mâché*. But, Nora, were you wise to go out?"

"Yes, quite. My head ached fearfully, now it is better."

"It may be; but you look wretched. I do not know what Mr. Marsden will say to me when he comes back. I wish you would read his letter. I am anxious to hear what Lady Dorrington says."

"Nothing very pleasant, I fear," said Nora, with a sigh.

"Why couldn't Mr. Winton come this afternoon?"

"Oh! he was obliged to go somewhere else. I imagine he is going away to see his uncle to-morrow."

* * * *

Marsden had braced himself up for a stormy interview with his sister.

After carefully reviewing his position, and assuring himself there was no flaw in his armour, that the accounts of his trusteeship were in perfect order, he determined to announce his intended marriage to the world.

The first person to be informed was Lady Dorrington. That done, there was nothing more to fear.

He did not reach Chedworth till just in time to dress for dinner. There were one or two country neighbours to share that repast, and the conversation Lady Dorrington wished to have with her brother was postponed till the next morning.

Marsden observed that his sister looked very grave and portentous; but that in no way damped his spirits or lessened his efforts to amuse and interest his sister's guests, which were peculiarly successful. He listened with lively attention to the details Lady Dorrington poured forth respecting Mrs. Ruthven's sufferings and tedious recovery. She feared that the poor invalid would scarcely be able to see him. Marsden begged she might not be asked to do anything not quite agreeable to her.

"It is no question of what is agreeable," said Lady Dorrington severely. "It is of what will be safest for Mrs. Ruthven. You cannot imagine the weakness to which she is reduced. Any relapse *now* would be fatal. She is anxious to go away to the South of France, or the Riviera, but I trust she will not go alone."

"No; she had much better get some pleasant companion. You will find her one, I daresay. You always have such a supply of admirable persons on hand fitted to fill every possible position."

Lady Dorrington darted an angry, warning glance at her brother, and addressed him no more that evening.

When breakfast was over next morning, as the frost was too hard for hunting, Marsden sauntered into the billiard-room, and was knocking the billiard-balls about by himself, when the inevitable message reached him:

"My lady would be glad to see you, sir, in the boudoir."

"I have been waiting for you this half-hour, Clifford."

"So sorry; I did not like to intrude on you till you sent for me," he returned, coming up to the fireplace, and leaning easily against the mantel-piece. "Do you know you are looking wonderfully well, in spite of your nursing worries."

"My looks are of small consequence," said Lady Dorrington, sternly. "I want some serious conversation with you, Clifford; your conduct is very unaccountable and unfeeling. What, may I ask, is your motive for staying in town all this time?"

"Oh, because—because I like it."

"There is something more than that—or rather there is some strong attraction—which I do not understand, to keep you in London! Pray, has it anything to do with Mrs. L'Estrange and Nora?"

"They are very agreeable relatives, and I see a good deal of them," returned Marsden, in a lazy, indifferent way, most irritating to his sister.

"Why, Clifford, you surely would not be so unprincipled as to delude Nora, your own cousin, with the notion that you are in love with her, and you could not be so insane as to think of *marrying* her? I shall certainly warn Mrs. L'Estrange against you; you are too regardless of everything except your own amusement."

"In this case, I have thought more of my own happiness."

"What do you mean?" in a tone of alarm. "Do you mean to say you have taken one of your wild fancies to poor, dear Nora?"

"I do; and what is more, I have persuaded 'poor, dear Nora,' to take me for better, for worse."

"Good God!" cried Lady Dorrington. She sat a moment staring at him in silence, as if dazed. Marsden was quite unmoved. "Clifford," gasped Lady Dorrington at last, "your conduct is most dishonourable towards Mrs. Ruthven!"

"How do you make that out?"

"When she was at Evesleigh, every one thought, judging from your manner—your attentions—that you were engaged."

"Then every one was mistaken."

"I, myself, believed that you were determined to marry Mrs. Ruthven."

"Why? because I flirted with her? Don't you understand she is the sort of woman to whom the end and aim of existence is to flirt? She would not thank you for friendship, however true; for service, however kindly, if you did not offer her the homage of overt flirtation. I never intended to marry Mrs. Ruthven."

"Then, you have behaved abominably, and just, think of your own interests. Nora L'Estrange has nothing, or next to nothing."

"She has all I want."

"She has nothing you really want; she is a mere distant relative, a nobody; before six months are over, you will be sick of her, and wonder that madness induced you to tie yourself to her."

"I think the madness will last a couple of years," put in Marsden in a low tone, but his sister did not heed him. "Do be advised by me, Clifford! Break off with Nora L'Estrange; she cannot care much about you, in so short a time; she is reasonable and un-

selfish; she would not like to condemn you *and* herself to the horrible fate of becoming pauper gentry. I protest you drive me to my wit's end; you will disgrace yourself whatever you do. I assure you you have contrived to impress Mrs. Ruthven with a conviction that you intended to marry her."

"I cannot help her being highly imaginative, can I?" asked Clifford quite unmoved. "I never said, and certainly never *wrote*, anything approaching a proposal. Now I *have* asked Nora to be my wife, and, after some prudent hesitation, she has consented. I cannot back out of that."

"Hesitation! Good heavens!" ejaculated Lady Dorrington.

"As to poverty, well, we shall not starve. I have almost come to an arrangement, to let Evesleigh, with the shooting, etc., for six hundred per annum, that will help to keep the wolf from the door, eh! sister mine? Then, after a few years' wandering in pleasant places, I shall return a free man, and hold high revels in the hall of my fathers."

"Let Evesleigh!" said Lady Dorrington, aghast, as if that was the lowest depth.

"Yes! Nora quite approves," continued Marsden serenely. "She is prudent, and very resolute for so youthful and charming a wood nymph. She will reform *me*, and my estate, depend upon it."

"And what—what *am* I to say to Mrs. Ruthven?" cried Lady Dorrington, pressing her large white hands together.

"Whatever occurs to you," said Marsden politely. "Only that you require no hints from me, I would

suggest your telling the simple fact, as a matter of ordinary gossip."

"How can you be so unfeeling, so shameless?" exclaimed his sister, her eyes sparkling with indignation. "I would not answer for the consequences, were she told too suddenly of your treachery. I dare not face her with the knowledge of your base desertion in my heart. Do you know that she is worth two hundred thousand pounds, if not more?"

"Two hundred thousand!" repeated Marsden, slowly. "What a delightful rhythm there is in those words. Yes, my dear sister, no one knows better than myself her financial position. She is not *quite* so rich as that, but, I confess, I wish her fortune were Nora's; still I daresay we shall manage an immense amount of enjoyment without it."

"Clifford!" exclaimed Lady Dorrington, rising in her wrath, "you have not the ordinary gentleman's sense of honour, you have not the faintest regard for duty or justice, you are a slave to the grossest selfishness, regardless of everything except your own pleasure and self-indulgence; you are weak beyond what I should have expected, for you must have yielded against your better judgment to Nora's wiles, for I never *will* believe that she did not try to attract you."

Marsden laughed.

"You can take what view you like of the matter," he said, watching her with quiet eyes.

"Dorrington will be disgusted with you, and I quite give you up. As to Nora and Mrs. L'Estrange, I never wish to see them again. I did believe they were well-bred gentlewomen."

"Do well-bred gentlewomen never scheme?" asked Marsden innocently.

"If you had any honourable instincts, I would hope to move you," continued Lady Dorrington. "As it is, I give you up, and I beg you will leave my house, where you will never again be a welcome guest."

"Very well," looking at his watch. "There is a train at three-thirty, which will suit me. I will have luncheon and bid you very heartily farewell."

Lady Dorrington took up some letters that lay on the table before her, darted an angry, scornful look at her brother, and left the room without further speech.

Marsden's face grew graver and softer when he was alone.

"A man can't help his nature, I suppose?" he muttered to himself. "I cannot look on the cant and shibboleths of society as constraining truths, and I am certainly a better man than most of my fellows. How I hate unpleasant faces! The worst of this storm in a tea-cup is, that Isabel will not do the civil to Nora, and Nora will worry herself about it. At any rate I have her promise, and I feel I can trust her."

He rose, drew the writing materials to him, and quickly traced these words:

"DEAR MRS. RUTHVEN,—May I hope to see you for a few moments, as I am obliged to return to town immediately. I should like to see with my own eyes how you are, and shall be most discreet."

To this, a verbal answer was returned.

"Mrs. Ruthven's compliments. She was sorry she

did not feel equal to see anyone but would write when able."

"Is luncheon ready?" asked Marsden, when the footman had delivered this message.

"Not yet, sir. It will not be ready for quite half-an-hour."

"Then you must give me something to eat first, and tell them to bring round a trap. I want to catch the three-thirty up train at Rockingham. Send my man to me."

Lady Dorrington was in Mrs. Ruthven's room, and Lord Dorrington had gone down to the Home farm, when Marsden set forth. So he left without leave-taking, save from the stately butler and his satellite footmen, with whom the easy-going, open-handed, affable squire was a prime favourite.

"*Tant mieux*," said Marsden to himself, as he gathered up the reins and drove off sharply. "I wonder if Mrs. Ruthven scents the battle from afar? Her message sounded warlike."

CHAPTER XIII.

AN OLD STORY.

It was more than an hour before Lady Dorrington felt sufficiently recovered from the excitement of her interview with her brother to present herself in the invalid's chamber. Lord Dorrington, whom she had sought as the only possible recipient of her indignant complaints, was out, and his whereabouts uncertain. She felt dreadfully uncertain how to act. She was afraid to break the news of his engagement to the deserted widow, lest it might produce a fatal effect, yet she felt it incumbent on her to enlighten Mrs. Ruthven as to the true state of affairs.

When, at last, Lady Dorrington entered the sitting-room into which Mrs. Ruthven had been moved for a few hours daily since her strength could bear it, she found that lady writing on a movable desk attached to the arm of her easy chair. She was very white, and looked already weary; a lace cap, with pale pink ribbons, covered her hair, which had been cut short, and a white cashmere wrapper, trimmed with cream lace over pink, hung loosely on her attenuated figure.

"My dear," exclaimed Lady Dorrington, "you are not surely trying to write?"

"I really am," a smile parting her pale lips. "Only a few lines for I am certainly stronger. Do not fear any imprudence; I am too anxious to get well. I

should like to see Sir Harley Portman again; he will tell me when I can move. I begin to be very anxious to deliver you from the long-endured incubus of a sick guest."

"Believe me, we only care to see you well. There is not the slightest need to hurry away."

"I know you are all goodness, but there are matters to be attended to that no one can do for me. I have been scribbling a few lines to my lawyer. Will you write for me to Sir Harley?"

"Certainly. But you know when he was here last he said——"

"Yes, yes, that I could not move for three weeks. But one has passed, and if he sees what progress I have made I am sure he will let me go on Wednesday or Thursday next. Wherever I go ultimately, I must take London on the way."

"All I beg, dear Mrs. Ruthven, is, that you will not hasten your departure on our account. You know we are to spend our Christmas with Aunt Ilminster, so there will be no party here! I am sure you are not equal to write, you look so weary."

Mrs. Ruthven lay back in her chair, and let her maid unfasten and remove the desk. When they were alone she said, as she lay back, her eyes closed, her figure very still:

"I had a message from Mr. Marsden just now."

"Indeed!" cried Lady Dorrington, feeling exceedingly uncomfortable. "He had no business to disturb you."

"He did not disturb me. I would not *be* disturbed. He asked to see me." There was a silence of nearly two minutes, while Lady Dorrington sought in vain for

some wise and cautious words with which to reply before she found them. Mrs. Ruthven resumed very languidly, but opening her eyes and settling them on her hostess: "I suppose he wished to announce his engagement to Miss L'Estrange, if it is true. *Is* it true, Lady Dorrington?"

What a question! What would she not have given to be able to deny the fact with scorn and indignation? As it was, ought she not to be thankful the ice was broken?

"Why, my dear Mrs. Ruthven, who in the world told you?"

"Some one mentioned it in one of the letters I have been reading."

"Shirley," thought Lady Dorrington. "Viper."

"But *is* it true?" persisted Mrs. Ruthven.

"Oh! I don't know what to think! I am afraid there *is* something in it. Indeed, I have been infinitely annoyed." Lady Dorrington paused abruptly, feeling inexpressibly awkward.

"You are not inclined for this marriage then?" said Mrs. Ruthven, a peculiar and not very amiable smile passing over her face.

"Inclined for it! Why it is the bitterest disappointment to me! You must know that, my dear Mrs. Ruthven!"

