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SYRLIN BY OUIDA.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

"The World is too much with us."

Inv. A. 23.411

SYRLIN

BY

OUIDA,

AUTHOR OF

"UNDER TWO FLAGS," "SIGNA," "A HOUSE PARTY," ETC.

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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TO

THE BELOVED MEMORY

OF

LAURENCE OLIPHANT.

SYRLIN.

CHAPTER I.

It was a Drawing-room Day.

London was looking its brightest and best. There was a blue sky and a strong north wind. March was waning, and the crocuses starred the turf in Hyde Park, although the spring buds had not yet ventured forth on the black boughs of the elm-trees. The usual dingy and good-tempered crowd stood about before Buckingham Palace, waiting to see the equipages pass by: waiting, with that willingness to be amused by trifles, and that interest in a world with which they have nothing to do, which is characteristic of the London populace, and lends facility to their government, although it is unhappily a quality most lamentably neglected, indeed entirely ignored, by those who call themselves their rulers.

It was between three and four of the clock, and the ladies were leaving the Palace as fast as they were able to do so: smart broughams with sleek horses and dark, well-fitting liveries; closed landaus,

with billows of gauze and enormous bouquets partially seen through their glass windows; here and there, the real old magnificent fashion of a state carriage, with coachman in full bottomed wig and three-cornered hat seated alone in his glory, and glittering footmen, gorgeous as flamingoes, swinging behind, passed in turn through the ranks of the good-natured and for the most part admiring crowd. Disparaging comments were occasionally uttered as the equipages rolled by, and the gold lace shone, and the horses pranced along the Mall.

"There goes an old ewe decked lamb fashion!" cried a butcher's boy as a dowager, very much undressed and very badly rouged, loomed large through the glass of her carriage windows.

"There's a naked woman sittin' in soap-suds," remarked a small shoeblack, as a famous beauty, with clouds of white tulle rising all around her eagerly-displayed bust was borne by in her blazoned coach.

"Lord! when they can clothe 'emsells as they choose, why do they go bare like that, in this here wind?" said a sorrowful and thinly-clad woman, with entire unconsciousness of any satire in her words.

But far more frequently the comments on the Court pageantry were favourable and friendly; and the coachmen in the periwigs were hailed with admiration and delight; the quiet coloured broughams with their sober liveries were received with disappointment and disfavour.

"What did I tell you?" said Wilfreda, Lady

Avillion, to her husband as their carriage, which had a coachman in a periwig, and two lackeys behind, with enormous bouquets and white wands, was hailed with a shout of applause that almost became a cheer; "what did I tell you? The people delight in us when we are splendid. If we only always made ourselves worth looking at we should always have influence. They are perfectly enchanted with Sykes's wig."

"Damn them and their delight," said Lord Avillion drowsily. He had got his sword uncomfortably entangled between his legs, and he hated the scent of the gardenias of his wife's bouquet, and her train was covering and smothering him, and he had been imprisoned three hours with no possibility of a cigarette, and he did not know which he would like the best—whether to see Buckingham Palace sacked and burnt, and all this rubbish of ceremony made impossible for ever, or to have a Government with the ideas of the first Duke of Wellington, and to see the crowd dispersed by a cavalry charge or by a volley of grape-shot.

"We ought to have much more pageantry," continued his wife. "The people like it. And more music too. There ought to be military music constantly heard in London, just as there is in Dresden, Vienna, or Munich; music everywhere, in the parks, in the churches, at the corners of the streets, costing nothing to the multitude, and warming and gladdening the soul of the sorriest beggars. There should

be martial music all day long in London if I had the ruling of it."

"The bandsmen would require a large outlay in waterproofs and cough lozenges," remarked her cousin, the Duke of Beaufront, who sat opposite to her. "But at such rare intervals as their fingers would be unfrozen the effect would, I admit, be very exhilarating."

"Exhilarating, yes; and the best of all education," said Lady Avillion. "I would have music everywhere, and I would gild all the railings, and I would plant trees all along the streets, and I would wash the statues every week, and I would have fireworks on the top of the Marble Arch very often—because nothing amuses a whole population like fireworks—and I would have coffee with plenty of milk in it sold at a half farthing a cup, under Government supervision, in thousands of places; and I would absolutely forbid all advertisements on hoardings and posters and the backs of serving-men, and I would pass a law to compel every London tradesman to go to Paris, Florence, or Dresden, to see how shops ought to be set out."

"And I hope you would abolish Drawing-rooms," said her husband.

"I should have them held in the evening, and everyone would be delighted."

"That arrangement would necessitate something to eat; tea and ices, at least; it would impoverish the Crown. With what rapture that sweep is grinning at you—I hope you enjoy your popularity."

"The sweep is a very nice man."

"Yet I always thought you a proud woman, Freda!" said her cousin.

"I believe I am, in some ways."

"I believe you are the greatest contradiction that ever a woman was. All women are contradictions—their theories are so good and their practice is so bad."

"That contradiction is not confined to our sex," remarked Lady Avillion, while the March wind ruffled her feathers and laces as it blew in through the window, which good-nature had made her leave open for the multitude to admire her.

Their carriage stopped at the mansion facing the Green Park which belonged to the Avillion family, and its mistress descended amidst an admiring little crowd of gazers as warmly appreciative as the sweep. Her husband and her cousin followed her; the doors of the great house closed on them, and their gorgeous equipage, with the bewigged coachman and the bouquets and the white wands, went away to their mews in a side street.

"How thirsty I am!" said Lady Avillion as she went upstairs. "A lot more peacocks will come to tea to show us their trains: you'll stay and see them, won't you, Ralph?"

"Who's coming to you?" asked Beaufront, also mounting the staircase, whilst the master of the house disappeared into some apartments on the ground floor belonging especially to himself.

"Oh, most of the smart people," replied Lady

Avillion, as she cast her train, in all its glory of gold embroideries and silver lilies and bordering of pale pink feathers, behind her upon the carpet of her own favourite room.

"No, thanks; I think I will go home at once and get out of this toggery," said Beaufront—meaning his Court dress—but he hesitated and lingered as he looked round the apartment.

It was a fascinating room, artistic, interesting, inspiring, a mixture of every style, but a successful mixture, a room suggestive of intimacy, confidences, and repose. Its atmosphere was warm and fragrant; its hues subdued yet brilliant, candles burned in little groups under rosy shades, and flowers were there in myriads, from crowds of the stateliest odontoglossum to bowls of the dear little violet whose home is the coppice and whose companion is the redbreast.

Lady Avillion stooped over one of these bowls of violets and buried her face in it.

"They are not real hedge violets though, you know; at least I am afraid not," she said regretfully. "The gardeners grow them in horrible long straight rows just as they grow parsley or peas, on purpose for sale. Do you remember hunting for violets in the meadows for me at Bellingham, when I was a baby?"

"Yes, I remember everything about Bellingham," replied Beaufront, throwing his sword on a sofa. "It was the only place where I was really happy."

"Surely you are happy now?"

"Not in the least; why should I be?"

"Well—well—I really don't know; but why should you not? Most people expect you to be so. Most things and people have lost their prestige nowadays, but Dukes haven't just yet."

Beaufront lighted a cigarette at one of the wax-candles.

"Really, Freda," he replied as he did so, "what the world thinks our gain is generally our loss. I am not half so free as I used to be, and I am infinitely more bored. I am supposed to be a very rich man now, but I am not even that. Succession duties, and charges on this estate and that estate, and falling rents, and mortgaged lands, and all the rest of it, and three large houses to keep up *coûte que coûte,* will make me actually poor for many a day. When I was Ralph Fitzurse I could do what I chose, nobody cared; if I had been hanged nobody would have cared."

"Surely you couldn't like that?"

"I like it very much in retrospect."

"Ah, in retrospect. *Pauvre petite chaumière, comme je t'aimais!* We all know that kind of sentiment."

As she stood on her own hearth, leaning one arm on the mantelpiece, with her diadem of diamonds on her blonde hair, and her white satin train with its gold and silver embroideries sweeping the floor, Beaufront looked at her with renewed admiration and pride.

"I think my cousin is the handsomest woman in England," he said, as he kissed her hand.

"I would rather be the most charming," she replied.

"You are that, too."

"Really?"

"I think so really, on my honour."

Freda Avillion turned her head without otherwise altering her attitude, and looked at herself in a Venetian mirror behind her. She looked long, seeing the shimmer of her crown of diamonds and the interrogation in her dark eyes reflected in the glass.

"I am not ill-looking," she said slowly, "especially when I am in all my war paint like this. I dare say I should look nothing if I were in rags."

"Even then you would make your fortune as a painter's model. Don't pretend to ignore your own beauty, Freda."

"Oh, I never pretend, my dear," said Lady Avillion, withdrawing her gaze from the mirror and sweeping towards the tea-table. "But I don't always please myself."

"Those who please themselves always are those who have no power of pleasing others," said Beaufront.

"Ah! here is Alex," she said, as the door opened and there entered the room a very handsome young woman of twenty years of age, with a Greuze-like face and a childlike expression, half mirthful, half sullen, who was announced as the Duchess of Queenstown.

She came in, in all her glory, her train of silver

and white tissue trailing behind her, and a funny story about an usher's mistake on her lips. She was followed by another lady equally young, and blonde as cream or primroses; she was known to the world in general as the Countess of Sevenoaks, and by her friends was called "Mouse." After these there appeared Lady Ilfracombe, the sister of the mistress of the house, all purple and gold and pansies; Lady Henley, a cousin, young and lately married, dressed in black and white, with point d'Alençon and water lilies; and several others in gorgeous apparelling, until the chamber looked like a lawn bespread with peacocks and chrysanthemums, a pretty gathering which would not have been unworthy of the brush of Vandyke.

"But they can none of them hold a candle to *her*," thought Beaufront, as his gaze wandered back from them all to his cousin Wilfreda Avillion.

She was truly a beautiful woman, with a perfect figure. The expression of her features in profile was cold, proud, a little scornful; but seen in full face the enchanting luminousness and radiance of her large violet eyes, and the loveliness of a rosy and rather full mouth, gave warmth and light to her countenance; she was very tall, and carried herself with easy grace and supreme distinction; the great jewels covering her throat and bosom were suited to the cast of her beauty, and the mighty splendour of the dress enhanced the whiteness of her skin and the youthful flexibility of her movements.

She looked what she was—a very great lady,

with high breeding in every line of her limbs, and English air bespoken in every shade of her colouring.

Avillion also entered at that moment, having changed his clothes and recovered as much good temper as he ever condescended to own, and murmured in his low drowsy tones the prettiest compliments to the prettiest women. He was a handsome man, with a peevish and bored expression; he moved slowly, indolently and gracefully, and looked half asleep when he was not fully awakened by being worried or made angry.

Other women, lovely, interesting, or distinguished, followed as she had promised Beaufront that they would do, and he was momentarily reconciled to his existence under its changed phase, as he watched the light shine on their jewels and in their eyes, and on the soft beauty of their bosoms and shoulders. Women never look better than at tea after a Drawing-room. Their stately and gorgeous attire, the magnificence of their jewels, their consciousness that they look their best, the contrast of their easy intimacy of attitude and conversation with their ceremonial splendour of appearance, all combine to make the Drawing-room tea one of the prettiest moments of London life. As Beaufront looked at the groups standing about in the faint warm light of the hearth, the diamonds flashing in a tiara as their wearer turned her head, or the jewelled butterfly trembling on a polished shoulder, he admitted to himself that Vandyke and Veronese

might find something worth painting in *this*, could they be brought back from their land of slumbers.

"London life out of doors is hideous, but in-doors it has beautiful pictures," he admitted, as he took from her hand Alex Queenstown's empty cup.

"Yes, beautiful pictures when the shutters are shut," said his cousin. "The true sunrise of London is the moment when the lamps are lighted. That is why the season should have been in winter."

"We all say so and think so, but nobody proposes to make it so."

"Because the gunners and the hunting men are too strong. Perhaps when division of the land has made sport impossible we shall get our London seasons in winter."

"By the laws of compensation. But you must be very sanguine if you think Socialism would let you have any season at all, or any such lovely toys as this," he said, as he touched two love-birds made of emeralds which sat on his cousin's right shoulder. "What a droll emblem for you, who know nothing about love at all!"

"Except to inspire it and ill-treat it," said the Duchess Alex.

"Women who treat it well are ill-treated themselves; so much my observation informs me," said Freda.

"Is there even as much as that?" said Beaufront. "Ill-treatment suggests some sort of passion, kicking in its dying struggles. With us there is nothing

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more than a cord hanging loosely at play in two hands, which drops little by little, little by little, out of each of them, and is let fall by both with absolute indifference."

"Yes; there is not much more than that. I never see why there need be any more," said Freda Avillion quite seriously. "Why will people speak as if love were of so much importance? It really isn't."

"The leprosy is not of much importance to countries it does not visit," said Beaufront, with some impatience. "You are very clever, my dear child, and infinitely charming, but there is one charm and one knowledge which you have not. If it did not sound alarming I should say that you wanted to eat your apple. If you only had any temptation in your life, Temptation with a capital T, I think you would be more delightful. You are a little too completely, too loftily, above us as you are."

"I have no capital letters in the chapters of my life, for I have no emotions; I suppose they only come with the apple!"

"Nobody has any, though we eat pecks of forbidden apples," he rejoined moodily. "We would give our life to get up some, and we can't."

"We have no time."

"No; it is not so much that: we don't care, we don't really care."

"No, we don't; it would be so nice to care if one could."

"It tears one's life into tatters, you know, when one does."

"And wrinkles people frightfully," she responded. She had not a single wrinkle, although she was seven-and-twenty years old, which seemed to her like complete old age. "We are all so wise—or so worn out; it is a pity; 'to know is much, but to enjoy is more.' We know our world so thoroughly, so tediously, so intimately, that we can get no kind of enjoyment out of it."

"Are you sure, Freda—quite sure—that you never enjoy your successes, your toilettes, your innumerable effects, your crushed and pulverised rivals, your entirely unscrupulous influence over the world which so loves you?"

"I am quite sure," said Lady Avillion, and she believed she spoke the truth.

CHAPTER II.

"WHY do we all come to London? We all hate it," said Beaufront, moodily standing in front of a group of orchidæ and gazing gloomily down upon them as if they were nettles.

"Do we hate it?" said another man, Lord Alnemouth, whom Society, with its usual considerate clipping, called Annuth. "It is open to doubt. We hate it when we are in it, certainly, but we are frightfully bored when we are anywhere else."

"All corrupting influences get into our very blood and bones, till we can't do without them," said Beaufront, still plunged into dense gloom and drearily contemplating the brilliant gold, the dazzling white, the splendid crimson of the children of the swamps.

"London is like one of those ugly women who fascinate one, Heaven alone knows why, and hold one much longer than any of the beauties," said an ex-minister, Lord Medway.

"It's hopelessly vulgar," said Beaufront, with a groan.

"Yes, it's vulgar enough," said Medway cheerfully. "But everything's vulgar, go where you will."

"Surely a good deal of it is hypercritical and over-refined?"

"It's so frightfully big," said Beaufront. "Look at last night's Marlborough Houselist—fills three columns of the newspaper. Good Heavens!"

"Two columns are only outsiders' names: they don't count."

"If they don't count the bearers of them go, and they cram, and they crowd, and they push, and they perspire, and they spoil the whole thing," said Beaufront fretfully. "Didn't you notice the Maharajah what's-his-name last night?"

"The Maharajah of Zadar?"

"Yes, Zadar; well, if ever I saw a man look unutterable disgust he looked it last night in the midst of that beastly crowd. There they all were just because he was new, gushing, and pushing, and crowding all round him; once too, by Jove! I saw some of the women fingering the ropes of pearls hanging over his gold breastplate, and never a muscle did he move, only you saw by his eyes that he was thinking to himself: 'What a horrible people! what a coarse and uncouth and discourteous and idiotically inquisitive people! Do these women, old and young, want me to buy them all?' I felt ashamed; positively I felt ashamed; I expected every minute to see them make a snatch at his big diamonds. I said to myself, 'We're at Marlborough House; this is the end of the nineteenth century; this is good society; we are a superior race, we have conquered India, and this glorious creature is our vassal, and will be copied at Madame Tussaud's, and shown our music-halls, and our cab-stands, and our police-

courts, to convince him of our civilisation, and we behave as if we were Yahoos, and had never seen an emerald or a ruby or a well-made man before in our lives.'"

"We don't see jewels ever day blazing on men's stomachs and chests," said the Duchess of Queenstown.

"And we don't see every day men who look like the Saurian Apollo cut in pale bronze," said Mrs. Greville Leigh.

"The gold breastplate is much better than a masher's *plastron*, at any rate," said Lady Avillion. "Why did you go there last night, my dear Ralph? You knew there must be a crowd."

"Why does anyone go anywhere?"

"Why do sheep follow each other?"

"Why do we all jam together in London?" said Beaufront, who when he had once fastened on a subject always "worried it well."

"If a party isn't crowded it is thought dull and stupid; we think our lives are so unless we pass them in a throng," replied Lady Avillion.

"But how intensely vulgar that is!"

"Yes, it is; and all the lovely green gardens are left like painted groves without a figure in them, and all the dear old country houses are left to brown holland and grey mice, to dust and dusters! it is very sad."

"You must ask Zadar into the country."

"To convince him of our civilisation? It would hardly be successful. The conquering race going

out to shoot tame birds fattened on purpose to be shot, and coming home to fall asleep after dinner in front of their women, would not suggest its greatness to him."

"I wonder what he does think of us!"

"There are two things that he will naturally look for amongst us, and that equally certainly he will not find."

"Hubble-bubbles and rhinoceros fights?"

"No; repose and dignity."

"They have both been monopolised by the House of Commons!"

Everyone laughed and then sighed, for the House of Commons is not a pleasant spectacle or a flattering recollection to Englishmen, and allusion to it is a joke which pricks like a thorn.

"Here is Sir Maurice Brune," said Lady Avillion, as a gentleman came through the ante-room. "He will tell us what Zadar thinks of us."

To Sir Maurice Brune the India Office had confided the delicate and interesting task of guiding the steps of the young Maharajah through the labyrinth of English Society.

"His Highness," replied Sir Maurice Brune, "is dazzled by the marvellous beauty of English women, especially of their shoulders."

"Indeed? English shoulders are not often good," said Lady Avillion, whose own were faultless.

"I used the term 'shoulders' as an inoffensive, comprehensive and suggestive expression," said

Brune. "I did not mean that his admiration was limited to the shoulders alone."

"The exhibition of their persons is certainly not so limited," murmured Beaufront.

No one would appear to hear, but every one tittered.

"What does he think of this bear-garden that we call 'the best people'?" Beaufront continued.

Sir Maurice hesitated: he was a man who liked to be always agreeable and always to agree; especially with dukes.

"He is charmed; perfectly charmed," he said effusively. "It must always impress the Oriental mind enormously to be brought in contact with the forces and the graces of European life."

"It must indeed," said Beaufront. "The force of a black eye as administered so frequently in Shoreditch or Seven Dials, and the grace of a gathering round any gin-palace in Houndsditch or Lambeth, must strike him irresistibly and convincingly with the extent to which sweetness and light are prevalent in these islands: if you take him to a few more crushes too in polite Society, varied by an occasional boisterous division at Parliament, his convictions of our superiority will become indelible and overwhelming."

Brune was displeased. He knew no habits, thoughts, or manners outside the western and south-western postal districts of the Metropolis, and he was convinced that within those limitations alone was social salvation possible or existence endurable.

"The Maharajah is very gravely impressed by the power of the empire," he said stiffly. "Yesterday he visited Woolwich and Sheerness."

"As commentaries on Christianity? I should think he was impressed—extremely. Our consistency alone must seem so striking. The gospel of St. John, with addenda by Armstrong and Whitworth."

"You needn't be profane, Ralph," said Lady Avillion, "and every nation must keep its powder dry. I don't care in the least what Zadar thinks of our muzzle-loaders; I want to know what he thinks of ourselves—of our crushes, of our chatter, of our hurry, of our hurly-burly, of our general atmosphere, of our droll ways of marrying people, and of our equally funny way of going into dinner."

"I am really unable to say," murmured Sir Maurice, confused and offended. "The Prince is charmed—inexpressibly charmed: that is really all I absolutely know."

"And is especially impressed," added Beaufront, "with our elegance and dignity when we walk on a sloppy day under our umbrellas, or get in or out of 'the gondolas of London,' assailed by barefooted match-boys as living witnesses to our humanity and prosperity."

"I wonder what he does think," said Lady Avillion. "It must all seem so dark and ugly and noisy to him after his forests of magnolias and tulip trees, and his white cities with their mosques and palaces like ivory cut into lace-work."

"And after those noiseless palanquin journeys

over bridges of sacred rivers and through thickets of rhododendron and camellias, what can Cannon Street Junction seem to him?" said Mrs. Greville Leigh.

"He positively may not even appreciate the Holborn Viaduct or the magnificence of the Underground," said Beaufront. "What a conceited people we must always have been to have imagined that we could teach the East anything! How far above us it is!—whether it weaves a carpet, carves a toy, beats out a gold coffee-pot, or creates a Religion!"

"The East is frightfully barbaric," objected Brune, with a little shudder; in his secret soul he was made nervous and bored by the barbarian whom he had in charge.

"You've never been there," said Beaufront very curtly. "I have, three times."

"That sort of reply is no more an argument than a box of the ears is rhetoric," remarked Brune, goaded into irritation, and forgetful of his desire to please.

"My cousin never argues," said Lady Avillion, "and he is always boxing everybody's ears. He was so cheerful when he was only Ralph Fitzurse, and always good-humoured; people see things in so much brighter a light when they have no responsibilities except their debts."

"One is always as poor as a sweep in England," said Beaufront, "because the demands made on all real property are so enormous, and they will grow more and more enormous every year, because we

are governed by the working-man, and he means to drink champagne every day at our expense and pay no taxes."

"Yes, the working-man governs," said Lord Alnemouth, "or what is called the working-man, though he makes holiday Saturday, Sunday, and Monday, and don't work much any other day."

"Why should he do anything at all when he is your master, and you are all so afraid of him?" said Lady Avillion. "When will you bring me the Maharajah, Sir Maurice? Does he like dinners, or crushes, or garden parties, or musical parties, or what does he like best?"

"He likes oysters at the New Club," replied his mentor.

"The Saurian Apollo eating oysters!" cried Mrs. Greville Leigh. "I am glad he did not eat oysters last night; he would have destroyed my ideal."

"He makes two mouthfuls of a quail, and pulls *foie gras* to pieces with his fingers," said Sir Maurice, whose sensibilities received severe shocks every instant from the conduct of his amber-skinned Telemachus.

"What does that matter?" said Beaufront. "We behave no better ourselves when we are in the Rockies or the Antilles."

"When Syrlin comes they will forget this Maharajah," he said to his cousin, when all the pretty peacocks had folded up their trains and departed. "Syrlin will treat them much in the same way. He has a boundless contempt for his adorers."

"But he hasn't a gold breastplate."

"On the contrary," said Beaufront, "he has a breastplate of fine gold, the one that genius always wears; but though the gold is fine, it is not proof against envy and malignity."

"It is odd," said his cousin, "that I have never seen your friend off the stage. I suppose I am the only person who remains in such arctic darkness as not to be acquainted with him personally."

"Well, he will be over here in a day or two," replied Beaufront. "I will bring him to you then; at least, if he will come."

"Artists are always so capricious and captious, and they want so much attention."

"They often merit it; which is more than can be said of our class."

"My dear Ralph! your artists make you very uncivil and rough."

"My artists never make me either, but fine society makes me both."

"That is probably more your fault than that of fine society."

Beaufront smiled and lit a cigarette. He did not care to say so, but he thought of the time when every woman of position had been in agony lest he should marry her daughter, and dowagers had sent him word at their balls not to bring casino-dancing into their houses.

"Is it true that he is going to abandon the stage altogether?" asked Lady Avillion.

"Quite true," said Beaufront.

"But why?"

"Well, last year, for us most unfortunately, a French merchant of Tripoli who was childless and had known him as a lad left him a great deal of money; he has made a good deal too, as you may fancy; but he is generous to extravagance and never sees the wisdom of putting by *une poire pour la soif.* This Tripoli legacy, however, even he could not be quixotic enough to reject, and it is so legally tied up to him that he cannot very easily squander it. The fortune is large and unencumbered. It had been amassed in trade and judiciously invested; it relieves him of all necessity ever to reappear on the stage. Great artist though he is, I do not think the histrionic art is one which he cares to pursue for itself."

"I think it is a very bad thing for your hero to have been made rich. He will most likely squander it all in ten years, and then, when he wants to maintain himself again by his art, he will find himself out of fashion and forgotten, and he will be quite miserable. Besides, I do not believe in these universal talents. He can act divinely, but he would probably only fiddle fairly, paint horribly, and write rubbish."

"He is an admirable musician, all the composers and singers know that," said Beaufront angrily, "and he has read aloud to us at his place at St. Germain verses and fragments of prose which vibrated with genius. I am convinced that his departure from the stage will be the beginning for him

only of a new and greater triumph in other ways. He is disliked by his contemporaries; he has nothing of the craze for the theatre which characterises most actors; he thinks slightingly of the drama and more slightingly still of its patrons: all this has made him detested by rivals and critics, though it has probably contributed to make his extraordinary and European celebrity. So that for himself it is best that he should be set wholly free by this bequest, but the world will lose; unless indeed, as I said, he betakes himself to some other art; he has very varied talents. I think he could do almost anything he liked."

"An Admirable Crichton!" said Lady Avillion unkindly.

"Even to the stab in the streets of Mantua? Well, stabbed he has been very often by jealous rivals, but they have used the modern bravo's weapons, abuse and slander."

"You grow quite romantic, Ralph," said his cousin, with the chill smile with which she was wont to receive romance. "And you can actually speak good English when your feelings are involved. I hope when people attack me that you display as much ardour and credulity in my defence. And really I do not attack your idol; I only think that it is bad for a young man to be able to lie down on rose leaves and do nothing. However, I dare say he will enjoy it, and perhaps if you bring him here he will condescend to recite us something."

The first thought with her was politics; but the

second was invariably her own parties; she liked to have them esteemed, as they were, the best in London; and nothing which could shed any lustre or confer any originality upon them escaped her vigilance.

"We will make him recite in private," was her prominent reflection on learning that this great and accomplished artist was lost to the public.

"You remind me of a lady I knew," said Beaufront grimly, "knew in Rome. A block of new houses fell down in her immediate vicinity, and thirty or forty people were buried under them. 'Is it not tiresome?' she said to me; 'it has made such a dust that my balcony flowers are quite ruined, and I can't hang out my cockatoo.'"

He was annoyed that his narrative had been met with so little interest; he was greatly attached to the man of whom he had spoken; with the usual unwisdom of human nature he expected his sentiments to be shared simply because they were his sentiments; and moreover, when his cousin had her air of chilliness and indifference and contempt, she vexed him, irritated him, offended him as no one else had power to do at any time.

"Why are you so extraordinarily fond of this young man?" asked his cousin.

"Well, for various reasons. But principally because he is wholly unlike any one else. We are all copies of other people without knowing it; our English society is a dead level of eternal commonplace."

"Yes, there is a great deal of imitation and a great deal of monotony in it," replied Lady Avillion. "But still, when one thinks that Mr. Browning and Charlie Beresford, Mr. Irving and the Prince of Wales, Lord Dufferin and Lord Hartington, Lord Lytton and Joe Chamberlain, Mr. Toole and Matthew Arnold, Mr. Swinburne and Arthur Balfour, are all of them incontestably Englishmen, the range is rather a wide one."

Beaufront grumbled that you never knew what blood there might be in anybody, and that genius had no country.

"I am not fond of geniuses," replied Lady Avillion; "they are always opinionated, generally smoke all over the house, and never like to be spoken to when they are eating."

"Les poètes aiment la bonne chère," quoted Beaufront. "Well, why not? Syrlin, however, is the most abstemious man I know; an anchorite."

"An actor an anchorite?"

"Yes; he says food and drink are the enemies of all talent."

"More than women?"

"I don't know where he places woman; I think to him she appears a tiresome and unreasonable being, always writing him declarations and waiting for him as he comes out to his brougham."

"I dare say his ideal is a *fille du quartier*. These romantic-looking artists are always prosaic and very often vulgar in real life."

"What a shockingly prejudiced remark! Worthy of a Philistine."

"If that is philistinism, our Society women would be better for some of it. To see English society on its knees before actors and actresses is really more absurd than denying them Christian burial as they used to do in the last century."

"If they have no genius I quite agree with you. But you cannot deny genius to Syrlin; he is a poet and an artist, and he has invariably moved his audience as only genius can."

"Oh, I quite admit that on the stage; but I dare say when he goes home he is a very ordinary person."

"No; it would be better for himself if he were, now that he has money."

"Genius should never be rich."

"On the contrary; it is only genius which ought to be rich, for it alone would be able to bring imagination into the spending of its riches, and deliver the world from dulness."

"How could it do that? It could not permeate the world with itself. The large majority would always remain dull and limited, instruments with one string, Single-speech Hamiltons, barrel-organs set to one tune. If all the wits were here to-morrow, from Horace himself to Horace Walpole and Horace Smith, they could not alter our tedium, our hurry-scurry, and our unpleasant union of apathy and sur-excitation. They would have to talk of Bismarck and Sarah Bernhardt, of the weather, and of last night's

vote, and if they said anything clever about any subject it would be repeated, and repeated badly, in five hundred houses over five hundred dinner tables, till they would wish to heaven they had held their tongues."

"That is true enough," said Beaufront; "you are very depressing sometimes, my dear Freda, you are invariably logical and unromantic."

"I certainly see no romance in modern life," said Lady Avillion.

"Humph!" said Beaufront doubtfully. He was by no means sure of the correctness of the proposition. Then he bade her adieu and drove to his own house in St. James's Square, a stately mansion built by Wren for the Duke of Beaufront, who had been a gallant and a spendthrift at Whitehall.

As he now entered his residence by a side door which opened on the gardens, one of his house servants approached him and murmured some information in a low tone.

Beaufront's face cleared and brightened as he heard.

"I am delighted," he said warmly, and went with quick steps across the house to the library.

"My dear friend, this is charming. You know you are welcome as the sun, if only we had any sun to greet you," he said with affectionate cordiality as he grasped the hand of a young man, who came forward to meet him; a man about thirty years old, with great beauty of person and a countenance much like that of the portrait of Abd-el-Kadir. His deep

lustrous pensive eyes, black as night, smiled with pleasure at Beaufront's greeting.

"You are always so good, my dear Ralph," he said in English which was softened and mellowed by a foreign intonation. "I am earlier than you expected; but your friendship is proof against even such a trial as that."

"Such a favour as that," said Beaufront. "Your rooms are all ready. I have given you a suite that opens on the gardens; I hope you will like them, though they are dull like everything in London."

"A thousand thanks, dear friend. But I have my rooms for the season taken at the St. James's. I could not consent to burden you so greatly."

"Oh!" said Beaufront, dismayed and aggrieved. "Do you mean to go to an hotel the first time you visit my country? You shall be perfect master of your own actions in this house I promise you, and you shall have the pass-key to go in and out as I do myself through the garden unobserved. Come! You cannot be such a savage as to refuse!"

"You are all that is most kind; but my rooms are taken and my man is there. I prefer it so," said the other, with obstinacy which his enemies and his friends alike knew to be very difficult to move.

Beaufront in vain used every argument with which hospitality and affection could supply him to induce the new-comer to change this resolution; Syrlin only laughed a little and remained inflexible. "I will dine with you every night if you like," he said. "But let me have *ma niche à part*. You

know that I am an ungracious and misanthropical animal. You must let me have my way, Ralph. I am beyond all cure."

"But I presume you will come at least to Heronsmere?" said Beaufront, displeased and almost offended.

"Oh yes, I will come to Heronsmere. To-morrow if you wish."

"Very well. To-morrow. But my cousin is anxious to see you."

"Your cousin? Which?"

"Lady Avillion."

"I will see Lady Avillion later. Take me to Heronsmere first, I want rest and country air."

"You are not polite, but you never are. I will do as you choose. I always do even when you most irritate and offend me."

"Dear Ralph!" said his churlish guest caressingly.

Beaufront wrote to his cousin that evening.

"Syrlin has arrived, but he will go nowhere to-night. I take him down to Heronsmere to-morrow morning; he will have it so. I shall hope to see you again in ten days or a fortnight."

"What a slave he is of his artist," thought Lady Avillion when she read the note. She was not very tolerant of artists, or of any slavery in which she was not herself the ruling power.

CHAPTER III.

"AND you seriously intend to leave the stage for ever?" said Beaufront later, when his friend, having absolutely refused to let himself be taken anywhere or amused in any way, they sat alone after dinner in the smoking-room.

"Certainly; most seriously; I have long wished to do so, and now I am able to carry out my wish."

"You really wish it?"

"Why not?"

"But your art? Your fame?"

"Acting is not an art," said Syrlin. "At least not in my estimation. As for fame, that is a very questionable affair. One shares notoriety with sensational murderers, successful speculators, and medical and physiological quacks."

"That is a *boutade*. Your kind of fame is worth having, because it is gained by influence over human emotions."

"Human imbecility! They ridicule M. Pairier and despise Mercadet on the stage, but in real life they flatter, use, and profit by both. They weep over Otello on the stage; in real life they would hang or behead him. They weep over Ruy Blas on the stage; in real life they would shut him up in the

Maison Centrale, or in Dartmoor prison. What are their emotions worth? They are fictitious. The crowd at a theatre is electrified by the heroism in 'Patrie,' or moved to tears by the genius of Chatterton; in real life they abandon Charles Gordon, or they leave Méryon to perish, and let the grave of Gustave Doré lie unmarked."

"I will not take up the cudgels for humanity; I do not care the least about it. But I do not think its emotions are fictitious. They are only short-lived. They are febrile, and nothing feverish is ever durable. But the best they have to give, if bad be the best, they certainly give to you, and the quality of your fame is picturesque; it has a kind of likeness (remote if you will) to the celebrity of Petrarch, of Bernardo Accolti."

"Pshaw!" said Syrlin, ungraciously.

"And through you," continued Beaufront, "multitudes are moved by the living thoughts of dead poets. It is art, and it is fame, although in your present mood you underrate it."

"In every mood," said Syrlin, with entire sincerity, "I have never done otherwise. My contempt has probably been the reason of my success. I can imagine no man in his senses caring for public applause when he sees with whom it is shared."

"You obtained it too early."

"It may be so. But if one cannot obtain it early one has certainly no title to have it at all. I see no reason why I should continue a career of which I am so tired, when there is no kind of financial necessity

to do so. I am rich: much richer than I need to be. I do not care for money in any way. The only real enjoyment which it can give is liberty; that it does give, at least when those who have it know how to take it; Aladdin's lamp can be only old metal to you unless you know its secrets."

"That is true of other things besides money."

"Undoubtedly. It is true of everything. It sounds absurd, but it is of no use for us to be happy unless we know how to appreciate and use happiness. I have never been happy since I was a boy in Morocco, and I do not suppose I ever shall be."

Beaufront smiled.

"*Beau ténébreux!* You are probably happier than you are aware of; we most of us are, and we only believe how well off we have been when some dire accident knocks us over and leaves us blind, maimed, or miserable, to muse upon all we have lost. I cannot think you will do well to break up your career, to stop the course of your way at its perihelion. You will be *désœuvré,* and you will miss the stimulant of effort and of triumph."

Syrlin made a gesture of denial.

"I have never lost my head in my successes. Crowds in a fine frenzy have dragged my carriage through the streets more than once; but I have always thought, 'If I die to-night, to-morrow who will care? Some few dogs, because canine fidelity is superhuman, and some few poor persons, because they will miss their daily bread. The others will let the grass grow on my grave as it grows on Doré's.'"

"That is morbid, my dear friend."

"Ah! excuse me, no; it is not morbid at all. It is simply and entirely a fact, and a useful fact to remember."

"That may be, but you are twenty years too young, and a million times too fortunate, to have such a view of life."

Syrlin smiled.

"You have not much brighter views yourself."

"It is very different with me. I occupy one of the most tiresome positions on earth, and I have neither your genius nor your youth."

"Let us speak of other things; I hear too much of myself," said Syrlin. "Tell me of your cousin, Lady Avillion; I know her very well by sight; she is a beautiful woman, but she never looks to me as if she had much soul."

"English women are always practical," said Beaufront. "My cousin is a great politician. Politics and what you call soul do not go together; the one kills the other."

"Politics for a woman! *Ça enlaidit comme des lunettes.*"

"You will be torn to pieces by our Bacchantes if you say so in England. Politics is the craze of the moment with all our women of light and leading. I imagine that when they have brought the country into an altogether irremediable muddle they will sit down panic-stricken and implore some military dictator to set it right for them."

CHAPTER IV.

THE Duke of Beaufront, cousin and confidant of Lady Avillion, was known as one of the best-looking and most discontented men in England, although he was esteemed undoubtedly one of the most fortunate.

As Ralph Fitzurse he had been a remote connection of the late Duke, and five strong youthful and healthy lives had stood between him and the possible succession to ducal honours. So wildly improbable had it seemed that he could ever become more than a distant collateral heir, that he had never even given the chance a thought; he would have believed it as likely that he should be called to the throne or the primacy.

He was then very popular and very poor, a man of fashion and almost penniless; how he lived in his world at all astonished himself, and when by one of those strange improbabilities, so often to be found in real life though deemed ridiculous in fiction, one after another of the Duke's sons and nephews died and he became the heir presumptive, and then the heir apparent, and lastly the successor to the title and estates of Beaufront, no one was so truly distressed and so blankly astonished as himself.

From its being an absolute question with him as to how he could pay his club fees, he became in the short space of three years inheritor and possessor of one of the greatest positions in the country.

Ralph Fitzurse, the terror of women with marriageable daughters and the marked ogre of every tradesman in London, became fifth Duke of Beaufront and Marquis of Saltaire, Viscount Wriotheley and Baron Deloraine; and beheld all the world—social, political and commercial—prostrate at his feet.

The studies of humanity thus afforded him embittered him, and made him say, "Plus je connais les hommes, plus j'aime les chiens."

Nowadays if he had danced the cancan itself at their balls, where would have been the dowager who would not have signified her approval and said, with smiling pleasantry, that the Duke had always such delightfully high spirits?

When once you have been a damaged peach, and are changed into a basket where you are ticketed "Best hothouse, a guinea each," you know what life really is.

Ralph Fitzurse had been not only a very poor man, but one of those men who were regarded by their world as good for nothing.

He had considerable talents which he never used, great charm which he was considered to use only to abuse, an excellent heart of which he was shy and ashamed, and he led that perfectly useless and sensual life which is only pardoned to an idler who idles on ten or twenty thousand a year.

