SIR TOM

BY

MRS. OLIPHANT

AUTHOR OF "THE WIZARD'S SON," "HESTER," ETC.

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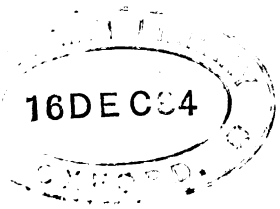

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CHAPTER I.

THE EVENING AFTER.

THE outcry that rose when, after Montjoie's comic song—a performance of the broadest and silliest description—was over, it was discovered that Bice had disappeared, and especially the blank look of the performer himself when, turning round from the piano, he surveyed the company in vain for her, gratified the Contessa beyond measure. She smiled radiantly upon the assembly in answer to all their indignant questions. "It has been for once an indulgence," she said; "but little girls must keep early hours." Montjoie was wounded and disappointed beyond measure that it should have been at the moment of his performance that she was spirited away. His reproaches were vehement, and there was something of the pettishness of a boy in their indignant tones. "I shouldn't have sung a note

if I'd thought what was going on," he cried. "Contessa, I would not have believed you could have been so mean—and I singing only to please you."

"But think how you have pleased me—and all these ladies!" cried the Contessa. "Does not that recompense you?" Montjoie guessed that she was laughing at him, but he did not, in fact, see anything to laugh about. It was natural enough that the other ladies should be pleased; still he did not care whether they were pleased or not, and he did care much that the object of his admiration had not waited to hear him. The Contessa found the greatest amusement in his boyish sulk and resentment, and the rest of the evening was passed in baffling the questions with which, now that Bice was gone, her friends overpowered her. She gave the smallest possible dole of reply to their interrogations, but smiled upon the questioners with sunshiny smiles. "You must come and see me in town," she said to Montjoie. It was the only satisfaction she would give him. And she perceived at a much earlier hour than usual that Lucy was waiting for her to go to bed. She gave a little cry of distress when this seemed to flash upon her.

"Sweet Lucy, it is for me you wait!" she cried. "How could I keep you so late, my dear one?"

Montjoie was the foremost of those who attended her to the door, and got her candle for her, that indispensable but unnecessary formula.

"Of course I shall look you up in town; but we'll talk of that to-morrow. I don't go till three—to-morrow," the young fellow said.

The Contessa gave him her hand with a smile, but without a word, in that inimitable way she had, leaving Montjoie a prey to such uncertainty as poisoned his night's rest. He was not humble-minded, and he knew that he was a prize which no lady he had met with as yet had disregarded; but for the first time his bosom was torn by disquietude. Of course he must see her to-morrow. Should he see her to-morrow? The Contessa's smile, so radiant, so inexplainable, tormented him with a thousand doubts.

Lucy had looked on at all this with an uneasiness indescribable. She felt like an accomplice, watching this course of intrigue, of which she indeed disapproved entirely, but could not clear herself from a certain guilty

knowledge of. That it should all be going on under her roof was terrible to her, though it was not for Montjoie but for Bice that her anxieties were awakened. She followed the Contessa upstairs, bearing her candle as if they formed part of a procession, with a countenance absolutely opposed in expression to the smiles of Madame di Forno-Populo. When they reached the Contessa's door, Lucy, by a sudden impulse, followed her in. It was not the first time that she had been allowed to cross the threshold of that little enchanted world which had filled her with wonder on her first entrance, but which by this time she regarded with composure, no longer bewildered to find it in her own house. Bice sprang up from a sofa on which she was lying on their entrance. She had taken off her beautiful dress, and her hair was streaming over her shoulders, her countenance radiant with delight. She threw herself upon the Contessa, without perceiving the presence of Lady Randolph.

"But it is enchanting—it is ravishing. I have never been so happy," she cried.

"My child," said the Contessa, "here is our dear lady, who is of a different opinion."

"Of what opinion?" Bice cried. She was startled by the sudden appearance, when she

had no thought of such an apparition, of Lucy's face so grave and uneasy. It gave a contradiction which was painful to the girl's excitement and delight.

"Indeed, I did not mean to find fault," said Lucy. "I was only sorry——" and here she paused, feeling herself incapable of expressing her real meaning, and convicted of interference and unnecessary severity by the girl's astonished eyes.

"My dear one," said the Contessa, "it is only that we look from two different points of view. You will not object to little Bice that she finds society intoxicating when she first goes into it. The child has made what you call a sensation. She has had her little *succès*. That is nothing to object to. An English girl is perhaps more reticent. She is brought up to believe that she does not care for *succès*. But Bice is otherwise. She has been trained for that, and to please makes her happy."

"To please—whom?" cried Lady Randolph. "Oh, don't think I am finding fault. We are brought up to please our parents and people who —care for us—in England."

Here Bice and the Contessa mutually looked at each other, and the girl laughed, putting her

hands together. "*She* is pleased most of all," she cried; "she is all my parents. I please her first of all."

"What you say is sweet," said the Contessa, smiling upon Lucy; "and she is right too. She pleases me most of all. To see her have her little triumph, looking really her very best, and her dress so successful, is to me a delight. I am nearly as much excited as the child herself!"

Lucy looked from one to another, and felt that it was impossible for her to say what she wished to say. The girl's pleasure seemed so innocent, and that of her protectress and guardian so generous, so tender. All that had offended Lucy's instincts—the dramatic effort of the Contessa, the careful preparation of all the effects, the singling out of young Montjoie as the object—all seemed to melt away in the girlish delight of Bice and the sympathetic triumph of her guardian. She did not know what to say to them. It was she who was the culprit, putting thoughts of harm, which had not found any entrance there, into the girl's mind. She flushed with shame and an uneasy sense that the tables were thus turned upon her; and yet how could she depart without some warning? It was not only her own troubled uncomfortable feeling;

but had she not read the same, still more serious and decided, in her husband's eyes?

"I don't know what to say," said Lucy. "But Sir Tom thinks so too. He will tell you better—he knows better. Lord Montjoie is—I do not know why he was asked. I did not wish it. He is—dear Madame di Forno-Populo, you have seen so much more than I—he is vulgar—a little. And Bice is so young; she may be deceived."

For a moment a cloud, more dark than had ever been seen there before, overshadowed the Contessa's face. But Bice burst forth into a peal of laughter, clapping her hands. "Is that vulgar?" the girl cried. "I am glad. Now I know how he is different. It is what you call fun, don't you know," she cried with sudden mimicry, at which Lucy herself could not refuse to laugh.

"I waited outside to hear a little of the song. It was so wonderful that I could not laugh; and to utter all that before you, Madama, after he had heard you—oh, what courage! what braveness!" cried Bice. "I did not think any one could be so brave!"

"You mean so simple, dear child," said the Contessa, whose brow had cleared; "that is

really what is so wonderful in these English men. They are so simple, they never see how it is different. It is brave, if you please, but still more simple-minded. Little Montjoie is so. He knows no better; not to me only, but even to you, Bice, with that voice of yours, so pure, so fresh, he listens, then performs as you heard. It is wonderful, as you say. But you have not told me, Lucy, my sweetest, what you think of the little one's voice."

"I think," said Lucy, with that disapproval which she could not altogether restrain, "that it is very wonderful, when it is so fine, that we never heard it before——"

"Ah, Bice," cried the Contessa, "our dear lady is determined that she will not be pleased to-night. We had prepared a little surprise, and it is a failure. She will not understand that we love to please. She will have us to be superior, as if we were English."

"Indeed, indeed," cried Lucy, full of compunction, "I know you are always kind. And I know your ways are different—but——" with a sort of regretful reflectiveness, shaking her head.

"All England is in that 'but,'" said the Contessa. "It is what has always been said to me. In our country we love to arrange these little

effects, to have surprises, impromptus, events that are unexpected. Bice, go, my child, go to bed; after this excitement you must rest. You did well, and pleased me at least. My sweet Lucy," she said, when the girl with instant obedience had disappeared into the next room, "I know how you see it all from your point of view. But we are not as you—rich, secure. We must make while we can our *coup*. To succeed by one *coup*, that is my desire. And you will not interfere?"

"Oh, Contessa," cried Lucy, "will you not spare the child? It is like selling her. She is too good for such a man. He is scarcely a man —he is a boy. I am ashamed to think that you should care to please——him, or any one like him. Oh, let it come naturally! Do not plan like this, and scheme and take trouble for——"

"For an establishment that will make her at once safe and sure; that will give her so many of the things that people care for—beautiful houses, a good name, money—— I have schemed, as you say, for little things much of my life," said the Contessa, shaking her head with a mournful smile; "I have told you my history: for very, very little things—for a box at the opera, for a carriage, things which are

nothing, sweetest Lucy. You have plenty; such things are nothing to you. You cannot understand it. But that is me, my dear one. I have not a higher mind like you; and shall I not scheme," cried the Contessa, with sudden energy, "for the child, to make her safe that she may never require scheming? Ah, my Lucy! I have the heart of a mother to her, and you know what a mother will do."

Lucy was silent, partly touched, partly resisting. If it ever could be right to do evil that good might come, perhaps this motive might justify it. And then came the question, how much, in the Contessa's code, was evil of these proceedings? She was silenced, if not satisfied. There is a certain casuistry involved in the most Christian charity: "thinketh no evil" sometimes even implies an effort to think that there is no harm in evil according to the intention in it. Lucy's intellect was confused, though not that unobtrusive faculty of judgment in her which was infallible, yet could be kept dumb.

"My love," said the Contessa, suddenly kissing her as a sort of dismissal, "think that you are rich and we poor. If Bice had a provision, if she had even as much as you give away to your

poor friends and never think of again, how different would all things be for her! But she has nothing; and therefore I prepare my little tableaux, and study all the effects I can think of, and produce her as in a theatre, and shut her up to *agacer* the audience, and keep her silent and make her sing, all for effect; yes, all for effect. But what can I do? She has not a penny, not a penny, not even like your poor friends."

The sudden energy with which this was said was indescribable. The Contessa's countenance, usually so ivory-pale, shone with a sort of reflection as if of light within, her eyes blazed, her smile gave place to a seriousness which was almost indignation. She looked like a heroine maintaining her right to do all that human strength could do for the forlorn and oppressed; and there was, in fact, a certain *abandon* of feeling in her which made her half unconsciously open the door, and do what was tantamount to turning her visitor out, though her visitor was mistress of the house. Her feelings had indeed for the moment got the better of the Contessa. She had worked herself up to the point of indignation, that Lucy, who could, if she would, deliver Bice from all the snares of poverty, had not done so, and was not, so far as appeared, intending to

do so. To find fault with the devices of the poor, and yet not to help them—is not that one of the things least easily supportable of all the spurns of patient merit? The Contessa was doing what she could—all she could—in her own fashion, strenuously, anxiously. But Lucy was doing nothing, though she could have done it so easily; and yet she found fault and criticised. Madame di Forno-Populo was swept by a great flood of instinctive resentment. She put her hostess to the door in the strength of it, tenderly with a kiss but not less hotly, and with full meaning. Such impulses had stood her instead of virtue on other occasions; she felt a certain virtue as of superior generosity and self-sacrifice in her proceedings now.

As for Lucy, still much confused and scarcely recognising the full meaning of the Contessa's warmth, she made her way to her own room in a haze of disturbed and uneasy feeling. Somehow —she could not tell how—she felt herself in the wrong. What was it she had done? What was it she had left undone? To further the scheme by which young Montjoie was to be caught and trapped and made the means of fortune and endowment to Bice was not possible. In such cases it is usually of the possible victim, the man

against whom such plots are formed, that the bystander thinks; but Lucy thought of young Montjoie only with an instinctive dislike, which would have been contempt in a less calm and tolerant mind. That Bice, with all her gifts, a creature so full of life and sweetness and strength, should be handed over to this trifling commonplace lad, was in itself terrible to think of. Lucy did not think of the girl's beauty, or of that newly-developed gift of song which had taken her by surprise, but only and simply of herself, the warm-hearted and smiling girl, the creature full of fun and frolic whom she had learned to be fond of, first for the sake of little Tom, and then for her own. Little Tom's friend, his playmate, who had found him out in his infant weakness, and made his life so much brighter! And then Lucy asked herself what the Contessa could mean, what it was that made her own interference a sort of impertinence, why her protests had been received with so little of the usual caressing deference. Thoughts go fast, and Lucy had not yet reached the door of her own room when it flashed upon her what it was. She put down her candle on a table in the corridor and stood still to realise it. This gallery at the head of the great staircase was dimly lighted, and the

hall below threw up a glimmer, reflected in the oaken balusters and doors of the closed rooms, and dying away in the half-lit gloom above. There were sounds below, far off, that betrayed the assembly still undispersed in the smoking-room, and some fainter still, above, of the ladies who had retired to their rooms, but were still discussing the strange events of the evening. In the centre of this partial darkness stood Lucy, with her candle, the only visible representative of all the hidden life around, suddenly pausing, asking herself:

Was this what it meant? Undoubtedly, this was what it meant. She had the power, and she had not used it. With a word she could make all their schemes unnecessary, and relieve the burden on the soul of the woman who had the heart of a mother for Bice. Tears sprang up into Lucy's eyes unawares as this recollection suddenly seized her. The Contessa was not perfect—there were many things in her which Lady Randolph could with difficulty excuse to herself; but she had the heart of a mother for Bice. Oh yes, it was true—quite true. The heart of a mother! And how was it possible that another mother could look on at this and not sympathise? And how was it that the idea had never occurred

to her before—that she had never thought how changed in a moment might be Bice's position if only—— Here she picked up her candle again and went away hastily to her room. She said to herself that she was keeping Fletcher up, and that this was unkind. But, as a matter of fact, she was not thinking about Fletcher. There had sprung up in her soul a fear which was twofold and contradictory. If one of those alarms was justified, then the other would be fallacious; and yet the existence of the one doubled the force of the other. One of these elements of fear—the contradiction, the new terror—was wholly unthought of, and had never troubled her peace before. She thought—and this was her old burden, the anxiety which had already restrained her action and made her forego what she had never failed to feel as her duty, the carrying out of her father's will—of her husband's objection, of his opposition, of the terrible interview she had once had with him, when she had refused to acquiesce in his command. And then, with a sort of stealthy horror, she thought of his departure from that opposition, and asked herself, would he, for Bice's sake, consent to that which he had so much objected to in other cases? This it was that made her shrink from herself and her

own thoughts, and hurry into her room for the solace of Fletcher's companionship, and to put off as long as she could the discussion of the question. Would Sir Tom agree to everything? Would he make no objections—for Bice's sake?

CHAPTER II.

THE CONTESSA'S TACTICS.

THAT morning the whole party came down to breakfast expectant, for, notwithstanding the Contessa's habit of not appearing, it was supposed that the young lady whom most people supposed to have arrived very recently must be present at the morning meal. Young Montjoie, who was generally very late, appeared among the first; and there was a look of curiosity and anxiety in his face as he turned towards the door every time it was opened, which betrayed his motive. But this expectation was not destined to be repaid. Bice did not appear at breakfast. She did not even come downstairs, though the Contessa did, for luncheon. When Madame di Forno-Populo came in to this meal there was a general elevation of all heads and eager look towards her, to which she replied with her usual smile but no

explanation of any kind; nor would she make any reply, even to direct questions. She did nothing but smile when Montjoie demanded to know if Miss Forno-Populo was not coming downstairs, if she had gone away, if she were ill, if she would appear before three o'clock—with which questions he assailed her in downright fashion. When the Contessa did not smile she put on a look of injured sweetness. "What!" she said, "Am I then so little thought of? You have no more pleasure, ficklest of young men, in seeing me?"

"Oh, I assure you, Countess," he cried, "that's all right, don't you know; but a fellow may ask. And then it was your own doing to make us so excited."

"Yes, a fellow may ask," said the Contessa, smiling; but this was all the response she would give, nothing that could really throw the least light upon the subject of his curiosity. The other men of her following looked on with undisguised admiration at this skilled and accomplished woman. To see how she held in hand the youth whom they all considered as her victim was beautiful, they thought; and bets even were going amongst them as to the certainty that she would land her big fish. Sir Tom, at the head

of the table, did not regard the matter so lightly. There was a curve of annoyance in his forehead. He did not understand what game she was playing. It was, without doubt, a game of some sort, and its object was transparent enough; and Sir Tom could not easily forgive the dramatic efforts of the previous night, or endure the thought that his house was the scene of tactics so little creditable. He was vexed with the Contessa, with Bice, even with Lucy, who, he could not keep from saying to himself, should have found some means of baulking such an intention. He was somewhat mollified by the absence of Bice now, which seemed to him perhaps a tribute to his own evident disapproval; but still he was uneasy. It was not a fit thing to take place in his house. He saw far more clearly than he had done before that a stop should have been put ere now to the Contessa's operations, and in the light of last night's proceedings perceived his own errors in judgment—those errors which he had indeed been sensible of, yet condoned in himself with that wonderful charity which we show towards our own mistakes and follies. He ought not to have asked her to the Hall; he ought not to have permitted himself to be flattered and amused by her society, or to have encouraged

her to remain, or to have been so weak as to ask the people she wished, which was the crowning error of all. He had invited Montjoie, a trifling boy in whom he felt little or no interest, to please her, without any definite idea as to what she meant, but only with an amused sense that she had designs on the lad which Montjoie was quite knowing enough to deliver himself from. But the turn things had taken displeased Sir Tom. It was too barefaced, he said to himself. He too felt, like his more innocent wife, as if he were an accomplice in a social crime.

"I've been swindled, don't you know," Montjoie said; "I've been taken a mean advantage of. None of these other beggars are going away like me. They will get all the good of the music to-night, and I shall be far away. I could cry to think of it, I could, don't you know; but you don't care a bit, Countess."

The Contessa, as usual, smiled. "*Enfant!*" she said.

"I am not an infant. I am just the same age as everybody, old enough to look after myself, don't you know, and pay for myself, and all that sort of thing. Besides, I haven't got any parents and guardians. Is that why you take such a base advantage of me?" cried the young man.

"It is perhaps why——" The Contessa was not much in the way of answering questions; and when she had said this she broke off with a laugh. Was she going to say that this was why she had taken any trouble about him, with a frankness which it is sometimes part of the astutest policy to employ?

"Why what? why what? Oh, come, you must tell me now," the young man said.

"Why one takes so much interest in you," said the Contessa sweetly. "You shall come and see me, *cher petit Marquis*, in my little house that is to be, in Mayfair; for you have found me, *n'est ce pas*, a little house in Mayfair?" she said, turning to another of her train.

"Hung with rose-coloured curtains and pink glass in the windows, according to your orders, Contessa," said the gentleman appealed to.

"How good it is to have a friend! but those curtains will be terrible," said the Contessa, with a shiver, "if it were not that I carry with me a few little things in a great box."

"Oh, my dear Contessa, how many things you must have picked up!" cried Lady Anastasia. "That peep into your boudoir made me sick with envy; those Eastern embroideries, those Persian rugs! They have furnished me with a lovely

paragraph for my paper, and it is such a delightful original idea to carry about one's pet furniture like one's dresses. It will become quite the fashion when it is known. And how I shall long to see that little house in Mayfair!"

The Contessa smiled upon Lady Anastasia as she smiled upon the male friends that surrounded her. Her paper and her paragraphs were not to be despised, and those little mysterious intimations about the new beauty which it delighted her to make. Madame di Forno-Populo turned to Montjoie afterwards with a little wave of the hand. "You are going?" she said; "how sad for us! we shall have no song to make us gay to-night. But come and you shall sing to us in Mayfair."

"Countess, you are only laughing at me. But I shall come, don't you know," said Montjoie, "whether you mean it or not."

The company, who were so much interested in this conversation, did not observe the preoccupied looks of the master and mistress of the house, although to some of the gentlemen the gravity of Sir Tom was apparent enough. And not much wonder that he should be grave. Even the men who were most easy in their own code looked with a certain severity and astonish-

ment upon him who had opened his door to the adventuress-Contessa, of whom they all judged the worst, without even the charitable acknowledgment which her enemy the Dowager had made, that there was nothing in her past history bad enough to procure her absolute expulsion from society. The men who crowded round her when she appeared, who flattered and paid their court to her, and even took a little credit to themselves as intimates of the siren, were one and all of opinion that to bring her into his house was discreditable to Sir Tom. They were even a little less respectful to Lucy for not knowing or finding out the quality of her guest. If Tom Randolph was beginning to find out that he had been a fool it was wonderful he had not made the discovery sooner. For he had been a fool, and no mistake! To bring that woman to England, to keep her in his house, to associate her in men's minds with his wife—the worst of his present guests found it most difficult to forgive him. But they were all the more interested in the situation from the fact that Sir Tom was beginning to feel the effects of his folly. He said very little during that meal. He took no notice of the badinage going on between the Contessa and her train. When he spoke at all it was to

that virtuous mother at his other hand, who was not at all amusing, and talked of nothing but Edith and Minnie, and her successful treatment of them through all the nursery troubles of their life.

Lucy, at the other end of the table, was scarcely more expansive. She had been relieved by the absence of Bice, which, in her innocence, she believed to be a concession to her own anxiety, feeling a certain gratitude to the Contessa for thus foregoing the chance of another interview with Montjoie. It could never have occurred to Lucy to suppose that this was policy on the Contessa's part, and that her refusal to satisfy Montjoie was in reality planned to strengthen her hold on him, and to increase the curiosity she pretended to baffle. Lucy had no such artificial idea in her mind. She accepted the girl's withdrawal as a tribute to her own powers of persuasion, and a proof that though the Contessa had been led astray by her foreign notions, she was yet ready to perceive and adopt the more excellent way. This touched Lucy's heart and made her feel that she was herself bound to reciprocate the generosity. They had done it without knowing anything about the intention in her mind, and it should be hers to

carry out that intention liberally, generously, not like an unwilling giver. She cast many a glance at her husband while this was going through her mind. Would he object as before? or would he, because it was the Contessa who was to be benefited, make no objection? Lucy did not know which of the two it would be more painful to her to bear. She had read carefully the paragraph in her father's will about foreigners, and had found there was no distinct objection to foreigners, only a preference the other way. She knew indeed, but would not permit herself to think, that these were not persons who would have commended themselves to Mr. Trevor as objects of his bounty. Mr. Churchill, with his large family, was very different. But to endow two frivolous and expensive women with a portion of his fortune was a thing to which he never would have consented. With a certain shiver she recognised this; and then she made a rush past the objection and turned her back upon it. It was quite a common form of beneficence in old times to provide a dower for a girl that she might marry. What could there be wrong in providing a poor girl with something to live upon that she might not be forced into a mercenary marriage? While all the talk was going on at the other end

of the table she was turning this over in her mind—the manner of it, the amount of it, all the details. She did not hear the talk: it was immaterial to her—she cared not for it. Now and then she gave an anxious look at Sir Tom at the other end. He was serious. He did not laugh as usual. What was he thinking of? Would his objections be forgotten because it was the Contessa, or would he oppose her and struggle against her? Her heart beat at the thought of the conflict which might be before her; or perhaps if there was no conflict, if he were too willing, might not that be the worst of all!

Thus the background against which the Contessa wove her web of smiles and humorous schemes was both dark and serious. There were many shadows behind that frivolous central light. Herself the chief actor, the plotter, she to whom only it could be a matter of personal advantage, was perhaps the least serious of all the agents in it. The others thought of possibilities dark enough, of perhaps the destruction of family peace in this house which had been so hospitable to her, which had received her when no other house would; and some, of the success of a plan which did not deserve to succeed; and some, of the danger of a youth to whom at present all the

world was bright. All these things seemed to be involved in the present crisis. What more likely than that Lucy, at last enlightened, should turn upon her husband, who no doubt had forced this uncongenial companion upon her, should turn from Sir Tom altogether, and put her trust in him no longer! And the men who most admired the Contessa were those who looked with the greatest horror upon a marriage made by her, and called young Montjoie poor little beggar and poor devil, wondering much whether he ought not to be "spoken to." The men were not sorry for Bice, nor thought of her at all in the matter, save to conclude her a true pupil of the guardian whom most of them believed to be her mother. But in this point where the others were wanting Lucy came in, whose simple heart bled for the girl about to be sacrificed to a man whom she could not love. Thus tragical surmises floated in the air about Madame di Forno-Populo, that arch plotter whose heart was throbbing indeed with her success and the hope of successes to come, but who had no tragical alarms in her breast. She was perfectly easy in her mind about Sir Tom and Lucy. Even if a matrimonial quarrel should be the result, what was that to an experienced woman of the world, who knew that such things

are only for the minute? and neither Bice nor Montjoie caused her any alarm. Bice was perfectly pleased with the little Marquis. He amused her. She had not the slightest objection to him; and as for Montjoie, he was perfectly well able to take care of himself. So that while everybody else was more or less anxious, the Contessa in the centre of all her webs was perfectly tranquil. She was not aware that she wished harm to any man, or woman either. Her light heart and easy conscience carried her quite triumphantly through all.

When Montjoie had gone away, carrying in his pocket-book the address of the little house in Mayfair, and when the party had dispersed to walk or ride or drive, as each thought fit, Lucy, who was doing neither, met her husband coming out of his den. Sir Tom was full of a remorseful sense that he had wronged Lucy. He took her by both hands and drew her into his room. It was a long time since he had met her with the same effusion. "You are looking very serious," he said; "you are vexed, and I don't wonder; but I see land, Lucy. It will be over directly—only a week more——"

"I thought you were looking serious, Tom," she said.

"So I was, my love. All that business last night was more than I could stand. You may think me callous enough, but I could not stand that."

"Tom!" said Lucy, faltering. It seemed an opportunity she could not let slip—but how she trembled between her two terrors! "There is something that I want to say to you."

"Say whatever you like, Lucy," he cried; "but for God's sake don't tremble, my little woman, when you speak to me. I've done nothing to deserve that."

"I am not trembling," said Lucy, with the most innocent and transparent of falsehoods. "But oh, Tom, I am so sorry, so unhappy."

"For what?" he said. He did not know what accusation she might be going to bring against him; and how could he defend himself? Whatever she might say he was sure to be half guilty; and if she thought him wholly guilty, how could he prevent it? A hot colour came up upon his middle-aged face. To have to blush when you are past the age of blushing is a more terrible necessity than the young can conceive.

"Oh Tom!" cried Lucy again, "for Bice! Can we stand by and let her be sacrificed? She

is not much more than a child; and she is always so good to little Tom."

"For Bice!" he cried. In the relief of his mind he was ready to have done anything for Bice. He laughed with a somewhat nervous tremulous outburst. "Why, what is the matter with her?" he said. "She did her part last night with assurance enough. She is young indeed, but she ought to have known better than that."

"She is very young, and it is the way she has been brought up—how should she know any better? But, Tom, if she had any fortune she would not be compelled to marry. How can we stand by and see her sacrificed to that odious young man?"

"What odious young man?" said Sir Tom, astonished, and then with another burst of his old laughter such as had not been heard for weeks, he cried out, "Montjoie! Why, Lucy, are you crazy? Half the girls in England are in competition for him. Sacrificed to——! She will be in the greatest luck if she ever has such a chance."

Lucy gave him a reproachful look.

"How can you say so? A little vulgar boy —a creature not worthy to——"

"My dear, you are prejudiced. You are taking Jock's view. That worthy's opinion of a fellow who never rose above lower fourth is to be received with reservation. A fellow may be a scug, and yet not a bad fellow—that is what Jock has yet to learn."

"Oh, Tom, I cannot laugh," said Lucy. "What can she do, the Contessa says. She must marry the first that offers, and in the meantime she attracts notice *like that.* It is dreadful to think of it. I think that some one —that we—I—ought to interfere."

"My innocent Lucy," said Sir Tom, "how can you interfere? You know nothing about the tactics of such people. I am very penitent for my share in the matter. I ought not to have brought so much upon you."

"Oh Tom!" cried Lucy again, drawing closer to him, eager to anticipate with her pardon any blame to which he might be liable. And then she added, returning to her own subject, "She is of English parentage—on one side."

Why this fact, so simply stated, should have startled her husband so much, Lucy could not imagine. He almost gasped as he met her eyes, as if he had received or feared a sudden blow, and underneath the brownness of his complexion

grew suddenly pale, all the ruddy colour forsaking his face. "Of English parentage!" he said, faltering, "do you mean?—what do you mean? Why—do you tell this to me?"

Lucy was surprised, but saw no significance in his agitation. And her mind was full of her own purpose. "Because of the will which is against foreigners," she said simply. "But in that case she would not be a foreigner, Tom. I think a great deal of this. I want to do it. Oh, don't oppose me! It makes it so much harder when you go against me."

He gazed at her with a sort of awe. He did not seem able to speak. What she had said, though she was unconscious of any special meaning in it, seemed to have acted upon him like a spell. There was something tragic in his look which frightened Lucy. She came closer still and put her hand upon his arm.

"Oh, it is not to trouble you, Tom; it is not that I want to go against you! But give me your consent this once. Baby is so fond of her, and she is so good to him. I want to give something to Bice. Let me make a provision for her?" she said, pleading. "Do not take all the pleasure out of it and oppose me. Oh, dear Tom, give me your free consent!" Lucy cried.

He kept gazing at her with that look of awe. "Oppose you!" he said. What was the shock he had received which made him so unlike himself? His very lips quivered as he spoke. "God forgive me; what have I been doing?" he cried. "Lucy, I think I will never oppose you more."

