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MAGDALEN'S VOW

BY

Mrs. MAY AGNES FLEMING

**AUTHOR OF "THE DARK SECRET," "THE GYPSY QUEEN'S VOW," "THE QUEEN OF
THE ISLE," "THE HEIRESS OF CASTLE CLIFF," "THE MIDNIGHT QUEEN," "THE
RIVAL BROTHERS." ETC.**

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MAGDALEN'S VOW.

CHAPTER I.

MAGDALEN.

The month was October, very near its close; the time, late in the evening of a wet and dismal day; the place, a cottage kitchen, its only occupants an old woman and a baby, not twenty-four hours old. The soft patter of the ceaseless rain on the glass, the sobbing cry of the wind around the gables, the moaning surge of the pine woods near—these made their own tumult without.

Within a bright fire blazed in the shining cook stove; a big brass clock ticked loudly in a corner, a maltese cat purred on a mat, and the tea-kettle sung its pleasant song.

The little old woman, who swayed in her Boston rocker before the stove, was the trimmest little old woman ever firelight shone on.

The baby lay in her lap, a bundle of yellow flannel; and, as she rocked, she cried, miserable, silent tears.

"To think that this should be her welcome home!" she kept moaning drearily to herself. "Only one short year and all gone—father, sister, brother, home! My poor dear—my poor dear!"

The loud-voiced clock struck six, with a clatter. The last vibration was drowned in the shrill scream of a locomotive, rushing in. The shrill shriek rent the stormy twilight like the cry of a demon, and woke the sleeping child.

"Hush, baby, hush!" the old woman said, crooning a dismal lullaby. "There she is—there is Magdalen! Poor dear! poor dear! She'll be here in ten minutes now."

But the ten passed—twenty—half an hour—before the knock for which she listened came to the door.

"There she is!"

She plumped the baby into the rocker, made for the door with a rush, and flung it wide. On the threshold, all wet and dripping and worn-looking, a young girl stood. The rainy evening light was just strong enough to show a pale young face, a slender, girlish figure, and a pair of great, luminous dark eyes.

"My darling!" the old woman cried, catching her in her arms. "My own darling girl! And you are wet through and through! You must have walked all the way from the station in the rain."

The girl slowly disengaged herself, entered the hall and stood looking at her.

"Rachel," she said, "am I in time?"

The old woman broke suddenly out crying—loud, anguished sobs, that shook her from head to foot.

It was the girl's most eloquent answer, and she leaned against the wall with a face of blank despair.

"Too late!" she said, slowly; "too late! Laura is dead!"

The old woman's sobs grew louder and her pitiful attempts to stifle them were vain.

"I oughtn't to, I know," she cried, hysterically; "that you should come home like this, and only last year——"

She broke down, weeping wildly. But the girl stood, tearless and white, staring blankly at the opposite wall.

"Father and Laura dead—and Willie! Oh, my God! how can I bear it?"

The old woman hushed her sobs and looked up.

The despair of that orphaned cry smote her, with its unutterable pathos, to the heart.

"Magdalen! Magdalen!" she cried. "My darling, don't look like that! Come in—you are worn and wet—come in to the fire. My child, don't wear that sorrowful face; it breaks your poor old nurse's heart! Come!"

She led the way; the girl followed. The old Scripture name—full of its own pathos always—seemed strangely appropriate here. Mary Magdalene herself might have worn those amber-dropping tresses—might have owned that white, young face, so indescribably sad.

"You poor child!" the old nurse said, "you are as white as a spirit! You must have a cup of tea and some dry clothes right away. Where is your trunk?"

Even in the midst of death and despair, these commonplace questions rise.

Magdalen looked at her with great, haggard eyes.

"I left it at the station. Rachel, when did Laura die?"

"Yesterday," old Rachel answered, crying again; "an hour after her baby was born."

"Her baby? Oh, Rachel!" with a wild start, "I did not know—I did not know——"

The old woman undid the bundle of flannel. The babe lay soundly asleep.

The girl covered her colorless face for a moment, her tears coming at last, falling like rain.

"Laura! Laura! My sister!"

Her tears were noiseless, burning, bitter. She looked up presently, to bend over the sleeping child and kiss its velvet cheek.

"Laura's baby! Poor little motherless thing! Oh, Rachel, it is very, very hard!"

"Very hard, my dearest and terrible to bear; but it must be borne, for all that. My pet, go up to your room and change these dripping clothes. I don't want to lose you, too."

"Better so," the girl said, wearily. "Better end it all, and lie down and die with them. Others would die of half this misery, but I only suffer and live on!"

Slowly and spiritlessly she ascended the stairs to her own familiar room. She changed her wet garments, bathed her aching head, brushed out the rippling, yellow ringlets—all in a weary, aimless sort of way—and then returned to the apartment below. It was a very simple toilet she had made, and her black dress was frayed and faded, and scant and ill-made; but for all that she was well worth looking at.

She was very pretty, in spite of her pallor—so brightly pretty, that it was a pleasure only to look at her.

"My own darling!" the old nurse said, fondly kissing her, "you are more beautiful than ever, and almost a woman at sixteen. It's a sad pity, but oh dear, dear! how can I help it? To think you can go to school no more."

"I must only study at home," Magdalen said, "and practise my music as well as I can. I suppose no one would be willing to engage a governess only sixteen years old. Have we enough to live on for a year, Rachel?"

"More than enough, surely. Your poor papa's lawyer, Mr. Hammond, will tell you. It is very hard, my poor dear, you should have to go out into the big, wicked, cruel world, to earn your own living at all. You are a great deal too pretty."

"Rachel," said Magdalen, abruptly, "where is Laura? I want to see her."