That nothing dishonourable had ever been laid to his charge made no difference; no one would have been the least surprised to hear that he had passed the border line which separates the man who is only in debt to his tradesmen from the man who is in debt to his acquaintances.

Nothing but the influence and affection of the various great families to which he belonged had kept him so long without being black-balled by Society.

He had seriously arrived at the conclusion that this life must end somehow, either tranquilly by a pistol shot in the gardens of Monte Carlo, or more tamely by the sale of the *bric-à-brac* in his chambers in Mount Street, and the purchase of a passage to Borneo or South Wales, when that series of deaths occurred in the distant Beaufront family which made him heir presumptive to the dukedom, and changed his whole prospects in a single week.

As Ralph Fitzurse the world in general had been ready to believe any infamy of him—even that he held more aces than was natural at whist.

Of the Duke of Beaufront no one said any thing but good; and if he had liked to deal himself all four aces, he would always have found scores of players delighted to lose the rubber to him all night long.

He whose eyes had been washed with the collyrium of poverty and experience understood and appreciated the change to its full value, and gave a

little low laugh sometimes, which sadly disconcerted his adorers.

The person he was most attached to, and who had never changed to him, was Lady Avillion.

Her mother had been the only daughter of the late Duke, and if the dukedom could have descended in the female line would in due course have inherited it: he always felt as if he owed her some great amends for his own succession.

He had always been fond of her from the days when she, a little child of five, and he, a young man of twenty, had rambled about the sunny gardens and the hazel woods of her old country home of Bellingham.

When her people had married her at eighteen to Lord Avillion he had felt a pang which no one guessed, and he had gone out of England. A few years later on he had become Duke of Beaufront, and might very well have become also her suitor. "Perhaps it was all for the best," he tried to say to himself; he might have asked for her hand; and she might have mistaken liking for love, and have married him, and seen her mistake too late, and what a hell would that have been!—a hell of his own making.

Lord Avillion was not troubled by any speculations as to what his wife felt for him. She was his wife. That was enough, and even a little too much.

His cousin remained to Beaufront much such a regret and such an ideal as Penelope Devereux re-

mained in the thoughts of Sidney after Kenilworth—a suggestion of what might have been, the embodiment of a dream, a lovely memory and possibility, with summer air and country light mingled in it with the simplicity of an innocent and passionless affection.

She had long outgrown that gracious childhood, and had become a woman of the world, and a great lady, and many other dreams and desires less innocent had filled his own life. But, deep down in the depths of his thoughts, there had remained this tenderness of reminiscence, and whatever affected her in any way affected him profoundly still; and at times he felt that this woman, whom he might have loved, made it difficult for any great love for any other woman to take possession of him.

Her sex believed that it was cynicism, heartlessness, and sensuality which led him to seek and to leave them so indifferently; but it was rather due to the fact that in all his intercourse with her sex this vague and visionary attachment, which was rather for his cousin as she had been, and might have been, than as she was, deprived all others of any great power to hold him long. If he had come into his inheritance whilst she had been still a girl, with her rebellious curls catching on the boughs of the hazel trees as he drew them down to her in the nutting time, things might have been different; there might have been something in life which he did not find in it now. But then again—who could tell? They might by this time have hated each

other, and, worse still, have played that pitiable comedy, so often seen, in which the man and woman, for the sake of conventional appearances and of conventional interests, affect before their world an *entente cordiale* which is one long smiling lie.

"For she is not *facile,* and I should have wanted more than Uther Avillion wants," he thought sometimes with a sigh.

Wilfreda Damer, now Lady Avillion, called "Freda" only by her intimate friends, had been the daughter of Augustus Damer of Bellingham, who had been one of those country gentlemen of long descent, who are such very great persons, that no title could make them greater, and who had married Lady Blanche Fitzurse, the daughter of that Duke of Beaufront to whom Ralph Fitzurse had succeeded.

The Damers of Bellingham had dwelt under the oaks and elms of their corner of Wiltshire ever since the Conquest; and Bellingham was a very beautiful and interesting place, richly wooded, and famed for its herds of fallow deer.

There she had passed a happy and lovely childhood; and there one day, when she was seventeen years old and had not even been presented, Lord Avillion visiting at a neighbouring house had chanced to see her at a garden party, and had been fascinated at first sight by her enchanting union of childish bloom and high-bred bearing.

A few days spent later on at Bellingham Park, where he always saw her amongst roses, and sun-

shine, and woodlands steeped in the glow of slumbrous afternoons, confirmed his admiration and decided his actions.

Three weeks after his first meeting with her, he asked her to marry him; and she, not very sure, amused, astonished, flattered, and vaguely attracted in her turn, reflected for five minutes, looking down on a bunch of roses with the dew on them, which she held in her hands, and then said with a little hovering smile, "Perhaps; if you like; I don't think I should mind."

It was not exactly the reply which her suitor, a very pampered and spoilt idol of society, had expected, but he made the best of it; her own people were of course charmed with the alliance; everybody petted and flattered her, and assured her that she was the most fortunate child upon earth; she had no leisure given her to reflect, no opportunity to regret, no possibility to alter her mind, and in three months she became Countess of Avillion and Pontefract.

Uther Bertrand Hubert, Earl of Avillion and Pontefract, was one of the richest peers in the country; his riches were not only vast but solid, and did not only depend on airy trifles such as land, which can be blown into soap-bubbles by the breath of any political agitator who is out of office, but on copper and coal and slate and tin, and also on the accumulation of bullion due to a long minority. His race was of the purest and oldest nobility and clearly traced to remote centuries and royal ancestries, and

no more lofty and chivalrous lineage or traditions could be desired than were his.

His earldom had had its existence in the days of Ethelred; and such ancientness of date is extremely rare in England, where the aristocracy, as a rule, is as modern as the railway stations which they attach to their park gates, or the steam tugs in which they go to and fro to their yachts.

Avillion was as great a prince as it is possible to be in a country where your tailor and wine merchant can go to the levée, and your bootmaker can summon you in a County Court.

His party was wont to praise him because he was so magnanimously free from all ambition; in truth Lord Avillion was not ambitious because he was so entirely satisfied that nothing higher or better existed, or could possibly exist, than all that Lord Avillion was already.

Lord Greatorex had once been so foolish and tactless as to hint at a Marquisate; but the imprudent words had been frozen on his lips by the blank bland stare of hauteur and incredulity with which his powerful supporter had chilled him to the bone.

"I am so glad you are so happy, dear Freda!" her mother, Lady Blanche, said about once a year, generally at the close of the year, when everybody is expected to be more or less tender; and her daughter always smiled slightly, and answered, "Oh, thanks so much."

Lady Blanche was a still handsome and youthful woman who had her own interests and her own

adorers, and when she had seen her daughters well married thought very little more about them and liked her grandchildren to call her m'amie, or bonne maman, or even Blanchette, or anything which sounded French and pretty and young; she thought Avillion quite perfect and told everyone so; she was of opinion, though she never said it, that Freda tried him considerably, she was so very indifferent and always *cherchant midi à quatorze heures.*

She herself had been the chief promoter of the Avillion alliance, and therefore could see nothing wanting in it, indeed no one ever did except the persons most concerned. Marriage is often like the shoe which looks so admirable a fit to others, but sorely pinches the foot which wears it.

Lady Blanche was a sensible and attractive woman, and admired Avillion, and flattered him, and smoothed him, and often amused him; in return he was most agreeable to her, and had even arranged for her with tact and good-humour certain affairs which she would not have liked the world in general and her daughters in especial to know; naturally and sincerely she thought him quite perfect.

Her daughters Lady Blanche did not like; there was a serious side to their characters which was tiresome to her own, and there was an expression in their eyes occasionally when she was enjoying herself in a ball-room, or on a race day, which she resented; her son Fulke, now master of Bellingham, she preferred infinitely, although he was continually a source of anxiety, of that form of anxiety which

has become chronic in England; he was always playing high, and running horses which never won, and had already mortgaged his fine estates up to their tree-tops.

Avillion, who in affairs was very acute despite his indolence, said repeatedly: "Sell if you must, but never mortgage. What is 'mortgage'? It is the luxury of paying a high rate of interest for a number of years for the privilege of seeing somebody else step into your shoes at the last."

But his brother-in-law did not appreciate the wisdom of the advice, and continued to keep his racing stables and to borrow money on his land.

"I will buy Bellingham of you now at the best market price, if you like," said Avillion, "and it will be a family arrangement, and no scandal, and you can go abroad and live on the money, as everybody is doing; but I won't help you in any other way, because all you will do eventually is to lose the place to the Jews, for next to nothing, and potter about miserably in continental towns on a halfpenny a day ever afterwards."

His wisdom, however, was spoken to the winds; and his wife had the pleasure of hearing him, twenty times a month, dilate upon the improvidence and imbecility of her people.

Before her marriage Avillion appeared to her only as a courtly and gracious person whose homage was very intoxicating to her youthful vanity, and whose presents to her seemed as endless as they were undoubtedly magnificent. The intimacy of mar-

riage had not been agreeable to her, and she had resented having been led, in her ignorance, into an association which she had not understood until she could no longer escape it.

He was a man who could make himself absolutely adored by women, and he could have made her also adore him had he chosen; but she was his wife, and he had no temptation and no inclination to do so.

In three months from his union with her, he was as completely tired of her as if she had been a peasant girl or a dancer; probably still more tired.

She was a Gainsborough picture which he had wished to add to his gallery; he had got the picture, by paying a very high price for it; and after studying its details elaborately for a little while he turned its face to the wall and went away. The Gainsborough maiden grew gradually into a Titian great lady, a Carolus Duran leader of fashion; but, though he approved of them, the transitions had no attraction for him.

Avillion had got exactly what he wanted: a woman who let him alone, never asked questions, entertained admirably, and looked superb with all the Avillion diamonds on at State balls and Drawing-rooms. He would have preferred it had she been a little less intelligent, a little less acute, that was all: he had an unpleasant feeling at times that she knew a great deal more about himself than was ever hinted in her words. But still as whatever she knew was confined to her own breast in silence, her knowledge

did not trouble the passive good understanding which existed between them.

Their children had not been any tie between them; indeed children are oftener a fertile source of dissension than they are anything else.

To him, they were nice little boys who were necessary, if troublesome, adjuncts to a great position and large possessions. He patted their heads once in three months, and told his stud-groom to be careful in choosing their ponies.

To her they were a disappointment, after the first ecstasy of their infancy had passed away, and for the first few years of her married life she was, she frankly confessed to herself, unhappy, wanting a great deal of sympathy and consideration which Lord Avillion did not give her, and haunted by that desire to express or receive tenderness which very young women feel, and which men so stupidly attribute to mere sensuality or sentimentality.

"When I had been married a few weeks he made me cry one day: very young girls always do cry so easily," she said once to her elder sister Lady Ilfracombe, "they know no better; you see I knew no better; I sobbed my heart out; he picked up my handkerchief very politely and then left the room. He will always pick up your handkerchief, and he will always leave the room. However it is much nicer to have a man leave the room than to have one stay in it and swear at you; a good many men do swear; and it is pleasant you know in the long run to be let alone; he does let me alone, entirely."

In a great many ways her marriage suited her, suited her very well; as she grew older she felt that she would have been terribly impatient of a man who should have worried her, interfered with her, or dictated to her. Her very large expenditure Avillion always endorsed, only raising his eyebrows slightly now and then, but never uttering a word of blame or protest.

That was in itself so immense a virtue that she could afford to let it cover a multitude of faults. There are men so constituted that they look at accounts before paying them; and that interference with her is greater annoyance to a woman than many sins against her forbidden by statute.

Avillion was a voluptuary, an egotist, a person irritable, self-centred, and very peevish; but he was a gentleman: generous in all financial matters; so many much better men are not that! and if she did not estimate the fact at its worth, her family did.

After a few years, by mutual consent, their lives drifted wholly apart; only linked together in appearance by the conventionalities of society, and the fact of dwelling under the same roof. They were both intensely proud people, and neither would have liked to give their sentiments, their differences, or their enmities, to the criticism of an inquisitive world.

"Freda suits me perfectly," Avillion was accustomed to say to his own people; and he meant what he said.

To be let alone, to be unquestioned, to be

harassed by no demands for a tenderness which he could not feel, to have his name always well represented in the world by a beautiful and prudent woman was all he wanted: in return he paid all her demands without interrogation, and let her bring up her children in any way she chose. All he really cared about was that she should receive without reproach; and in the art of receiving she excelled.

When they had been married about three months and the London season had been beginning, he had said to her wearily: "Now don't ask me how to do it, for I haven't a notion how women do do it, and I can't be bored: but mind you make your entertainments a success; I don't care a straw what they cost, only take care that they're perfect: mind you have only the right people, and pray be heedful that all your ideas are new; of course you won't ask me to be present except when it is absolutely necessary; but when it is so, you may be quite satisfied that you will command me."

She had never asked him anything from that time onward, but her entertainments had fulfilled his wishes and surpassed his expectations.

He himself did but little to aid them. He put on his blue ribbon, and deigned as he had promised to be present for an hour or so when necessary, or longer if any crowned heads were there; and then he took off some lady he admired to a picture gallery, or the gardens, and was no more seen, or retired to his own apartments and went to bed, with

a reading lamp, a French novel, and a box of Russian cigarettes beside him.

At Brakespeare he lived with great magnificence, and in London also; but he never really enjoyed himself until he was in his pretty pavilion at St. Germains, or in his villa overlooking the bay of Monte Carlo.

He considered that at home, in your own place, and among your own people, you were bound to live according to your position; but he thought position a bore, and liked to get away from his own country as often as he could and live as it amused him to live, which was not a manner which would have gratified the Queen or Lady Greatorex.

A very selfish man can never be a good host. But his wife learned in their very first season to do without him; and had, by instinct, that gift of reception which distinguishes successful ambassadresses and great queens.

Only now and then, as she grew older and began to think of and observe the condition of the country, she sometimes asked herself what use was it, all this expenditure, this magnificence, this pageantry? What use was it to hide the mouth of the pit with roses?

Avillion House was one of those grand dwellings which stand here and there in London to show what that capital might do if it chose. It stood behind its great bronze gates in dignified retirement from the noise of Piccadilly. It had a fine square hall with a vaulted ceiling, painted by Italian artists in

Charles the Second's time, a double staircase of white marble, carpeted with pale blue velvet, and innumerable reception rooms filled with all kinds of treasures of the arts. Avillion himself was a man of fine taste and judgment in art, and his wife brought into all her houses that grace, and, as it were, that fragrance of a true sense of beauty, which softens magnificence and makes a home of a palace.

If Avillion House owed to its master many a volume of an *editio princeps* and many a noble picture brought from church, or convent, or gallery on the Continent, it owed to its mistress all its harmony of hue, all its abundance of flowers and green exotic plants, all its atmosphere of that nobler use of wealth which is but the obedient minister of culture.

They have five great houses in different parts of England and Scotland, and the mighty castle of Brakespeare, which stood amidst Yorkshire vales and streams, was especially famous both for its splendour and its hospitalities; but the London house was the one of all others in which her taste had been most conspicuously prevalent, and it was the one in which she felt most of all others at home.

She was fond of London, though no one could be more sensible of its defects and its drawbacks than was she, and now she did not look upon Avillion House as a mere stopping place for a few feverish and detested weeks of hurry and ennui, as so many great ladies do look upon their London mansions.

At Brakespeare, and at her other houses in the country, she was never alone. She had always a

large party staying with her, which she disliked, though to Avillion it was a necessity of existence.

In London, absurd as it sounds, she found more tranquillity than in the country, and she could be more alone whenever she chose to be so.

At her doors sat the janitor who had for his seat a painted and gilded sedan chair of George the Second's time; and by those doors and that sedan chair no rag-tag and bobtail passed, even though it had just brushed against her at a State concert, or had brought all the silver mines of Potosi to its own mansion in Park Lane.

Nothing resists wealth. Nothing is respected except money.

These are the two lines from the gospel which Society writes at the head of the copy-books of its pupils.

But Lady Avillion did not subscribe to them. She could never understand what charm other people's money could possess for you. "One doesn't want to borrow it, and if one did want to, one couldn't," she had observed once.

"Ah! but lots of people want to, and lots of people do," her cousin Beaufront had replied with much philosophy; and she had sighed, thinking of her brother's extravagances with impatience and disgust.

She was one of those women who keep their affairs in strict order; and, whilst knowing how to display all the brilliancy of a great fortune, would know equally well, were they put to it, how to keep within a small income.

She loved Bellingham with an affection born of many happy childish memories of sports and pastimes with a father who had idolised her, and she hated to see it drifting to ruin for sake of the training stable, the kennels, the forcing houses, the racing stud, the vast establishment, the endless series of guests, the lavish London expenditure, which drain the fortunes of English gentlemen, until they sell to the Jews and fly the country.

"Have we any right to lecture the poor about thrift, when our own people are letting their estates drift into the market because they have not the common sense to look into their affairs in time, and pull themselves together?" she said once to Lady Greatorex, the premier's wife, who disliked the remark, and said something vague about the obstinacy of the poor in eating bacon, so bad for them, so dear, and so very nasty.

"I have never been able to make out what you feel for Avillion," said Beaufront to her one day. She smiled, a vague, agreeable smile, which might mean anything.

She thought to herself that she really felt nothing at all. She had neither liking nor disliking for him. He was an accepted fact in her life, and she never rebelled against what was unchangeable.

Sometimes when she heard in society the praises of women given to his charming manners, his fascinating influence, his unusual charm, she smiled bitterly, knowing how selfish and narrow and poor a

nature that social charm concealed, how shallow was the amiability, how tainted with insincerity the apparent geniality, how brief and callous and valueless the swiftly passing passions of the man whom they adored.

He was charming—when he was amused; he was kind—when it cost him nothing; he was devoted—when his devotion had the attraction of being also novelty and inconstancy.

But she knew well that this was all: that, at heart, no one on earth ever found in Avillion a single impulse that was unselfish, a single sentiment that was deeper rooted than vanity, or a single motive that was higher or more lasting than self-indulgence.

When she watched him in the world with his graceful courtesies, his ardent homage, and his apparent munificence, it seemed to her that she saw the most polished perfection of high comedy.

"And to think that his brittle spun sugar can break their hearts," she thought, with profound contempt of the victims of his *bonnes fortunes*.

In reality he was no conscious impostor. He was simply a man wholly heartless and self-centred, who had the gift of pleasing women, and was wholly indifferent if those whom he had thus pleased broke their lives in pieces afterwards on the rack of his egotism.

He would have said, had any one reproached him, that he had never invited them to such suicide. He had never suffered himself, and he could not

see for the life of him why other persons should do so.

Everything bored him, and he thought that was the fault of his wife.

He had married her for her beauty, and had tired of it, and he disliked her intelligence, which had developed since her marriage; then she was a political woman, and he did not like political women; and for these reasons, and other reasons, he saw as little of her as he could, having due regard to the fact that Society believed their marriage to be a very happy one, and that he did not wish Society to think otherwise.

Society is always willing to believe that a marriage is well assorted.

Marriage is its own cherished institution, the dearest to it as the most completely artificial, and the one which it considers most necessary to its own continuance and prosperity.

Their world always said that Lord and Lady Avillion were so perfectly suited: the world dined at the great house in Piccadilly, and stayed at the great house in Yorkshire, and went to shoot and stalk over the great moors in Inverness-shire, and being extremely well entertained and well amused, said in return very willingly that the marriage had been an admirable one.

Now and then Lady Avillion herself heard this remark, and smiled, whether with pleasure, or irony, or acquiescence, or disdain, no one would have

known, for she had that same smile about many things which moved her to very opposite emotions.

"How many women you must have made suffer horribly!" she said to him once.

Avillion looked astonished. "Suffer? Oh no; women don't suffer, at least they like it. When they can't suffer they don't love, and that is worse for them, because if they don't love they can't enjoy."

"What do you do when a woman still cares for you of whom you have tired?"

"I go away."

"And forget her?"

"Of course one forgets what one is tired of; that goes without saying."

"But suppose she writes to you?"

"I don't read what she writes. That is very simple."

She looked at him and smiled: she gauged the immensity of the absolute selfishness which was so instinctive in him that it was scarcely blamable.

"What a happy thing I never really loved him," she thought. "He would have broken my heart. To appeal to that intense egotism would be like asking warmth from the Mer de Glace!"

"And do you never give them a thought," she said aloud, "those poor *délaissées* whose letters you don't read?"

"I never think of anything disagreeable," he replied with entire sincerity: "anything one has left is disagreeable, whether one wants it or doesn't want

it. Byron always looked back at the steeple with regret, or so he says, whenever he left the most unpleasant place or people. That is *l'esprit du clocher.* I have not *l'esprit du clocher* in my wanderings, whether on the face of the globe or on the *carte tendre!*"

CHAPTER V.

Ten days after there was a second reception at the Foreign Office, as important and as numerous as that at which the Maharajah Zadar and the Rao of Nautch had first been present. It was at a moment when the Government desired the presence of all its supporters in demonstration of the union of its party which some troublesome rumours and some disagreeable events had of late made more doubtful than was agreeable to the leaders of it. Things as yet were quite safe in every way, but there was agitation in the air, and some of those tiresome people who are always the unquiet element in every administration disapproved of Ministerial measures, and made unpleasant allusions to what Lord Palmerston or the Duke of Wellington would or would not in similar moments have done.

Under the circumstances, the Marquis of Greatorex, who was both Premier and Foreign Secretary, had urgently desired the presence of the great persons belonging to his party in the capital at Primrose time, and many of them, groaning and miserable, had left the Cairene palace, the Cannes pavilion, the Spanish waters, the Roman hotel, or

the Indian province where they were enjoying themselves so comfortably, to return to their London houses all shuttered up and enwrapped in calico, that they might hang their grand cordon collars round their throats, and make their bow to Lady Greatorex.

It was overpoweringly dreadful to them; but it had to be done; and coughing and blaspheming in their native fog, the patriots did it.

Amongst them Lord Avillion, who had quitted Monte Carlo a fortnight before, for the purpose of appearing at the Drawing-room and at political gatherings, with the sense that his self-sacrifice to his country was quite equal to that of a Curtius.

"I don't think, you know, that they ought to call us home like this for anything short of a Revolution or a Bill of Attainder," he said plaintively to his wife, as he drove beside her to Downing Street.

"Do you wish us to lead the country or not?" said Freda rather curtly.

"What a question!" murmured her lord.

"Then we must bore ourselves sometimes," she added, whilst the lights from the streets dashed on the jewels of her tiara.

"We don't lead it," murmured Avillion. "I told Greatorex so yesterday; he knows it. We shall never lead it again. All the real power lies with the Caucuses."

"Oh, those dreadful American words!" said his wife with impatience.

"They represent dreadful English facts," said

Avillion in a tone of fatigue, as the carriage came to a dead stop in the line.

As he yawned, in the moments during which his horses were at a standstill with a thousand other horses fretting and chafing at the delay, Avillion looked critically at his wife. He did not care about her, did not like her, but he wished her to look well, because she represented him; it was as necessary that she should be handsome as that his house parties should be splendid, or his sons be healthy, or his political subscriptions be large. It was a matter of personal pride with him.

"She is extremely good-looking and has great distinction," he thought, as he surveyed her through his half-shut eyelids. "I wonder whatever I saw in her once;—but then that one always does with all of them after a little while."

With which melancholy reflection he closed his eyes quite, and did not unclose them till the carriage door was pulled open with that violence which the London lackey deems necessary to his own importance.

The large courtyard of the Foreign Office was full of equipages, and the throng on the staircases was already densely packed. Within the reception-rooms above the stairs there was everybody who was anybody, and alas, a good many who were not anybody at all.

A London fashionable crowd is like the ever-moving *iracundior Hadria* of Horace; it is always irritated and incessantly restless. All alike desire

and pine to see and be seen, to hear news and to tell it, and to be the first to do both, to stare at any fresh notability there may be present, and then to get away to their carriages as quickly as they can, and agree how dull it has been, and what a crush, and how ill everything is always managed in that great house. Any house which they have just quitted is always the especial house at which everything is managed most dreadfully, and where everybody is dullest and most miserable in all England.

As no hospitality enters into the motives of giving, so no gratitude enters into the receiving, of social entertainments in these years of the century's decrepitude. It is a mere question of expediency with both the givers and the takers of invitations, and criticism is as largely visited on the results as it is exercised in the preparation of those long lists of names with which the head servants supply the reporters of the press.

It was a pretty scene, like all these affairs to which the beauty of flowers and of women contribute so much; the political importance of the moment had brought all the people to town who would not otherwise have been seen in it until after Whitsuntide, and the gathering of the Tory clans was so unanimous that scarcely any family of note to the party was absent that night.

Conspicuous among the crowd was the Indian Maharajah, with his Mentor anxiously hovering near, and another young Oriental potentate, the Rao of Nautch, both of them blazing with sun-like jewels

and watching with impassive countenances the bare-bosomed beauties crowding around them.

"There is the best of them all," said Zadar in Hindustanee to his countryman the Rao, and the dusky gleaming eyes of both princes followed admiringly the stately and graceful figure of Lady Avillion as she passed through the rooms, the silver tissues of her train rippling in the light and the diamonds of her tiara crowning her small and shapely head.

"Yes; she is," thought another person, who understood Hindustanee, overhearing. "Ralph, is not that lady whom these natives admire, your cousin, Lady Avillion?"

"It is," said Beaufront. "I will take you to her when she has made her tour of the rooms."

"She is a beautiful woman," said the other man gravely; "you have not said too much about her. But I should not think she was *facile.* Is she *facile?*"

"It depends on what way you mean it," said Beaufront. "And it depends on how she happens to take you."

"No doubt," said Syrlin.

"Who is that lad they are bringing to her now?" he added.

"That is young Flodden. He is a great excitement to London; almost as much as are you and the Orientals. He has had a fifteen-year long minority, and has never been in England till last week since he was a baby; every breast in Belgravia

palpitates; we call him the new Lothair. He looks very harmless and supremely wretched."

"Lord Flodden would like to have the honour—" her host was at that moment murmuring to Lady Avillion, as he led up to her a very young man who had a sweet expression on a fair, boyish countenance, and had a look of candour and astonishment in his blue eyes which made him appear younger than he actually was, as, blushing painfully, he bent before her with a grace and ceremony which bespoke a foreign education, and were in marked contrast to the simplicity and rusticity of his aspect.

She smiled on him graciously over a large fan of pale rose ostrich feathers.

"How sincerely I pity you!" she said as she made way for him to sit beside her. "To leave your Sicilian orange woods, and your deep blue waves, to come into the land of fog and factory chimneys!—how dreadfully sorry you must be. But, of course, you had no choice."

"It was so plain a duty," murmured Flodden, too young and too nervous to make the reply he should have made, and assure her that England was delightful since it contained Lady Avillion.

She looked at him with amusement; he was so young, and so timid, and so unconscious of the importance of his own position, and yet so visibly oppressed by his responsibilities.

"Ah; I am glad you are going to take life like that," said Lady Avillion, much as she might have said that she was so glad he took currant jelly with

venison. "I am so very glad. Of course, you will get called priggish; but still, it is popular, and it always does good in the country; so many of our young men never see that."

Flodden looked greatly perplexed. He was not sure whether she approved or ridiculed him.

"I do not mean to be priggish," he said, with great humility, "and I don't wish at all to be popular. I thought that I ought to see my country and my estates, and—and—and all that sort of thing. I have never been in England or Scotland since I was seven years old. My trustees told me I was obliged to come."

"Of course you were obliged to come. I wonder if you will hate it or delight in it. What do you like best? Art or nature? People or books? Sport or study?"

Flodden coloured to the roots of his fair hair as he felt her beautiful eyes dwelling on him with interrogation and raillery.

"I—I—like best being quite alone with books and dogs," he murmured, unconscious of any incivility in the ungallant reply.

Freda laughed outright.

"You will be miserable in London, then, where dogs are worried, and books are unread; London has nothing to offer anybody except its people. We get people on the brain here. We have nothing but people, people, people, all day long, and half the night. I think Lady Flodden was very wrong to let

you get so *farouche,* and keep you so utterly away from your countrymen."

"I suppose it was a mistake," said the poor lad, sadly. "But my father hated England and Scotland, and when he died, my mother would do just as he had done."

"So natural!" said Freda, very much bored. "But I think it was unwise. I am sure you know a great deal more than if you had been brought up here with Eton and Oxford, and all the rest of the routine; but still, I am afraid you will feel astray here, and our people do so hate anything foreign and out-of-the-way. I will look after you a little if you like. Come and see me to-morrow; I shall be in town for another week."

And with that she gave him a little smile of dismissal, and an imperceptible nod; and Flodden, though he was new to all these matters, became conscious that he was wanted no longer, and rose, blushing vividly, and ceded his place to a gentleman who wore the Garter ribbon.

"What a beautiful woman!" he said to a man whom he knew, who laughed.

"She is one of the beauties; and she is something more; you are very lucky to be told to call on her without any probation."

"I am so charmed you will take up that boy," said the gentleman with the Garter ribbon to her, as he sat down. "It is so very good of you. You know it is quite a toss up with which side he will vote; he has no politics at present, and his father

was half mad and had none; but all his people have been Whigs, and Jane Wiltshire has already got at him."

"Then I am glad I asked him to come to tea," said Freda. "I will tell Lord Avillion to call on him. He has a pretty, ingenuous face, but I am afraid he will be very tiresome; boys who blush and have views and consciences are always such bores."

"Not if you sketch out the views and colour the consciences yourself," said the K.G. with a smile. "He will be worth a little trouble; he has a great stake in the country, and people are wondering to which side he will go; and, from the little I have seen of him, I should say he would make, in time, a very safe, painstaking, and creditable Under Secretary for the Colonies, for instance, or for India."

"My dear Lord! Under Secretaries, who belong to the Upper House, are always mistakes and failures. But, of course, you could give him something, and it is quite certain that he must not go to the other people."

"I have no fear that he will go to them now that you have once deigned to smile on him," said the minister, who knew the powers of her sorcery, and knew that if anything on earth would stimulate her to interest and exertion it was the rivalry in a political matter of Lady Wiltshire.

Lady Wiltshire was the only really great lady whom the Radicals possessed; and in his innermost soul Lord Greatorex feared Jane Wiltshire as he feared no male unit of the opposition.

Beaufront meanwhile was contemplating his cousin with gloomy admiration, mingled with that wistful tenderness and conjecture which were always in his thoughts when they dwelt on her.

"That rustic swain from Sicily has seen *you*: so he is safe booked for the Carlton," he said, with vast meaning in the simple words.

She ignored his insinuation.

"We are not in the least sure of him," she answered. "What did Lord Beaconsfield always say, that the attendance at a reception meant nothing, because it is only a bow of courtesy to the Minister's wife."

"Society thinks it means everything in this case."

"I should be sorry to be responsible for what Society thinks at any time."

"Why should you find fault with Society? It adores you."

"I always dislike what adores me."

"Ungrateful but natural. I should like to bring you somebody who feels in the same way, but I am afraid you might be rude to him. He has no influence on politics."

"I am not in the habit of being rude to people; not even when they deserve it."

"May I bring him?"

"Who is it?"

"It is Syrlin."

"Is he here, then?"

"Yes; he is back in London and in the next

room. He might interest you, but he will be of no kind of use—"

"I find a good many people who are of use in some way or another, but very seldom anyone who is interesting."

"You permit me then?"

"Oh yes."

Beaufront left her side, and his place was filled instantly by one of the many who were patiently waiting their chance for a word with her or a smile from her. Flodden was standing behind her chair not daring to ask her notice unless she accorded it to him. People very rarely sit down at a London reception; nobody is expected to do so; fifty seats to five hundred guests is a liberal allowance. Freda Avillion, however, never moved much about; seated, she held her court wherever she was; she knew all those faces and figures, and all the stories which attached to them, and all the by-play and undersprings which agitated them. Society was to her a comedy and a pageant; only the comedy was not witty enough, and the pageant was too ordinary to please her. She was a woman of some imagination, only her imagination was not dominant enough to console her as it often consoles those in whom it is strong for the shortcomings of reality.

"Allow me," said the voice of her cousin in her ear, in that scarce audible murmur which always suffices for the formality of introduction.

She looked up and saw a countenance which she had often seen in the blaze from the footlights in

Paris. A countenance wholly unlike any other's there, and as great a contrast to the physiognomy of the fashionable English crowd, as were the olive-skinned and lustrous-eyed princes of India.

"I am glad to thank you in person for the intellectual pleasure you have so often given me, Monsieur de Syrlin," she said with a sweetness which did not prevent the words having a touch in them of condescension, of patronage, to the ear of Syrlin; it seemed that she meant to imply to him, "What place has an artist in a Prime Minister's Drawing-rooms?"

"As I have ceased to give that pleasure (which you are good enough to call intellectual) to the public, may I not, Madame, be spared that kind of compliment?" he said, with mingled suavity and rudeness.

"Do you object to hear a compliment, then?" she asked with astonishment.

"Pardon me if I say, yes. There is a kind of compliment which is always distasteful to me. This is a *terrain neutre;* let me claim to be lost in the crowd."

She looked at him with attention and some impatience.

"What nonsense!" she thought. "But then he belongs to the *genus irritabile.* Those people are always angry if we remind them of the only title by which they are in society at all!"

Syrlin smiled reading her thoughts.

"You think that when one is a lion led *en laisse* one should have the tricks of the spaniel? I am so

sorry, but I have never learnt them," he said as he sat down beside her on the couch which Flodden had not dared to occupy. "Let us not talk of myself," he said abruptly. "Let us talk of Beaufront. He is a dear friend of mine. He has so often spoken to me of Lady Avillion."

"How kind!"

There was a great deal of polite contempt in the two little words.

"Not kind, but surely natural enough," replied Syrlin. "He has an affectionate nature, and he is very proud of his beautiful cousin."

"His cousin has the same dislike to having her appearance discussed as M. de Syrlin has to hear his genius alluded to by others."

Syrlin smiled.

"I fear the genius is not as indisputable as the beauty, Madame! But I admit the justice of the rebuke. Were you not sorry when Ralph came into this great dukedom? I was. He was so light-hearted and genial and contented before that. Now his expression reminds me of nothing so much as of that picture of Millet's where the woodman, bowed down under the faggots, comes through the leafless wood."

"He will get used to his faggots, don't be afraid."

"And his wood is full of pretty hamadryads and smiling goddesses, no doubt. But he was a happier man before his bundle of gilded sticks was imposed on him."

"He was a very poor man."

"Oh, poor! what is that? It is one's temper not one's purse which determines the question of happiness or unhappiness."

"It is easy for you to say that. You are a great artist, which means a great alchemist. All you touch becomes gold; gold of some sort, real or fairy gold. You know nothing of the miseries of an ordinary Englishman living on strained means and mortgaged lands with the incessant demands of Society round him like so many sharks."

"That is only conventional misery," said Syrlin impatiently. "It ceases at once the moment the man leaves Society. In those old days I used to say so to your cousin. I used to say to him, 'You are so harassed because you cannot bring yourself to give up all you are accustomed to; if you lived as I live you would no more feel yourself poor.' But habit was too strong for him, and he went on with his cab and his clubs and his conventionalities, and he was always burdened with debts accordingly. Now he has got the opposite conventionalities of an immense social position, and of great riches, and he likes them no better. Indeed, he likes them less."

"Are you a great philosopher?"

"I endeavour to be, because I see other men miserable through not being so."

"You do not look it; you look like Faust, Werner, Manfred, Hamlet—"

"That is only because you associate me with romantic characters on the stage."

"No, it is not. You have in your countenance—"

"Why do you hesitate?"

"Well, you have what Vandyke saw in the cast of Charles the First's."

"Misfortune? Very possibly. I have had great successes in life, they are usually followed by their avengers. I have had sorrows, but they have not been irremediable as yet. Very likely some will come to me which will have no remedy."

He rose as a great personage approached, bowed low and left her circle.

"He is interesting, and he can be refreshingly rude," she said to Beaufront a little later. "Bring him to me some day, or tell him to come to-morrow."

"I suppose it is the rudeness which interests you," said Beaufront, with a little jealousy. "He is always very insolent, but I did not think even he would dare to be so to you."

"He was certainly not insolent," said Freda, "and I affronted him without intending it. You know if you compliment an artist on his art he always thinks that you mean to allude to the Foundling Hospital, or the travelling show, or the parish school which saw his first efforts."

"All artists are not educated at parish schools or reared in foundling hospitals; that is a remark quite unworthy of you, Freda."

"Most of them are; and who was he?"

"Oh, that is a very long story."

"Well, come and lunch and tell it me to-morrow."

"I will come and lunch, and I don't suppose you will remember to ask for the story. A great lady's day is so very full of small things."

CHAPTER VI.

"You do not look much amused, M. de Syrlin," she said with an indulgence in her tone as to a spoilt child, as she met Syrlin an hour later in the music-room.

"I am never amused in Society," he replied. "It is a disgusting spectacle."

"Rather a strong expression, is it not?" said Lady Avillion, much diverted and thinking to herself: "How odd they are, these people, always dying to push themselves into our world, and always uneasy when they get there!"

"Perhaps not a polite expression in the presence of one who should reconcile the greatest boor to it. But I think a true expression. What a mass of insincerity, of intrigue, of unkindness, of envy, of discontent, of inflated vanity, of embittered failure, is a great gathering like this one. From the place-hunters who make their bow because it is useful to them to be seen at the Premier's, to the innocent débutantes who are dying to sell themselves for a dowry and a coronet to Lord Flodden or your cousin Ralph, who is there here that is not moved by secret motives which they would be ashamed to have to avow?"

"Well, I don't know," said Freda, still diverted. "I am sure I have no motive in going to places myself, except perhaps to see and to be seen, and because everybody else comes. I imagine a great many people are like that, mere sheep, you know; and Lord Avillion is too lazy, and one of us must show. And you yourself, M. de Syrlin, what motive have you?"

"I came to be presented to Lady Avillion."

"Oh, oh! That sounds very well, but it is a little conventional, isn't it, for one who despises conventionalities?"

"It is a least quite true. Beaufront promised me that honour if I would come here to-night."

"My cousin has always the goodnatured, if not always successful desire to make people he is attached to acquainted with each other. It is not his fault if you and I have not heard so much of each other that we are quite ready with any amount of sympathy or of antipathy."

"I fear the former the more," said Syrlin a little abruptly, while his great dark eyes dwelt on hers with meditative admiration.

She smiled still with a certain kindly condescension as to a person privileged to be eccentric, and with a tiny nod of the head took the arm of one of the Ministers who was passing and left him.