CHAPTER III.

DISCOVERIES.

This interview had an agitating and painful effect upon Lucy, though she could not tell why. It was not what she expected or feared —neither in one sense nor the other. He had neither distressed her by opposing her proceedings, nor accepted her beneficence towards the Contessa with levity and satisfaction, both of which dangers she had been prepared for. Instead, however, of agitating her by the reception he gave to her proposal, it was he who was agitated by something which in entire unconsciousness she had said. But what that could be Lucy could not divine. She had said nothing that could affect him personally so far as she knew. She went over every word of the conversation without being able to discover what could have had this effect. But she could find

nothing; there was no clue anywhere that her unconscious mind could discover. She concluded, finally, with much compunction, that it was the implied reproach that he had taken away all pleasure in what she did by opposing her that had so disturbed her husband. He was so kind. He had not been able to bear even the possibility that his opposition had been a source of pain. "I think I will never oppose you any more." In an answering burst of generosity Lucy said to herself that she did not desire this; that she preferred that he should find fault and object when he disapproved, not consent to everything. But the reflection of the disturbance she had seen in her husband's countenance was in her mind all day; she could not shake it off; and he was so grave that every look she cast at him strengthened the impression. He did not approach the circle in which the Contessa sat all the evening, but stood apart, silent, taking little notice of anybody until Mr. Derwentwater secured his ear, when Sir Tom, instead of his usual genial laugh at MTutor's solemnities, discharged little caustic criticisms which astonished his companion. Mr. Derwentwater was going away next day, and he too was preoccupied. After that conversation with Sir Tom he betook

himself to Lucy, who was very silent too, and doing little for the entertainment of her guests. He made her sundry pretty speeches, such as are appropriate from a departing guest.

"Jock has made up his mind to stay behind," he said. "I am sorry, but I am not surprised. I shall lose a most agreeable travelling companion; but, perhaps, home influences are best for the young."

"I don't know why Jock has changed his mind, Mr. Derwentwater. He wanted very much to go."

"He would say that here's metal more attractive," said the tutor, with an offended smile; and then he paused, and, clearing his throat, asked in a still more evident tone of offence, "Does not your young friend the Signorina appear again? I thought from her appearance last night that she was making her *début*."

"Yes, it was like it," said Lucy. "The Contessa is not like one of us," she added after a moment. "She has her own ways—and, perhaps, I don't know—that may be the Italian fashion."

"Not at all," Mr. Derwentwater said promptly. He was an authority upon national usages. "But

I am afraid it was very transparent what the Contessa meant," he said after a pause.

To this Lucy made no reply, and the tutor, who was sensitive, especially as to bad taste, reddened at his inappropriate observation. He went on hastily, "The Signorina—or should I say Mademoiselle di Forno-Populo ?—has a great deal of charm. I do not know if she is so beautiful as her mother——"

"Oh, not her mother," cried Lucy quickly, with a smile at the mistake.

"Is she not her mother ? The young lady's face indeed is different. It is of a higher order —it is full of thought. It is noble in repose. She does not seem made for these scenes of festivity, if you will pardon me, Lady Randolph, but for the higher retirements——"

"Oh, she is very fond of seeing people," said Lucy. "You must not suppose she is too serious for her age. She enjoyed herself last night."

"There is no age," said Mr. Derwentwater, "at which one can be too serious—and especially in youth, when all the world is before one, when one cannot tell what effect a careless step may have one way or another. It is just that sweet gravity that charms me. I think she was quite

out of her element, excuse me for saying so, Lady Randolph, last night."

"Do you think so? Oh, I am afraid not. I am afraid she liked it," said Lucy. "Jock, don't you think Bice liked it? I should much rather think not, but I am afraid—I am afraid——"

"She couldn't like that little cad," said Jock, who had drawn near with an instinctive sense that something was going on which concerned him. "But she's never solemn either," added the boy.

"Is that for me, Jock?" said MTutor, with a pensive gentleness of reproach. "Well, never mind. We must all put up with little misunderstandings from the younger generation. Some time or other you will judge differently. I should like to have had an opportunity again of such music as we heard last night; but I suppose I must not hope for it."

"Oh, do you mean Lord Montjoie's song?" cried one of the young ladies in blue, who had drawn near. "Wasn't it fun? Of course I know it wasn't to be compared to the Contessa; but I've no musical taste. I always confess it—that's Edith's line. But Lord Montjoie *was* fun. Don't you think so, dear Lady Randolph?" Miss Minnie said.

Mr. Derwentwater gave her one glance and retired, Jock following. "Perhaps that's your opinion too," he said, "that Lord Montjoie's was fun?"

"He's a scug," said Jock laconically; "that's all I think about him."

Mr. Derwentwater took the lad's arm. "And yet," he said, "Jock, though you and I consider ourselves his superiors, that is the fellow that will carry off the prize. Beauty and genius are for him. He must have the best that humanity can produce. You ought to be too young to have any feeling on the subject; but it is a humiliating thought."

"Bice will have nothing to say to him," said Jock, with straightforward application of the abstract description; but MTutor shook his head.

"How can we tell the persecutions to which woman is subject?" he said. "You and I, Jock, are in a very different position. But we should try to realise, though it is difficult, those dangers to which she is subject. Kept indoors," said MTutor with pathos in his voice, "debarred from all knowledge of the world, with all the authorities about her leading one way. How can we tell what is said to her? with a host of petty

maxims preaching down a daughter's heart—strange!" cried Mr. Derwentwater, with closer pressure of the boy's arm, "that the most lovely existence should thus continually be led to link itself with the basest. We must not blame woman; we must keep her idea sacred, whatever happens in our own experience."

"It always sets one right to talk to you," cried Jock, full of emotion. "I was a beast to say that."

"My boy, don't you think I understand the disturbance in your mind?" MTutor said, with a sigh.

They had left the drawing-room during the course of this conversation, and were crossing the hall on the way to the library when some one suddenly drew back with a startled movement from the passage which led to Sir Tom's den. Then there followed a laugh, and "Oh, is it only you?" after which there came forth a slim shadow, as unlike as possible to the siren of the previous night. "We have met before, and I don't mind. Is there any one else coming?" Bice said.

"Why do you hide and skulk in corners?" cried Jock. "Why shouldn't you meet any one? Have you done something wrong?"

This made Bice laugh still more. "You don't understand," she said.

"Signorina," said Mr. Derwentwater (who was somewhat proud of having remembered this good abstract title to give to the mysterious girl), "I am going away to-morrow, and perhaps I shall never hear you again. Your voice seemed to open the heavenly gates. Why, since you are so good as to consider us different from the others, won't you sing to us once more?"

"Sing?" said Bice with a little surprise; "but by myself my voice is not much——"

"It is like a voice out of heaven," Mr. Derwentwater said fervently.

"Do you really, really think so?" she said, with a wondering look. She was surprised, but pleased too. "I don't think you would care for it without the Contessa's; but perhaps——" Then she looked round her with a reflective look. "What can I do? There is no piano, and then these people would hear." After this a sudden idea struck her. She laughed aloud like a child with sudden glee. "I don't suppose it would be any harm! You belong to the house—and then there is Marietta. Yes! Come!" she cried suddenly, rushing up the great staircase and waving her hand impatiently,

beckoning them to follow. "Come quick, quick," she cried, "I hear some one coming," and flew upstairs. They followed her, Mr. Derwentwater passing Jock, who hung back a little, and did not know what to think of this adventure. "Come quick," she cried, darting along the dimly-lighted corridor with a laugh that rang lightly along like the music to which her steps were set. "Oh, come in, come in. They will hear, but they will not know where it comes from." The young men, stupefied, hesitating, followed her. They found themselves among all the curiosities and luxuries of the Contessa's boudoir. And in a moment Bice had placed herself at the little piano which was placed across one of the corners, its back covered with a wonderful piece of Eastern embroidery which would have invited Derwentwater's attention had he been able to fix that upon anything but Bice. As it was, he gave a half regard to these treasures. He would have examined them all with the devotion of a connoisseur but for her presence, which exercised a spell still more subtle than that of art.

The sound of the singing penetrated vaguely even into the drawing-room, where the Contessa, startled, rose from her seat much earlier than

usual. Lucy, who attended her dutifully upstairs according to her usual custom, was dismayed beyond measure by seeing Jock and his tutor issue from that door. Bice came with them, with an air of excitement and triumphant satisfaction. She had been singing, and the inspiration and applause had gone to her head. She met the ladies not with the air of a culprit, but in all the boldness of innocence. "They like to hear me, even by myself," she cried; "they have listened as if I had been an angel." And she clapped her hands with almost childish pleasure.

"Perhaps they think you are," said the Contessa, who shook her head, yet smiled with sympathy. "You must not say to these messieurs below that you have been in my room. Oh, I know the confidences of a smoking-room! You must not brag, *mes amis*. For Bice does not understand the *convenances*, nor remember that this is England, where people meet only in the drawing-room."

"Divine forgetfulness!" murmured Derwentwater. Jock, for his part, turned his back with a certain sense of shame. He had liked it, but he had not thought it right. The room altogether, with its draperies and mysteries, had

conveyed to him a certain intoxication as of wrong-doing. Something that was dangerous was in the air of it. It was seductive, it was fascinating; he had felt like a man banished when Bice had started from the piano and bidden them "Go away; go away!" in the same laughing tone in which she had bidden them come. But the moment he was outside the threshold his impulse was to escape—to rush out of sight—and obliterate even from his own mind the sense that he had been there. To meet the Contessa, and still more his sister, full in the face was a shock to all his susceptibilities. He turned his back upon them, and, but that his fellow-culprit made a momentary stand, would have fled away. Lucy partook of Jock's feeling. It wounded her to see him at that door. She gave him a glance of mingled reproach and pity; a vague sense that these were siren-women dangerous to all mankind stole into her heart.

But Lucy was destined to a still greater shock. The party from the smoking-room was late in breaking up. The sound of their steps and voices as they came upstairs roused Lady Randolph, not from sleep—for she had been unable to sleep—but from the confused maze of recollections and efforts to think which distracted

her placid soul. She was not made for these agitations. The constitution of her mind was overset altogether. The moment that suspicion and distrust came in there was no further strength in her. She was lying not thinking so much as remembering stray words and looks which drifted across her memory as across a dim mirror, with a meaning in them which she did not grasp. She was not clever. She could not put this and that together with the dolorous skill which some women possess. It is a skill which does not promote the happiness of the possessor, but perhaps it is scarcely more happy to stand in the midst of a vague mass of suggestions without being able to make out what they mean, which was Lucy's case. She did not understand her husband's sudden excitement; what it had to do with Bice, with the Contessa, with her own resolution and plans, she could not tell, but felt vaguely that many things deeply concerning her were in the air, and was unhappy in the confusion of her thoughts. For a long time after the sounds of various persons coming upstairs had died away, Lucy lay silent waiting for her husband's appearance—but at last, unable to bear the vague wretchedness of her thoughts any longer, got up and put on a

dressing-gown and stole out into the dark gallery to go to the nursery to look at her boy asleep, which was her best anodyne. The lights were all extinguished except the faint ray that came from the nursery-door, and Lucy went softly towards that, anxious to disturb little Tom by no sound. As she did so a door suddenly opened, sending a glare of light into the dark corridor. It was the door of the Contessa's room, and with the light came Sir Tom, the Contessa herself appearing after him on the threshold. She was still in her dinner-dress, and her appearance remained long impressed upon Lucy's imagination like a photograph without colour, in shadow and light. She gave Sir Tom a little packet apparently of letters, and then she held out both hands to him, which he took in his. Something seemed to flash through Lucy's heart like a knife, quivering like the "pale death" of the poet, in sight and sense. The sudden surprise and pang of it was such for a moment that she seemed turned into stone, and stood gazing like a spectre in her white flowing dress, her face more white, her eyes and mouth open in the misery and trouble of the moment. Then she stole back softly into her room—her head throbbing, her heart beating—and buried

her face in her pillow and closed her eyes. Even baby could not soothe her in this unlooked-for pang. And then she heard his step come slowly along the gallery. How was she to look at him? how listen to him in the shock of such an extraordinary discovery? She took refuge in a semblance of sleep.

CHAPTER IV.

LUCY'S DISCOVERY.

WHEN it happens to an innocent and simple soul to find out suddenly at a stroke the falsehood of some one upon whose truth the whole universe depends, the effect is such as perhaps has never been put forth by any attempt at pyschological investigation. When it happens to a great mind, we have Hamlet with all the world in ruins round him—all other thoughts as of revenge or ambition are but secondary and spasmodic, since neither revenge nor advancement can put together again the works of life or make man delight him, or woman either. But Lady Randolph was not a Hamlet. She had no genius, nor even a great intellect to be unhinged—scarcely mind enough to understand how it was that the glory had paled out of earth and sky, and all the world seemed different when she rose

from her uneasy bed next morning, pale, after a night without sleep, in which she had not been able to have even the relief of restlessness, but had lain motionless, without even a sigh or tear, so crushed by the unexpected blow that she could neither fathom nor understand what had happened to her. She was too pure herself to jump at any thought of gross infidelity. She felt she knew not what—that the world had gone to pieces—that she did not know how to shape it again into anything—that she could not look into her husband's face, or command her voice to speak to him, for shame of the thought that he had failed in truth. Lucy felt somehow as if she were the culprit. She was ashamed to look him in the face. She made an early visit to the nursery, and stayed there pretending various little occupations until she heard Sir Tom go downstairs. He had returned so much to the old ways, and now that the house was full, and there were other people to occupy the Contessa, had shown so clearly (as Lucy had thought) that he was pleased to be liberated from his attendance upon her, that the cloud that had risen between them had melted away; and, indeed, for some time back it had been Lucy who was the Contessa's stay and support—

a change at which Sir Tom had sometimes laughed. All had been well between the husband and wife during the early part of the season parliamentary, the beginning of their life in London. Sir Tom had been much engrossed with the cares of public life, but he had been delightful to Lucy, whose faith in him and his new occupations was great. And it was exhilarating to think that the Contessa had secured that little house in Mayfair for her own campaign, and that something like a new honeymoon was about to begin for the pair, whose happiness had seemed for a moment to tremble in the balance. Lucy had been looking forward to the return to London with a more bright and conscious anticipation of well-being than she had ever experienced. In the first outset of life happiness seems a necessary of existence. It is calculated upon without misgiving; it is simple nature, beyond question. But when the natural "of course" has once been broken, it is with a warmer glow of content that we see the prospect once more stretching before us, bright as at first and more assured. This is how Lucy had been regarding her life. It was not so simple, so easy as it once had been; but the happiness to which she was looking forward, and which she had

already partially entered into possession of, was all the more sweet and dear that she had known, or fancied herself about to know, the loss and absence of it. Now, in a moment, all that fair prospect, that blessed certainty, was gone. The earth was cut away from under her feet; she felt everything to be tottering, falling round her, and nothing in all the universe to lay hold of to prop herself up; for when the pillars of the world are thus unrooted, the heaving of the earthquake and the falling of the ruins impart a certain vertigo and giddy instability even to heaven.

Fletcher, Lucy's maid, who was usually discreet enough, waited upon her mistress that morning with a certain air of importance, and of knowing something which she was bursting with eagerness to tell, such as must have attracted Lady Randolph's attention in any other circumstances. But Lucy was far too much occupied with what was in her own mind to observe the perturbation of the maid, who consequently had no resource, since her mistress would not question her, but to introduce herself the subject on which she was so anxious to utter her mind. She began by inquiring if her ladyship had heard the music last night. "The music?" Lucy said.

"Oh, my lady, haven't you heard what a singer Miss Beachy has turned out?" Fletcher cried.

Lucy, to whom all this seemed dim and far away as if it had happened years ago, answered, with a faint smile, "Yes, she has a lovely voice."

"It is not my place," said Fletcher, "being only a servant, to make remarks; but, my lady, if I might make so bold, it do seem to the like of us an 'orrible thing to take advantage of a young lady like your ladyship that thinks no harm."

"You should not make such remarks," said Lucy, roused a little.

"No, my lady; but still a woman is a woman, even though but a servant. I said to Mrs. Freshwater I was sure your ladyship would never sanction it. I never thought that of Miss Beachy, I will allow. I always said she was a nice young lady; but evil communications, my lady—we all know what the Bible says. Gentlemen upstairs in her room, and her singing to them, and laughing and talking like as no housemaid in the house as valued her character would do——"

"Fletcher," said Lucy, "you must say no

more about this. It was Mr. Jock and Mr. Derwentwater only who were with Miss Bice—and with my permission," she added after a moment, "as he is going away to-morrow." Such deceits are so easy to learn.

"Oh-oh!" Miss Fletcher cried, with a quaver in her voice. "I beg your pardon, my lady; I'm sure—I thought—there must be something underneath, and that Miss Beachy would never—— And when she was down with Sir Thomas in the study it would be the same, my lady?" the woman said.

"With Sir Thomas in the study!" The words went vaguely into Lucy's mind. It had not seemed possible to increase the confusion and misery in her brain, but this produced a heightening of it, a sort of wave of bewilderment and pain greater than before, a sense of additional giddiness and failing. She gave a wave of her hand and said something, she scarcely knew what, which silenced Fletcher; and then she went downstairs to the new world. She did not go to the nursery even, as was her wont; her heart turned from little Tom. She felt that to look at him would be more than she could bear. There was no deceit in him, no falsehood —as yet; but perhaps when he grew up he

would cheat her too. He would pretend to love her, and betray her trust; he would kiss her, and then go away and scoff at her; he would smile, and smile, and be a villain. Such words were not in Lucy's mind, and it was altogether out of nature that she should even receive the thought, which made it all the more terrible when it was poured into her soul. And it cannot be told what discoveries she seemed to make even in the course of that morning in this strange condition of her mind. There was a haze over everything, but yet there was an enlightenment even in the haze. She saw in her little way, as Hamlet saw the falsehood of his courtiers, his gallant young companions, and the schemes of Polonius, and even Ophelia in the plot to trap him. She saw how false all these people were in their civilities, in their extravagant thanks and compliments to her as they went away; for the Easter recess was just over, and everybody was going. The mother and her daughters said to her, "Such a delightful visit, dear Lady Randolph!" with kisses of farewell and wreathed smiles; and she perceived, somehow by a sort of second sight, that they added to each other, "Oh, what a bore it has been! nobody worth meeting," and "how thankful I

am it's over!" which was indeed what Miss Minnie and Miss Edith said. If Lucy had seen a little deeper she would have known that this too was a sort of conventional falsity which the young ladies said to each other, according to the fashion of the day, without any meaning to speak of; but one must have learned a great many lessons before one comes to that.

Then Jock, who had been woke up in quite a different way, took leave of MTutor, that god of his old idolatry, without being able to refrain from some semblance of the old absorbing affection.

"I am so sorry you are not coming with me, old fellow," Mr. Derwentwater said.

Jock replied, "So am I," with an effort, as if firing a parting volley in honour of his friend; but then turned gloomily with an expression of relief. "I'm glad he's gone, Lucy."

"Then you did not want to go with him, Jock?"

"I wouldn't have gone for anything. I've just got to that—that I can't bear him," cried Jock.

And Lucy, in the midst of the ruins, felt her head go round: though here too it was the falsehood that was fictitious, had she but known. It

is not, however, in the nature of such a shock that any of those alleviating circumstances which modify the character of human sentiment can be taken into account. Lucy had taken everything for gospel in the first chapter of existence; she had believed what everybody said; and like every other human soul, after such a discovery as she had made, she went to the opposite extremity now—not wittingly, not voluntarily—but the pillars of the earth were shaken, and nothing stood fast.

They went up to town next day. In the meantime she had little or no intercourse with the Contessa, who was preparing for the journey and absorbed in letter-writing, making known to everybody whom she could think of, the existence of the little house in Mayfair. It is doubtful whether she so much as observed any difference in the demeanour of her hostess, having in fact the most unbounded confidence in Lucy, whom she did not believe capable of any such revulsion of feeling. Bice was more clear-sighted, but she thought Milady was displeased with her own proceedings, and sought no further for a cause. And the only thing the girl could do was to endeavour by all the little devices she could think of to show the warm affection she really felt for

Lucy—a method which made the heart of Lucy more and more sick with that sense of falsehood which sometimes rose in her almost to the height of passion. A woman who had ever learned to use harsh words, or to whose mind it had ever been possible to do or say anything to hurt another, would no doubt have burst forth upon the girl with some reproach or intimation of doubt which might have cleared the matter so far as Bice went. But Lucy had no such words at her command. She could not say anything unkind. It was not in her. She could be silent, indeed, but not even that, so far as to "hurt the feelings" of her companion. The effect, therefore, was only that Lucy laboured to maintain a little artificial conversation, which in its turn reacted upon her mind, showing that even in herself there was the same disposition to insincerity which she had begun to discover in the world. She could say nothing to Bice about the matters which a little while before, when all was well, she had grieved over and objected to. Now she had nothing to say on such subjects. That the girl should be set up to auction, that she should put forth all those arts in which she had been trained, to attract and secure young Montjoie or any like him, were things which had

passed beyond her sphere. To think of them rendered her heart more sick, her head more giddy. But if Bice married some one whom she did not love, that was not so bad as to think that perhaps she herself all this time had been living with, and loving, in sacred trust and faith, a man who even by her side was full of thoughts, unknown to her, given to another. Sometimes Lucy closed her eyes in a sort of sick despair, feeling everything about her go round and round. But she said nothing to throw any light upon the state of her being. Sir Tom felt a little gravity—a little distance in his wife; but he himself was much occupied with a new and painful subject of thought. And Jock observed nothing at all, being at a stage when man (or boy) is wholly possessed with affairs of his own. He had his troubles too. He was not easy about that breach with his master now that they were separated. When Bice was kind to him, a gleam of triumph, mingled with pity, made him remorseful towards that earlier friend; and, when she was unkind, a bitter sense of fellowship turned Jock's thoughts towards that sublime ideal of masculine friendship which is above the lighter loves of women. How can a boy think of his sister when absorbed in such a

mystery of his own?—even if he considered his sister at all as a person whom it was needful to think about—which he did not, Lucy being herself one of the pillars of the earth to his unopened eyes.

All this, however, made no difference in Lucy's determination. She wrote to Mr. Rushton that very morning, after this revolution in her soul, to instruct him as to her intentions in respect to Bice, and to her other trustee in London to request him to see her immediately on her arrival in Park Lane. Nothing should be changed in that matter; for why, she said to herself, should Bice suffer because Sir Tom was untrue? It seemed to her that there was more reason than ever why she should rouse herself and throw off her inaction. No doubt there were many people whom she could make, if not happy, yet comfortable. It was comfortable (everybody said) to have enough of money—to be well off. Lucy had no experience of what it was to be without it. She thought to herself she would like to try, to have only what she actually wanted, to cook the food for her little family, to nurse little Tom all by herself, to live as the cottagers lived. There was in her mind no repugnance to any of the details of poverty. Her

wealth was an accident; it was the habit of her race to be poor, and it seemed to Lucy that she would be happier could she shake off now all those external circumstances which had grown, like everything else, into falsehoods, giving an appearance of well-being which did not exist. But other people thought it well to have money, and it was her duty to give it. A kind of contempt rose within her for all that withheld her previously. To avoid her duty because it would displease Sir Tom—what was that but falsehood too? All was falsehood, only she had never seen it before.

They reached town in the afternoon of a sweet April day, the sky aglow with a golden sunset, against which the trees in the park stood out with their half-developed buds: and all the freshness of the spring was in the long stretches of green, and the softened jubilee of sound to which somehow, as the air warms towards summer, the voices of the world outside tune themselves. The Contessa and Bice, in great spirits and happiness, like two children home from school, had left the Randolph party at the railway to take possession of the little house in Mayfair. They had both waved their hands from the carriage window and called out, "Be

sure you come and see us," as they drove away. "You will come to-night," they had stipulated with Sir Tom and Jock. It was like a new toy which filled them with glee. Could it be possible that those two adventurers going off to their little temporary home with smiles so genuine, with so simple a delight in their new beginning, were not, in their strange way, innocent, full of guile and shifts as one was, and the other so apt a scholar? Lucy would have joined in all this pleasure two days ago, but she could not now. She went home to her luxurious house, where all was ready, as if she had not been absent an hour. How wonderfully wealth smooths away the inconveniences of change! and how little it has to do, Lucy thought, with the comfort of the soul! No need for any exertion on her part, any scuffling for the first arrival, any trouble of novelty. She came from the Hall to London without any sense of change. Had she been compelled to superintend the arrangement of her house, to make it habitable, to make it pretty, that would have done her good. But the only thing for her to do was to see Mr. Chervil, her trustee, who waited upon her according to her request, and who, after the usual remonstrances, took her instructions about the gift to Bice very

unwillingly, but still with a forced submission. "If I cannot make you see the folly of it, Lady Randolph, and if Sir Thomas does not object, I don't know what more is to be said." "There is nothing more to be said," Lucy said, with a smile; but there was this difficulty in the proceeding which she had not thought of, that Bice's name all this time was unknown to her—Beatrice di Forno-Populo, she supposed, but the Contessa had never called her so, and it was necessary to be exact, Mr. Chervil said. He hailed this as an occasion of delay. He was not so violent as he had been on previous occasions when Lucy was young; and he did not, like Mr. Rushton, assume the necessity of speaking to Sir Tom. Mr. Chervil was a London solicitor, and knew very little about Sir Tom. But he was glad to seize upon anything that was good for a little delay.

After this interview was over it was a mingled vexation and relief to Lucy to see the Dowager drive up to the door. Lady Randolph the elder was always in London from the first moment possible. She preferred the first bursting of the spring in the squares and parks. She liked to see her friends arrive by degrees, and to feel that she had so far the better of

them. She came in, full as she always was of matter, with a thousand things to say. "I have come to stay to dinner if you will have me," she said, "for of course Tom will be going out in the evening. They are always so glad to get back to their life." And it was perhaps a relief to have Lady Randolph to dinner, to be saved from the purely domestic party, to which Jock scarcely added any new element; but it was hard for Lucy to encounter even the brief questionings which were addressed to her in the short interval before dinner. "So you have got rid of that woman at last," Lady Randolph said; "I hear she has got a house in Mayfair."

"Yes, Aunt Randolph, if you mean the Contessa," said Lucy.

"And that she intends to make a bold *coup* to get the girl off her hands. These sort of people so often succeed: I shouldn't wonder if she were to succeed. I always said the girl would be handsome, but I think she might have waited another year."

To this Lucy made no reply, and it was necessary for the Dowager to carry on the conversation, so to speak, at her own cost.

"I hope most earnestly, Lucy," she said,

"that now you have got clear of them you will not mix yourself up with them again. You were placed in an uneasy position, very difficult to get out of, I will allow; but now that you have shaken them off, and they have proved they can get on without you, don't, I entreat you, mix yourself up with them again."

Lucy could not keep the blood from mounting and colouring her face. She had always spoken of the Contessa calmly before. She tried to keep her composure now. "Dear Aunt Randolph, I have not shaken them off. They have gone away of themselves, and how can I refuse to see them? There is to be a party here for them on the 26th."

"Oh, my dear, my dear, that was very imprudent! I had hoped you would keep clear of them in London. It is one thing showing kindness to an old friend in the country, and it is quite another——"

Here Lucy made an imperative gesture, almost commanding silence. Sir Tom was coming into the room. She was seated in the great bay window against the early twilight, the soft radiance of which dazzled the eyes of the elder lady and prevented her from per-

ceiving her nephew's approach. But Lady Randolph, before she rose to meet him, gave a startled look at Lucy. "Have you found it out, then?" she said involuntarily, in her great surprise.

CHAPTER V.

THE DOWAGER'S EXPLANATION.

THE Dowager was a woman far more clever than Lucy, who knew the world. And she was apt perhaps, instead of missing the meaning of the facts around her, to put too much significance in them. Now, when the little party met at dinner, Lady Randolph saw in the faces of both husband and wife more than was there, though much was there. Sir Tom was more grave than became a man who had returned into life, as his aunt said, and was looking forward to resuming the better part of existence—the House, the clubs, the quick throb of living which is in London. His countenance was full of thought, and there was both trouble and perplexity in it, but not the excitement which the Dowager supposed she found there, and those signs of having yielded to an evil influence which eyes accus-

tomed to the world are so ready to discover. Lucy, for her part, was pale and silent. She had little to say, and scarcely addressed her husband at all. Lady Randolph, and that was very natural, took those signs of heart sickness for tokens of complete enlightenment, for the passion of a woman who had entered upon that struggle with another woman for a man's love which, even when the man is her husband, has something degrading in it. There had been a disclosure, a terrible scene, no doubt, a stirring up of all the passions, Lady Randolph thought. No doubt that was the reason why the Contessa had loosed her clutches, and left the house free of her presence; but Lucy was still trembling after the tempest, and had not learned to take any pleasure in her victory. This was the conclusion of the woman of the world.