"She's laid out in the parlor, poor darling! Widow Morgan sat up with me the last night, and she helped me afterward to lay her out. She makes a lovely corpse—sweet, pale lamb—and peaceful as an angel. Don't go now. Take some tea first. You look fagged out and I shall have you sick on my hands, too."

"You don't know how strong I am," said Magdalen. "I have grown of late tired of my life, of the world, of myself, of everything; but nothing hurts me. I suffer and live on. Others, more fortunate, would suffer and die."

She drank the tea, strove to eat, and failed.

"It's of no use, Rachel—I can't. I feel as though it were choking me. Let me go and see my sister; then you shall tell me

all."

Rachel arose and led the way down the hall, bearing a light. In dead silence she opened the parlor door and Magdalen followed her in.

The cottage parlor was very like any other cottage parlor, plainly and prettily furnished. Carpet and furniture and pictures were all very simple and bright and nice: but one ghastly object was there to chill the quiet beauty of the picture.

In the center of the floor stood a long table, draped in ghostly white. Awfully stiff and rigid, under a white sheet, could be seen the outline of what lay stark and dead thereon.

Magdalen paused on the threshold and laid her hand on Rachel's arm, her eyes fixed, large and dilated, on that ghastly sight. The dim lamplight showed her face, with its stare of white horror.

"Leave me alone, Rachel!" she said, in a hoarse whisper. "Go!"

There was that in her nursling's face the old woman dared not disobey. She turned reluctantly away and left the room.

The girl advanced and stood beside the bed. Only the soft sobbing of the October rain, the shuddering wail of the night wind and the solemn surging of the pine trees, broke the silence of the room.

With a face like snow, like marble, she drew the sheet down, and gazed upon the sister she had loved so well. It was a face wonderfully beautiful in its last dreamless sleep—more beautiful, perhaps, than it had ever been in life. The straight, delicate features were like her own; so was the mass of burnished hair, combed away from the icy brow. The hands were folded together across the bosom; the sweet, beautiful lips were closed with an ineffable expression of rest. Too solemn for words to tell was the unutterable peace of that death sleep.

"And it all ends here!" Magdalen thought. "Youth and hope and innocence! Sweetness and beauty and tenderest love, could not save her one poor hour from ruin and the grave! Oh, my sister—my sister!"

She dropped on her knees and laid her face on the marble breast. No tear fell, no sob shook her slender frame. She seemed to have passed beyond all that. The steady drip, drip, of the ceaseless rain, the mournful sighing of the wind, sounded like a dirge for the dead. So long she knelt there that old Rachel, growing alarmed, opened the door and came in.

"My child! my child!" in an awe-struck whisper, "come away. This will never do!"

The girl got up at once, pale as the dead sister lying before her, and almost as rigid. One last look and she followed the old nurse out into the kitchen. She sat down before the fire, that icy calm still over all.

"And now, Rachel," she said, "tell me the whole story."

The dead girl's sleeping child lay cozily in Rachel's lap, as she rocked to and fro in her nurse chair.

"It's a short enough story," she said, with a heavy sigh, "to contain so much misery. Let me see. It was last September, twelve months, you went away to New Haven, to school?"

"Yes."

"Well, one week after, the trouble began. Willie, you know, was not going to New York, to continue his medical studies, until December, and he spent a good deal of his time in the woods, fishing and shooting, and in the Village loitering about the hotel. It was there he met the villain who brought all our misery—a wretch for whom hanging would be a great deal too good!"

Magdalen's teeth clenched and her eyes suddenly blazed up.

"Go on," she said; "tell me his name."

"His name was Maurice Langley, and he was very handsome. Tall and fair, you know, with dark, curling hair, and a black mustache. He had come to the country for a month's fishing and Willie and he grew as intimate as brothers. Willie brought him home and your poor papa and Laura were taken with him at once. He had such winning ways, such a

pleasant laugh and such a charming, offhand manner, that he took people's fancy at first sight. He could play the piano better than Laura and sing most beautiful, and he could talk to your papa like a book. He fascinated all of us the very first visit and I don't know who sang his praises loudest when he went away. It was not Laura; she said nothing; but there was a look in her sweet face that told far more than words.

"After that Mr. Langley was every day and nearly all of every day, at the house. He and Laura were always together, playing and singing, and drawing and reading. And the more we saw of him, the better we liked him, and we never tried to check this intimacy. And that month passed, and the next came, and Mr. Langley began to talk of going home. I don't know rightly where his home was, but I think in New York, where he was studying law, he told us. The middle of October he did go, shaking hands with the whole of us, the villain, and saying he would never forget the pleasant days he had spent amongst our New Hampshire hills.

"I was afraid Laura would droop and fret after him, but she didn't. She sang as blithely about the house as ever, and how was I to know she was only waiting a letter from him to follow him? That they had it all arranged beforehand? Before the month closed the letter came. Laura bade us good-night the evening that brought it, and next morning, when I went to call her to breakfast, she was gone."

There was a pause. Rachel's tears were falling fast, but Magdalen sat staring straight at the fire, with dry, glittering eyes.

"There was a note for your papa, hurried and brief, telling him she loved Mr. Langley, and was gone to be married. It was necessary, for family reasons, Mr. Langley told her, that the marriage should be strictly private. His family wished him to marry his cousin, and he dared not oppose them openly. She begged her father not to search for her; she would be well and happy and would write again as soon as she was Mr. Langley's wife.

"She never wrote again. It was a terrible suspense. Nobody would believe the story of the marriage in the village and she was disgraced forever. Willie was furious at first. He would seek out Langley and shoot him like a dog, if Laura was not his wife. But you know Willie; his rage flew over. December came; he went to New York and he had not even tried to find them.