"He is *dans le bleu,* as they say in his Paris," she thought, as she turned away. "But I hope he will not continue to make me this sort of speeches,

or I shall remind him that he is not in his green-rooms."

Syrlin bowed low. His eyes followed her as she went through the glittering crowd, and followed with the same meditative admiration in them the undulating movement of her admirable form, the gleam of the diamond tiara on her small stately head, the whiteness of her beautiful shoulders.

"Your cousin is a lovely woman, but she only lives for herself," he said to Beaufront, who said impatiently:

"My dear boy, what should you know of who or what she lives for? On the contrary, there are few women, I think, who occupy themselves with so many impersonal interests as Lady Avillion does."

"That is not at all what I meant," said Syrlin, with some disdain. "I meant that she has never loved anyone."

"How can you possibly presume to judge of her in any way?" replied Beaufront, with rising anger. "She certainly loves her children, and her country, and all her duties in it. English women have wholesome and simple affections and find them quite sufficient."

"Pshaw!" said Syrlin, with a delicate intonation of supreme contempt, as he stood a moment in the portals of the Foreign Office to close his fur coat around him, for this spring night in London seemed chilly to a man born where the warm waves of ocean wash the sunny shores of Morocco.

CHAPTER VII.

"WHO is he, really?" she inquired of her cousin the next day, in her own house, after luncheon.

"Nobody asks who artists are," grumbled Avillion, who was present. "What the deuce does it matter what hole they come out of? It's all one, whether the butcher, the baker, or the candlestick-maker had the honour of their procreation."

"Yes," said Beaufront angrily. "It does not matter in the very least what soil the reed that Pan cuts grow in; it is the music that matters."

"When it is music!" said Avillion drearily. "But there is not any nowadays; it is all drumming on frying-pans and letting off cannon; you never, by any chance, hear any melody now unless the train breaks down in Italy, and you have to get out at some beggarly country town and go into a theatre, lighted with a little petroleum flaring in tins, and hear dear old Donizetti or Bellini for half a franc; I heard *Crispino e la Comare* last December that way, in the Romagna. Such delicious harmonies, all rippling and laughing, like a brook in the sun; and the prima donna ran behind the scenes to suckle her child, and the baritone had a pot boiling in the dressing-room with a hare and some

fennel and garlic in it, which he assured me was a dish for the gods."

And Avillion laughed, enjoying the recollection as he had enjoyed the reality, because it had been something unfamiliar and out of England.

"Ralph, you don't tell me who he was," said Freda, who never relinquished a point.

"Well, he was a natural son of the late Duc d'Alger," replied Beaufront, "by a Spanish woman, the daughter of a tradesman, who lived in a suburb of Ceuta. The Prince was travelling in Morocco, and was struck by her beauty. It was a mere little flirtation for him, but Valencia Hurtado was tenacious and of long memory (there is generally one of the two who remembers). She brought the boy up to think himself of royal birth, and had him highly educated by some Spanish Dominicans who had a mission at Tripoli. When he was about fifteen years old she died of cholera, after two hours' illness, and in her dying moments, she said to him, 'Go to your father in France, and claim your place.' Now comes the dramatic part of it, as dramatic as Avillion's baritone with his hare soup."

"Do not spoil your story. Well, this boy went to France? I remember the Duc d'Alger very well; he was a charming person and of very artistic tastes."

"Yes; his artistic tastes have been transmitted to his son, *plus* genius. The boy went to France. He was a young man in appearance and in passions, but a mere child, a mere baby, in all knowledge

except of books. He had passed his life with a superstitious Spanish woman, who had been wedded to her religion and her memories, and a monastery full of studious devout recluses, shut in behind their aloe hedges and their adobe walls. He has often told me;—but I ought not, perhaps, to speak of this, for I believe he never speaks himself of it willingly."

"Oh, pray go on."

"Woman has no honour when she is curious," murmured her lord. "But go on; the old prince is dead and it can't matter."

"Well," continued Beaufront, "the lad set out for France. He knew the language well, but his accent was foreign; his enemies will tell you that it is so still. He had money, for his mother had been fairly rich. He had made his way easily enough by sea and land to Paris, and thence to the gates of the Château d'Elbœuf, which you all know so well, and there asked straightway for the Duc d'Alger. He was refused an entrance, naturally enough. On his persisting, they asked him who he was; and he answered simply that he was the son of the Duc d'Alger; he said so quite innocently, and with frank pride. They shut the gates on him, and talked of sending for the police. He was beside himself with indignation. 'I am his son, I tell you; I am a child of France,' he cried to them like a romantic young simpleton, unconscious of all ridicule. At last, though the gates were closed to him, he managed to get in, unarrested, to the forest, and thence into the inner park, and hid himself under the trees and

waited his opportunity; his heart ready to break with rage and pride, and pain and helplessness. At last, after a night and two days spent in the woods, he saw the Prince approach, riding down one of the drives with a number of gentlemen. He recognised his father's face from a portrait he had seen, and also by the fact of his riding in advance of the suite and alone. He came out of his hiding place, and ran out before the Duke's horse and caught its bridle. 'She is dead, and she told me to come to you,' he said between his sobs, clinging madly to the horse's mane and expecting Heaven knows what romantic recognition."

"Poor d'Alger! What a bore!" murmured Avillion.

"It was not much of a bore," said Beaufront, "for d'Alger did not see any necessity to make it one. He asked one of his gentlemen who this lad was; he had no remembrance of the brief romance of Ceuta. 'I am your son,' said the boy. 'I am your son and hers, and she is dead. She bade me come to you.' 'Who was your mother?' asked d'Alger, who no doubt was not well pleased at this scene at the opening of a hunting party. The lad let go of his bridle and stared at him, growing red and white by turns. 'Do you disown me?' he said, with all his heart in his mouth. 'I do not disown you, I do not know you,' said the Prince. 'If you want anything done for you, go to my almoner, and tell him what it is.' And he shook his rein free, and would have ridden on, but the boy had fallen

down insensible on the ground right under his horse's hoofs."

Beaufront paused a moment; his cousin was listening earnestly.

"I shall tire Avillion," he said; "he hates romance."

"Oh no," said Avillion, "I rather like it, unless it has anything to do with myself, and worries me."

He had had many stormy scenes made him by deserted ladies, and had deserted not a few.

"Go on," he continued. "It was a horrid nuisance for poor d'Alger, after all those years—"

"It was a nuisance which soon came to an end," said Beaufront. "When the boy recovered his senses the Prince's chaplain was with him, in a room in the castle, and his mother's letters and his own certificate of birth having been found in his pockets, had been taken to the Prince, who, with very great difficulty, had brought to his recollection the name and memory of Valencia Hurtado. The chaplain, with all delicacy and kindness, made the boy acquainted with his real position, and assured him of the future protection of the Prince, which would be given on one condition, that he should never allude to his parentage or approach his father. But the lad had been too deeply wounded to consider his own interests, or listen to any reason. 'If he will have none of me, I will have none of him,' he said violently; infuriated and profoundly hurt. And no forces could soothe or retain him. He escaped at

night out of one of the windows, and slid down a buttress on to the grass, and got away into Spain and back again to Morocco.

"D'Alger, who was distressed by the whole affair, and felt some remorse at the boy's disappearance, caused him to be sought out and found by his agents; by them he made various munificent offers, but they got no other answer and made no other impression than the chaplain of Elbœuf had done. All the child's grand visions had proved a mere mirage, and an intense bitterness of disappointment and of disgust took possession of him. It was not reasonable, of course, but who is reasonable who is sixteen years old, and has Spanish blood and Arab habits?

"He was too early his own master; he fell a prey to thieves; he studied deeply; he lived with Moors and Arabs in Africa, and with gipsies in Spain; he had more adventures than Gil Blas and more perils than Munchhausen; finally an actress in Madrid got hold of him and ruined him totally. He came face to face with misery and hunger.

"It was at that time that the French actor, Montjoie, fell in with him, and, struck by the beauty of his physique, the variety of his talents, and the flexibility of his voice, persuaded him to try his fortunes on the Paris stage. He had little or no special training except a few lessons in elocution from Montjoie; but I think you, Avillion, will remember his instantaneous success as Gringoire. Since then he has been the world's idol."

"And d'Alger? Did he ever recognise him?" asked Avillion.

"Everyone recognises you when you are famous," replied Beaufront drily. "One night, after the performance of the *Luthier de Crémone*, a command was brought to Syrlin to present himself in the box of Son Altesse le Duc d'Alger. 'Dites à Monseigneur que je ne le connais pas,' said Syrlin, very coldly. What message they took back to d'Alger I do not know, but I believe the Duke never made any more advances. He died, as you will recollect, about five years ago, and I suppose he had admired the spirit with which his overtures had been met, for he left to Syrlin his whole collection of Spanish pictures, which Syrlin immediately gave away to the Louvre."

"He was wrong," said Avillion; "there is more than one superb Murillo amongst them, and some fine Goyas. But he is one of your sentimentalists. It is odd. For actors are usually as hard as nails about money."

"I am not at all sure that it is sentiment," said Beaufront. "Indeed, I am sure it is not so."

"I think he was very unforgiving," said Lady Avillion. "When he became famous, he could have afforded to go down in amity to the Château d'Elbœuf."

"I think his feeling exaggerated myself," said Beaufront. "I have told him so more than once. But there are so few who would have felt it at all, and so many who would have been so glad to take

the royal arms with the bar sinister, that I do not think we should quarrel with it. Besides, Syrlin, like many poetical men, has made a cultus of his mother's memory. I daresay she was an indolent, illiterate, superstitious, sensual Spanish woman, remarkable for nothing except her beauty; but he has idealised her into a saint and a martyr."

"She had one virtue, constancy," said Freda.

"One defect," murmured Avillion.

"We suppose she was constant, as we know nothing to the contrary," said Beaufront. "But without cynicism one may say that women do not forget a royal lover."

"The royal lover behaved very ill; but men always do, royal or unroyal," said his cousin. "At least, they do when women care for them."

"I know that is your theory," said Beaufront. "Syrlin is an artist in every fibre of his body and in every cell of his brain, but he has not the happy gaiety of the artistic temperament: that gladness in the mere sense of living which sustains the artist as its wings sustain a bird. That was chilled out of him by the monastic influences of his early life, and by the (to me) exaggerated bitterness with which he regards the story of his birth. I confess I have never been able to understand how a man of genius, and a man who knows the world so well and estimates it so justly, can attach so much importance to what is, after all, of no real moment, and only obtains a fictitious importance from the prejudices and conventions of society."

"I think I understand it; he is proud."

"He should be too proud to be affected by it, or to resent it."

"That would be very philosophic, but he is not a philosopher; he is an artist."

"Artists are always a cranky lot," said Avillion, "and we pamper and cocker them up so that we make them worse than they would be. They don't know whether they are on their head or their heels, asked to Sandringham and patted on the back as they are."

Beaufront laughed grimly.

"The patron who took liberties with Syrlin's back would regret it. Don't try it if you want to keep a whole skin."

Avillion laughed too with a faint amusement.

The idea of this young man giving himself airs was diverting to him; he was very civil to artists as a rule, but he always expected them to kiss his hand, so to speak, in return for his condescension. Like many another fine gentleman, he was ready to dispense with etiquette on condition that he should receive deference. He had seen the artist now under discussion scores of times on the stage, and off it had frequently met him in the salons, and at the clubs of Paris; but he did not know Syrlin personally, except thus by sight, and as far as his languid interest in any thing could amount to curiosity, he was curious to do so. His pet pavilion on the borders of the forest of St. Germains was not more than half a mile off an old tower, relic of

a hunting palace of Charles the Sixth's reign, of which Syrlin was the proprietor; and the unsocial, almost ascetic mode of life in it which was characteristic of the latter, had been often a source of raillery and of wonder to Avillion.

People who felt anything strongly always appeared such very odd creatures to Avillion: half crazy or half imbecile; but this man he knew had great talent, had even genius, had the world at his feet, and could do with it very much as he pleased; how on earth could he care about that dead woman, and the neglect of her by the Duc d'Alger?

CHAPTER VIII.

"M. de Syrlin," said the groom of the chambers, putting aside the tapestries hanging before the doorway.

They all looked a little guilty, as the most self-possessed persons are apt to do when any one of whom they have just been talking is shown in on them in the midst of their conversation.

Avillion advanced with his best manner and his most enchanting smile.

"I am charmed to see you in my house, M. de Syrlin," he said with a gracious warmth. "But how can you possibly endure London? Myself, I am never decently well or moderately happy unless I am somewhere whence I can see the top of the Dome of the Invalides."

"The happiness of my Lord Avillion cannot surely depend upon place?" said Syrlin, as he turned to the mistress of the house.

"Happiness is a word which should be struck out of the dictionary. It is not only archaic but irritating," said Beaufront. "We are none of us ever happy nowadays. We 'get along' tolerably, that is all, and Avillion means that he 'gets along' best in Paris."

"One is less bored in Paris than anywhere else," said Avillion. "There is always somebody or something to amuse one."

"There are a good many to amuse one in London if one know where to look for them," said his wife.

"Oh, London!" repeated Avillion, with slighting contempt; "if the whole world is in London, how can that help one in such a climate?"

"You all seem to be miserable in your own country," said Syrlin. "Your one sole anxiety is to get out of it."

"All life in England is dull; London is itself provincial," said Avillion,

"Life in it seems extravagant enough surely? There is not time to breathe."

"That has nothing to do with it," said Avillion peevishly. "We are always dull, even when we're indecent."

"That is very sad!" said Syrlin amused, "to cast off clothes and yet not to be able to take the *plongeon.*"

"You'll find it quite true what I say," replied Avillion wearily.

He never argued, he gave you his opinion; you could take it or leave it, he did not care a straw which you did. Nothing mattered in this world; except to get over to Paris as soon as possible.

Syrlin, who knew a good deal about him in Paris, looked on him with unsympathetic eyes.

"To leave such a woman as that for those

cabotines," he thought, forgetful that however charming Lady Avillion was to others, she had not the very faintest charm in the eyes of Avillion himself. If a man has never loved a woman, he may any day, to his surprise, wake up to find himself in love with her; but when he has tired of her, it were as easy to raise the dead in their graves as admiration in his heart.

He knew that she was lovely and admirable, and to others seductive, just as he knew that the illuminated Evangeliarium of the thirteenth century in the library at Brakespeare was exquisite and precious in the estimate of bibliophiles. But the Evangeliarium had not the very slightest power to interest him, its possessor, for five minutes; he wanted a paper-bound volume of Maupassant or Richepin to do that.

Syrlin's knowledge of mankind and the passions should have told him this, but it did not, and in his own thoughts he called this polished and august person who received him so charmingly, *un infâme.*

"Pleasure depends on climate," said Avillion's wife. "Can you bear the weather of England, M. de Syrlin, and the darkness of London?"

"The sunshine of London is in its women," said Syrlin, "and the interest of England is in its men."

"Ah, people?—yes; what I said last night. There is nothing but people here."

"A people without a digestion," said Avillion gloomily, with a sigh, "and without an atmosphere."

"Watkin says that there is nothing digestible

upon earth except sea-biscuit," said Beaufront. "What would life be worth passed on sea-biscuit?"

Sir William Watkin was a celebrated physician.

"It would be very possible to me," said Syrlin. "I have lived for years on pulse and rice."

Avillion raised his eye-glass and looked curiously at him through it.

"How odd!" he thought; "artists are generally such very big feeders."

A man who was indifferent to the pleasures of the appetite seemed to him as great a *lusus naturæ* as a man who could fret himself about the woes and wrongs of a dead and gone Spanish woman.

"He is a wonderfully good-looking fellow," he thought, as he gazed at Syrlin, "and he has a queer sort of coolness and cheek about him. I never saw anybody quite like him. That is what makes the women so wild. I hope Freda will be nice and pleasant to him. She is generally so odiously uncivil to anybody I like."

He really thought so, although in truth his wife's chief effort and solicitude from one year's end to the other was to surround him with the persons most agreeable to him, carrying indeed her complacency in this respect to an extent for which she was sometimes blamed by the world.

"Will you dine with me to-morrow at the Marlborough? I cannot promise rice and pulse, but we will be as simple as manners and meats permit," he said to Syrlin, with that charming affability which no one knew better than himself how to render cap-

tivating and cordial. To ask a man to the Marlborough was his way of conferring the Grand Cross on him.

"You are very good," said Syrlin; "what is the Marlborough?"

"It is a club," said Avillion. "Our clubs are tolerable. They are one of the few things we understand. I fear I must leave you now, for unluckily for myself I have promised to be at the Lords by four; such a terrible nuisance, but Chelsea George speaks this afternoon."

"By Heaven, so he does!" said Beaufront.

Chelsea George was the nickname of one of the most popular members of the Ministry and the Peerage.

"I hope you will come to us at Brakespeare for Whitsuntide," he added to Syrlin, as he was about to leave the room; he was always quick to retain anyone or anything likely to amuse him.

"You are very kind, but will you have a large party?" asked Syrlin, somewhat ungraciously. "You know I abhor the world."

"Only a few people," said Avillion, "and I think Brakespeare as a place may possibly interest you; I hate it myself, but it is considered very interesting."

Syrlin accepted the invitation. "One thing will be interesting in it—his wife," he thought, "Perhaps he hates her also."

"You are going again to Heronsmere later on?" said Freda; "I have promised Ralph to be there;

Lord Avillion will not come there or anywhere; he is going to Paris."

"I never go to other people's country houses," explained her lord, who was lingering to light his cigarette. "It is quite bad enough to have to go to one's own."

"But Heronsmere is exceptionally charming; it is a 'green dream of England.'"

"I never dream of England," said Avillion, "except when I have a nightmare after a political banquet."

"Or a rent-dinner," said Beaufront.

Then they went away, leaving Syrlin alone for the moment with the mistress of Avillion House.

"How I should like to ask him all about Morocco and that scene at the Château d'Elbœuf," she thought, but instead she said aloud:

"Pray dine with Lord Avillion to-morrow; it will be such a charity; he dislikes almost everybody."

"What makes him so amiable as to allow me to be an exception to the rest?"

"You bring your own welcome, M. de Syrlin, and interest the most apathetic amongst us. Is it true that you will never let us see you, except in private life again? My cousin tells me you are never going to act again."

Syrlin's dark brows contracted a little; he was intolerant of all personalities. To the artist who has both dignity and sensibility the continual note of interrogation with which society approaches him is an unbearable irritation. The little people like it,

because it makes them of importance, and flatters them up into the empyrean of a momentary notoriety, but the great artist loathes it, and would fain flee from it for ever to some Ultima Thule unknown to man.

"I do not know why I should ever act again," he said with impatience and irritation. "Except that an art becomes a habit, a necessity, as you said last night that Society does."

"Surely, if you left the stage, you would miss its excitations, its triumphs?"

Syrlin smiled a little.

"It does not excite me. I am cold while I make my audience burn."

"That is very odd. There is an Italian proverb, *Quello che non brucia, non accende.* I should have thought there could not be that sort of influence without the contagion of mutual feeling."

"Why? The hypnotiseur does not fall asleep, he only causes sleep; he does not act, he only causes action."

"You imply that the actor does not feel emotion, only produces it."

"Of course. If he felt it he would cease to act, for he would lose the power of producing artificial passions and delivering set words. If the actor once lost himself in his art, he would be ruined. The improvisatore may feel such emotions as you think of, not the actor."

"Ideal acting, then, would be improvisation?"

"Yes, if we could imagine any number of people

brought together who would be capable of it; but that will never be but a dream."

"What made you act first, if it be not an impertinent question?"

"Because I am that unhappy anomaly—an artist who is incapable of creation. I am only a poet in feeling; a painter only in delight before nature; a sculptor only in a sensibility to all forms of plastic beauty. I have not the power of creating art. I can only represent what others describe. It is folly to speak of an actor creating a part; the poet or the dramatist has created it; the actor is the lute over which the hand of the creator passes to call forth the air already composed."

"That is a very modest definition of your calling."

"It is a true one. I have never regarded it in any other light. We are of use to convey the images and ideals of men greater than ourselves to the common multitudes. In a social condition of perfect and universal culture there would be no place for the theatre. The imaginations and apprehensions of men would be too delicate and acute to endure physical embodiment of their finest fancies."

"We are certainly neither delicate nor acute in our generation. But I think you are scarcely just to yourself or the public whom you move. Racine and Corneille, Hugo and Musset, seemed to me mere dry bones rattling in their coffins, until I saw your impersonation of these characters."

He bowed with a smile.

"But you are not imaginative, Madame; the world has been with you too early and too much. It has intensified the perceptive, but it has destroyed the receptive and creative faculties in you."

Freda Avillion felt unreasonably offended and displeased at this frank analysis of her qualities of mind.

She had always fancied that she was a person of imagination and susceptibility, dwelling in considerable mental isolation in a society which possesses neither. She had said that she had not understood Racine and Corneille, Hugo and Musset, as a pretty compliment to himself; but she had been far from meaning it, or supposing that he would think she meant it.

"Of course one's life here is the most unpoetic life in the world, I know that," she said, with a rising sensation of anger, "and Society is always about us, as you say; it is like the fog, it gets into one, and colours everything a dull grey; but still one is not really satisfied—one misses something, one cannot tell what it is, or what it should be—and then one hears some music, or reads a poem, or sees your Fortunio or your Hippolyte, and one gets into a fairer air for a moment, only it never lasts."

It was not so clear or so clever a speech as her speech usually was, but Syrlin understood its suggestion of inadequacy and of vague desire in a life which appeared to observers to be even insolently perfect.

He was about to reply, when the tapestries were again drawn aside, and there came in a gay party: the Duchess of Queenstown, Lady Gloucester, Lady Whitby, the Russian Ambassador, the Rao of Nautch, and several young men of fashion; they were full of news, speculation, laughter, and idleness, and were charmed to find Syrlin in her drawing-rooms, though he limited himself to bowing over the hands of the ladies whom he knew already, and standing beside the fireplace in silence. He regretted his interrupted *tête-à-tête*, and as he listened to their chatter, what fools they seemed to him, good Heavens! What fools!

The Rao of Nautch, with his three months of Europe, fresh from his rhinoceros duels, and his elephant hunts, and his marble mosques, and his monkey-filled temples under the palm groves, was not farther removed from the spirit of the society around him than was Syrlin; was nearer to it indeed, for the Rao of Nautch was a cheerful and pleasure-loving young man, who thought this superior civilisation to which they had brought him was amusing enough, though extremely absurd, with its perpetual eating, its admirable wines, its frightful architecture, its very unveiled ladies, and its funny pretences of regarding human life and property as sacred, while it made its big guns at Woolwich, and gathered its taxes throughout his own kingdom of Nautch.

A succession of people followed these, and Freda Avillion was never alone until it was time to dress

for dinner. She was going to a very ceremonious dinner that night, and to show herself at two parties after it. As her woman dressed her, she thought of Syrlin's words with disproportionate irritation.

"Why did he take for granted that she had no imagination? Why did he seem to fully understand that the poets and dramatists had been a dead letter to her until his own impersonation had aroused her comprehension of them? Artists were always like that; they always spoke as if they alone were of the elect, as if they alone could see, or hear, or feel! Talk of the pride of birth!" she thought, "where was there any pride like intellectual pride? All the Pharisees of Jerusalem were not so stiff-necked as one man of genius can be. Look at Henry Irving, all sweetness and suavity, yet how plainly thinking himself much greater and better than any king or Kaiser. She did not blame them for it. They were quite right to be insolent to a world which would have been as insolent to them if they had failed as it was servile and sycophantic to their success. She did not blame them, only she did not see why they should make so sure that they had such an entire monopoly of all the higher qualities or warmer sympathies. *On peut être reine et aimer son mioche,*" she thought, "but that is what they will never allow; it can only be the fisherman's or the beggar's wife alone *qui aime son mioche* according to them; you can see the stars just as well from the White Tower at Windsor as from the top of Eddystone Lighthouse, but they will never admit it; if you are not out un-

comfortably in the midst of the blackness of the water they think you cannot possibly have eyes for Orion and the rest. That is their form of prejudice, though they think they have no prejudices."

"They" were very odd persons in Freda Avillion's mind. She tolerated them because they amused her, but she saw their vanities, their contradictions, and their shortcomings very plainly, and regarded them with the same kind of half-contemptuous indulgence which Mary Stuart probably felt towards her minstrels and poets. Minstrels and poets and queens have none of them changed their natures, though their places have altered since the days of Amboise and of Holyrood.

When Syrlin left the house a few minutes later he overtook Beaufront, who instead of going to the Lords was strolling towards Wilton Street; they walked in silence towards the Park and along the Drive. They had reached Albert Gate with scarcely any words being exchanged between them; at last he said abruptly without any prelude:

"Is she happy?"

"Who?" asked Beaufront very astonished.

"Your cousin."

"Lady Avillion?" said Beaufront stiffly. "Certainly. Why not? And what affair of yours would it be if she were not?"

Syrlin was absorbed in his own thoughts and did not resent the rudeness of the rebuke.

"Why did she marry him?" he enquired; pursuing his meditations.

"I don't know, I am sure. Because she liked him I suppose. My consent was not asked," said Beaufront crossly; and whistled to his colley dog, who was barking at a horse and kicking up the tan of the Ride.

CHAPTER IX.

"Freda has fads," said Avillion one morning in his own house to Beaufront. "All kinds of fads. They do no good, not the slightest good. You don't stave off the deluge because you stick primroses under your horse's ears. You don't check the horrible growth of population because you send a wagon-load of ragged children into Epping Forest. Women take politics with their lives nowadays, just as they sprinkle salt on their muffins. It's all play. I understand an ugly woman taking to it, but in a handsome woman it's preposterous. My wife is an *élégante*, and a beauty, and all the rest of it; what has she got to do with politics? She might as well try to stop a runaway horse with her fan. Nothing will alter anything. All the world over the democracy is getting bigger and bigger, stronger and stronger, but I think the country here will last out our time. If it doesn't she can't bale out the rising tide with her parasol. I wish you would make her understand that, Beau."

"Not I. I admire her earnestness," said Beaufront. "It shows that a woman thinks."

"Why should a woman think?" said Avillion.

"And besides, it doesn't show that she thinks, it only shows she repeats the cackle she hears."

"And what else do we do?" replied Beaufront. "Haven't we all got primroses at our horses' ears to-day? The primroses make one shiver a little; it's rather like gathering flowers on the brink of the bottomless pit, it rather savours of the white lilies soaked in the sea of blood, but still they mean something; they mean that the great lady and the labourer's wife may have a common bond in a common country."

"Oh, yes," said Avillion. "I daresay they have a common bond, especially when the labourer's wife digs the roots up for nothing out of somebody else's field, and the great lady buys them at six shillings a dozen. But if you think that Freda and her friends and their little yellow flowers will stave the seizure of land off for a single half-century you will believe anything."

"She will find plenty of men to believe everything she tells them, even if it be still more improbable than that," said Beaufront, as he advanced to meet his cousin, who had a great bouquet of primroses in her hand and was dressed for driving.

"Won't you come to the meeting?" she asked her husband.

"I!"

He did not deign any further reply. He grumbled at giving, but he gave his money to the Carlton regularly and liberally; he grumbled at going, but he went down to the Lords when there was any im-

portant decision; he subscribed to any political feasts or any elections that went on in his own county, and he bored himself to be civil to the county members. But for all the fuss and fiddle-faddle of the party, all the rose-water with which it sought to quench the sulphur fumes of a seething naphtha pool, Avillion had nothing but contempt; the contempt of a clever, selfish, keen-sighted, and very indolent man for the toil and trouble with which others tried to weave ropes of sand, and to fill bottomless vessels, and to persuade those who hooted and hated them that they were the salt of the earth.

"Lord Flodden is coming here to go to Battersea," she said with a smile, half amused, half triumphant.

"Really?" said Beaufront. "Well that *is* clever of you. What an advertisement! He cannot draw back after that."

"On the contrary, he is coming because I have convinced him that to do so does not pledge him at all," she replied with some offence, conscious of the integrity of her motives and the candour of her explanations.

"Oh, of course," said Beaufront dryly. "We always say that to the ephebes. Well, anyhow, you are always right, Freda, for those to whom you condescend to be charming."

"I hope that *we* are right, that the interests of the country and the people are much safer with us than they ever can be with the other side."

Avillion laughed:

"My dear Freda, you don't seriously go in for all those *fadaises,* do you? To be sure your neophyte is very young."

"The *fadaises* are at all events the political programme of the Carlton, so they are or they ought to be yours," said his wife with coldness. "As for this poor boy, he is really in earnest in his desire to do what is right, and it would be wicked to let him stray over to the Radicals' ranks unwarned for want of a word in time."

"Not to speak of the immense chagrin which Lady Wiltshire will feel when she sees him with primroses in his button-hole! Amiable as you are, my lady, you will grant that her suffering will be not without amusement for you."

"It is a matter surely of general principles, not of personal malignity or gratification."

"Oh, of course we know that no personal feeling ever does enter into politics! But it is really very clever of you to have enticed that lad from the creed of his fathers. A Tory Flodden will be something like a mute Irish member."

"Lord Flodden," announced the groom of the chambers, and a well-made youth over six feet in height and carrying himself half awkwardly, half gracefully, entered the room, his eyes very eagerly seeking Lady Avillion.

He was a good-looking boy, with something unlike other boys in his appearance. His education at once cloistral and classic, his ignorance of English life, his timidity which was not without grace, and

his delightful abhorrence of all sport, made him as totally unlike the youth of the day as his crisp rippling golden curls were unlike the shaven pates of the mashers. They called him the new Lothair (behind his back), and (to his face) men courted him and women caressed him. The boy was astonished, dazzled, disgusted, all in one; but he had a good deal of sound sense which counterbalanced his simplicity, and saved him alike from vanity and deception. He perceived that everyone wanted to use him in some way or another, and his natural candour and trustfulness drew back from their snares and sophisms as a sea-anemone draws back into itself at the touch of a human finger.

There had been great speculation in the world of politics when the young Marquis of Flodden had attained his majority six months before. His father had been a hypochondriac, a recluse, living in southern climates, and wholly indifferent to all which went on at home. The boy had been brought up in the strictest seclusion, and nothing was known in London of his tastes, habits, or views. It was thought that his sympathies would be Whig, because every bearer of the title had been a Whig ever since the Lord Flodden of that time had marched against Charles Edward, to the amazement and fury of all the Western Highlands. But the boy's mother had been of an old Tory family, and it was possible that she might have inclined him that way. There was at least an open field for speculation, and when the young man descended at his long unoccupied man-

sion in St. James's Square, there was between the two parties an open rivalry to secure him, which Avillion viewed with mild derision, and Beaufront with profound contempt.

But the inertia of her cousin and her husband were amply atoned for by the energy and decision which Lady Avillion had thrown into the matter.

"Yes: certainly we must go for Lothair," she had said to herself after the request of Lord Greatorex in Downing Street; a boy with no ready-made ideas, whose mind would be a sheet of white paper on which to write her own views, was a delightful thing to secure, whilst his large fortune and his territorial influence would make him the most valuable of supporters.

Flodden had not been a dozen hours in town before the card of Lord Avillion was left on him, and had not been a week before Lady Avillion's boudoir had become to him the one place in this astonishing Babylon where he felt happy and safe. He knew no more of the world than if he had kept sheep on one of his own strathsides all his life; he had been brought up by a simple and pious mother, and grave tutors who represented life to him as a morass of temptation and a mire of despond. He had scarcely understood anything of his own powers and standing in the world, until all at once he found himself in the bewildering, intoxicating, enervating atmosphere of fashionable London, at the beginning of the Parliamentary Session. That world secretly compared him to a goose, an ass, and a lamb, and

wanted to pluck the goose, to lead the ass, and to tether the lamb. But Freda Avillion said to him in the rose light of her favourite room as she gave him some tea:

"Don't let anyone get hold of you. Come to me when you want to understand anything. You know your mother and my mother were such great friends."

They had been so in girlhood for a year or two, and this fact lost nothing under her delicate management of it. Why should this boy go to the Radicals, when by a little care and caressing bestowed on him he might so easily be brought to wear primroses? And indeed wear them he did in his buttonhole as he now entered the library of Avillion House on the anniversary of Disraeli's death.

"They don't bind you to anything, you know," she said with a smile as she saw them. "Numbers of Radicals wear them; they say it is because they honour Lord Beaconsfield's genius, but I am sure it is only because they like to try and be in the swim."

Flodden looked grave, as he always did when he did not understand.

"Disraeli was at heart a Radical," he said with hesitation, for he had so few opinions that he advanced any of them very timidly, as a man who has only a few shillings in the world cannot tender one without anxiety.

Lord Avillion laughed.

"Don't say that where you're going."

"Why shouldn't he say it if he thinks it?" said

Beaufront. "If Disraeli were a Radical he couldn't have served his purpose better than by joining the Tories, for no man ever belonged to them that did so much damage to their cause."

"My dear Ralph!" said Freda with considerable annoyance, "why will you say those things? You don't mean them."

"I certainly mean that, and I will prove it out of his books, and out of his speeches. If you will read 'Sybil,' and remember the Household Suffrage, you cannot dispute it."

"He certainly approved the principle of aristocracy."

"But did his best to prevent its application. Besides, what must an aristocracy, which thinks it grand to go back as far as Magna Charta, which is generally incapable of going back as far as the Stuarts, and which is largely composed of enriched tradesmen of the Victorian era, appear to a Venetian Jew or to an high-caste Hindoo? The terrible irony of 'Sybil,' indeed of all his novels, harrows and hacks the English peerage like a steam-saw."

"I think we must go to Battersea, or we shall be too late for Lord Greatorex's address," said Freda, who did not bring her new Lothair to her house to hear this kind of conversation. He could hear enough of it, if he liked, at Jane Wiltshire's.

Flodden was gazing at her with all his young soul in his eyes, not in the least conscious of all which his gaze expressed, and lost in a dreamy adoration, infinitely amusing to the two other men.

Avillion looked at him, smiled, and lighted a cigarette. He could cast the youth's horoscope without any difficulty.

"You're going to belong to us, I see," said Avillion to him with a slow, cynical little smile; but neither the meaning nor the inference contained in his remark was visible to the boy.

He never dreamt that his adhesion to the Carlton, and his addition to the Tory Premier's supporters, was the conquest of the moment on which Lady Avillion's soul was set as on a matter of personal pique and supremacy.

"You are going to a heaven of primroses and platitudes," said Beaufront to him. "Happily for you there will be some pretty women to look at——"

"And to hear," added his cousin. "Violet Guernsey is going to speak."

"I am glad I am not Guernsey," said Avillion.

"My husband is very old fashioned in some ideas. He doesn't like women to do anything," she said to Flodden, in explanation and attenuation of these dangerous remarks, as they descended the staircase.

Beaufront saw her to her carriage, lifted his hat, and walked away towards Pall Mall. The boy went alone with her, to his own unutterable ecstasy and embarrassment, with the faint sweet odour of her primroses wafted to him as they drove, and her delicate profile his to contemplate as he would, in the grey, cloudy air of a London afternoon. There

were primroses in the horses' frontlets; primroses in the coats of the servants; primroses everywhere, on the pavement, in the shop windows, in the button-holes of gentlemen, in the hands of the crowds. Flodden thought of babyish days when he had gathered them under the birch-woods of his old Scottish home, Brae-eden, with the grey sea shining beyond the silvered trunks; and Freda thought of the undulating turf of her own old home at Bellingham, with the primrose roots clustering round the bog beeches, and the rooks flying silently to and fro the elm-trees by the lake, where they made their nests.

"People always think of their childhood when they see primroses," she said, as the carriage rolled past Hyde Park Corner. "It is the most innocent of all the flowers, and it was cruel to make it into a party emblem; only the cause is so good!"

"If I were quite sure of that," said Flodden, and he coloured, being afraid that the expression of his doubts might offend her.

London made a strong impression on the young man; it at once depressed and excited him. Its want of artificial and natural charm, its melancholy architecture, and its grey atmosphere, were painful to him, used as his eyes were to the beauties of Nature and of Art; but, at the same time, the exhilaration of its endless life, the animation of its ceaseless society, and the attraction of its agreeable interior, gave him a sense at once of confusion and of gratification. Everything was new and strange

to him; and he was divided between a strong sense of æsthetic disappointment and an equally strong instinct of youthful amusement. Though they thought him so simple, he was keen-sighted, and, whilst as innocently trustful as any antelope which has never seen humanity, he had perceptions which were not easily led astray. He felt that everyone in England wanted to use him, for some reason or other, financial, political, or social, and the knowledge saddened him. He thought that Lady Avillion alone actually liked him for himself; she was so kind: she, a beauty, a wit, a great lady, who wanted nothing of anybody in existence: and the conviction attached him to her with intense gratitude. Of the rivalries of Primrose Dames, of the acerbities and jealousies of Party, of the pleasure of out-manœuvring and forestalling Jane Wiltshire, this innocent from the shores of Sicily dreamed nothing; he was only sensible of his Lady's kindliness.

She sympathised now with his mingling of depression and excitation.

"I feel just like that myself when I am in London," she said to him. "Everything is so ugly, and so absolutely without charm, and the life one leads is so mere a routine, and so hurried and so material, and so gross under all its varnish, that one feels any soul one has is dying inch by inch every day in such an atmosphere. And yet there is such a fascination in it, in the intense movement, in the incessant intrigue, in the endless conflict of minds, in the ceaseless varieties of character, in the sense of

being in the very centre of the world's axis, as it were, that one cannot resist its influences; and when I go away from it down to my own houses, or other people's houses in the country, or to Cannes, or Carlsbad, or Como, I miss even the boys crying the evening newspapers in the streets, as I drive out of my gates to go to a dinner party. One knows one will hear at the dinner party what the town won't hear till the morning papers are out: that is the great charm of London. Everybody in it is always asking *quid novi?* and it is the only place on earth where everybody is quite sure to get an immediate answer. Of course the wish for news is vulgar in itself; of course it is much better and finer to be reading Pindar or Thomas à Kempis all by oneself in a library, than to be fishing for tit-bits of *haute politique* as one eats a truffle or an oyster. But it is life, movement, interest; it is one's generation and one's epoch; and as somebody wrote, you know, 'Whatever my mood is, I love Piccadilly.'"

With such light and irrevelant discourse did she beguile the way to Battersea that her object in their pilgrimage never once showed its cloven foot of political purpose amongst the carelessly scattered flowers of her charms and fancies.

"How kind she is! How sweet she is!" thought Guy, with all a boy's enthusiasm; "and, oh, how fair she is!" he thought as he noted the upward curl of her long eyelashes in the dim light. It seemed wonderful that she could take so much

trouble about him, and care to admit him to her intimacy; and an ecstatic worship, of which the humility was even greater than the devotion, filled his empty, wistful, boyish heart for this great Sovereign who stooped to him and spared his shyness so many tremors, and spared his ignorance so many errors.