The dinner was not a lengthy one, and the ladies went upstairs again with a suppressed constraint, each anxious to know what the other was on her guard not to tell. They sat alone expectant for some time, making conversation, taking their coffee, listening, and watching each how the other listened, for the coming of the gentlemen, or rather for Sir Tom; for Jock, in his boyish insignificance, counted for little. The

trivial little words that passed between them during this interval were charged with a sort of moral electricity, and stung and tingled in the too conscious silence. At length, after some time had elapsed, "I am glad I came," said Lady Randolph, "to sit with you, Lucy, this first evening; for of course Tom cannot resist, the first evening in town, the charms of his club."

"His club! Oh, I think he has gone to see the house," Lucy said. "He promised——; it is not very far off."

"The house? You mean that woman's house. Lucy, I have no patience with you any more than I have with Tom. Why don't you put a stop to it? why don't you—for I suppose you have found out what sort of a woman she is by this time, and why she came here?"

"She came—— to introduce Bice and establish her in the world," Lucy said in a faint tone. "Oh, Aunt Randolph, please do not let us discuss it! It is not what I like to think of. Bice will be sacrificed to the first rich man who asks her; or at least that is what the Contessa means."

"My dear Lucy," said the Dowager calmly, "that is reasonable enough. I wish the Con-

tessa meant no worse than that. Most girls are persuaded to marry a rich man if he asks them. I don't think so much of that. But it will not be so easy as she thinks," the Dowager added. "It is true that beauty does much—but not everything; and a girl in that position, with no connections, or at least none that she would not be better without——"

Lucy's attention strayed from this question, which once had been so important, and which now seemed so secondary; but the conversation must be maintained. She said at random, "She has a beautiful voice."

"Has she? And the Contessa herself sings very well. That will no doubt be another attraction," said Lady Randolph in her impartial way. "But the end of it all is, who will she get to go, and who will invite them? It is vain to lay snares if there is nothing to be caught."

"They will be invited—here," said Lucy, faltering a little. "I told you I am to have a great gathering on the 26th."

"I could not believe my ears; you!—and she is to appear here for the first time to make her *début*. Good heavens, Lucy! What can I say to you—*that* girl!"

"Why not, Aunt Randolph?" said Lucy (oh,

what does it matter—what does it matter, that she should make so much fuss about it? she was saying in herself); "I have always liked Bice, and she has been very good to little Tom."

"Well," cried the angry lady, forgetting herself, and smiling the fierce smile of wrath, "there is no doubt that it is perfectly appropriate—the very thing that ought to happen if we lived according to the rules of nature, without thought of conventionalities and decorums, and so forth —oh, perfectly appropriate! If you don't object, I know no one who has any right to say a word."

Even now Lucy was scarcely roused enough to be surprised by the vehemence of these words. "Why should I object?" she said; "or why should any one say a word?" Her calm, which was almost indifference, excited Lady Randolph more and more.

"You are either superhuman," she said with exasperation, "or you are—— Lucy, I don't know what words to use. You put one out of every reckoning. You are like nobody I ever knew before. Why should you object? Why, good heavens! you are the only person that has any right—— Who should object if not you?"

"Aunt Randolph," said Lucy, rousing herself with an effort, "would you please tell me plainly what you mean? I am not clever. I can't make things out. I have always liked Bice. To save her from being made a victim I am going to give her some of the money under my father's will—and if I could give her—— What is the matter?" she cried, stopping short suddenly, and in spite of herself growing pale.

Lady Randolph flung up her hands in dismay. She gave something like a shriek as she exclaimed, "And Tom is letting you do this?" with horror in her tone.

"He has promised that he will not oppose," Lucy said; "but why do you speak so, and look so? Bice—has done no harm."

"Oh no; Bice has done no harm," cried Lady Randolph bitterly; "nothing, except being born, which is harm enough, I think. But do you mean to tell me, Lucy, that Tom—a man of honour, notwithstanding all his vagaries —Tom—— lets you do this and never says a word? Oh, it is too much. I have always stood by him. I have been his support when every one else failed. But this is too much, that he should put the burden upon you—that

he should make *you* responsible for this girl of his——"

"Aunt Randolph!" cried Lucy, rising up quickly and confronting the angry woman. She put up her hand with a serious dignity that was doubly impressive from her usual simpleness. "What is it you mean? This girl of his! I do not understand. She is not much more than a child. You cannot, cannot suppose that Bice—that it is she—that she is——" Here she suddenly covered her face with her hands. "Oh, you put things in my mind that I am ashamed to think of," Lucy cried.

"I mean," said Lady Randolph, who in the heat of this discussion had got beyond her own power of self-restraint, "what everybody but yourself must have seen long ago. That woman is a shameless woman, but even she would not have had the effrontery to bring any other girl to your house. It was more shameless, I think, to bring that one than any other; but she would not think so. Oh, cannot you see it even now? Why, the likeness might have told you; that was enough. The girl is Tom's girl. She is your husband's——"

Lucy uncovered her face, which was per-

fectly colourless, with eyes dilated and wide open. "What?" she whispered, looking intently into Lady Randolph's face.

"His own child—his—daughter—though I am bitterly ashamed to say it," the Dowager said.

For a moment everything seemed to waver and turn round in Lucy's eyes, as if the walls were making a circuit with her in giddy space. Then she came to her feet with the sensation of a shock, and found herself standing erect, with the most amazing incomprehensible sense of relief. Why should she have felt relieved by this communication which filled her companion with horror? A softer air seemed to breathe about Lucy; she felt solid ground under her feet. For the first moment there seemed nothing but ease and sweet soothing and refreshment in what she heard.

"His—daughter?" she said. Her mind went back with a sudden flash upon the past, gathering up instantaneously pieces of corroborative evidence, things which she had not noted at the moment, which she had forgotten, yet which came back nevertheless when they were needed: the Contessa's mysterious words about Bice's parentage, her intimation that Lucy would one

day be glad to have befriended her: Sir Tom's sudden agitation when she had told him of Bice's English descent: finally, and most conclusive of all, touching Lucy with a most unreasonable conviction and bringing a rush of warm feeling to her heart, baby's adoption of the girl and recommendation of her to his mother. Was it not the voice of nature, the voice of God? Lucy had no instinctive sense of recoil, no horror of the discovery. She did not realise the guilt involved, nor was she painfully struck, as some women might have been, by this evidence of her husband's previous life. "If it is so," she said quietly, "there is more reason than ever, Aunt Randolph, that I should do everything I can for Bice. It never came into my mind before. I see now—various things; but I do not see why it should—make me unhappy," she added with a faint smile which brought the water to her eyes; "it must have been—long before I knew him. Will you tell me who was her mother? Was she a foreigner? Did she die long ago?"

"Oh Lucy, Lucy," cried Lady Randolph, "is it possible you don't see? Who would take all that trouble about her? Who would burden themselves with another woman's girl that was

no concern of theirs? Who would—can't you see? can't you see?"

There came over Lucy's face a hot and feverish flush. She grew red to her hair; agitation and shame took possession of her; something seemed to throb and swell as if it would burst in her forehead. She could not speak. She could not look at her informant for shame of the revelation that had been made. All the bewildered sensations which for the moment had been stilled in her breast sprang up again with a feverish whirl and tumult. She tottered back to the chair on which she had been sitting, and dropped down upon it, holding by it as if that were the only thing in the world secure and steadfast. It was only now that Lady Randolph seemed to awake to the risks and dangers of this bold step she had taken. She had roused the placid soul at last. To what strange agony, to what revenge might she have roused it? She had looked for tears and misery, and fleeting rage and mad jealousy. But Lucy's look of utter giddiness and overthrow alarmed her more than she could say.

"Lucy! Oh, my love, you must recollect, as you say, that it was all long before he knew you—that there was no injury to you!"

Lucy made a movement with her hand to bar further discussion, but she could not say anything. She pointed Lady Randolph to her chair, and made that mute prayer for silence, for no more. But in such a moment of excitement there is nothing that is more difficult to grant than this.

"Oh Lucy," the Dowager cried, "forgive me! Perhaps I ought not to have said anything. Oh, my dear, if you will but think what a painful position it was for me! To see you so unsuspicious, ready to do anything, and even Tom taking advantage of you. It is not more than a week since I found it all out, and how could I keep silence? Think what a painful position it was for me."

Lucy made no reply. There seemed nothing but darkness round her. She put out her hand imploring that no more might be said; and though there was a great deal more said, she scarcely made out what it was. Her brain refused to take in any more. She suffered herself to be kissed and blessed, and said good-night to, almost mechanically. And when the elder lady at last went away, Lucy sat where Lady Randolph had left her, she did not know how long, gazing woefully at the ruins of that

crumbled world which had all fallen to pieces about her. All was to pieces now. What was she, and what was the other? Why should she be here and not the other? Two were there?—two with an equal claim upon him? Was everything false, even the law, even the external facts which made her Tom's wife? He had another wife and a child. He was two, he was not one true man—one for baby and her, another for Bice and the Contessa. When she heard her husband coming in, Lucy fled upstairs like a hunted thing, and took refuge in the nursery where little Tom was sleeping. Even her bourgeoise horror of betraying herself, of letting the servants suspect that anything was wrong, had no effect upon her to-night.

CHAPTER VI.

SEVERED.

Sir Tom came home later, so much later than he intended that he entered the house with such a sense of compunction as had not visited him since the days when the alarm of being caught was a part of the pleasure. He had no fear of a lecture from Lucy, whose gifts were not of that kind; but he was partially conscious of having neglected her on her first night in town, as well as having sinned against her in matters more serious. And he did not know how to explain his detention at the Contessa's new house, or the matters which he had been discussing there. It was a sensible relief to him not to find her in any of the sitting-rooms, all dark and closed up, except his own room, in which there was no trace of her. She had gone to bed, which was so sensible, like Lucy's unex-

aggerated natural good sense: he smiled to himself—though, at the same time, a wondering question within himself, whether she felt at all, passed through his mind—a reflection full of mingled disappointment and satisfaction. But when, a full hour after his return, after a tranquil period of reflection, he went leisurely upstairs, expecting to find her peacefully asleep, and found her not, nor any evidence that she had ever been there, a great wave of alarm passed over the mind of Sir Tom. He paused confounded, looking at her vacant place, startled beyond expression. "Lucy!" he cried, looking in his dismay into every corner, into his own dressing-room, and even into the large wardrobe where her dresses hung, like shells and husks, which she had laid aside. And then he made an agitated pause, standing in the middle of the room, not knowing what to think. It was by this time about two in the morning—the middle of the night, according to Lucy. Where could she have gone? Then he bethought himself with an immediate relief, which was soon replaced by poignant anxiety, of the only possible reason for her absence—a reason which would explain everything—little Tom. When this thought occurred to him all the excitement that

had been in Sir Tom's mind disappeared in a moment, and he thought of nothing but that baby lying, perhaps tossing uneasily upon his little bed, his mother watching over him—most sacred group on earth to him, who, whatever his faults might be, loved them both dearly. He took a candle in his hand and, stepping lightly, went up the stairs to the nursery-door. There was no sound of wailing within, no pitiful little cry to tell the tale; all was still and dark. He tried the door softly, but it would not open. Then another terror awoke, and for the moment took his breath from him. What had happened to the child? Sir Tom suffered enough at this moment to have expiated many sins. There came upon him a vision of the child extended motionless upon his bed, and his mother by him refusing to be comforted. What could it mean? The door looked as if hope had departed. He knocked softly, yet imperatively, divided between the horror of these thoughts and the gentle everyday sentiment which forbade any noise at little Tom's door. It was some time before he got any reply—a time which seemed to him interminable. Then he suddenly heard Lucy's voice close to the door whispering. There had been no sound of any footsteps. Had she been

there all the time, listening to all his appeals and taking no notice?

"Open the door," he said anxiously. "Speak to me. What is the matter? Is he ill? Have you sent for the doctor? Let me in."

"We are all shut up and settled for the night," said Lucy through the door.

"Shut up for the night? Has he been very ill?" Sir Tom cried.

"Oh, hush, you will wake him; no, not very ill: but I am going to stay with him," said the voice inside, with a quiver in it.

"Lucy, what does this mean? You are concealing something from me. Have you had the doctor? Good God! tell me. What is the matter? Can't I see my boy?"

"There is nothing—nothing to be alarmed about," said Lucy from within. "He is asleep; he is—doing well. Oh, go to bed and don't mind us. I am going to stay with him."

"Don't mind you?—that is so easy," he cried, with a broken laugh; then the silence stealing to his heart, he cried out, "Is the child——?" But Sir Tom could not say the word. He shivered, standing outside the closed door. The mystery seemed incomprehensible, save on the score of some great calamity. The

bitterness of death went over him; but then he asked himself what reason there could be to conceal from him any terrible sudden blow. Lucy would have wanted him in such a case, not kept him from her. In this dread moment of sudden panic he thought of everything but the real cause, which made a more effectual barrier between them than that closed door.

"He is well enough now," said Lucy's voice, coming faintly out of the darkness. "Oh, indeed, there is nothing the matter. Please go away; go to bed. It is so late. I am going to stay with him."

"Lucy," said Sir Tom, "I have never been shut out before. There is something you are concealing from me. Let me see him, and then you shall do as you please."

There was a little pause, and then slowly, reluctantly, Lucy opened the door. She was still fully dressed as she had been for dinner. There was not a particle of colour in her face. Her eyes had a scared look, and were surrounded by wide circles, as if the orbit had been hollowed out. She stood aside to let him pass without a word. The room in which little Tom slept was an inner room. There was scarcely any light in either, nothing but the faint glimmer of the

night-lamp. The sleeping-room was hushed and full of the most tranquil quiet, the regular soft breathing of the sleeping child in his little bed, and of his nurse by him, who was as completely unaware as he of any intrusion. Sir Tom stole in and looked at his boy, in the pretty baby attitude of perfect repose, his little arms thrown up over his head. The anxiety vanished from his heart, but not the troubled sense of something wrong, a mystery which altogether baffled him. Mystery had no place here in this little sanctuary of innocence. But what did it mean? He stole out again to where Lucy stood, scared and silent in her white dress, with a jewelled pendant at her neck which gleamed strangely in the half light.

"He seems quite well now. What was it, and why are you so anxious?" he asked. "Did the doctor——"

"There was no need for a doctor. It is only —myself. I must stay with him, he might want me——" And nobody else does, Lucy was about to say, but pride and modesty restrained her. Her husband looked at her earnestly. He perceived with a curious pang of astonishment that she drew away from him, standing as far off as the limited space permitted, and avoiding his eye.

"I don't understand it," he said; "there is something underneath; either he has been more ill than you will let me know, or—there is something else——"

She gave him no answering look, made no wondering exclamation, what could there be else? as he had hoped; but replied hurriedly, as she had done before, "I want to stay with him. I must stay with him for to-night——"

It was with the most extraordinary sense of some change, which he could not fathom or divine, that Sir Tom consented at last to leave his wife in the child's room and go to his own. What did it mean? What had happened to him, or was about to happen? He could not explain to himself the aspect of the slight little youthful figure in her airy white dress, with the diamonds still at her throat, careless of the hour and time, standing there in the middle of the night, shrinking away from him, forlorn and wakeful with her scared eyes. At this hour on ordinary occasions Lucy was fast asleep. When she came to see her boy, if society had kept her up late, it was in the ease of a dressing-gown, not with any cold glitter of ornaments. And to see her shrink and draw herself away in that strange repugnance from his touch and shadow

confounded him. He was not angry, as he might have been in another case, but pitiful to the bottom of his heart. What could have come to Lucy? Half a dozen times he turned back on his way to his room. What meaning could she have in it? What could have happened to her? Her manifest shrinking from him had terrified him, and filled his mind with confusion. But controversy of any kind in the child's room at the risk of waking him in the middle of the night was impossible, and no doubt, he tried to say to himself, it must be some panic she had taken, some sudden alarm for the child, justified by reasons which she did not like to explain to him till the morning light restored her confidence. Women were so, he had often heard; and the women he had known in his youth had certainly been so—unreasoning creatures, subject to their imagination, taking fright when no occasion for fright was, incapable of explaining. Lucy had never been like this; but yet Lucy, though sensible, was a woman too, and if it is not permitted to a woman to take an unreasoning panic about her only child, she must be hardly judged indeed. Sir Tom was not a hard judge. When he got over the painful sense that there must be something more in this than met the

eye, he was half glad to find that Lucy was like other women—a dear little fool, not always sensible. He thought almost the better of her for it, he said to himself. She would laugh herself at her panic, whatever it was, when little Tom woke up fresh and fair in the morning light.

With this idea he did what he could to satisfy himself. The situation was strange, unprecedented in his experience; but he had many subjects of thought on his own part which returned to his mind as the surprise of the moment calmed down. He had a great deal to think about. Old difficulties which seemed to have passed away for long years were now coming back again to embarrass and confuse him. "Our pleasant vices are made the whips to scourge us," he said to himself. The past had come back to him like the opening of a book, no longer merely frivolous and amusing, as in the Contessa's talk, touched with all manner of light emotions, but bitter, with tragedy in it, and death and desolation. Death and life: he had heard enough of the dead to make them seem alive again, and of the living to confuse their identity altogether; but he had not yet succeeded in clearing up the doubt which had been thrown into his mind. That question about Bice's parentage, "English

on one side," tormented him still. He had made again an attempt to discover the truth, and he had been foiled. The probabilities seemed all in favour of the solution which at the first word had presented itself to him; but still there was a chance that it might not be so.

His mind had been full and troubled enough, when he returned to the still house, and thought with compunction how many thoughts which he could not share with her he was bringing back to Lucy's side. He could not trust them to her, or confide in her, and secure her help, as in many other circumstances he would have done without hesitation. But he could not do that in this case,—not so much because she was his wife, as because she was so young, so innocent, so unaware of the complications of existence. How could she understand the temptations that assail a young man in the heyday of life, to whom many indulgences appear permissible or venial, which to her limited and innocent soul would seem unpardonable sins? To live even for a few years with a stainless nature like that of Lucy, in whom there was not even so much knowledge as would make the approaches of vice comprehensible, is a new kind of education to the most experienced of men. He

had not believed it to be possible to be so altogether ignorant of evil as he had found her; and how could he explain to her and gain her indulgent consideration of the circumstances which had led him into what in her vocabulary would be branded with the name of vice? Sir Tom even now did not feel it to be vice. It was unfortunate that it had so happened. He had been a fool. It was almost inconceivable to him now how for the indulgence of a momentary passion he could have placed himself in a position that might one day be so embarrassing and disagreeable. He had not behaved ill at the moment; it was the woman who had behaved ill. But how, in the name of wonder, to explain all this to Lucy? Lucy, who was not conscious of any reason why a man's code of morals should be different from that of a woman! When Sir Tom returned to this painful and difficult subject the immediate question as to Lucy's strange conduct died from his mind. It became more easy, by dint of repeating it, to believe that a mere unreasonable panic about little Tom was the cause of her withdrawal. It was foolish, but a loving and lovely foolishness which a man might do more than forgive, which he might adore and smile at, as men love to do, feeling that for a

woman to be thus silly is desirable, a counterpoise to the selfishness and want of feeling which are so common in the world. But how to make this spotless creature understand that a man might slip aside and yet not be a dissolute man, that he might be betrayed into certain proceedings which would not perhaps bear the inspection of severe judges, and yet be neither vicious nor heartless. This problem, after he had considered it in every possible way, Sir Tom finally gave up with a sort of despair. He must keep his secret within his own bosom. He must contrive some means of doing what, in case his hypothesis was right, would now be clearly a duty without exciting any suspicion on Lucy's part. That, he thought with a compunction, would be easy enough. There was no one whom it would cost less trouble to deceive. With these thoughts he went to sleep in the room, which seemed strangely lonely without her presence. Perhaps, however, it was not ungrateful to him to be alone to think all those thoughts without the additional sense of treachery which must have ensued had he thought them in her presence. There was no treachery. He had been all along, he thought to himself, a man somewhat sinned against in the matter. To be sure it was wrong

—according to all rules of morals, it was necessary to admit this; but not more wrong—not so much wrong—as most other men had been. And, granting the impropriety of that first step, he had nothing to reproach himself with afterwards. In that respect he knew he had behaved both liberally and honourably, though he had been deceived. But how—how—good heavens! explain this to Lucy? In the silence of her room, where she was not, he actually laughed out to himself at the thought—laughed with a sense of an impossibility beyond all laws or power of reasoning. What miracle would make her understand? It would be easier to move the solid earth than to make her understand.

But it was altogether a very strange night—such a night as never had been passed in that house before; and fearful things were about in the darkness, ill dreams, strange shadows of trouble. When Sir Tom woke in the morning and found no sign that his wife had been in the room or any trace of her, there arose once more a painful apprehension in his mind. He hurried half-dressed to the nursery to ask for news of the child, but was met by the nurse with the most cheerful countenance, with little Tom hold-

ing by her skirts in high spirits, and full of babble and glee.

"He has had a good night, then?" the father said aloud, lifting the little fellow to his shoulder.

"An excellent night, Sir Thomas," the woman said, "and not a bit tired with his journey, and so pleased to see all the carriages and the folks passing."

Sir Tom put the boy down with a cloud upon his face.

"What was the cause, then, of Lady Randolph's anxiety last night?"

"Anxiety, Sir Thomas! Oh no; her ladyship was quite pleased. She do always say he is a regular little town-bird, and always better in London. And so she said when I was putting of him to sleep. And he never stirred, not from the moment he went off till six o'clock this morning, the darling. I do think now, Sir Thomas, as we may hope he's taken hold of his strength."

Sir Tom turned away with a blank countenance. What did it mean, then? He went back to his dressing-room and completed his toilette without seeing anything of Lucy. The nurse seemed quite unconscious of her mistress's vigil by the baby's side. Where, then, had Lucy

passed the night, and why taken refuge in that nursery? Sir Tom grew pale, and saw his own countenance white and full of trouble, as if it had been a stranger's, in the glass. He hurried downstairs to the breakfast-room, into which the sun was shining. There could not have been a more cheerful sight. Some of the flowers brought up from the Hall were on the table; there was a merry little fire burning; the usual pile of newspapers were arranged for him by Williams's care, who felt himself a political character too, and understood the necessity of seeing what the country was thinking. Jock stood at the window with a book, reading and watching the changeful movements outside. But the chair at the head of the table was vacant. "Have you seen Lucy?" he said to Jock, with an anxiety which he could scarcely disguise. At this moment she came in, very guilty, very pale, like a ghost. She gave him no greeting, save a sort of attempt at a smile and warning look, calling his attention to Williams, who had followed her into the room with that one special dish which the butler always condescended to place on the table. Sir Tom sat down to his newspapers confounded, not knowing what to think or to say.

CHAPTER VII.

LADY RANDOLPH WINDS UP HER AFFAIRS.

Lucy contrived somehow to elude all private intercourse with her husband that morning. She was not alone with him for a moment. To his question about little Tom and her anxiety of last night she made as slight an answer as possible. "Nurse tells me he is all right." "He is quite well this morning," Lucy replied with quiet dignity, as if she did not limit herself to nurse's observations. She talked a little to Jock about his school and how long the holidays lasted, while Sir Tom retired behind the shield of his newspapers. He did not get much benefit from them that morning, or instruction as to what the country was thinking. He was so much more curious to know what his wife was thinking, that simple little girl who knew no evil. The most astute of men could not have perplexed Sir Tom

so much. It seemed to him that something must have happened; but what? What was there that any one could betray to her?—not the discovery that he himself thought he had made? That was impossible. If any one else had known it, he surely must have known it. It could not be anything so unlikely as that.

But Lucy gave him no opportunity of inquiring. She went away to see the housekeeper, to look after her domestic affairs; and then Sir Tom made sure he should find her in the nursery, whither he took his way, when he thought he had left sufficient time for her other occupations. But Lady Randolph was not there. He heard from Fletcher, whose disturbed countenance seemed to reflect his own, that her mistress had gone out. She was the only one of the household who shared his certainty that something had happened out of the ordinary routine. Fletcher knew that her mistress had not undressed in the usual way—that she had not gone to bed. Her own services had not been required either in the morning or evening, and she had a strong suspicion that Lady Randolph had passed the night on a sofa in the little morning-room upstairs. To Fletcher's mind it was not very difficult to account for this. Quarrels between

husband and wife are common enough. But her consciousness and sympathetic significance of look struck Sir Tom with a troubled sense of the humour of the situation which broke the spell of his increasing agitation, if but for a moment. It was droll to think that Fletcher should be in a manner his confidante, the only participator in his woes.

Lucy had gone out half to avoid her husband, half with a determination to expedite the business which she had begun, with very different feelings, the day before. The streets were very gay and bright on that April morning, with all the quickening of life which many arrivals and the approach of the season, with all its excitements, brings. Houses were opening up, carriages coming out, even the groups of children and nurse-maids in the Park making a sensible difference on the other side of the great railing. It was very unusual for her to find herself in the streets alone, and this increased the curious dazed sensation with which she went out among all these real people, so lively and energetic, while she was still little more than a dream-woman, possessed by one thought, moving along, she knew not how, with a sense of helplessness and unprotectedness which made the novelty

all the more sensible to her. She went on for what seemed to be a long time, following mechanically the line of the pavement, without knowing what she was doing, along the long course of Park Lane, and then into the cheerful bustle of Piccadilly, where, with a sense of morning ease and leisure, not like the artificiality of the afternoon, so many people were coming and going, all occupied in business of their own, though so different from the bustle of more absorbing business, the haste and obstruction of the city. Lucy was not beautiful enough or splendid enough to attract much attention from the passers-by in the streets, though one or two sympathetic and observant wayfarers were caught by the look of trouble in her face. She had never walked about London, and she did not know where she was going. But she did not think of this. She thought only on one subject, —about her husband and that other life which he had, of which she knew nothing, which might, for anything she could tell, have been going on side by side with the life she knew and shared. This was the point upon which Lucy's mind had given way. The revelation as to Bice had startled and shaken her soul to its foundations; but after the shock things had fallen into their

place again, and she had felt no anger, though much pain and pity. Her mind had thrown itself back into the unknown past almost tenderly towards the mother who had died long ago, to whom perhaps Bice had been what little Tom was now to herself. But when the further statement reached her ears all that softening which seemed to have swept over her disappeared in a moment. A horrible bewilderment had seized her. Was he two men, with two wives, two lives, two children dear to him?

It is usual to talk of women as being the most severe judges of each other's failures in one particular at least, an accusation which no doubt is true of both sexes, though generally applied, like so many universal truths, to one. And an injured wife is a raging fury in those primitive characterisations which are so common in the world. But the ideas which circled like the flakes in a snowstorm through the mind of Lucy were of a kind incomprehensible to the vulgar critic who judges humanity in the general. Her ways of thinking, her modes of judging, were as different as possible from those of minds accustomed to generalisation and lightly acquainted with the vices of the world. Lucy knew no general; she knew three persons involved in an

imbroglio so terrible that she saw no way out of it. Herself, her husband, another woman. Her mind was the mind almost of a child. It had resisted all that dismal information which the chatter of society conveys. She knew that married people were "not happy" sometimes. She knew that there were wretched stories of which she held that they could not be true. She was of Desdemona's mind, and did not believe that there was any such woman. And when she was suddenly strangely brought face to face with a tragedy of her own, that was not enough to turn this innocent and modest girl into a raging Eleanor. She was profoundly reasonable in her simple way, unapt to blame; thinking no evil, and full of those prepossessions and fixed canons of innocence which the world-instructed are incapable not only of understanding but of believing in the existence of. A connection between a man and a woman was to her, in one way or other, a marriage. Into the reasons, whatever they might have been, that could have brought about any such connection without the rites that made it sacred she could not penetrate or inquire. It was a subject too terrible, from which her mind retreated with awe and incomprehension. Never could it, she felt, have been intended so,

at least on the woman's side. The mock marriage of romance, the deceits practised on the stage and in novels upon the innocent, she believed in without hesitation, everything in the world being more comprehensible than impurity. There might be villainous men, betrayers, seducers, Lucy could not tell; there might be monsters, griffins, fiery dragons, for anything she knew; but a woman abandoned by all her natural guard of modesties and reluctances, moved by passion, capable of being seduced, she could not understand. And still more impossible was it to imagine such sins as the outcome of mere levity without any tragic circumstances; or to conceive of the mysteries of life as outraged and intruded upon by folly or for the darker bait of interest. Her heart sickened at such suggestions. She knew there were poor women in the streets, victims of want and vice, poor degraded creatures for whom her heart bled, whom she could not think of for the intolerable pang of pity and shame. But all these questions had nothing to do with the sudden revelation in which she herself had so painful a part. These broken reflections were in her mind like the falling of snow. They whirled through the vague world of her troubled soul without consequence or

coherence; all that had nothing to do with her. Her husband was no villain, and the woman—the beautiful smiling woman, so much fairer, greater, more important than Lucy—she was no wretched, degraded creature. What was she then? His wife—his true wife? And if so, what was Lucy? Her brain reeled and the world went round her in a sickening whirl. The circumstances were too terrible for resentment. What could anger do, or any other quick-springing short-lived emotion? What did it matter even what Lucy felt—what any one felt? It was far beyond that. Here was fact which no emotion could undo. A wife and a child on either side, and what was to come of it; and how could life go on with this to think of, never to be forgotten, not to be put aside for a moment? It brought existence to a stand-still. She did not know what was the next step she must take, or how she could go back, or what she must say to the man who perhaps was not her husband, or how she could continue under that roof, or arrange the commonest details of life. There was but one thing clear before her, the business which she was bent on hurrying to a conclusion now.