"The next we heard he and Langley were as thick as ever. He met Langley in New York and he was Laura's husband; but Laura was only the wretched shadow of herself. They were poor and lived in a shabby boarding-house, and she was miserably dressed. Langley was no law student—nothing but a professional gambler—and in a few months he had made a professional gambler of our poor, weak boy. He wrote and wrote perpetually for money, until there was no more to write for; he was deeply in debt to Langley and others; he grew desperate; he forged Doctor Wentworth's name for two thousand dollars, was detected, arrested, tried and sentenced for six years."

Rachel's voice sank in a hoarse whisper. Magdalen's face had dropped in her hand; she never lifted it during the remainder of the story.

"That blow finished what Laura had begun. Your father dropped down in a fit when he heard it, and never left his bed after; and in September—just one year after that matchless villain came amongst us—he was laid beside your mamma in the churchyard.

"I cannot tell you how desolate I felt here alone, Magdalen. They all wanted me to send for you right away, but I hadn't the heart. I seemed to know poor Laura would come back and I waited for that.

"Early in October, one stormy night, when the wind blew a gale, and the rain fell in torrents, she came. She walked, in all the downpour, from the station, and I think that helped to give her her death blow. But she would have died anyway. She wanted nothing but to get back to the old home and die. Oh, that changed face!—so haggard, so heart-broken! My poor nursling! And so wretched and miserably dressed! She gave one scream when I told her that her father was dead and dropped down in a dead faint.

"Ah, what a wretched, wretched time it was! I never saw despair before, and I pray God I never may again. I wanted to send for you, but she cried out, in a wild, frenzied sort of way:

"'No! no! no! not for ten thousand worlds! I am not fit to breathe the same air she does! Magdalen is my name, not hers! Send for her when I am dead!'

"Once, and once only, I spoke of Langley. She had been quiet for hours, sitting crouching over the fire. At the sound of

his name she started up and tossed the hair back from her face like a mad woman.

"Don't speak of him!" she cried out; 'he is the blackest and basest villain on the face of the earth! My curse on him wherever he goes!"

"My poor Magdalen, it is terrible to have to tell you of such things. After that I never mentioned Langley's name, nor your father's, nor Willie's. I left her to herself. The few days before her last illness she spent in writing a letter. It took her a long time, she was so very weak; but she finished it at last, and told me to give it to you when she was dead and buried.

"I have told my sister all,' she said; 'it may keep her from quite hating my memory when I am gone!"

"From that hour I could see death approaching. The doctor and the clergyman knew as well as I did she would never rise from her bed again. I wrote for you, but you came too late. Laura's earthly troubles are over."

With fast-falling tears, Rachel's story of sin and suffering closed. The rain and wind, that had made a dismal accompaniment to her dismal words, the light fall of red cinders, the ticking of the old clock, had the silence to themselves; and Magdalen cowered before the fire, her face hidden, hearing all, and never moving or looking up.

CHAPTER II.

THE DEAD SISTER'S LETTER.

Through the gray gloom of another dull October day the scant funeral procession left the cottage, and took their way to the village churchyard. The coffin plate told the dead girl's mournful but too common history:

LAURA ALLWARD. Aged 18.

Laura Allward! And her baby wailed in old Rachel's faithful arms. That was why only one or two elderly matrons came near the cottage, and why such a handful of men followed the hearse, gloomily, to the grave!

It was not customary in that little New England village for women to attend funerals, but Magdalen Allward, with a thick veil over her face, and a heavy shawl drawn around her slender form, followed her sister to the grave. Curious eyes peeped from closed windows to scan that black-draped, girlish figure, and heads shook ominously, and croaking voices hoped she might come to a good end. But they doubted it—these good people; the taint of her sister's shame, her brother's disgrace, would cling to her like a garment of fire, through life.

The sods rattled down on the coffin lid, the men stood by with bare heads. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, and then the sexton, blue and cold, in the bleak October weather, filled up the grave in a hurry, and slapped briskly on the sods. And all the time the veiled figure of the lonely girl stood apart, forlorn and shivering in the raw blasts. One by one the men straggled away and left her there, as desolate and forsaken a creature as the whole world held.

The new-made grave was under a clump of melancholy fir trees, worried by the high wind, and writhing like things in human agony. Side by side lay two others, sacred to the memory of John Allward and his wife Helen, but forever and ever that new-made grave must lie nameless.

Magdalen Allward looked up with a shiver at the low-lying sky, gray and desolate as her young life, and slowly, slowly turned away at last. Heaven knows what her thoughts had been while she stood there, alone among the dead, alone among the living, and felt that one man had wrought all this misery, and disgrace, and death. Her veiled face kept her secret well, as she walked wearily homeward through the windy twilight.

Rachel sat before the fire, holding the baby, and crooning softly as she rocked it asleep. Magdalen threw back her veil, stooped and kissed it.

"Then you are not going to dislike it," the nurse said, looking relieved. "I was afraid you would."

"Dislike it! Dislike a little babe!"

"You know what I mean, dear—for that villain's sake."

Magdalen rose up suddenly, her face darkening vindictively.

"You are right; I ought to hate it—spawn of a viper—as I hate him! But, no; it is Laura's baby; I will try and like it, for Laura's sake. I am going to my room now, Rachel. I am worn out. No, I want nothing but rest. Good night."

She quitted the room, ascended to her own, with slow, weary steps, undressed, and then threw herself upon the bed. Worn out she surely was, and scarcely had her head touched the pillow than she was asleep—the sound, blessed sleep of youth and health.

It was almost noon next day when she came down-stairs. Breakfast awaited her and in dark silence and moody she ate it. As she arose from the table she said:

"Rachel, where is the letter Laura left for me?"

Rachel produced it at once. A thick letter, in a buff envelope, sealed and addressed:

To My Sister Magdalen. To be read when I am buried.