"Ah! Miss L'Estrange has but a small fortune, and it will take more than an ordinary one to put your brother's affairs in order."

"Besides that," cried Mrs. Dorrington, "there are other considerations! Nora L'Estrange is quite unfit to be Clifford's wife. He will tire of her in six months."

"That is very probable. He is not wise."

"And he actually talks of letting Evesleigh on a lease for years, and sinking into a Continentalised dilettante Englishman."

Mrs. Ruthven compressed her lips, and her pale cheeks flushed as she answered in a low, clear tone:

"Your brother is changeable and impulsive. After all, it is quite probable the marriage may *never* take place."

"He appears to have committed himself fully," said Lady Dorrington who, now that the ice was broken, found it a relief to talk on this vexatious subject. Mrs. Ruthven was silent, leaning her elbows on the arms of her chair, and pressing her finger tips together, while her face, which had grown deadly white again, expressed cold, implacable displeasure.

"I am no sensitive young girl, Lady Dorrington," she said at length, with a kind of slow bitterness, "to shrink from expressing my feelings, and I think you will admit that your brother has deceived me, basely, treacherously. He no doubt found it convenient to lead his creditors to believe that he was on the point of marriage with a rich widow, and so gain time for the settlement of his affairs. For this, he did not hesitate to make me an object of remark to all the company at his house when I was his guest."

"I am not surprised at anything you say," cried Lady Dorrington, greatly distressed and even alarmed at the suppressed concentrated fury which she perceived under Mrs. Ruthven's carefully preserved self-control. "I am infinitely ashamed of Clifford; but, indeed, he is in every way incapable of making the use you suggest of his position with you. He is the merest slave of his whims and fancy. He was, I know,

greatly taken with you; and then all that horrid business of the robbery kept you apart; and he fell in with Nora—and—oh! it is all beyond my comprehension! It makes me perfectly ill when I think of Clifford's unutterable folly. I had, indeed, hoped to call you my sister."

"I think you are honest, and alive to the advantages that marriage with me offers. I shall always consider you my friend. As to your brother, I have made up my mind how to act. He will find I am not to be trifled with; but I must gather a little more strength before I can deal with the matter."

"Surely, my dear Mrs. Ruthven, no legal redress could possibly atone for the wrong done?" said Lady Dorrington, in uncertain accents, very different from her usual decided tone, so appalled was she by the prospect of the commonplace vulgarity of an action in court.

"Are you afraid of a breach of promise trial," was her guest's counter-question, accompanied by a mocking, contemptuous laugh. "That would be a very weak and inefficient payment of the debt I owe Mr. Marsden—but I will not allow myself to speak more on the subject. It must be most painful to you; it is too much for me. I can write no more to-day. May I trust to your kindness to send for Sir Harley Portman? And will you be so good as to ask Virginie to bring me my medicine? I must rest and be quite quiet now."

Lady Dorrington felt herself dismissed.

If she had gone to Mrs. Ruthven in an anxious, angry frame of mind, she left her with a sense of danger and trouble intensified tenfold. The change

in Mrs. Ruthven's manner from its ordinary caressing softness to the abrupt decision of one who knew her power and would use it, seemed to take the ground of superior position and higher breeding from under the elder woman's feet. Mrs. Ruthven was, indeed, not to be trifled with. The vagueness of her threats made Lady Dorrington still more uneasy. Did she know of any crooked corners in Clifford's conduct which would brand him with disgrace, were they known and blazoned abroad? If so, how merciless she would be. "I wish I never had had anything to do with her," thought Lady Dorrington, as she sat down in the refuge of her own morning-room. "It is useless to try and help Clifford. He is hopeless. But I think I must send him a line of warning. I am really afraid of that woman. I shall never care to be with her again. She was naturally angry, and I do not wonder at it; but there was a murderous look in her eyes. I do believe she has a large share of Eastern blood! How unprincipled it was of Mrs. L'Estrange and Nora to attract Clifford! They are quite aware that I am most anxious he should marry Mrs. Ruthven! quite; yet they set themselves against me; and I have been *so* fond of Nora, and so kind to her too."

Here her reflections became chaotic. Though of the strong-minded order of woman, Lady Dorrington had both family pride and family affection in abundance. The idea of open scandal or disgrace attacking her brother was intolerable, and her anxiety to shield him was not one whit lessened by her indignation and wrath with his inconsiderate folly!

* * * *

Clifford Marsden meantime sped London-wards, well content with the result of his visit. He had put matters in train; there was no room now for Lady Dorrington to say that he had kept her in the dark about so important a matter as his marriage, and she would no doubt impart the knowledge to Mrs. Ruthven. They would have ample opportunity to abuse him together, and by the time they all met again the worst would have blown over.

He arrived in town late, and resolved not to disturb Nora and Mrs. L'Estrange at that hour. Next morning would do. He had a deep, though unacknowledged, conviction that he must be careful and cautious in his conduct to Nora.

Yet, in spite of his love, there were moments when a kind of lurid revelation flashed across him that, if he could not succeed in warming her coldness into something akin to his own fire, the day might come when he would hate her with a deadly hatred, aye, and revenge himself cruelly on her, if she persisted in her maddening indifference. He could scarce endure the torture it gave him, when she shrank from the caresses with which he would fain have loaded her, and his longing for the reciprocity of natural, unforced tenderness, was painfully intense.

However, absence always made him more hopeful. He had not seen Nora for three days, and who could tell what change that interval might have wrought in the incomprehensible heart of a young girl?

The post brought him a large number of letters, most of which needed notice, and before Marsden had finished the briefest replies, he was informed that a gentleman wished to see him. This proved to be a

clerk from the office of Messrs. Cookson and Dunn, his solicitors, who was the bearer of a letter announcing that a fresh tenant for Evesleigh had offered better terms, and it was desirable that the question should be discussed without loss of time.

Finally, it was past mid-day before Marsden could present himself at S—— Street.

Nora was looking, he thought, well, and very handsome. She had more colour than usual, and her manner was less tranquilly composed. She seemed disturbed by his presence, and was red and white alternately. But her welcoming smile was as sweet as ever, and Marsden tasted some moments of intoxicating delight, fancying that the icy indifference he so much dreaded was at last melting before the passionate ardour of his advances.

"I am glad to see you looking better, Nora," he said, taking his accustomed place beside her work-table. Work was her great resource—such a blessed occupation for eyes and hands.

"Yes," remarked Mrs. L'Estrange; "I assure you I was quite nervous about her the night before last, she had a sore throat and looked ghastly; she is much brighter to-day."

"And Lady Dorrington?" asked Nora. "How is she? And did you—did you tell her?" colouring crimson.

"I did," said Marsden smiling. "Murder will out!"

"Was she very angry?" persisted Nora, eagerly. "I am sure she is displeased."

"She wishes you had more money, that's all, I think."

"There is a good deal more, I imagine, Clifford;

she is angry with me? I know what her plans were, and it makes me uncomfortable to feel that I have been the cause of their defeat. I am really fond of Lady Dorrington."

"And you naturally object to be converted into an instrument of torture?" said Marsden lightly. "She is mistaken, however; she would never have succeeded in marrying me to her mind, even if I had not met a certain witch of a kinswoman. Why, Nora, you must not look dismayed. When you have been Isabel's sister-in-law for a year or two, she will think me the luckiest fellow going, especially when she sees the reformation you will work in me."

"I share Nora's feeling that your only near relative's objection to your marriage is peculiarly unfortunate; perhaps it might be as well to postpone——"

"Great Heavens! No!" interrupted Marsden, energetically. "You know I have agreed to put off the wedding till after the 15th of February, and that is an age—nearly two months off."

"Barely enough time to make due preparations," said Mrs. L'Estrange, laughing.

"Preparations! Why, very few are necessary. Nora and I are old friends, and don't want to astonish each other with finery," urged Marsden.

Nora laughed, and tried to rouse herself.

"I am very fond of pretty things, I assure you," she said.

"And is there any reason that the power of choice or purchase should leave you when Nora L'Estrange becomes Nora Marsden?"

"And Mrs. Ruthven is really getting better?" asked Mrs. L'Estrange.

"Really and truly this time—recovering sufficiently to dabble in business, which her soul loves. I was amazed this morning by a summons from my lawyer, which delayed my appearance here, and on reaching the office, I found it was an offer from Mrs. Ruthven to rent Evesleigh for five years at a higher rent than any yet proposed. Fortunately, I had not absolutely come to terms with the man who has been nibbling at it for some time, so I determined to give the fair widow the preference."

"It is curious her wishing to live at Evesleigh, when she wanted to fly from it after that dreadful robbery," said Mrs. L'Estrange. "I suppose those jewels will never be found, nor the robber."

"Not after this lapse of time, I fancy," returned Marsden lightly. "I should think the thief is tolerably safe."

"I forgot to tell you that Mr. Winton passed through town while you were away," said Mrs. L'Estrange. "He seems disposed to return to India before his holiday is half over. He has gone down to see his uncle, Giles Winton, before he goes."

"Ah! Mark Winton is a capital fellow, in spite of his solemnity. You did not make yourself agreeable enough to him, Mrs. L'Estrange, or he would not be in such a hurry to run away," and Marsden threw an expressive glance at Nora as he spoke, which sent an icy, painful dart through her heart. What had not this fatal impression of Marsden's cost her? "That is the uncle who brought him up with his own son, is it not?" continued Marsden.

"Yes," said Mrs. L'Estrange. "The son is dead," she sighed.

"I did not know that. Then Winton is the old man's heir?"

"I believe so." Mrs. L'Estrange rose and closed her writing-book. "You will, I am sure, excuse me, as I promised——"

"Pray do not apologise," cried Marsden gleefully.

"Is it not very fine to-day?" exclaimed Nora. "Do you know, Clifford, I should enjoy a drive so much."

"Would you? Well, I will go and find a conveyance, and a tolerable pair of horses; you shall drive to your heart's content."

"And you, Helen?"

"My dear, you know I am engaged," and with a smile and nod of the head Mrs. L'Estrange left them together.

"And you are glad to see me back, Nora, as glad as the last time I returned?" said Marsden, taking her hand and kissing it repeatedly.

"Yes! Oh yes! only I feel nervous, uneasy, not a bit like myself. I am distressed about Lady Dorrington. I scarcely can say what I fear. But I feel I want air and motion."

"Very well, we shall have a nice drive. I shall be back in about three-quarters of an hour. You will be ready?"

"Quite ready!" Still Marsden lingered.

"Look at me, Nora," he said softly. "You have not given me a kiss to-day."

"Do not ask me," exclaimed Nora. "I cannot, not now." She half turned from him, but held out her hand.

He kissed it again, murmuring, "As you will, darling!" and went away not displeased; he fancied

she must be waking from the unconsciousness that chilled him.

These were terrible days and nights to Nora L'Estrange. Her heart knew no rest from gnawing regret for the miserable misunderstanding which had wrecked her life, and the torturing doubt as to what was best and right to do. She was the source of sorrow to the man she loved most truly, she was deceiving the lover whom she sincerely liked, and, Winton out of the way, might have loved. Then, although she had been mistaken as regarded Mark Winton's feelings, it did not follow that her ideas respecting Mrs. L'Estrange were also wrong; perhaps in his disappointment Winton might turn to *her*. If so, Nora felt she ought to be pleased, but she was not by any means pleased with the idea; on the contrary, it was very bitter. Then what was the right course to take with Marsden? Poor fellow, he was so fond of her. How could she break with him, and break his heart? And suppose she had the hardihood to tell Marsden the truth, how would it sound to say, "Despairing of Mark Winton, I promised to be your wife; now I find *he* is willing to take me, I wish to break my word to you." Such was the simple fact. No! She never, never could make such an avowal. It were best she should bear the penalty of her own weakness in having too readily yielded to persuasion, to her over-eager desire to throw off the pain and shame of caring for a man who preferred another. Besides, what would Winton himself think if, after telling him she was to marry Marsden, she declared herself free? Probably that she was a heartless jilt.

No, there was but one way for her to walk in; she

must lock up her secret and her sufferings in her own heart; leave Winton to conquer his fancy for herself, which a strong sensible man, as he was, no doubt soon would; forget him quickly, if possible; marry Marsden, and love him, or seem to love him, and do everything for him in the spirit of affection till love came. Oh! would it come? And if it did, would she not be a traitor to her true, first love? Destiny was too potent for her; she could only conquer, by bearing her fate!