She criticised her own leaders and their policy so frankly, and with such utter absence of all trace of a *parti pris,* that he felt quite safe in her society, and its freedom from all ulterior motive.

"You are so exceptionally free," she said to him; "most young men, when they come of age, are already irrevocably pledged to one side or another by their family, their traditions, or their education. But you have lived out of England. Your father had no politics at all, one of your uncles was a Radical, the other a Liberal-Conservative, as ran the jargon of those days; (we say Unionist; *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*); your grandfather was a Whig, and his grandfather before him. But your mother's people all belonged to us; and your maternal grandfather was Privy Seal in the late Lord Derby's Administration. You really are not bound by family respect to either side. Take time, and look around you before you decide."

And he, poor boy, replied with timid enthusiasm:

"Don't think me a prig, Lady Avillion; but you know I do feel one ought to bring one's conscience into these things; I feel that political life ought to be a matter of real conviction, not a mere mechani-

cal repetition of what one's own family has thought and done. I know it sounds presumptuous and silly to say so, but I have thought about it a good deal, and I do so want to do what is right."

"That is very sweet of you, and so rare in these days! But it is because I wish you to be guided wholly by your own ideas of right and wrong, that I ask you dispassionately to listen to our best exponents of our views," replied Freda Avillion, in her sweetest tones. "I would not for worlds bias you in the very least. If you like to be true to the traditions of your family, why should you not? Some men think it a point of honour to sacrifice their own convictions to that sort of family consistency. But this I must remind you of,—the Liberalism of your father's youth would be the Conservatism of to-day."

"Pray go on"—murmured Flodden, little conscious of the arguments, so melodious was the voice which urged them, of which the clear, low melody was audible above the roar of traffic in Sloane Street.

"Oh, you will hear better arguments than mine," she said with a sigh. "And I don't even *wish* to persuade you. Such singleness of purpose and honesty of search as yours are things too good in themselves for me to seek to change them into any rash or blind acceptance of our policy. You are young, free, sincere, and you have the world before you: why should you be in a hurry to pledge or promise away any part of yourself?"

"It is so kind of you not to be angry with me," murmured Guy, with colour in his cheeks. "Lady Wiltshire always gets so irritable because I do not make up my mind, and do something decisive."

Freda Avillion smiled and thought to herself, "What a goose Jane Wiltshire always is! As the American girl said to Beau when they were out fly-fishing, 'She's put the wrong bug on her pole.'"

Aloud, she replied as they rolled on towards the squalor and æstheticism, the furnace chimneys and the blue china, the dusky streets and the glowing red brick of Chelsea:

"I do so respect you; how could I be angry? There is so very little earnestness in political feelings; people talk a great deal, but in their hearts they all think they are just patching the country up to last their own time, and they care very little about anything else that may come afterwards. Now you, on the contrary, think, and think for yourself, and wish to be of use in your generation, and to do nothing that shall be harmful in an after time. You are your own master and have a great stake in the game which we are playing at Westminster; you are so entirely right not to join either side of the players in a hurry which you would repent at leisure. How nice those Queen Anne houses are, are they not? When London is all red brick, Prout may come out of his grave and take pleasure in it. And the big bay windows are nice, if they would only learn to drape them properly inside; English people never know how to drape windows well."

They were now passing through Chelsea, which tries so painfully to be an artistic suburb, and finds its prospect of factory chimneys and penny steamers agree so ill with its indoor decoration of lilies and sunflowers and sixpenny Japanese fans and parasols.

"And to think it was once called Shingle-Ea!" said Freda, whose thoughts never considered themselves bound to follow any regular sequence. "And they say the river was widespread like a lagoon in those early ages; sometimes I am wicked enough to wish it would become a lagoon again and swallow up all the gas works and the soap manufactories and the dust consumers, and all the 'desirable residences' with electric bells, and modern sanitation. What a fearful word that is! how intensely modern in its priggishness, its pomposity, its ugliness, its scientific wind-baggishness! By-the-bye, did you ever notice, Lord Flodden, that nobody ever had diphtheria till people began to get frightened about their drains? It wasn't even in the world at all, I believe, until chemistry taught us that it was our duty to poison our fields."

"Is the weather often like this?" he asked. "I have been in England a month, and I have not yet seen the sun."

"Be thankful if you see him in two months' time. He is like Syrlin—he rarely crosses the Channel. Two years ago I came from a winter in Egypt, and I saw a dusky mottled red orange hanging above the chimneys of Apsley House as I drove

home. I thought it was a railway signal, but they called it the sun. I told the Astronomer Royal that it was impossible it could be the same sun that I had seen shine dazzling as a god above my dahabieh for five months, but he assured me that in our solar system there are not two. After all, I suppose the Nile sun and the Piccadilly sun are not more different than we are ourselves when we are pleased and good-humoured, and when we are discontented or cross."

And Flodden listened, enthralled and enchanted, whether her theme was moral conscientiousness or the Tite Street houses, political obligations or old Chelsea china.

From Hyde Park Corner through Chelsea to Battersea Park is as ugly a drive as any civilised city can show in its midst, but to Flodden it was all transfigured; for him the red brick houses had the glow of a Venetian street scene; the college garden grounds had the beauty of the Lido acacia-woods, the railway bridge had the stateliness of the Rialto, the factory chimneys were as the slender bell towers which are mirrored in the silver surface of the lagoons, and the clouds of dust which rose in the grey and melancholy air were lovely as the white steam of surf that is breaking on the bar of Malamocco. She was silent and he was happy as they drove at Battersea up to the entrance of the Albert Hall amidst the handsome equipages, the pushing pedestrians, and the hot and hoarse policemen.

"How ugly it all is!" said his companion. "And

what a funny idea it is of the last years of the century, that to build a remarkably hideous structure of glass, iron, and bricks, painted in violent colours, and mew the people up in it, is to advance culture and education! It really don't advance anything except a few pushing gentlemen who get C.B.'s by doing it."

When Lady Avillion took her calm graceful deliberate way towards the places reserved for the great ladies and leaders of the Primrose League, followed by Flodden with his little bouquet in his buttonhole and a flush on his frank fair boyish face, there was a rustle and a murmur of excitement in all those spectators who knew enough of the great world to know the importance in it of the great Scotch Marquisate.

"She has actually got him," thought the chief of the party, and felt that Providence was indeed on his side when it gave him such an assistant as Lady Avillion. *She* had not put the "wrong bug on the pole."

Flodden, not by any means aware of the weight and significance of his appearance there in the eyes of all, received with some embarrassment the greetings and congratulations showered on him from the gentlemen on the platform and watched with enraptured eyes the grace with which she saluted her friends, exchanged a confidential whisper with the Prime Minister, and then sank on to her chair while the organ sent forth the last strains of the National Anthem, and the body of people in the hall cheered

and stamped and waved their handkerchiefs in a magnetic frenzy of wholly unintelligible excitement. Everyone there present who knew anything, knew that the young Lord Flodden was irrevocably committed to the party there gathered; he himself alone did not know it. Had she not told him that the little pale flowers in his buttonhole bound him to nothing? If she had told him that they were blue flowers or black flowers and not yellow flowers at all, he would have believed her.

CHAPTER X.

The Athene who had brought him to Battersea meanwhile watched him with amusement. She knew that she could lead him wherever she liked, and she rather disdained the facility of her dominion; but it diverted her to see how seriously he took all the comedy of the meeting, with what admirable attention he listened to the various orations, and how painfully he was endeavouring to turn his thoughts from herself to the political themes of the speeches.

"He is indeed conscientious! He thinks we come here to listen and learn!" she thought with a little irreverent smile which she hid in her bouquet, for the Premier was speaking.

He did listen with painstaking care and honesty, the crude light falling through the glass roof on to his blue questioning candid eyes, whilst interest, wonder and perplexity and finally disappointment, passed over a countenance which had not learned the art of concealing impressions and emotions.

"I have put the right fly on my rod, but the fish may not bite after all," thought Freda, whose candour to herself was never obscured by any vain refusal to recognise what she saw was true. And yet

it would be hardly possible for him to go to the other side now, after sitting here in the very innermost circle and holiest of holies of the primrose party.

"Well, what did you think of us?" she asked as they were driving back again through Chelsea.

Flodden grew red and hesitated.

"There were a great many platitudes," he said timidly.

"Of course there were. What else would a monster meeting at Battersea understand? The food must be suited to the eater. You cannot feed a babe on venison or a navvy on turbot."

"But he said," Flodden contended, meaning the Prime Minister, "he said 'My policy is, appeal to the people.' He said that twice over."

"Well?" said Freda impatiently.

"Well," said Flodden with deference and timidity, "I do not call that Conservatism. The demagogue can say that. The Radical says it. If I am only to appeal to the people and not to lead them, what difference is there in me whether I be a Radical or a Tory?"

Freda's delicate eyebrows drew together in a little frown. She was not patient of rebellion; and her own secret opinions leaned towards agreement with him.

"You want an Oligarchy? We can't have an Oligarchy; we should like one immensely, but it is impossible.

And all submitted to a people's will.

That is Tennyson's line, and we have all got to repeat it after him. After all, what else is parliamentary government based upon if not on the mutations of the national will?"

"But the great Statesman bends that will to his own."

"Yes, he does; but the great Statesman doesn't say so, my dear Lord Flodden. Have you never heard an old peasant woman tell you that if you wish a pig or a donkey to go your way, you must always let him think that he goes his own?"

The youth was silent; the silence of that dejection which must come over every ingenuous and aspiring mind when it first is brought in contact with the realities of political life and finds that what it expected was a battle of the Gods is but little more than a game of drawpoker.

"You know, I myself," continued Freda, "should infinitely prefer it if one could throw the glove down, and have a new war of King and Commonwealth. Or at least I should much prefer it if we could make an absolute stand against electoral representation, and the dominance which it brings about, either of the Mob or of the Caucus. But it is impossible to do so at this time. To talk of it is to dream like Lisette and break all the eggs in our basket. We must rule through and by the multitude. The only difference is that we rule, or try to do so, disinterestedly and patriotically; the other side through opportunism and by flattery. If you object to the phrase 'appeal to the people,' will you tell me what

other programme is possible under the system of government by Representation?"

"It is very difficult to know what is best," said Flodden with a sigh.

"Indeed it is; and that is why a young man does well to give his conscience in some measure into the keeping of his political chief. You have no chief as yet. You are standing aloof and looking on. There is no hurry for you to choose one. But when you do choose, you will, I think, come to us, because you will recognise that if, to get ourselves understood, we are driven to use conventional language, which does not seem to you quite sincere enough, to please you, we are at least honest in our dealings, and disinterested and patriotic in our efforts. But you will judge for yourself. Not for the world would I persuade you and have you repent afterwards. It always looks so bad to have to change sides, doesn't it, whatever excellent reasons we may have for doing it? And now let us go and wash all this dust and heat out of our throats at Violet Guernsey's. You must at least compliment her on her speech. It was very clever, I thought, and besides she is so pretty. If she had told them any kind of rubbish they would have cheered her."

The carriage stopped at a mansion by Prince's Gate; and Flodden went obediently and made his bow and paid his compliments at Lady Guernsey's, who was receiving such homage from right and left as, still wearing the tall plumed hat in which she had made her oration, and with a large bunch of prim-

roses stuck in her lace waistcoat, she was smoking a cigarette and standing over a tea-table.

"Lord Flodden thinks we were prosy, my dear," said Freda Avillion. "And he can't distinguish us from demagogues."

"We are demagogues when we are popular enough," replied Lady Guernsey.

"I thought you had made him quite safe? Surely he can't draw back *now?*" she whispered anxiously, when Flodden was momentarily out of hearing.

"Oh, one never knows with boys," said Freda carelessly. "So often with a very young man it is *la dernière venue qui a raison.*"

"Not when you have been *la première venue,*" said Violet Guernsey. "I never knew any one of them revolt against you, though you treat them so ill."

"I am not aware that I treat anyone ill," replied Freda Avillion. She really thought she did not. She found people very unreasonable. They never understood why she tired of them, and her suave and gracious courtesy seldom varied, even when they had grown tiresome. She had a softness of tone, a simulation of sympathy, which appeared to them assurance that they were full of interest for her. Even when she had quite done with them she let them fall easily.

If anyone had told Flodden that she was only now so kind because she wished for his adhesion to the Carlton Club and the total discomfiture of Jane Wiltshire, it would have seemed to him a blasphemy.

He would not have believed. He was shy and she gave him confidence, he was hesitating and she pointed the way; he was friendless amongst a crowd of parasites, and she seemed his friend; he was ignorant of this world of hers, and she had the patience to teach him its shibboleth, its meaning, and its devious ways. She was the Mentor to his Telemachus, only the Mentor had the smile and the form of a Calypso.

He walked home that day with a tumult of new emotions stirring in him, adoration of his teacher striving in him against disappointment with much of what she taught or of what those to whom she led him taught. London had already found out that Lord Flodden was odd. How, said London men, could a poor boy be otherwise, who has passed his youth on a remote sea-shore between a hopeless hypochondriac and a dreaming devotee? If he had worn his white flannels at Surly Hall, all these queer ideas would have been taken out of him, he would have learnt to crop his hair, clip his English, pack up his soul in a gun-case, and mortgage his estates like a gentleman.

He was singularly *énervé* and depressed by his Battersea observations, but he had endeavoured to be agreeable at the Guernseys' since she had wished him to be so. After all, he said to himself, he had not taken any side, he had only worn some little flowers and listened to some tedious speeches to please a woman.

He was surprised in the papers of the evening

to see his presence at Battersea announced in large letters, and in the *Times* of the next day the fact was alluded to in a leading article, and his adhesion to the Conservative cause was taken for granted.

"But I have not in the least decided," he said piteously to Freda, who answered:

"Of course you haven't; why should you? But the journalists always decide our fate for us, and know what we are going to do long before we know it ourselves."

"You recollect," she added, "I have always told you to make no rash engagement; but I am sure that you care for the dignity of England, don't you?"

"Indeed I do," he answered with all his soul in his eyes and all his heart in his tone, like a boy who had been reared on Scott and Macaulay.

"Then you see you couldn't very well join *them?*" she said dreamily; "they will withdraw an army under defeat if it save them putting a penny more on the income-tax, and will give up every coaling station round the whole world if they can keep in office by pleasing the ratepayers. Only remember one thing: nothing can be more unlike the old Whigs than the new Liberals. Myself, I do not mind much what any man's politics are, provided they permit him consistency and manliness. It is not consistent to be a great noble and a rank democrat in one; and it certainly is not manly. Do you think it is?"

"How different," thought Flodden as he heard,

"how different this open candid way of speaking, this freedom from all bias, this sweet calm wide-minded frankness, to the severe dogmatism of tone, the dictatorial conviction of infallibility in principle with which Lady Wiltshire drove her opinions into him, and trod contemptuously upon his own." Flodden was very young, and politics were to him a motive of conscience; he could forgive no one who viewed them in any lesser light.

Unlike Lady Wiltshire, who had shown him her aim at the onset, and had wearied and alarmed him with eulogies of her party, Freda had admirably concealed her drift, had treated him with candour and carelessness, and had earnestly recommended him not to be hastily led into doing or thinking, accepting or declining, anything whatever, and, beyond this sort of suggestive remark, had never approached persuasion. She had made her politics lovely to him by her person, as saints should make their religion; and she had rendered her opponents absurd by well-timed and delicately-worded depreciation of them, couched in phrases which remained in her hearer's mind, comprehensive and portable to the memory as a line of Pope's or Publius Syrus.

Jane Wiltshire would shut him up in a corner and hammer at him for half-an-hour, leaving nothing with him behind her but a sense of tedium and attempted tyranny. The human mind resists compulsion at all times, and even against persuasion is obdurate. When the success of such persuasion is taken for granted it is adamant.

From the first day when he had called on her, and he had seen her come towards him with a little smile, and heard her say, "Ah, how I pity you, Lord Flodden, to exchange the sound of the sea and of Etna for the roar of our cabs and omnibuses!" Freda Avillion had taken complete possession of his fancy and his feelings. He was but a boy, with the narrow views and exalted feelings of a lad reared by a sentimental woman in a sylvan seclusion; and had anyone told him that he was in love with Lord Avillion's wife he would have been horror-stricken as at the imputation of some unpardonable sin. But he was in love without knowing it, which was of the two the more dangerous for him, and every hour of his day was numbered solely by the hope of seeing, or by the fear of not seeing her, which it might bring to him. It was the exalted natural, spiritual, and timid adoration, which is only possible to extreme youth, and if he had seen her profile as she drove down Grosvenor Place or had had from her a little smile of recognition at a crowded party, it sufficed to make his happiness for the morning or the evening thus distinguished.

"You are doing that boy an immense deal of mischief," said Beaufront.

"What absurd things you can say, for a clever man!"

"He worships you already," said Beaufront irritably.

"Already! How long should it take?"

"Oh, I know you pride yourself on dealing *coups de foudre!*"

"I pride myself on nothing, except, perhaps, on having a fairly good temper, which all my relatives are agreed to try to the uttermost!"

"Seriously, my dear Freda, can you say that the honour and glory of belonging to the Tory party will compensate to that lad for all you mean to make him suffer?"

"He must belong to some party, and he must be *mené en laisse* by somebody; he can't run alone at his age—"

"But when it pleases you to drop the leash?"

"Somebody will take it up. Young men can always find guardian angels."

"Young peers can always find Mentors in petticoats and political Calypsos," said Beaufront very crossly.

That evening, Flodden, who had hitherto refused all dinner invitations, drew aside the curtains of one window of his dining-room and looked out into the street. His mansion was in Grosvenor Street, and considering its fashion, there is no duller or drearier thoroughfare in fashionable London. It was a moonless, rainy night; broughams and cabs were hurrying by, the flanks of their horses steaming, and the water running off the waterproofs of their coachmen and drivers; boys were bawling out some newspaper news of an earthquake in Bolivia and a murder in Tipperary; a dog went by, timid and alone; some ragged women talked together under a gas lamp.

The young man sighed. When he had looked out of his window in Sicily he had seen the sea, moonlit or phosphorescent, or gorgeous in storm; Etna with forests of snow about his summit, magnificent against a luminous sky; orange and almond orchards sloping down to meet ilex and tamarisk woods, cloud-like in shadow.

He rang the bell. To the stately servant, who answered the summons, he said:

"There is a stray dog in the street, bring it in. There are some wretched women under the lamp; ask where they live, and what is the matter with them."

"But, my lord," stammered the servant, amazed and aghast. "But your lordship—"

"Do what I tell you," said Flodden. "If you are afraid of the dog I will go myself. Perhaps it will be best that I should go."

And he went. The four men standing in his ante-chambers looked at each other, and felt that they were in the service of a madman. The dog, a gentle, honest, rough-coated nondescript, lost and unhappy, trembled very much, but trusted and accepted his hospitality. The women told him long contradictory, improbable stories, and smelt filthily of drink, and disappointed him. They were whining and servile, coarse and obsequious. The men in the entrance hall looked out after him through the open doorway, and seeing him stand there in the rain, grinned across at one another. What a poor young fool he seemed to them!

He took down the addresses of the women, gave each of them a little money, and came indoors with the stray dog. Though it was a rainy night and late, the spectacle of a young peer, bare-headed in the street, before the lighted façade of his own mansion, had begun to attract a little crowd. He brought in the muddy, dripping dog, and ordered it some food; then he read over the addresses of the women; then he sighed. They had stunk so of gin, and they had crammed such a number of transparent lies into four of five sentences of speech. Poor wretches! they were the products of civilisation.

"If my lord want mongrels and tramps, he won't have far to go to get 'em," said one of the powdered lackeys to another. They were all of them stately, polished London servants, who knew what was proper, and each of them despised their new master with all the force of a vulgar soul which had been varnished in an artificial ward.

"What a nice creature you are!" said Flodden to the dog, whose clear brown eyes were looking up at him gratefully through very dirty shaggy hair. "I am glad I saw you out of the window. What do you think we can do for those women? Nothing. Drink and dirt are what they love; how is one to persuade them that drink and dirt are their destruction? I can put them into clean houses with good water-pipes, but I cannot make them drink the water, or keep the houses clean with it. What an abject thing is modern life seen in a London street! Was there any life ever lower? I doubt it."

The dog went to sleep at his feet, he looked over the evening papers. There were the earthquake and the murder in big type; there were details of burglaries, bigamies and adulteration of food; there were two columns about Irish outrages and a paragraph stating that there were three hundred and fifty private bills waiting to be brought forward between Easter and Whitsuntide. The newspapers produced on him the same sensation of dreariness and hopelessness that the rainy street had done; life seemed a coil of care without any object or issue.

"If only one could do anything," he thought. It did not seem to him that anything was being done or even could be done. He remembered the speeches he had heard that day at Battersea, and they seemed to him like Nero's fiddling while Rome was burning. The airs played were pretty enough, but they were inappropriate to the smouldering fires and the roaring flames, to the tottering palaces and the menaced Forum. Huge blind uncontrollable forces were brewing and moving and rising, with their one motive power Envy, and their one master-key Want; and these dear ladies of fashion smiled and wore their primroses and talked of their Habitations; and these good ministers turned well-known phrases about the indomitable spirit of the nation and the unity and prosperity of the empire!

Flodden was young, and he had that diffidence in judgment which is as becoming as it is rare in youth; but his studious solitary boyhood had taught him to think for himself, and he was depressed and

alarmed by what he saw around him in this London which was so new to him, but which seemed to him as inconceivably careless and credulous as ever Paris had been on the eve of the great storm.

The clock on his mantel-piece struck eleven as he sat thus in his reverie, and even as it did so one of his men entered and presented him with a little note.

The handwriting, which he already knew from any other, made the colour come into his face. On a card inside were written two lines:

"Mind that you come to Arlington Street to-night;" and it was signed by an intricate hieroglyph intended to mean W. A., while in the corner of the card was a coronet stamped in silver.

He rose joyously to his feet and bade his servant call a hansom.

"Good night, my friend; you are at home you know now," he said with a kindly caress of the dog's shaggy head, and then he ran lightly upstairs to his rooms to have a touch or two added to his evening dress; in five minutes he was on his way to Arlington Street, forgetful of political economy and patriotic foreboding; he was only a youth very much in love, who knew that he was going whither he would in a few moments meet the lady of his dreams.

His presence in Arlington Street in the evening, combined with his attendance at the Battersea gathering in the afternoon, was a significant fact to the party in particular, and society in general. But Flodden was unconscious of that at the reception

as at the meeting; he only saw Freda Avillion's eyes.

"If the Garter were not so ungallantly confined to the ugly sex, you would have the blue riband to-morrow, Freda, or at least at the first vacancy," said Beaufront to his cousin that night.

"And I should say, like the creator of the order, *Honi soit qui mal y pense*," replied Lady Avillion, who had a crown of real primroses on her graceful head, and wore a necklace of large diamonds set in primrose shape.

She had never looked handsomer.

Flodden felt content to take the political gospel, or anything else, from her hands; and would have signed, blindfold, any charters which she might have dictated.

CHAPTER XI.

"How does your idol Syrlin like our world?" she asked of Beaufront on the following morning. "He looks exceedingly discontented in it."

"Women flatter him so unblushingly."

"That he blushes instead of them? That is exceedingly kind."

"He was very happy down at Heronsmere. He hates all cities."

"Ah! There are people whom society makes melancholy, just as music makes dogs howl;—one doesn't know why."

"I should not liken Syrlin to a howling dog myself, nor should I compare society to music—unless to such music as they have in Dahomey, where logs of wood are persistently beaten by wooden hammers."

Lady Avillion laughed.

"I wonder if I am a hammer or a log. A hammer, I think. How *entêté* you are about your Syrlin; but it is the fashion to go mad over actors. Our society is so like French society before the Revolution in everything. In nothing more than in its insane adoration of the theatre. Our people are stagestruck, just as the French society was in the

days of Guimard and Clairon. It is always a sign of decadence; just as the abundance of our literature is, with its ten thousand writers of mediocrity, under whose verbiage any genius which there may be is smothered as a piece of agate is smothered under the sands of a beach."

"I know you think we are in a very bad way."

"Has not every nation been 'in a bad way,' to use your Americanism, when it has come to be unable to distinguish between originality and imitation? That is where we are now. We have a multitude of copyists, and we are so vain, or so ignorant, that we greet them as geniuses. We do not even exact anything approaching style from them. As a people, we have ceased even to know what style means."

"I have seen you pale with excitement before his Hippolyte and his Hernani."

"Oh, he is a great artist! No one could deny that. But I think it is always better not to know people of genius socially. One expects so much of them, and one is so annoyed to find them smoke and eat and grumble, and look like anybody else. Artists are like the Greek oracles, all their power lies in keeping unseen in their shrines. If an oracle had dined out, nobody would have listened to its decrees."

"Syrlin is a man of genius."

"I never said he was not; but it would not matter if he had not a grain of genius; he is an actor, and they will ask him everywhere, from the garden parties at Lambeth Palace to the garden

parties at Buckingham Palace. With all their *entêtement* in France in the last century, they wouldn't give a player the Sacraments; but nowadays he may dine with an Archbishop, and even build a church."

"And be churchwarden of it! What glory! Syrlin will answer Archbishops much like Gil Blas; and he would be more likely to build an Invalides for poor players than a church. He might have realised an immense fortune if he chose, but he gave it all away as he made it."

"He is the only person about whom you are enthusiastic. 'Will you make all France weep?' said the actor Lekain, when somebody stamped on his foot. M. Syrlin's foot would seem just as sacred to you—perhaps so, too, to himself."

Lady Avillion abhorred oddness. She always thought that real genius had infinitely better ways of displaying itself than by wearing queer waistcoats and uncombed hair on its shoulders. If you were eccentric, she thought, you might be cracked; you could not possibly be really strong. "Look what a gentleman Mozart always was, and Mendelssohn and Chopin," she would say. "Look how *soigné* and nice Raphael was, and Leonardo, and Milton even in his blindness; and Dante must, I am sure, have dressed well; you know he holds a pomegranate branch in that portrait of him by Giotto."

She was perhaps right, and she was perhaps wrong; at all events, Dr. Johnson would have obtained no tea at her hands, and Théophile Gautier and Berlioz would never have passed her portals.

Syrlin did not offend her in these respects; he was used to the great world, and knew its ways and habits and demands; although his physiognomy was rather that of some *caballero* painted by Velasquez than a man of his time, his appearance and his manners were those of any other person used to the most polished society in Europe. But, at times, in his speech, he violated those rules of well-bred inanity which such society lays down; and he spoke his opinions strongly and brusquely, whilst he never disguised either his disapproval or his ennui.

The world of London thought this delightful and adorable, because it was something new; Lady Avillion did not like it at all.

"He is a *poseur,*" she said constantly.

"What do you mean by a *poseur?*" asked Beaufront once.

"What do I mean? What anybody means, I suppose. Look in the dictionary."

"Dictionaries define a *poseur* as a 'layer of stones.' We, by it, mean a mass of affectation. Now I have known Syrlin ever since he first came out in Paris, a lad of twenty; and I can declare that a more ingenuous, natural, and sincere character I have never met. He never affects to be pleased when he is not so, and when he is displeased he does not scruple to show it."

"That is exceedingly rude."

"It may be so; but it is not a *pose.*"

"How can you tell? Diogenes was exceedingly rude; but his tub was only a *pose,* a very studied

pose too: so were Swift's brutalities, and Thackeray's sneers, and Turner's boorishness; genius may grumble and growl as it likes if it keeps to its garret, but when it comes into our drawing-rooms it should be civil like other people and wear gloves."

"What a Philistine you are, Freda!"

"You have told me so often before; I know you only find sweetness and light in all those wild, savage, spontaneous persons, but I am quite sure many of them are great impostors. I sat at dinner last week, next to that man who writes about the soul, and the Renaissance, and the spiritual life, and the obligation to deny one's appetite: and all he said was, once, 'Do you prefer thick soups or clear?' and, once, 'Do you like white or black truffles?'—and he picked the biggest ones for himself out of the napkins."

"He probably then writes his Essays when he is suffering from indigestion, and thinks the gratification of fleshly instincts not worth their cost. Syrlin won't offend you in that way; he is an anchorite!"

"*Vous m'embêtez* with your eternal Syrlin," said his cousin impatiently. What was much praised before her always irritated her; and she was in this instance the more irritated because the person praised at once attracted and offended her.

"I wish you had not invited this French actor to Brakespeare," she said to her husband, who answered petulantly:

"Of course you say that just because I like him."

"I often ask many persons you like," said Freda with some significance; "many a lovely lady had been bidden to Brakespeare whom its mistress might well have refused to invite."

"Hang your insinuations," murmured Avillion inaudibly. "Why don't you like the man?" he said aloud. "I thought all women went mad about him."

"It is perhaps because they have done so that he has become so insufferably dictatorial and conceited."

"*On a les défauts de ses qualités*," said her husband. "He is a great artist and he has the insolence of one, and it amuses me immensely, because you know it isn't so many years ago that actors were a kind of pariahs, and had no civil rights; and now we treat them, on my soul, as if each of them were Wales himself."

"You mean to let him come, then?"

"Of course I do; and if you don't rub him up the wrong way I dare say you'll end by adoring him."

"I am sorry to say I have no faculty of adoration; I never had any," said his wife coldly.

"No, you never had," thought Avillion; he liked women to adore himself when they did not give him too much of it. His wife was a cold woman; he had decided that in the very first weeks of their union, and he had never altered his opinion; it was excellent that it should be so: it prevented scenes, reproaches, and espionage on his movements: and it never occurred to him that there might be many

phases in her temperament which he, from indifference, had never observed.

What irritated her now was that she found herself looking at Syrlin and listening to him, when she had no knowledge that she was doing so. The first might be due to his unusual physical beauty, and the second to his celebrity; but the fact that her eyes and ear were thus magnetised by him when she did not even like him was an annoyance to her.

London had gone down before him with that sudden and complete prostration of itself before a new idol which is characteristic of it, and is sometimes very misleading to the idols involved, who imagine that their apotheosis will be eternal. Syrlin resisted the tide of adulation, and was never for a moment swept away by it, but he could not be in London and remain invisible. He went perforce to all the best houses. He knew the great world intimately; he had no illusions about it; he remained always at heart aloof from it, as Abd el Kader remained a stranger in the splendour of that French château which was his prison; but this only added to his charm for women, and the coldness, sometimes almost brutal, with which he repulsed them, only excited more keenly the fancy of those sated with success. He was used to live amongst them, and such habit becomes second nature: no great lady in Paris would have thought her *cinq heures* perfect unless Syrlin had been there under the palms of her salon at least once a week. He sought soli-

tude often, but when he was in the world it adored him and enchained him despite himself.

"Well, he is the god of the moment of English society," said Lady Avillion. "I hope he appreciates it. He is raised to the same level with the Missouri Juliet, the St. Louis circus-manager, and the Professor of Tweedledee and Tweedledum from Boston, who have alternately been set up on high and asked out to dinner from Portland Place to Lowndes Square. What a funny book might be written about the divinities of London society, only it would have to be published every quarter, for three months is the longest reign of any of them!"

Beaufront heard her with impatience, he did not like jests at his friend's expense.

"Syrlin's reign will last as long as he is in the world at all," he said angrily, "and why should you laugh at London if it tries to shake off its *morgue* and make itself pleasant to people of talent? It is very much better than for society to sulk behind a chevaux de frise of prejudice and caste. I think there is something very generous, very kind, very graceful, in the way in which London receives whatever it thinks is at all out of the common."

"Paris did that before the Revolution," said his cousin with significance. "Have you never read in Grimm's memoirs of how all patrician Paris went mad over the old vinedresser whom he introduced to them? Do read it. If you alter the names and dates you would say it was a long-haired backwoodsman being feasted in Belgravia to-day, only

the vinedresser kept his senses like a sober old French peasant, and the American loses his—or hers,—and takes all the adoration quite seriously."

"You are always down on Americans because you think she is an American," said Beaufront incautiously, "and I always tell you she isn't; I always tell you she is a creole."

"At all events she is 'she' to you, which means everything," said Freda with some disdain.

"In this case it means nothing," said Beaufront savagely, "except that she is a very dear and old friend."

Lady Avillion smiled; and the smile was as chill as the January sun when it shines on the ice floes on the Neva. She thought it exceedingly bad taste in her cousin to always endeavour to pass off this fable upon her. She had a speaking acquaintance with the "she" who was called Mrs. Laurence, and that was a concession by no means agreeable to her; she thought he might have been grateful, and have refrained from bringing up the name of the lady à propos of everything and nothing, and trying to impose this nonsense upon her whenever they happened to be alone. The world was nowadays full of adventuresses, and they went to court and everywhere, and there was no help for it; but she still had the right to say whom her own hall porter should let into her house, and it was a right which she exercised very tenaciously, however loosely others of her friends and neighbours might relax their *consigne;* you cannot help Tag Rag and Bobtail being ac-

cepted by the Lord Chamberlain, but you can tell your own Cerberus not to let them pass your door-mat. She was of opinion that a few women of position, if they chose to be firm about it, might still "save society"; others of this persuasion did not seem, however, to be anywhere; but if alone, like the beleaguered châtelaine of Vaudemont, she would not cede her castle to the foe.

The doors of Avillion House were of solid oak studded with steel knobs, and that they had never unclosed to admit her was a thorn in the roses with which Mrs. Laurence's path was strewn. There is a melancholy truth in Benjamin Constant's reflection: *l'objet qui nous échappe est naturellement tout différent de celui qui nous poursuit.* Human nature even at its best is wayward, thankless, and given to yearn after the unattainable. In her heart of hearts she would always feel herself a *déclassée* so long as she had not passed those great gates which frowned on Piccadilly with the crowned dragons of the Avillion supporters carrying the coronet between them in gilded bronze.

It was a social Hesperides which those dragons guarded; and as season after season had passed and she was still shut out by them, Consuelo Laurence felt that it was an intentional, a very intentional humiliation to her. Many women in her place would have harassed and wearied Beaufront continually to alter this state of things, but she never did. She was a complex union of humility and pride.

"I should do as Lady Avillion does if I were she," she said to herself, and contented herself with appearing so unconscious of the slight that London society, and even Freda Avillion herself, imagined that she did not perceive or think about it.

She was suspected of having such incredibly disgraceful intrigues, and of managing them all so exquisitely, that no one could do otherwise than envy and respect her. A very fair woman, with a colourless skin, a perfect figure, a manner of admirable finish, ease, and sweetness, and eyes which had the candour of a child's, with a strange pathos in them which went to the heart of all men, Consuelo Laurence, with her great pearls about her throat, the only jewels she ever wore, looked such an incarnation of purity, ethereality and perfect womanhood, that it was delicious and delightful to everyone to know that she had sold flowers in Broadway, sung at cafés chantants, married a Cuban planter and shot him, been wrecked off Valparaiso, and picked up by a wealthy Mexican whose millions she had annexed and finished, migrated to Brazil, where she had ruined ministers and millionaires, and finally drifted to Paris, where she had been rescued just as she was springing off the parapet of the Pont Neuf to drown herself for want of five francs, whence, none exactly knew how, she had suddenly appeared in London and become the idol of society.

People even said that an English Prince, coming out of some naughty place or another without any gentleman of his suite, had been the person who

had saved her from jumping over the bridge, and had persuaded her that life was always worth living if one were a woman and good-looking.

But the English Prince was notoriously poor and in debt, and his homage was always as empty as it was agreeable.

He could not be supposed to account for the truffled chickens and the ortolans which were ortolans. Society was disposed to attribute this part of it to Beaufront, who was rich, generous, cynical and often seen in Hill Street.

This rumour in no way lessened the crowd of exclusive ladies who flocked to sip Consuelo Laurence's yellow tea and hear her admirable music. On the contrary ladies liked meeting Beaufront, and they always met him there; the only person whom it did slightly affect was his cousin Freda.

Lady Avillion and Avillion House remained the only person and place of influence not captured by Mrs. Laurence.

Freda had indeed permitted that Mrs. Laurence should be presented to her, and their cards had been exchanged; but the acquaintance had gone no farther. When they met, a slight smile was the only recognition they gave each other, and when Mrs. Laurence went to some great dinner at Beaufront's, from that dinner his cousin was invariably absent.

Mrs. Laurence's position was far too completely achieved a thing for her to need to seek the civilities even of Lady Avillion.

It was a position about which there was nothing dubious, insecure, or fluctuating. She was one of the powers of society, and all the dark romance and unsavoury melodrama which was supposed to lie in the remote conditions of her past, only served to interest people the more, as the sombre burnt-umber and bistre background of an old Sienese or Perugino panel serves to throw up the silvery nimbus and the pale gold hair of the Madonna's head which is painted upon it.

She had a house in Wilton Street, opposite the sparrow-haunted trees and the grey walls of St. Paul's Church. The church is not old, and the trees are not many, but they give a slightly cloister-like look to that corner of Belgravia, an academic calm and colouring which are pleasant and tranquillising.

When the threshold of this house was crossed, everything within it was serene and reposeful, like the church corner in which it was situated.

Her servants were old and noiseless, her carpets thick as moss, her windows of the thickest plate glass; even the fog when it stole there subdued itself into a religious, dreamy mistiness, and was humanised by the rare transparencies through which it had to pass.

Her drawing-rooms, with their pale cream-hued walls, their tempered light, and their screens of growing palms, were often filled with all the "best people" in London. Royalty often bestowed its coveted presence, and the most excellent music was

to be heard there, and the most wayward tenor, the most avaricious prima donna would always sing at Mrs. Laurence's afternoons.

She had that power which is as indisputable as it is indefinable.

The charm of Consuelo Laurence was in her entire simplicity of manner and expression.

"It is so irritating that a creature, come God knows whence, should have such perfect distinction," said the old Duchess of Kincardine and Oronsay when Consuelo Laurence first made her success in London society.

Come by it how she might, she had a great distinction, which, united to a *morbidezza* and indolence of movement due to her creole blood, gave her an irresistible charm.

"It is all acting," said Freda Avillion, but if it were it was that highest art which perfectly conceals itself, and she had the same sweetness and composure for an old violionist with snuff on his waistcoat as she had for a royal adorer.

That appearance of interest in the person with whom she conversed which Lady Avillion could assume at will, but rarely ever felt, was real in Consuelo Laurence.

Her childhood and girlhood had been passed in seclusion amongst the savannahs and swamps of the far South; the great world was fresh and beguiling to her as it can never be to women who have been born and bred in it, and her capture of it flattered her as their successes in it can never flatter them.

"People are so kind," she said often, and meant what she said.