She found herself in the bustle of the streets

that converge upon the circus at the end of Piccadilly as she thus went on thinking, and there Lucy looked about her in some dismay, finding that she had reached the limit of the little world she knew. She was afraid of plunging alone into those bustling ways, and almost afraid of the only other alternative, which, however, she adopted, of calling a cab and giving the driver the address of Mr. Chervil in the city. To do this, and to mount into the uneasy jingling cab, gave her a little shock of the unaccustomed, which was like a breach of morals to Lucy. It seemed, though she had been independent enough in more important matters, the most daring step she had ever taken on her own responsibility. But the matter of the cab, and the aspect of this unknown world into which it conveyed her, occupied her mind a little, and stopped the tumult of her thoughts. She seemed scarcely to know what she had come about when she found herself set down at the door of Mr. Chervil's office, and ascending the grimy staircase, meeting people who stared at her and wondered what a lady could be doing there. Mr. Chervil himself was scarcely less surprised. He said, "Lady Randolph!" with a cry of astonishment when she was shown in. And she found some diffi-

culty, which she had not thought of, in explaining her business. He reminded her that she had given him the same instructions yesterday when he had the honour of waiting upon her in Park Lane. He was far more respectful to Lady Randolph than he had been to Lucy Trevor in her first attempts to carry out her father's will.

"I assure you," he said, "I have not neglected your wishes. I have written to Rushton on the subject. We both know by this time, Lady Randolph, that when you have made up your mind—and you have the most perfect right to do so—though we may not like it, nor think it anything but a squandering of money, still we are aware we have no right to oppose——"

"It is not that," said Lucy faintly. "It is that the circumstances have changed since yesterday. I want to—I should like to——"

"Give up your intention? I am delighted to hear it. For you must allow me to say, as a man of business——"

"It is not that," Lucy repeated. "I want to increase the sum. I find the young lady has a claim, and I want it to be done immediately, without the loss of a day. Oh, I am more, much more in earnest about it than I was yesterday.

I want it settled at once. If it is not settled at once difficulties might arise. I want to double the amount. Could you not telegraph to Mr. Rushton instead of writing? I have heard that people telegraph about business."

"Double the amount! Have you thought over this? Have you had Sir Thomas's advice? It is a very important matter to decide so suddenly. Pardon me, Lady Randolph, but you must know that if you bestow at this rate you will soon not have very much left to you."

"Ah, that would be a comfort!" cried Lucy; and then there came over her the miserable thought that all the circumstances were changed, and to have a subject of disagreement between her husband and herself removed would not matter now. Once it had been the only subject, now—— The suddenness of this realisation of the change filled her eyes with tears. But she restrained herself with a great effort. "Yes," she said, "I should be glad—very glad—to have done all my father wished; for many things might happen. I might die—and then who would do it?"

"We need not discuss that very unlikely contingency," said Mr. Chervil. (He said to

himself: Sir Tom wouldn't, that is certain.) "But even under Mr. Trevor's will," he added, "this will be a very large sum to give—larger, don't you think, than he intended; unless there is some very special claim?"

"It is a special claim," cried Lucy, "and papa made no conditions. I was to be free in doing it. He left me quite free."

"Without doubt," the lawyer said. "I need not repeat my opinion on the subject, but you are certainly quite free. And you have brought me the young lady's name, no doubt, Lady Randolph? Yesterday, you recollect, you were uncertain about her name. It is important to be quite accurate in an affair of so much importance. She is a lucky young lady. A great many would like to learn the secret of pleasing you to this extent."

Lucy looked at him with a gasp. She did not understand the rest of his speech or care to hear it. Her name? What was her name? If she had not known it before, still less did she know it now.

"Oh," she cried, "what does it matter about a name? People—girls—change their names. She is Beatrice. You might leave a blank and it could be filled up after. She is going to—

marry. She is—must everything be delayed for that?—and yet it is of no importance—no importance that I can see," Lucy said, wringing her hands.

"My dear Lady Randolph! Let me say that to give a very large sum of money to a person with whose very name you are unacquainted—forgive me, but in your own interests I must speak. Let me consult with Sir Thomas."

"I do not wish my husband to be consulted. He has promised me not to interfere, and it is my business, not his," Lucy said, with a flush of excitement. And though there was much further conversation, and the lawyer did all he could to move her, it need not be said that Lucy was immovable. He went down to the door with her to put her into her carriage, as he supposed, not unwilling even in that centre of practical life to have the surrounding population see on what confidential terms he was with this fine young lady. But when he perceived that no carriage was there, and Lucy, not without a tremor, as of a very strange request, and one which might shock the nerves of her companion, asked him to get a cab for her, Mr. Chervil's astonishment knew no bounds.

"I never thought how far it was," Lucy said,

faltering and apologetic. "I thought I might perhaps have been able to walk."

"Walk!" he cried, "from Park Lane?" with consternation. He stood looking after her as she drove away, saying to himself that the old man had undoubtedly been mad, and that this poor young thing was evidently cracked too. He thought it would be best to write to Sir Thomas, who was not Sir Tom to Mr. Chervil; but if it was going to happen that the poor young lady should show what he had no doubt was the hereditary weakness, Mr. Chervil could not restrain a devout wish that it might show itself decisively before half her fortune was alienated. No Sir Thomas in existence would carry out a father-in-law's will of such an insane character as that.

In the meanwhile Lucy jingled home in her cab, feeling more giddy, more heartsick than ever. There now came upon her with more potency than ever, since now it was the matter immediately before her, the question, what was she to do? What was she to do? She had eluded Sir Tom on the night before, and obliged him to accept, without any demand for explanation, her strange retirement. But now what was she to do? Little Tom would not answer for

a pretext again. She must either resume the former habits of her life, subdue herself entirely, meet him with a cheerful face, ignore the sudden chasm that had been made between them, or—— She looked with terrified eyes at this blank wall of impossibility, and could see no way through it. Live with him as of old, in a pretence of union where no union could be, or explain how it was that she could not do so. Both these things were impossible—impossible! —and what, then, was she to do?

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LITTLE HOUSE IN MAYFAIR.

THE little house in Mayfair was very bright and gay. What conventional words are those! It was nothing of the kind. It was dim and poetical. No light that could be kept out of it was permitted to come in. The quality of light in London, even in April, is not exquisite, and perhaps the Contessa's long curtains and all the delicate draperies which she loved to hang about her were more desirable to see than that very poor thing in the way of daylight which exists in Mayfair. Bice, who was a child of light, objected a little to this shutting out, and she would have objected strongly, being young enough to love the sunshine for itself, but for the exquisite reason which the Contessa gave for the interdict she had put upon it. "*Cara*," she said, "if you were all white and red like those English

girls (it is *tant soit peu* vulgar between ourselves, and not half so effective as your *blanc mat*), then you might have as much light as you pleased; but to put yourself in competition with them on their own ground—no, Bice mia. But in this light there is nothing to desire."

"Don't you think, then, Madama," said Bice, piqued, "that no light at all would be better still, and not to be seen the best——"

"Darling!" said the Contessa, with that smile which embodied so many things. It answered for encouragement and applause and gentle reproof, and many other matters which words could but indifferently say, and it was one of her favourite ways of turning aside a question to which she did not think fit to give any reply. And Bice swallowed her pique and asked no more. The lamps were all shaded like the windows in this bower of beauty. There was scarcely a corner that was not draped with some softly-falling, richly-tinted tissue. A delicate perfume breathed through this half-lighted world. Thus, though neither gay nor bright, it realised the effect which in our day, in the time when everything was different, was meant by these words. It was a place for pleasure, for intimate society, and conversation, and laughter, and wit;

for music and soft words; and, above all, for the setting off of beauty, and the expression of admiration. The chairs were soft, the carpets like moss; there were flowers everywhere betraying themselves by their odour, even when you could not see them. The Contessa had spared no expense in making the little place—which she laughed at softly, calling it her doll's house—as perfect as it could be made.

And here the two ladies began to live a life very different from that of the Randolphs' simple dwelling. Bice, it need scarcely be said, had fulfilled all the hopes of her patroness, else had she never been produced with such bewildering mystery, yet deftness, to dazzle the eyes of young Montjoie at the Hall. She had realised all the Contessa's expectations, and justified the bills which Madame di Forno-Populo looked upon with a certain complacency as they came in, as something creditable to her, as proof of her magnificence of mind and devotion to the best interests of her *protégée*. And now they had entered upon their campaign. It had annoyed her in this new beginning, amid all its excitements and hopes, to be called upon by Sir Tom for explanations which it was not to her interest to give; which she had, indeed, when she deliberately

sowed the seed of mystery, resolved not to give. To allow herself to be brought to book was not in her mind at all, and she was clever enough to mystify even Sir Tom, and to keep his mind in a suspense and uncertainty very painful to him. But she had managed to elude his inquiries, and though it had changed the demeanour of Sir Tom and entirely done away with the careless good humour which had been so pleasant, still she felt herself now independent of the Randolphs, and had begun her life very cheerfully and with every promise of great enjoyment. The Contessa "received" every day and all day long, from the time when she was visible, which was not, however, at a very early hour. About four, the day of the ladies began. Sometimes, indeed, before that hour two favoured persons, not always the same, who had accompanied them home from the Park, would be admitted to share a dainty little luncheon. Bice now rode at the hour when everybody rides, with the Contessa, who was a graceful horsewoman, and never looked to greater advantage than in the saddle. The two beautiful Italians, as they were called, had in this way, within a week of their arrival, caused a sensation in the Row, and already their days overflowed with amusement and society. Few

ladies visited the little house in Mayfair, but then they were not much wanted there. The Contessa was not one of those vulgar practitioners who profess in words their preference for men's society. But she said, so sweetly that it was barbarous to laugh (though many of her friends did so), that, having one close companion of her own sex, her dearest Bice, who was everything to her, she was independent of the feminine element. "And then they are so busy, these ladies of fashion; they have no leisure; they have so many things to do. It is a thraldom—a heavy thraldom—though the chains are gilded." "Shall we see you at Lady Blank Blank's to-night? You must be going to the Duchess's? Of course we shall meet at the Highton Grandmodes!" "Ah!" cried the Contessa, spreading out her white hands, "it is fatiguing even only to hear of it. We love our ease, Bice and I; we go nowhere where we are expected to go."

The gentlemen to whom this speech was made laughed "consumedly." They even made little signs to each other behind back, and exploded again. When she looked round at them they said the Contessa was a perfect mimic, better than anything on the stage, and that she had perfectly caught the tone of that old Lady Barbe

Montfichet, who went everywhere (whom, indeed, the Contessa did not know), and laughed again. But it was not at the Contessa's power of mimicry that they laughed. It was at the delicious falsehood of her pretensions, and the thought that if she pleased she might appear at the Highton Grandmodes, or meet the best society at Lady Blank Blank's. These gentlemen knew better; and it was a joke of which they never tired. They were not, perhaps, the most desirable class of people in society who had the *entrée* in the Contessa's little house; they were old acquaintances who had known her in her progress through the world, mingled with a few young men whom they brought with them, partly because the boys admired these two lovely foreign women; partly because, with a certain easy benevolence that cost them nothing, they wanted the Contessa's little girl, whoever she was, to have her chance. But few, if any, of these astute gentlemen, young or old, was in any doubt as to the position she held.

Nor was she altogether without female visitors. Lady Anastasia, that authority of the Press who made them publicly acquainted with the movements of distinguished strangers and was not afraid of compromising herself, sometimes made one at the little parties and enjoyed them much.

The Dowager Lady Randolph's card was left at the Contessa's door, as was that of the Duchess, who had looked upon her with such consternation at Lucy's party in the country. What these ladies meant it would be curious to know. Perhaps it was a lingering touch of kindness, perhaps a wish to save their credit in case it should happen by some bewildering turn of fortune that La Forno-Populo might come uppermost again. Would she dare to have herself put forward at the drawing-room was what these ladies asked each other with bated breath. It was possible, nay, quite likely, that she might succeed in doing so, for there were plenty of good-natured people who would not refuse if she asked them, and of course so close a scrutiny was not kept upon foreigners as upon native subjects, while, as a matter of fact, the Dowager Lady Randolph was right in her assertion that, so far as could be proved, there was nothing absolutely fatal to a woman's reputation in the history of the Contessa. Would she have the courage to dare that ordeal, or would she set up a standard of revolt and declare herself superior to that hall-mark of fashion? She was clever enough, all the people who knew her allowed, for either *rôle;* either to persuade some good woman, innocent and ignorant enough, to

be responsible for her, and elude the researches of the Lord Chamberlain, or else to retreat bravely in gay rebellion, and declare that she was not rich enough, nor her diamonds good enough, for that noonday display. For either part the Contessa was clever enough.

Meanwhile Bice had all the enjoyment without any of the drawbacks of this new life. It was far more luxurious, splendid, and even amusing, than the old existence of the watering-places. To ride in the Park and feel herself one of that brilliant crowd, to be surrounded by a succession of lively companions, to have always "something going on," that delight of youth, and a continual incense of admiration rising around her enough to have turned a less steady head, filled Bice's cup with happiness. But perhaps the most penetrating pleasure of all was that of having carried out the Contessa's expectations and fulfilled her hopes. Had not Madame di Forno-Populo been satisfied with the beauty of her charge none of these expenses would have been incurred, and this life of many delights would never have been; so that the soothing and exhilarating consciousness of having indeed deserved and earned her present well-being was in Bice's mind. The future, too, opened before her a horizon of bound-

less hope. To have everything she now had and more, along with that one element of happiness which had always been wanting, the certainty that it would last, was the happy prospect within her grasp. Her head was so steady, and the practical sense of the advantage so great, that the excitement and pleasure did not intoxicate her; but everything was delightful, novel, breathing confidence and hope. The guests at the table, where she now took her place equal in importance to the Contessa herself, all flattered and did their best to please her. They amused her, either because they were clever or because they were ridiculous. Bice, with youthful cynicism, did not much mind which it was. When they went to the opera, a similar crowd would flutter in and out of the box, and appear afterwards to share the gay little supper and declare that no *prime-donne* on the stage could equal the two lovely-blending voices of the Contessa and her ward. To sit late talking, laughing, singing, surrounded by all this worship, and to wake up again to a dozen plans and the same routine of pleasure next day, what heart of seventeen (and she was not quite seventeen) could resist it? One thing, however, Bice missed amid all this. It was the long gallery at the Hall, the nursery in Park

Lane, little Tom crowing upon her shoulder, digging his hands into her hair, and Lucy looking on—many things, yet one. She missed this, and laughed at herself, and said she was a fool—but missed it all the same. Lucy had come, as in duty bound, and paid her call. She had been very grave—not like herself. And Sir Tom was very grave; looking at her she could not tell how; no longer with his old easy good humour, with a look of criticism and anxiety—an uneasy look, as if he had something to say to her and could not. Bice felt instinctively that if he ever said that something it would be disagreeable, and avoided his presence. But it troubled her to lose this side of her landscape, so to speak. The new was entrancing, but the old was a loss. She missed it, and thought herself a fool for missing it, and laughed, but felt it the more.

The only member of the household with whom she remained on the same easy terms as before was Jock, who came to the house in Mayfair at hours when nobody else was admitted, though he was quite unaware of the privilege he possessed. He came in the morning when Bice, too young to want the renewal which the Contessa sought in bed and in the mysteries of the

toilette, sometimes fretted a little indoors at the impossibility of getting the air into her lungs, and feeling the warmth of the morning light. She was so glad to see him that Jock was deeply flattered, and sweet thoughts of the most boundless foolishness got into his head. Bice ran to her room, and found one of her old hats which she had worn in the country, and tied a veil over her face, and came flying downstairs like a bird.

"We may go out and run in the Park so long as no one sees us," she cried. "Oh, come; nobody can see me through this veil."

"And what good will the air do you through that veil?" said Jock contemptuously. "You can't see the sun through it; it makes the whole world black. I would not go out if I were you with that thing over my face—the only chance I had for a walk. I'd rather stay at home; but perhaps you like it. Girls are such——"

"What? You are going to swear, and if you swear I will simply turn my back. Well, perhaps you didn't mean it. But I mean it. Boys are such—— What? little prudes, like the old duennas in the books, and that is what you are. You think things are wrong that are not wrong. But it is to an Englishman the right

thing to grumble," Bice said, with a smile of reconciliation as they stepped into the street. On that sweet morning even the street was delightful. It restored them to perfect satisfaction with each other as they made their way to the Park, which stretched its long lines of waving grass almost within sight.

"And I suppose," said Jock, after a pause, "that you like being here?"

Bice gave him a look half friendly, half disdainful. "I like living," she said. "In the country, in what you call the quiet, it is only to be half alive; we are always living here. But you never come to see us ride, to be among the crowd. You are never at the opera. You don't talk as those others do——"

"Montjoie, for instance," said Jock, with a strange sense of jealousy and pain.

"Very well, Montjoie. He is what you call fun; he has always something to say—*bêtises*, perhaps, but what does that matter? He makes me laugh."

"Makes you laugh! at his wit perhaps?" cried Jock. "Oh, what things girls are! Laugh at what a duffer like that, an ass, a fellow that has not two ideas, says!"

"You have a great many ideas," said Bice;

"you are clever—you know a number of things; but you are not so amusing, and you are not so good-natured. You scold me; and you say another, a friend, is an ass——"

"He was never any friend of mine," said Jock, with a hot flush of anger. "That fellow! I never had anything to say to him."

"No," said Bice, with a smiling disdain which cut poor Jock like a knife. "I made a mistake, that was not possible, for he is a man and you are only a boy."

To describe Jock's feelings under this blow would be beyond the power of words. He inferior to Montjoie! he only a boy while the other was a man! Rage was nothing in such an emergency. He looked at her with eyes that were almost pathetic in their sense of unappreciated merit, and, deeper sting still, of folly preferred. In spite of himself, Locksley Hall and those musings which have become, by no fault of the poet's, the expression of a despair which is half ridiculous, came into his mind. He did not see the ridicule. "Having known me to decline"—his eyes became moist with a dew of pain—"If you think that," he said slowly, "Bice——"

Bice answered only with a laugh. "Let us make haste; let us run," she cried. "It is so

early, no one will see us. Why don't you ride?—it is like flying. And to run is next best." She stopped after a flight, swift as a bird, along an unfrequented path which lay still in the April sunshine, the lilac bushes standing up on each side all athrill and rustling with the spring, with eyes that shone like stars, and that unusual colour which made her radiant. Jock, though he could have gone on much faster, was behind her for the moment, and came up after her, more occupied by the shame of being outrun and laughed at than by admiration of the girl and her beauty. She was more conscious of her own splendour of bloom than he was: though Bice was not vain, and he was more occupied by the thought of her than by any other thought.

"Girls never think of being able to stay," he said, "you do only what can be done with a rush; but that's not running. If you had ever seen the School Mile——"

"Oh no, I want to see no miles," cried Bice; "this is what I like, to have all my fingers tingle." Then she suddenly calmed down in a moment, and walked along demurely as the paths widened out to a more frequented thoroughfare. "What I want," she said, "is little Tom upon my shoulder, and to hear him scream and hold by

my hair. Milady does not look as if I pleased her now. She has come once only and looked—not as she once looked. But she is still kind. She has made this ball for me—for me only. Did you know? Do you dance, then, if nothing else? Oh, you shall dance, since the ball is for me. I love dancing—to distraction; but not once have I had a single turn—not once—since we came to England," Bice said with a sigh, which rose into a laugh in another moment as she added, "It will be for me to come out, as you say, to be introduced into society; and after that we shall go everywhere, the Contessa says."

CHAPTER IX.

THE SIEGE OF LONDON.

THE Contessa, but perhaps not more than half, believed what she said. Everything was on the cards in this capricious society of England, which is not governed by the same absolute laws as in other places. It seemed to be quite possible that she and her charge might be asked everywhere after their appearance at the ball which, she should take care to tell everybody, Lucy was giving for Bice. It was always possible in England that some leader of fashion, some great lady, whose nod gave distinction, might take pity upon Bice's youth, and think it hard that she should suffer, even if without any relentings towards the Contessa. And Madame di Forno-Populo was very strong on the point, already mentioned, that there was nothing against her which could give any one a right

to shut her out. The mere suggestion that the doors of society might or could be closed in her face would have driven another woman into frantic indignation; but the Contessa had passed that stage. She took the matter quite reasonably, philosophically. There was no reason. She had been poor and put to many shifts. Sometimes she had been compelled to permit herself to be indebted to a man in a way no woman should allow herself to be. She was quite aware of this, and was not therefore angry with society for its reluctance to receive her; but she said to herself, with great energy, that there was no cause. She was not hopeless even of the drawing-room, nor of getting the Duchess herself, a model of all the virtues, to present her, if the ball went off well at Park Lane. She said to herself that there was nothing on her mind which would make her shrink from seeking admission to the presence of the Queen. She was not afraid even of that royal lady's penetrating eye. Shiftiness, poverty, debts, modes of getting money that were perhaps equivocal, help too lightly accepted—all these are bad enough, but they are not in a woman the unpardonable sin. And a caprice in English society was always possible. The young

beauty of Bice might attract the eye of some one whose notice would throw down all obstacles; or it might touch the heart of some woman who was so high placed as to be able to defy prejudice. And after that, of course, they would go everywhere, and every prognostication of success and triumph would come true.

Nevertheless, if things did not go on so well as this, the Contessa had furnished herself with what to say. She would tell Bice that the women were jealous, that she had been pursued by their hostility wherever she went, that a woman who secured the homage of men was always an object of their spite and malice, that it was a sort of persecution which the lovely had to bear from the unlovely in all regions. Knowing that it was fully more likely that she should fail than succeed, the Contessa had carefully provided herself with this ancient plea, and would not hesitate to use it if necessary; but these were *grands moyens*, not to be resorted to save in case of necessity. She would herself have been willing enough to dispense with recognition and live as she was doing now, among the old and new admirers who had never failed her, enjoying everything except those dull drawing-rooms and heavy parties for which her soul longed, yet which she despised

heartily, which she would have undergone any humiliation to get admission to, and turned to ridicule afterwards with the best grace in the world. She despised them, but there was nothing that could make up for absence from them; they alone had in their power the *cachet*, the symbol of universal acceptance. All these things depended upon the ball at Park Lane. Something had been going on there since she separated herself from that household which the Contessa did not understand. Sir Tom, indeed, was comprehensible. The discovery which he thought he had made, the things which she had allowed him to divine, and even permitted him to prove for himself without making a single assertion on her own part, were quite sufficient to account for his changed looks. But Lucy, what had she found out? It was not likely that Sir Tom had communicated his discovery to her. Lucy's demeanour confused the Contessa more than words can say. The simple creature had grown into a strange dignity, which nothing could explain. Instead of the sweet compliance and almost obedience of former days, the deference of the younger to the elder woman, Lucy looked at her with grave composure, as of an equal or superior. What had happened to the

girl? And it was so important that she should be friendly now and kept in good humour! Madame di Forno-Populo put forth all her attractions, gave her dear Lucy her sweetest looks and words, but made very little impression. This gave her a little tremor when she thought of it; for all her plans for the future were connected with the ball on the 26th at Park Lane.

This ball appeared to Lucy, too, the most important crisis in her life. She had made a sacrifice, which was heroic, that nothing might go wrong upon that day. Somehow or other, she could not tell how, for the struggle had been desperate within her, she had subdued the emotion in her own heart and schooled herself to an acceptance of the old routine of her life until that event should be over. All her calculations went to that date, but not beyond. Life seemed to stop short there. It had been arranged and settled with a light heart in the pleasure of knowing that the Contessa had taken a house for herself, and that consequently Lucy was henceforward to be once more mistress of her own. She had been so ashamed of her own pleasure in this prospect, so full of compunctions in respect to her guest, whose departure

made her happy, that she had thrown herself with enthusiasm into this expedient for making it up to them. She had said it was to be Bice's ball. When the Dowager's revelation came upon her like a thunderbolt, as soon as she was able to think at all, she had thought of this ball with a depth of emotion which was strange to be excited by so frivolous a matter. It was a pledge of the warmest friendship; but those for whom it was to be had turned out the enemies of her peace, the destroyers of her happiness: and it was high festival and gaiety, but her heart was breaking. Lady Randolph, afraid of what she had done, yet virulent against the Contessa, had suggested that it should be given up. It was easy to do such a thing—a few notes, a paragraph in the newspaper, a report of a cousin dead, or a sudden illness; any excuse would do. But Lucy was not to be so moved. There was in her soft bosom a sense of justice which was almost stern; and through all her troubles she remembered that Bice, at least, had a claim upon all Sir Thomas Randolph could do for her, such as nobody else could have. Under what roof but his should she make her first appearance in the world? Lucy held sternly with a mixture of

bitterness and tenderness to Bice's rights. In all this misery Bice was without blame, the only innocent person, the one most wronged, more wronged even than was Lucy herself. She it was who would have to bear the deepest stigma, without any fault of hers. Whatever could be done to advance her (as she counted advancement), to make her happy (as she reckoned happiness), it was right she should have it done. Lucy suppressed her own wretchedness heroically for this cause. She bore the confusion that had come into her life without saying a word for the sake of the other young creature who was her fellow-sufferer. How hard it was to do she could not have told; nor did any one suspect, except, vaguely, Sir Tom himself, who perceived some tragic mischief that was at work without knowing how it had come there or what it was. He tried to come to some explanation, but Lucy would have no explanation. She avoided him as much as it was possible to do. She had nothing to say when he questioned her. Till the 26th! Nothing, she was resolved, should interfere with that. And then—but not the baby in the nursery knew less than Lucy what was to happen then.

They had come to London on the 2d, so that

this day of fate was three weeks off, and during that time the Contessa had made no small progress in her affairs. Three weeks is a long time in a house which is open to visitors, even if only from four o'clock in the afternoon, every day, and without intermission; and indeed that was not the whole, for the ladies were accessible elsewhere than in the house in Mayfair. It had pleased the Contessa not to be visible when Lord Montjoie called at a somewhat early hour on the very earliest day. He was a young man who knew the world, and not one to have things made too easy for him. He was all aflame, accordingly, to gain the *entrée* thus withheld, and, when the Contessa appeared for the first time in the Park with her lovely companion, Montjoie was eagerly on the watch, and lost no time in claiming acquaintance and joining himself to her train. He was one of the two who were received to luncheon two or three days afterwards. When the ladies went to the opera he was on thorns till he could join them. He was allowed to go home with them for one song, and to come in next afternoon for a little music. And from that time forward there was no more question of shutting him out. He came and went almost when he pleased, as a young man

may be permitted to do when he has become one of the intimates in an easy-going, pleasure-loving household, where there is always "something going on." He was so little flattered that never during all these days and nights had he once been allowed to repeat the performance upon which he prided himself, and with which he had followed up the singing of the Contessa and Bice at the Hall. The admirable lady whom they had met there, with her two daughters, had been eager that Lord Montjoie should display this accomplishment of his, and the girls had been enchanted by his singing; but the Contessa, though not so irreproachable, would have none of it. And Bice laughed freely at the young nobleman who had so much to bestow, and they both threw at him delicate little shafts of wit, which never pierced his stolid complacency, though he was quite quick withal to see the fun when other gentlemen looked at each other over the Contessa's shoulder, and burst into little peals of laughter at her little speeches about the Highton Grandmodes and other such exclusive houses. Montjoie knew all about La Forno-Populo. "But yet that little Bice," he said, "don't you know." No one like her had come within Montjoie's ken.

He knew all about the girls in blue or in pink or in white who asked him to sing. But Bice, who laughed at his accomplishment and at himself, and was so saucy to him, and made fun of him, he allowed, to his face, that was very different. He described her in terms that were not chivalrous, and his own emotions in words still less ornate; but before the fortnight was over, the best judges declared among themselves that, by Jove, the Forno-Populo had done it this time, that the little one knew how to play her cards, that it was all up with Montjoie, poor little beggar, with other elegances of a similar kind. The man who had taken the Contessa's house for her, and a great deal of trouble about all her arrangements, whom she described as a very old friend, and whose rueful sense, that house-agents and livery stables might eventually look to him if she had no success in her enterprise, did not impair his fidelity, went so far as to speak seriously to Montjoie on the subject. "Look here, Mont," he said, "don't you think you are going it rather too strong? There is not a thing against the girl, who is as nice as a girl can be; but then the aunt, you know——"

"I am glad she is the aunt," said Montjoie.

"I thought she was the mother: and I always heard you were devoted to her."

"We are very old friends," said this disinterested adviser. "There's nothing I would not do for her. She is the best soul out, and was the loveliest woman, I can tell you—the girl is nothing to what she was. Aunt or cousin, I am not sure what is the relationship; but that's not the question. Don't you think you are coming it rather strong?"

"Oh, I've got my wits about me," said Montjoie; and then he added rather reluctantly—for it is the fashion of his kind to be vulgar, and to keep what generosity or nobleness there is in them carefully out of sight—"and I've no relations, don't you know. I've got no nobody to please but myself——"

"Well, that is a piece of luck, anyhow," the Mentor said. And he told the Contessa the gist of the conversation next morning, who was highly pleased by the news.