Meantime Lady Dorrington made no sign. The Society papers announced that Mrs. Ruthven had sufficiently recovered to remove to Torquay, where she had taken Lord G——'s beautiful villa, and added a hint that "as we asserted some time since, there was no truth in the report that she was about to contract an alliance with a certain Squire of high degree in the Midlands, whose brilliant success as a sportsman, yachtsman, and man of the world, could not ensure that other and greater success which, no doubt, was dearest to him of all."

Mrs. L'Estrange and Nora both watched with uneasiness for some token of amity from Lady Dorrington, and the seeming estrangement of his only sister greatly increased Nora's reluctance to become Marsden's wife.

Nothing, however, can put the drag on Time's chariot wheels; the days went by swiftly yet heavily. Nora was surprised how few opportunities she found for being alone with Mrs. L'Estrange. She longed to ascertain what tie had existed between Mark Winton and her step-mother. Yet she never had a chance for leading up to that subject. It was one respecting which she could not ask a simple, straightforward

question, and she never was long enough alone with Mrs. L'Estrange to approach the topic with masked batteries.

Marsden was constantly with them, always charming, obliging, sympathetic; and it needed all Nora's tact and ingenuity to avoid the frequent *tête-à-tête* interviews he was perpetually contriving, to escape his caresses, from which she shrank with a sort of dread she was herself ashamed of.

Sometimes she could not conceal this shrinking from him, and it filled him with an angry despair, that called forth her deepest remorse, and obliged her to atone so amply, that Marsden was once more joyous and hopeful.

"If you knew all you have cost me!" he would sometimes cry, "all I have risked for you, you would not cut me to the soul, with this accursed cold prudery! Not that I would hesitate to pay *any* price that would make you mine; but I sometimes doubt you have any heart to give."

Then Nora would tremble, and assure him how dear his happiness was to her, and take his hand in hers, and stroke it with gentle kindness, and Marsden would become reasonable once more.

For Bea, this was a heavenly interval of treats and toys, the Circus and the Panorama. Indeed, as at the harvest of the sugar-cane, all came in for a share of sunshine and good things, and at times Nora wondered at her own insensibility and ingratitude.

One evening, shortly before Christmas, Marsden had looked in later than usual, after dining with some friends at his club. He stood on the hearthrug retailing the political and other gossip he had heard,

and questioning Mrs. L'Estrange and Nora respecting their shopping.

"Mrs. Ruthven is coming to town next week," he said. "I had a talk with Shirley to-day. He has been down to see her; she has not deigned to communicate with me, but I hear through my solicitor she has sold that villa she was so wild to get a month or six weeks ago, and made fifteen hundred pounds by the transaction."

"Is it possible!" exclaimed Nora.

"Some people seem to have the power of turning all they touch to gold," said Mrs. L'Estrange.

"Fortunate people," returned Marsden. "Talking of gold, I see Winton's old uncle died rather suddenly on the thirteenth, so, I suppose he'll have plenty to do settling his affairs, instead of rushing back to punish the unworthy in his district."

"Was old Mr. Winton rich?" asked Mrs. L'Estrange carelessly.

"I am not sure. I think I have heard that he made money or saved money of late years. He lived at a little shooting box he had on the edge of a Yorkshire moor. I don't think he ever held up his head since 'Black Mark' went to the bad."

"Do not say that, Mr. Marsden!" exclaimed Mrs. L'Estrange earnestly. "Father and son misunderstood each other; but the son was more sinned against than sinning." Her delicate face flushed as she spoke.

"You are more charitable than most people, Mrs. L'Estrange, to one who, if not sorely belied, did not care for anyone save himself; at any rate, it is likely Red Mark, as we used to call him, will step into his shoes."

"Old Mr. Winton had a daughter, I think?"

"Yes, who married against his will. I don't know what became of her. Perhaps she may come in for some of the father's money. But I must bid you good-bye, as well as good-night. I am going down to Evesleigh to-morrow to see after some matters. I don't fancy, after all, Mrs. Ruthven will take the place, she has made so many difficulties and stipulations."

"How long shall you be away?" asked Nora, who had grown very silent of late.

"Well, quite three or four days. You will write to me, will you not, my sweetest sweetheart?"

"Yes, certainly."

"And will you take a parcel for me to Brookdale?" asked Mrs. L'Estrange. "I'll go and fetch it."

"With pleasure," said Marsden. "Now, dearest," he cried, as soon as they were alone, "one farewell kiss. I have an odd sort of fancy that this may be the last you'll ever give me. It is extremely absurd this superstition, and must mean I am going to die, for if I live I shall undoubtedly have many a sweet kiss in the days that are coming."

"Do not think of such things, Clifford," said Nora, more touched by his words than he was aware, and she leant forward to press her lips gently to his cheek. "I trust you have many, many happy years before you."

"Will *you* make me happy?"

"I will do my best for you, dear Clifford. I will, indeed."

"God bless you, darling!" kissing her hair, her brow, her cheek quickly, passionately, and letting her go as Mrs. L'Etrange re-entered the room.

"It is not very large, and if you will send it over to the cook at Brookdale, I shall be much obliged," she said, handing the packet to him.

After a few more words Marsden bid them adieu and departed. Mrs. L'Estrange and her step-daughter drew nearer the fire, and sat for some minutes in silence.

"I did not think Mr. Marsden as bright as usual," said the former at length.

"No. He was a little more serious than usual," returned Nora.

"But he is always pleasant and kind. I really think, dear Nora, you are wonderfully fortunate. Yours is a case where true love has run smooth."

"The ides of March have come, not gone."

"That is quite an uncanny speech, Nora." There was another pause.

Then Nora, gathering up her resolution, said quietly:

"Did Clifford Marsden know Mr. Winton and his cousin when they were all boys?"

"Yes. They used to be in Oldbridge now and then, and he was at my father's Rectory once."

"Will you think me unwarrantably intrusive if I ask you a few questions about those bygone days?" laying her hand gently on her step-mother's knee.

Mrs. L'Estrange smiled thoughtfully.

"No, dear, I can tell you anything, and there is not much to tell."

"Did you know Clifford before you married my father?"

"Scarcely knew him. I met him several times. He was a delightful boy at nineteen or twenty."

"Was he a great friend of Mark Winton's?"

"No. More the friend of the other Mark. You know both the Wintons had the same name, it used to make confusion. They had not been brought up exactly together. They were at different schools, but both were sent to study with my father—one for the army, the other for India. We used to distinguish them as Black and Red Mark. They made Clifford Marsden's acquaintance at his aunt's, Mrs. Atherley's, at Oldbridge, and he came down from London to see them once, for a few days, to my father's Rectory in Hampshire. Oh! what a sweet home it was. What ages away back that time seems!"

"And," whispered Nora, leaning lightly against her companion, and fixing her eyes on the glowing coals, "Mark Winton was very fond of you?"

"Well," returned Mrs. L'Estrange, with a quiet smile, "he fancied he was—he said he was—and I, a foolish, motherless girl, believed him."

"But was he not faithful and true?" cried Nora, infinitely surprised.

"There might have been a mistake somewhere; but it all came hard enough on me," returned Mrs. L'Estrange. "There was a gentleman in our neighbourhood who wished me to marry him—a very good fellow. I was inclined to like him, but after Mark made me believe he loved me I thought of no one else, and I refused my first admirer. Then Mark went away to India. He wrote to me once or twice. Then came my great sorrow. My dear father died, leaving barely sufficient to pay his debts. I was very friendless, we had lived away from all our relations, and I waited and waited for a letter from Mark, but none came for more than a year. Then I had a curious

epistle, bidding me farewell, and expressing deep regret for any pain he might have caused me, but that marriage was out of the question, for him. I never replied. I felt that chapter was closed for ever. That was just after I went to live with Miss Webster—an engagement Mrs. Atherly got for me."

"I could never have believed that such a man as Mr. Winton would have acted so basely," exclaimed Nora, her heart beating, her eyes lit up with indignation. "How can you——"

"But, Nora," interrupted Mrs. L'Estrange quickly, "it was not Red Mark, whom you know, who behaved in this way! I do not fancy he ever was in love in his life. Oh, no! It was his cousin. Our friend was always true and steady. I well remember when, owing to the similarity of name, some knowledge of his cousin's engagement to me reached him, he warned me against throwing away a certainty for a Will-o'-the-wisp, as, no doubt, I did. Ah! that was a dreadful time. Its bitterness and mortification sting me still! My life, under its new conditions, was dreary and trying enough to make me very grateful to your father for giving me the chance of leaving it—and you know the rest."

"Then—" Nora paused and, changing her sentence, observed, "Do you know, I fancied, at one time, that you would marry Mr. Winton?"

Mrs. L'Estrange laughed softly.

"That is curious," she said, "for *I* fancied you and he were taking to each other, until after the Evesleigh ball—when a sort of change came to both of you."

There was a pause of a few minutes. The light

died out of Nora's eyes—the colour from her cheek. At length she said:

"Then you would not marry Mr. Winton?"

"It is extremely unlikely *he* would ever ask me," said Mrs. L'Estrange, laughing. "And as to me, all ideas of love or matrimony are over for ever. Bea is, and will be, my only love. I want no more."

A dull sense of despair numbed Nora's heart; it was a few seconds before she could collect herself to say:

"Do you think Clifford Marsden knew all this?"

"Yes; I imagine he did. He was very friendly with Mark, and continued to be after *our* friend, Red Mark, went out to India. My *fiancé*, as I fancied him to be, did not go till after. He was appointed to a regiment stationed at Delhi, and, I believe, was very unfortunate and weak. Mr. Winton gave me an account of his later life. He died two years ago. I had not heard anything of him for a long time, and I was so grieved to think of his wasted life! How well it is that the future is hidden from us! There, dear, is the whole history."

The whole history! Mrs. L'Estrange little dreamed what a sting it left in her step-daughter's soul. Was Clifford Marsden's memory really defective? Or, had he misrepresented facts? Surely he was too much a gentleman to do so? At any rate, she (Nora) had been juggled out of the best chance of happiness ever offered her; for she now felt convinced Mark Winton had loved her from the first.

"Dear Helen," she said, rising with an effort, "I have kept you up too late; let us go to bed. What an extraordinary jumble life is!"

"Yes! Is it not incomprehensible?" returned Mrs. L'Estrange, kissing her. "You look dreadfully pale and tired, Nora."

"Incomprehensible!" the word kept repeating itself in fiery syllables all night long; strive as she would, Nora could hear nothing else, think of nothing else. What an incomprehensible destiny that which doomed her and the man that loved her well, as she now believed, to separation for ever!

Was she deceived, or only inadvertently misled? If deceived, she would never, never, forgive. And she *must* find out.

CHAPTER XIV.

"THE PLOT THICKENS."

THE balmy air of Torquay did wonders for Mrs. Ruthven, and her own resolute eagerness to regain health and strength still more.

The attentions and inquiries of various noble and distinguished invalids, sojourning, like herself, in that famous resort, soothed and satisfied her. Lady Dorrington had written glowing eulogiums and recommendations of her friend and guest, and all things promised fair for the ensuing spring campaign. But though sweet and placid to those few favoured visitors who were admitted to her presence, the real vivifying influence which was bringing back energy to her system, was the hope, the prospect of revenge. To lose Clifford Marsden, by whom she had been so fascinated, was bad enough; to lose the lord of Evesleigh, the hero of a hundred conquests, was worse; to lose him to a simple, inexperienced girl, whom she had herself praised and patronised, was worst of all.

Already Society had begun to talk of Clifford Marsden being about to marry some country nobody; but as yet there was no certainty in the report, and, deep in her heart, Mrs. Ruthven swore the marriage should never take place.

It was part of her scheme to prevent Evesleigh from going into strange hands, even for a season. She

was determined to rule there herself. Captain Shirley's visit was a stimulating tonic; but she was not too confidential with her right hand man.

She listened to his accounts of Marsden's devotion to Nora, the steadiness and sobriety of his life in consequence, of the early date fixed for their marriage, the rumours that he intended to settle all he possibly could upon his bride elect, etc., etc., to all of which Mrs. Ruthven listened almost in silence, with downcast eyes, and a slight, inscrutable smile.

In vain, Shirley tried to draw some observations from her, which might indicate in what direction the current of her feelings was setting. He could not even make up his mind if she had resolved to renounce Marsden. The only sentence which escaped her lips on the subject, was when Shirley reiterated the report that the marriage was to take place immediately; then Mrs. Ruthven said languidly:

"If it does not take place soon, it will probably not take place at all."

"May I ask your reason for saying so?"