Magdalen stood silently gazing at the familiar handwriting for a few moments, then, silently still, she turned and walked out of the kitchen. Rachel looked after her uneasily.

"She is going to read it in her own room. Poor child! I hope it may not distress her much. Her troubles are too heavy for her sixteen years."

Rachel was mistaken; she was not going to read it in her own room. She came down presently dressed for a walk, holding the letter in her hand.

"Where are you going with that letter, Magdalen?" the old woman asked, in alarm.

The girl paused on the threshold to answer her.

"I am going to read Laura's letter beside Laura's grave. It will seem like her voice speaking to me from the dead."

Magdalen could not have chosen a more secluded or lonely spot. Shut in by firs and hemlock, a place where no one ever came, save on a sunny Sunday afternoon, she was not likely to be disturbed. On a rustic bench, under the gloomy firs, she sat down, threw back her veil and reverently opened the letter. It was long and closely written, and there, by the writer's grave, seemed indeed a voice from the dead. Magdalen read:

MY DEAREST SISTER:

When you read this the grave will have closed over me, and—and when you know the whole truth you may learn at least to think pityingly of the dead sister who has blighted your young life, but who has been more "sinned against than sinning." It is a little more than a year ago, and yet what a century of sin and misery it seems. My little Magdalen! my pretty, gentle, golden-haired sister! How little I thought when I kissed you good-by, that sunny September morning, it would be good-by forever and ever.

Rachel will tell you how I left home—she can tell you no more. Not how I loved Maurice Langley; not how I believed in him; not how I trusted him. He was the veriest hero of romance—the prince of my silly girlish dreams—and I loved him madly, after the fashion of foolish, novel-reading girls, and thought the sunshine of heaven not half so bright as his smile. And he—oh, Magdalen; it was easy for him—false to the core of his deceitful heart—to take me in his arms, and make me think I was all the world to him. I listened and I trusted, and was wrapt in ecstasy—delirious with love and delight—and like plastic wax in the hands of a molder, I heard his plausible story, and I believed it as I believed the Scriptures. It must be a secret marriage, or a total separation. His parents would never consent to an open marriage, and my father would never consent to a clandestine one. So I must fly. Separation to me was worse than death. I consented to anything—everything—rather than that.

He arranged it all that night, with the ready facility, I know now, of one well used to such deception. In two days he would start for New York—make all necessary arrangements—I was to follow, and join him there. A clergyman, a college friend of his, would perform the ceremony within an hour of my arrival, and then no more partings from his darling Laura in this lower world. Oh, never did Satan, in tempting Eve, paint the forbidden fruit in more dazzling colors than did my tempter in alluring me.

Magdalen, I consented. I left my home—my father—all that was dear to me in this world, for my lover.

I reached New York. He was there as I left the cars, impatiently awaiting me, for he loved me then, with a fierce, impetuous love—too burning to last. And he kept his promise—within the hour a marriage ceremony took place. A clergyman, white-haired and venerable, married us at the hotel, without witnesses, and immediately departed. I had no doubts of its validity—no thought of any horrible fraud. I was his wife, or death by torture would not have kept me by his side one moment, dearly as I loved him.

We lived in the hotel, quiet and retired, and I was unutterably happy, unutterably blessed. There was but one drawback to my perfect joy—he would not let me write home. And that refusal was the forerunner—the first of the misery that was to come. It came soon—very soon—bitter and heavy. Indifference began—coldness, neglect, cruelty. He left me alone, day after day, night after night. When he did return it was always brutally drunk, and in drunkenness the truth came out. The man I had married was a professed gambler.

After that bitter blow the others followed fast. Coldness and cruelty turned to loathing and hate. I was a nuisance

and a burden to him. He wished he had never seen me; he was a fool for encumbering himself with a white-faced, pitiful, whimpering cry-baby. He took me from the hotel and placed me in a shabby boarding-house, reeking with foul smells and loathing sights; he swore at me when he came home reeling, beastly drunk, and often, often Magdalen, maddened with liquor and losses, he struck me. It was after that Willie came. They met and Maurice obtained his old ascendancy over Willie's weak mind. He could be so agreeable, so delightful, so fascinating, when he chose. He brought Willie home, apologizing in his laughing way for our Bohemian lodgings, and, knowing well I would never betray him. God knows I tried to save Willie. I warned him. I did what I could, but it was all in vain. In a few months he was in a felon's cell, for forgery. It was through an anonymous letter the news reached me first, written in a man's hand, very brief, but full of appalling facts. Maurice Langley was the most worthless of all worthless scoundrels, false and corrupt to the core of his heart. His name was not Langley; that name was as false as the dyed hair and mustache he wore to disguise himself. I was not his wife—that ceremony in the hotel was the most contemptible of shams; he had a bona-fide wife living before he ever saw me, and living still—deserted. I had been fooled from the first to the last. If I doubted the charges, let me show the letter to Langley, and let him disprove them if he dare.

I did not doubt. Conviction, strong as death, seized upon me from the first. I was so stunned by repeated blows that I sat in a sort of numb despair, hardly conscious that I suffered. A horrible stupor held me—I sat without a tear or groan, waiting for my betrayer to come.

He came some time before midnight, drunk as usual, reeling into the room, singing a vulgar song. I rose up and put the letter in his hand, without saying a word. He read it through and burst out with an oath: "That scoundrel, Burns, I always knew he would peach! Well, my girl, it's all true, and now what are you going to do about it?"

I stood there before him and looked him straight in the face until he quailed. I never spoke a word. I went over to the bed where my shawl and bonnet lay and put them on.

"Where are you going?" he said.

"I am going home."