The curious point in all this was that Bice had not the least objection to Montjoie. She was a clever girl, and he was a stupid young man; but whether it was that her entirely unawakened heart had no share at all in the matter, or that her clear practical view of

affairs influenced her sentiments as well as her mind, it is certain that she was quite pleased with her fate, and ready to embrace it without the least sense that it was a sacrifice, or anything but the happiest thing possible. He amused her, as she had said to Jock. He made her laugh, most frequently at himself; but what did that matter? He had a kind of good looks, and that good nature which is the product of prosperity and well-being, and a sense of general superiority to the world. Perhaps the girl saw no man of a superior order to compare him with; but, as a matter of fact, she was perfectly satisfied with Montjoie. Mr. Derwentwater and Jock were more ridiculous to her than he was, and were less in harmony with everything she had previously known. Their work, their intellectual occupations, their cleverness and aspirations, were out of her world altogether. The young man-about-town, who had nothing to do but amuse himself, who was always "knocking about," as he said, whose business was pleasure, was the kind of being with whom she was acquainted. She had no understanding of the other kind. He who had been her comrade in the country, whose society had amused her there, and for whom she had a sort of half-condescending affection, was

droll to her beyond measure, with his ambitions and great ideas as to what he was to do. He, too, made her laugh; but not as Montjoie did. She laughed, though this would have immeasurably surprised Jock, with much less sympathy than she had with the other, upon whom he looked with so much contempt. They were both silly to Bice,—silly as, in her strange experience, she thought it usual and natural for men to be,—but Montjoie's manner of being silly was more congenial to her than the other. He was more in tune with the life she had known. Hamburg, Baden, Wiesbaden, and all the other Bads, even Monaco, would have suited Montjoie well enough. The trade of pleasure-making has its affinities like every other, and a tramp on his way from fair to fair is more *en rapport* with a duke than the world dreams of. Thus Bice found that the young English marquis, with more money than he knew how to spend, was far more like the elegant adventurer living on his wits than all those intervening classes of society, to whom life is a more serious and certainly a much less festive and costly affair. She understood him far better. And instead of being, as Lucy thought, a sacrifice, an unfortunate victim sold to a loveless marriage

for the money and the advantages it would bring, Bice went on very gaily, her heart as unmoved as possible, to what she felt to be a most congenial fate.

And they all waited for the 26th and the ball with growing excitement. It would decide many matters. It would settle what was to be the character of the Contessa's campaign. It might reintroduce her into society under better auspices than ever, or it might—but there was no need to foretell anything unpleasant. And very likely it would conclude at the same source as it began, Bice's triumph—a *débutante* who was already the affianced bride of the young Marquis of Montjoie, the greatest *parti* in the kingdom. The idea was like wine, and went to the Contessa's head.

She had in this interval of excitement a brief little note from Lucy, which startled her beyond measure for the moment. It was to ask the exact names of Bice. "You shall know in a few days why I ask, but it is necessary they should be written down in full and exactly," Lucy said. The Contessa had half forgotten, in the new flood of life about her, what was in Lucy's power, and the further advantage that might come of their relations; and she did not

think of this even now, but felt with momentary tremor as if some snare lay concealed under these simple words. After a moment's consideration, however, she wrote with a bold and flowing hand:

"SWEET LUCY—The child's name is Beatrice Ersilia. You cannot, I am sure, mean her anything but good by such a question. She has not been properly introduced, I know—I am fantastic, I loved the Bice, and no more.

"DARLING, A TE."

This was signed with a cipher, which it was not very easy to make out—a little mystery which pleased the Contessa. She thus involved in a pleasant little uncertainty her own name, which nobody knew.

CHAPTER X.

THE BALL.

LADY RANDOLPH'S ball was one of the first of the season, and as it was the first ball she had ever given, and both Lucy and her husband were favourites in society, it was looked forward to as the forerunner of much excitement and pleasure, and with a freshness of interest and anticipation which, unless in April, is scarcely to be expected in town. The rooms in Park Lane, though there was nothing specially exquisite or remarkable in their equipment, were handsome and convenient. They formed a good background for the people assembled under their many lights without withdrawing the attention of any one from the looks, the dresses, the bright eyes, and jewels collected within, which perhaps, after all, is an advantage in its way. And everybody who was in town

was there, from the Duchess, upon whom the Contessa had designs of so momentous a character, down to those wandering young men-about-town who form the rank and file of the great world and fill up all the corners. There was, it is true, not much room to dance, but a bewildering amount of people, great names, fine toilettes, and beautiful persons.

The Contessa timed her arrival at the most effective moment, when the rooms were almost full, but not yet crowded, and most of the more important guests had already arrived. It was just after the first greetings of people seeing each other for the first time were over, and an event of some kind was wanted. At such a moment princes and princesses are timed to arrive and bring the glory of the assembly to a climax. Lucy had no princess to honour her. But, when out of the crowd round the doorway there were seen to emerge two beautiful and stately women unknown, the sensation was almost as great. One of them, who had the air of a Queen-Mother, was in dark dress studiously arranged to be a little older, a little more massive and magnificent than a woman of the Contessa's age required to wear (and which, accordingly, threw up all the more, though this, to do her justice, was a coquetry

more or less unintentional, her unfaded beauty); and the other an impersonation of youth, contemplated the world by her side with that open-eyed and sovereign gaze, proud and modest, but without any of the shyness or timidity of a *débutante*, which becomes a young princess in her own right. There was a general thrill of wonder and admiration wherever they were seen. Who were they? everybody asked. Though the name of the Forno-Populo was too familiarly known to a section of society, that is not to say that the ladies of Lucy's party, or even all the men, had heard it bandied from mouth to mouth, or were aware that it had ever been received with less than respect: and the universal interest was spoiled only here and there in a corner by the laugh of the male gossips, who made little signs to each other, in token of knowing more than their neighbours. It was said among the more innocent that this was an Italian lady of distinction with her daughter or niece; and her appearance, if a little more marked and effective than an English lady's might have been, was thus fully explained and accounted for by the difference in manners, and that inalienable dramatic gift which, it is common to believe

in England, foreigners possess. No doubt their entrance was very dramatic. The way in which they contrasted and harmonised with each other was too studied for English traditions, which, in all circumstances, cling to something of the impromptu, an air of accidentalism. They were a spectacle in themselves as they advanced through the open central space, from which the ordinary guests instinctively withdrew to leave room for them. "Is it the Princess?" people asked, and craned their necks to see. It must at least be a German Serenity—the Margravine of Pimpernikēl, the Hereditary Princess of Weissnichtwo—but more beautiful and graceful than English prejudice expects German ladies to be. Ah, Italian! that explained everything—their height, their grace, their dark beauty, their effective pose. The Latin races alone know how to arrange a spectacle in that easy way, how to produce themselves so that nobody could be unimpressed. There was a dramatic pause before them, a hum of excitement after they had passed. Who were they? Evidently the most distinguished persons present—the guests of the evening. Sir Tom, uneasy enough, and looking grave and preoccupied, which was so far from being his usual aspect, led them into the great draw-

ing-room, where the Duchess, who had daughters who danced, had taken her place. He did not look as if he liked it, but the Contessa, for her part, looked round her with a radiant smile, and bowed very much as the Queen does in a state ceremonial to the people she knew. She performed a magnificent curtsey, half irony, half defiance, before the Dowager Lady Randolph, who looked on at this progress speechless. How Lucy could permit it, how Tom could have the assurance to do it, occupied the Dowager's thoughts. She had scarcely self-command to make a stiff sweep of recognition as the procession passed.

The Duchess was at the upper end of the room, with all her daughters about her. Besides the younger ones who danced, there were two countesses supporting their mother. She was the greatest lady present, and she felt the dignity. But when she perceived the little opening that took place among the groups about, and, looking up, perceived the Contessa sweeping along in that regal separation, you might have blown her Grace away with a breath. Not only was the Duchess the most important person in the room, but her reception of the new-comer would be final, a sort of social life or death for the Contessa. But the supplicant

approached with the air of a queen, while the arbiter of fate grew pale and trembled at the sight. If there was a tremor in her Grace's breast, there was no less a tremor under the Contessa's velvet. But Madame di Forno-Populo had this great advantage, that she knew precisely what to do, and the Duchess did not know: she was fully prepared, and the Duchess taken by surprise: and still more that her Grace was a shy woman, whose intellect, such as it was, moved slowly, while the Contessa was very clever, and as prompt as lightning. She perceived at a glance that the less time the great lady had to think the better, and hastened forward for a step or two, hurrying her stately pace, "Ah, Duchess!" she said, "how glad I am to meet so old an acquaintance. And I want, above all things, to have your patronage for my little one. Bice—the Duchess, an old friend of my prosperous days, permits me to present you to her." She drew her young companion forward as she spoke, while the Duchess faltered and stammered a "How d'ye do?" and looked in vain for succour to her daughters, who were looking on. Then Bice showed her blood. It had not been set down in the Contessa's programme what she was to do,

so that the action took her patroness by surprise, as well as the great lady whom it was so important to captivate. While the Duchess stood stiff and awkward, making a conventional curtsey against her will, and with a conventional smile on her mouth, Bice, with the air of a young princess, innocently, yet consciously superior to all her surroundings, suddenly stepped forward, and taking the Duchess's hand, bent her stately young head to kiss it. There was in the sudden movement that air of accident, of impulse, which we all love. It overcame all the tremors of the great lady. She said, "My dear!" in the excitement of the moment, and bent forward to kiss the cheek of this beautiful young creature, who was so deferential, so reverent in her young pride. And the Duchess's daughters did not disapprove! Still more wonderful than the effect on the Duchess was the effect upon these ladies, of whose criticisms their mother stood in dread. They drew close about the lovely stranger; and it immediately became apparent to the less important guests that the Italian ladies, the heroines of the evening, had amalgamated with the ducal party—as it was natural they should.

Never had there been a more complete triumph. The Contessa stepped in and made hay while the sun shone. She waved off with a scarcely perceptible movement of her hand several of her intimates who would have gathered round her, and vouchsafed only a careless word to Montjoie, who had hastened to present himself. The work to which she devoted herself was the amusement of the Duchess, who was not, to tell the truth, very easily amused. But Madame di Forno-Populo had infinite resources, and she succeeded. She selected the Dowager Lady Randolph for her butt, and made fun of her so completely that her Grace almost exceeded the bounds of decorum in her laughter.

"You must not, really; you must not—she is a great friend of mine," the Duchess said. But perhaps there was not much love between the two ladies. And thus by degrees the conversation was brought round to the Populina palace and the gay scenes so long ago.

"You must have heard of our ruin," the Contessa said, looking full into the Duchess's face; "everybody has heard of that. I have been too poor to live in my own house. We have wandered everywhere, Bice and I. When one is proud it is more easy to be poor away

from home. But we are in very high spirits to-day, the child and I," she added. "All can be put right again. My little niece has come into a fortune. She has made an inheritance. We received the news to-night only. That is how I have recovered my spirits—and to see you, Duchess, and renew the beautiful old times."

"Oh, indeed!" the Duchess said, which was not much; but then she was a woman of few words.

"Yes, we came to London very poor," said the Contessa. "What could I do? It was the moment to produce the little one. We have no Court. Could I seek for her the favour of the Piedmontese? Oh no; that was impossible. I said to myself she shall come to that generous England, and my old friends there will not refuse to take my Bice by the hand."

"Oh no; I am sure not," said the Duchess.

As for Bice, she had long ere now set off with Montjoie, who had hung round her from the moment of her entrance into the room, and whose admiration had grown to such a height by the cumulative force of everybody else's admiration swelling into it that he could scarcely keep within those bounds of compliment which are permitted to an adorer who has not yet acquired the right to be hyperbolical.

"Oh yes, it's pretty enough; but you don't see half how pretty it is, for you can't see yourself, don't you know," said this not altogether maladroit young practitioner. Bice gave him a smile like one of the Contessa's smiles, which said everything that was needful without giving her any trouble. But now that the effect of her entrance was attained, and all that dramatic business done with, the girl's soul was set upon enjoyment. She loved dancing as she loved every other form of rapid movement. The only drawback was that there was so little room. "Why do they make the rooms so small?" she said pathetically; a speech which was repeated from mouth to mouth like a witticism, as something so characteristic of the young Italian, whose marble halls would never be overcrowded; though, as a matter of fact, Bice knew very little of marble halls.

"Were you ever in the gallery at the Hall?" she asked. "To go from one end to the other, that was worth the while. It was as if one flew."

"I never knew they danced down there," said Montjoie. "I thought it very dull, don't you know, till you appeared. If I had known you had dances, and fun going on, and other fellows cutting one out——"

"There was but one other fellow," said Bice gravely. "I have seen in this country no one like him. Ah, why is he not here? He is more fun than any one, but better than fun. He is——"

Montjoie's countenance was like a thunder-cloud big with fire and flame.

"Trevor, I suppose you mean. I never thought that duffer could dance. He was a great sap at school, and a hideous little prig, giving himself such airs! But if you think all that of him——"

"It was not Mr. Trevor," said Bice. Then catching sight of Lady Randolph at a little distance, she made a dart towards her on her partner's arm.

"I am telling Lord Montjoie of my partner at the Hall," she said. "Ah, Milady, let him come and look! How he would clap his hands to see the lights and the flowers! But we could not have our gymnastique with all the people here."

Lucy was very pale; standing alone, abstracted amid the gay crowd, as if she did not very well know where she was.

"Baby? Oh, he is quite well, he is fast asleep," she said, looking up with dim eyes.

And then there broke forth a little faint smile on her face. "You were always good to him," she said.

"So it was the baby," said Montjoie, delighted. "What a one you are to frighten a fellow! If it had been Trevor I think I'd have killed him. How jolly of you to do gymnastics with that little beggar; he's dreadfully delicate, ain't he, not likely to live? But you're awfully cruel to me. You think no more of giving a wring to my heart than if it was a bit of rag. I think you'd like to see the blood come."

"Let us dance," said Bice with great composure. She was bent upon enjoyment. She had not calculated upon any conversation. Indeed, she objected to conversation on this point even when it did not interfere with the waltz. All could be settled much more easily by the Contessa, and if marriage was to be the end, that was a matter of business not adapted for a ball-room. She would not allow herself to be led away to the conservatory or any other retired nook such as Montjoie felt he must find for this affecting purpose. Bice did not want to be proposed to. She wanted to dance. She abandoned him for other partners without the slightest evidence of regret. She even accepted, when he

was just about to seize upon her at the end of a dance, Mr. Derwentwater, preferring to dance the Lancers with him to the bliss of sitting out with Lord Montjoie. That forsaken one gazed at her with a consternation beyond words. To leave him and the proposal that was on his very lips for a square dance with a tutor! The young Marquis gazed after her, as she disappeared, with a certain awe. It could not be that she preferred Derwentwater. It must be her cleverness which he could not fathom, and some wonderful new system of Italian subtlety to draw a fellow on.

"I like it better than standing still—I like it —enough," said Bice. "To dance, that is always something." Mr. Derwentwater also felt, like Lord Montjoie, that the young lady gave but little importance to her partner.

"You like the rhythm, the measure, the woven paces, and the waving hands," her companion said.

Bice stared at him a little, not comprehending. "But you prefer," he continued, "like most ladies, the modern Bacchic dance, the whirl, the round, though what the old Puritans call promiscuous dancing of men and women together was not, I fear, Greek——"

"I know nothing of the Greeks," said Bice.

"Vienna is the best place for the valse, but Greek—no, we never were there."

"I am thinking of classic terms," said MTutor, with a smile, but he liked her all the better for not knowing. "We have in vases and in sculpture the most exquisite examples. You have never perhaps given your attention to ancient art? I cannot quite agree with Mr. Alma Tadema on that point. He is a great artist, but I don't think the wild leap of his dances is sanctioned by anything we possess."

"Do not take wild leaps," said Bice, "but keep time. That is all you require in a quadrille. Why does every one laugh and go wrong? But it is a shame! One should not dance if one will not take the trouble. And why does *he* not do anything?" she said, in the pause between two figures, suddenly coming in sight of Jock, who stood against the wall in their sight, following her about with eyes over which his brows were curved heavily; "he does not dance nor ride, he only looks on."

"He reads," said Mr. Derwentwater. "The boy will be a great scholar if he keeps it up."

"One cannot read in society," said Bice. "Now, you must remember, you go *that* way; you do not come after me."

"I should prefer to come after you. That is the heavenly way when one can follow such a leader. You remember what your own Dante——"

"Oh!" murmured Bice, with a long sigh of impatience, "I have no Dante. I have a partner who will not give himself the pains—Now," she said, with an emphatic little pat of her foot and movement of her hands. Her soul was in the dance, though it was only the Lancers. With a slight line of annoyance upon her forehead she watched his performance, taking upon herself the responsibility, pushing him by his elbow when he went wrong, or leading him in the right way. Mr. Derwentwater had thought to carry off his mistakes with a laugh, but this was not Bice's way of thinking. She made him a little speech when the dance was over.

"I think you are a great scholar too," she said; "but it will be well that you should not come forward again with a lady to dance the Lancers, for you cannot do it. And that will sometimes make a girl to have the air of being also awkward, which is not just."

Mr. Derwentwater grew very red while this speech was making to him. He was a man of great and varied attainments, and had any one

told him that he would blush about so trivial a matter as a Lancers——! But he grew very red and almost stammered as he said with humility, "I am afraid I am very deficient, but with you to guide me—Signorina, there is one divine hour which I never forget—when you sang that evening. May I call? May I see you for half an hour to-morrow?"

"Oh," said Bice, with a deep-drawn breath, "here is some one else coming who does not dance very well! Talk to him about the Greek, and Lord Montjoie will take me. To-morrow! oh yes, with pleasure," she said as she took Montjoie's arm and darted away into the crowd. Montjoie was all glowing and radiant with pride and joy.

"I thought I'd hang off and on and take my chance, don't you know. I thought you'd soon get sick of that sort. You and I go together like two birds. I have been watching you all this time, you and old Derwentwater. What was that he said about to-morrow? I want to talk about to-morrow too—unless, indeed, to-night——"

"Oh, Lord Montjoie," cried Bice, "dance! It was not to talk you came here, and you can dance better than you talk," she added, with

that candour which distinguished her. And Montjoie flew away with her rushing and whirling. He could dance. It was almost his only accomplishment.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BALL CONTINUED.

OTHER eyes than those of her lovers followed Bice through this brilliant scene. Sir Tom had been living a strange stagnant life since that day before he left the Hall, when Lucy, innocently talking of Bice's English parentage, had suddenly roused him to the question—Who was Bice, and who her parents, English or otherwise? The suggestion was very sudden and very simple, conveying in it no intended hint or innuendo. But it came upon Sir Tom like a sudden thunderbolt, or rather like the firing of some train that had been laid and prepared for explosion. The tenor of his fears and suspicions has already been indicated. Nor has it ever been concealed from the reader of this history that there were incidents in Sir Tom's life upon which he did not look back with satisfaction, and which it

would have grieved him much to have revealed to his wife in her simplicity and unsuspecting trust in him. One of these was a chapter of existence so long past as to be almost forgotten, yet unforgetable, which gave, when he thought of it, an instant meaning to the fact that a half-Italian girl of English parentage on one side should have been brought mysteriously, without warning or formal introduction, to his house by the Contessa. From that time, as has been already said, the disturbance in his mind was great. He could get no satisfaction one way or another. But to-night his uneasiness had taken a new and unexpected form. Should it so happen that Bice's identity with a certain poor baby, born in Tuscany seventeen years before, might some day be proved, what new cares, what new charge might it not place upon his shoulders? At such a thought Sir Tom held his very breath.

The first result of such a possibility was that he might find himself to stand in a relationship to the girl for whom he had hitherto had a careless liking and no more, which would change both his life and hers; and already he watched her with uneasy eyes and with a desire to interfere which bewildered him like a new light upon

his own character. He could scarcely understand how he had taken it all so lightly before, and interested himself so little in the fate of a young creature for whom it would not be well to be brought up according to the Contessa's canons, and follow her example in the world. He remembered, in the light of this new possibility, the levity with which he had received his wife's distress about Bice, and how lightly he had laughed at Lucy's horror as to the Contessa's ideas of marriage, and of what her *protégée* was to do. He had said if they could catch any decent fellow with money enough it was the best thing that could happen to the girl, and that Bice would be no worse off than others, and that she herself, after the training she had gone through, was very little likely to have any delicacy on the subject. But when it had once occurred to him that the girl of whom he spoke so lightly might be his own child, an extraordinary change came over Sir Tom's views. He laughed no longer—he became so uneasy lest something should be done or said to affect Bice's good name, or throw her into evil hands, that his thoughts had circled unquietly round the house in Mayfair, and he had spent far more of his time there on the watch than he himself

thought right. He knew very well the explanation that would be given of those visits of his, and he did not feel sure that some good-natured friends might not have already suggested suspicion to Lucy, who had certainly been very strange since their arrival in town. But he would not give up his watch, which was in a way, he said to himself, his duty, if—— He followed the girl's movements with disturbed attention, and would hurry into the Park to ride by her, to shut out an unsuitable cavalier, and make little lectures to her as to her behaviour with an embarrassed anxiety which Bice could not understand, but which amused more than it benefited the Contessa, to whom this result of her mystification was the best fun in the world. But it was not amusing to Sir Tom. He regarded the society of men who gathered about the ladies with disgust. Montjoie was about the best—he was not old enough to be much more than silly—but even Montjoie was not a person whom he would himself choose to be closely connected with. Then came the question: If it should turn out that she was *that* child, was it expedient that any one should know of it? Would it be better for her to be known as Sir Thomas Randolph's daughter, even illegiti-

mate, or as the relative and dependent of the Forno-Populo? In the one case, her interests would have no guardian at all; in the other, what a shock it would give to his now-established respectability and the confidence all men had in him, to make such a connection known! Turning over everything in his thoughts, it even occurred to Sir Tom that it would be better for him to confess an early secret marriage, and thus save his own reputation and give to Bice a lawful standing ground. The poor young mother was dead long ago; there could be no harm in such an invention. Lucy could not be wounded by anything which happened so long before he ever saw her. And Bice would be saved from all stigma; if only it was Bice! if only he could be sure!

But Sir Tom, whose countenance had not the habit of expressing anything but a large and humorous content, the careless philosophy of a happy temper and easy mind, was changed beyond description by the surging up of such thoughts. He became jealous and suspicious, watching Bice with a constant impulse to interfere, and even—while disregarding all the safeguards of his own domestic happiness for this reason—in his heart condemned the girl because

she was not like Lucy, and followed her movements with a criticism which was as severe as that of the harshest moralist.

Nobody in that lighthearted house could understand what had come over the good Sir Tom, not even the Contessa, who after a manner knew the reason, yet never imagined that the idea, which gave her a sort of malicious pleasure, would have led to such a result. Sir Tom had always been the most genial of hosts, but in his present state of mind even in this respect he was not himself. He kept his eye on Bice with a sternness of regard quite out of keeping with his character. If she should flirt unduly, if she began to show any of those arts which made the Contessa so fascinating, he felt, with a mingling of self-ridicule which tickled him in spite of his seriousness, that nothing could keep him from interposing. He had been charmed in spite of himself, even while he saw through and laughed at the Contessa's cunning ways; but to see them in a girl who might, for all he knew, have his own blood in her veins was a very different matter. He felt it was in him to interpose roughly, imperiously—and if he did so, would Bice care? She would turn upon him with smiling defiance, or perhaps ask what right

had he to meddle in her affairs. Thus Sir Tom was so preoccupied that the change in Lucy, the effort she made to go through her necessary duties, the blotting out of all her simple kindness and brightness, affected him only dully as an element of the general confusion, and nothing more.

But the Contessa, for her part, was radiant. She was victorious all along the line. She had received Lucy's note informing her of the provision she meant to make for Bice only that afternoon, and her heart was dancing with the sense of wealth, of money to spend and endless capability of pleasure. Whatever happened this was secure, and she had already in the first hour planned new outlays which would make Lucy's beneficence very little of a permanent advantage. But she said nothing of it to Bice, who might (who could tell, girls being at all times capricious) take into her little head that it was no longer necessary to encourage Montjoie, on whom at present she looked complacently enough as the probable giver of all that was best in life. This was almost enough for one day; but the Contessa fully believed in the proverb that there is nothing that succeeds like success, and had faith in her own fortunate star for the other events of the evening. And she had been

splendidly successful. She had altogether vanquished the timid spirit of the Duchess, that model of propriety. Her entry upon the London world had been triumphant, and she had all but achieved the honours of the drawing-room. Unless the Lord Chamberlain should interfere—and why should he interfere?—her appearance in the larger world of society would be as triumphant as in Park Lane. Her beautiful eyes were swimming in light, the glow of satisfaction and triumph. It fatigued her a little indeed to play the part of a virtuous chaperon, and stand or sit in one place all the evening, awaiting her *débutante* between the dances, talking with the other virtuous ladies in the same exercise of patience, and smilingly keeping aloof from all participation at first hand in the scene which would have helped to amuse her indeed, but interfered with the fulfilment of her *rôle*. But she had internal happiness enough to make up to her for her self-denial. She would order that set of pearls for Bice and the emerald pendant for herself which had tempted her so much, to-morrow. And the Duchess was to present her, and probably this evening Montjoie would propose. Was it possible to expect in this world a more perfect combination of successes?

Mr. Derwentwater went off somewhat discomfited to make a tour of the rooms after the remorseless address of Bice. He tried to smile at the mock severity of her judgment. He, no more than Montjoie, would believe that she meant only what she said. This accomplished man of letters and parts agreed, if in nothing else, in this, with the young fool of quality, that such extreme candour and plain speaking was some subtle Italian way of drawing an admirer on. He put it into finer words than Montjoie could command, and said to himself that it was that mysterious adorable feminine instinct which attracted by seeming to repel. And even on a more simple explanation it was comprehensible enough. A girl who attached so much importance to the accomplishments of society would naturally be annoyed by the failure in these of one to whom she looked up. A regret even moved his mind that he had not given more attention to them in earlier days. It was perhaps foolish to neglect our acquirements, which, after all, would not take very much trouble, and need only be brought forward, as Dogberry says, when there was no need for such vanities. He determined, with a little blush at himself, to note closely how other men did, and so be able

another time to acquit himself to her satisfaction. And even her severity was sweet; it implied that he was not to her what other men were, that even in the more trifling accessories of knowledge she would have him to excel. If he had been quite indifferent to her, why should she have taken this trouble? And then that "To-morrow; with pleasure." What did it mean? That though she would not give him her attention to-night, being devoted to her dancing (which is what girls are brought up to in this strangely imperfect system), she would do so on the earliest possible occasion. He went about the room like a man in a dream, following everywhere with his eyes that vision of beauty, and looking forward to the next step in his life-drama with an intoxication of hope which he did not attempt to subdue. He was indeed pleased to experience a *grande passion.* It was a thing which completed the mental equipment of a man. Love—not humdrum household affection, such as is all that is looked for when the exigencies of life make a wife expedient, and with full calculation of all he requires the man sets out to look for her and marry her. This was very different, an all-mastering passion, disdainful of every obstacle. To-morrow! He felt an internal con-

viction that though Montjoie might dance and answer for the amusement of an evening that bright and peerless creature would not hesitate as to who should be her guide for life.

It was while he was thus roaming about in a state of great excitement and a subdued ecstasy of anticipation, that he encountered Jock, who had not been enjoying himself at all. At this great entertainment Jock had been considered a boy, and no more. Even as a boy, had he danced there might have been some notice taken of him, but he was incapable in this way, and in no other could he secure any attention. At a party of a graver kind there were often people who were well enough pleased to talk to Jock, and from men who owed allegiance to his school a boy who had distinguished himself and done credit to the old place was always sure of notice. But then, though high up in sixth form, and capable of any eminence in Greek verse, he was nobody; while a fellow like Montjoie, who had never got beyond the rank of lower boy, was in the front of affairs, the admired of all admirers, Bice's chosen partner and companion. The mind develops with a bound when it has gone through such an experience. Jock stood with his back against the wall, and watched everything from

under his eyebrows. Sometimes there was a glimmer as of moisture in those eyes, half veiled under eyelids heavily curved and puckered with wrath and pain, for he was very young, not much more than a child, notwithstanding his manhood. But what with a keenness of natural sight, and what with the bitter enlightening medium of that moisture, Jock saw the reality of the scene more clearly than Mr. Derwentwater, roaming about in his dream of anticipation, self-deceived, was capable of doing. He caught sight of Jock in his progress, and, though it was this sentiment which had separated them, its natural effect was also to throw them together. MTutor paused and took up a position by his pupil's side. "What a foolish scene considered philosophically," he said; "and yet how many human interests in solution, and floating adumbrations of human fate! I have been dancing," Mr. Derwentwater continued with some solemnity and a full sense of the superior position involved, "with, I verily believe, the most beautiful creature in the world."

Jock looked up, fixing him with a critical, slightly cynical regard. He had been well aware of Mr. Derwentwater's very ineffective performance, and divined too clearly the sentiments of

Bice not to feel all a spectator's derision for this uncalled-for self-complacency; but he made no remark.