To her other people were kind because she was popular, attractive, and extremely the fashion, and although the quality of the kindness did not deceive her, although she knew that if she became poor, or blind, or ill, on the morrow very few of them would ever ask where she had gone to or what had become of her, she allowed herself to be etherised by that soporific yet stimulating atmosphere; it was so pleasant whilst it lasted! But she never let it intoxicate her; her temperament was calm and her penetration fine.

"They think me only an adventuress," she told herself often, "though they have made me a queen —much as they might make a queen of a gipsy, if she could possibly be seen in society, and had large eyes, and a new way of telling fortunes."

"You are a very wise woman," said Beaufront one day to her.

"And at heart a very impudent one perhaps," she said with a smile, "or I should never have dared to become a London fine lady, with all behind me that—that you know."

Beaufront smiled. "That is the sort of thing you say when you are in low spirits. One might as well say a doe or a gazelle was impudent as you."

"Well, the doe or the gazelle would be impudent, I suppose, if they intruded in drawing-rooms and pushed their way in at State balls—as I do."

"Don't talk nonsense," said Beaufront irritably.

"If any of them heard you they would take you at your word!"

"Why don't you take me at my word? You know what I say is true."

"It's not the least true," he said. "Surely nature made you for the best society the world holds. Bad is the best here, but still, such as it is you are in the swim of it, and you 'fetch' it more than anybody. Excuse me that ridiculous word; I hate the slang of the day, but one catches it up despite oneself!"

Consuelo Laurence shook her head.

"I 'fetch' it, yes. That I admit. But I am a pariah all the same. Ask your cousin."

Beaufront was annoyed.

"My cousin has prejudices, and nobody can move her when she has a prejudice. It is very absurd, because she believes herself so very open to conviction and so very dispassionate. But women are a mass of contradictions."

"Men are not very consistent," said Mrs. Laurence, who let the subject pass, as it annoyed him. "Why should human nature be consistent? Nature is not. Her earthquakes come on a calm summer day, and I have seen a water-spout rise in a clear sky and a tornado sweep down on a blue lake and dry it up as it seemed in an instant."

"I hope there will never be any more tornadoes in your atmosphere."

"Thanks; your world here is not tempestuous."

She had never deceived herself as to the real

value of her special success; she knew that if she lost her beauty, her voice, or her fortune, she would lose her fashion, and that if she lost all three Wilton Street would no longer be blocked by carriages crowding to her door, and in six months' time her very name would be forgotten in the London world.

She had been born at Martinique, and had a little mulatto blood in her; but no one would have dreamed of that, her complexion was of the purest and softest paleness; and only her great black eyes under those languid lids spoke of her *métisse* origin.

It was all so long ago that it was distant to her like the dream of some other earth, some other sky; but yet it was all so strangely homelike to her still whenever her thoughts wandered back to that island in the deep blue tropic seas.

Her father had been a very rich man, owning vast plantations and dwelling in a paradise of palm-groves, banana-trees, tamarind-alleys, marble fountains, marble colonnades, marble courts, filled with the odours of tropical flowers, and looking down from the green cloud-veiled slopes of Mont Pelée out to the warm lapis-lazuli-coloured Bay of St. Pierre.

It was all so dim and yet so clear to her, that sweet enchanted isle, that far away yet unforgotten life, where fragrance and light and heat and ever-changing colour, and the mirth of the child-like negroes, and the fresh voices of the leaping waves and the sound of the church bells chiming in the city far below, and the droning hum of the insects buzzing in the white bells of the datura flowers,

were all blent in one delicious memory, gorgeous and fugitive as the glow of a West Indian sunset.

For fourteen years she had lived without care or knowledge that any care was anywhere in life; a purely flower-like and exquisite existence in that wilderness of vegetation amidst which the marble and lava-rock walls of her father's house arose.

She had never known her mother, but her nurse, a mulatto, never let her feel what she had lost; a strong, tall, stately woman, clothed in the brilliant turban and costume of her race and her island, she idolised her charge with maternal passion and fidelity, and the earliest and brightest of Consuelo Laurence's memories was of being rocked by her in her hammock under a flowering catalpa tree, and bathed by her amongst the lotus lilies in the fountain beneath the feathery tamarisk foliage, while silvery and golden fish flashed and curled about her own rosy feet and the great emerald flies sparkled like jewels in the light.

Martinique had been like one long fairy story to her in her infancy and childhood, and was like an oriental phantasy in her remembrance; whenever she shut her eyes to outward things, she could recall the scent of its orange boughs, the golden light on its sugar fields, the glory of its gorgeous birds and blossoms, the blue wonder of its leaping waves, and whenever she smelt the smell of the incense in some dusky damp aisle of a London chapel she remembered the perfumed clouds rising above the bowed heads of the people in the Grande Rue of St. Pierre,

radiant with its roses and lilies, its banners and vestments, its draped awnings, its twisted balconies, its red roofs, its bubbling streams, its living sunshine, its many-coloured multitude like groups of variegated petunias glowing in the sun.

Like Syrlin she carried with her into the world the remembrance and the perfume of solitudes where childhood had been nursed in the lap of nature, where warmer winds, and deeper hues, and brighter suns than those of Europe had been associated with the earliest lisped word, the earliest hesitating step of infant years.

One day Beaufront proposed, thinking to please her, to make up a party on his yacht, to go to Santa Cruz and St. Kitts, and Martinique, and all the other isles of the West Indian Archipelago.

But she shrank from the offer. "No," she said with a mist rising before her eyes. "It is a perfect memory, let it remain such. The flowers of that island are wonder-flowers to me; those shores are to me bathed in the light that never yet was upon land or sea; I would not revisit them; it would be like breaking open a tomb. And you know when the common day shines in on those tombs, the gold and the dead all crumble and disappear together."

"What your eyes see is never common day," said Beaufront.

"Oh-h-h!" said Mrs. Laurence with indulgent smile. "I fear it is very common day which one looks on in London, let one put up all the rose-coloured glass and lace transparencies that one may."

Beaufront emitted a vague sound suggestive of annoyance and disappointment; he never made by any chance what are called "pretty speeches," and he had made one this time, and received nothing for it.

Besides, he had planned the voyage to the Caribbean Sea very much to his liking; his yawl was a perfect vessel; he had invited people who were at once pleasant and proper, the young Duchess of Worthing amongst them. He had expected a very agreeable cruise and a series of island stoppages which should combine the Lotus-eaters of Tennyson with the bill-of-fare of the Café des Ambassadeurs; and then she would not go, the one woman who had inspired the project, and on whom he had relied to sustain him in the dead calm of the tropical seas! He gave it all up, and backed out of the whole thing in a manner which the Duchess of Worthing called shabby and odious. She was a very pretty brown, dusky-haired woman, who knew what became her, and she had heard of the golden necklaces and yellow turbans of the native women of Martinique, and was dying to buy them on the spot, and wear them at the first costume ball or fancy fair that she should go to after she came home.

CHAPTER XII.

"YOUR friend Syrlin says that I have no imagination," said Lady Avillion, a few days later.

"Well, I don't suppose you have. We none of us have any. What do we ever originate?" replied Beaufront gloomily. "We go on with the same sort of life, year after year. If we had imagination we should discover new forms of pleasure; and Parliamentary government, tall hats, and wedding breakfasts would be left all to savages."

He had been forced to be present at a fashionable wedding that day, and the recollection of it was fresh and detestable to him; he had been forced to give away the bride, as she was his sister's daughter, cover her with diamonds, and lend her Heronsmere; he did not grudge her the diamonds, but he grudged Heronsmere. For a month he had to think of these young idiots mooning about his favourite woods and his dim green old gardens.

"When shall we be bidden to your wedding breakfast?" said his cousin.

He laughed. "You will have to wait a long time for that."

"Wait Mrs. Laurence's pleasure?"

"Mrs. Laurence has nothing to do with it."

"Perhaps her husband is alive somewhere. Their husbands so often are—hidden out of sight in oil-springs, or backwoods, or mines, or offices, 'making their pile' docilely, while the lady becomes a leader of fashion in London, though nobody would know her where she was born."

Beaufront reddened with anger.

"That is very unworthy of you. She is the best woman I know," he said incautiously and warmly.

Freda smiled, the sceptical and very chilly smile which he detested.

"Dear Ralph," she said with some coldness, "your friend is lovely, accomplished, attractive, and extremely fashionable; pray do not put our good-nature to too great a strain by asking us to place her also in the Calendar of Saints! It would be too much combined in one person."

Beaufront said nothing in reply, but he frowned and his eyes grew angry; the sombre anger of a lazy man.

"Really, Ralph should know better than to talk that nonsense to me," thought his cousin with impatience. "It is the fashion to accept these unknown women, and to ask no questions about them, and to place them on the topmost pinnacles in the midst of us; but to be asked to believe in their virtues also—that is really too much."

And so Avillion House remained the only great house in London of which Mrs. Laurence had never crossed the threshold.

It could not affect her position, but it pained

her susceptibilities and her pride. Lady Avillion would have said that she had no possible right to be proud; but she was so, after her own manner.

"Your cousin makes me feel that I am nobody," she said to Beaufront, who answered, "Freda makes everybody feel that they are nobody. It is her speciality, just as ices are Gunter's, or Sèvres china is Davis's."

"She can afford to be unamiable," said Mrs. Laurence. "We who are nobody—as she thinks—cannot be so."

"You wouldn't be so if you were an Empress; Josephine never was. Your heart, like hers, wouldn't let you."

"Oh, how can one tell?" said Mrs. Laurence. "You know I have had to be amiable, just as a waiter or a crossing-sweeper has to smile."

"I wish you wouldn't say these things," said Beaufront. "You know fools if they heard you would believe them."

"Well, are they not true?"

"No; not in the least true."

"I am not so sure. I think, you know," she added, "that Lady Avillion does not like me because I am an intimate friend of yours."

"My dear Consuelo," said Beaufront, rather bitterly, "if you suppose that my cousin honours me with the slightest feeling of jealousy as to my sympathies or antipathies, you are very much mistaken. If I married a Hottentot, or ruined myself for a

French actress, she wouldn't feel the very smallest interest in my fate."

"I am sure you are mistaken; men are always mistaken. They never see anything," said Mrs. Laurence, with some impatience. "She has great influence over you, very naturally, and there is nothing of which women are so tenacious as of influence. They cannot endure to have it shared. They know that it is one of those things which will not have a dual ownership. Once divided, it is destroyed."

"I don't think she has any influence over me," said Beaufront, and he thought that he meant what he said.

"She has far more influence than I have," replied Mrs. Laurence: she was a woman who never over-rated her own powers, to which fact her great success in life was no doubt attributable.

Beaufront sighed with some impatience, and lighted a cigarette. He knew that she was right; and he wished that it were otherwise.

"She is never sympathetic," he said irritably. "Now, you always are. You always divine one's humours and moods, and never jar on them."

"Oh, sympathy is my speciality," said Mrs. Laurence, lightly; "I suppose it will always be mine. When I am quite old, I think I shall still get them to come to me, because I shall be such a safe confidante, such a good listener. Cannot you see me, Ralph, as I shall be then, with a tall, gold-headed cane, and a quantity of black lace and a little ruff,

or perhaps a big ruff; old people should always have a costume; it brightens up old age so much, and dignifies it. Then the young people will come to my musical parties, and they will say to each other: 'Isn't it odd? You know the old fogies declare that Mrs. Laurence was a beauty once; could you ever believe it? And she remembers all sorts of persons who lived in the last century, Millais and Leighton, and Lord Salisbury and Philippe Sept who rebuilt the Tuileries, and Edward the Seventh, who made Americans the fashion?' That is what they will say. Can't you hear them? I can."

"No, I can't; and I should wring their necks if I could," said Beaufront, curtly. "The idea of your *ever* being old. My dear child! It is preposterous."

"It is inevitable, unless one dies; and I am not very young now as it is," said Consuelo Laurence, while her black, soft eyes, under their heavy lids, seemed to gaze very far away, far as the silver portals of the eternal sleep.

"You will marry, I dare say," said Beaufront, rather brutally, and inappropriately.

"No, I shall not. Why should I?"

"To give you an assured position, since you think your own unstable."

"That would be very unfair to my poor victim, whoever he might be," she said, with a smile, as some visitors entered, amongst them the old Duchess of Kincardine and Oronsay, a very large woman,

fair, coarse, and heavy, who said afterwards at a dinner-party that evening:

"Oh, yes; Beaufront was at Mrs. Laurence's; he is always at Mrs. Laurence's; constancy is such a pretty thing, but he can't be of a jealous temperament, or his life would be purgatory."

"I suppose he'll have to marry her some day," said the man who was on her right hand, a famous Judge.

"Oh, I dare say she will make him; only Freda Avillion is against it. It will be pull devil, pull baker."

"I envy Beau," said a man on her left, a Secretary of State. "I envy Beau immensely, if the devil and the baker are in his case represented by Lady Avillion and Mrs. Laurence, and he is between them; lucky fellow!"

"It would be a frightful marriage for him," said the Duchess severely, picking up the *foie gras* and truffles out of her aspic. "And she would never have any children."

"How can you possibly know that?" thought the Secretary of State, selecting his largest truffle and eating it carefully.

The Judge on the right side of her observed that they did say—at least, somebody said, he forgot who—that Mrs. Laurence had grown-up sons in Arizona, or somewhere.

"That is very possible," said the Duchess, grimly; "anything is possible in Arizona." Then she added, in a lower tone: "It's said, you know—two little

girls—Convent in Paris—Duc d'Alger—I don't know—can't say more, his son's over here—and it may have been Beaufront."

She returned to her *foie gras.*

"Where does her money come from?" asked the Judge, rather loudly, for he did not hear quickly.

The Duchess drank a little wine before she replied:

"Her money? I imagine her money is like her native Delaware—a broad river, which is fed from many unnamed streams and unknown sources."

People laughed: the Duchess had a reputation for dry humour.

A very young man, at a little distance from her on the right of the hostess, lifted a bronzed, boyish face, and said, angrily, with a foreign accent, stammering a little in his great eagerness:

"Permit me to correct you, Madame la Duchesse; the Delaware river has nothing to do with Madame Laurence. She is a creole, and her money came to her straight enough from her uncle, who was a very rich planter in Martinique. I had the honour to know her for years, as my family has done also."

People smiled discreetly at their plates: the chivalrous young man was the Prince de Tunisie, younger son of the late Duc d'Alger.

"So glad to hear it, monseigneur!" said the Duchess, with a bow and smile across the table; then she helped herself to some *jambon au vin blanc,* and murmured to the Judge:

"Poor boy! I suppose his father has told him

so. There are stories, you know, that his father and he quarrelled—on her account. She is just the sort of person who would annex two generations. The dead uncle, too! how naïf! I wonder if Beaufront believes in the uncle!"

Then she turned to her slice of ham, which was excellent.

She had been calling on Mrs. Laurence; she had drunk tea with her, and called her my dear, and asked her to subscribe for a new church in a lonely glen in Kincardineshire; but she disliked Mrs. Laurence, with all the force of a very malignant and ingenious mind. She was very poor; she had only a dull and scrubby little house in Green Street, furnished in the style of thirty years ago. She had a variety of daughters, who did not marry; the youngest of them had been out four seasons: she was the wife of a Scotch Duke, and the sister of an English Duke, and she felt that there was something wrong in the ways of Providence when a person, whom at first nobody knew, except a few men, who were no better than they should be, could have become such a power in London as Consuelo Laurence had done, own such a house as that in Wilton Street, have no limit, apparently, to her toilettes or her money, and possess a most immoral and inconceivable potency over the souls of men of rank. The Duchess of Kincardine and Oronsay was certainly a woman of incontestable position; her husband had a hereditary right to keep his bonnet on before the Queen, and she herself had been on

many a long and intimate visit to Balmoral; but she found life hard; the day is gone by when duchesses were esteemed like the Ark of the Covenant; people did not care to go to her dusky, narrow house, her economical dinners, and her sharp, biting remarks; the cream of the pan of society was skimmed by those who had golden spoons; the success of the day was not with blue blood, but with cleverness, with impudence, with physical beauty, above all, with wealth: this knowledge made the naturally bitter temper of Anne Kincardine much more bitter, and, being a woman with five plain and unprofitable daughters, what could she do but say savage things of Mrs. Laurence, who, it was well known, might marry numbers of the best men next week if she would, and was supposed to keep Ralph Beaufront, as it is vulgarly termed, tied to her apron-strings.

CHAPTER XIII.

A FEW days later there was a small luncheon party given by a noble and famous poet at the Bachelors' Club, and although the brightest light that is ever seen in London finds its way into those pleasant rooms in Hamilton Place, Syrlin in that light looked, as Lady Avillion, who was tired of hearing his praises, was compelled to admit, as handsome as it was possible for a man to look.

His lustrous eyes, his delicate features, his abundant hair, had all the beauty of youth and manhood in one, and the pensive hauteur of his expression, with the sombre brilliancy of his great black eyes, lent a shadow almost of austerity to his countenance, and gave character to a beauty which would otherwise have been almost too classically regular.

The party was small, there were present only two other great ladies beside herself, both famous for their beauty and their brains; a brilliant novelist who lived by preference in loneliness on Mount Hermon, but occasionally saw the light of day in Pall Mall; a very animated Cabinet Minister called by his friends Shuttlecock; an irresistible diplomatist known to London Society as the Blue Jay; Beau-

front, Syrlin, and a great artist, handsome, bland, courtly and popular, who had made only one mistake in his life, that of chaining his Muse amongst the smuts and the stucco of dreary Kensington; his Muse being a fair Greek maiden, sensuous and sweet, who needed a softer and a clearer air.

The little party was well assorted, loquacious and gay as most informal meetings are, and the sun was shining without on the trees, and the crowds, and the equipages rolling to and from Hyde Park Corner.

"Now if you were lunching with me in Berkeley Square you would all of you be as dull as ditch-water," said their host as the little repast drew to an end.

"I dare say we should, though you are not perhaps polite to our wits in saying so," said Beaufront. "But there is something about this little club which puts everyone in good spirits; it has caught something of the look and the atmosphere of a Paris café; I almost fancy those trees must be the trees of the Boulevards."

"Yes; it is the only place in London which has any *entrain* in its atmosphere," said the novelist who dwelt in Palestine.

"What does London seem like to you after your desert, Mr. Iona; very bewildering, or very commonplace?" asked Freda.

"Very dull," said Lorraine Iona.

"Dull? Duller than the desert?"

"Incomparably duller; in the desert one can

think, in London one cannot; one is too saturated with other people's thoughts."

"There is political thought, surely?" said Freda somewhat offended.

"Oh dear no," said Iona calmly. "Nowhere else in the world is politics so little of a science, so much of a family affair. You do not attempt, any of you, to think at all about politics. You take the side which birth and circumstance have shovelled you into, and never know in the least why you espouse it."

"According to you, then," said Beaufront, "the only respectable people are the people who rat. They must at least think, if they only think of their own interests."

"Surely, Mr. Iona," said Lady Avillion, "surely nowhere in Europe are politics so much discussed as in London. Nowhere are public events talked of with so much keenness and knowledge. Nowhere is there so strong a sense of what has happened, what does happen, and what will happen, in the world at large. If in some things and judgments there is insularity, in others there is a wonderful breadth and force; and if there be too great a tendency to overrate the influence of England on Europe, there is also a generosity and nobility in the estimate of other nations which has no parallel anywhere else in the world."

"Bravo, my lady," said her host.

"If we were all of us like her," said Beaufront, "we should have back a parliament of 'five hundred kings,' as James the First called it; and we should

have the Tower choke-full of journalists and all the Reform Bills repealed."

"Lady Avillion is the only one amongst us who has any faith left in ourselves," said their host.

"I never like to contradict such a judge of men and manners as Mr. Iona," said Freda, "but surely London, say what he will, produces three-quarters of the thought of the world? I always considered it as a very machine-room for thought, with the presses and engines always at work."

Lorraine Iona smiled pityingly.

"There is no real thought where there is haste; and of original thought in London there is absolutely none."

It was after luncheon, and they had gone up to one of the little rooms, with the red walls and the Japanese fans, and they had divided into little groups and the men were smoking.

"That is a sweeping condemnation of us; we are all of us always in a hurry."

"Ah yes; and thought is like food; hurriedly absorbed it is inevitably ill digested. When I come here from my mountain, for the first weeks, *ça me grise;* I am conscious of the same feeling in my mind that a too hot bath gives one's body, I am heated and stupefied: the second week I cool down and begin to observe; the third week I am capable of analysing; in the fourth week I realise that what has momentarily affected me is only vapour; I find the greatest ingenuity in words everywhere around me, but of any real thought, nothing."

"Surely, we have still some great men," said the host with chagrin: he was himself a great man.

Lorraine Iona hesitated.

"The race is still great perhaps, now and then," he said after a pause. "But it has entered on its decadence."

"I should be sorry to think so."

"And I am more than sorry," said Lorraine gravely. "Yet it is so."

"But is it necessary to live in a desert to be wise? Plato at least allowed one a garden."

"It is necessary to be alone with Nature: Plato was not only the wisest, but the happiest of men, for he lived in an unworn world; the earth must have been one vast natural garden in his days."

"You know the meadow behind the Albert Monument?" said Freda with her usual appropriate irrelevancy. "There is a hedge and hawthorns, and other larger trees there, and in the grass there are always white, woolly, fat sheep; it is only an artificial little bit of London, but when I am there, a verse of Wordsworth, or Tennyson, or Matthew Arnold often comes to me, and I forget the ugly barracks and tan on the Row close by, and the big Albert Mansions staring at me with their stony eyes. It is not the garden of Plato's Academy certainly, but it is rather nice."

"Lady Avillion carries beauty in her own eyes and so creates it even opposite Prince's Gate," said Lorraine Iona as he rose, and with a smile took his leave.

"What a pretty speech to come out of the Caves of Palestine!" said Freda.

"Does he really live in a cave?" asked the diplomatist. "He is an interesting person."

"Well, in a mud house on the slopes of Mount Hermon; it is the same thing."

"The mud house of Palestine is better than the mud-bath of so-called civilisation," said Syrlin.

"Oh-h!"

She was scandalised; she believed in civilisation; it did not go as far as it might, certainly, and it had solved none of the problems of political economy versus over-population, but still it meant a great deal that was cleanly, cultured, christian, energetic, promising and hopeful; at least that was the kind of thing which had to be said at Conservative meetings.

"I do like civilisation," she said in an apologetic tone; "at least you know it does mean soap and water."

"Does it? It means machine smoke and cinder heaps, furnace-soot and polluted water," said Syrlin. "Will you tell me, Lady Avillion, any city in modern Europe which has the system of public baths that Rome had in the days of Caracalla? Baths for the freed man and the slave; for the whole of the multitudes, Latin or alien, without fee or payment, and made as beautiful as the palace of Augustus or the temple of Venus. What does the civilisation of this time give equal to that, in generosity, in healthfulness, or in wisdom?"

"Well, but you know, in those days when your slave came out of his bath you could put him into

your fishpond if you liked, to have him eaten up alive by your fish. Would it be approved nowadays if I fed my carp at Brakespeare with the gardeners and gamekeepers?"

"Corduroys and all? The carp would die of indigestion," said Beaufront. "Roman slaves weren't so tough as British Tories."

"The slave had always the chance of becoming a freedman," said Syrlin. "What chance has the city outcast of our generation of ever knowing what the enjoyment of life can be? I would run my risk of the fishpond if I could have the unsullied skies and the unsoiled marble beauties of Imperial Rome."

"You would defend slavery?"

"Has trade no slavery? When one thinks that there are many trades which kill all operatives in them before they are thirty-five, and yet that these trades find tens of thousands of operatives to work in them, the abolition of slaves is a farce. We have forbidden a man to sell other men; but we have not forbidden him to buy them, bodies and souls, for a dole of daily bread."

"You are very depressing, M. de Syrlin," said Freda, with a sigh; she always hid the nakedness of the world from herself in clouds of rose gauze.

"I am not *de* Syrlin."

"Everyone calls you so."

"They are very good to ennoble me. I am not noble, I am merely Syrlin *tout court;* it is the name of the little French settlement near Ceuta which was my birthplace."

"It is a poetical name."

"Do you think so? It is a poetical place at least; if Moorish ruins, great neglected gardens, groves of palm, memories of St. François Xavier and the Bay of Biscay can make it so."

"Do you ever go there?"

"Sometimes; before I die I think I shall build and endow a hospice, or perhaps a monastery, there, where artists who have failed to suit their talent to the times or bend their necks to the yoke can go and forget the world in peace."

"Is the world ever forgotten? Do you think ever, even at the Chartreuse or La Trappe, or on Mr. Iona's Holy Mount?"

"It is always forgotten by the artist when he has any true moment of inspiration. The world is the artist's Venusberg; if he kneels he is lost."

"Have you ever knelt, really?"

"Never. Neither to the unit nor the mass," he replied, and spoke the truth.

"Society will never be destroyed as long as there are women," said Beaufront joining them; "women will always want caste and class, and ornament, and somewhere to show themselves. When an earthquake breaks upon them, they may forget their children, their dogs, and their chemises, but they will always remember to catch up their false hair and their jewels. Women are the real supports of our civilisation. I read the other day of a woman who had committed a murder and was to be hanged for it; it rained on the day she was to be executed, and she begged to

be allowed to have a silk umbrella. 'I always did long for a silk umbrella,' she said as she walked under it across the prison yard; and she was quite happy between the sheriff and the chaplain because she had got her umbrella 'like a lady.' That's the sex all over. Marie Antoinette objected to the tumbril. *'Le Roi avait une voiture.'* It was the same sentiment."

"Oh no! The wish for the umbrella was pretension, the wish for the carriage was dignity!"

"You will never allow any fault in a woman *porphyrogenite.*"

"Well, she is what she has been from her cradle; there is always a certain sincerity, simplicity, and stateliness in that. Nobody on tiptoe can be stately; the parvenue is always on tiptoe trying to reach where she has no business to be."

At that moment the little party broke up; Freda went to her carriage and the carriage bore her to the half hundred engagements which filled up the day between luncheon and dinner for a woman of position in the month of April.

Beaufront and Syrlin lingered a little while after the others had left, looking out of the window on the budding trees of the Green Park, and the varied and ceaseless traffic passing to and fro below.

Syrlin sat silent in dreamy contemplation, and Beaufront was mute and somewhat moody.

"How could she marry him?" the former said abruptly at last, as he had said it a fortnight before.

"My cousin?" said Beaufront a little surprised.

"Why did she marry Avillion? I am sure I cannot say. Most persons would have said that she was mad if she had not, her father and mother foremost of all. It was what they call a great marriage; he can be very agreeable when he chooses, and I believe they 'get on,' as the phrase goes, well enough. At least one never hears anything to the contrary."

Syrlin was silent, musing on all he knew of the villas at St. Germains and Monte Carlo.

"I wonder you have not thrashed or shot him many years ago," he said at last.

Beaufront laughed a little.

"My dear Hernani! We don't do that sort of thing, and Freda would be very far from obliged to me if I committed such a solecism. Never to interfere is the highest wisdom of social life; above all with one's relations."

"If she were your sister would you say so?"

"Ten times over if she were my sister. You are a romanticist; you do not understand that the one supreme effort in which all our energies are absorbed in England is to seem to be perfectly happy when we are utterly miserable. It would be much nicer to be frankly and honestly miserable, and tell all our acquaintances that our lives and our loves have been a tissue of mistakes. But it would not be our style, and we don't do it. We have, metaphorically speaking, neuralgia and sciatica and heaps of other ills; but we go out to dinner and make ourselves pleasant. It is our way. Nobody probably is deceived by our

smiles, but we think they are. Three-quarters of the lives of all Englishmen and Englishwomen in society are consumed in this elaborate pretence. Perhaps it is pride, perhaps *morgue,* perhaps humbug; but it is a fact that our existences are given over to this kind of affectation. If my cousin and Avillion dislike each other, which we have no right to suppose, they conceal it perfectly; we have no business to take off their disguise."

"I understand," said Syrlin with some contempt; the contempt which every genius feels for the ways of the world.

"No, you don't understand because it would be impossible for you to feel as they feel. You cannot measure the stifling burden which 'position' lays on English people of rank. They are like the knights of the fourteenth century whose armour grew so heavy that they were fairly suffocated to death underneath it. I quite grant that in this instance Avillion sometimes dances the Cancan in his armour somewhat conspicuously, but it is the occupation of his wife's life that the world should think she does not perceive those gambades."

"A quoi bon?" said Syrlin impatiently.

"A quoi bon?" repeated Beaufront as impatiently. "Because she is a proud woman, a cold woman perhaps, a woman to whom the pity of her world would be even more intolerable than its scorn, were such a thing as its scorn possible to her. Besides which, she is a woman who is a great figure in the world and she likes being so. If she resented

the gambades of Avillion, what would separation do for her? She would lose the one thing on earth for which she cares—position. She is a person in whom the affections have a slight, the intelligence has a large, place, and in whom the passions have none at all. But talk of something else. I do not choose to talk of Lord and Lady Avillion. They lead their lives as they choose; it is their own affair."

Syrlin looked at him in silence. His instincts of apprehension were swift and fine; he read the innermost heart of his friend under Beaufront's irritable and careless phrases.

"But how can such a woman as your cousin," he obstinately said suddenly, "choose this sickening career of repetition and commonplace?"

"It is the life she was born to lead," said Beaufront crossly. "What life would you have her lead? Should she go to Syria with Lorraine Iona, or like Darwin write a treatise on earthworms? My cousin is the most practical of women, and she would be disgusted to hear her life called commonplace. She is a leader of fashion, and also believes herself one of the political forces of the empire."

"What blasphemy!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that it is like setting a goddess to pound corn between stones! Corn, do I say?—husks!"

"That is a matter of opinion. I do not think there is much corn myself, but then I have no political faith, as she tells me continually."

"Can she care about that rubbish?"

"Ah, my dear Syrlin, you have not been reared in the magic circle of Party or you would not ask such a question. The only politics you have even dreamt about is a kind of mixture of iconoclasm and altruism, hyperbolic, visionary, unworkable. You cannot understand the attraction of belonging to the governing class, and the intensity of irritation at seeing power slip aside from that class chiefly through their own ineptitude and timidity. I do not myself care about it, because I hate the whole sham structure of social life, and do not care if it be swept away with all its lies to-morrow; but Lady Avillion cares intensely, cares as Maria Theresa would have done could she have seen Eighty-nine and Forty-eight."

"You mean that she is an arrogant woman?"

"I mean that she is a great lady. There are hardly any left."

"Tell her if the mob clamour for blood at her gate she will only need to show herself to rule them."

"Humph!" said Beaufront, moderately pleased at anyone presuming to praise his own relative to him in so bold a fashion. "Beauty did not serve or save Marie Antoinette or Eugénie Montijo. What my cousin cares for is her own creeds, her own country, and her own order. That she thinks she can benefit these by an emblem and a few fair words is only a woman's mistake. She honestly believes, not only that her class has the right to

govern, which is no doubt only a prejudice and an egotism, but she believes that let alone it could govern, on the whole, much better than any other class, in which I doubt if she be far wrong. Joined to the irritated sense that her Order is being robbed of all its just privileges, there is a nobler, finer sense, that it is being deprived of its power to do good to the country. It may be an unfounded opinion, but it is an honest one, and the regret it causes is patriotic. It is the kind of sentiment which has made the greatness of England. Jingoism if you will; but an elevated and elevating form of it."

"But for such a woman to think at all of politics! It is profanity."

"That is another question. I doubt if you will readily understand our gentlewomen in any way," said Beaufront. "They are hard to understand unless you have been used to them all your life. They give a stranger two fingers chillily, and he thinks them statues of ice, and at that very moment they are possibly pondering how they can get a special train for him, or invite the people he would like best. They are prejudiced, caste is very strong with them, they are bound irrecoverably by ties of family and connection, they have a deep and often tiresome sense of their own influence and their responsibility for that influence; they suffer great wrongs imperturbably, they smile blandly with the steel in their souls, they have something stoical like the Red Man of Cooper's American novels; the fire consumes and the knives pierce them, but they do not gratify

their enemies by any sign. They are conventional, they are uninventive, they have no adaptability and little sympathy: this is inevitable, because their whole existence is a routine, and they believe their routine to be more desirable and excellent than anything else in human existence. But they have admirable qualities: they are long-suffering, they are dignified, they are capable of vast and secret sacrifices, they have a high code of honour, you may trust to them in all things; but if you leave the high-roads of life for the bypaths, you must not expect them to understand your preferences. They do not readily understand anything, and they like their ideas like their point lace to be very old indeed: it would be impossible to convince them that wrong is sometimes better than right, that shadows are sometimes sweeter than light, that Josephine is more delightful than Marie Louise, that La Vallière is nobler than Maria Theresa. The legitimate is the only realm they comprehend. But sometimes (very admirably) when the illegitimate which they abhor hurts, tortures, injures them, they pardon it that they may conceal their wounds from the world; because what they do comprehend is what nearly everybody else has forgotten in these days, that *noblesse oblige*. Of course," he added in a lighter tone, "there are other types: English society, even the best, has got a 'little mixed' in the last twenty or thirty years. Prince Albert with the purest intentions spoiled it. He did as much to destroy the old aristocracy as Richelieu did: Richelieu substituted for it the power of the

Crown; Prince Albert substituted, or caused to be substituted for it, the *richards*, the ennobled middle classes, the commercial people. He meant well, but he did ill. However, all that belongs to a deeper question. I was speaking of our women. We have our Lady Guernseys who speak on platforms, and our Lady Dovers who sing comic songs at the East End, and our Duchesses of Shetland who have been warned off the Heath, and our Duchesses of Solway who would willingly stand on their heads in Regent Street, to get stared at by street-boys; and they are, I admit, some of them very queer, and some of them very wild; but the old type is still with us, it is still even the most usual amongst English women of position; and you will not find it easy to understand, because you will take its stillness for melancholy, its reserve for hauteur, and its formalism for want of feeling, and you will be wrong in doing so."

"All this means—?" said Syrlin.

"It means that you must not make hasty generalisations, and that you must not conclude that an Englishwoman is unhappy because she has no *effusion* and smiles seldom."

Lady Avillion meanwhile drove down Grosvenor Place and thence to St. James's, and made two or three visits which tired, as they also bored her; then she went back into the Park. The unusual beauty of the afternoon had brought out many well-known faces; the drive was full of equipages and the side walks were full of pedestrians, politicians, mashers, popular painters, fashionable clergymen, aristocratic

idlers, going their way past the bright grass and the many-coloured hyacinths, with here and there amongst them a troop of children in picturesque dresses, with rosy cheeks and curling hair.

As the carriage drove past the barracks, that unfortunate achievement of modernity, with its narrow windows and its stifling stables, she recognised Syrlin coming from her favourite meadow.

"He has been to look at the hawthorns," she thought; and she smiled as she gave him a very slight nod of acquaintanceship. His visit to the hawthorns was a delicate compliment such as she appreciated.

How unlike he looked to all the other passers-by!—he could not have looked more unlike if he had worn the turban and the robes of the Sultan of his own Morocco.

"Your meadow is idyllic, Lady Avillion," he said to her that evening at Grosvenor House. "The sheep are fatter and woollier than Verboekhoven's, and the hedge in the misty sunshine would have charmed Corot."

"Did you think to-day misty? Why, it was our very finest possible kind of weather!" said Freda, with another slight smile and almost imperceptible bend of her head as she passed onward. She had appreciated the compliment of his visit to her hawthorns, but she did not disclose that she had even perceived it was a compliment; whilst yet an unconquerable inclination to say unpleasant things of Syrlin still possessed her.

"He is very opinionated and very vain," said she to her cousin a few minutes later, as he took her downstairs.

"Opinionated perhaps. Vain never—" answered Beaufront. "Vain men are happy; Syrlin is not happy."

"Because he is so arrogant."

"Or because he is so modest; he is the only person in all Europe who does not think himself a great artist."

"That is only a form of affectation," said Lady Avillion with severity, as she entered her carriage.

"I have two very dear friends, Consuelo Laurence and Syrlin, and you are unkind to them both," said Beaufront sadly, as he rested his hand on the carriage door.

"The humility of the man is about as real as the virtues of the woman," thought Freda; but aloud she merely said, "Both your friends are at the least very good-looking. Be satisfied with that admission. *Au revoir.*"

There was a chord in her which was not touched by anything in the life around her; a life which yet had become so utterly second nature to her that when once her carriage wheels rolled down Piccadilly and over the soft ground of the drive, she belonged wholly to it and to nothing else.

Paris did not hold Syrlin's soul though it held his body as he walked into the Mirlitons or through the foyer of the Français; but London did hold hers: London, or all which London symbolised and re-

presented, absorbed her whole character, whenever she passed through the heavy Vanbrugh-built stone gate-way of Avillion House.

"If she ever loved a man he would have a demon for his rival, the ten thousand millions of demons which throng the great world," Iona, who had known her from infancy, said one day to Beaufront.

And Beaufront, with a fineness of perception which astonished Iona, replied:

"He would have a much stronger rival, he would have herself. What my cousin adores without being conscious of it is herself; and yet she is not what one would call a vain woman by any means; what is in her was in Queens like Maria Theresa or Catherine: it is an immense consciousness of inalienable prerogative, so inborn in them that they are insensible of it. I am disposed, however, to think that every great lady should have that; she could scarcely be a great lady without it. They say that there are no great ladies nowadays, but I do think that my cousin is one."

"I think so too," said Iona. "And, alas for our degenerate age, Catherine Sforza herself, in defence of her faith and order, could do no more, were she living in our day, than be a Primrose Dame!"

"If such a woman once loved greatly, all that would be changed," said Syrlin impatiently, who in the profound ignorance of the influence of caste and place, had chafed and rebelled as he had heard.

"Ah no, excuse me; they would do no such

thing," said Beaufront. "Or rather such a woman would never love greatly in your sense of the word; she might love and suffer from it; but she would always be much stronger than her passion, because habit would be like an armour upon her. I do not place it more highly than that; it is rather force of habit and pride of place than conscious principle or self-control; such a woman would no more give her name to calumny than she would go to the Drawing-room in her bonnet. One would seem quite as dreadful, as ill-bred, as absurd to her as the other."

"I suppose," said Syrlin, sceptically, "that human nature is not wholly extinguished even in a Mistress of the Robes?"

"My dear friend, have you not observed that there is very little human nature in our society? There is some, but not much. Marriage is a financial transaction; even improper loves are on one side at least usually only commercial affairs; we are in an artificial and avaricious state altogether. But if your imaginary Mistress of the Robes were to love like Helen she would conquer it, because to indulge it would be to offend her taste, to vulgarise her habits, to descend from her daïs; and she would never love like Helen, because love would alarm her at the outset; and the woman who yields is the woman who willingly or unwillingly is blind to the brink of the flowery pit. Your experience must have told you that. Your imaginary Mistress of the Robes sees the pit and knows all about it, and will

never either fall into it or be allured by it. You do not understand what a fetish and safeguard caste is to such women."