"Well, chiefly because Mr. Marsden is not a man of very fixed purpose—and—something may occur to change his views. Talking of change, did I tell you that I have got rid of that place at Twickenham? It seems that a rich stockbroker took a violent fancy to it, and he has given me a thousand pounds for my bargain."

"Did you tire of it so soon?" asked Shirley, in surprise.

"Yes; sickness and seclusion have wrought a radical change in me. I now feel I must be *in* London and in the complete country, alternately."

"I am afraid, Mrs. Ruthven, that I have unconsciously done something, or left undone something, that has induced you to withdraw the confidence you once placed in me," said Shirley, with a wounded air, looking straight into her eyes.

"Then you are mistaken; I give you exactly the same amount of confidence I always did—a good deal, but by no means all. You have been useful to me, and I have been useful to you. I am still disposed to be your friend, but do not suppose you have the smallest power to injure me. The day is long gone by for that."

"Injure you! Do you suppose that such an idea ever crossed my brain? My inclination is only to be your most devoted servant—more, if you would accept me!"

Mrs. Ruthven laughed softly.

"I quite believe you," she said; "still——"

"You have never been quite the same since you were robbed of your rubies," he interrupted. "You seem to have grown doubtful of everyone."

"I am," she exclaimed with sudden fire. "Utterly, completely distrustful; and *you* mutter feeble complaints because I will not tell you the vague hope I have of recovering them. Leave that alone; I may confide even that to you one day, but never if I find you presuming to try discovery on your own account. I alone have a slight clue, and I will have no one meddle."

Shirley looked at her so completely startled and surprised, that she laughed a strange, almost hysterical, laugh.

"You must not excite yourself," he exclaimed; "you might bring on another relapse."

"That would never do," she returned in an altered voice. "I want to be well soon; I have a good deal to do. Tell me, Shirley," she went on, "why did you not make love to Nora L'Estrange? She would have been a suitable wife for you."

"I was quite willing to do so, but somehow it was impossible. I could never get beyond the weather, or the last new waltz, with her."

"What is there different in her from other women?" she asked scornfully; "you have been tolerably successful with other women."

"I don't know; Miss L'Estrange is frank and pleasant, and all that sort of thing, but she is the most inaccessible woman I ever came across."

"Shirley, you are a fool! A young creature fresh from the school-room and educational irons, is the easiest game of all! Man, have you so little experience as not to know you can always count on at least one traitor within the trenches?"

"Perhaps the game was not sufficiently exciting; anyhow, Winton did not give a fellow much chance."

"Winton! yes, that is a man I should enjoy mortifying. I think he was fond of Nora L'Estrange, and I suspect she liked him. But who would refuse Marsden of Evesleigh?"

"He is not so great a catch."

"Listen to me," cried Mrs. Ruthven, not heeding him. "I want to go to London—let me see—I think I could bear the journey next week. I want you to take rooms for me at the Alexandra Hotel; I shall keep them for a while. I like this place, and can go

up to town as I like. You must secure good rooms, and have everything made comfortable and warm—above all things, warm."

Captain Shirley took her directions with profound attention, and then their talk flowed in ordinary channels. Mrs. Ruthven was quiet, and in rather a more cheerful mood; she was more civil and friendly than usual. Yet Shirley left her with an odd impression that there was danger in the air.

The short absence which Marsden contemplated, unavoidably extended itself to nearly a week.

This, which would otherwise have been a welcome period of repose to Nora, was robbed of its restfulness by her brooding over her step-mother's communication. It was like fighting the air, this constant routing of phantom doubts, which dispersed only to reassemble in palpable battalions, while the question, did Marsden knowingly deceive her? remained unsolved. She determined to ask him. She would not again permit herself to be blinded with some half truth. She was more uneasy than she would admit; she could not apply herself to anything, and she even incurred a gentle rebuke from her step-mother, for her indecision respecting some of her preparations, which Mrs. L'Estrange complained caused unnecessary delay.

The day before Marsden rejoined them, the post brought Mrs. L'Estrange two letters of some importance to this true history. The first she opened was from Winton. It was written in a depressed though friendly tone, and gave some particulars respecting his uncle's death and the amount of property bequeathed by deceased. There was, he said, a good deal of business to be settled. His uncle's only daughter was dead,

but he found she had left a son in indifferent circumstances; and Winton went on to say, that he felt it his duty to divide the bequest with this boy, whose guardian he would undertake to be; finally he expected to be in town after Christmas, when he would have the pleasure of calling on Mrs. L'Estrange.

"I am sure Mark Winton does not write like a man who had inherited money," she said, when she had finished the letter; "and I don't suppose he is inconsolable for the loss of his uncle—they did not love each other much in old times."

"Dear Helen, *do* read this letter," interrupted Nora; "it is, I see, from Lady Dorrington. I know it will be unpleasant, but do not try to hide anything from me."

"It looks formidable," said Mrs. L'Estrange, "perhaps you had better read it with me." Nora came behind her step-mother, and read as follows:

"Dear Mrs. L'Estrange,—I address myself to you rather than Nora, because I naturally consider you the more responsible of the two for the present disastrous state of affairs.

"I can scarcely say how deeply hurt, and, I may say exasperated, I feel by your, and Nora's, want of consideration and good faith towards both Clifford and myself. You especially were fully aware (at least I made no effort to conceal it) of my wish that Clifford should marry Mrs. Ruthven—a woman whom I like personally, and whose fortune was of the last importance to my brother. He, too—so far as I could see—was pleased with the idea, and quite sufficiently attached to the lady to make things smooth and feasible.

With this admirable arrangement Nora chose, for the indulgence of idle vanity in the first place, I believe, to interfere, by getting up a foolish flirtation with her cousin, and drawing him on in the most deliberate manner, and with your knowledge, till my brother—the most reckless of men—was fully committed, and is now unable to extricate himself. Had Nora any true sense of honour and duty, she would have checked Clifford, have consulted *me*, have done anything rather than drag us all into a position of such difficulty and disgrace, for I see that Mrs. Ruthven is determined to take some steps, which will, no doubt, cover us with confusion.

"I shall only add, that if you and Miss L'Estrange think for a moment her union with Clifford Marsden will secure her happiness, you are profoundly mistaken. He will never make a good husband to anyone; he will never be true to any woman. Mrs. Ruthven knows the world, she knows men; she could find comfort in the substantial advantages of her position; but Nora, if at all the girl I believed her to be, would fret herself to death. However, I am probably giving her credit for more feeling than she possesses. Young and old seem alike indurated by the greed for material things, which grasps at wealth and luxury by any means, however unworthy. She may accomplish this marriage, but she will never be acknowledged as a sister-in-law by

"Yours,
"I. DORRINGTON."

Nora, white as a sheet, took the offensive letter and reperused it in silence.

"Lady Dorrington must have been out of her mind when she wrote that," cried Mrs. L'Estrange indignantly. "She little knows the true state of the case."

"It is very cruel and unjust," said Nora, in low, unsteady tones. "It is too bad to be accused of dishonourable scheming to win a man from whom I would give the world to be free."

"My dear Nora, do not allow your anger against Lady Dorrington to make you unjust to poor Clifford," exclaimed Mrs. L'Estrange, startled by the suppressed passion in her voice. "There is no reason to doubt him."

"It is neither doubt nor anger, Helen. I am averse to marry Mr. Marsden. It was instinct at first—it is—I don't know what it is now."

"My dear child, this is dreadful! I never anticipated anything half so bad," said Mrs. L'Estrange, aghast at this revelation. "What can you do. You cannot break with him now, and yet to marry with such a feeling is horrible. What can you do?"

"I don't know." Nora's lip trembled as she spoke. "I seem acting badly and falsely. I am so sorry for Clifford, he deserves better treatment from me. I will show him this letter. I will point out the folly of marrying me. Why did he ever take a fancy to me?"

"It is more than a fancy, Nora. I am very, very sorry for Clifford."

Nora's only reply was a burst of tears.

"Oh! I must tell him," she said. "I will show him this letter, and tell him. I do not deserve that he should quarrel with his only sister for my sake."

Mrs. L'Estrange did not reply. She was too puzzled and distressed to see the fair fabric of joy and happiness that she had seen grow up, crumble to dust at a touch.

Nora dried her tears.

"I am weak and selfish, Helen. But I *do* want to act rightly. Do you think that Clifford is quite true, or that he is impulsive enough to misrepresent a thing he wishes for very much?"

"I don't quite understand you. But I am sure Clifford Marsden is an honourable gentleman, who would never knowingly deceive anyone."

"Oh! I suppose so—I suppose so," despondingly.

"How shall I answer this horrid letter?" asked Mrs. L'Estrange.

"Do not answer it for a day or two, not till I have shown it to Clifford. It is possible things may arrange themselves."

* * * * *

Angry though she was at the unwarrantable assertions in Lady Dorrington's hasty, ill-judged letter, it gave Nora a gleam of hope, or rather it offered her an opportunity of suggesting to Marsden the expediency of breaking off their engagement. This would be to her an infinite relief. It is true that her freedom might secure peace, but not happiness. She would probably never see Winton again, save, perhaps, for a brief formal farewell interview; but, at least, she would not be forced into a marriage which she dreaded more and more as the days rolled by. If she could only prove Marsden's integrity! Was he really under the impression that Mark Winton, the Mark she knew,

had been Helen's lover, or had he misrepresented the facts?

Time was flying fast. In less than six weeks—unless her intended effort to extricate herself succeeded—she would be Marsden's wife. It was extraordinary—it was terrible—the reluctance with which she contemplated what many would consider so fair a prospect.

It was the second day after the receipt of Lady Dorrington's letter that Marsden returned from Evesleigh.

He was charmed to find Nora alone, as she usually did her best to include her step-mother in their interviews. Marsden looked bright and joyous, as became a bridegroom elect. He had had a prosperous journey, and all things were coming round to his wishes. Fortune smiled upon him; he had but to play boldly, and he would break the bank of ill-luck which had hitherto raked in all his stakes.

After he had greeted Nora with his usual warmth, he noticed that she was white and cold and tremulous, and he drew her to the light, looking into her face with eager questioning eyes, while he held her hands firmly though gently.

"You have something unpleasant, some bad news for me, Nora?" he said. "Out with it, dearest, I am not afraid."

"Yes! something very unpleasant, a very unjust letter from Lady Dorrington; if you will let my hands go, I will give it to you."

"Is that all?" in a tone of relief, as he released her, "I fully expected Isabel would be about as disagreeable as could be managed."

Nora took the letter from her pocket and gave it to him. She could hardly stand, so deep was her agitation. She sank into the chair near which she stood, and watched Marsden while he read.

His face expressed no great emotion; a slightly contemptuous look, an occasional frown, that was all.

"Well! there is nothing very tremendous in this," he cried turning to his *fiancée* and leaning his arms on the top of a high chair opposite her; "it is a most improper letter, and I shall insist on Lady Dorrington making the fullest apology to Mrs. L'Estrange and yourself. But she cannot forbid the banns, or interfere in any way, so you need not trouble about her preposterous nonsense."

"But, Clifford, I cannot help troubling! I am distressed about Mrs. Ruthven. Of course I know very little about her, or how you stand with her, but I did think that time at Evesleigh you intended to marry her, and perhaps she thought so too?"

"My dear girl, you can no more understand a woman such as Mrs. Ruthven than you can read Sanscrit or Amharic. She can't do without lovers, admirers I should say, and as an attentive host I was bound to supply her needs."

"But were there not others who would do as well as you?"

"None would have quite the same effect as the bachelor master of the house. My darling, is it possible that you honour me by being jealous?"

"No, Clifford, I am not jealous—but—but—I wish —you could, without too much pain, gratify Lady Dorrington and give me up."

"Ah! I see, magnanimity, not jealousy, is your line."

He kept his light tone, but his eyes darkened, and his face grew hard.

"I want—I want you to listen quietly, Clifford," she returned, feeling her mouth parched and scarcely able to utter the words she forced herself to speak. "You will be angry, but I feel I ought to tell you all that is in my mind."

"I am always glad to listen to you," said Marsden, giving her back the letter and throwing himself on the sofa.

"Don't you think, Clifford, there is some truth in what your sister says? If you need Mrs. Ruthven's fortune so much, and I suppose Lady Dorrington knows, is it not foolish to increase your difficulties—to—to vex your only near relative, who loves you so much, by marrying a girl who is willing to give you up if it is for your good?"

"It is the magnanimous trick, then? Magnanimity which I suspect does not cost you much," said Marsden bitterly.