"There is nothing trivial in the exercise in such a combination. I incline to think that beauty is almost the greatest of all the spectacles that Nature sets before us. The effect she has upon us is greater than that produced by any other influence. You are perhaps too young to have your mind awakened on such a subject——"

To hear this foolish wisdom pouring forth, while the listener felt at every breath how his own bosom thrilled with an emotion too deep to be put into words, with a passion, hopeless, ridiculous, to which no one would accord any sympathy or comment but a laugh! Heaven and earth! and all because a fellow was some dozen years older, thinking himself a man, and you only a boy!

"—— but you have a fine intelligence, and it can never be amiss for you to approach a great subject on its most elevated side. She is not much older than you are, Jock."

"She is not so old as I am. She is three months younger than I am," cried Jock in his gruffest voice.

"And yet she is a revelation," said Mr. Derwentwater. "I feel that I am on the eve of a great crisis in my being. You have always been my favourite, my friend, though you are so much younger; and in this I feel we are more than ever sympathetic. Jock, to-morrow—to-morrow I am to see her, to tell her—— Come out on the balcony, there is no one there, and the moonlight and the pure air of night are more fit for such heart opening than this crowded scene."

"What are you going to tell her?" said Jock, with his eyebrows meeting over his eyes and his back against the wall. "If you think she'll listen to what you tell her! She likes Montjoie. It is not that he's rich and that, but she likes him, don't you know, better than any of us. Oh, talk about mysteries," cried Jock, turning his head away, conscious of that moisture which half-blinded him, but which he could not get rid of, "how can you account for that? She likes him, that fellow, better than either you or me!"

Better than Jock; far better than this man, his impersonation of noble manhood, whom the most levelling of all emotions, the more than Red Republican Love, had suddenly brought

down to, nay below, Jock's level—for not only was he a fool like Jock, but a hopeful fool, while Jock had penetrated the fulness of despair, and dismissed all illusion from his youthful bosom. The boy turned his head away, and the voice which he had made so gruff quavered at the end. He felt in himself at that moment all the depths of profound and visionary passion, something more than any man ever was conscious of who had an object and a hope. The boy had neither; he neither hoped to marry her nor to get a hearing, nor even to be taken seriously. Not even the remorse of a serious passion rejected, the pain of self-reproach, the afterthought of pity and tenderness would be his. He would get a laugh, nothing more. That schoolboy, that brother of Lady Randolph's, who does not leave school for a year! He knew what everybody would say. And yet he loved her better than any one of them! MTutor, startled, touched, went after him as Jock turned away, and linking his arm in his said something of the kind which one would naturally say to a boy. "My dear fellow, you don't mean to tell me—— Come, Jock! This is but your imagination that beguiles you. The heart has not learned to speak so soon," MTutor said, leaning upon Jock's

shoulder. The boy turned upon him with a fiery glow in his eyes.

"What were you saying about dancing?" he said. "They seem to be making up that Lancers business again."

CHAPTER XII.

NEXT MORNING.

"You have news to tell me, Bice mia?"

There was a faint daylight in the streets, a blueness of dawn as the ladies drove home.

"Have I? I have amused myself very much. I am not fatigued; no. I could continue as long —as long as you please," Bice answered, who was sitting up in her corner with more bloom than at the beginning of the evening, her eyes shining, a creature incapable of fatigue. The Contessa lay back in hers, with a languor which was rather adapted to her *rôle* as a chaperon than rendered necessary by the fatigue she felt. If she had not been amused, she was triumphant, and this supplied a still more intoxicating exhilaration than that of mere pleasure.

"Darling!" she said in her most expressive tone. She added a few moments after, "But

Lord Montjoie! He has spoken? I read it in his face——"

"Spoken? He said a great deal—some things that made me laugh, some things that were not amusing. After all he is perhaps a little stupid, but to dance there is no one like him!"

"And you go together—to perfection——"

"Ah!" said Bice, with a long breath of pleasure, "when the people began to go away, when there was room! Certainly we deserted our other partners, both he and I. Does that matter in London? He says no."

"Not, my angel, if you are to marry."

"That was what he said," said Bice with superb calm. "Now I remember that was what he said; but I answered that I knew nothing of affairs—that it was to dance I wanted, not to talk; and that it was you, Madama, who disposed of me. It seemed to amuse him," the girl said reflectively. "Is it for that reason you kiss me? But it was he that spoke, as you call it, not I."

"You are like a little savage," cried the Contessa. "Don't you care, then, to make the greatest marriage, to win the prize, to settle everything with no trouble, before you are presented or anything has been done at all?"

"Is it settled, then?" said Bice. She shrugged her shoulders a little within her white cloak. "Is that all?—no more excitement, nothing to look forward to, no tr-rouble? But it would have been more amusing if there had been a great deal of tr-rouble," the girl said.

This was in the blue dawn, when the better portion of the world which does not go to balls was fast asleep, the first pioneers of day only beginning to stir about the silent streets, through which now and then the carriage of late revellers like themselves darted abrupt with a clang that had in it something of almost guilt. Twelve hours after, the Contessa in her boudoir—with not much more than light enough to see the flushed and happy countenance of young Montjoie, who had been on thorns all the night and morning with a horrible doubt in his mind lest, after all, Bice's careless reply might mean nothing more than that fine system of drawing a fellow on—settled everything in the most delightful way.

"Nor is she without a sou, as perhaps you think. She has something that will not bear comparison with your wealth, yet something—which has been settled upon her by a relation. The Forno-Populi are not rich—but neither are they without friends."

Montjoie listened to this with a little surprise and impatience. He scarcely believed it, for one thing; and when he was assured that all was right as to Bice herself, he cared but little for the Forno-Populi. "I don't know anything about the sous. I have plenty for both," he said, "that had a great deal better go to you, don't you know. She is all I want. Bice! oh, that's too foreign. I shall call her Bee, for she must be English, don't you know, Countess, none of your Bohem—Oh, I don't mean that; none of your foreign ways. They draw a fellow on, but when it's all settled and we're married and that sort of thing, she'll have to be out and out English, don't you know."

"But that is reasonable," said the Contessa, who could, when it was necessary, reply very distinctly. "When one has a great English name and a position to keep up, one must be English. You shall call her what you please."

"There's one thing more," Montjoie said, with a little redness and hesitation, but a certain dogged air, with which the Contessa had not as yet made acquaintance. "It's best to understand each other, don't you know; it's sort of hard-hearted to take her right away. But, Countess, you're a woman of the world, and

you know a fellow must start fair. You keep all those sous you were talking of, and just let us knock along our own way. I don't want the money, and I daresay you'll find a use for it. And let's start fair; it'll be better for all parties, don't you know," the young man said. He reddened, but he met the Contessa's eye unflinchingly, though the effort to respond to this distinct statement in the spirit in which it was made cost her a struggle. She stared at him for a moment across the dainty little table laden with knick-knacks. It was strange in the moment of victory to receive such a sudden decisive defeat. There was just a possibility for a moment that this brave spirit should own itself mere woman, and break down and cry. For one second there was a quiver on her lip; then she smiled, which for every purpose was the better way.

"You would like," she said, "to see Bice. She is in the little drawing-room. The lawyers will settle the rest; but I understand your suggestion, Lord Montjoie." She rose with all her natural stately grace, which made the ordinary young fellow feel very small in spite of himself. The smile she gave him had something in it that made his knees knock together.

"I hope," he said, faltering, "you don't

mind, Countess. My people, though I've not got any people to speak of, might make themselves disagreeable about — don't you know. You—you're a woman of the world."

The Contessa smiled upon him once more with dazzling sweetness. "She is in the little drawing-room," she said.

And so it was concluded, the excitement, the tr-rouble, as Bice said; it would have been far more amusing if there had been a great deal more tr-rouble. The Contessa dropped down in the corner of the sofa from which she had risen. She closed her eyes for the moment, and swallowed the affront that had been put upon her, and what was worse than the affront, the blow at her heart which this trifling little lord had delivered without flinching. This was to be the end of her schemes, that she was to be separated summarily and remorselessly from the child she had brought up. The Contessa knew, being of the same order of being, that, already somewhat disappointed to find the ardour of the chase over and all the excitement of bringing down the quarry, Bice, who cared little more about Montjoie than about any other likely person, would be as ready as not to throw him off if she were to communicate rashly the conditions on which he insisted. But,

though she was of the same order of being, the Contessa was older and wiser. She had gone through a great many experiences. She knew that rich young English peers, marquises, uncontrolled by any parent or guardians, were fruit that did not grow on every bush, and that if this tide of fortune was not taken at its flood there was no telling when another might come. Now, though Bice was so dear, the Contessa had still a great many resources of her own, and was neither old nor tired of life. She would make herself a new career even without Bice, in which there might still be much interest—especially with the aid of a settled income. The careless speech about the sous was not without an eloquence of its own. Sous make everything that is disagreeable less disagreeable, and everything that is pleasant more pleasant. And she had got her triumph. She had secured for her Bice a splendid lot. She had accomplished what she had vowed to do, which many scoffers had thought she would never do. She was about to be presented at the English Court, and all her soils and spots from the world cleared from her, and herself rehabilitated wherever she might go. Was it reasonable, then, to break her heart over Montjoie and his miserable conditions?

He could not separate Bice's love from her, though he might separate their lives—and that about the sous was generous. She was not one who would have sold her affections or given up anybody whom she loved for money. But still there were many things to be said, and for Bice's advantage what would she not do? The Contessa ended by a resolution which many a better woman would not have had the courage to make. She buried Montjoie's condition in her own heart—never to hint its existence—to ignore it as if it had not been. Many a more satisfactory person would have flinched at this. Most of us would at least have allowed the object of our sacrifice to be aware what we were doing for them. The Contessa did not even, so far as this, yield to the temptation of fate.

In the meantime Bice had gone through her own little episode. Mr. Derwentwater came about noon, before the Contessa was up; but he did not know the Contessa's habits, and he was admitted, which neither Montjoie nor any of the Contessa's friends would have been. He was overjoyed to find the lady of his affections alone. This made everything, he thought, simple and easy for him, and filled him with a delightful confidence that she was prepared for the object

of his visit, and had contrived to keep the Contessa out of the way. His heart was beating high, his mind full of excitement. He took the chair she pointed him to, and then got up again, poising his hat between his hands.

"Signorina," he said, "they say that a woman always knows the impression she has made."

"Why do you call me Signorina?" said Bice. "Yes, it is quite right. But then it is so long that I have not heard it, and it is only you that call me so."

"Perhaps," said Mr. Derwentwater, with a little natural complacency, "others are not so well acquainted with your beautiful country and language. What should I call you? Ah, I know what I should like to call you. *Beatrice, loda di deo vera.* You are like the supreme and sovran lady whom every one must think of who hears your name."

Bice looked at him with a half-comic attention. "You are a very learned man," she said, "one can see that. You always say something that is pretty, that one does not understand."

This piqued the suitor a little and brought the colour to his cheek. "Teach me," he said, "to make you understand me. If I could show you my heart, you would see that from the first

moment I saw you the name of Bice has been written——"

"Oh, I know it already," cried Bice, "that you have a great devotion for poetry. Unhappily I have no education. I know it so very little. But I have found out what you mean about Bice. It is more soft than you say it. There is no sound of *tch* in it at all. Beeshè—like that. Your Italian is very good," she added, "but it is Tuscan, and the *bocca romana* is the best."

Mr. Derwentwater was more put out than it became a philosopher to be. "I came," he cried with a kind of asperity, "for a very different purpose, not to be corrected in my Italian. I came——" but here his feelings were too strong for him, "to lay my life and my heart at your feet. Do you understand me now? To tell you that I love you—no, that is not enough, it is not love, it is adoration," he said. "I have never known what it meant before. However fair women might be, I have passed them by; my heart has never spoken. But now! Since the first moment I saw you, Bice——"

The girl rose up; she became a little alarmed. Emotion was strange to her, and she shrank from it. "I have given," she said, "to nobody permission to call me by my name."

"But you will give it to me! to your true lover," he cried. "No one can admire and adore you as much as I do. It was from the first moment. Bice, oh listen! I have nothing to offer you but love, the devotion of a life. What could a king give more? A true man cannot think of anything else when he is speaking to the woman he loves. Nothing else is worthy to offer you. Bice, I love you! I love you! Have you nothing, nothing in return to say to me?"

All his self-importance and intellectual superiority had abandoned him. He was so much agitated that he saw her but dimly through the mists of excitement and passion. He stretched out his hands appealing to her. He might have been on his knees for anything he knew. It seemed incredible to him that his strong passion should have no return.

"Have you nothing, nothing to say to me?" he cried.

Bice had been frightened, but she had regained her composure. She looked on at this strange exhibition of feeling with the wondering calm of extreme youth. She was touched a little, but more surprised than anything else. She said, with a slight tremor, "I think it

must be all a mistake. One is never so serious —oh, never so serious! It is not something of —gravity like that. Did not you know? I am intended to make a marriage—to marry well, very well—what you call a great marriage. It is for that I am brought here. The Contessa would never listen—Oh, it is a mistake altogether—a mistake! You do not know what is my career. It has all been thought of since I was born. Pray, pray, go away, and do not say any more."

"Bice," he cried, more earnestly than ever, "I know. I heard that you were to be sacrificed. Who is the lady who is going to sacrifice you to Mammon? she is not your mother; you owe her no obedience. It is your happiness, not hers, that is at stake. And I will preserve you from her. I will guard you like my own soul; the winds of heaven shall not visit your cheek roughly. I will cherish you; I will adore you. Come, only come to me."

His voice was husky with emotion; his last words were scarcely audible, said within his breath in a high strain of passion which had got beyond his control. The contrast between this tremendous force of feeling and her absolute youthful calm was beyond description. It was

more wonderful than anything ever represented on the tragic stage. Only in the depth and mystery of human experience could such a wonderful juxtaposition be.

"Mr. Derwentwater," she said, trembling a little, "I cannot understand you. Go away, oh go away!"

"Bice!"

"Go away, oh, go away! I am not able to bear it; no one is ever so serious. I am not great enough, nor old enough. Don't you know," cried Bice, with a little stamp of her foot, "I like the other way best? Oh, go away, go away!"

He stood quiet, silently gazing at her till he had regained his power of speech, which was not for a moment or two. Then he said hoarsely, "You like—the other way best?"

She clasped her hands together with a mingling of impatience and wonder and rising anger. "I am made like that," she cried. "I don't know how to be so serious. Oh, go away from me. You tr-rouble me. I like the other best."

He never knew how he got out of the strange unnatural atmosphere of the house, in which he seemed to leave his heart behind him. The per-

fumes, the curtains, the half lights, the blending draperies, were round him one moment; the next he found himself in the greenness of the Park, with the breeze blowing in his face, and his dream ended and done with.

He had a kind of vision of having touched the girl's reluctant hand, and even of having seen a frightened look in her eyes as if he had awakened some echo or touched some string whose sound was new to her. But if that were so, it was not he, but only some discovery of unknown feeling that moved her. When he came to himself he felt that all the innocent morning people in the Park, the children with their maids, the sick ladies and old men sunning themselves on the benches, the people going about their honest business, cast wondering looks at his pale face and the agitation of his aspect. He took a long walk, he did not know how long, with that strange sense that something capital had happened to him, something never to be got over or altered, which follows such an incident in life. He was even conscious by and by, habit coming to his aid, of a curious question in his mind if this was how people usually felt after such a wonderful incident — a thing that had happened quite without demonstration, which

nobody could ever know of, yet which made as much change in him as if he had been sentenced to death. Sentenced to death!—that was what it felt like more or less. It had happened, and could never be undone, and he walked away and away, but never got beyond it, with the chain always round his neck. When he got into the streets where nobody took any notice of him, it struck him with surprise, almost offence. Was it possible that they did not see that something had happened—a mystery, something that would never be shaken off but with life?

He met Jock as he walked, and without stopping gave him a sort of ghastly smile and said, "You were right; she likes that best," and went on again, with a sense that he might go on for ever like the wandering Jew and never get beyond the wonder and the pain.

And there is no doubt that Bice was glad to hear Montjoie's laugh and the nonsense he talked, and to throw off that sudden impression which had frightened her. What was it? Something which was in life, but which she had not met with before. "We are to have it all our own way, don't you know," Montjoie said. "I have no people, to call people, and she is not going to interfere. We shall have it all our own way, and

have a good time, as the Yankees say. And I am not going to call you Bice, which is a silly sort of name, and spells quite different from its pronunciation. What are you holding back for? You have no call to be shy with me now. Bee, you belong to me now, don't you know," the young fellow said, with demonstrations from which Bice shrunk a little. She liked, yes, his way; but, but yet — she was perhaps a little savage, as the Contessa said.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LAST BLOW.

Lucy stood out stoutly to the last gasp. She did not betray herself, except by the paleness, the seriousness which she could not banish from her countenance. Her guests thought that Lady Randolph must be ill, that she was disguising a bad headache, or even something more serious, under the smile with which she received them. "I am sure you ought to be in bed," the elder ladies said, and when they took their leave of her, after their congratulations as to the success of the evening, they all repeated this in various tones. "I am sure you are quite worn out; I shall send in the morning to ask how you are," the Duchess said. Lucy listened to everything with a smile which was somewhat set and painful. She was so worn out with emotion and pain that at last neither words nor looks made much impression upon her. She saw the Contessa and Bice stream

by to their carriage with a circle of attendants, still in all the dazzle and flash of their triumph; and after that the less important crowd, the insignificant people who lingered to the last, the girls who would not give up a last waltz, and the men who returned for a final supper, swam in her dazed eyes. She stood at the door mechanically shaking hands and saying "Good-night." The Dowager, moved by curiosity, anxiety, perhaps by pity, kept by her till a late hour, though Lucy was scarcely aware of it. When she went away at last, she repeated with earnestness and a certain compunction the advice of the other ladies. "You don't look fit to stand," she said. "If you will go to bed I will wait till all these tiresome people are gone. You have been doing too much—far too much." "It does not matter," Lucy said, in her semi-consciousness hearing her own voice like something in a dream. "Oh, my dear, I am quite unhappy about you!" Lady Randolph cried. "If you are thinking of what I told you, Lucy, perhaps it may not be true." There was a bevy of people going away at that moment, and she had to shake hands with them. She waited till they were gone and then turned, with a laugh that frightened the old lady, towards her.

"You should have thought of that before,"

she said. Perhaps it might not be true! Can heaven be veiled and the pillars of the earth pulled down by a perhaps? The laugh sounded even to herself unnatural, and the elder Lady Randolph was frightened by it, and stole away almost without another word. When everybody was gone Sir Tom stood by her in the deserted rooms, with all the lights blazing and the blue day coming in through the curtains, as grave and as pale as she was. They did not look like the exhausted yet happy entertainers of the (as yet) most successful party of the season. Lucy could scarcely stand and could not speak at all, and he seemed little more fit for those mutual congratulations, even the "Thank heaven it is well over" with which the master and the mistress of the house usually salute each other in such circumstances. They stood at different ends of the room, and made no remark. At last, "I suppose you are going to bed," Sir Tom said. He came up to her in a preoccupied way. "I shall go and smoke a cigar first, and it does not seem much good lighting a candle for you." They both looked somewhat drearily at the daylight, now no longer blue, but rosy. Then he laid his hand upon her shoulder. "You are dreadfully tired, Lucy, and I think there has been something the

matter with you these few days. I'd ask you what it was, but I'm dead beat, and you are dreadfully tired too." He stopped and kissed her forehead, and took her hand in his in a sort of languid way. "Good-night; go to bed, my poor little woman," he said.

It is terrible to be wroth with those we love. Anger against them is deadly to ourselves. It "works like madness in the brain;" it involves heaven and earth in a gloom that nothing can lighten. But when that anger, being just and such as we must not depart from, is crossed by those unspeakable relentings, those quick revivals of love, those sudden touches of tenderness that carry all before them, what anguish is equal to those bitter sweetnesses? Lucy felt this as she stood there with her husband's hand upon her shoulder, in utter fatigue, and broken down in all her faculties. Through all those dark and bitter mists which rose about her, his voice broke like a ray of light: her timid heart sprang up in her bosom and went out to him with an *abandon* which, but for the extreme physical fatigue which produces a sort of apathy, must have broken down everything. For a moment she swayed towards him as if she would have thrown herself upon his breast.

When this movement comes to both the estranged persons, there follows a clearing away of difficulties, a revolution of the heart, a reconciliation when that is possible, and sometimes when it is not possible. But it very seldom happens that this comes to both at the same time. Sir Tom remained unmoved while his wife had that sudden access of reawakened tenderness. He was scarcely aware even how far she had been from him, and now was quite unaware how near. His mind was full of cares and doubts, and an embarrassing situation which he could not see how to manage. He was not even aware that she was moved beyond the common. He took his hand from her shoulder, and without another word let her go away.

Oh, those other words that are never spoken! They are counterbalanced in the record of human misfortune by the many other words which are too much, which should never have been spoken at all. Thus all explanation, all ending of the desperate situation, was staved off for another night.

Lucy woke next morning in a kind of desperation. No new event had happened, but she could not rest. She felt that she must do something or die, and what could she do? She spent

the early morning in the nursery, and then went out. This time she was reasonable, not like that former time when she went out to the city. She knew very well now that nothing was to be gained by walking or by jolting in a disagreeable cab. On the former occasion that had been something of a relief to her; but not now. It is scarcely so bad when some out-of-the-way proceeding like this, some strange thing to be done, gives the hurt and wounded spirit a little relief. She had come to the further stage now when she knew that nothing of the sort could give any relief; nothing but mere dull endurance, going on, and no more. She drove to Mr. Chervil's office quietly, as she might have gone anywhere, and thus, though it seems strange to say so, betrayed a deeper despair than before. She took with her a list of names with sums written opposite. There was enough there put down to make away with a large fortune. This one so much, that one so much. This too was an impulse of the despair in her mind. She was carrying out her father's will in a lump. It meant no exercise of discrimination, no careful choice of persons to be benefited, such as he had intended, but only a hurried rush at a duty which she had neglected, a desire to be done with

it. Lucy was on the eve, she felt, of some great change in her life. She could not tell what she might be able to do after; whether she should live through it or bring her mind and memory unimpaired through it, or think any longer of anything that had once been her duty. She would get it done while she could. She was very sensible that the money she had given to Bice was not in accordance with what her father would have wished: neither were these perhaps. She could not tell—she did not care. At least it would be done with, and could not be done over again.

"Lady Randolph," said Mr. Chervil in dismay, "have you any idea of the sum you are —throwing away?"

"I have no idea of any sum," said Lucy gently, "except just the money I spend, so much in my purse. But you have taught me how to calculate, and that so much would—make people comfortable. Is not that what you said? Well, if it was not you, it was—I do not remember. When I first got the charge of this into my hands——"

"Lady Randolph, you cannot surely think what you are doing. At the worst," said the distressed trustee, "this was meant to be a

fund for—beneficence all your life: not to be squandered away, thousands and thousands in a day——"

"Is it squandered when it gives comfort—perhaps even happiness? And how do you know how long my life may last? It may be over—in a day——"

"You are ill," said the lawyer. "I thought so the moment I saw you. I felt sure you were not up to business to-day."

"I don't think I am ill," said Lucy; "a little tired, for I was late last night; did not you know we had a ball—a very pretty ball?" she added, with a curious smile, half of gratification, half of mockery. "It was a strange thing to have, perhaps, just—at this moment."

"A very natural thing," said Mr. Chervil. "I am glad to know it; you are so young, Lady Randolph, pardon me for saying so."

"It was not for me," said Lucy; "it was for a young lady—my husband's——"

Was she going out of her senses? What was she about to say?

"A relation?" said Mr. Chervil. "Perhaps the young lady for whom you interested yourself so much in a more important way? They are fortunate, Lady Randolph, who have you for a friend."

"Do you think so? I don't know that any one thinks so." She recovered herself a little and pointed to the papers. "You will carry that out, please. I may be going away. I am not quite sure of my movements. As soon as you can you will carry this out."

"Going away — at the beginning of the season!"

"Oh, there is nothing settled; and, besides, you know life—life is very insecure."

"At your age it is very seldom one thinks so," said the lawyer, at which she smiled only, then rose up, and without any further remark went away. He saw her to her carriage, not now with any recollection of the pleasant show and the exhibition of so fine a client to the admiration of his neighbours. He had a heart after all, and daughters of his own; and he was troubled more than he could say. He stood bare-headed and saw her drive away, with a look of anxiety upon his face. Was it the same bee in her bonnet which old Trevor had shown so conspicuously? was it eccentricity verging upon madness? He went back to his office and wrote to Sir Tom, enclosing a copy of Lucy's list. "I must ask your advice in the matter instead of offering you mine," he wrote. "Lady Randolph

has a right, of course, if she chooses, to press matters to an extremity, but I can't fancy that this is right."

Lucy went home still in the same strange excitement of mind. All had been executed that was in her programme. She had gone through it without flinching. The ball—that strange frivolous-tragic effort of despair—it was over, thank heaven! and Bice had got full justice in her—was it in her—father's house? She could not have been introduced to greater advantage, Lucy thought with a certain forlorn simple pride, had she been Sir Tom's acknowledged daughter. Oh, not to so much advantage; for the Contessa, her guardian, her —— was far more skilful than Lucy ever could have been. Bice had got her triumph; nothing had been neglected. And the other business was in train—the disposing of the money. She had made her wishes fully known, and even taken great trouble, calculating and transcribing to prevent any possibility of a mistake. And now, now the moment had come, the crisis of life when she must tell her husband what she had heard, and say to him that this existence could not go on any longer. A man could not have two lives. She did not mean to upbraid him. What good would it do

to upbraid?—none, none at all; that would not make things as they were again, or return to her him whom she had lost. She had not a word to say to him, except that it was impossible —that it could not go on any more.

To think that she should have this to say to him made everything dark about her as Lucy went home. She felt as if the world must come to an end to-night. All was straightforward now that the need of self-restraint was over. She contemplated no delay or withdrawal from her position. She went in to accomplish this dark and miserable necessity like a martyr going to the cross. She would go and see baby first, who was his boy as well as hers. Sir Tom, no doubt, would be in his library, and would come out for luncheon after a while, but not until she had spoken. But first she would go, just for a little needful strength, and kiss her boy.

Fletcher met her at the head of the stairs.

"Oh, if you please, my lady—not to hurry you or frighten you—but nurse says please would you step in and look at baby."

Suddenly, in a moment, Lucy's whole being changed. She forgot everything. Her languor disappeared, and her fatigue. She sprang up to where the woman was standing. "What is

it? is he ill? Is it the old——" She hurried along towards the nursery as she spoke.

"No, my lady, nothing he has had before; but nurse thinks be looks—oh, my lady, there will be nothing to be frightened about—we have sent for the doctor."

Lucy was in the room where little Tom was before Fletcher had finished what she was saying. The child was seated on his nurse's knee. His eyes were heavy, yet blazing with fever. He was plucking with his little hot hands at the woman's dress, flinging himself about her, from one arm, from one side to the other. When he saw his mother he stretched out towards her. Just eighteen months old; not able to express a thought; not much, you will say, perhaps, to change to a woman the aspect of heaven and earth. She took him into her arms without a word, and laid her cheek—which was so cool, fresh with the morning air, though her heart was so fevered and sick—against the little cheek, which burned and glowed. "What is it? Can you tell what it is?" she said in a whisper of awe. Was it God Himself who had stepped in—who had come to interfere?

Then the baby began to wail with that cry of inarticulate suffering which is the most pitiful

of all the utterances of humanity. He could not tell what ailed him. He looked with his great dazed eyes pitifully from one to another as if asking them to help him.

"It is the fever, my lady," said the nurse. "We have sent for the doctor. It may not be a bad attack."

Lucy sat down, her limbs failing her, her heart failing her still more, her bonnet and outdoor dress cumbering her movements, the child tossing and restless in her arms. This was not the form his ailments had ever taken before. "Do you know what is to be done? Tell me what to do for him," she said.

There was a kind of hush over all the house. The servants would not admit that anything was wrong until their mistress should come home. As soon as she was in the nursery and fully aware of the state of affairs, they left off their precautions. The maids appeared on the staircases clandestinely as they ought not to have done. Mrs. Freshwater herself abandoned her cosy closet, and declared in an impressive voice that no bell must be rung for luncheon—nor anything done that could possibly disturb the blessed baby, she said as she gave the order. And Williams desired to know what was pre-

paring for Mr. Randolph's dinner, and announced his intention of taking it up himself. The other meal, the lunch, in the dining-room, was of no importance to any one. If he could take his beef-tea it would do him good, they all said.

It seemed as if a long time passed before the doctor came; from Sir Tom to the youngest kitchen-wench, the scullery-maid, all were in suspense. There was but one breath, long drawn and stifled, when he came into the house. He was a long time in the nursery, and when he came out he went on talking to those who accompanied him. "You had better shut off this part of the house altogether," he was saying, "hang a sheet over this doorway, and let it be always kept wet. I will send in a person I can rely upon to take the night. You must not let Lady Randolph sit up." He repeated the same caution to Sir Tom, who came out with a bewildered air to hear what he had said. Sir Tom was the only one who had taken no fright. "Highly infectious," the doctor said. "I advise you to send away every one who is not wanted. If Lady Randolph could be kept out of the room, so much the better, but I don't suppose that is possible; anyhow, don't let her sit up. She is just in the condition to take it.