"You do not give them credit for very high motives!"

"I give them credit for what I see in them. It is not an ignoble motive; it is a sense of responsible power, of an obligation to give an example; and I also think that in thoroughbred women the instinct of personal dignity is overwhelmingly strong, stronger than anything which men can oppose in combat to it."

They were talking apparently impersonally of unnamed and imaginary women, but one living woman was present to the minds of both.

CHAPTER XIV.

A DAY before anyone else was expected at Brakespeare its châtelaine went down there herself accompanied by her two little sons. Her firstborn child had died in infancy, and these children were respectively eight and seven years old. The elder, Lord Camelot, called May by his own people, a nick-name of the nursery, was a very handsome boy, with his father's and mother's beauty blended in him, and Avillion's perpetual expression of mingled annoyance and discontent curiously repeated on his fair features; he was clever, graceful, beautiful, with long loose flowing curls and eyes like sapphires; but in character he was selfish, unkind, masterful, and extremely vain.

The younger, Augustus, called generally Fluff, was a pretty flaxen-haired cherub of a child, without his brother's extreme beauty, but admirably made and with a skin like lilies and roses; his character was still in an embryo state, and his chief characteristic was a careful and continual imitation of his elder in everything. They had each of them that look of high breeding which no scion of the race which had so long ruled at Brakespeare had ever been without. They were children of great

physical and sufficient mental promise; they had fine constitutions, good courage, and great strength; what more could any reasonable woman require in her offspring?

Yet they failed to satisfy their mother. She supposed she had not naturally those strong maternal instincts which so absorbed and contented many women, for they did not move her to any great emotions. They were always well and strong and independent of her affections, and all-sufficient for themselves; she used to think that if she had a lame child, or a blind one, or a sick one, perhaps she would have felt all those tremendous maternal sensations of which she had read and heard. She knew exactly how it would be with these boys; they would have their hair cropped like convicts, and go to a preparatory school, and then they would go to Eton and wear ridiculous jackets and tall hats, and then they would grow up quite, and become young men of fashion, and be very political, or very fast, or very something or other, and then some fine day they would marry, probably some young women whom she would particularly dislike, and she would be expected to be delighted, and she would only be infinitely more bored—she could see the whole thing as it would go on, absolutely uninteresting, entirely monotonous. There was no possibility of taking English boys or men out of their grooves; when an Englishman did get out of his groove he was always thought mad or immoral, and he generally ended by drinking too much brandy or chloral. This poor

boy Flodden, because he was not in their groove, had all the men against him, and all the women found him ridiculous.

That incessant pressure of custom, which is so strong and constant in English society, was oppressive to her, without her being conscious of it, and her children were little living symbols of that conventional life which dissatisfied her, even whilst she suffered herself to be ruled by it.

They were little Elzevir editions of the habits and thoughts of their period; the one ambition of their souls was to smoke and to shoot, and when they went to a morning performance at any theatre they preserved unmoved and supercilious countenances alike through all the jests and all the pathos. There was no single reflection of her own mind and nature ever mirrored in their little souls. There was something shallow, chilly, unreceptive in their tempers which escaped all her efforts to soften it. She could not blame Avillion for ever having attempted to weaken her influence; he had let her do just as she chose with them, partly from indifference and partly from a high-bred sense that it was mean to bother a woman about her children. It was no one's fault, but she felt that these pretty boys were little monsters of selfishness and had narrow little souls that would be for ever shut to the poetry and spirituality of life. There was no help for it; only when she heard other people saying what a consolation and sufficiency children were to a woman she sighed, for she knew that sometimes they

would leave the heart colder and sadder than it would have been without them.

"What do you want these brats to be?" said Avillion to her once. "They are healthy, good-looking, and well-bred. What on earth can you want more? I don't want anything more. I suppose you would like a child like Paul Dombey, who would talk blank verse and die early."

"I am glad you are satisfied," said his wife; and his quick ear detected a considerable amount of irony in the felicitation.

"I don't know that I said I was satisfied," he said peevishly; "I don't remember ever being satisfied in my life. But I think your children are warmly to be congratulated on not having any nerves, if they haven't got any—you seem to say that they haven't. I am sure I hope they won't have livers either, at least not livers that remind them of their existence, as mine is perpetually recalling its own to me. After all, a happy life is only a good digestion."

"Or a tough conscience."

"Conscience?" repeated Avillion, with a vague astonishment, as if anybody had told him that he ought to wear his grandfather's buckskins and blue coat with gold buttons.

"I know it's old-fashioned language," said his wife.

"It's gone out, like duelling," said Avillion. "But our livers are always with us."

And to assist his liver, he lighted his fiftieth cigarette of that morning.

She looked at him as he stood near her lighting his cigarette. He was graceful, good-looking, unmistakably patrician, and when he ceased to be querulous or irritable, could be an agreeable companion; many women she knew found him much more than that, and worshipped him. Why had she been utterly unable to care for him? Why had her idea that she was in love with him hardly lasted longer than the roses of that nuptial summer? Why, even before the birth of her first child, had an unconquerable fatigue and distaste come over her at all the obligations of union? People, she knew, thought that her lord's inconstancy was an offence to her; they did not know how supremely thankful she had learned to be for it. Other women adored him; why could not she? "It must be delightful to be able to adore!" she thought. What was amiss in her that she had never been able to do so? Was it some latent *sécheresse de cœur* in herself, such as pained her in her children?

Perhaps if she had not been like that, she would have borne some other child who would have warmed her heart and had all her ideals of childhood in it; some tender and fond thing, all smiles and tears, with kisses soft as falling rose leaves.

"What strange creatures women are!" thought Avillion at that moment. "Here is one of the coldest of all living women breaking her heart because her children are not gushing and romantic!

If they were sentimental little fools she would be the first to laugh it out of them. If ever she loses her head about anybody, it will be out of sheer obstinacy and contrariety, and I am sure I should pity the fellow from my soul, whoever he was."

Brakespeare was the one thing which her marriage had conferred on her which soothed and did not disappoint her. It was an ideal house, stately, peaceful, beautiful, and full of memories and suggestions; standing grandly, on high slopes covered with forests, and dominating one of the richest and greenest vales in the north of England.

"O May! how fond you should be of it," she said to her elder boy, on the day of their arrival, as they drove from the station through the vast oak avenues of the park, and came in sight of the grouping of towers and bastions, and terraced walks, and high metal roofs, which rose before them in the distance.

May laughed, with the cynicism so common to the modern child.

"I daresay I shall sell it; Dawlish says he shall sell Pleasaunce."

Lord Dawlish was his oracle; a year or two older than himself, the son of a duke. Pleasaunce was one of the oldest and noblest estates in the Midlands.

"O you miserable child!" said his mother, wounded to the quick. "Have you no more heart, no more pride than that? And you are *my* child!"

"I suppose I am," said May discontentedly. "I

suppose if I was anybody else's I should be at school, and in jackets, as I ought to be, with my hair cut close like all the rest of them."

"You will soon have that beatitude," said Freda coldly; "you will soon be able to look exactly like your friend Lord Dawlish, who is exactly like his own groom in miniature. But tell me, my dear little boy, seriously, have you no love for Brakespeare? Even your father admires it."

"I don't know what you mean," said the child crossly. "That kind of thing has gone out, you know."

"I hate it," said his brother. "It is so dull. I like Pall Mall. I won't stay a day in the country when I'm grown up, unless it is for racin'."

"*Deux petits cœurs secs*," thought their mother for the hundredth time. "How can it be possible that these little withered hearts grew out of mine?"

Little Lord Dawlish, with his sharp pinched pert face, his stable knowledge, his stolen cigarettes, his smooth-shorn pate, his absurd shiny hat, was their model and mould of fashion. Her influence counted for nothing against that of their friend. Outwardly, she could keep them still for a little while beautiful, rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed, curly-haired children; but she could not reach their little souls to keep them fresh and young, she could not save them from the dry, hot blast of egotism and cynicism and indifferentism which is breathed from the nostrils of the century's decrepitude.

"And people say a woman's solace and safeguard are her children!" She thought, "Mine can no more give me any warmth or rest than if they were two little figures of wood and sawdust."

Physically, they were all she could have desired, lovely, vigorous, and graceful; but she had no power to move the spirits within, no means to make those childish eyes see the greenness of the grass and the glory of the flower; no spell to draw those opening minds towards high aims, and fair hopes, and chivalrous desires.

It was all very well to talk about Cornelia, and Madame Mère of the Bonapartes, and Garibaldi's mother; they had not been women in society; and they had had no great grinding mill of position waiting to press and mould their children into exact likenesses of other people's. She herself did make her little boys bow prettily, and change their boots before they came into her presence out from the wet park or the dusty streets; but, then, what did not Lady Greatorex, the Premier's wife, say to her for doing so?

Did she not say: "My dear, don't make them such little dandies; it's so dreadfully un-English!"

What was the pleasure of teaching these little lads things which the whole effort of their after lives would be to forget and abjure?

"I have never seen the sanctity of English mud," she had replied, with perversity. "All my men change their boots before they come in to tea at Brakespeare."

Un-English was the epithet with which Lady Greatorex was accustomed to include all the graces, all the talents, all the wit, and all the genius, which she encountered in her path. "So very un-English," is such a useful and all-suggestive epithet of censure when there is no other which can well be employed. What is so admirable about it is, that no one can really say what it means. All that is known about it is that it is esteemed un-English to have any hair on your head if you are a man, or to have stockings the same shade as your dress if you are a woman; it is un-English to speak good English, or to have any originality when you speak at all; it is un-English to like Russian society, and to dislike luncheons at two o'clock; it is un-English to bend your back pliably to any person who is not of royal birth; it is un-English to see no charm in walking over ploughed earth in a gust of sleet; it is un-English to write poetry, or to quote it; it is un-English to have a peroration to your remarks in Parliament, or to pronounce the word "clôture" otherwise than as "closshe;" it is utterly and entirely un-English to be indifferent about killing things, and especially un-English to take for granted that public-speaking requires any study of elocution. Indeed, it is so un-English to do anything whatever, except shoot, that it is altogether wonderful to note that in the teeth of this eternal prohibition England has produced in the past, and still occasionally produces in the present, the most original thinkers, the most poetic poets, the greatest variety of intelligence, and

the most dignified orators of Europe! These abnormal developments probably thrive on Repression, as fruit trees flourish on pruning, and yet, very possibly, if we could count up all that conventionality and custom have effaced or intimidated, we should find that England's loss has been greater than her gain. Where but in England could people be found who could turn from the "Prometheus Unbound" to discuss what was, or was not, Shelley's conduct to Harriet Westbrook, or who could seriously censure Lord Byron for writing his glowing verses on the backs of unpaid bills?

Not long ago a learned paper was printed, proving that, among the various benefits which England would have enjoyed from the victory of Charles Edward and the restoration of the Stuarts, there would have been numbered her total exemption from the National Debt. Is it not possible that she would also have enjoyed considerable exemption from the drag upon her intelligence of the eternal commonplace?

The vast pile of the castle was illumined by the ruddy glare of the setting sun, as they drove up to the side entrance on the west of the house, where long stone terraces led down into what was called the Italian garden, and it looked so majestic, so splendid, and yet so homelike, that all her heart went out to it in a warm and reverent welcome, such as would never move the icy little souls of her children if they lived for a hundred years.

She regarded it with tender feelings; its his-

torical associations and its age appealed to the imaginative side of her temperament, and she liked to think that men and women of her blood would be there after her. She tried to make her sons feel as she did about it, but May and Fluff were children of their epoch; they had *l'esprit positif* of their time, and the indolent egotism of their father. They did not respond to her efforts, and when she tried to interest them in the traditions of the place, which went back to Arthur of Bretagne and the Plantagenet children, May shook his head, and Fluff yawned. They were wholly indifferent to the information that Edward the Fifth and his little brother of York had passed one happy summer there, and that Edward the Sixth had spent a spring-tide there, with his Latin books and his solemn tutors. That the Prince Eddie whom they knew was coming to shoot pheasants there in October, was a far more interesting fact to them.

"History doesn't matter," said May. "They were all dead, if ever they lived; and Mr. Brownson says they didn't ever live."

Mr. Brownson was their tutor.

"Oh, you hard little Realists!" said Freda in distress. "Is it possible you can be my children?"

"I don't see what it matters who was here before; we're here now," said May. "And I like London much better; there's the conjurers, and the Zoo, and the shops, and the Row. It isn't any fun here, as you won't let us ever go out with the guns."

"No; I will never allow you to do that; you will get brutal soon enough when you go to school. You have never seen me walk with the guns. I abhor that kind of thing."

"All the women walk with the guns except you, and Dawlish says you make us ridiculous," said May very sullenly.

She did not reply; she pushed him away with some impatience. That terrible coldness of heart which is common in the children of modern life, and which leaves a sense of despair with their elders, out of these narrow, cold, self-centred little souls, what beauty can come? They are dry and hard as paths of beaten sand.

"You care for the place, Ina, though you have nothing to do with it; but these children regret the Row and the Zoo," she said to a young girl, who had come out on to the western terrace to meet them, as the low sun sank downward beyond the distant lines of forest still dark and leafless, although April had almost passed away.

"Yes, I dearly love it," said the girl warmly. "But then, Aunt Freda, you have given me so many happy summers here."

"My dear child, it is sweet to say so, but the same summers would not be happy summers to my sons; they would be bored and pine for Piccadilly. I suppose I must not find fault with them. I am, unhappily, bored very quickly myself."

"You are, and you are not."

"What do you mean by that dark saying, Ina?"

The girl coloured and hesitated.

"Well, I mean that people weary you, but you do not weary yourself. You are bored, perhaps, because you want things so much better than any you find; you are not bored as empty minds are bored, because you cannot appreciate; you appreciate only too finely, and so you are never satisfied."

Freda laughed.

"My dear philosopher! Lorraine Iona could not have turned a more subtle and delicate compliment. You are so penetrated with your German theorists and your English psychologists that you grow wholly beyond me. But there is truth in what you say. People think me disdainful of others; I am not; I am only dissatisfied with them."

They had come into the house, and she loosened, as she spoke, some furs which the chilly spring weather had made agreeable in travelling; her delicate skin was warmed by the north country wind; her shapely head looked all the statelier for the small fur hat which crowned it.

The young girl looked at her with admiring eyes.

"My cousin Beaufront says," added Freda, with a smile, "that when he knows plain people well, he often finds them good-looking. Now, on the other hand, when I know good-looking people well, I am very apt to find them plain. That is not amiable, is it? I was amiable, dear, when I was your age. Marriage and society spoil the temper and jaundice the eyes."

Then, remembering that this was not a remark adapted to the ear of a young lady, whom it was desirable to persuade that marriage and society were the only legitimate aims, rewards, and safeguards of woman, she went to her own apartment with a tender gesture of dismissal to Ina d'Esterre.

The girl was Avillion's ward, and the daughter of one of his sisters who had married a vicious and extravagant person, well known, too well known, on the turf, George, Earl of Naseby, by whom she had been rendered very unhappy, and on whose behalf in his difficulties she had continually importuned and irritated her brother. She had died whilst her children were very young. When, a few years later, Naseby broke his neck in a steeplechase, his children were confided under his will to the joint guardianship of his brother-in-law and of his own brother, a north-country rural dean.

Lord Naseby had known very well what he was about; he cared little for his two sons, but much for his only daughter, and he wished to secure for her the thought and interest of Freda Avillion, for whose character and intelligence he had as great an admiration as it was possible for a man of his pursuits and habits to feel for anyone. When he died the child was thirteen years old, much younger than her age in some things, and in others much older.

"It's a joke putting in Avillion; of course he will never bother himself, but *she* will; and she is far and away the cleverest woman I know, and the one

whom I would soonest choose to have anything to do with my little girl," Lord Naseby had said when the lawyer had remonstrated with him on the nomination to the guardianship of the children of a man who was notoriously indolent, selfish, and cynical as Lord Avillion.

"People are so utterly without conscience when they make their wills," Avillion had said drearily when his brother-in-law had died. "They are getting out of it all themselves, and they don't care who they put in it instead. There is a ghastly selfishness about death; it grins at you and flings its codicils at you, and says, 'you'll remember me, *mon vieux,* for a precious long time, and you will sincerely regret me; and how nice that will be!' There is one thing I might do. I might decline to act with Dean Thoroton."

But he did not decline to act with the dean, because he was a man who knew the value in this world of ostensible concessions to obtain actual indulgences; he never went into any church, but he was always affable and courteous to the Church with a capital C. And although he never took an hour's actual trouble about his wards, he so impressed his coadjutor by his urbanity, that the dean everywhere declared ever afterwards that, whatever the world might say against Lord Avillion, he, the dean, was convinced such sayings were mere slanderous gossip. Avillion had accepted the trust nominally because he could scarcely do otherwise; but his wife, in concert with the other trustee, practically endured all

the trouble of it; sent the boys to Eton, saw after their boats, their bills, and their allowances, whilst on Freda in especial devolved the care of Lady Ina, of whom she had grown really fond in the seven years during which she had been the young girl's chief friend.

Ina d'Esterre was now eighteen, and was to be presented in the course of the next season. She was neither lovely nor beautiful, but she was charming; she had a brilliant complexion, beautiful hair, and eyes which smiled so honestly and sweetly, that even Avillion, who detested the sight of her because she represented a duty, had once murmured *"C'est une laide, mais une jolie laide."* United to her charming countenance she had great height, and a figure, slender now, but of perfect proportions, and she had that look of race, that air of high breeding, that fine and admirable manner, which no one with any drop in them of the Avillion blood was ever without. She was quite a child in thought, feeling, and knowledge, for Freda had found her own premature knowledge of the world no source of joy, and had kept her in seclusion under wise and simple teachers.

Lady Ina was by nature intelligent, and her education had been such as to develop her natural talents in their fittest directions; she was not learned in any way, but she was thoughtful, and in music, for which she had a passionate love, she was very skilled; she had a profound and accurate knowledge of harmony, and when playing on the organ at

Brakespeare and on her own violin anywhere, she was completely happy.

"I am almost sorry you play that violin so wonderfully," Freda said once to her, "because when you are once out they will be always teasing you to join their amateur concerts in the East End, and their 'Ladies' string bands,' and their 'Recitals,' and all the rest of it, and that is in such very bad taste. You look like a young, very young, St. Cecilia, with your big eyes, and your auburn curls bent over that bow; but I should not like to think that all London would come and stare at you at a guinea a-piece for a charity, or that Whitechapel and Shoreditch could see you so for nothing at all. To be sure," she added, forgetting that her remarks were not benevolent, "it is all that is right and nice to try and humanise these poor creatures, and if they really do care for Bach, and Schumann, and Gluck, they must be less dreadful than they look, and can hardly kill their women and eat with the same knife afterwards, as one of them did the other day; but I do not think it is delicate or dignified for young girls to play in any public places. St. Cecilia never could have done it; I always told Violet Guernsey that."

"I should not like to play in public," said Lady Ina. "I do not think I could; I always play best and enjoy it most when I am quite alone. Then it seems as if the great dead men who wrote down all those harmonies come to listen to one."

"You are an enthusiast," said Freda indulgently,

but thought "we must marry her as soon as she is out or she will become too odd."

Ina d'Esterre had no grain of genius, but she had talent, and a warm, sympathetic, generous temperament; her imagination had no great scope in the wholly artificial world which surrounded her, but her intelligence was carefully cultured, and her natural tendency towards idealisation and admiration had concentrated itself in Lady Avillion.

"But though she is so good to me, she does not really care for me," thought the girl, with the correct intuitions of a very warm and sensitive temper. Still she was very happy; especially happy in those weeks which she passed at Avillion House, at Brakespeare, or at Strathisla, watching, listening to, and mutely adoring her châtelaine with the whole-hearted idealism of an unworn fancy and an ardent nature.

"She would make Ralph so happy, if he would only think of her instead of that intolerable Mrs. Laurence," Lady Avillion reflected more than once; but Beaufront did not enter into such views for his happiness, though he thought Ina d'Esterre a charming child.

Ina was very quiet; she said little, being, as far as a high-bred person can be so, shy. She had read a good deal, thought a little, and had opinions of her own which were very dear to her, so that she seldom intruded them on others. She had been almost always in the country, and she loved air, movement, and Nature with a passion which was almost

poetic; her vitality was strong and her health perfect. She adored Freda Avillion with the enthusiasm of a girl for a woman who is her ideal in everything; but the expression of such enthusiasm was rare and timid, for Freda conveyed to her, as to most other people, that vague sense of being far away in spirit and feeling when she was kindest and sweetest in manner.

"I would die a hundred deaths for her," thought Ina, as Flodden and many another had thought, "but I should never presume to tell her so."

"You are my daughter," said Freda, with the gracious jest of one who was her senior by nine years, and she treated her like one, never wearied in buying pretty clothes and costly presents for her, and studied her welfare both seriously and sincerely.

The lady of Brakespeare enjoyed a calm twenty-four hours to herself, a breezy sunshiny spring day, which she spent chiefly out of doors with Ina and the two little boys. It was cold on these wide heathered moors and forest lands of the North Riding, but to her strong vitality and perfect health the bracing winds were welcome.

She visited the Habitation of the Primrose League named after her, and established in the little gray town, which in the Wars of the Roses and the strife of the Rebellion had been covered by the archers and protected by the culverins of the great castle—a homely place with red roofs and a square-towered church, and a stone cross shapeless with age, and

a quaint town hall of ancient date and modest aspect; a town where the whole population turned out of doors to see May and Fluff scamper down the steep high street upon their ponies, and where the canary-coloured liveries of the Avillion carriages, when the flag was flying from the keep and the great people drove in to the Primrose Lodge, still were a source of wonder and admiration to the burgesses and the rustics who watched them with round good-humoured eyes, unglazed by envy.

Lady Avillion got down from her horse at the Wilfreda Habitation, which had been inaugurated by, and named after her, and entered it and held a long colloquy with the citizens who were on its council, and arranged with them the programme for the summer and autumn meetings. She was as blandly interested, as solicitous for its success, as observant of its interests, and as keenly alive to its necessities as she had ever been; but she was herself conscious of a certain hollowness in the expression of her convictions and her enthusiasms that passed unperceived by the flattered and fussy townsfolk. A word of her husband's haunted her; was it possible, could it be possible, that this new and precious Conservative palladium of the State was, after all, nothing but the American caucus—the frightful American caucus—in disguise?

"Your uncle has invited Syrlin here," she said abruptly to Ina d'Esterre, as their horses paced homewards through the town whilst the little boys trotted on before. "I did not wish it; but your uncle has

taken a great liking to him. Yes; Syrlin! how surprised you look! surely even your ignorance of the world has knowledge of his fame."

"Oh yes; and he is M. Auriol's dearest friend," said the girl quickly, and then coloured and paused in some confusion.

"Auriol! what should you know about Auriol?" said Freda in some astonishment.

"I have met him once or twice at Rufusdene and Ditchley and Craigisla," replied her niece; they were country places belonging to her relatives.

"And he made an impression on you?" asked Freda.

"Who would not be impressed by his voice?" said the girl a little hurriedly, looking down on her bridle-hand.

"Oh, his voice is admirable" replied Lady Avillion carelessly. "It brings him in a *joli denier*, I believe; but he is too lavish with it. He is always singing here and there and everywhere for nothing, for acquaintances who scarcely thank him."

Ina d'Esterre said nothing more, but as she rode, looked down at the little stream running under the stone causeway of the little street, so that her face was turned away from the scrutiny of Lady Avillion. Freda, however, did not notice the attitude or the embarrassment; it never occurred to her that a girl like her ward could by any possibility be interested in this Orpheus of the drawing-rooms.

On the following day Avillion came down by a special train, bringing with him the Queenstowns and some other people.

"I had told Syrlin to come down with us, but he did not turn up in time at King's Cross," he said to his wife. He was annoyed; any failure to recognise his plans or his condescensions irritated him extremely at all times. To have offered an artist a seat in his own special railway carriage and then have the seat left unfilled, seemed to him an almost unpardonable offence.

"Why would you insist on inviting him here at all?" replied Freda, with some irritation. "You know very well that he is always capricious and self-willed; perhaps he did not care to appear in your train, like your court jester."

"You dislike him, merely because I like him," said Avillion fretfully, all his inclinations to blame his recalcitrant guest disappearing before the discovery that his wife was willing to join in the blame. "I wonder, for my part, that you do not go over to Gladstone just to be in opposition to me; you are so terribly *hargneuse.*"

His wife's temper remained unruffled. She smiled slightly.

"I think it was a pity to invite Syrlin," she said quietly, "because your likings last such a very little time, and they always have a little tinge of patronage, and so you probably prepare yourself some disagreeable."

Avillion liked anybody who amused him whilst the amusement lasted. If it quickly ceased, his regard ceased with it; but that surely, he would have said, was the other people's fault, not his, and he never, by any chance, pardoned a jest which touched his dignity.

One season there was, as usual, an American young woman who was attracting all eyes. She was even more adorable than usual, because her father had really been a miner and she really a mill-hand, until oil, or gas, or silver, or some one of the products which the American soil kindly keeps in its bowels to provide these startling transformations, had made a billionaire of Jim Gossett and had sent his wife and daughters to make their bow in Buckingham Palace. Esmeralda Euphrosyne Gossett enraptured the fastidiousness of London. It knew that four years before she had been sifting coal dust in a boy's shirt and leather drawers; it knew that four years before her father had been lying on his back picking at a seam of coal by the light of a tallow candle; it knew that her eldest brother had shot a man in a drunken brawl in a spirit shop, and was somewhere or other undergoing punishment by the State for that momentary self-forgetfulness. There was no possible doubt about these things, and to know them and then see Esmeralda Euphrosyne Gossett with five rows of pearls round her white throat, smiling over her bouquet of gardenia and stephanotis at a drawing room was just the moral and mental "eye-opener" that was rapture and in-

toxication to a bored and satiated society. Society, in London at any rate, is like a *viveur* whose palate has become so numbed by over-feeding, that nothing but the queerest and strongest condiments can give it any pleasure. When Euphrosyne Gossett took more rum-sorbets than were good for her, and at balls in high places resorted to the vernacular of the coal-shaft, Society, led by its princes, held its sides in delight; and she led all London by the nose, with her own small nose in the air and princes clinging to her skirts in unextinguishable laughter. A few great ladies like Freda Avillion might still hold aloof, and refuse to let her be presented to them; they were in a minority, an unpopular minority too, and one so small that it could have no possible effect. When the century was young and Almacks were in power, great ladies were the arbiters of social destiny; their frown fatal, their smile the empyrean; but in these later days great ladies are as utterly impotent as post-chaises to hold, or turnpikes to bar the roads. The pretty flowers which have sprung up in a night on the rottenness of the dunghills are wholly independent of their censure. The dunghill flavour has become indispensable to titillate and please the blunted senses of society.

Even to the sublimest mind there was something irresistibly comical in seeing the representatives of ancient crowns and coronets doing linkboy's service in the fog for the mill-hand from Milwaukee, and the most sober countenance could not but relax into a smile when a prince of the blood ran breathless

along a railway-station platform to catch the last glimpse of the handkerchief she waved to him as she cried, through her tiny, turned-up nose: "Mind you're spry, and don't funk," referring to an appointment to eat prawns and peaches with her at a New Club supper.

Esmeralda Gossett, however, though she let princes pant after her, was much too wise a young woman to compromise herself with them, however much she compromised them; she meant "business," and ducal business. The necessity of this had been repeatedly dinned into her ears by her mother on the deck of the Transatlantic liner which had borne them to the upper ether of Great Britain and Claridge's. She had acquired, in an incredibly short space of time, an external *chic*, which was, to cloyed palates and jaded tastes, entrancing, by reason of its appetising contrast to the crudeness of her vernacular and the emptiness of her mind. The great tailors and milliners and hairdressers turned her out to perfection; a completely perfect *poupée à la mode*. She was one of those toys which London in its senile self-indulgence most delights to play with, and to be "cheeked" by her was a rapture to the sons of men. She "cheeked" everybody, from the highest to the lowest, but in a fatal moment for herself she "cheeked", amongst others, Lord Avillion.

Avillion was infinitely diverted by her, and contributed considerably to her success and notoriety by his praises and attentions. The mere fact that his

wife would not know her made him keener and warmer in his support of her. One day, at a State Ball, when she was looking more bewitching than usual, with her saucy eyes dancing above her bouquet of friesias, he murmured to her, with a melancholy regard which he found usually irresistible: "Alas—alas! Oh fairest child! Why am I not free to offer you something more than my mere homage? How happy I should be if only I could do so!"

He liked saying this kind of thing, because he could not possibly be taken at his word, and the fluttering trepidations and full belief in his sincerity, with which they were always received, diverted him immeasurably. He looked for the same emotions in this untutored child of nature.

But Esmeralda Euphrosyne grinned in his face with her tiny sharp teeth, like a fox-cub's, all displayed:

"Guess you wouldn't do for me; you're two rungs of the ladder too low."

"What!" said Avillion, faintly: he could not believe his ears. He!—he! Uther, Earl of Avillion and Pontefract, spoken to thus!

The young beauty grinned more and more, and her tiny teeth nibbled the edges of her friesias.

"Wal, I know you're a first-class Earl, but I sneeze at any of you as aren't Dukes. I suppose you could get made a Duke if you was to try

hard?" she added, in kindly explanation of her meaning.

A first-class Earl! Get made a Duke! He! who had almost quarrelled with Greatorex for hinting at such degrading possibilities. Offence, amaze, and horror gave place to profound pity in her hearer's mind.

"Was it possible," he thought, "that there could be any soul so dead as not to understand the immeasurable gulf separating an old, old earldom, old as the waters of Camelot and the towers of Caerleon, from newly-blossomed strawberry-leaves given for political services by a nineteenth century administration, or a dukedom created for personal reasons by William of Orange or George of Hannover?"

"I fear that I could not oblige you in that matter, even to obtain such a reward as your favour," he said coldly. "You do not yet understand our *nuances*, my dear young lady; pray do not judge us all by our new pillars of the State, Lord Maltby, Lord Echéance, and Lord Gunmetal."

Esmeralda Gossett did not understand at all, nor know why she had offended him, but she saw that she had done so, and she was made to suffer for it. Avillion ceased to haunt her, praise her, send her flowers, and lend the might of his influence to keep her the queen of the hour. He spoke slightingly of her profile, suggested gently that her pretty mouth was under-hung, and held her so sweetly and delicately up to ridicule in every way,

that she lost two-thirds of her adorers, and all her royalties, and before that season was out was glad to marry a "one-horse concern" in the shape of an Irish Viscount. She never knew to whom she owed her social undoing, and always remained in the happy belief that Lord Avillion would have been at her feet if his wife had died in an opportune moment.

CHAPTER XV.

THE day following the first circle of guests arrived, and Freda Avillion was a great lady at the head of a great house. Every one of her guests was in turn the object of her gracious solicitude, but no one of them had any intimate half-hours with her. The fatigues of a châtelaine, even of one who has the most perfect of households behind her, are much greater than the people who only read the lists of house parties in the newspapers ever dream. If she fulfil her duties she must be perpetually *en évidence;* she must show no signs of personal sympathies or antipathies, and she must arrange her guests with as much attention to harmony as a composer gives when he arranges his musical phrasing. All these obligations demand great toil, unflagging interest, or the appearance of it, and a perpetual sacrifice of personal ease and inclination. The mistress of Brakespeare Castle had these qualities, and her house parties were admirable.

Avillion seconded her very little; he liked them to go well as a matter of vanity, but he never gave her the slightest assistance. He remained in his own rooms until dinner, and after dinner amused himself with any person or persons he might take a

fancy to for the moment. Brakespeare was only a prison to him, as sombre as Windsor and as dull as Versailles.

"If I were fond of him it would distress me much more, no doubt," she said once to her sister, Lady Ilfracombe; "as it is, it only distresses me because it offends my pride, or perhaps my vanity, since I know that he is always thinking to himself what much nicer women he might have married, and that I don't give him any sufficient equivalent for all that he has given to me. He would always have thought so of any woman he had married. It isn't really anything personal against myself, and so I look on it philosophically. There is only one thing that he has ever required of me, and that one thing is to receive well. I do do that; it is tiresome, but I do it; it is an art in its way; most women think it is enough to open their houses and let people walk in; but it isn't enough. You can, of course, have a crowd with no trouble; but if you want to go beyond that you must take trouble."

And she did take it; exerting all her tact and intelligence to make her houses agreeable to others. From Avillion she had no assistance whatever; he loved elegance, splendour, and in a certain degree ceremony; that is, he liked people to observe strict ceremony towards himself, but he expected to be able to do away with it whenever he chose. He had the hauteur and punctilio of a great noble combined with the easy-going nonchalance and carelessness of a man entirely bent on pleasure and indifferent

where he found it. Such a man can never by any chance be a good host. He is only bent on his own entertainment, and if he be not entertained is apt to sulk and show his displeasure in his own house as in that of others.

Syrlin did not make his appearance that day nor the next. A brief telegram, *"Détenu, mille pardons,"* was the only message he sent, and Avillion was not familiar with this brusque inconsiderate manner of deranging and upsetting his house-parties.

"Those people always do that sort of thing," he said fretfully. "It is to make themselves the more wanted; but it is beastly bad manners; serve us right, though, for inviting them."

"Le beau ténébreux nous manque," said Alex Queenstown, who did not care to sing her negro songs to her banjo unless Syrlin were there to appreciate the shining of her small pearl-like teeth and the curves of her white round arms as she did so. She was not sure that he ever did or ever would appreciate these or anything else about her, and this uncertainty was an intense stimulant to the pampered and sated vanity of a young woman who was wonderfully handsome, utterly spoilt, nineteen years old, and an English duchess. To Avillion, a spoilt child also, it seemed that, this one guest being missing, nothing was agreeable or harmonious; it appeared to him altogether monstrous that a mere artist should treat the magnificent ceremonial of

English country-house life with this indifference and disrespect.

"It is just like them though," he said irritably for the hundredth time. "It is our own idiocy that allows us to be their foot-ball like this."

It was on the afternoon of the third day from the arrival of the telegram that having sent all her people to amuse themselves after luncheon, Lady Avillion was for half-an-hour alone in the library: a rare pleasure to one for whom life was for ever passed in a crowd. There was a new book out by Lorraine Iona, and she hoped at least for leisure enough to enjoy the cream of it. His books were not so delightful as himself, but they were nevertheless impressed with all his originality, vigour, and unconventional modes of thought. It was a fine morning at Brakespeare, and at three o'clock the tardy sun had shone out, and was brightening the woods and glades of the home park, and the terraces and parterres of the still chilly gardens.

She sat in an embrasure of one of the windows, and the light fell full of mellow colour through the painted casement on to the fresh-cut pages of the book and the precious stones on the fingers with which she turned leaf after leaf. For a little while there was entire silence round her; the vast room was wrapped in that stillness which best becomes a home of books. She started as a voice of which the silvery tones were now familiar to her said on the other side of the one open pane of the window,

"May I be forgiven if I enter in so unceremonious a manner? I had lost my way in walking across the park, and I came up these terrace steps in the hope of finding some one who would guide my steps."

As he spoke, Syrlin looked through the space where the oriel was open; and smiling, awaited his pardon and permission.

"How exactly like him!" she thought; "why could he not come as the dressing-bell rang, as everybody else does?"

But aloud she said graciously:

"Pray come in; yes, that door opens from the outside. But why did you not telegraph again, that we might have sent for you to the station?"

"There was no need," replied Syrlin. "My man will stay there with my things. And it is only a two-mile walk, and so charming a one, through your forest and gardens. I find this keen northern air delightful after London."

He had opened the door, whilst he was invisible, from without, and stood before her with his hat in his hand; not in the least like other men, and yet with an air of distinction and grace which took all rudeness and offence from his want of ceremony.

Freda Avillion laid down her volume without regret for it. He irritated, he astonished, he displeased her very often; but she could not resist his fascination.

"Why did you not come on the day appointed?" she asked him. "Lord Avillion was very disappointed."

"I could not," he replied; "I had a friend who arrived."

"But your friends were waiting for you here."

"Friends! Oh no; you are none of you my friends."

"That is very uncivil and unkind. We are poor ordinary mortals, but we do our best. Sit down, will you not, and tell me who this friend is who has so much dominion over you?"

Syrlin threw himself down on a long low chair beside her.

"It was one of my teachers from Tripoli," he said in answer. "One of those who educated me and to whom I owe all I know. He had been sent over on a special mission, and I met him by chance all astray and uncomfortable like a lost lamb in the terrible city. Of course, I stayed to finish his affairs for him and set him at ease. Unhappily he had only two days of his liberty left. Dear old man! He was so rejoiced to see me, and I to see him. I felt twelve years old once more, running amongst the aloe-hedges and the rosebushes in the monastery garden."

"I understand; but I doubt if Lord Avillion would," said his hostess with a smile. "And your good old monk, where is he? You should have brought him down with you. It would have been something new for us."

The brows of Syrlin grew dark.

"There is nothing to laugh at in him. He is as simple as a child, but as wise as a sage, and a fine

Hellenist also. I saw him safely on to a good ship going straight to Morocco, and have promised to go and stay in the monastery this coming winter if I am living."

"Living! Surely that is a very needless proviso, at your years and with your health and strength?"

"Giorgione was young," said Syrlin curtly, "and Gaston de Foix."

"Oh, if you count the hazards of war and pestilence!—"

"There are greater dangers," said Syrlin, whilst his eye dwelt on her with that deep and luminous gaze which always troubled her and made her own eyes look elsewhere. It was utterly absurd that it should so trouble her and annoy her, for no other regard had ever done so before.

"What business has Gringoire in a palace?" said Syrlin with a smile.

"I fear the palaces must bore Gringoire," replied Freda.

At that moment the two little boys came on the terrace and entered the room, flushed and handsome as they had come in from riding.

"These are my children," she said as she touched their curls. "My dears, bid this gentleman welcome to your house."

"Your children!" he repeated with a sense of surprise and of annoyance which he felt was utterly unreasonable, but which he could not control.

They were more like Avillion than they were like their mother, and had his expression of querulousness, petulance, and hauteur; they looked askance superciliously at Syrlin, they knew that he was an artist, for they had heard of him in London from their valet, who had said of him *"pour riche, il est riche, et pour beau il est beau; mais il n'est que comédien, et voilà qu'il aille partout!"*

Syrlin, with a consciousness that his hostility to them was absurd, and knowing well his own powers of charming others when he chose, conquered his distaste and talked with them, until the children, despite themselves, were won over by the spell of that wonderful harmony of voice and expression. He spoke to the children but he looked at their mother, who sat near with the golden light of the afternoon sun falling through the painted panes of the windows, and illumining the russet velvet of her gown, and shining on the precious stones of the many rings she wore.