"Clifford," said Nora, determined to be brave and honest, feeling her courage reviving with the sincerity of her resolution, "I will be true, though it hurts me horribly to speak the truth to you. You ought not to throw away every consideration of prudence, perhaps duty, for the sake of a girl who does not, cannot, love you as you ought to be loved for making such sacrifices. I ought not to have promised what I did. Can you ever forgive me, if I beg of you to give up the idea of marrying me? I should disappoint you, I fear I should?"

"Forgive you!" repeated Marsden quietly, "*Never!*" His hand, which lay on the sofa cushions, clenched

itself tight. "If you persist in breaking with me, if you attempt to juggle me—but you are too wise, too kindly! My sister talks of what she does not understand. I certainly will not attempt to reside at Evesleigh, and throw open my house to the county for some time, but I am by no means in the straits she imagines or invents; and even if I were, no amount of fortune, no advantages would atone to me for you—I love you—I want you—and *nothing* shall separate us."

"But, Clifford, shall you be happy with me, if I cannot love you as you do me?"

"Love as I do?" cried Marsden, starting up to take a hasty turn, and throwing himself on the sofa again. "That you never can! Nature forbids it! but you shall be my wife, and give me what tenderness you can!"

Nora began to feel indignant at his tone.

"If you really loved me, you should think of my happiness as well as your own."

"I do! I only care to make you happy! But I don't want any one *else* to make you happy. Nora! it cannot be possible that after your solemn promise to me, you want to draw back? There is something I do not understand here; something more than Isabel's letter."

"Her letter brought on a climax; but I have been uneasy for some time, frightened at the responsibilities I was going to undertake; frightened at my own want of affection for you; though I do like you, and I am miserable at making you unhappy!"

"Then save your misery and my unhappiness! Marry me; marry me willingly—for marry me you must."

"Are you so resolved?" asked Nora, changing colour and feeling alarmingly faint.

"I am; even though I think I have hit on the solution of the riddle, said Marsden, rising and confronting her. "You may not love me; but you love some one else!"

Nora was silent. Falsehood in every shape was abhorrent to her, yet truth in this case was terrible; how could she confess her weakness! Marsden's eyes, full of deadly rage, were fixed on her. "I am right? You do not reply!" Then, Nora, with a sudden flash of courage, determined that all concealment should be swept away. "You are right, Clifford," she said, colouring crimson, throat and cheeks and ears. "But I thought I had got over it all, that it would trouble me no more; and I do humbly pray you to forgive me for deceiving you, as well as myself."

"Forgive you! of course I forgive you, my sweetest, my darling!" he exclaimed. "I only want you to love *me* now. If you will but give me the fragments which remain, I am satisfied! I will even bless that solemn rectangular prig Winton, for trampling the divine pearl of your tenderness under his feet, so that it may come to me in any shape."

"Why do you imagine—what makes you think of Mr. Winton?" faltered Nora, vaguely distressed by his tone, and shocked beyond description at the notion of having betrayed herself.

"Who else could it be? Unless, indeed, some very juvenile affair, with a Teutonic baron or graf abroad," he laughed harshly. "I do not mind Winton. *He* never could love as I do. He has a sort of chilled-shot attachment to your pretty step-mother, which may——"

"There you are mistaken," interrupted Nora quickly. "Which of the two Wintons did you believe her engaged to?"

Marsden turned and looked sharply at her. "You have been exchanging confidences with Mrs. L'Estrange?" he said.

"I have received hers."

"It was Black Mark Winton who was for a while engaged to her; but your friend was attached to her too!" returned Marsden.

"You told me—you implied—he was engaged," murmured Nora.

"Oh, I see. You mean I deceived you? I really cannot remember what I said—only what I believed. But that is of no consequence. I want you to understand me, Nora. I will *not* give you up. I hold you to your promise. Keep it, and I'll gladly devote my life to you. Break it—no, I will not believe that! I'll not think of it! Nora, do not desert me! All the good that's left in me, clings round you. If you shake me off, I know I shall go to the devil, and it will be the worse for you. I know what I am capable of; I could be damnably cruel."

"Do not suppose you can frighten me," cried Nora, roused to anger by the shadow of a threat. "I care too much for you not to feel infinite pain in disappointing you; but I will not submit to be bullied!"

"Great Heavens! You misunderstand me. I do not know what I am saying, Nora! You must not be faithless. Look here, I am utterly dependent on you for my future. I have no hope, no life, apart from you, and I hold you to your promise, as I cling to salvation. On your head be it whatever becomes of

me without you! My love! my soul! do not turn from me. I will never give you up! I claim you, whatever happens."

The profound supplication of his voice, the entreaty of his speaking eyes, shook Nora's heart. Had she, indeed, any right to turn from one to whom she seemed so essential?

"Do not decide anything to-day, Clifford," she said in a low voice. She was beginning to feel quite exhausted. "Think over all I have said, and so will I of what you have urged."

"I will do anything you like, save one thing," he interrupted, "but no reflection will change me. I see all this has been too much for you. I will leave you for the present, and in a day or two I trust to find you reconciled to the dreadful alternative of keeping your promise to me."

Nora bent her head in silence, and after looking at her for a minute or two with a glance of mingled anger and admiration, Clifford said with a short laugh:

"Curiously enough, I am summoned to-morrow to see the rival to whom you would fain hand me over —on business, she says. I wonder if she could invent a bribe big enough to induce me to give *you* up, Nora?"

He took and kissed her hand, pressing it painfully hard.

"If I did not love you so madly, how I could hate you!" he said between his teeth, and hastily left the room.

CHAPTER XV.

DETECTION.

DESPITE his cool indifference to the opinions and interests of others, Marsden felt that he should be as well pleased that his interview with Mrs. Ruthven was over. It is true that she seemed a mere frivolous, fanciful trifler, much taken up with the outside of things; but instinct rather than any deliberate thought impressed him with the conviction that beneath her pretty draperies was a heart of steel, which would never melt, though you might strike fire from it, and an iron will, tenacious to carry out her purposes, great or small. He knew better than anyone else that, a short time ago, he had only to ask and he would have been accepted; and, thinking that such might have been his destiny, he had done his best to prepare and smooth the way. From this, his supreme good luck had delivered him.

Even if he had not fallen headlong in love with Nora L'Estrange, there was much in Mrs. Ruthven which dimly displeased him. She was carefully well-bred, yet her manners had not the indescribable ease or grace of one born in the purple, there was an undertone of animalism in her tastes and looks; moreover, he shrewdly suspected that fidelity to a husband would be with her very much a matter of accident, though he did her the justice to believe that she would always keep up appearances.

In fact, she was an admirably composed morsel of Paris paste, excellently set and pleasant to the eye, until placed beside a brilliant of the purest water, like Nora.

However, the visit had to be paid, so Marsden made a careful toilette, and set out to keep his appointment.

It was some time since they had met, indeed, since their encounter in Paris the previous spring, they had not been so long apart.

Mrs. Ruthven was fully dressed in black silk and velvet, with a handkerchief of creamy lace knotted round her neck, and a dainty cap of the same on her thick, short hair. Her costume seemed to indicate that the business in hand was too serious for the easy negligence of a morning gown.

Marsden thought her looking better than he had ever seen her before. The debility and languor of slow convalescence had spiritualised her expression, and given more refinement to her movements. He could even understand how some men might think her charming, a charming toy. There was something unusual too, in the earnestness with which she looked into his eyes, something pained and reproachful in the expression of her own.

"I hope she is not going to make a scene," thought Marsden, as he greeted her cordially.

"You are very good, for an unpunctual man, to be so punctual," she said graciously, but gravely.

"I was eager to see with my own eyes how you were progressing," he returned, smiling sweetly upon her. "You know you were cruel enough to reject my prayer for an interview at Chedworth."

"Yes, it was cruel, considering how anxious you were about me." Marsden did not quite like her tone. "I want to speak to you about Evesleigh; there are one or two little matters you and I can settle better between ourselves than through our lawyers."

"More agreeably, I am sure!"

"Before I go into my own affairs, however, Mr. Marsden, I must congratulate you on your engagement with Miss L'Estrange. I always admired her. But your taste is unimpeachable." There was a kind of deadly composure in her manner that struck him as ominous.

"It's coming," he thought, while he said aloud, "You are very good! I am sure Nora has the highest appreciation of you, she has often spoken of you most warmly."

"She will appreciate me much more deeply and justly later on," returned Mrs. Ruthven, with a slight laugh. "Pray when does the marriage take place?"

"That is not settled yet."

"And I suppose your fair inexperienced *fiancée* is desperately in love with you? You have quite distanced Mr. Winton?"

"Well, I hope so," carelessly, feeling more and more uncomfortable.

"I should think you had, you are rather a fascinating sinner. I had a fancy for you at one time myself." And she glanced quickly at him, a glance fiery enough, half admiration and half anger.

"Is it possible?" cried Marsden, with an exaggerated air of regret. "And how was I such an idiot as not to see it?"

"That unconsciousness and modesty for which you

are celebrated, no doubt preserved you," she returned in a peculiar tone. "However, it is too late to talk of the past; besides, I have a curious story to tell you, in which, I am sure, you will be interested. Do you know I have found a trace of my rubies at last, and the day you marry Nora L'Estrange, I will give her one of the *best* for a wedding present!"

"My dear Mrs. Ruthven, I *am* astonished and interested!" cried Marsden, struck by her tone and looking full at her. "Nor shall I——"

"Pray listen to me," she interrupted, leaving her seat by the fire, and drawing a chair to a writing-table at a little distance, where a number of closely written sheets fastened together with a clip, lay beside her blotting-book. "It is a long story, and I do not want to occupy your time more than I need."

"You rouse my curiosity," cried Marsden placing himself opposite her.

Mrs. Ruthven turned over a page or two of the manuscript before her, and resting her clasped hands on it, fixed her eyes on her companion.

"I had," she began, "a clue, a mere trifle, which no one knew save myself, and when I came up from Evesleigh, I sent for a man of whom I had heard, no matter how, a man of keen, trained intelligence, for I saw that the regular solemn English detective, with his heavy precaution and transparent devices, was merely announcing to the criminal world, 'I have a secret inquiry to conceal.' I sent for this man, I gave him, and him only, my clue."

"And why did you not give it at least to me," cried Marsden, "when I was tearing my heart out in fruitless efforts to recover your jewels?"

"I will tell you presently. Well, this employé of mine, led by my—my suggestions, fixed upon an individual whom he thought might possibly have been the robber or agent of the robber, and shadowed him" (she emphasised the word with cruel bitterness). "For days he followed the unconscious thief, in various disguises; at last, after keeping him in sight with infinite difficulty, he watched him leaving a country house not far from St. Germain."

Marsden's expression changed from polite attention to deep gravity.

"At a station midway to Paris he got out, a small valise in his hand. The detective followed. It was early afternoon, and few passengers were travelling; the suspected thief went into a first class carriage, with small dark moustaches, a low-crowned brown hat, such as Englishmen wear in the country, and a long loose overcoat. He came out at a station some ten miles off in a sort of frock coat, rather shabby, braided and fitting badly, a soft black felt hat pulled over his eyes and large *light* moustaches; his overcoat was hanging on his arm, and he still carried his valise. Here he waited some time reading a paper, which he held before his face, and finally, as it began to grow dusk, he took a third class ticket to Paris, my employé travelled in the same carriage," she turned a page. "It is too long to tell how he tracked him that night to an obscure street in the Marais, to the shop of a Polish Jew dealer in precious stones, where he held a long parley, and then back to a shabby café, where he engaged a room for the night—he went to it, after partaking of some wine and food. When his pursuer had ascertained that he was locked in for the night,

he returned to the shop—I ought to have told you, that this man was himself the son of a Polish Jew, and spoke the language well. He made himself known to the owner of the shop, told some story of having been on the outlook for jewels, and, in short, persuaded his compatriot to let him hide in a corner, where he could witness the interview arranged for next day. I am dwelling too much on details, perhaps! Ultimately my employé witnessed the sale of ten large unset rubies for a price, which, though high, was not enough for their value, and he *saw the face of the man who sold them.*"

"Indeed!" with a slightly contemptuous accent; "and may I ask what was your clue?"

"There it is," cried Mrs. Ruthven, raising her voice for the first time above the level tone at which she had kept it, and drawing her breath in a deep sob, as she took out of a small leather case, and threw to him, a diamond stud. He had grown perfectly colourless, but the hand with which he took up the stud was steady.

"And what does this prove?" he asked.