I don't know what there was in my face that awed and sobered him. I dare say he thought me mad. He kept aloof, very pale, watching me.

"It's the middle of the night, Laura," he said, "don't go. Wait until morning."

I heard him, as we hear people talking in a dream. I never heeded—I opened the door and walked out into a blind, black night, as wretched a creature as ever trod the pave.

I wandered about until morning. I think I was light-headed. There was a mad, reckless longing in my half-crazed brain to go home—to fall at my father's feet, to sob out my sin and die. How I got to the station, how I knew enough to take my ticket and start on my journey, I cannot tell. It is all confused and bewildering. The first distinct impression I had was of being face to face with Rachel, and hearing her say my father was dead.

I have no more to tell—my story and my life are done.

You will think as pityingly and as forgivingly of me as you can, and if my child lives you will take its dead mother's place. Never let its father look on it if you can prevent it—he is my murderer—your father's—Willie's. I cannot forgive him—I cannot! I am dying and I cannot.

Farewell, my sister; may your life be as happy as mine has been miserable. I leave this record in justice to myself. Don't hate poor Laura's memory when she is gone.

There the letter ended. Magdalen looked up, whiter than snow—whiter than death. The twilight had fallen, the stars swung silver-white, the young moon shimmered on the edge of an opal-tinted sky, and the evening wind sighed forlornly among the melancholy firs. The girl dropped the letter, fell on her knees by her sister's grave, and, clasping her hands, held up her pale face to the starry sky.

"Hear me, oh God!" she cried, "hear the vow of a desolate orphan—of a blighted and ruined life! From this hour I swear to devote myself to the discovery of my sister's murderer—to the avenging of my sister's wrongs. Thou who hast said, 'an

eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a life for a life,' hear me, and help me to keep my vow!"

She dropped down, her colorless, rigid face, lying on Laura's grave as if waiting some response to her wild appeal. But no sound responded—only the dreary wailing of the cold October wind over the lonely graves.

CHAPTER III.

MR. GEORGE BARSTONE.

The cloudless sunshine of a June morning, streaming through the hotel windows, made squares of luminous glory on the gaudy Brussels carpet, and shone and scintillated on the china and silver of a freshly laid breakfast table. A white-aproned waiter had just borne in the steaming coffee and steak and rolls, and now stood anxiously awaiting the arrival of the gentleman who was to demolish these edibles before they grew cold. The early mail had just arrived, and, piled beside the hot plates, were about twenty letters in white envelopes, and in dainty—more or less—female hands. The Herald, all damp, and smelling very strong of printer's ink, lay beside them.

"Good morning, William," said Mr. Barstone. "Nice sort of day, isn't it? Hey! The mail got in, and half a bushel of notes for me! All from ladies, William—every one from ladies, bless their precious little hearts! Pour out the coffee like a good fellow, and then go."

William obeyed, whipped the silver covers off the steak and eggs, and took his departure, leaving Mr. Barstone to eat and read at his leisure.

Mr. Barstone seated himself at the table, tumbling over the pile of letters, shook his head reflectively as he counted twenty, buttered his first roll and unfolded the moist newspaper.

He was a big man—this Mr. George Barstone—six feet, if an inch, with broad shoulders, fair hair, blue eyes and a good-looking, good-humored face.

Very leisurely he ate and read, swallowing the "horrid murders," and robberies, and awful accidents, with his coffee and underdone steak. By and by he turned to the advertisements and glanced down the long columns of "wants." At one he suddenly paused.

WANTED—A Governess. Must be under twenty-five, of attractive appearance, willing to reside in the country, and proficient in music, drawing and French. Terms liberal. Address G. B., Herald Office.

Mr. Barstone perused this advertisement with extraordinary relish, considering how often he had read it before. Then he flung down the papers and turned to the letters with a look of commiseration.

"Poor little things!" he said, tossing them over; "twenty to-day, and eighteen yesterday; all under twenty-five—all attractive and all proficient in music, French and drawing. Poor little souls! I wish I could engage the whole of them, and take them to Connecticut with me, and settle them in a colony of pretty white cottages, and pension them off with husbands and dowries. But I can't, I can only give thirty-seven my deepest compassion, and bring the thirty-eighth home with me to Golden Willows."

Mr. Barstone plunged at once into business and began tearing open the white missives. They were all more or less alike; the writers were all twenty or thereabouts, prepossessing to look at, possessed of the requisite arts and all perfectly willing to reside in the country.

The gravity of Mr. Barstone's face, as he read these piteous appeals, was a sight to see.

"Poor little soul! poor little thing!" he interjected, compassionately, after each, as it fluttered down among the white drifts on the carpet. "'How happy could I be with either were t'other dear charmer away!' Any one of them would do; but how in the world is a fellow to choose among so many? I wish Fanny was here to help me."

The last of the twenty seemed to impress Mr. Barstone. There was no particular reason why it should, either. It was daintily written, but so were the rest, and it was briefer and less elaborate than most.

The writer did not even mention her good looks, and she was the only one who had omitted that important item. She was under twenty, she said—eighteen that very month—and had but a year's experience as governess. A personal interview could be had by calling at No. —West Twenty-third Street, and the note was signed "Magdalen Wayne."

Perhaps it was the pretty, peculiar name that struck his fancy, and Mr. Barstone was whimsical in his fancies; but he

folded this note up and put it in his pocket, with the resolution of calling at No.—West Twenty-third Street. On the trifle of a name destinies hung—on the turning of a hair whole lives balance. He pulled out his watch and saw that it was nearly eleven.

"I'll jump into an omnibus and go there at once," thought the young man. "I'm very sorry for you," apostrophizing the other letters as he picked them up—"deucedly sorry; but what's a man to do? If Magdalen Wayne don't suit, I'll try some of you; but, I've a presentiment that she will."