May and Fluff sat at her feet and in front of Syrlin, their eyes scrutinising him keenly as they half reluctantly yielded themselves to the spell of his fascination and listened to stories of his own boyish sports and adventures in Morocco.

"Won't you say us something?" said May at last, his curiosity vanquishing his pride. "Do say us something. They say that what you say is so wonderful you make people laugh and cry just as you choose."

"You mean recite, May," said his mother. "But you must not tease M. Syrlin; he does not come here to be worried to amuse little boys."

"I do not want *de me faire prier* if your children wish a thing, Madame," said Syrlin. "Let me think a moment—what is your name—May?"

"I am Lord Camelot," said the child quickly with a flush of anger.

"You are Lord Snob, I think!" said his mother, with a touch which was not light on his shoulder. "His name is Uther, it is a family name," she said to Syrlin; "but he always called himself May in the nursery, and it remains with him as nursery nick-names do. You honour him very much when you remember it."

"Oh, but I stand corrected," said Syrlin with a smile, "and I am going to recite to my Lord Camelot."

He paused a moment, and then recited Schiller's ballad of the Knight and the Lady's Glove. With scarcely a gesture, merely from the marvellous modulations of his voice and its varied powers of almost infinite suggestion, the poem lived and breathed as he spoke it.

The gay court gathered, the fierce king muttered, the cruel beauty smiled, the lion lay down in his indolent strength, the tiger yawned and waited for blood, the leopards wrestled, the glove fell—then came the insolent murderous words, and between the jaws of the beast the scorned lover leapt down.

Freda Avillion knew the ballad line by line, but the contagion of its suspense and terror gained on her as the voice of Syrlin lent to the familiar words the charm of some new, unknown, mysterious thing.

"I should think he would go after one's glove like that," she thought as she listened. "But when he had brought it back he would be even ruder than the knight; he would throw it in one's face I think."

"You say it very beautifully," May remarked with affable condescension. "But he was a very silly man, that knight; if he did not care to please the lady, why did he go?"

"And he might have killed one or two of the beasts when he was down there," added Fluff with a practical spirit.

Syrlin looked at them with amusement.

"You would not have gone for the glove, Lord Camelot?"

"No; I would have stayed up where I was," said May very decidedly.

"She couldn't have liked him, you know, or she wouldn't have sent him," said Fluff.

"Wise critics! At your age I was not such a logical analyst. I admired the knight and hated the lady."

"Tell us another, will you?" said both the children at once.

"But you are not to be moved, *mes enfants*. What can I do with such a frozen audience?" said

Syrlin, and he recited them, good-naturedly enough, "The Diver" of Schiller. As he repeated it, their mother could not repress a shudder of sympathy or sense of terror; the waiting waves, the nameless creatures of the unfathomable depths, the wasted heroism, the jealous sea that closed over its treasures, moved her as the sonorous cadences of the poem fell on her ears.

Both poems had been familiar to her from the days that she had read German in her schoolroom, hating it passionately and longing to be out under the chestnuts and larches of the home park at Bellingham. But they were revealed to her in all their beauty, in all their meaning and metaphor, as Syrlin recited them while the pale light of the spring day which was drawing to its close fell on his countenance and shone in his deep, luminous, eloquent eyes.

The children were the excuse for, she was the object, of his elocution, and although she was not easily susceptible to that sort of attraction, the magic of his voice and manner gained upon her.

"One could wish Schiller were living to hear you," she said when silence followed on the last lines. She had seen and heard him often in Paris: she knew his "Hippolyte," his "Alceste," his "Gaston de Presles," his "Gringoire," and she had always known that he was a man of genius. But he had not moved her as strongly on the stage as he did now, in this quiet library of Brakespeare, with the

two indifferent little boys seated at her feet, and without the gray terrace, calm and pale in the afternoon air of the north.

It was a rare treat to induce Syrlin to recite; one for which princes sometimes begged in vain; it was a feast for the ear, for the eye, and for the intellect, from the melody of his tones, the beauty of his gestures, and the infinite variety of suggestion contained in his powers of expression. But all these riches of utterance were as pearls before swine to the Avillion children; they listened wholly unmoved.

"One is always so sorry," she murmured as he ceased. "Why would the king insist! Is it not just like life—always the same abuse of obedience, the same exorbitant demands upon any unselfish devotion. England was just like that king when she bade Gordon go back into the desert."

"I should like to hear more about the fish monsters," said Fluff. "Were they real?"

"Oh, it was only the octopus," said May contemptuously. "We've seen it you know at the Aquariums, only I suppose this one was bigger."

"My dear children, you will rival Mr. Froude and Mr. Freeman," said their mother, impatiently. "I would sooner see tears running down your cheeks for the drowned diver!"

"Et tout mon Paris pleure quand je veux!" he murmured half aloud.

"Your *tout Paris* is younger than my sons are,"

said Freda a little bitterly. "What can one say? They are children of their epoch. My dears, thank M. de Syrlin for his great kindness and then go to your rooms."

Syrlin's eyes followed the children out of the library.

"It is the first time that I have missed my effect on my audience," he said with a smile. "Imagine an entire audience like these callous little critics! It would freeze one's voice into silence on one's lips! What do you say, Madame, of the knight? Do you think with your son that he was a fool?"

"I wish my son were likely to be such a fool when he is grown up," replied Freda. "But there will be no chance of that. He will only love himself. They are young in nothing!" she added impatiently. "I was saying so to their father as you came in; it is all the better for them he thinks. I suppose their impenetrability is a very safe quality, it is like a steel corslet in the world."

"It is like the armadillo in the jungle," said Syrlin. "He is not an animal that one would be inclined to pet or take in one's arms, but he goes safely through existence. Yet I pity those who have not the amulet of imagination to transfigure life. For George Sand it made the Sologne blossom with the flowers of the soil and the flowers of the fancy, as though those dull heaths had been an Arcady. Leopardi on the contrary was no true poet, or he would have found suggestion and sympathy even in the very stones of Recconati, and the mere lilies brought

in for Pentecost would have made him happy for a year."

"It is strange," he added abruptly, "that your children, Lady Avillion, should be so cold."

"I believe I am cold myself," replied Freda.

"No! You are proud, but you are not cold."

"You know I am really a very unimaginative woman."

"Ah, Madame! so the lute is dumb until some touch awakes the music."

"I have no music in me to awaken," said Freda somewhat coldly.

"I do not believe that," said Syrlin curtly. "I believe the world has been with you all your life, and its breath is like the sand wind of the desert."

"You are so poetical," said the lady, with a smile which was a little derisive. "You are so poetical that you can even discern romance in an Englishwoman absorbed in her political party, her social set, and her country houses, surely the most unpromising subject for romance that can exist."

"Look in your mirror, and look in your soul, Madame," said Syrlin with a familiarity and a roughness which made her cheek glow warm with anger. It was not the language of London men. Did he know nothing of the *convenances* of life, this strange artist, with his daringly expressed admiration and his equally daring rudeness? Or did he deliberately ignore and walk over them?

"Men of genius may be as interesting as they may be original," she thought with impatience, "but

nothing will ever prevent their being in society like the traditional bull in the china-shop!"

Her mirror and her soul!

Would her own brother even ever have dared to say such a thing?

"If only he were not in my own house," she thought; if only he had been in any other house that she might have wholly ignored his existence!

At that moment the Duchess of Queenstown and two or three other people, already staying in the castle, came together into the library; they had been trout-fishing, and were full of their successes in that deep brown river flowing under the oak-clothed slopes of Brakespeare forest, which fifty miles away, as it rolled through mining districts and smoke-smothered towns, grew foul and thick with slime and soot, ere it washed itself white in the boiling waves of the North Sea on the Northumbrian coast. They were talkative, triumphant and mirthful; they brought with them a fresh breezy sense of the woods; they were languid, fashionable, idle, luxurious by habit, but they were English people, and they were at home in the open air, under the budding boughs, by the side of the running rivers.

It is very odd that the English, who have the most uncertain climate in the world, are the most out-of-door people of any on earth except South Sea Islanders and the Green Savages of the Corea.

"It is such a pity you don't care for sport, Syrlin," said Alex Queenstown as she sat down by him.

"Is it?" said Syrlin.

"Oh dear yes!—you never killed anything, did you?"

"A lion once, and I have regretted it ever since. A man once, and I have never regretted it."

"Where was the lion? Where was the man?"

"The lion was killing an antelope; he was on his own ground, and quite within his rights, but I did not respect them and I fired at him; the man—oh! the man does not matter—he was a Prussian swash-buckler, he was a-jeering at France, and riddling the family portraits with bullets in a château of Alsace which he had purchased and was going to pull down. I struck him; and then of course I went out with him and I shot him;—they were both moments of passion—the one of the lion I regret."

Alex Queenstown stared and laughed.

"How droll you are! You are very fond of France?"

"I care for her, yes. She has cared for me."

"And you dislike civilisation?"

"I dislike it because it has become nothing but a mould into which human nature has been run; it has made originality rare, freedom of action impossible, and life a routine. Every man must do like his fellows. Can he even clothe himself in his own way? Never—or he would be mobbed as he went down Pall Mall or the Boulevard des Capucins."

"You are very alarming, Syrlin," said the Duchess. "You have something of the Moor in you, I think."

"Perhaps," said Syrlin. "The country we are born in colours our life; *sans le vouloir, sans le savoir*."

Avillion, who had heard from his secretary of the arrival of his tardy guest, entered the library at that moment and welcomed Syrlin with the utmost grace, but with a tinge of hauteur designed to recall to the wayward visitor that invitations in England are strictly limited to their dates.

"Oh, I am conscious of my crime," said Syrlin, replying as was his wont to what was merely implied. "You were so good as to invite me for eight days, I have missed three of my days, and so I shall only enjoy your hospitality for five."

"My dear sir," said Avillion, staring at him somewhat blankly, and with a vague sense of confusion extremely unwelcome to him, "of course that was not in the very least degree my thought, my intention; the longer you deign to honour Brakespeare the greater favour and happiness will you confer upon me and upon my wife. Can I say more?"

"Oh no!" said Syrlin with his sweetest smile; "you have even said a little too much. I have never liked too sweet things myself ever since an Arab woman, when I was a child, gave me some senna in a honeyed date."

Avillion absorbed himself in lighting his cigarette, as tittering softly around him there was an unwelcome little laugh; he had always prided himself on putting senna in his conversational dates, and in

making everybody swallow the compound with grimaces wreathed in smiles, and here the trick had been detected and unsuccessful.

"If he is going to answer Uther like that," thought the mistress of Brakespeare, "the week will certainly not be one of harmony."

Brakespeare by evening was filled with great people; the stately guest-chambers, some tapestried, some hung with gilded Cordovan leather, some gay with embroidered French satins, were lettered with high names, and along the sombre corridors with their panels and pillars of carven oak the electric light streamed, and the hot air of water-pipes glowed, and supercilious maids and valets passed each other, sauntering to those they served, and gathering notes of scandal to discuss over their fruit and wine in the upper servants' withdrawing-room.

Syrlin felt chafed and depressed, he could not have said why, as he went to his apartment, which was in that part of the castle known as Warwick's Tower because the Kingmaker had been once a prisoner there. He was used to houses as great as this, and its antiquity and majesty pleased his taste; but he wished he had not come thither, he disliked to eat the salt of Lord Avillion. He had the soul of the Arab in him as the lady had said, and he could not reconcile himself to the easy treacheries of society which have laughed away into scorn and disuse the old obligations and meanings of hospitality given and received. He disliked Avillion; it was

disagreeable to him to sleep under his roof and break his bread.

"It is absurd of me to come hither," he said to himself. "What have I to do with the great world? It is the worst enemy the artist has."

The great world polishes wit, dissipates prejudices, teaches wisdom, corrects exaggeration; but in return for these gains from it, the artist pays away much of his own riches, because to all great creations of art an atmosphere of serenity is necessary, and in the world there is no rest. There are stimulus, interest, friction, dramatic movement, but there is no rest; its atmosphere is heated and intoxicating, its pleasures are quickly followed by depression, and its passions become a dram-drinking which steals away time and force and contentment from anyone who becomes famous in it. It saps his energies, it debilitates his imagination, it fritters away his time, it makes a plaything of his power, it coaxes the lion in him to let itself be frisé and be-ribboned, and drawn into tricks like the poodle; and then one fine day when he is tired, or unwell, or out of spirits, fashion leaves him, and the great world forgets him, and he may die like Sheridan, and have his bed sold from under his body for aught that it will care.

Syrlin was not likely to be thus misled. He wanted nothing of that world, and treated it with an insolence which kept it meek and humble at his feet. He would have cared nothing if its doors had been shut in his face. But it saddened him often,

it irritated him always; and he had never felt either sadness or irritation in it so strongly as now at Brakespeare.

"He is really charming. My wife does not in the least appreciate him," said Avillion that night in his drawing-rooms to a friend when Syrlin had been reciting the "Nuit d'Octobre." In society he was usually taciturn, restive and reserved, speaking little and wholly indifferent to what others said of him or wished from him. But at Brakespeare he was easily wooed and willing to be heard.

He had heard it said before his arrival there that the house-parties were magnificent but dull; he wished that this one should be otherwise through him, that she should always remember it as unlike others.

As it was well known that he had withdrawn from the stage, and would in probability never be seen again in any theatre, his recitations in her drawing-rooms were pearls of price not to be had for any prayer save hers.

Avillion, who had read a good deal and had cultured tastes, though they lay dormant, could appreciate the versatile talents which could imitate Coquelin, Irving, or Mounet Sully to the life, recite the "Grasshopper" or the "Per Vigilium Veneris" in the original Greek or Latin; charm the listening women with a monologue of Musset's or a verse of Richepin's; parody a reception at the Academy with improvised orations, or successively and successfully

imitate every well-known speaker of the French Chambers.

"They are only talents of the salon," said Syrlin slightingly when they gathered round and flattered him; he had those lighter talents at his command, though he used them so seldom, and half despised himself when he did so. But it pleased him to make the Lady of Brakespeare smile: it pleased him still more to make her eyes grow dim and hold her whole attention enchained.

He put aside his pride, his hauteur, and that ill-humour of which he was so often accused, and exerted all his great and varied powers to charm. Avillion was offended and yet delighted; he was always bored to death in his own house, and for once his evening passed without his having to hide a single yawn.

"When artists know what is expected of them and do it, they are such a godsend in a country place!" he said the next morning in his wife's hearing.

She looked at him with a glance of irrepressible impatience and rebuke, and smiled slightly. "If he heard you," she thought, "he would not be an hour under your roof."

Her cousin's worship of artists might be absurd, as it was certainly exaggerated, she reflected, but it was better than Avillion's indiscriminating insolence of patronage; she resented his insolence as she had resented her children's apathy. It made her more kind and considerate in her manner to Syrlin than

she would otherwise have been; she neglected no occasion of showing her respect for the royalty of genius, and as far as she had leisure to do so she bestowed the honour of her companionship on him.

"I am so grateful to him; he amuses Lord Avillion, and hardly anybody can do that," she said once to Violet Guernsey.

Was she indeed more grateful than her children had been?

He did not know, he did not ask, he was content for the moment if he made her smile or sigh with a jest of Molière's or a regret of Coppée's. Avillion, who was very quick in discernment whenever he emerged from his egotism sufficiently to notice others, was amused.

"He is in love with Freda, poor devil!" her husband thought. "Much good may it do him! He might as well lose his head about York Minster!"

She was a beautiful woman, and was much more than merely that; but when Avillion had come up with her in a dusty railway carriage after an evening and morning of unutterable boredom at Windsor Castle, or had returned with her from a Drawing-room smothered underneath her train and her bouquet, she could be nothing to him but the representation in flesh and blood of all the constraint, monotony, and imbecility which society entails on rank. It was unjust no doubt, but human nature is always unjust, and our estimate of others is far more often coloured by the scenes with which we associate them, than it is deliberately founded on their merits or demerits.

All the ceremonial part of life was odious to him, and as his wife was perforce the associate of his sacrifice to it, she was inextricably associated with what was disagreeable and tiresome in his life. It seemed to him that you must inevitably dislike a person whose name was everywhere bracketed with your own, from the list of names at a State Concert to the lists of patrons and patronesses at a Charity Ball. All the most intolerable ennui of an Englishman's existence is associated with his wife, from the ceremonial dinner at Windsor to the weddings, and churches, and county meetings which he is obliged to attend in her company.

She did not care or inquire what he thought; but many women pass their whole lives in wondering why their husbands do not care for them, and in their obtuseness never perceive or imagine that, as they are the associates of the most tedious hours of the men's lives, they inevitably become to those men sources and emblems of irritation and weariness.

The affections of a man should be perpetually associated in his thoughts only with what is delightful and diverting to him. The ladies who go to Court with them, go to Sandringham with them, go to dreary Ministerial dinners and solemn State receptions with them, cannot be thus associated. They are incarnations of ennui, and would still be so were they gifted with the beauty of Helen or the mind of Hypatia.

Many a woman wonders why her lord takes all

his time and attachment elsewhere, and perplexes her mind wearily as to what is the charm which others exercise over him; and it never occurs to her that the reason why she fails where others succeed is that she, in his eyes, has folded about her like a sad gray shroud the reflected dulness of so many empty hours in which the edict of society makes her his associate.

CHAPTER XVI.

WITH the earliest of his financial gains Syrlin had bought himself a little hunting lodge, a tall and picturesque tower, enclosed in walled gardens near the park of St. Germains; tradition associated with it the name of Louis d'Orléans, the beloved of women; he who was murdered at the corner of the old Rue du Temple, as he rode in the gloom of the November evening, lightly carrying his embroidered glove and singing half aloud a love song.

It was one of those corners of Paris which keep the memories and the silence of old, and are undisturbed by all the changes and the clamour near. Syrlin spent there at least three nights out of seven, and within its high stone walls and under its aged lofty trees found a solitude and a repose as complete, when he would, as Louis d'Orléans had found in his cell at the monastery of the Célestins; the time of Louis, the darling of women, and of the brute Jean de Bourgogne, is one so remote that it has left little which is to be found by the most arduous collector. But Syrlin knew his France by heart, knew her by-ways and villages, and the small châteaux of her *hobereaux* which stand far away

from any line of rail, and even from any much frequented high-road; and are only visited by the *coucou* once a week, by the *pelletier* once a month, and by the *greffier* once a year; and are only remembered by their Prefects whenever there is a dissolution of the Chambers and a general election. Syrlin, with the eyes of a Corot or a Millet in his head, and the sympathies of a George Sand or an André Theuriet in his heart, had spent many a summer month wandering in those unknown woodland mazes and those hidden chestnut valleys of the Jura, of the Vosges, of Berry, and of the Charente; had slept in the forest by the wood fire of the charcoal burners and found out many a little hamlet grey with the lichens of ages, and scarcely known even to the makers of ordnance maps. In these wanderings he had found in cabin and cottage and hostelry and presbytery, a tapestry here, a chest there, a corner cupboard, a set of drinking goblets, a rapier, a pair of wood tongs, or a press for holy linen of the church, which were of the time of Charles VII., and which he rescued from damp and cobwebs and neglect, and took to his tower at St. Germains. And all these things, gathered together in the mellow light which shone on them from the painted windows, picked up pane by pane in Bretagne and La Vendée, made his three rooms a joy to the soul of purists and dilettanti.

When the massive bolts and steel locks of the low-browed arched portal were fastened, and the oil wicks lit in the silver sconces, he could hear the owls

hoot and the winds moan around his solitary chambers; and could, if he chose, believe himself to be Louis d'Orléans waiting for some fair captive to be brought to him by his men-at-arms, or come in silken litter, only too willingly, across the forest to his arms. But no woman had ever entered this tower since Syrlin's occupation of it; such visitants were for the apartment in the Avenue Joséphine where modern art, modern luxury, and modern folly obtained his reluctant concessions to them. Near at hand the woods of the park of St. Germains closed the horizon; and as it chanced, a mile or two away, was that pavilion built in the days of the Second Empire, which was so delightful to Uther Avillion, and whither, not being a hermit by nature like Syrlin, he came accompanied by any pretty people from the Palais Royal, or Folies Dramatiques, or Bouffes Parisiennes, who momentarily took his fancy.

It was a charming pavillion, glittering, luxurious, elegant, with gilded spires and shining roof, colonnades of glass and rose gardens, rococo fountains and lawns of velvet grass; it was the best beloved retreat of the present master of Brakespeare, and all that he knew of that pavilion and its pastimes haunted the recollection of Syrlin persistently during his sojourn in the north.

"We have long been neighbours over the water, M. Syrlin," said Avillion with an ambiguous smile one night in the smoking-room at Brakespeare. "I hope that you will find your way across the woods to the Bonbonnière, whenever we are next hibernating

at St. Germains. Charming tower that is of yours; same date as Pierrefonds, isn't it? Ah! anything of the Valois epoch is so rare. My little place is, on the contrary, frightfully modern; but there are some good Bouchers, and some admirable nymphs of Coustou's, which may please you."

Syrlin looked him straight in the eyes.

"Thanks," he said coldly. "But dare we mention those Bouchers where your family Holbeins hang? And I confess I care little for nymphs, even when living, and *émoustillées* by champagne."

"Hang his impudence! Does he dare to censure me? A French actor playing prude and preacher! What next?" thought Avillion in a towering passion, which for once wholly prevented him from being ready with a reply, and which was all the greater because he was in his own house and could not punish the offender. Indeed had he been anywhere else he could hardly have quarrelled with a rebuke which was so delicately veiled and so covertly implied.

From the full height of his greatness he had stooped down goodnaturedly, and treated this fellow as his friend and equal; and in return the man had the intolerable insolence and audacity to play with his words, and condemn his improprieties, and set laughing in their sleeves all the men who were smoking there: laughing at him—him!—Uther, Lord Avillion!

All the momentary regard and admiration which he had conceived for Syrlin or had professed to con-

ceive for the sake of differing from his wife, vanished like magic at the irritation of such an affront.

"He must be in love with Freda or what would the Bonbonnière matter to him?" he thought. "Nobody on earth is ever so alarmingly down on your vices as a person who aspires to sap the virtue of your wife!"

He could never have entered into the chivalric sentiments of Syrlin if he could have known them.

"When one sees such a woman as this in his house and thinks of all one knows of St. Germains, one feels that one ought to choke to death for touching his bread," said Syrlin passionately to Lorraine Iona.

"My dear fellow, what the devil is it to you?" said that shrewd philosopher. "And you really distress yourself unnecessarily. I am quite sure that Lady Avillion knows all about St. Germains, and a great many other similar things too, and I do not believe that she cares in the very least; why should she? She does not care for him."

"I suppose she cares for her own dignity?"

"I imagine that it is not in Lord Avillion's power, or the power of any other man, to injure that."

"It does not hurt an ivory Madonna if a brute spits at it, but he is none the less a brute," said Syrlin with moody bitterness.

"If the Madonna belongs to him the passer-by who interferes is on the wrong side of the law," said Iona, "and I should not liken Lady Avillion to any Madonna myself; if she is like any statue at all, it is the Diane Chasseresse of Goujon, and her lord has

at all events one merit, he does not prevent her using her arrows."

"She does not care for such poor sport as men."

"Humph!" said Iona doubtfully. "She would prefer gods no doubt, but there are none. You are a *demi-dieu;* what does she say to you? I think if she heard you pitying her she would say that Diana is a strong goddess who needs no champions."

"These people never know their places," Avillion was saying at the same moment fretfully to the Duke of Queenstown as they went upstairs from the smoking-room.

"Oh, damn 'em, don't they?" said Queenstown. "And don't they all think, like the O'Donoghue, that where *they* are is the head of the table!"

"The more fools we to bid them to our tables," grumbled Avillion.

"I don't know why we do; it's the fashion just now," replied Queenstown. "It's the women's doings; those fellows are generally awfully good-looking."

"Gaia's gladiators were better; Gaius hadn't to ask *them* to dinner," said Avillion, in whose inmost soul there rankled an extreme offence, that an artist, however celebrated, should have presumed to even look a rebuke to him for his diversions in his pavilion. He was not unwilling to treat anybody who amused him on a temporary equality with himself, but he expected that it should never be forgotten that the equality *was* temporary and the condescension voluntary.

"Guilt hath pavilions, but no secresy," wrote a rabid society journalist once of the Bonbonnière; and reports of Avillion's doings there frequently crept into those *chroniques scandaleuses* which his wife said that she never read; but no man living had ever dared to hint that reproof to him which the glance of Syrlin and the words of Syrlin in response to his invitation had so plainly spoken.

"Men never blame you for an *atteinte aux mœurs* unless they meditate one at your expense," he thought shrewdly enough; and he took it into his head to observe the manner of Syrlin to his châtelaine.

It was a manner of perfect courtesy and impassiveness, of no *empressement* whatever, it had even an occasional ostentatious appearance of coldness; but Avillion was experienced in all the indices of nascent passions, and that coldness suggested to him the heat of the tropics beneath it.

To Avillion it seemed the very oddest thing in life that men fell in love with his wife.

"She hasn't the smallest charm," he would say pettishly; and really thought so because the day had so long gone by when she had had any for him, that he had quite forgotten it.

His recent loves were seldom in his own world.

"Never let yourself love a *femme du monde,*" he said once to a young man whose welfare he desired; "they are exacting and compromising. They fleece you like *cabotines*, but they never let you forget their position. You can never get away from them either, because you are eternally coming

across them in society. Dido would inevitably have got hold of Eneas again, if on the evening of the day that he broke with her, he had found himself obliged to take her in to dinner in Arlington Street or to give her his arm to her carriage as she left a crush at Wharncliffe House. When you can't get away from them there is no end to it."

And as he liked everything to have a very rapid and easy end to it, few women of his own rank had ever been able to enlist the fleeting affections of the lord of Brakespeare, though he flirted with hundreds of them, and not seldom even poisoned their lives with what his wife called his spun sugar.

One evening at Brakespeare the game of question and answer was being played and the interrogation was "What is happiness?" and whilst many answers were grotesque, *gouailleur*, flippant, or laboured in wit, Syrlin wrote briefly what he thought: "To be independent of man: to be dependent on God."

It was like a quotation from the "Confessions of St. Augustine" occurring in the midst of the dialogue of a piece by Meilhac and Hervé, and when it was read aloud a brief effective silence followed.

"He must always *pose* even in scribbling with a pencil," said one of the men who hated him in the ear of Alex Queenstown.

Freda took no notice of it at the moment, but, later in the evening as he was for a little space beside her, she said to him in a low tone, "I thought you had no religion, M. Syrlin, yet you gave us a sermon."

"Madame," replied Syrlin, "I have no religion as I have no home; but I know all that I miss in both."

The answer touched her, although she knew that if others had heard it they would only have considered it an additional affectation.

"When people wish for a religion they go to Lorraine Iona, and when they wish for a home they marry," she said with a smile, though she knew that the answer would jar on him.

Had it been a premeditated confession instead of an involuntary one, as it was, it could not have been better worded to haunt the ear and interest the imagination of Freda Avillion. Here was no *raté*, no embittered and envious toiler, left behind in the race of life, but a man at the perihelion of success, of triumph, of art, of personal popularity and of personal beauty, who carried with him in the privacy of his soul the lonely sadness of Solomon without the sanguine faith of Job.

"M. Iona is a great prophet, and marriage may be a great panacea," replied Syrlin "but neither could heal my soul, when it is sick."

"Sick of what? You are young, you are famous, you have the world with you, what can you need more?"

"I need to be happy; I am not," he answered, and there was a tone in the words which bore witness to their unvarnished truth; it was not a *pose*, nor an affectation, nor a sentimental phrase, but a fact.

She would not have been a woman if the contrast of his position and his feeling had not awakened her sympathy, and she was, moreover, one who though she had become absorbed in the movement and the interests of her world, yet retained in her heart a vague unanalysed ideal which did not find its fruition in society, in fashion, in politics, in that harassing harness which is called position, or in that feverish monotony which is called pleasure. True, she had reconciled herself to these and found a certain charm in them, yet there were moments when with all her belief in her opinions and all her pride in her influence, her inmost nature cried out to her in discontent, "Be these your gods, O Israel?"

The same instincts of her temperament which made her impatient of her children's want of fancy and of warmth in their tender years, made her comprehend the regret and the dissatisfaction of Syrlin in the height of his success.

CHAPTER XVII.

SYRLIN had not noticed Ina d'Esterre at Brakespeare; he had been scarcely conscious of her existence amidst that brilliant and numerous party; until one evening when he was speaking of his friend Auriol, he was struck by the quick flush and earnest look of interest with which she, who was listening whilst he spoke to others, heard the name. The next morning, as he passed the closed doors of the music room, his attention was arrested by a solo on the violin, which was being played with so much precision yet with so much feeling that he paused to hear it to its close; it was an arrangement of the "In der Fremde" of Schumann, adapted to string instrumentation.

As the last notes vibrated through the silence, he pushed open the door and entered to see who the player was. It was Lady Ina, who, at the farther end of the room, with her violin still resting against her shoulder, and her right hand with the bow in it still suspended, made a pretty picture, despite her lack of actual beauty, her tall, straight slender figure showing clear against the old carved oak behind her, and some sunbeam from the coloured window near

playing on her curling auburn hair; her face had the soft rapt look on it which comes on the faces of those who execute or listen to great music when they feel it greatly.

Beyond a word or two, when near her in the drawing-room, Syrlin had never spoken to the girl; he had never thought of her; she was one amongst the many, the innumerable young girls, who filled the houses he frequented. But the beauty and delicacy of her interpretation, and something in her attitude as she stood with her head slightly bent over her violin, attracted the artistic instincts always so susceptible within him.

The music-room was an immense oval chamber with very fine and old oak carvings and pillars of porphyry, and high windows with stained glass, representing in odd union S. Cecilia, and Apollo and Marsyas, Pan piping, and Christian angels chanting. It was admirably formed for its purpose, and had, it was said, in Tudor times, once been a church attached to the Castle of Brakespeare. It had a noble organ at one end of it, and an orchestra at the other. Very good music was often heard there when the house was full; at the present moment there was no one except Ina d'Esterre, who liked nothing so well as to be alone in it, amidst the numerous volumes of printed and manuscript music of three centuries, which were to be found on its shelves.

"*Mes félicitations*, Lady Ina," said Syrlin ap-

proaching. "You rendered that very accurately and beautifully, and it is by no means easy to do so. It is rare to hear such mastery of the violin at your age."

"Mine is very imperfect playing, I am afraid," replied the girl, colouring at his praise. "But I never tire of studying great music."

"That is the secret of success," said Syrlin. "But study avails nothing without sympathy."

He looked over the scores of the music lying beside her, and spoke of them with intimate knowledge; he spoke of Baireuth and of Louis of Bavaria, with whom he had stayed at Rosenberg; of Ambroise Thomas and St.-Saëns, and what he had personally known of the beautiful old age of Auber and of Verdi; and then by quite imperceptible digressions, which his companion was too simple to perceive, led the way to the theme of his own inmost thoughts, his hostess.

Ina told him innocently of Lady Avillion's incessant kindness to herself, of her many good actions on the estates, of her sincere endeavours to put into practice all that which with too many was allowed to remain mere precept.

"She cannot do much that she would," she added, "because—because—well, you see, she is not very ably seconded. Lord Avillion does not believe in charity; he thinks it encourages improvidence. But still, even within his limitations, she has done so much."

"*Ça se voit,*" said Syrlin, who, like Avillion, though for other reasons, did not believe in the efficiency of philanthropy, yet for that of his lady would have been ready to lose his life. "I have never believed in the excellences of property before, but here I see what a great educational and spiritualising factor a generous gentlewoman can make of it. I fear it is never really forgiven anyone, but in her it at least deserves forgiveness."

"You surely cannot be a Socialist?" said Ina, with a little apprehension. Her only knowledge of Socialists was confined to seeing very noisy and ill-dressed persons bellowing and waving their arms about under the elm trees in Hyde Park, making children cry, and horses fidget, and dogs lose their masters.

"If I have been," said Syrlin, with his sweetest smile, "I am so no longer, and am prepared to take the primrose as my device with all its obligations."

"I am afraid you do not mean that," said the girl wistfully. "You say it to—to be—to be courteous."

She was about to say "to please Lady Avillion," but checked herself in time.

"I am nothing at all," said Syrlin, a little impatiently. "There are no social theories that will work in face of the increasing populations of the world. But one influence must always remain under all systems the purest and the best; the influence of a noble woman on all classes that are around her."

"You have studied music too?" she asked.

"I can hardly presume to say so much as that; it is not my own art; but I have lived much with musicians and singers, and I know how good music should be rendered. Your rendering is very true. Will you let me hear you again?"

She coloured.

"Oh no, I could not. I could not play a note. You must have heard all that is grandest and best."

"I have heard much that is good, certainly. But even good players do not always interpret music truly. You do."

"That is to flatter me very much," said the girl, a little wistfully; she did not think that he was sincere, and insincerity pained her.

"I never flatter," said Syrlin. "It is a base coinage which I never put in my purse. And I am sure, if I were to offer it to you, you would detect it instantly."

"You know nothing of me, how can you know that?" replied the girl, with a smile which softened the ungraciousness of the words.

"I have studied physiognomy," said Syrlin, "and I have heard that you are the ward of Lady Avillion, to whom all shallow and base things are odious; and what is more shallow and more base than flattery?"

The name of Lady Avillion was an open sesame to her heart; she spoke of her willingly, with the

adoration she felt; it was what Syrlin had hoped for. Next to the happiness of being with her, to hear her praises by one who knew her in the intimacy of private life was the greatest pleasure life could hold for him at that moment.

Ina's natural reserve gave way before the charm of this one name; she was not conscious of the skill and intention with which the stranger drew her on to speak of the châtelaine of Brakespeare, but she felt that she had in him an interested and sympathetic listener to all that she said of her, and very innocently and unconsciously she betrayed her own vague sense that Lady Avillion's existence was incomplete and dissatisfied.

"I cannot tell why it is," she said at last; "she is so infinitely good to everyone, and she is always taking thought for others, but none of this seems to please her; she has everything the world can give, has she not? But it is the old story of the princess who could not rest because of the doubled rose-leaf; no one can find the rose-leaf anywhere, but she can feel it; it is enough for discomfort, I suppose."

"You are very young, Lady Ina; but you are a delicate observer," said Syrlin. "There are things the world cannot give; and the finest temperaments are apt to have dissatisfaction lie at the root of them. And after all, what is there to satisfy the heart or even the mind in this English life of yours? It is too hurried for enjoyment to be possible; it has the

tediousness of ceremony with the bustle of haste—externally it is sometimes a pageant, but internally it is always an ennui; there is no liberty in it; every-one is always before the footlights; Lady Avillion always has to appear in a rôle; it is a grand rôle, the very greatest, but a rôle. I, who know what a weariness it is to play a part three times a week, know what a weariness it must be to play it continually."

"I dare say; I am not in the world yet; I cannot tell," said Ina, but his fascination had drawn the thoughts out of her mind and the speech from her lips with an irresistible attraction. And how wholly and profoundly he understood the virtues and the beauties of the one woman who was like a goddess in her own sight!

It never occurred to her that no one spoke thus solely and persistently of one person except on the impulse of a sentiment much greater than curiosity or even admiration. She did not think of those things. She had read no novels but Walter Scott's, and she had associated little with girls of her own age. She was used to hear her own marriage spoken of as an event as certain as her presentation, and not more interesting. Of love, very little had ever been said to her. Lady Avillion's own profound contempt for that sentiment had made it wholly impossible that she should ever encourage a child to think of it; she left it completely out of her philosophy of life. She had had ideas about it herself, when she was very young, and they had proved

delusive; she did not encourage anyone to cherish delusions; it was as unkind as to bring them up on candies and ices, like American children.

Syrlin, conscious of his own self-betrayal, turned the subject, and spoke of one who, almost unknown to the child herself, had already gained a potent influence over her fancy and her sympathy.

"My friend Auriol told me the other day, Lady Ina, of your great talent and feeling for music," he said; and was surprised at the embarrassment and confusion which his remark caused to her. "You have met him, I think," he continued, "at various country houses. He is my dearest comrade. He has a heart of gold as well as a *voix d'or.*"

The girl murmured assent inarticulately, and bent her face over the loose music-sheets on the piano before her.

Syrlin smiled, and spoke a great deal of Auriol, warmly as he deserved, and relating traits of the unworldliness and of the generosity to rivals and enemies which were conspicuous in his comrade's character.

She lost her momentary shyness and listened with interest unfeigned and unconcealed, the colour warm in her cheeks, and her ingenuous eyes lifted full of varying expression to those of Syrlin as he spoke. She had laid down her violin and bow, and stood absorbed in all he told her, whilst he, leaning over the grand pianoforte, talked to her with animation and eloquence of a man whom he sincerely loved.

As they stood thus, absorbed in the interest of their conversation, a spectator of their apparently intimate *tête-à-tête* was astonished by it, and displeased; with a displeasure wholly out of proportion to the slenderness of their offence.

"Why do you come here alone, my dear?" said the sweet, clear, chill voice of Lady Avillion, as coming from the garden doorway behind them she approached them in all the fulness of her noonday beauty. There was an expression of annoyance and of surprise upon her countenance.

"You should not come here by yourself, my love, when the house is full of people," she said again. "Where are your women? M. Syrlin knows a great deal about music, indeed, but I do not think you must absorb him like this. Alex and Lady Dover are wanting him in the gallery."

"I was passing the door by accident, and I was drawn hither by hearing Schumann so admirably rendered," said Syrlin, whilst Ina, always docile and now vaguely conscious of imprudence and incorrectness, gathered up some of the scores, and laying her violin in its case, left the chamber swiftly.

"She has talent," said Lady Avillion, still coldly. "But all girls have talents—small talents—nowadays; Apollo's bow is now a schoolroom plaything."

It was an ungenerous speech, and she was sensible of that.

"She is a very dear child," she hastened to say,

"but she is already sadly full of fancies. Pray do not encourage her in them. It is so old-fashioned and so unpopular, and I cannot bear a young girl to be thought odd; there is nothing which does her so much harm."

Syrlin smiled; that slight smile which had the power at once to perplex, interest, and annoy her.