"That Clifford Marsden, of Evesleigh Manor, is a felon!" she answered, fierce exultation lighting up her face and gleaming in her eyes. "Do you think I did not recognise the peculiar setting of the diamond which caught my hair in that waltz—*that* waltz——"

She stopped, her breast heaving.

"I know I lost this stud," said Marsden, very deliberately, "on that unlucky evening, and never could find it; but why should not the robber have picked it up, if he found it, as he most probably did, in the tent?"

"You are a brave man to face me as you do!" she exclaimed. "But I hold you in my hand," and she clenched it. "*I* will tell you who found it, and where! Your sweet, beloved *fiancée*, when paying me a private visit in my room, admiring my ball-dress, espied the glitter of that diamond among the lace on the body, where it had dropped when you struggled to stupefy me with your horrible chloroform. *Me*, the woman you had been making love to ten minutes before—who was ready to give you all she had—you base midnight thief!"

"Do not be so positive. Might it not have fallen among your lace as we danced together, or when I was assisting to lift you?"

"No, no, no!" she cried, as if carried out of herself, and speaking with immense rapidity. "I saw it on your breast when you left me, and Nora, *your* Nora, told me you never touched me! It is useless denying your guilt. Waite, the detective, knows you. He saw you *here*, here with *me*, before he started to pursue you. He was with you at Amsterdam, in Paris, at Chanlaire, when you went to your sick friend de Meudon. He tracked you, he can swear to you. I have paid hundreds to prove it, and I have you in my grasp!"

She stopped, panting.

Marsden rose slowly, his eyes fixed upon her. She was frightened by his silence, his desperate look. She, too, rose; but her fury seemed to evaporate.

"What are you going to do, Marsden?" she said, quivering. "You would not murder me?"

He laughed a strange, discordant laugh.

"I am blackguard enough," he said; "but I would

not hurt a hair of your head. No! It is useless to contradict your assertions. You have me, indeed, in your grasp, and there is but one way of escape."

He moved to the door, but she was too quick for him. Setting her back against it, she stretched out her arms to keep him off.

"You shall not kill yourself! I forbid you! You are bad, and base, but you belong to me—you belong to *me!* No, Marsden, you shall not leave me!"

"What is life to me?" asked Marsden, with a calm despair. "A dishonouring shackle! The sooner I am rid of it the better. I cannot struggle with you. If you have any pity, let me go!"

"I will not! I cannot! Oh! Marsden, how I have hated you! You have been so unspeakably false! To rob me, that you might shake me off and marry my rival. Yet," and her eyes softened as they rested on his fine face, so rigid in its despair, on his attitude, grand even in its expressive abandonment, "with all, I cannot let you destroy yourself! If I could hope that gratitude would awaken anything like affection, tenderness!"

"I am not worth saving," interrupted Marsden, speaking more collectedly. He began to calculate chances. "I know I have done a dastardly deed. I never saw its full baseness till I was found out." He smiled a bitter, cynical smile. "That does not show much of a moral nature to work upon; but I have so much decency left that it is torture to be under your eye, to hear your just reproaches. I do not ask you for mercy. If you choose to call a policeman, do so. You would be in your right. I will not resist."

He folded his arms and stood quite still.

"And do you not know I should tear my own heart to pieces, if I injured you?" she cried, in a passion of anger and love. "Oh! I can save you! I *will* save you! if you promise to give me the love I long for! Can I not win you by such service as man never had offered him before? I can save more than your life."

"I have no love to give!" said Marsden in a low tone. "I have done with love and friendship; and, however generous you may be, how can you silence your detective?"

"I have bound up his interest with his discretion," she said eagerly, still keeping between Marsden and the door.

"I tell you, your bitterest revenge is to prevent my escaping life and its intolerable pangs."

"And I tell you," she cried, hardening again, "that if you kill yourself I will blazon the story of your felony, your shame, to the whole world! I will myself describe to Nora L'Estrange your disguises, your creeping to and fro to sell your plunder."

"Silence!" interrupted Marsden fiercely, making a step forward, then recovering himself. "It is not probable I can do anything to atone, to compensate. If I can——" he broke off.

Mrs. Ruthven paused and clasped her hands tightly together.

"If I hold my tongue none need ever know of your —infamy," she said slowly. "It will be a secret between our two selves. Ought not *that* to be an indissoluble bond of union? There is not a breath of suspicion against you, Waite's interest is distinctly to be

silent. If I choose to submit to so great a loss, that is my affair."

"It is a tremendous if," said Marsden. "How am I to repay so huge a debt?"

"By giving me your life," she returned in quickly resolute tones, "by giving me your name!"

"Do you remember that I am not only in love with Nora, but openly engaged to her?"

"I do, and breaking with her will be a considerable part of your atonement. I know men tolerably well; you are quite capable of loving two."

"You are right! My love for Nora is—I cannot speak of it to you—it has hitherto been the most, the only, spiritualised passion I ever knew, there has been no time as yet for it to become incarnate. Now there is in you an undertone of devilry that always attracted me."

"Will you break with Nora for my sake?" demanded Mrs. Ruthven imperiously.

"It could be managed," he returned thoughtfully, remembering his last interview with her. "Be that as it may, I shall never marry her now!"

"And my great sacrifice, will it not draw your heart to me!" she cried. "Oh! I have been wild with love and hate for you, and I feel how madly foolish and despicable I am to act as I do!" She burst into a passionate fit of sobbing.

The light came back to Marsden's eyes.

"You are a woman any man might love," he said, "and as you wisely admit that men can love two or more (we are generally broader than women, some women), you shall have all the love left in me, of my life-long gratitude you may be sure. You are making

a sorry bargain, I warn you. I shall never be the same again, but if you care to be Mrs. Marsden of Evesleigh, so be it!"

"Ah! you are simply selling yourself! And what a price I pay!"

"No! by Heaven! I *am* grateful, and I always admired you! Even that night, when I unclasped your necklace I felt inclined to kiss the pretty white throat that was so velvety soft to my sacrilegious touch!"

"And why did you not! Had you brought back consciousness by your kisses and confided your difficulties to me, all would have been well!" cried the infatuated woman, throwing herself into his arms.

What could a criminal so respited do but pay the tribute demanded with liberal lips?

For the moment Marsden was moved and really grateful, though a bitter sense of being sold into slavery tinged his feelings of relief.

"How could you be so fascinated by Nora L'Estrange?" asked Mrs. Ruthven, still leaning against him and looking up in his face. "*She* never could understand you as *I* do, she never could share your feelings as I can."

"She is what she is," said he shortly, "and has been an infinite misfortune to me."

"I am glad you see it." Mrs. Ruthven sat down on the sofa and signed to him to sit beside her. "Can I trust you, Marsden?" looking intently into his face.

"I think so. Dictate your own terms—settle everything on yourself—everything of mine that is available. I shall never feel more than a dependant on your charity."

"You must not say that. You will see that, together, we shall command society."

"Tell me," resumed Marsden, after a moment's pause, "before we drop this accursed subject for ever. How did that detective fellow see me?"

"Do you remember an engineer, a Mr. Colville, calling here and speaking to me of his little girl, who was my god-daughter?"

"Yes. Shirley was here."

"That man was Waite. I wanted him to see you. I wanted to test the completeness of his disguise by defying Shirley's recognition. Shirley found him for me."

"Good God, has Shirley any suspicion?"

"Not the faintest. Do not doubt, I took every precaution to shield the name I might possibly bear. I waited, Oh, how impatiently! hoping you would avow your love and difficulties to me, then I should have hidden my knowledge even from you; but when I found you were going to marry Nora L'Estrange, to expose me to the contemptuous pity of all *your* world and mine, I was on the verge of getting a warrant of committal against you. My relapse saved you. Ay, and saved me. Does not Nora love you intensely?" with keen curiosity.

Marsden understood the drift of the question.

"It would be unchivalrous to boast," said he, with a significant smile.

A look of delight in the suffering she hoped to inflict gleamed in Mrs. Ruthven's large dark eyes.

"I must let you go, dearest," she said, laying her hand caressingly on his shoulder, yet he fancied with a touch of proprietorship. "But you will be sure to

return to dinner, and be sure you do not go to the L'Estrange's. A letter will do much better than an interview."

"An interview? God forbid!" he exclaimed, with unmistakable sincerity.

"How pleased Lady Dorrington will be," said Mrs. Ruthven, meditatively.

"Oh, charmed," returned Marsden, while he thought how cruel fate had been in permitting his affectionate interlocutor to leave Chedworth alive. "I must leave you now," he said. "I feel I must be alone. I am still dizzy and unhinged with—with the sense of your great goodness."

"But you will come back? You will not do yourself any harm?"—anxiously.

"No. I don't think I have pluck enough left to blow my brains out, or rather *you* have given me a fresh zest for life. You are looking awfully exhausted. You must lie down and rest."

"Do you care enough for me to wish I should rest?"

"How can you doubt? Good-bye for the present." A little further tribute, and he fled from her, half-mad with rage, despair and self-contempt.

His ruling motive for the last few minutes had been to escape from Mrs. Ruthven, to be alone with his crushing sense of discovery and defeat. He had been utterly outwitted, he was at the mercy of a deeply injured woman—a woman from whom he shrank revolted, all the more because he *had* injured her.

The force of degradation could no further go, and he had been such a doubly damned fool as to believe himself safe! That he could defy this keen, subtle,

tenacious woman, and hug himself in the belief that by so base, so shabby a crime, he could secure an adorable creature like Nora! He had said truly that failure, detection, showed him the depth of shame into which he had fallen. Had he succeeded, it would not have occurred to him to repent.

Still aglow with the passion Nora had inspired, it was torture to give her up; yet he had so much sense of right left, or rather restored, that he felt it would be equally torture to meet her eyes, to hear her voice, knowing he was a despicable outcast, from whom, was she but aware of his true character, she would turn with scorn and loathing. Why, if he had murdered a man in anger, he thought, as he paced his room, or sat with locked doors, his head buried in his hands, he could face the world with comparative boldness, and yet, how unjust opinion is! What real harm had he done Mrs. Ruthven? Only deprived her of a few baubles, she looked quite as well without. He had not robbed her of any comfort or necessity, or of money or lands. Why had he been so unlucky, as to have taken such an overpowering fancy to a girl like Nora, unapproachable save by the tremendous sacrifice of marriage? This was really the mainspring of his misfortunes.

As to the future, he shuddered to think of it. Why should he not escape it? As to his solemn promise to Mrs. Ruthven, that weighed but lightly on his soul. What stayed his hand was partly the demoralisation which seemed to paralyse him, but chiefly his dread of being hopelessly disgraced in Nora's eyes. She had immense power over him, and he had said truly, that all of good in him was linked with his feelings for

her. No! he might have had resolution to end his ruined life, had he not felt convinced that Mrs. Ruthven, furious at being robbed of her prey, would tell all and make the worst of all to Nora. No; the one shred of comfort in the hell he had created for himself, was to remain unblemished in Nora's eyes. He would affect to release her by a noble effort of self-denial, and perhaps she would give him a kind thought; perhaps, when wearied of a monotonous life with Winton or some other prig, a regretful thought.

What a sham life was altogether! Was Nora as true, as real, as she seemed? Yes, now, he would swear, but how long would her truth last the wear and tear of the world?

Well, he had escaped detection, and for Nora's sake, for his sister's, his name's sake, he had better drift with the tide which seemed setting in his favour. His only way of enduring existence was to forget there was a yesterday or a to-morrow.

But dine with that woman, who was his mistress in the cruellest sense, he could not—at least, to-day. No; to-day he must be alone; he must be free to swallow, unchecked, such an amount of burgundy, champagne, brandy, as might drown the intolerable rage and remorse that maddened him.

His incoherent note of excuse, however, only brought Nemesis upon him, in the shape of Mrs. Ruthven herself, wrapped in shawls and furs, who sent up an urgent message, and sat in her carriage at the hotel door till her captive joined her, and was taken off in triumph.

CHAPTER XVI.

RETRIBUTION.

A DAY had passed—two—three—and Marsden had made no sign.

Nora began to hope he was wise enough to perceive that it would not be for his own happiness to insist on marrying a girl who was so reluctant to be his wife.

After some consideration, she wrote a sensible, dignified letter to Lady Dorrington, rebutting her accusations and assuring her that, so far from wishing to mar her brother's prospects by holding him to his engagement, she had earnestly begged him to set her free.