The house in Twenty-third Street was very easily found—a stately brownstone front. Mr. Barstone rang the bell, inquired for Miss Magdalen Wayne, and was ushered at once into a handsome parlor.

"What name, sir?" insinuated the damsel in calico, hovering, expectant, on the threshold, and the gentleman pulled Miss Wayne's note out of his pocket by way of reply.

"Give her that," he said, "and tell her I'm the person whose advertisement she answered."

The girl departed and Mr. Barstone was left to his reflections.

"Silence and solitude," he thought, glancing around and taking stock. "I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls, with vassals and'—nice style of thing this. Miss Wayne's lines seem to have fallen in pleasant places. Inlaid tables, pretty pictures, velvet carpets, grand piano—remarkably nice, indeed! I hope she'll hurry."

But she didn't hurry. Ten minutes passed—fifteen—half an hour. Mr. Barstone fidgeted in his cushioned chair as if it had been stuffed with squirming eels.

"I might have known how it would be," he mused, despondingly; "she is doing up her hair. Fanny always does up her hair when gentlemen call. If one could only smoke, or if I had brought the Police Gazette, or something entertaining to read."

But all things come to an end. Just there the door opened, and, with a mighty rustling of silk, a lady swept stormily in.

"I'm afraid I've kept you waiting an 'orrid length of time," burst out the lady, volubly; "but I was so busy with the children, and nobody knows what a torment children are except those that have to deal with them. You really must excuse me, for I couldn't have helped it anyway."

Mr. Barstone gazed aghast. The lady was short and fat—dreadfully fat—with a high-colored, chubby face, and certainly never destined to see thirty-five again.

"Oh, my heavens!" thought Mr. Barstone, in consternation, "she'll never do! To think of a woman of her inches and time of life answering my advertisement for an attractive-looking governess!"

He rose as he spoke, his dismay vividly depicted on his face and stared at the lady.

"You are Miss Wayne, are you not?"

"Oh, dear, no!" shrilly cried the fat lady. "I'm Mrs. 'Oward. Miss Wayne is my governess, and a treasure of a governess she is; and I wouldn't think of parting with her on any account if she'd stay, for she's worth her weight in gold, and Mr. 'Oward thinks everything of her, and so do the children; but it's natural, you know, she shouldn't care to leave her native county and go to Hingland, particularly 'aving relatives 'ere who are entirely dependent upon her, and very 'ard that must be for her, poor dear! 'Ow many children 'ave you got?"

Mr. Barstone, with his breath quite taken away, and, sitting staring helplessly, was some time before he could realize this question was addressed to him.

"There are no children!" exclaimed the young man, desperately. "It's a young lady—a ward of my aunt's—a young lady of sixteen. Pray, ma'am," cutting in briskly as he saw Mrs. Howard about to burst out afresh, "where is Miss Wayne, and when can I see her? My time is precious—very precious—and I want to close the business at once."

"And so you can," responded Mrs. Howard, "for she'll be here directly. She's just run across to Sixth Avenue, to Miss Simpkins' store, to match my pea-green—oh, here she is, now!"

As she spoke the parlor door opened and a young girl entered, recoiling again immediately at sight of a stranger.

"I beg your pardon," she said, hurriedly, "I thought you were alone."

"Oh, come right in," cried Mrs. Howard. "It is to see you this gentleman came, and he's been waiting goodness knows how long. It's about the advertisement, my dear—'G. B.,' you know, my love—and I'm sure the situation will suit you, seeing that there are no children, and only one young lady, which will be quite like a sister to you, I'm sure. My dear sir, my governess, Miss Magdalen Wayne."

The young person named bowed respectfully. Mr. Barstone rose up and bowed respectfully also. He had seen, while good Mrs. Howard chattered, that she was a very pretty young person, with a pale face, deep dark eyes, and golden brown hair, and Mr. Barstone was always impressed by pretty people. She was stately, too, and tall, with a certain queenliness about her that, perhaps, was a trifle out of place in a governess.

"My name is Barstone," said the gentleman, quite subdued by so much beauty; "and I am certain, Miss Wayne, from all Mrs. Howard says, I will be fortunate, indeed, if I can secure your services."

"May I inquire, Mr. Barstone, where it is?"

"Millford, Connecticut," responded Mr. Barstone. "Millford is our town. The place to which you are going—a country villa—is called Golden Willows."

"And as to terms, now," struck in Mrs. Howard, "Magdalen has no head for business, whatever, so you'll excuse my asking, I hope. They're liberal I trust, because, poor dear, she has an old nurse and a little niece, down in New Hampshire, to support. You mentioned in the advertisement, you know, Mr. Barstone, 'terms liberal.'"

"Terms? Oh, yes; my aunt requested me to say five hundred dollars per annum."

"And extremely liberal, I am sure, that is!" cried Mrs. Howard; "do you hear, Magdalen, my dear? Only one pupil and five hundred dollars per annum. I am certain, Mr. Barstone, Magdalen is delighted to close with your offer at once."

Mr. Barstone bowed with a beaming face.

"I will call for you on Friday morning, at half-past seven. Good morning, Mrs. Howard—good morning, Miss Wayne. I congratulate myself on my success."

Mr. Barstone soon reached his hotel, and ran up to pen a line to his aunt before descending to the three o'clock dinner:

"NEW YORK.

"MY DEAR AUNT:—

"It's all right. I've got Fan a governess—a regular out-and-outer! Pardon the force of that expression, but it just conveys my meaning. She plays and sings like St. Cecilia—never heard St. Cecilia, but heard of her—her name is Miss Magdalen Wayne, eighteen years old, and pretty as a picture. Tell Fanny we will be down Friday evening, and let her be on her best behavior. Is Phil with you yet? Best regards if he is, and until Friday, my dear aunt, adieu. Affectionately,

GEORGE."