It would be better if you did not go near the child yourself; but, of course, I understand how difficult that is. Parents are a nuisance in such cases," the doctor said, with a smile which Sir Tom thought heartless, though it was intended to cheer him. "It is far better to give the little patient over to scientific unemotional care."

"But you don't mean to say that there is danger, Doctor?" cried Sir Tom. "Why, the little beggar was as jolly as possible only this morning."

"Oh, we'll pull him through—we'll pull him through," the good-natured doctor said. He preferred to talk all the time, not to be asked questions; for what could he say? Nurse looked very awful as she went upstairs, charged with private information almost too important for any woman to contain. She stopped at the head of the stairs to whisper to Fletcher, shaking her head the while, and Fletcher too shook her head and whispered to Mrs. Freshwater that the doctor had a very bad opinion of the case. Poor little Tom had got to be "the case" all in a moment. And "no constitution" they said to each other under their breath.

Thus the door closed upon Lucy and all her

trouble. She forgot it clean, as if it never had existed. Everything in the world in one moment became utterly unimportant to her, except the fever in those heavy eyes. She reflected dimly, with an awful sense of having forestalled fate, that she had made a pretence that he was ill to shield herself that night, the first night after their arrival. She had said he was ill when all was well. And lo! sudden punishment, scathing and terrible, had come to her out of the angry skies.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE EXPERIENCES OF BICE.

Sir Tom was concerned and anxious, but not alarmed like the women. After all, it was a complaint of which children recovered every day. It had nothing to do with the child's lungs, which had been enfeebled by his former illness. He had as good a chance as any other in the present malady. Sir Tom was much depressed for an hour or two, but when everything was done that could be done, and an experienced woman arrived to whom the "case," though "anxious," as she said, did not appear immediately alarming, he forced his mind to check that depression, and to return to the cares which, if less grave, harassed and worried him more. Lucy was invisible all day. She spoke to him through the closed door from behind the curtain, but in a voice which he could scarcely hear, and

which had no tone of individuality in it, but only a faint human sound of distress. "He is no better. They say we cannot expect him to be better," she said. "Come down, dear, and have some dinner," said the round and large voice of Sir Tom, which even into that stillness brought a certain cheer. But as it sounded into the shut-up room, where nobody ventured to speak above their breath, it was like a bell pealing or a discharge of artillery, something that broke up the quiet, and made, or so the poor mother thought, the little patient start in his uneasy bed. Dinner! oh, how could he ask it—how could he think of it? Sir Tom went away with a sigh of mingled uneasiness and impatience. He had always thought Lucy a happy exception to the caprices and vagaries of womankind. He had hoped that she was without nerves, as she had certainly been without those whims that amuse a man in other people's wives but disgust him in his own. Was she going to turn out just like the rest, with extravagant terrors, humours, fancies—like all of them? Why should not she come to dinner, and why speak to him only from behind the closed door? He was annoyed and almost angry with Lucy. There had been something the

matter, he reflected, for some time. She had taken offence at something; but surely the appearance of a real trouble might at least have made an end of that. He felt vexed and impatient as he sat down with Jock alone. "You will have to get out of this, my boy," he said, "or they won't let you go back to school; don't you know it's catching?" To have infection in one's house, and to be considered dangerous by one's friends, is always irritating. Sir Tom spoke with a laugh, but it was a laugh of offence. "I ought to have thought of it sooner," he said; "you can't go straight to school, you know, from a house with fever in it. You must pack up and get off at once."

"I am not afraid," cried Jock. "Do you think I am such a cad as to leave Lucy when she's in trouble? or—or—the little one either?" Jock added in a husky voice.

"We are all cads in that respect nowadays," said Sir Tom. "It is the right thing. It is high principle. Men will elbow off and keep me at a distance, and not a soul will come near Lucy. Well, I suppose, it's all right. But there is some reason in it, so far as you are concerned. Come, you must be off to-night. Get hold of MTutor, he's still in town, and ask him what you must do."

After dinner Sir Tom strolled forth. He did not mean to go out, but the house was intolerable, and he was very uneasy on the subject of Bice. It felt, indeed, something like a treason to Lucy, shut up in the child's sick-room, to go to the house which somehow or other was felt to be in opposition, and dimly suspected as the occasion of her changed looks and ways. He did not even say to himself that he meant to go there. And it was not any charm in the Contessa that drew him. It was that uneasy sense of a possibility which involved responsibility, and which probably he would never either make sure of or get rid of. The little house in Mayfair was lighted from garret to basement. If the lights were dim inside they looked bright without. It had the air of a house overflowing with life, every room with its sign of occupation. When he got in, the first sight he saw was Montjoie striding across the doorway of the small dining-room. Montjoie was very much at home, puffing his cigarette at the new-comer. "Hallo, St. John!" he cried; then added with a tone of disappointment, "Oh! it's you."

"It is I, I'm sorry to say, as you don't seem to like it," said Sir Tom.

The young fellow looked a little abashed.

"I expected another fellow. That's not to say I ain't glad to see you. Come in and have a glass of wine."

"Thank you," said Sir Tom. "I suppose, as you are smoking, the ladies are upstairs."

"Oh, they don't mind," said Montjoie; "at least the Contessa, don't you know. She's up to a cigarette herself. I shouldn't stand it," he added after a moment, "in—Mademoiselle. Oh, perhaps you haven't heard. She and I—have fixed it all up, don't you know."

"Fixed it all up?"

"Engaged, and that sort of thing. I'm a kind of boss in this house now. I thought, perhaps, that was why you were coming, to hear all about it, don't you know."

"Engaged!" cried Sir Tom, with a surprise in which there was no qualification. He felt disposed to catch the young fellow by the throat and pitch him out of doors.

"You don't seem over and above pleased," said Montjoie, throwing away his cigarette, and confronting Sir Tom with a flush of defiance. They stood looking at each other for a moment, while Antonio, in the background, watched at the foot of the stairs, not without hopes of a disturbance.

"I don't suppose that my pleasure or displeasure matters much; but you will pardon me if I pass, for my visit was to the Contessa," Sir Tom said, going on quickly. He was in an irritable state of mind to begin with. He thought he ought to have been consulted, even as an old friend, much more as—— And the young ass was offensive. If it turned out that Sir Tom had anything to do with it Montjoie should find that to be the best *parti* of the season was not a thing that would infallibly recommend him to a father at least. The Contessa had risen from her chair at the sound of the voices. She came forward to Sir Tom with both her hands extended as he entered the drawing-room. "Dear old friend! congratulate me. I have accomplished all I wished," she said.

"That was Montjoie," said Sir Tom. He laughed, but not with his usual laugh. "No great ambition, I am afraid. But," he said, pressing those delicate hands, not as they were used to be pressed, with a hard seriousness and imperativeness, "you must tell me! I must have an explanation. There can be no delay or quibbling longer."

"You hurt me, sir," she said, with a little

cry, and looked at her hands, "body and mind," she added, with one of her smiles. "Quibbling —that is one of your English words a woman cannot be expected to understand. Come then with me, barbarian, into my boudoir."

Bice sat alone, somewhat pensively, with one of those favourite Tauchnitz volumes from which she had obtained her knowledge of English life in her hand. It was contraband, which made it all the dearer to her. She was not reading, but leaning her chin against it lost in thought. She was not pining for the presence of Montjoie, but rather glad, after a long afternoon of him, that he should prefer a cigarette to her company. She felt that this was precisely her own case, the cigarette being represented by the book or any other expedient that answered to cover the process of thought.

Bice was not used to these processes. Keen observation of the ways of mankind in all the strange exhibitions of them which she had seen in her life had been the chief exercise of her lively intelligence. To Mr. Derwentwater perhaps may be given the credit of having roused the girl's mind, not indeed to sympathy with himself but into a kind of perturbation and general commotion of spirit. Events were

crowding quickly upon her. She had accepted one suitor and refused another within the course of a few hours. Such incidents develop the being; not, perhaps, the first in any great degree —but the second was not in the programme, and it had perplexed and roused her. There had come into her mind glimmerings, reflections, she could not tell what. Montjoie was occupied in something of the same manner downstairs, thinking it all over with his cigarette, wondering what Society and what his uncle would say, for whom he had a certain respect. He said to himself on the whole that he did not care that for Society! She suited him down to the ground. She was the jolliest girl he had ever met, besides being so awfully handsome. It was worth while going out riding with her just to see how the fellows stared and the women grew green with envy; or coming into a room with her, Jove! what a sensation she would make, and how everybody would open their eyes when she appeared blazing in the Montjoie diamonds! His satisfaction went a little deeper than this, to do him justice. He was, in his way, very much in love with the beautiful creature whom he had made up his mind to secure from the first moment he saw her. But, perhaps, if it had not been for the

triumph of her appearance at Park Lane, and the hum of admiration and wonder that rose around her, he would not have so early fixed his fate; and the shadow of the uncle now and then came like a cloud over his glee. After the sudden gravity with which he remembered this, there suddenly gleamed upon him a vision of all his plain cousins gathering round his bride to scowl her down and blast her with criticism and disapproval, which made him burst into a fit of laughter. Bice would hold her own; she would give as good as she got. She was not one to be cowed or put down, wasn't Bee! He felt himself clapping his hands and urging her on to the combat, and celebrated in advance with a shout of laughter the discomfiture of all those young ladies. But she should have nothing more to do with the Forno-Populo. No; his wife should have none of that sort about her. What did old Randolph mean always hanging about that old woman, and all the rest of the old fogeys? It was fun enough so long as you had nothing to do with them, but, by Jove! not for Lady Montjoie. Then he rushed upstairs to shower a few rough caresses upon Bice and take his leave of her, for he had an evening engagement formed before he was aware of the change which was

coming in his life. He had been about her all the afternoon, and Bice, disturbed in her musings by this onslaught, and somewhat impatient of the caresses, beheld his departure with satisfaction. It was the first evening since their arrival in town which the ladies had planned to spend alone.

And then she recommenced these thinkings which were not so easy as those of her lover; but she was soon subject to another inroad of a very different kind. Jock, who had never before come in the evening, appeared suddenly unannounced at the door of the room with a pale and heavy countenance. Though Bice had objected to be disturbed by her lover, she did not object to Jock; he harmonised with the state of her mind, which Montjoie did not. It seemed even to relieve her of the necessity of thinking when he appeared—he who did thinking enough, she felt, with half-conscious humour, for any number of people. He came in with a sort of eagerness, yet weariness, and explained that he had come to say good-bye, for he was going off—at once.

"Going off! but it is not time yet," Bice said.

"Because of the fever. But that is not altogether why I have come either," he said,

looking at her from under his curved eyebrows. "I have got something to say."

"What fever?" she said, sitting upright in her chair.

Jock took no notice of the question; his mind was full of his own purpose. "Look here," he said huskily, "I know you'll never speak to me again. But there's something I want to say. We've been friends——"

"Oh yes," she said, raising her head with a gleam of frank and cordial pleasure, "good friends—*camarades*—and I shall always, always speak to you. You were my first friend."

"That is," said Jock, taking no notice, "you were—friends. I can't tell what I was. I don't know. It's something very droll. You would laugh, I suppose. But that's not to the purpose either. You wouldn't have Derwentwater to-day."

Bice looked up with a half laugh. She began to consider him closely with her clear-sighted penetrating eyes, and the agitation under which Jock was labouring impressed the girl's quick mind. She watched every change of his face with a surprised interest, but she did not make any reply.

"I never expected you would. I could have

told him so. I did tell him you liked the other best. They say that's common with women," Jock said with a little awe, "when they have the choice offered, that it is always the worst they take."

But still Bice did not reply. It was a sort of carrying out, without any responsibility of hers, the vague wonder and questionings of her own mind. She had no responsibility in what Jock said. She could even question and combat it cheerfully now that it was presented to her from outside, but for the moment she said nothing to help him on, and he did not seem to require it, though he paused from time to time.

"This is what I've got to say," Jock went on almost fiercely. "If you take Montjoie, it's a mistake. He looks good-natured and all that; he looks easy to get on with. You hear me out, and then I'll go away and never trouble you again. He is not—a nice fellow. If you were to go and do such a thing as—marry him, and then find it out! I want you to know. Perhaps you think it's mean of me to say so, like sneaking, and perhaps it is. But, look here, I can't help it. Of course you would laugh at me—any one would. I'm a boy at school. I know that as well as you do——" Something got into Jock's

voice so that he paused, and made a gulp before he could go on. "But, Bice, don't have that fellow. There are such lots; don't have *him*. I don't think I could stand it," Jock cried. "And look here, if it's because the Contessa wants money, I have some myself. What do I want with money? When I am older I shall work. There it is for you, if you like. But don't have that fellow. Have a good fellow; there are plenty—there are fellows like Sir Tom. He is a good man. I should not," said Jock, with a sort of sob, which came in spite of himself, and which he did not remark even, so strong was the passion in him. "I should not—mind. I could put up with it then. So would Derwentwater. But, Bice——"

She had risen up, and so had he. They were neither of them aware of it. Jock had lost consciousness, perception, all thought of anything but her and this that he was urging upon her. While as for Bice the tide had gone too high over her head. She felt giddy in the presence of something so much more powerful than any feeling she had ever known, and yet gazed at him half alarmed, half troubled as she was, with a perception that could not be anything but humorous, of the boy's voice sounding so bass and

deep, sometimes bursting into childish, womanish treble, and the boy's aspect which contrasted so strongly with the passion in which he spoke. When Sir Tom's voice made itself audible, coming from the boudoir in conversation with the Contessa, the effect upon the two thus standing in a sort of mortal encounter was extraordinary. Bice, straining up to the mark which he was setting before her, bewildered with the flood on which she was rising, sank into ease again and a mastery of the situation; while Jock, worn out, and with a sense that all was over, sat down abruptly, and left, as it were, the stage clear.

"The poor little man is rather bad, I fear," said Sir Tom, coming through the dim room. There was something in his voice, an easier tone, a sound of relief. How had the Contessa succeeded in cheering him? "And what is worse (for he will do well, I hope) is the scattering of all her friends from about Lucy. I am kept out of it, and it does not matter, you see; but she, poor little woman"—his voice softened as he named her with a tone of tenderness—"nobody will go near her," he said.

The Contessa gave a little shiver, and drew about her the loose shawl she wore. "What can we say in such a case? It is not for us, it

is for those around us. It is a risk for so many——"

"My aunt," said Sir Tom, "would be her natural ally; but I know Lady Randolph too well to think of that. And there is Jock, whom we are compelled to send away. We shall be like two crows all alone in the house."

"Is it this you told me of—fever?" cried Bice, turning to Jock. "But it is I that will go —oh, this moment! It is no tr-rouble. I can sit up. I never am sleepy. I am so strong, nothing hurts me. I will go directly—now."

"You!" they all cried, but the Contessa's tones were most high. She made a protest full of indignant virtue.

"Do you think," she said, "if I had but myself to think of that I would not fly to her? But, child, in your position! *fiancée* only to-day—with all to do, all to think of, how could I leave you? Oh, it is impossible; my good Lucy, who is never unreasonable, she will know it, she will understand. Besides, to what use, my Bice? She has nurses for day and night. She has her dear husband, her good husband, to be with her. What does a woman want more? You would be *de trop*. You would be out of place. It would be a trouble to them. It would be a blame to

me. And you would take it, and bring it back and spread it, Bice—and perhaps Lord Montjoie——"

Bice looked round her bewildered from one to another.

"Should I be *de trop?*" she said, turning to Sir Tom with anxious eyes.

Sir Tom looked at her with an air of singular emotion. He laid his hand caressingly on her shoulder. "*De trop?* no; never in my house. But that is not the question. Lucy will be cheered when she knows that you wanted to come. But what the Contessa says is true; there are plenty of nurses—and my wife—has me, if I am any good; and we would not have you run any risk——"

"In her position!" cried the Contessa; "*fiancée* only to-day. She owes herself already to Lord Montjoie, who would never consent, never; it is against every rule. Speak to her, *mon ami*, speak to her; she is a girl who is capable of all. Tell her that now it is thought criminal, that one does not risk one's self and others. She might bring it here, if not to herself to me, Montjoie, the domestics." The Contessa sank into a chair and began fanning herself; then got up again and went towards the girl, clasping her hands.

"My sweetest," she cried, "you will not be *entêtée*, and risk everything. We shall have news, good news, every morning, three, four times a day."

"And Milady," said Bice, "who has done everything, will be alone and in tr-rouble. Sir Tom, he must leave her, he must attend to his affairs. He is a man; he must take the air; he must go out in the world. And she—she will be alone; when we have lived with her, when she has been more good, more good than any one could deserve. Risk! The doctor does not take it, who is everywhere, who will perhaps come to you next, Madama; and the nurses do not take it. It is a shame," cried the girl, throwing up her fine head, "if Love is not as good as the servants, if to have gratitude in your heart is nothing! And the risk, what is it? An illness, a fever. I have had a fever——"

"Bice, you might bring—what is dreadful to think of," cried the Contessa, with a shiver. "You might die."

"Die!" the girl cried in a voice like a silver trumpet, with a keen sweetness of scorn and tenderness combined. "*Après?*" she said, throwing back her head. She was not capable of those questions which Mr. Derwentwater and

his pupil had set before her. But here she was upon different ground.

"Oh, she is capable of all! she is a girl that is capable of all," cried the Contessa, sinking once more into a chair.

CHAPTER XV.

THE EVE OF SORROW.

Sir Tom stepped out into the night some time after, holding Jock by the arm. The boy had a sort of thrill and tremble in him as if he had been reading poetry or witnessing some great tragic scene, which the elder man partially understood without being at all aware that Jock had himself been an actor in this drama. He himself had been dismissed out of it, so to speak. His mind was relieved, and yet he was not so satisfied as he expected to be. It had been proved to him that he had no responsibility for Bice, and his anxiety relieved on that subject; relieved, oh yes: and yet was he a little disappointed too. It would have been endless embarrassment, and Lucy would not have liked it. Still he had been accustoming himself to the idea, and, now that it was broken clean

off, he was not so much pleased as he had expected. Poor little Bice! her little burst of generous gratitude and affection had gone to his heart. If that little thing who (it appeared) had died in Florence so many years ago had survived and grown a woman, as an hour ago he had believed her to have done, that is how he should have liked her to feel and to express herself. Such a sense of approval and admiration was in him that he felt the disappointment the more. Yes, he supposed it was a disappointment. He had begun to get used to the idea, and he had always liked the girl; but of course it was a relief—the greatest relief—to have no explanation to make to Lucy, instead of the painful one which perhaps she would only partially believe. He had felt that it would be most difficult to make her understand that, though this was so, he had not been in any plot, and had not known of it any more than she did when Bice was brought to his house. This would have been the difficult point in the matter, and now, heaven be praised! all that was over, and there was no mystery, nothing to explain. But so strange is human sentiment that the world felt quite impoverished to Sir Tom, though he was much

relieved. Life became for the moment a more commonplace affair altogether. He was free from the annoyance. It mattered nothing to him now who she married—the best *parti* in society, or Jock's tutor, or anybody the girl pleased. If it had not been for that exhibition of feeling Sir Tom would probably have said to himself, satirically, that there could be little doubt which the Contessa's ward and pupil would choose. But after that little scene he came out very much shaken, touched to the heart, thinking that perhaps life would have been more full and sweet had his apprehensions been true. She had been overcome by the united pressure of himself and the Contessa, and for the moment subdued, though the fire in her eye and swelling of her young bosom seemed to say that the victory was very incomplete. He would have liked the little one that died to have looked like that, and felt like that, had she lived to grow a woman like Bice. Great heaven, the little one that died! The words, as they went through his mind, sent a chill to Sir Tom's breast. Might it be that they would be said again—once more—and that far-back sin bring thus a punishment all the more bitter for being so long delayed? Human nature will never

get to believe that God is not lying in wait somewhere to exact payment of every account.

"She understands that," said Jock suddenly. "She don't know the meaning of other things."

"What may be the other things?" said Sir Tom, feeling a half jealousy of anything that could be said to Bice's disadvantage. "I don't think she is wanting in understanding. Ah, I see. You don't know how any one could resist the influence of MTutor, Jock."

Through the darkness under the feeble lamp Jock shot a glance at his elder of that immeasurable contempt which youth feels for the absence of all penetration shown by its seniors, and their limited powers of observation. But he said nothing. Perhaps he could not trust himself to speak.

"Don't think I'm a scoffer, my boy," said Sir Tom. "MTutor's a very decent fellow. Let us go and look him up. He would be better, to my thinking, if he were not quite so fine, you know. But that's a trifle, and I'm an old fogey. You are not going back to Park Lane to-night."

"After what you heard her say? Do you think I've got no heart either? If I could have it instead of him!"

"But you can't, my boy," Sir Tom said, with a pressure of Jock's arm. "And you must not make Lucy more wretched by hanging about. There's the mystery," he broke out suddenly. "You can't—none of us can. What might be nothing to you or me may be death to that little thing, but it is he that has to go through with it; life is a horrible sort of pleasure, Jock."

"Is it a pleasure?" the boy said under his breath. Life in him at that moment was one big heavy throbbing through all his being, full of mysterious powers unknown, of which Death was the least—yet, coming as he did, a great shadow upon the feeblest, a terrible and awe-striking power beyond the strength of man to understand.

After this night, so full of emotion, there came certain days which passed without sign or mark in the dim great house looking out upon all the lively sights and sounds of the great park. The sun rose and reddened the windows, the noon blazed, the gray twilight touched everything into colour. In the chamber which was the centre of all interest no one knew or cared how the hours went, and whether it was morning or noon or night. Instead of these common ways of reckoning, they counted by the hours when

the doctor came, when the child must have his medicine, when it was time to refresh the little cot with cool clean linen or sponge the little hot hands. The other attendants took their turns and rested, but Lucy was capable of no rest. She dozed sometimes with her eyes half opened, hearing every movement and little cry. Perhaps, as the time went on and the watch continued, her faculties were a little blunted by this, so that she was scarcely full awake at any time, since she never slept. She moved mechanically about, and was conscious of nothing but a dazed and confused misery, without anticipation or recollection. Something there was in her mind, besides, which perhaps made it worse; she could not tell. Could anything make it worse? The heart, like any other vessel, can hold but what it is capable of, and no more.

It is not easy to estimate what is the greatest sorrow of human life. It is that which has us in its grip, whatever it may be. Bereavement is terrible until there comes to you a pang more bitter from living than from dying: and one grief is supreme until another tops it, and the sea comes on and on in mountain waves. But perhaps of all the endurances of nature there is none which the general consent would agree

upon as the greatest, like that of a mother watching death approach, with noiseless awful step, to the bed of her only child. If humanity can approach more near the infinite in capacity of suffering it is hard to know how. We must all bow down before this extremity of anguish, humbly begging the pardon of that sufferer, that in our lesser griefs we dare to bemoan ourselves in her presence. And whether it is the dear companion—man or woman grown—or the infant out of her clasping arms, would seem to matter very little. According as it happens, so is the blow the most terrible. To Lucy, enveloped by that woe, there could have been no change that would not have lightened something (or so she felt) of her intolerable burden. Could he have breathed his fever and pain into words, could he have told what ailed him, could he have said to her only one little phrase of love, to be laid up in her heart! But the pitiful looks of those baby eyes, now bright with fever, now dull as dead violets, the little inarticulate murmurings, the appeals that could not be comprehended, added such a misery as was almost too much for flesh and blood to bear. This terrible ordeal was what Lucy had to go through. The child, though he had, as the maids said, no con-

stitution, and though he had been enfeebled by illness for half his little lifetime, fought on hour after hour and day after day. Sometimes there was a look in his little face as of a conscious intelligence fighting a brave battle for life. His young mother beside him rose and fell with his breath, lived only in him, knew nothing but the vicissitudes of the sick-room, taking her momentary broken rest when he slept, only to start up when, with a louder breath, a little cry, the struggle was resumed. The nurses could not—it would be unreasonable to expect it—be as entirely absorbed in their charge as was his mother. They got to talk at last, not minding her presence, quite freely in half whispers about other "cases," of patients and circumstances they had known. Stories of children who had died, and of some who had been miraculously raised from the brink of the grave, and of families swept away and houses desolated, seemed to get into the air of the room and float about Lucy, catching her confused ear, which was always on the watch for other sounds. Three or four times a day Sir Tom came to the door for news, but was not admitted, as the doctor's orders were stringent. There was no one admitted except the doctor; no cheer or

comfort from without came into the sick-room. Sir Tom did his best to speak a cheerful word, and would fain have persuaded Lucy to come out into the corridor, or to breathe the fresh air from a balcony. But Lucy, had she been capable of leaving the child, had a dim recollection in her mind that there was something, she could not tell what, interposing between her and her husband, and turned away from him with a sinking at her heart. She remembered vaguely that he had something else—some other possessions to comfort him—not this child alone, as she had. He had something that he could perhaps love as well, but she had nothing; and she turned away from him with an instinctive sense of the difference, feeling it to be a wrong to her boy. But for this they might have comforted each other, and consulted each other over the fever and its symptoms. And she might have stolen a few moments from her child's bed and thrown herself on her husband's bosom and been consoled. But, after all, what did it matter? Could anything have made it more easy to bear? When sorrow and pain occupy the whole being, what room is there for consolation, what importance in the lessening by an infinitesimal shred of sorrow!

This had gone on for—Lucy could not tell how many days (though not in reality for very many), when there came one afternoon in which everything seemed to draw towards the close. It is the time when the heart fails most easily and the tide of being runs most low. The light was beginning to wane in those dim rooms, though a great golden sunset was being enacted in purple and flame on the other side of the house. The child's eyes were dull and glazed; they seemed to turn inward with that awful blank which is like the soul's withdrawal; its little powers seemed all exhausted. The little moan, the struggle, had fallen into quiet. The little lips were parched and dry. Those pathetic looks that seemed to plead for help and understanding came no more. The baby was too much worn out for such painful indications of life. The women had drawn aside, all their talk hushed, only a faint whisper now and then of directions from the more experienced of the two to the subordinates aiding the solemn watch. Lucy sat by the side of the little bed on the floor, sometimes raising herself on her knees to see better. She had fallen into the chill and apathy of despair.

At this time a door opened, not loudly or

with any breach of the decorum of such a crisis, but with a distinct soft sound, which denoted some one not bound by the habits of a sick-room. A step equally distinct, though soft, not the noiseless step of a watcher, came in through the outer room and to the bed. The women, who were standing a little apart, gave a low involuntary cry. It looked like health and youthful vigour embodied which came sweeping into the dim room to the bedside of the dying child. It was Bice, who had asked no leave, who fell on her knees beside Lucy and stooped down her beautiful head, and kissed the hand which lay on the baby's coverlet. "Oh, pardon me," she said, "I could not keep away any longer. They kept me by force, or I would have come long, long since. I have come to stay, that you may have some rest, for I can nurse him—oh, with all my heart!"

She had said all this hurriedly in a breath before she looked at the child. Now she turned her head to the little bed. Her countenance underwent a sudden change. The colour forsook her cheeks, her lips dropped apart. She turned round to the nurse with a low cry, with a terrified question in her eyes.

"You see," said Lucy, speaking with a gasp

as if in answer to some previous argument, "she thinks so too——" Then there was a terrible pause. There seemed to come another "change," as the women said, over the little face, out of which life ebbed at every breath. Lucy started to her feet; she seized Bice's arm and raised her, which would have been impossible in a less terrible crisis. "Go," she said; "go, Bice, to your father, and tell him to come, for my boy is dying. Go—go!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LAST CRISIS.

"Go to your father." Bice did not know what Lucy meant. The words bewildered her beyond description, but she did not hesitate what to do. She went downstairs to Sir Tom, who sat with his door opened and his heart sinking in his bosom waiting to hear. There was no need for any words. He followed her at once, almost as softly and as noiselessly as she had come. And when they entered the dim room, where by this time there was scarcely light enough for unaccustomed eyes to see, he went up to Lucy and put his arms round her as she stood leaning on the little bed. "My love," he said, "my love, we must be all in all to each other now." His voice was choked and broken, but it did not reach Lucy's heart. She put him away from her with an almost imperceptible movement. "You

have others," she said hoarsely; "I have nothing —nothing but him." Just then the child stirred faintly in his bed, and first extending her arms to put them all away from her, Lucy bent over him and lifted him to her bosom. The nurse made a step forward to interfere, but then stepped back again wringing her hands. The mother had risen into a sort of sublimity, irresponsible in her great woe; if she had killed him to forestall her agony a little, as is the instinct of desperation, they could not have interfered. She sat down, and gathered the child close, close in her embrace, his head upon her breast, holding him as if to communicate life to him with the contact of hers. Her breath, her arms, her whole being enveloped the little dying creature with a fulness of passionate existence expanded to its highest. It was like taking back the half-extinguished germ into the very bosom and core of life. They stood round her, with an awe of her which would permit no intrusion either of word or act. Even the experienced nurse, who believed that the little spark of life would be shaken out by this movement, only wrung her hands and said nothing. The rest were but as spectators, gathering round to see the tragedy accomplished

and the woman's heart shattered before their eyes.