Christmas had gone by, to Bea's infinite disappointment, without the presence of her favourite, Marsden. There was a pause in the little drama of their lives! This interval was first broken by a few lines from Winton to Mrs. L'Estrange, in which he asked her to fix an hour when she could see him, as he was in town for a short time, and, if she adhered to her intention of returning to Brookdale early in January, it would be his only opportunity of wishing her goodbye, as he hoped to complete his business and sail for India the end of the month.

Nora accepted this note as notice to be out of the way, and felt truly grateful to Winton for sparing her the pain of an encounter.

Mrs. L'Estrange began to form some idea of the truth. Though she liked Mark Winton, she thought Marsden would be a more suitable husband for Nora. He was bright and companionable, while Mark was older than his years, sobered too by a life of steady work and serious responsibility. Nora could not be so much attracted by a man too much in earnest for civil speeches or implied compliments, or any of the gallant trickery in which Marsden excelled—who differed from and argued with her as he would with a comrade of his own sex, and, to crown all, had no looks to boast of beyond a good figure and gentlemanlike air.

However, she made out very little from their *tête-à-tête* interview.

Winton looked worn and gaunt, but seemed very glad to see her, and to find her alone. He spoke freely enough of his own affairs, of the division he had made of his uncle's bequest with the deceased's grandchild, and of his own approaching departure, of herself and her little daughter, in even a kindlier tone than usual; but not until he rose to take leave, after refusing her invitation to dinner, did he mention Nora. Then he asked calmly—"And Miss L'Estrange; I hope she is well?"

"Yes; very well."

"And when does the wedding take place?"

"I am not quite sure."

"I thought it was fixed for the beginning of February?"

"Yes; that was talked of; but we do not quite know yet."

"Are you pleased with the marriage?" he asked, looking at her very searchingly.

"Certainly, I am. It is a good marriage, from a worldly point of view; and then Clifford Marsden is so utterly devoted, that I think dear Nora's happiness is sure to be his first consideration."

"It ought to be," very gravely. "But, Mrs. L'Estrange, Marsden's financial position ought to be looked into carefully before the marriage takes place. Marsden of Evesleigh sounds like a grand alliance, but he is a good deal dipped; of course, he may have cleared himself. Miss L'Estrange has no guardian, I believe?"

"No. Colonel L'Estrange, after making many wills, which he destroyed, finally died intestate; our good friend, Mr. Barton, the colonel's solicitor, has managed everything for us, and I have got into the habit of looking on Lord Dorrington as an informal guardian; but he cannot, or will not, interfere now, because he, or rather Lady Dorrington, is so displeased with the proposed marriage."

"Ha! I feared so. Lady Dorrington was, I think, anxious her brother should secure Mrs. Ruthven's fortune. This must be a source of annoyance to Nora—I mean Miss L'Estrange—who is, I suppose, attached to Marsden; he is a sort of fellow to please a girl's fancy." There was a tinge of bitterness in his tone.

"Oh, yes, of course! But Nora is no sentimentalist, you know!"

"I do. She is something better. Well, good morning, Mrs. L'Estrange."

"We shall see you again, though? You will not go without saying good-bye to Nora, and poor little Bea?'

Winton hesitated.

"I should like to shake hands with Miss L'Estrange once more," he said slowly. "As to Bea, you must keep me posted up in your own, and her doings—if you will consider me *her* informal guardian, I shall be pleased."

"You are very good—you always *were* good, Mark," cried Mrs. L'Estrange, warmed out of formality. "But you are not going away for ever! India is so accessible now; you can come to and fro, and——"

"India is the best place for me," he interrupted, somewhat grimly. "There I have work to do; here there are no ties to keep me! I shall come and say good-bye, before I start." He shook hands cordially, and left her.

Mrs. L'Estrange hurried upstairs to report proceedings to Nora, who was pretending to read in her own room, where she was fond of retiring, finding the restraint even of her step-mother's kindly presence irksome, in her present over-taxed condition of mind—consumed as she was by perpetual anxiety respecting her own position, and intolerable regret for what she had lost by mere misapprehension, or, worse still, the deliberate misleading.

"And Mr. Winton is to leave so soon!" she exclaimed, growing very white, as her step-mother ceased speaking. "Why does he hurry away?"

"I cannot imagine! He seems anxious to get back to his work, and to think there is no place for him in England."

Nora was silent, and Mrs. L'Estrange continued to speak, repeating Winton's kind words, volunteering to

be Bea's guardian. Suddenly she broke out, as if she had not heard what her step-mother had been saying:

"It is cruel of Clifford to keep me waiting so long—so long—for his decision. It will be five days to-morrow since he left me! And I cannot bear this terrible anxiety! Helen! Ought I to marry him, when I have such doubts—such reluctance? Am I weaker than other people, that I cannot see the right thing to do—and do it? Would Clifford really break his heart about me? What shall I do, Helen? Oh! what shall I do?"

She burst into a passion of tears, which absolutely frightened her step-mother, to whom she had scarcely ever—even in her childish days—displayed such strong emotion.

"Dear Nora," she cried, caressing her, "if it distresses you so dreadfully, do not marry Mr. Marsden! Better face the difficulty now, than let yourself be indissolubly linked to a man you do not like—though why you do not I cannot understand."

There was a prolonged silence, while Nora's sobs subsided, and she gradually regained her self-possession.

* * * * *

At the Duchess of Ilminster's dower house, there was not unmixed joy on the receipt of a carefully composed letter from Mrs. Ruthven, announcing her engagement to Marsden.

Lady Dorrington could not make it out. She was not so carried away by her eagerness for this fresh betrothal as to lose sight of the probable injustice to Nora, whose proud high-spirited letter had touched her, and, more still, had inspired her with hopes that

the mischief was not irreparable. She hastened with Mrs. Ruthven's epistle to Lord Dorrington.

"Well, my dear," said that sapient nobleman, when he had slowly perused it, "that brother of yours is a clever fellow. How he manages to get rid of one woman, and secure another in the twinkling of an eye, is beyond me altogether. Mrs. Ruthven is wisely vague on the subject."

"Clifford's momentary engagement to Miss L'Estrange seems to have originated in misapprehension on all sides; and I feel assured that she, too, will see the wisdom of setting an unwilling *fiancé* free."

"Perhaps so; but I doubt if Clifford ever undertook anything against his will, unless under pressure of some tremendous necessity; and what the necessity was for his marrying Nora L'Estrange I cannot see."

"Depend upon it, my letter is at the root of this very prudent change of front," returned her ladyship. "I feel anxious about Nora, however. I think I had better run up to town and see for myself how matters stand. You return to Chedworth to-morrow. I will explain to my aunt that I am compelled to go to town, the same afternoon, instead of remaining the couple of days I promised."

It followed, of course, that my lady carried out her plans, and, having had a short interview with Mrs. Ruthven and found her brother was still absent at Evesleigh, she despatched a telegram to Mrs. L'Estrange, whom she wished to see alone.

Mrs. L'Estrange had been out early, having walked with Bea and her governess to a music class which that young lady attended, and doing some shopping on her way back.

The dignified master of the house having gone to dinner, the door was opened by the "slavey" of the establishment, and Mrs. L'Estrange found the telegram on the drawing-room table.

As Nora was not there, and the message boded nothing pleasant, Mrs. L'Estrange went down stairs at once, and meeting her own maid in the hall, she told her she was obliged to go out again, in case Miss L'Estrange asked, and set forth to keep the appointment.

The bell sounded more than once during the sacred hour of rest and refreshment, but the task of answering was left to the neat little housemaid, whose lot it was to serve more than one master.

Nora meanwhile employed herself in her own room. She shrank from meeting Winton alone, and he might come any day; so, while Helen was out, she kept in her special stronghold.

She had been greatly disappointed that day. The morning post had brought her nothing from Marsden; so, with a sinking heart, she had set herself to compose a letter to him.

She had written "Dear Clifford," and sat looking at the words in a sort of despair as to how she should attack her terrible subject, when the servant of the house brought her a letter, at the sight of which her heart stood still; the writing was Marsden's.

"Has Mrs. L'Estrange come in?" she asked.

"Yes 'm, she is in the drawing-room."

Nora tore open the envelope and glanced at the contents, before rushing to confide them to her stepmother.

"Nora," it began. "I think I see the relief in your eyes—those sweet truthful eyes I love so well—when you read these words—I give you back your promise, and set you free. There is that in you, I know not what, which forbids me to sham generosity. I give you up, because I cannot help it. A tremendous necessity, a necessity I cannot explain, compels me. No words can express the agony of bitterness and humiliation it costs me to release you, for I love you as passionately as ever, as I did from the first, when you unconsciously cast a spell over me that has been my ruin. Yet it has been all my own fault. I do not blame you. If I were to write for ever, I could say no more. You never loved me, but I should not the less have insisted on your keeping your promise to be my wife. Now I renounce you, and hope never to see you again! You will give yourself to another, of course—I would rather know you were safe in your grave out of reach where none could touch you. So good-bye! No one will ever love you so entirely, so intensely, as I do, though I curse the hour I first saw you. If it be possible you should ever regret me, I would break every law, every bond, to come to you. But this is madness!

"Yours—still utterly yours,

"CLIFFORD MARSDEN."

In the first infinite relief of finding herself free, Nora did not quite take in the fierce despair of this strange letter. Her impulse was to rush with her great tidings to Helen. She flew down-stairs, and into the drawing-room. Mrs. L'Estrange's arm-chair was in front of the fire, and Nora just saw, as she thought,

the dark line of her dress at one side, as if her feet were on the fender.

"Oh, Helen! dear Helen! Clifford releases me. Thank God, I am free, quite free!" she cried in joyous agitation.

She had scarce uttered the words when a figure started up from the chair, and Winton confronted her.

Nora stood still and dumb, the open letter in her hand, feeling dazed and helpless in the crushing confusion which had so suddenly overwhelmed her.

"Has Marsden then released you at your own request?" cried Winton, impetuously, and coming forward quickly, forgetting in the supreme excitement of the moment all conventionality; while to Nora it seemed equally natural to answer with an emphatic "Yes, oh yes! Where is Helen? I thought she was here?"

"So did I," returned Winton, recovering his self-possession and his reserve. "I called to—to say good-bye, and I trust you will forgive my inopportune presence, my unguarded, and I fear very presumptuous, question. My sincere interest in—in your welfare, must be my excuse."

"You are very kind, I——Oh, where is Helen? I must go and look for her." Before Winton could stop her, had he been so disposed, she had fled.

Winton gazed after her, an expression of hope and joy gradually lighting up his sombre face. She was free by her own desire. Life might be worth living yet! While he stood thinking, new and glowing views of much over which he had often puzzled suggesting themselves, the respectable Watson came in.

"If you please, sir, Mrs. L'Estrange went out again,

and Miss L'Estrange does not know when she will return."

"Ah!—well, perhaps—" he hesitated. He was dying for a few words with Nora, but it would be bad taste to intrude upon her now. "Perhaps," he continued, "I may find Mrs. L'Estrange at home to-morrow. I should not like to leave without bidding her good-bye."

He had nothing for it but to take his hat and depart.

Nora, greatly surprised at Helen's absence, could not compose herself to do anything. She wandered to and fro from room to room, sometimes sitting down—to fall into vague reveries. She read and re-read Marsden's letter; its passionate despair sobered and dismayed her. What could have happened to make him give her up so freely? She was deeply grieved for him. She strove to compose a letter to him in her mind, but could not command her ideas; all she could do—and she was ashamed of the pleasure she had in doing it—was to enclose the two rings Marsden had given her in a neat packet and address them to the giver—later in the evening she would write.

At last, Mrs. L'Estrange returned, looking pale and tired.

"Oh, Helen! Where—where have you been?" cried Nora, when her step-mother came into the room, now only partially lit by the glow of a good fire.

"You will hardly guess!—I have been with Lady Dorrington." And she proceeded to describe the telegram and her interview.

"I think Lady Dorrington is terribly afraid you

are breaking your heart, Nora. She feels sure you have renounced Mr. Marsden in consequence of her letter, she is therefore quite pleased with you. But I have a wonderful piece of news. He has absolutely engaged himself to Mrs. Ruthven, and they are to be married soon."

"Then that, in some way, accounts for this letter," said Nora, handing Clifford's to Mrs. L'Estrange, who read it with surprise and regret.

Many and varied were the conjectures of both as to what could possibly be the mysterious necessity which influenced Marsden; both coming, reluctantly, to the conclusion that money must be the root of the evil—which was certainly Nora's good.