Addressing this to "Miss Lydia Barstone, Golden Willows, Millford, Conn.," Mr. Barstone, with a heavy weight off his manly mind, gave it to a waiter to post, and went down-stairs to dinner.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MARK ON MAURICE LANGLEY'S ARM.

Toiling slowly in the warm afternoon sunshine, up the village street, shut in from the world by those green New Hampshire hills, went George Barstone's governess. There were few people abroad, for the train had dashed in just at tea time; but those few stopped to greet heartily the pretty girl in black.

"Dear me, now, if it's not Magdalen Allward! Have you come to stay, or is it only a visit?"

"Only a visit," Magdalen replied, to these good people. "I get lonely, sometimes, and homesick, in that great, dusty city yonder, and run down among our breezy hills to freshen up."

She walked on, a rested look coming over her tired young face, after each of these greetings.

"The world is not such an unfeeling world after all," she thought. "There are kindly hearts in it—stray roses among the thorns. It is worth enduring the pain of going away, for the pleasure of coming home."

"Home! She paused before it at last—a little brown cottage, with June creepers running over it. The front door stood wide to admit the pleasant evening coolness, and she could see through into the little yellow painted kitchen. There sat Rachel over her knitting—there lay pussy, coiled up on her mat—and there toddled about a little flaxen-haired, pink-cheeked fairy, very shaky on her fat legs. The golden sunset lit up the picture like amber rain.

"Dear old home!" Magdalen murmured. "Such a haven of rest and peace, after the turmoil and strife of the big, weary world. Thank God, I can keep it for them! thank God for my youth and strength that enables me to fight the battle of life. Such a happy, happy home as it once was, before that villain came. Father, Willie, Laura all gone—all their unavenged wrongs lying at his door. Heaven grant me patience to persevere until I find him, and then—then let him beware!"

Her face darkened vindictively, and her little hand clenched. Oh, to have him at her mercy now—to stand face to face with Laura's murderer.

She pushed open the low white gate and walked in. Old Rachel's blunt hearing failed to catch the light step, but the little toddler saw her and ran forward with a scream of delight.

"My pet! my pet!" Magdalen cried, catching her up and covering the bright baby face with kisses. "How glad I am to see you again!"

Rachel started up and stood with a face of doubt and delight. The girl laughed and kissed her, too.

"Dear old nurse! Yes, it's I, and very tired, dusty and hungry I am. Is tea almost ready, Rachel, and have you got anything particularly nice?"

"My child! my darling! You don't know what a happy surprise this is!" old Rachel exclaimed. "I cannot tell you how glad I am to see you! And Laura, too—look at that child's eyes!"

"That's because she's waiting for candy," said Magdalen. "Well, you shall have some, Laura. Here's candy, peanuts, picture books, dolls, ad infinitum. Cry 'havoc,' and disembowel the bag yourself."

She gave her reticule into the child's hands, and little Laura, with a childish scream of ecstasy, sat down on the floor and proceeded to entrench herself in a breastwork of toys and sweetmeats.

Magdalen shook out her dusty robes, smoothed the shining tresses Mr. George Barstone had admired so much, and sat down and looked at her old nurse, with a face so brightly beautiful, that it was a delight only to see her. She was a fresh and sanguine girl of eighteen, and the happy radiance would break out, in spite of present drudgery and past troubles.

"It is so nice to be here," she said, fetching a long breath. "You don't know how homesick I get sometimes, Rachel. New York seems like a great stone prison, and I and the rest of the men and women, all in the treadmill. I feel as though I should die if I did not make my escape occasionally, and see the blue sky and the swelling fields, and breathe the fresh mountain wind."

"You poor child! And how long are you going to stay?"

"Only until to-morrow afternoon. I have left Mrs. Howard's, and put my head in a new yoke on Friday morning."

"My dear—left your place?"

"Yes—for a better, I hope. The salary is higher, and the work, I take it, less; but I never expect to find a more indulgent employer than gossippy, good-natured Mrs. Howard. She is going home to England, you see, and I can't go with her on account of the old lady and the bairnie here, so I answered an advertisement in the Herald, and secured this new place."

"In New York?"

"No, the country—Millford, Conn. The name of the family is Barstone, and, from the sample I have seen, I think I shall like them. I don't go until Friday, so I took time by the forelock and ran home to tell you the news. And now for supper—I told you I was famished."

Nurse Rachel bustled about in a state of ecstasy. It was delightful to see her nursling at all—it was more delightful to see her in such good health and spirits.

"I wish I had you always," Rachel said. "You bring sunshine wherever you go, my pretty darling. It is a great deal too hard on a delicate young creature like you, to have to work like a galley-slave or a kitchen maid, for a good-for-nothing old woman like me, and poor little Laura. But I hope it won't last forever—that bright face of yours, my pet, will get you a handsome young husband one of these days, with plenty of money, and all your heart can wish."

"Plenty of money and nothing to do!" sang Magdalen; "that would be bliss, Rachel; but the handsome young husband is very slow in coming, and I'm getting dreadfully old—eighteen last birthday. They advertise for husbands in New York, when they grow quite desperate. I'll wait six months longer and if he doesn't come of himself by the end of that time, I'll send two dollars to the Herald office and try my fate in print."

Rachel shook her head and replenished her young lady's cup.

"Have patience, my dear, he'll come, depend upon it. I was twenty-eight when I got married—you've time enough yet. Laura, you'll be sick if you eat any more candy, and it's time little girls were in bed."

"Yes," said Magdalen, "little girls should go to roost with little chickens. Come, Laura, auntie will put you to bed herself, and the biggest doll shall sleep with you all night."