Which was unjust too—for the husband who stood behind was as great a sufferer. He was struck in everything a man can feel most; the instincts of paternal love awakened late, the pride a man has in his heir—all were crushed in him by a blow that seemed to wring his very heart out of his breast; but neither did any one think of him, nor did he think of himself. The mother that bare him!—that mysterious tie that goes beyond and before all was acknowledged by them all without a word. It was hers to do as she pleased. The moments are long at such a time. They seemed to stand still on that strange scene. The light remained the same; the darkness seemed arrested, perhaps because it had come on too early on account of clouds overhead, perhaps because time was standing still to witness the easy parting of a soul not yet accustomed to this earth, the far more terrible rending of the woman's heart.

Presently a sensation of great calm fell, no one could tell how, into the room. The terror seemed to leave the hearts of the watchers. Was it the angel who had arrived and shed a

soothing from his very presence though he had come to accomplish the end?

Another little change, almost imperceptible, Lucy beginning to rock her child softly, as if lulling him to sleep. No one moved, or even breathed, it seemed, for how long? some minutes, half a lifetime. Then another sound. Oh, God in heaven! had she gone distracted, the innocent creature, the young mother, in her anguish? She began to sing—a few low notes, a little lullaby, in a voice ineffable, indescribable, not like any mortal voice. One of the women burst out into a wail—it was the child's nurse—and tried to take him from the mother's arms. The other took her by the shoulders and turned her away. "What does it matter, a few minutes more or less; she'll come to herself soon enough, poor dear," said the attendant, with a sob. Thus the group was diminished. Sir Tom stood with one hand on his wife's chair, his face covered with the other, and in his heart the bitterness of death; Bice had dropped down on her knees by the side of that pathetic group; and in the midst sat the mother, bent over, almost enfolding the child, cradling him in her own life. Bice was herself not much more than a child; to her all things were possible—miracles, restorations from

the dead. Her eyes were full of tears, but there was a smile upon her quivering mouth. It was at her Lucy looked, with eyes full of something like that "awful rose of dawn" of which the poet speaks. They were dilated to twice their natural size. She made a slight movement, opening to Bice the little face upon her bosom, bidding her look as at a breathless secret to be kept from all else. Was it a reflection or a faint glow of warmth upon the little worn cheek? The eyes were no longer open, showing the white, but closed, with the eyelashes shadowing against the cheek. There came into Lucy's eyes a sort of warning look to keep the secret, and the wonderful spectacle was, as it were, closed again, hidden with her arms and bending head. And the soft coo of the lullaby went on.

Presently the women stole back, awed and silenced, but full of a reviving thrill of curiosity. The elder one, who was from the hospital and prepared for everything, drew nearer, and regarded with a scientific but not unsympathetic eye the mother and the child. She withdrew a little the shawl in which the infant was wrapped, and put her too-experienced, instructed hands upon his little limbs, without taking any notice of Lucy, who remained passive through this

examination. "He's beautiful and warm," said the woman in a wondering tone. Then Bice rose to her feet with a quick sudden movement, and went to Sir Tom and drew his hand from his face. "He is not dying, he is sleeping," she said. "And I think, miss, you're right. He has taken a turn for the better," said the experienced woman from the hospital. "Don't move, my lady, don't move; we'll prop you with cushions—we'll pull him through still, please God," the nurse said, with a few genuine tears.

When the doctor came some time after, instead of watching the child's last moments he had only to confirm their certainty of this favourable change and give his sanction to it; and the cloud that had seemed to hang over it all day lifted from the house. The servants began to move about again and bustle. The lamps were lighted. The household resumed their occupations, and Williams himself in token of sympathy carried up Mr. Randolph's beef-tea. When Lucy, after a long interval, was liberated from her confined attitude, and the child restored to his bed, the improvement was so evident that she allowed herself to be persuaded to lie down and rest. "Milady," said Bice, "I am not good for anything, but I love him. I will not inter-

fere, but neither will I ever take away my eyes from him till you are again here." There was no use in this, but it was something to the young mother. She lay down and slept, for the first time since the illness began; slept not in broken painful dozings, but a real sleep. She was not in a condition to think; but there was a vague feeling in her mind that here was some one, not as others were, to whom little Tom was something more than to the rest. Consciously she ought to have shrunk from Bice's presence; unconsciously it soothed her and warmed her heart.

Sir Tom went back to his room, shaken as with a long illness, but feeling that the world had begun again, and life was once more liveable. He sat down and thought over every incident, and thanked God with such tears as men too, like women, are often fain to indulge in, though they do it chiefly in private. Then, as the effect of this great crisis began to go off a little, and the common round to come back, there recurred to his mind Lucy's strange speech, "You have others——" What others was he supposed to have? She had drawn herself away from him. She had made no appeal to his sympathy. "You have—others. I have nothing but him."

What did Lucy mean? And then he remembered how little intercourse there had been of late between them, how she had kept aloof from him. They might have been separated and living in different houses for all the union there had been between them. "You have others——" What did Lucy mean?

He got up, moved by the uneasiness of this question, and began to pace about the floor. He had no others; never had a man been more devoted to his own house. She had not been exacting, nor he uxorious. He had lived a man's life in the world, and had not neglected his duties for his wife; but he reminded himself, with a sort of indignant satisfaction, that he had found Lucy far more interesting than he expected, and that her fresh curiosity, her interest in everything, and the just enough of receptive intelligence, which is more agreeable than cleverness, had made her the most pleasant companion he had ever known. It was not an exercise of self-denial, of virtue on his part, as the Dowager and indeed many other of his friends had attempted to make out, but a real pleasure in her society. He had liked to talk to her, to tell her his own past history (selections from it), to like yet laugh at her simple comments. He never despised

anything she said, though he had laughed at some of it with a genial and placid amusement. And that little beggar! about whom Sir Tom could not even think to-day without a rush of water to his eyes—could any man have considered the little fellow more, or been more proud of him or fond? He could not live in the nursery, it was true, like Lucy, but short of that—"Others." What could she mean? There were no others. He was content to live and die, if but they might be spared to him, with her and the boy. A sort of chill doubt that somebody might have breathed into her ear that suggestion about Bice's parentage did indeed cross his mind; but ever since he had ascertained that this fear was a delusion it had seemed to him the most ridiculous idea in the world. It had not seemed so before; it had appeared probable enough, nay, with many coincidences in its favour. And he had even been conscious of something like disappointment to find that it was not true. But now it seemed to him too absurd for credence; and what creature in the world, except himself, could have known the circumstances that made it possible? No one but Williams, and Williams was true.

It was not till next morning that the ordinary

habits of the household could be said to be in any measure resumed. On that day Bice came down to breakfast with Sir Tom with a smiling brightness which cheered his solitary heart. She had gone back out of all her finery to the simple black frock, which she told him had been the easiest thing to carry. This was in answer to his question, "How had she come? Had the Contessa sent her?" Bice clapped her hands with pleasure, and recounted how she had run away.

"The news were always bad, more bad; and Milady all alone. At length the time came when I could bear it no longer. I love him, my little Tom; and Milady has always been kind, so kind, more kind than any one. Nobody has been kind to me like her, and also you, Sir Tom, and baby that was my darling," the girl said.

"God bless you, my dear," said Sir Tom; "but," he added, "you should not have done it. You should have remembered the infection."

Bice made a little face of merry disdain and laughed aloud. "Do I care for infection? Love is more strong than a fever. And then," she added, "I had a purpose too."

Sir Tom was delighted with her girlish confidences about her frock and her purpose. "Some-

thing very grave, I should imagine, from those looks."

"Oh, it is very grave," said Bice, her countenance changing. "You know I am *fiancée*. There has been a good deal said to me of Lord Montjoie; sometimes that he was not wise, what you call silly, not clever, not good to have to do with. That he is not clever one can see; but what then? The clever, they do not always please. Others say that he is a great *parti* and all that is desirable. Myself," she added with an air of judicial impartiality, "I like him well enough; even when he does not please me, he amuses. The clever, they are not always amusing. I am willing to marry him since it is wished, otherwise I do not care much. For there is, you know, plenty of time, and to marry so soon—it is a disappointment, it is no longer exciting. So it is not easy to know distinctly what to do. That is what you call a dilemma," Bice said.

"It is a serious dilemma," said Sir Tom, much amused and flattered too. "You want me, then, to give you my advice——"

"No," said Bice, which made his countenance suddenly blank, "not advice. I have thought of a way. All say that it is almost wicked, at

least very wrong to come here (in the Tauchnitz it would be miserable to be afraid, and so I think), and that the fever is more than everything. Now for me it is not so. If Lord Montjoie is of my opinion, and if he thinks I am right to come, then I shall know that, though he is not clever—— Yes; that is my purpose. Do you think I shall be right?"

"I see," said Sir Tom, though he looked somewhat crestfallen. "You have come not so much for us, though you are kindly disposed towards us, but to put your future husband to the test. There is only this drawback, that he might be an excellent fellow and yet object to the step you have taken. Also that these sort of tests are very risky, and that it is scarcely worth while for this to run the risk of a bad illness, perhaps of your life."

"That is unjust," said Bice, with tears in her eyes. "I should have come to Milady had there been no Montjoie at all. It is first and above all for her sake. I will have a fever for her, oh willingly!" cried the girl. Then she added after a little pause, "Why did she bid me 'go to your father and tell him——?' What does that mean, go to my father? I have never had any father."

"Did she say that?" Sir Tom cried. "When? and why?"

"It was when all seemed without hope. She was kneeling by the bed, and he, my little boy, my little darling. Ah," cried Bice, with a shiver, "to think it should have been so near! when God put that into her mind to save him! She said, 'Go to your father and tell him my boy is dying.' What did she mean? I came to you; but you are not my father."

He had risen up in great agitation and was walking about the room. When she said these words he came up to her and laid his hand for a moment on her head. "No," he said, with a sense of loss which was painful; "no, the more's the pity, Bice. God bless you, my dear."

His voice was tremulous, his hand shook a little. The girl took it in her pretty way and kissed it. "You have been as good to me as if it were so. But tell me what Milady means; for at that moment she would say nothing but what was at the bottom of her heart."

"I cannot tell you, Bice," said Sir Tom, almost with tears. "If I have made her unhappy, my Lucy, who is better than any of us, what do I deserve? what should be done to me? And she

has been unhappy—she has lost her faith in me. I see it all now."

Bice sat and looked at him with her eyes full of thought. She was not a novice in life, though she was so young. She had heard many a tale not adapted for youthful ears. That a child might have a father whose name she did not bear, and who had never been disclosed to her, was not incomprehensible, as it would have been to an English girl. She looked him severely in the face, like a young Daniel come to judgment. Had she been indeed his child, to what a terrible ordeal would Sir Tom have been exposed under the light of those steady eyes! "Is it true that you have made her unhappy?" she said, as if she had the power of death in her hands.

"No!" he said, with a sudden outburst of feeling. "No; there are things in my life that I would not have raked up; but since I have known her, nothing; there is no offence to her in any record of my life——"

Bice looked at him, still unfaltering. "You forget us—the Contessa and me. You brought us, though she did not know. We are not like her, but you brought us to her house. Nevertheless," said the young judge gravely, "that

might be unthoughtful, but not a wrong to her. Is it perhaps a mistake?"

"A mistake or a slander, or—some evil tongue," he cried.

Bice rose up from the chair which had been her bench of justice and walked to the door with a stately step, befitting her office, full of thought. Then she paused again for a moment and looked back and waved her hand. "I think it is a pity," she said with great gravity. She recognised the visionary fitness, as he had done. They would have suited each other, when it was thus suggested to them, for father and daughter; and that it was not so, by some spite of fate, was a pity. She found Lucy dressed and refreshed sitting by the bed of the child, who had already begun to smile faintly. "Milady," said Bice, "will you go downstairs? There is a long time that you have not spoken to Sir Tom. Is he afraid of your fever? No more than me! But his heart is breaking for you. Go to him, Milady, and I will stay with the boy."

It was not for some time that Lucy could be persuaded to go. He had—others. What was she to him but a portion of his life? and the child was all of hers: a small portion of his life, only a few years, while the others had a far older

and stronger claim. There was no anger in her mind, all hushed in the exhaustion of great suffering past, but a great reluctance to enter upon the question once more. Lucy wished only to be left in quiet. She went slowly, reluctantly, downstairs. Unhappy? No. He had not made her unhappy. Nothing could make her unhappy now that her child was saved. It seemed to Lucy that it was she who had been ill and was getting better, and she longed to be left alone. Sir Tom was standing against the window with his head upon his hand. He did not hear her light step till she was close to him. Then he turned round, but not with the eagerness for her which Bice had represented. He took her hand gently and drew it within his arm.

"All is going well?" he said, "and you have had a little rest, my dear? Bice has told me——"

She withdrew a little the hand which lay on his arm. "He is much better," she said; "more than one would have thought possible."

"Thank God!" Sir Tom cried; and they were silent for a moment, united in thanksgiving, yet so divided, with a sickening gulf between them. Lucy felt her heart begin to stir and ache, that had been so quiet. "And you," he

said, "have had a little rest? Thank God for that too. Anything that had happened to him would have been bad enough; but to you, Lucy——"

"Oh, hush, hush," she cried, "that is over; let us not speak of anything happening to him."

"But all is not over," he said. "Something has happened—to us. What did you mean when you spoke to me of others? 'You have others.' I scarcely noticed it at that dreadful moment; but now—— Who are those others, Lucy? Whom have I but him and you?"

She did not say anything, but withdrew her hand altogether from his arm and looked at him. A look scarcely reproachful, wistful, sorrowful, saying, but not in words, in its steady gaze—You know.

He answered as if it had been speech.

"But I don't know. What is it, Lucy? Bice too has something she asked me to explain, and I cannot explain it. You said to her, 'Go to your father.' What is this? You must tell what you mean."

"Bice?" she said, faltering; "it was at a moment when I did not think what I was saying."

"No, when you spoke out that perilous stuff

you have got in your heart. Oh, my Lucy, what is it, and who has put it there?"

"Tom," she said, trembling very much. "It is not Bice; she—that—is long ago—if her mother had been dead. But a man cannot have two lives. There cannot be two in the same place. It is not jealousy. I am not finding fault. It has been perhaps without intention; but it is not befitting—oh, not befitting. It cannot—oh, it is impossible! it must not be."

"What must not be? Of what, in the name of heaven, are you speaking?" he cried.

Once more she fixed on him that look, more reproachful this time, full of meaning and grieved surprise. She drew away a little from his side. "I did not want to speak," she said. "I was so thankful; I want to say nothing. You thought you had left that other life behind; perhaps you forgot altogether. They say that people do. And now it is here at your side, and on the other side my little boy and me. Ah! no, no, it is not befitting, it cannot be——"

"I understand dimly," he said; "they have told you Bice was my child. I wish it were so. I had a child, Lucy, it is true, who is dead in Florence long ago. The mother is dead too, long

ago. It is so long past that, if you can believe it, I had—forgotten."

"Dead!" she said. And there came into her mild eyes a scared and frightened look. "And —the Contessa?"

"The Contessa!" he cried.

They were standing apart gazing at each other with something more like the heat of a passionate debate than had ever arisen between them, or indeed seemed possible to Lucy's tranquil nature, when the door was suddenly opened and the voice of Williams saying, "Sir Thomas is here, my lady," reduced them both in an instant to silence. Then there was a bustle and a movement, and, of all wonderful sights to meet their eyes, the Contessa herself came with hesitation into the room. She had her handkerchief pressed against the lower part of her face, from above which her eyes looked out watchfully. She gave a little shriek at the sight of Lucy. "I thought," she said, "Sir Tom was alone. Lucy, my angel, my sweetest, do not come near me!" She recoiled to the door, which Williams had just closed. "I will say what I have to say here. Dearest people, I love you, but you are charged with pestilence. My Lucy, how glad I am for your little boy—but every moment they

tell me increases the danger. Where is Bice? Bice! I have come to bring her away."

"Contessa," said Sir Tom, "you have come at a fortunate moment. Tell Lady Randolph who Bice is. I think she has a right to know."

"Who Bice is? But what has that to do with it? She is *fiancée*, she belongs to more than herself. And there is the drawing-room in a week—imagine, only in a week!—and how can she go into the presence of the Queen full of infection? I acknowledge—I acknowledge," cried the Contessa, through her handkerchief, "you have been very kind—oh, more than kind. But why then now will you spoil all? It might make a revolution—it might convey to Majesty herself—— Ah! it might spoil all the child's prospects. Who is she? Why should you reproach me with my little mystery now? She is all that is most natural; Guido's child, whom you remember well enough, Sir Tom, who married my poor little sister, my little girl who followed me, who would do as I did. You know all this, for I have told you. They are all dead, all dead—how can you make me talk of them? And Bice perhaps with the fever in her veins, ready to communicate it—to Majesty herself, to me, to every one!"

The Contessa sank down on a chair by the door. She drew forth her fan, which hung by her side, and fanned away from her this air of pestilence. "The child must come back at once," she said, with little cries and sobs—an *accès de nerfs*, if these simple people had known —through her handkerchief. "Let her come at once, and we may conceal it still. She shall have baths. She shall be fumigated. I will not see her or let her be seen. She shall have a succession of headaches. This is what I have said to Montjoie. Imagine me out in the air, that is so bad for the complexion, at this hour! But I think of nothing in comparison with the interests of Bice. Send for her. Lucy, sweet one, you would not spoil her prospects. Send for her—before it is known." Then she laughed with a hysterical vehemence. "I see; some one has been telling her it was the poor little child whom you left with me, whom I watched over—yes, I was good to the little one. I am not a hard-hearted woman. Lucy: it was I who put this thought into your mind. I said—of English parentage. I meant you to believe so—that you might give something, when you were giving so much, to my poor Bice. What was wrong? I said you would be glad one day that you had

helped her: yes—and I allowed also my enemy the Dowager, to believe it."

"To believe *that*." Lucy stood out alone in the middle of the room, notwithstanding the shrinking back to the wall of the visitor, whose alarm was far more visible than any other emotion. "To believe *that*—that she was your child, and——"

Something stopped Lucy's mouth. She drew back, her pale face dyed with crimson, her whole form quivering with remorse and pain as of one who has given a cowardly and cruel blow.

The Contessa rose. She stood up against the wall. It did not seem to occur to her what kind of terrible accusation this was, but only that it was something strange, incomprehensible. She withdrew for a moment the handkerchief from her mouth. "My child? But I have never had a child!" she said.

"Lucy," cried Sir Tom in a terrible voice.

And then Lucy stood aghast between them, looking from one to another. The scales seemed to fall from her eyes. The perfectly innocent when they fall under the power of suspicion go farthest in that bitter way. They take no limit of possibility into their doubts and fears. They do not think of character or nature. Now, in a

moment, the scales fell from Lucy's eyes. Was her husband a man to treat her with such unimaginable insult? Was the Contessa, with all her triumphant designs, her mendacities, her mendicities, her thirst for pleasure, such a woman? Whoever said it, could this be true?

The Contessa perceived with a start that her hand had dropped from her mouth. She put back the handkerchief again with tremulous eagerness. "If I take it, all will go wrong—all will fall to pieces," she said pathetically. "Lucy, dear one, do not come near me, but send me Bice, if you love me," the Contessa cried. She smiled with her eyes, though her mouth was covered. She had not so much as understood—she, so experienced, so acquainted with the wicked world, so *connaisseuse* in evil tales—she had not even so much as divined what innocent Lucy meant to say.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE END.

BICE was taken away in the cab, there being no reason why she should remain in a house where Lucy was no longer lonely or heartbroken—but not by her patroness, who was doubly her aunt, but did not love that old-fashioned title, and did love a mystery. The Contessa would not trust herself in the same vehicle with the girl who had come out of little Tom's nursery, and was no doubt charged with pestilence. She walked, marvel of marvels, with a thick veil over her face, and Sir Tom, in amused attendance, looking with some curiosity through the gauze at this wonder of a spring morning which she had not seen for years. Bice, for her part, was conveyed by the old woman who waited in the cab, the mother of one of the servants in the Mayfair house, to her humble home, where the girl was

fumigated and disinfected to the Contessa's desire. She was presented a week after, the strictest secrecy being kept about these proceedings; and mercifully, as a matter of fact, did not convey infection either to the Contessa or to the still more distinguished ladies with whom she came in contact. What a day for Madame di Forno-Populo! There was nothing against her. The Duchess had spent an anxious week, inquiring everywhere. She had pledged herself in a weak hour; but though the men laughed, that was all. Not even in the clubs was there any story to be got hold of. The Duchess had a son-in-law who was clever in gossip. He said there was nothing, and the Lord Chamberlain made no objection. The Contessa di Forno-Populo had not indeed, she said loftily, ever desired to make her appearance before the Piedmontese; but she had the stamp upon her, though partially worn out, of the old Grand Ducal Court of Tuscany—which many people think more of—and these two stately Italian ladies made as great a sensation by their beauty and their stately air as had been made at any drawing-room in the present reign. The most august and discriminating of critics remarked them above all others. And a lady, whose knowledge of family history is unrivalled, like

her place in the world, condescended to remember that the Conte di Forno-Populo had married an English lady. Their dresses were specially described by Lady Anastasia in her favourite paper; and their portraits were almost recognisable in the *Graphic*, which gave a special (fancy) picture of the drawing-room in question. Triumph could not farther go.

It was not till after this event that Bice revealed the purpose which was one of her inducements for that visit to little Tom's sick-bed. On the evening of that great day, just before going out in all her splendour to the Duchess's reception held on that occasion, she took her lover aside, whose pride in her magnificence and all the applause that had been lavished on her knew no bounds.

"Listen," she said, "I have something to tell you. Perhaps, when you hear it, all will be over. I have not allowed you to come near me nor touch me——"

"No, by Jove! It has been stand off, indeed! I don't know what you mean by it," cried Montjoie ruefully; "that wasn't what I bargained for, don't you know."

"I am going to explain," said Bice. "You shall know, then, that when I had those head-

aches—you remember—and you could not see me, I had no headaches, *mon ami.* I was with Milady Randolph in Park Lane, in the middle of the fever, nursing the boy."

Montjoie gazed at her with round eyes. He recoiled a step, then rushing at his betrothed, notwithstanding her Court plumes and flounces, got Bice in his arms. "By Jove!" he cried, "and that was why! You thought I was frightened of the fever; that is the best joke I have heard for ages, don't you know. What a pluck you've got, Bee! And what a beauty you are, my pretty dear! I am going to pay myself all the arrears."

"Don't," said Bice plaintively; the caresses were not much to her mind, but she endured them to a certain limit. "I wondered," she said, with a faint sigh, "what you would say."

"It was awfully silly," said Montjoie. "I couldn't have believed you were so soft, Bee, with your training, don't you know. And how did you come over *her* to let you go? She was in a dead funk all the time. It was awfully silly; you might have caught it, or given it to me, or a hundred things, and lost all your fun; but it was awfully plucky," cried Montjoie, "by Jove! I knew you were a plucky one;" and he

added, after a moment's reflection, in a softened tone, "a good little girl too."

It was thus that Bice's fate was sealed.

That afternoon Lucy received a note from Lady Randolph in the following words:—

"DEAREST LUCY—I am more glad than I can tell you to hear the good news of the dear boy. Probably he will be stronger now than he has ever been, having got over this so well.

"I want to tell you not to think any more of what I said *that* day. I hope it has not vexed you. I find that my informant was entirely mistaken, and acted upon a misconception all the time. I can't tell how sorry I am ever to have mentioned such a thing; but it seemed to be on the very best authority. I do hope it has not made any coolness between Tom and you.

"Don't take the trouble to answer this. There is nothing that carries infection like letters, and I inquire after the boy every day.—Your loving M. RANDOLPH."

"It was not her fault," said Lucy, sobbing upon her husband's shoulder. "I should have known you better, Tom."

"I think so, my dear," he said quietly, "though I have been more foolish than a man of my age ought to be; but there is no harm in the Contessa, Lucy."

"No," Lucy said, yet with a grave face. "But Bice will be made a sacrifice: Bice, and——" she added with a guilty look, "I shall

have thrown away that money, for it has not saved her."

"Here is a great deal of money," said Sir Tom, drawing a letter from his pocket, "which seems also in a fair way of being thrown away."

He took out the list which Lucy had given to her trustee, which Mr. Chervil had returned to her husband, and held it out before her. It was a very curious document, an experiment in the way of making poor people rich. The names were of people of whom Lucy knew very little personally; and yet it had not been done without thought. There was nobody there to whom such a gift might not mean deliverance from many cares. In the abstract it was not throwing anything away. Perhaps, had there been some public commission to reward with good incomes the struggling and honourable these might not have been the chosen names; but yet it was all legitimate, honest, in the light of Lucy's exceptional position. The husband and wife stood and looked at it together in this moment of their reunion, when both had escaped from the deadliest perils that could threaten life—the loss of their child, the loss of their union. It was hard to tell which would have been the more mortal blow.

"He says I must prevent you; that you cannot have thought what you were doing; that it is madness, Lucy."

"I think I was nearly mad," said Lucy simply. "I thought to get rid of it whatever might happen to me—that was best."

"Let us look at it now in our full senses," said Sir Tom.

Lucy grasped his arm with both her hands. "Tom," she said in a hurried tone, "this is the only thing in which I ever set myself against you. It was the beginning of all our trouble; and I might have to do that again. What does it matter if perhaps we might do it more wisely now? All these people are poor, and there is the money to make them well off; that is what my father meant. He meant it to be scattered again, like seed given back to the reaper. He used to say so. Shall not we let it go as it is, and be done with it and avoid trouble any more?"

He stood holding her in his arms, looking over the paper. It was a great deal of money. To sacrifice a great deal of money does not affect a young woman who has never known any need of it in her life, but a man in middle age who knows all about it, that makes a great difference.

Many thoughts passed through the mind of Sir Tom. It was a moment in which Lucy's heart was very soft. She was ready to do anything for the husband to whom, she thought, she had been unjust. And it was hard upon him to diminish his own importance and cut off at a stroke by such a sacrifice half the power and importance of the wealth which was his, though Lucy might be the source of it. Was he to consent to this loss, not even wisely, carefully arranged, but which might do little good to any one, and to him harm unquestionable? He stood silent for some time thinking, almost disposed to tear up the paper and throw it away. But then he began to reflect of other things more important than money; of unbroken peace and happiness; of Lucy's faithful loyal spirit, that would never be satisfied with less than the entire discharge of her trust; of the full accord, never so entirely comprehensive and understanding as now, that had been restored between them; and of the boy given back from the gates of hell, from the jaws of death. It was no small struggle. He had to conquer a hundred hesitations, the disapproval, the resistance of his own mind. It was with a hand that shook a little that he put it back. "That little beggar," he said, with his

old laugh—though not his old laugh, for in this one there was a sound of tears—"will be a hundred thousand or so the poorer. Do you think he'd mind, if we were to ask him? Come, here is a kiss upon the bargain. The money shall go, and a good riddance, Lucy. There is now nothing between you and me."

Bice was married at the end of the season, in the most fashionable church, in the most correct way. Montjoie's plain cousins had asked—asked! without a sign of enmity!—to be bridesmaids, "as she had no sisters of her own, poor thing!" Montjoie declared that he was "ready to split" at their cheek in asking, and in calling Bice "poor thing," she who was the most fortunate girl in the world. The Contessa took the good the gods provided her, without grumbling at the fate which transferred to her the little fortune which had been given to Bice to keep her from a mercenary marriage. It was not a mercenary marriage, in the ordinary sense of the word. To Bice's mind it was simply fulfilling her natural career; and she had no dislike to Montjoie. She liked him well enough. He had answered well to her test. He was not clever, to be sure; but what then? She was well enough content, if not rapturous, when she walked out of the church

Marchioness of Montjoie on her husband's arm. There was a large and fashionable assembly, it need not be said. Lucy, in a first place, looking very wistful, wondering if the girl was happy, and Sir Tom saying to himself it was very well that he had no more to do with it than as a friend. There were two other spectators who looked upon the ceremony with still more serious countenances, a man and a boy, restored to each other as dearest friends. They watched all the details of the service with unfailing interest, but when the beautiful bride came down the aisle on her husband's arm they turned with one accord and looked at each other. They had been quite still until that point, making no remark. She passed them by, walking as if on air, as she always walked, though ballasted now for ever by that duller being at her side. She was not subdued under her falling veil, like so many brides, but saw everything, them among the rest, as she passed, and showed by a half smile her recognition of their presence. There was no mystic veil of sentiment about her—no consciousness of any mystery. She walked forth bravely, smiling, to meet life and the world. What was there in that beautiful beaming creature to suggest a thought of future necessity, trouble, or the most

distant occasion for help or succour? Perhaps it is a kind of revenge we take upon too great prosperity to say to ourselves, "There may come a time!"

These two spectators made their way out slowly among the crowd. They walked a long way towards their after destination without a word. Then Mr. Derwentwater spoke:

"If there should ever come a time when we can help her, or be of use to her, you and I—for the time must come when she will find out she has chosen evil instead of good——"

"Oh, humbug!" cried Jock roughly, with a sharpness in his tone which was its apology. "She has done what she always meant to do—and that is what she likes best."

"Nevertheless——" said MTutor, with a sigh.

THE END.

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