"Oh, I know you think singularity a mark of the intellectual *élite*," she said, a little irritably, "and of course genius may be as singular as it pleases; it is a sovereign and makes its own laws. But for a little maiden who is only one amongst a number of marriageable girls to be odd in any way whatever is to only be in her own world absurd and to be odious. But will you kindly go to the picture gallery? They are wanting you. The Duchess wishes you to tell her what she should wear as Dona Sol; she does not wish merely to imitate Sarah Bernhardt's dress."

"She can go to Worth; Sarah goes to Felix; tell her I am no *costumier*," said Syrlin curtly. "Will you not stay a little while, Lady Avillion? One never sees you alone for a moment here."

"I have no time for serious conversations," she replied with a smile. "When the house is full I am the slave of my people. I once saw at an exhibition a machine with a long line of little brass knobs to it; a woman was in front of it, and was incessantly walking from one end to the other pulling out now one brass knob and now another, so as to

keep the whole affair going; I am exactly like that woman."

"Then why be sacrificed to a machine?" said Syrlin, with that abruptness which had a charm for her because it was in such interesting contrast to the grace of his manner.

"It is custom—obligation—perhaps even, in a way, duty."

"C'est un engrenage," said Syrlin with impatience.

"In a sense, no doubt. But I think position has its duties; we are bound to do what we can. As I told you once before, if those who misjudge us think our existence all enjoyment, they are very much mistaken. It is no use discussing these things, we should never think alike upon them."

"It offended you the first day I was here; and yet what I said to you was only the truth."

"Truth is the worst offence," said Freda smiling despite herself. "Surely you know the world well enough to know that."

"I know the world well enough, but I am not of it; and I am a barbarian who is constantly tearing the fine lace of fine ladies."

"I think you are as unjust to the fine ladies as the man in the hospital of whom you told us that terrible story."

"Ah, Madame! It is not that I do you injustice; my fault—my presumption—is rather to

admire you too greatly, to find your atmosphere too thick, too poor, too choked, for one who would be so easily touched to all fine issues."

"I do not know how you can possibly tell what I am or what I am not," she said distantly; but she coloured slightly under the brilliant and eloquent gaze which he bent upon her. "Believe me I am nothing whatever except a very ordinary woman to whom life is really very little more than an almanac marked with social engagements and Court obligations. Poets, I know, write in their calendar when the peach flowers and when the swallows come home, but in our calendars there is nothing but a series of entries: Drawing Room—Drum—Concert—Ball—Meeting—Flower-show—Windsor—Sandringham—Hatfield—Osborne—and so on *da capo,* quite as regular as the peach blossom and the swallow, but wholly uninteresting."

As it chanced, while they were conversing, Avillion, coming away from his own apartments to favour the ladies staying in his house with an hour or two of his presence, passed the doorway of the music-room, and as the doors stood open, glanced through as he went by, and saw what appeared to him to be a very confidential *tête-à-tête.* He smiled an unkind smile, and passed without even pausing a moment: neither his wife nor Syrlin saw him, and in a moment or two she went away to join her ladies, Syrlin obstinately refusing to go to the gallery; and sitting down to sing over Schubert's "Roi des Aulnes" to himself.

"Syrlin is like some Trouvère, Pierre Vidal or Ausias March," said Lorraine Iona one evening to his hostess; "one could fancy him proclaiming himself Emperor of Byzantium or meeting his Lady at Mass on Good Friday."

Lady Avillion assented rather coldly. "One could fancy him, I think, doing any folly. He is born too late you mean; there is no greater misfortune."

"The Trouvère soul exists in all ages," said Iona, "only it lives nowadays in an uncongenial atmosphere, so that it changes its outward form as the golden flower of the Jeux Floraux has become a publisher's cheque, and the Gai science instead of reciting to a lute prints itself on rough-edged paper with a mock vellum binding. The form is so changed that we do not recognise the old spirit."

"They were very absurd people, your Pierre Vidals and your Ausias Marches," said Lady Avillion; "there is no need to resuscitate them, they sleep well under nameless slabs of stone in dark forgotten crypts."

"Their bones lie there no doubt," said Iona, "but as for their spirits— What is Richepin's

> Un mois arrive, un autre s'ensuit,
> Le temps court comme un lévrier,

but *'Le temps qui s'en va nuit et jour, sans repos prendre, et sans séjour,'* of the 'Roman de la Rose'? And if you would hear still a sigh which seven centuries ago came from the lion's heart of Richard Plantagenet, ask someone to sing you the 'King's Sirvente,' *'Je suis deux hivers pris.'*"

"O my dear friend!" said Freda with a smile, "you keep your heart so fresh in Palestine that your sympathies would overlap twice seven centuries. But we are colder, duller, more prosaic creatures, and if we have little gleams of imagination in us they are like the linkboys' lights in the fog; they only take us from a dull dinner to a duller crush. What can Guillaume de Lorris do in our fog? He can only hang himself."

"He can find his Lady, perhaps, who may send him on his pursuit of the Rose. The Rose blooms still for those who seek it."

"Our roses come up from the hothouses to be crucified in tens of thousands on the walls of our ball-rooms and staircases, and our Guillaume de Lorris puts his strophes in the 'Nineteenth Century Review' at ten or twenty guineas a line," said Lady Avillion, who nevertheless turned to a young man who was a brilliant musician, and said:

"Do you know Cœur de Lion's Lament, Lord Walton? Will you sing it, as Mr. Iona suggests?"

"Alas, alas! dear Lady Avillion, I never even heard of it," said the young gentleman piteously.

"Syrlin knows it," said Iona; and he rose and walked into the next room, and in a moment or two brought back Syrlin with him.

"You wish to hear that old *Sirvente,* Madame?" he asked.

"If you know it, and if you do not mind giving us so much pleasure."

"Oh no!" said Syrlin, and without more premise

he went to the grand piano, played a few minor chords, and then sang to an old Provençal air the ballad which the hero of Cyprus and Jerusalem, the conqueror of Saladin, the foe of Tancred and of Philip Augustus, had rhymed in his Austrian prison; the mournful refrain and reproach, "Je suis deux hivers pris!" succeeding each stanza in pathetic monotony as the days and the seasons of his long captivity had succeeded to one another.

It touched the hearts of those who heard, as seven centuries before it had touched the heart of Blondel.

"The spirit lives, you see," murmured Iona in the ear of Freda Avillion as the last tone of the ballad died softly in the air. "The King which was in Richard cannot reach his crown, the warrior which was in him cannot raise his sword, but the minstrel which was in him can still move human hearts. The poet is stronger than the Plantagenet."

"What a democratic inference!" said Lady Avillion with a smile, for she did not choose to confess that her own heart had been touched by the "King's Lament."

"Oh no; democracy would level the royalty of genius with all other royalties," said Iona; "democracy means the supremacy of the eternally Mediocre."

"He could have been a great singer had he chosen," she said, looking at Syrlin, who with an expression of ennui was receiving the acclamations of the ladies gathered round the pianoforte.

"No doubt," said Iona. "But he would probably have rebelled against the drudgery of operatic training. You know he was never a pupil of the Conservatoire; like Frédéric Lemaître, he has been his own master, his own teacher in all ways."

"Tell him to sing something more."

"Something of the Trouvères?"

"Oh, yes! since he is in that mood."

"It is more than a mood, it is his nature; he was a born Trouvère, but a Trouvère who has a sword at his side."

Syrlin, who had remained at the instrument, hearing of Lady Avillion's wishes, touched a few chords of introduction; an old air which she had often heard under the blossoming orchards and the deep elm shadows of the old Angevin country:

> Marie, levez-vous, ma jeune paresseuse,
> Já la vive alouette a lá haut fredonné,
> Et já le rossignol doucement jargonné,
> Dessus l'épine assis, sa complainte amoureuse,
> Sus! Debout! Allons veir l'herbelette perleuse,
> Et votre beau rosier de boutons couronné,
> Et vos œillets mignons auxquels avez donné
> Hier au soir eau d'une main si mignonne.

Then he gave them the Fabliau of Aucassin and Nicolette half in song, half in recitative, and sang the delicious invocation of Ronsard to "La dame Marie," and half sang, half recited, and here and there acted, the story of the lovers of Beaucaire, with revival of the tender melodies of the now forgotten opera founded on that theme, whilst the great

ladies around him listened spell-bound by that magic which exists in genius, and lends a magnetism to its gestures and utterances.

"He knows how to fetch women," murmured Avillion, interested himself in all this by the fine artistic taste which he possessed, and yet a little irritated at so much attention being given to another, and by so much time being occupied in his drawing-rooms without his permission being asked.

"Oh yes, confound him!" muttered with emphasis the young Duke of Queenstown, who was esteemed very jealous of his wife. "They don't understand a syllable of that old queer French, but they hang on his lips as if it were heaven."

"It is a woman's heaven; it is something new," said Avillion drily.

He was interested himself in the Fabliaux, and the Romaunts, for he was in an indolent fashion a cultured scholar, and had a fine ear for music; but he did not precisely like to see an artist made of so much prominence in his own house without his own inclination or pleasure being previously consulted. He would be a patron both polished and generous, and liked being one, but it was on condition that his position as patron should be always clearly admitted and defined. He had said a great many charming things about a great artist being a great prince, independent of all laws and subject to no superior, but all the same he considered the Earl of Avillion and Pontefract a much greater person, and expected the artist to be very conscious of the fact.

"He is fantastic and insolent, and ignorant of his place," thought Avillion, who though he would lay aside his rank and all remembrance of it when it pleased him to ignore them for purposes of his own amusement, did not like others to forget it without his express permission to do so. He could be *bon prince* and *bon enfant* both in his genial moods, but the duration of these moods was at all times uncertain, and those who relied on their duration repented it. He was a spoilt child, and the world was to him as a nursery full of toys to such a child. His intelligence, acute though indolent, had early told him that Sir Robert Walpole was right, and that every man has his price. He could pay the price no matter how high, and he despised what he bought so easily.

He had not yet discovered what price Syrlin had; and this mystery in an artist kept alive his interest. The mystery was as simple as possible. Syrlin was not to be purchased or persuaded by any man, because he wanted nothing which any of them could give him; those of his desires which were unsatisfied were born of vague, romantic, impersonal visions, which nothing in humanity could realise; he would have given half his life to have a mother like Millet's, a sister like Tasso's, a heavenly faith like Chateaubriand's, a death in glory like Raffaele's. Who could give him these?

No man when he was disposed could condescend more affably, more gracefully, more completely than Avillion; but it was always on the tacit condition

that it should be understood that it *was* condescension. Syrlin had a manner which indicated that he never admitted this.

"He amuses me," thought the Lord of Brakespeare now, "but if he did not amuse me so much I should like immensely to see him kicked!"

He could not have him kicked; the time was gone by when the jongleur could be applauded in the banqueting-room at night and whipped in the castle yard in the morning. But he bethought himself of an ingenious method of recalling this *menestrier* to a consciousness that, although the guest, he was not the equal of Uther Avillion; a method delicate, suggestive, and wounding, without being offensive. He selected from his own treasures a ring of great value; a single diamond the size of a cherry which he had bought in Persia, and which could have been sold any day anywhere for a thousand pounds. This jewel he caused to be placed on the table in Syrlin's bedchamber, and wrote on a slip of paper with it:

"Reconnaissance pour une soirée charmante.

"AVILLION."

He had a keen intuition into the natures and minds of others, and he knew very well that this unimpeachable act of courtesy and generosity which everyone would admire in himself would sting like a wasp the sensitive soul of the man who would receive it. "That will teach him to keep his place," thought Avillion with a complacent smile, when he

had retired to his apartments, whilst the drawing-rooms were still full, and had sent the ring by his confidential servant to the Warwick Tower. It was payment as much as though he had sent the singer of the Plantagenet *Sirvente* a banknote or a cheque, and he went to bed that night with the pleasant sense of having so admirably wrapt up an insult in a compliment, that his guest could never again delude himself with the idea that he was on an equality with his host.

Avillion was clever at these things; no man could wound women of whom he was tired more brutally, under cover of a flattering phrase or of delicate courtesy.

He went to bed and slept well; there is no sleeping-draught so efficient as the agreeable titillation of an ingenious action remembered as you doze. He had scarcely had his bath and his coffee in the morning when his body servant, Philips, said to him with hesitation that M. de Syrlin had asked how soon his lordship could receive him?

Avillion, reading a French novel and smoking his earliest cigarette, stared with some surprise.

"Receive him? Here?" he repeated. "But I never see anybody in my own apartments; go and tell him so."

"Devil take him if it is his gratitude," he thought to himself. "If the fellow look at it in that way, it is a *coup manqué*. But I daresay he has Jew blood in him if we knew the truth, and can tell the value of the ring at a glance, and hasn't the fine feel-

ings I counted on; all those artists are *brocanteurs* at heart."

At this moment Philips with an agitated countenance returned,

"My lord, M. de Syrlin insists; he says—"

"Lord Avillion, I am sorry if I disturb your morning solitude," said Syrlin himself, who had followed the valet so closely that he was but a yard behind him. "But it was necessary that I should restore to you a jewel which seems to me of value, and which by some mistake, no doubt, I found on my table last night; how it got there I do not know."

As Syrlin spoke and laid down on the tray which held the coffee the Persian diamond in its case, Avillion was for once so astonished that he was at a loss for words. The idea that his ring could possibly be returned to him had never entered his conception. In a moment he had recovered his self-possession, and his charming suavity of manner.

"My dear M. de Syrlin," he said sweetly, "it was a very small token of gratitude for the delightful evenings you have given us in that dullest of all human retreats, an English country house. Did you not deign to read what I wrote with it?"

"I read what you wrote," said Syrlin curtly; "you meant amiably no doubt, but you mistook. I give jewels to women, I do not take them from men. For the rest, I am your guest, but I am not for that reason in your service."

Then without more words he bowed and went out of the apartment.

Avillion, for the second time, was too profoundly astonished to make any reply, or any gesture to recall him. The Persian diamond in its open case sparkled beside his coffee cup, and every ray of light from it seemed like a smile of derision at his defeated intentions. A sense of humiliation rankled in him at the consciousness, so new and hateful to him, that he had failed in his knowledge of human nature, and gone out of his way to court a rebuff. The possibility that Syrlin would refuse the ring had never occurred to him.

"Confound the fellow!" he thought petulantly. "I really believe that I shall end in hating him; and I hate to hate people, it disturbs the digestion and puts one on a level with them. The idea of his answering *me!* Will he tell the story, I wonder? It would make me intolerably absurd."

The mere thought that he could possibly be made absurd was unendurable to the pride of a very vain man. Avillion could not recall any moment of his life when any human being had ever caused him a rebuff or given him a reproof. He had received both now from the hands of Syrlin, and the humiliation galled him bitterly.

He threw the diamond in its case into a casket which stood near, and locked the lid down on it with a violent gesture.

"It serves one right for asking a bastard player under one's roof," he said passionately, while his servant waited, pale and nervous, beside his couch.

Syrlin met him later in the day as though nothing whatever had happened, made himself agreeable in the evening with those songs and recitations which so pleased the ladies there, and in the morning went away while the roads were still misty with antemeridian vapours; the fifth day, which had been the limit of his invitation to Brakespeare, having now dawned.

"Curse him!" thought Avillion, when he heard the new people who arrived that evening regretting his departure. Avillion never pardoned an affront; and now he wholly forgot or ignored that he had intended himself to offer one; he only remembered that he had received one.

"Curse him!" he said to himself a dozen times that week, in all the irritation of a very arrogant and self-satisfied temper under a reproof. He had been put in the wrong and did not for the moment see how to avenge himself. He could not be rude to a man in his own house, and he could not treat as a quarrel what the other had treated merely as an incident. Irritability in an artist would have left him free to laugh at it with the mockery of a great noble, but this finer *savoir faire* deprived him of this resource.

If Syrlin had taken his departure before the time appointed, his host would have told the story himself and turned into ridicule the touchiness and ostentatious pride of a Bohemian. But since Syrlin had had tact and good sense enough to remain there

as though nothing had happened to displease him, Avillion had not even this compensation.

"That cad of an actor has put my lord's back up and we pay for it," said his own man to some of the upper servants over their wine and fruit; and so, as most stories do, the narrative of the ring ascended gradually from the valets and maids to that fine ear which is called "Society," until to most people of the world it became known that Syrlin and his host had had a "scene" at Brakespeare.

There were many different versions of the narrative; some declared that they had quarrelled about their doings at St. Germains, others that Avillion had sent the artist a cheque for having sung and recited at Brakespeare, and that the cheque had been thrown in his face; others, more maliciously disposed, associated with the incident the august and blameless name of Lady Avillion herself.

Anyhow, it was talked about as the great world loves to talk about a thing which does not concern it, adding to it and adorning it at dinner tables, in club windows, and over tea-cups in the libraries of country houses, until the only people who did not know it was thus talked about were Syrlin himself, Avillion and his wife, and Beaufront, before whom none dared to joke about his friend or his relatives.

On the following week the last circle of guests at the castle was broken up; its master went off to his pavilion at St. Germains, its mistress after a few days in London was promised to her cousin's house of Heronsmere in Somersetshire, and the children

alone were left with their tutor and attendants within the solid old walls of Brakespeare, while the cold northern spring nipped the hawthorn buds unkindly, and frightened the buttercups and oxlips hiding in the grass.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Beaufront's chief place, Deloraine Castle, was not agreeable to him; it was an enormous pile of composite architecture suggestive of immense expenditure, stiffness, state, and constant social obligations. He infinitely preferred any of his other places; Heronsmere, in a south-western county, a lovely old Tudor house set amidst luxuriant woods; Ronceroi, a château in Normandy looking over the Channel seas; Appledene, a pretty place in Somerset, or Mountley, a cottage near Newmarket; any and all of these he liked, and Heronsmere he almost loved; but Deloraine he hated, and yet it was at Deloraine that it was most necessary he should most conspicuously reside and oftenest entertain.

Deloraine was the recognised home of the Dukes of Beaufront, and every one of them had always loathed it.

"Just as I hate Brakespeare," said Lord Avillion one day with a groan; "one always hates a show-house."

"I could attach myself to Brakespeare," replied Beaufront, "because it is noble and historical; but Deloraine is as ignoble as a cotton factory or a railway station. It was built by Vanbrugh, and was

pulled about and made worse by Barry and Street. It is gorgeous and yet naked, over-ornamented and yet dreary, magnificent, cumbersome, florid, dull, gilded like gingerbread at a fair and painted up to its eyes like a Nautch-girl. To alter it properly would cost me millions, and even then it would always be detestable; and yet I don't believe that there is another house in England which equally delights tourists and excursionists. It fulfils the popular ideal of what a great house should be. They think how delightful it would be to live amongst all that gilding. Heronsmere, which is Henry the Seventh *tout pur,* and is a place to dream life away in and die in contentedly, never impresses the sight-seers; they think it lonely and gloomy, and if they had it would colour the wood-carvings Venetian-red and put plate-glass in the dear old lancet windows. Then Heronsmere is in the most delicious county of England, all hill and dale, and stream and woodland and pasture, and this beastly Deloraine is set in the middle of a corn country, and what does that not mean in this crazy generation of high farming?"

It meant fields as flat and blank as billiard tables, no hedge, no wayside trees, no shady meadow paths, no coppices with little brooks bubbling through them, no hazel nuts in autumn and cowslips in spring-time for the children, no green moist mossy nooks for the mavis to build in and the mole to burrow in; only wide, dreary, pale expanses of land flooded in winter, scorched in summer, harassed all the year round with chemicals and steam engines, and harvested so

admirably by machinery that not a grain of wheat was left for a gleaner; and the labourers, labour diminishing, starved or went to the workhouse, or drifted in droves to America, which did not want them. Outside the park and woods of the great domain of Deloraine these vast flats desolated by scientific agriculture stretched monotonously to all four points of the compass, and were in the eyes of Ralph Beaufront hateful and depressing beyond expression. His nearest neighbour, young Lord Rugby, thought that, with progress as with Providence, all that is is best, so long as neither interfere with privilege and preserves; but Beaufront was of an opposite opinion and hated his castle in the corn-lands, and infinitely preferred Heronsmere, where the roads were natural avenues of honeysuckle-hung wayside trees, or Ronceroi, where the orchards of apple and pear blossom made the whole land a garden. But to live sometimes at Deloraine was an obligation which he, though as debonair a Conservative as might be, could not wholly evade, and he was indeed careful to discharge all the duties of his rank with a self-sacrifice which his world did not look for in him. He had entertained princes and great people whilst the house parties had been going on at Breakspeare, and had been as much bored and tired as a host can be under that social *corvée;* and with an infinite sense of relief he went out for a ride by himself on the day that his last guests had departed.

He intended to go to Heronsmere by the early

morning train to receive his cousin and the rest of his friends; and his detested duties at Deloraine were over for the time, and would only recur again with the late autumn. It was a relative liberty which made him feel for once almost light-hearted, and he rode far and fast through the ugly flat country, leaping over the iron hurdles and the bricked-up ditches which had replaced the little wandering moss-grown brooks and the tall hawthorn hedges which in earlier times had beautified even this level and monotonous province. As he came homeward by some fenced-in woodland belonging to his neighbour, Lord Rugby, he saw a farmer of the county, whom he had known from boyhood, though no tenant of his own, one John Kiston, of Whitelands, a plain, sensible person of the old sort, who saw after everything for himself, and made his daughters attend to the fowl-houses and the fruit garden and the dairy. John Kitson carried a little dead dog under one arm, and there was an expression of mingled pain and wrath on his countenance, and a glisten like water in his eyes.

"How do you do, Mr. Kitson? What is the matter?" asked Beaufront, stopping his horse by the fence.

The farmer looked up and recognised him.

"Good day to your Grace," he said, sullenly. "This is the matter; my landlord's keeper have killed my daughter's pet dog. Poor, pretty little innocent—we bought him from a travelling show in the town four or five years ago, and Bess loved him

like the apple of her eye, and I don't know how I'll find the heart to tell her of his end."

He held up to Beaufront's view the little curly white dog no bigger than a rabbit; it was stained with blood and mangled.

"Bess missed it last night; you know they will run about sometimes, and Whitelands aren't half a mile off this, and so I thought I would have a walk in the wood and whistle for it, and I come on it there in one of the clumps of bracken, caught in a trap, and dead. You see it's almost wrenched its head off trying to get out, and must have died of loss of blood. Poor little innocent! it never did no more harm than a kitten, and my girl will cry her eyes blind—curse 'em all, say I."

"I am very sorry," said Beaufront.

"Why, sir," said the man with increasing emphasis, "there aren't a squire's house nor a farmer's over half the width of England from which you can't hear, if you listen for it, all night long the squalls of the poor beasts in the traps. I'll shoot rabbits and eat 'em as soon as any man, but I won't set them devilish traps that are the shame of a country as calls itself Christian; I wouldn't set 'em, no! not to save ten quarters of wheat a minute!"

"I am wholly of your opinion," said Beaufront; "I will have no traps anywhere in my woods. Let me send your daughter another little dog like that. I daresay I can get one in London."

"Thank your Grace kindly, but it wouldn't be the same. This here little Snowball, as she called

him, she took away herself from the cruelty of the show, where they were making him dance, and he shivering with fright—and he's been as happy as a grig all the day long, running about in our place, and cuddled and cossetted, and now he must come by his death through those cursed gins. They'd trap Bess herself in 'em, and they wouldn't care. Poor little doggie! Poor little soul!"

He covered the little dog's blood-stained head with his handkerchief, and put on his hat, which he had been holding in his hand.

"There's too much of all this, my Lord Duke," he said sullenly.

"Too much of what?" asked Beaufront.

"Too much of giving up the land to the shooting," said Mr. Kitson, pressing his hat down on his brows. "Everything's ground down and shored up that my Lords and Squires may make their big bags, and have their day's work put in the newspapers. 'The Prince honoured my Lord, and shot fifty-two brace before luncheon.' Phew! even George the Fourth and his blood were better than that, I take it; more of a man, eh? What do you say, my Lord Duke? But there! of course you are one of 'em."

"Not exactly. I don't care about shooting tame birds or shooting anything where there is no danger."

"That's well," said the old farmer. "Perhaps your Grace thinks my words are strong because of this poor little dead dog, but it isn't only along of that; I've said the same thing five hundred times

over at home; the game is the curse of the land. Not the game if it was wild; if it was found natural and killed natural, with a good hard day's walking after it; but the game as it's kept now, to be drove together in hundreds and thousands for a few idle fools to waste their days—"

"The battue is German," said Beaufront. "The country is Germanised by the Crown, and is very much the worse for it; we have got the *Pickelhaube,* we shall have the conscription. I always wish Bolingbroke had succeeded."

"I never heard of him, my Lord Duke," said Mr. Kitson. "But I'm sorry, too, that he did not succeed if he'd have done away with this here system. 'Tisn't sport, no more than wringing the necks of tame chickens. It's just an empty boast, and a waste of time, and a frivolous brutality, that's what it is; and when the great folks uphold it they're just playing the anarchists' game for 'em. My lord," he added solemnly, "I have heard gentlefolk talk of the Cauden Forks as meaning an awkwardness and a danger; well, England is now going through her Cauden Forks, and the greatest peril of 'em, to my thinking, is the game. I am not one as wants to see the gentry and nobility done away with; but if they don't give up their shooting and their hunting, done away with like rats by arsenic they will be. The hunting, though it ruins crops, aren't so bad, because it pleases the whole country side to see 'em meet; but the shooting!—I'd like to know who could say a word in its favour? Look at a puny little

jackanapes like your neighbour and my landlord, Lord Rugby, pale as a tallow candle and thin as a match, couldn't walk over a few miles of plough to save his life, and couldn't beat a turnip-field for himself with a brace of setters if 'twas ever so. Well, look at him from September to March, it's nothing but guns, guns, guns with him, blazing away at poor tame fowls, and bringing down a lot of mashers to do the same thing, till it's enough to make one's blood boil. Thousands of heads of game in a week, and all sent to Leadenhall market, and farmers mayn't keep a dog loose lest it should run into his lordship's covers. Why should we stand that sort of thing, sir?—and why do my Lord Rugby and his like think themselves a penny better than the poulterers who sell their birds for 'em in London?"

"I quite agree with you, I wholly agree with you," said Beaufront. "But short of a revolution, how will you get rid of this state of things?"

"Well, your Grace, revolutions aren't much to the English blood," said Mr. Kitson. "We did it once to be sure, and did it thorough, and if we have to do it again we'll do it thorough. But we put up with a sight of bad things because we're slow to change. But if little Lords like Lord Rugby go on with the game as they do, I wouldn't say but what I'd see 'em hanged in their stiff collars every one of 'em, and yet I never was a man against the gentry."

"My dear Mr. Kitson, I quite understand you," said Beaufront. "I know, I feel exactly like you. I never enter a club or walk down Rotten Row with-

out wondering why the country stands us all for a week. A nobility, to have any reason for its own existence, must justify its existence; we only prove that our own is a farce. We ought to lead: we only follow. The only thing which can excuse your standing us so long, is that if you did away with us to-morrow the financiers and big tradespeople would come in our places, and be rather worse than ourselves."

"That's true enough, your Grace," said Mr. Kitson, "and the people know it. If all landlords were like you there wouldn't be no changes wanted."

"Thanks. But they call me a fool in the county and in the country, you know."

"Let 'em," said Mr. Kitson sturdily; "and I wish you was my landlord instead of little Rugby, your Grace, we shouldn't quarrel."

"We think so exactly alike, we couldn't. Good day, and please tell your daughter how sorry I am for the poor little dog," said Beaufront, as he lifted his hat with his good-humoured smile and went homewards.

"There's something rotten in the State decidedly," he thought, "when a sturdy Tory and a law-abiding rustic like this excellent Kitson is disposed against his wish to turn Anarchist. The little Rugbys and their pheasant-slaughter and their men-to-load have done it. Rugby don't mean to do any harm; he thinks himself a pillar of the State, and subscribes to the Carlton, and presides at county meetings and is always present to vote against marriage with a

deceased's wife's sister; but I do thoroughly understand how the sight of this excellent youth, with his guns and his friends and his keepers, does tend to make a mild Socialist of the worthy British farmer who pays rent to him. I wonder if the order generally will ever see it and reform itself without any fuss, and leave off shooting? Not a bit of it. It won't really understand until its respectable Kitsons turn Robespierres, and its own bodies adorn the oaks and beeches where its keepers have so long hung up the owl and the kestrel and the poor cottage-cat."

CHAPTER XIX.

A FEW hours later he had received his cousin and his other guests arriving by the afternoon train, and he was strolling with them through the beautiful home woods of this his favourite residence; woods which had been scarcely changed since the days of the Tudors, and where the fallow deer and the red deer led happy, untroubled lives. He had lived much at Heronsmere with his grandparents in his early childhood, and every stick and sod of it were dear to him. The possession of the old West Country house almost, at times, reconciled him to the constraint, burden, and worry which the succession to the dukedom had of necessity brought with it. Heronsmere represented the silver lining to what seemed to him the very leaden and stifling cloud of that "position" which outsiders in their ignorance deemed so enviable and delightful.

"Olympus must have bored Jove excruciatingly," Beaufront said often, with fellow-feeling and compassion for the god.

Heronsmere was the only one of the places he had inherited which inspired him with a feeling of home, and which he saw with pleasure. It was in the heart of Coleridge's Quantocks, and had lovely

peaceful and sylvan scenes around it, whilst its woods, stretching away to the sea-shore, lay full in the warmth of a southern aspect. At Deloraine he entertained princes, had large parties of fifties and hundreds, and did what was considered the duties of his position, but at Heronsmere it was always *la vie intime;* small parties of never more than a dozen met there, composed of people congenial to himself and each other, and within the old Tudor walls and in the yew-shadowed gardens there were many hours spent of gay and familiar converse. Everyone at Heronsmere followed their fancy, did as they liked, and led a perfectly easy and uncoerced existence: only one law recognised throughout the twenty-four hours, the sound of the gong which sent people to dress at eight o'clock.

"But I am not the least fitted for Heronsmere myself," said Beaufront always. "The owner of such a place as this should be a scholar, a poet, and a country gentleman, a Drummond of Hawthornden, with something of Matthew Arnold in him, who should live all the year round and find his heaven in its library in winter nights and in its gardens in summer days."

He felt that he did not at all reach to the height of its suggestions, possibilities and memories. He felt that he profaned it with that London and Paris atmosphere, those echoes of the clubs, which he brought with him perforce. It had come to him too late in life; he could not alter to suit it; it should have been the one sole home of a student and

philosopher, not merely a house among several other houses of a man of the world, left silent and empty for forty-five out of the fifty-two weeks of the year.

So many of the country houses of England are left vacant and neglected thus in the folds of her green woods and under the shadow of her low gorse-covered hills, houses which have withstood in their time the culverins of Cromwell and the torches of the Chartists, but which have a foe as insidious as time and as cruel as envy in the decaying fortunes of their masters and the modern impatience of the quietude of rural life.

It was a regret to him that Consuelo Laurence had never seen Heronsmere, which her slow soft step, and her dreamy loveliness, and her fine and delicate tastes would have suited so well. She had never been to any of his places, because Lady Avillion having given the word to them, none of the women of his family would meet her there, and as she divined very clearly that this was so, she had refused his invitations persistently until he had understood the reason, and invited her no more. If his devotion to his cousin had been less, he would have made an open quarrel of these persistent slights and offences to his friend, but he could not bring himself to quarrel with Lady Avillion, not even for one who was really as dear to him, in a sense, as was Mrs. Laurence.

"One day they'll learn to appreciate one another, and they'll get good friends," he thought, with a man's happy faculty of believing what he wishes to

believe, and trusting to time and accident to undo the knots which he is indisposed or incompetent to cut.

And so Consuelo Laurence had never seen the stained glass casements, the carved wood ceilings, and the yew-shadowed terraces of Heronsmere.

"It is very unkind of Freda always to set her back up in that way," he thought, and he had felt almost that he was disloyal to his absent friend as he had welcomed his cousin this day in his cedar-lined and emblazoned central hall, which was one of the chief beauties and wonders of the Quantock hills.

"He is wishing for Mrs. Laurence," thought Freda herself. "Surely after hanging about her everywhere for seven years, he must know her so well that an old Blue Book would be as interesting!"

Clever as she was, Lady Avillion did not know that there is only one thing of which the interest can outlast both time and habit, and that is what for want of a clearer definition we call sympathy, which may exist without either love or passion being united to it, but without which neither love nor passion can have any durability.

She did not know it because she had never felt it herself. She heard people talk about it, and she had no doubt that it was very nice, but it was only a word to her, and a word which conveyed no idea. Some people were miserable if they did not have lemon in their tea, or a doctor always travelling about with them; the need for sympathy seemed to her the same sort of nervous faddishness.

At Heronsmere she was a different person to the mistress of Brakespeare. At her own castle she was a stately châtelaine, entertaining a numerous and illustrious circle, courteous and amiable to all, but to no one especially so, occupied by her solicitude for their amusement, but being only kind in a manner which had something unconsciously chilling in it.

"She is so dreadfully bored by us that she has to take preternaturally elaborate precautions to be civil," said one of her guests once, and like everything elaborate the result was formal. But at her cousin's place it was wholly different; she was free to follow her own tastes, friendships and preferences, and the social atmosphere of Heronsmere was that of a delightful but unpretending country house. Brakespeare was a great palace, where etiquette, splendour, and ceremonial were inevitable; Heronsmere was homelike, bright, and intimate, with its blossoming gardens three months earlier in bloom than those of the northern castle.

"Here I have no responsibilities; and how charming it is!" she said as she opened one of the lattice windows embowered in ivy, where a pair of blue tits were keeping house in their little nest under her casement.

Heronsmere had long been the dower house of the Duchesses of Beaufront, and the touch of many gentlewomen of other days had left its impress on the house, and made it a casket full of gracious memories.

"I am too graceless and unworthy for it; it wants

you," said Beaufront, as he stood by her that day at the library window.

She answered rather unsympathetically:

"It wants nothing but what it has. I always envy you Mrs. Simeon; she is a perfect housekeeper, and her white hair and her mob cap are charming."

He smiled a little bitterly.

"I am not so thankless as to undervalue Mrs. Simeon's perfections; but one may want something beside sheets that smell of roses, servants who are well drilled, and *une maison qui marche bien.*"

"Oh, I know that sort of lament!" said Freda with impatience. "All men till they are married are always sighing for what the French call *un intérieur,* and as soon as they have married they are all bored to death by the nuisance of it. If you had a wife I should probably dislike her, and then I should not come here; and she might even be somebody who would have Maple's or Gillow's young men down to cover the oak panellings with embroidered plush, and put electric light in the cloisters."

"I said the house wanted *you;* no one else," said Beaufront with anger.

"Well, it has me, for five days," she replied as she glanced at him with a vague surprise. "I never go anywhere else for so long; you know that."

Beaufront frowned as he heard her; with the usual unreason of men he could not have endured for his cousin to know how long and hopelessly he had loved her, and yet he was galled and irritated

by her profound want of any perception of his feelings.

"I shall marry some time or other, I suppose," he said sullenly, "and it will certainly not be anybody who will call in Maple or Gillow's young men; let us hope it may be somebody honoured by your approval."

"When I come to Heronsmere I feel that you ought to marry, Ralph," she said gravely. "At Deloraine I do not; it is a big uncomfortable place, and you are *bon prince* in it, and you have the world about you, and I, or Helena, or one of your sisters, do the honours for you, and that is quite enough; but here you want a home, everything is so home-like: the world ought never to come here, it ought to shelter a quiet untroubled happiness."

"I am *au-dessous de mon assiette* here; I feel it," replied Beaufront irritably. "The place is simple, serious, poetic, and I have none of those spiritual qualities. But I doubt whether the presence of a woman I hated would improve either it or me."

"Why should it be a woman you hated? It might be a woman you adored."

"That couldn't be," he said crossly.

"I do not see why. I am sure I could find you a hundred charming—"

"My dear Freda," said Beaufront with increasing irritation, "for heaven's sake do not take *me* in hand. Exercise your inimitable tact and talents in uniting Flodden to the Tory party or in otherwise manipulating the interests of the State, but for heaven's sake

leave my uninteresting existence to continue its uneventful course unhastened by your kind assistance."

Lady Avillion opened her eyes very widely in undisguised astonishment.

"How irritable he is!" she thought. "Perhaps he has married Mrs. Laurence privately and never told us."

"I wish my cousin would give a mistress to this dear old house," she said to Syrlin one day. "But I am afraid he never will unless that designing woman, Mrs. Laurence, gets still farther hold upon him than she has."

"Why do you call her designing?" said Syrlin with an abruptness common to him when he heard what he did not like.

"Because she is so," replied Lady Avillion. "It is she who prevents him from marrying."

"I do not believe it," said Syrlin.

Freda affected not to hear.

"Have you known Mrs. Laurence long?" she asked with indifference.

"Yes," answered Syrlin sullenly. "She is a good woman, who has had an unhappy life—"

"An unhappy life! When she plays shuttlecock with our princes and has our whole world at her teas? I should say her sorrows like her virtues were—were—not very substantial."

"You are prejudiced, and you are unjust," said Syrlin in a tone to which she was unaccustomed. "I care nothing about her, but I respect her; and I cannot remain silent to hear her slandered. It is

unworthy of you, Lady Avillion; it is the prejudice of caste; you dislike to see a woman of whom you know nothing received as a leader of society, it irritates your *amour-propre;* you would send her back, if you could, to the obscurity she emerged from."

"I would send them all back to the obscurity they emerged from!" said Freda with a boundless disdain in her accent.

"And me too?" said Syrlin.

"You are a man of genius; you are *hors ligne.*"

"You are very kind; you have said that to me more than once; but if Mrs. Laurence have little right to her place in your great world, I have still less right to mine. As for Ralph marrying her, he will never even think of it."

"Why not?"

"Because—" he hesitated.

"Well, why?"

Syrlin hesitated still; then he answered with startling directness.

"Because there is only one woman whom he loves, and it is not she; it is you, Madame."

"I!" Freda stared at him haughtily; then she laughed. "It is a poet's privilege to romance, and as you are so admirable an interpreter of the poets, I suppose we must extend their privilege to you. But why speak of such things? We are not in a green-room."

"I beg your pardon," said Syrlin moodily. "But what I said was true."

"My dear sir! Who cares to hear truth? In this case it is your own very unbridled imagination which you take for fact."

"No," said Syrlin, and added under his breath: "how could it be otherwise with him or any other?"

"He is rude, and fanciful, and morbid," said Freda of him to her own thoughts. "But he is interesting, and with all his triumphs he is not vain; he takes them at what they are worth. If no one spoke to him in the whole world I believe he would not care. He would go back to his friends the Moors, and live on cactus fruit and dates."

And that most penetrating and delicate of all charms, the charm of a nature wholly new to us, began to attract her towards Syrlin.

END OF VOL. I.

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