* * * * *

Mrs. Ruthven was successful along the whole line she had marked out for herself. If she was a little sore respecting the feelings Marsden so frankly avowed towards Miss L'Estrange, she had the consolation of believing that she was inflicting the cruellest disappointment on that detested rival. Then, she had the man she loved so utterly at her mercy; and this, which would have been pain and humiliation to a woman of real heart and delicacy, gratified her crude love of power, while the certainty of accomplishing the marriage on which she had set her soul, of falsifying Shirley's spiteful prophecies of defeat, filled her with exultation. There was a very ugly reverse to this medal, but, for the moment, she was able to put it aside, if not to forget it. With her wealth, and Marsden's position and popularity, the world was at her feet. As to his craze about Nora L'Estrange, that

would pass over. He would find that an experienced woman of the world must be a more suitable wife for him than a mere simple school-girl like Nora.

For several days after she had come to a distinct understanding with Marsden, Mrs. Ruthven denied herself to every one—even to her faithful Shirley, who was by no means pleased with the aspect of things.

He had not been accustomed to be thus debarred admittance, and he scented mischief. Though the day was gone when he hoped to rekindle Mrs. Ruthven's passing caprice for himself, he objected very strongly to her marrying Marsden, who had unconsciously wounded his *amour propre*, and insulted him by his oppressive superiority. When, at last, Mrs. Ruthven was at home to him, he was in a very bad temper indeed, which was not improved by the careless triumph of her manner. "I thought you were going to cut me completely," he said, when they had exchanged greetings. "Why, it is more than a week since I was admitted!"

"You have no right to complain, I have not seen anyone."

"You have not been unwell, I hope?"

"No; I have felt remarkably well; but I have been busy with these tiresome papers," and she waved her left hand towards them; Shirley started, for on her finger sparkled the double-heart device, of rubies and diamonds, he had seen on Nora's.

"I can scarcely believe my eyes!" he exclaimed. "Am I to conclude that Marsden has transferred his allegiance, with the bethrothal ring, from Miss L'Estrange to you?"

"He has," she returned, twirling the ring round and round, and smiling softly.

"And how—how did Marsden contrive to break off with Miss L'Estrange?"

"That I do not know; but he has done so, and as I have always found you capable of keeping silence when necessary, I do not mind telling you, that Mr. Marsden has made some rather curious discoveries which, in short, render his marriage with Miss L'Estrange impossible."

"Discoveries, eh?" in a peculiar tone; "and will you not trust me completely?"

"No, my good friend; I—in short, I do not exactly know myself."

"It is all very mysterious, and deucedly hard for Miss L'Estrange."

"I don't suppose she is in a very enviable state of mind," returned Mrs. Ruthven, with an air of quiet enjoyment.

Shirley looked at her curiously.

"And have you given up *all* hopes of tracing your rubies?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, sharply; "what suggested them to you?"

"I don't know; perhaps an idea that Marsden has not hitherto brought you luck."

"He will replace my rubies by the Marsden diamonds. Now, Captain Shirley, you said you thought I was going to cut you completely; you are mistaken; I am not going to cut you, but I am going to drop you as an intimate friend. Mr. Marsden, for some reason or other, would not be pleased, I know, if I continued on the same terms with you, and he is

naturally my first consideration. You have always been friendly and useful, and I may add, prudent; for you have wisely agreed with me in letting bygones *be* bygones. But before entering into a new phase of my existence, I should like to look through a few acknowledgments of yours, which you have given me from time to time," and she drew from a russia leather despatch box several slips of paper neatly fastened together.

"Mrs. Ruthven!" cried Shirley, colouring crimson, "if you mean that I am to clear up with you, previous to your entering on your 'new phase,' you intend to reward my prudence by ruining me!"

She looked at him for a moment in amused silence.

"I am not quite so hard a creditor, Shirley; partly, perhaps, because I do not forget bygones, quite. No; I inaugurate this new phase of my existence, by returning you all these promissory notes. I wish to hear no more of them—let us part friends. I wish you good luck, in whatever way you would best like it."

Shirley's dark face changed. "You are kind, and —and most liberal," he said. "I wish our old—let me say friendship—was not to be ended." He took the papers she held out, and, twisting them up, thrust them into his breast pocket. "I shall never meet your match again; you have shown me what can be dared and done by a woman, blessed as you are with a heavy purse and a potent will."

"And all's well that ends well," returned Mrs. Ruthven. She gave him her hand with a slight inclination of the head, and he felt himself dismissed.

* * * *

The days flew fast, and that fixed for Winton's departure had dawned.

Nora dared not hope that she still held the same place in his regard. Of course, she thought, her sudden change, her apparent readiness first to accept Marsden and then to break with him, had lowered her in the estimation of so high-minded a man as Mark Winton.

He had called as he promised, but both Mrs. L'Estrange and her step-daughter were out.

"He will not go without bidding us good-bye," said the former more than once, as she began to understand matters without questioning, and grew anxious that the two she heartily loved should not spoil each other's lives for a punctilio. "I must write and ask him to luncheon or dinner."

"No, no, dear Helen! Promise me, promise me faithfully you will not," implored Nora, with such a distressed expression of countenance that Mrs. L'Estrange promised.

This last day was bright and crisp, there had been a light fall of snow, and the grass in the Park was prettily powdered.

No exterior brightness, however, could cheer Nora. She kept a brave face, but her heart felt as if it must break; for the moment life was to her like one of those wretched dreams, where the dreamer, all burning to attain some joy almost within touch, is kept back by impalpable barriers, vague obstacles, gossamer to the eye, impregnable to the striving spirit.

It was, she told herself useless, unmaidenly, to grieve so about a man who was evidently resolved not to renew his proposal to her. She had begged to join

Bea and her governess in their early walk; anything was better than sitting still.

She talked kindly and cheerfully in German to the little Fräulein about her home and her people, every now and then falling into silence and bitter thought, and then with the restlessness of pain, she wanted to go home and read; a tough book of some kind would draw her out of herself. She complained of fatigue, and they returned to the house.

Nora went listlessly up stairs, opened the drawing-room door, and stopped for a moment. Helen was speaking to someone, another step, and she saw her step-mother seated on a low chair looking up to Mr. Winton, who stood on the hearth-rug leaning his shoulders against the chimney-piece. She instinctively turned her face from the light, and assuming by an effort an air of composure, advanced to shake hands with him—a charming figure, as the reflection of the fire played on her dark green cloth, close fitting coat, edged with sable, and a pretty cap of the same fur crowning her golden brown curls. In spite of her will, and firmly exerted self-control, a vivid blush rose to her cheeks, which left colour enough even when it had partially faded.

"Where is Bea?" asked Mrs. L'Estrange, when the others had bid each other good-day.

"Gone to take off her things."

"I must bring her to see you," said Mrs. L'Estrange, with rather a significant look to Winton.

"He *is* going then," thought Nora, too much taken up with the idea to heed her step-mother leaving the room.

"I thought you were to sail to-day?" she said, tak-

ing off her cap and parting the fringe on her brow; the room was quite too warm, after the cold air, and sne drew a chair forward, still keeping her back to the windows.

"I have postponed my departure for a week or two," returned Winton; and there was an awkward pause, while Nora, with unsteady fingers, drew off her gloves and rubbed her hands gently together.

"You seem tired of your holiday?"

"No," said Winton, taking a step nearer to her and looking straight into her eyes. "I must tell you the truth, even though it may seem bad taste to do so, at least so soon. I am not tired of my holiday; but I wanted to throw myself into engrossing work, to deaden the pain of disappointed hope—hope that, probably, I had no right to entertain, yet which I could not resist!" Nora was silent. "I may seem a tiresome, persevering blockhead—but, once more, Nora, I offer you my future life! And I promise, with all my soul, to be your truest friend, as well as your true lover! Shall I go, or stay?"

And Nora—the tears welling over and hanging on her lashes—said softly, but most distinctly, "Stay!" Then she lost hold on herself, and burst into a fit of weeping.

"Good Heavens, Nora!" cried Winton, dismayed. "You do not accept me against your will?"

"No, no," she returned, recovering herself a little. "But I have been so miserable and so foolish!"

"Tell me," said Winton, bending one knee on a foot-stool beside her, and taking her hand gently in his, "why did you accept Marsden?"

"Because I thought he loved me very much;

and—" with a quick glance from her sweet, wet eyes, and a frank pressure of the hand, "that no one else did."

"How was that?" cried Winton—his heart beating fast. "You must have felt how soon you grew dear to me!—dearer than anything else on earth, or in heaven either?"

"Why did not you tell me so before?" asked Nora, smiling, though her lips still trembled.

"Because, my love, my life, I was afraid! Do you remember, one day, you bid me good-bye at the door, at Brookdale, and I dared to hold your hand closer and longer than I ought? The words, 'I love you,' were on my lips at that moment; but it was no time or place to speak them; and ever after, in some nameless way, you put me from you, and, virtually, told me you would have nothing to do with me?"

"Yes, I remember it, and I was told that—that you had been engaged to Helen, and were now hoping to marry her!"

"Who told you this? Marsden?" he asked, sternly, catching her other hand, and holding both tight.

"Yes," faltered Nora.

"Then he is an infernal liar! Why did you believe him?"

"Why should I doubt him?"

"Then you should not have doubted me."

"You would not have me so conceited as to fancy a man must be—very, very fond of me—when he never told me so?"

"While I thought everyone must see I was making a fool of myself!"

"Oh—if you wish to keep up a character for wisdom——"

"I don't suppose you believe much in my wisdom! But, Nora, will you really come with me to India?—to a wild, remote station?"

"I am not wise enough to refuse! But I can't start next week!"

"I should think not. You will believe me, when I tell you, I never loved any woman but yourself, and give me a place in your heart, in return?"

"I will, Mark," said Nora, gravely, steadily, with a tender solemnity.

So, when Mrs. L'Estrange was called back, it was all settled; a very happy party met at dinner that evening—at which repast Miss Beatrice, to her great delight, was allowed to be present, and did good service by promoting general and very discursive conversation.

The Society papers soon added to their usual paragraphs mysterious hints as to broken engagements, and the false information disseminated by their contemporaries respecting the approaching nuptials of a certain popular member of Society, whose domains lay not a hundred miles from a well-known Cathedral Town in the Midlands, etc., etc., etc.

Nora L'Estrange and Winton were too much strangers and pilgrims in the world of London, to share the attention bestowed on Mrs. Ruthven and Marsden. The noise made by the extraordinary theft of her jewels, had given the pretty widow a certain standing in the estimation of society, and her marriage with so well-known a man as Marsden made her position secure.

Little remains to tell of this ill-balanced tale,

where, though virtue is fairly rewarded, vice is by no means chastised as it ought to be. Justice, complete justice, is, however, rarely visible to the naked eye; let us believe there is a secret award, which brings unerring punishment to the evil doer, even though he "flourishes as a green bay tree" in the eyes of his neighbours.

A couple of years after what Nora considered her great deliverance, Mrs. L'Estrange, in her tranquil home at Brookdale, which it was arranged was to be her residence so long as Mr. and Mrs. Winton remained in India, wrote as follows, in one of her monthly letters to her step-daughter:

"You will, I am sure, be sorry to hear that Clifford Marsden had a bad fall, out hunting, last week. They tell me he rides most recklessly; indeed, he is much changed since his marriage. Mrs. Marsden, I must say, makes a capital lady of the manor, and is decidedly popular, though somewhat exacting; but Mr. Marsden is either silent and moody, or in fierce high spirits. He is very thin, and not nearly so handsome as he was. There is a curious, glazed, staring look in his eyes, that distresses me, for I always liked him; and he always shows the utmost friendliness to Bea and to myself. I never heard that he drinks too much, but it is whispered, that he eats opium. He is often away, and when at home seems to take no interest in anything. Madame is master and mistress, and people appear to consider her rather neglected by her husband. Mrs. Marsden shows me all proper civility, but I feel she does not like me; and I dare not encourage Clifford to come here as often as he would like. It is reported that Mrs. Marsden is trying

to bribe Colonel Marsden, the next heir, who is a bachelor and rather out at elbows, to join her husband in breaking the entail, and then the estate is to be settled on her. This may be mere gossip; I cannot help feeling grieved for Clifford, he seems so broken and hopeless.

"The mail has not come in yet, so I shall send this off. I cannot tell you what pleasure your descriptions of your delightful life up-country, give me; and Bea, too, looks eagerly for your letters. My kind love to Mark, who, I am sure, is a pattern husband. What a narrow escape you had of losing each other!"

THE END.

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