Magdalen bore her off and it was a long time before she came down. When she did the radiance had left her face and her cheeks were wet with tears.

"I have been singing Laura to sleep," she said; "she is sleeping with dolly hugged tight in her arms, and, oh, Rachel! there is such a look of her mother in her face!"

"Yes," Rachel said, very quietly, "she does look like her. Not at all like him!"

"Thank God she does not!" the girl cried passionately.

"My dear."

"I tell you I should! I could not help it! I would forget she was Laura's child if she had that monster's face, and I should hate her as I hate him!"

"But, my dear!" very much shocked.

"Oh, don't talk to me!" Magdalen cried. "I do forget sometimes, though never forget long, and I abhor myself for it! Two years, two long years, and no nearer the end yet! When I think of it, Rachel, it sets me wild! Two years and no nearer finding that villain than the day Laura was laid in her grave!"

"But, my child, what can you do? It is not your fault."

"No, heaven knows. I have sought for him—I have inquired for him—I have looked for him everywhere. Was it not in

the hope of meeting him that I went to New York, under the name of Wayne? But all in vain I have tried, until I am tempted to give up in despair."

"Better so, dear child. I wish you would."

"Never!" Magdalen cried, her eyes flashing black in the twilight. "Never while my life lasts! I will keep the vow I made beside my dead sister's grave, or he or I shall perish! Give up? I tell you, Rachel, when I think of my father, my sister, my brother, my hate and my wrongs burn in my heart and drive me nearly mad!"

She trod up and down like a young lioness, her eyes blazing, her hands clenched—a fierce young Nemesis.

"But, Magdalen, this is all very wrong, very wicked, very unchristian!"

"I don't believe it! A life for a life was Jehovah's command. It is justice—and justice should be done, though the heavens fall!"

"Ah, Magdalen, be merciful—be womanly! Not a life for a life, but 'Vengeance is mine—I will repay.'"

"Don't talk to me—don't!" the girl exclaimed, passionately. "You cannot feel as I feel! It was my father, my sister, my brother, who were done to death! Oh, my God!" she cried, raising her clasped hands, "hear me! Help me to find this man!"

There was a pause. The old woman was awed by the impassioned vehemence and despair she could not comprehend.

"You never will," she said, at last; "you never will find him. He may be dead, he may be at the other end of the universe, he may be in prison for life."

"He may! he may be! but he also may not be! You and I are alive—why not he? It is not that makes me fear—makes me despair. It is that, if I met him to-morrow, I should not know him—if I stood face to face with him this hour, I should not recognize Laura's destroyer. He is young, and he is tall—that is everything that I know about him. His name, his hair, his whiskers, all were false—you might hardly know him yourself if you met him again. I may have sat by his side, heard his voice, held his hand, and left him nothing the wiser. I suppose it is only in sensational novels and melodramas that people go about with convenient strawberry marks. There seems nothing left for me but give up in despair."

She sank down wearily, but looked around the same instant in surprise, for old Rachel had started to her feet, all at once, violently excited.

"The mark!" she cried; "the mark! I never thought of it before! The mark on Maurice Langley's arm!"

"What mark?" questioned Magdalen, breathlessly; "what mark? Speak, Rachel! One by which I may know him?"

"One by which you may know him among a thousand—a mark not to be mistaken. I recollect it as well, after three years, as if it had been three hours."

"Thank heaven!" Magdalen fervently exclaimed; "thank heaven, I may then find him yet! Tell me what it is like, Rachel?"

"It was by mere accident I saw it," said Rachel; "and you might meet Maurice Langley a million times, and never have an opportunity of seeing his arm. It was one day he had slightly sprained his wrist, and I had unfastened his shirt sleeve and rolled it up to the elbow to pour water on the sprain. That was how I saw the mark."

"And what was it like?"

"Like nothing I ever saw before. It was no natural mark—it was tattooing, and covered almost the whole inside part of the arm, between elbow and wrist. It was so curious that Willie, and Laura, and I forgot for a while all about the sprain in examining it."

"Well?"

"First," said Rachel, "there was a sort of wreath, done in blue ink, grapes and leaves, quite perfect. Inside the wreath, done in red ink, there was a heart, with a dagger through it, and drops falling like drops of blood. Surmounting this, in black ink, was a big capital letter 'B.' And, now I think of it, 'B' must have been the initial of his family name, though he

explained it away at the time. The device was the Bleeding Heart, and very well it was done, and very much it must have hurt him to get it done. He laughed over it, and said a sailor, with half his body illuminated in like manner, had tattooed it when he was a boy. But if ever you see an arm with that device (which isn't likely), you may know the owner of that arm is Maurice Langley."

"Thank heaven!" Magdalen repeated, "I have found some distinct clue at last! Accident revealed it once to you—accident may reveal it once again to me."

Rachel shook her head.

"It is very unlikely. You might live under the same roof with him for years and never see the mark. Oh, my dear, give up thinking about it! Be happy yourself, if you can, and let poor Laura rest in her grave."

"No, Rachel—no!" Magdalen said, resolutely; "I will never give up. I could not rest in my own grave, if I died to-morrow, with my vow unfulfilled. Be happy? How can I be happy, with my only brother in a felon's cell—my only sister in a disgraced grave? Am I a monster, that I should even try to forget, while the cold-blooded, matchless villain, who has wrought the ruin of all I love, goes free before the world? I tell you no, Rachel! If I live to be a hundred years old, I will never give up! Don't try to alter my purpose. Sooner or later, so sure as there is a just and avenging God above, I will meet that man, and punish him for his crime!"

She strode up and down the room like a tragedy queen, her face pale, her eyes flashing, her voice ringing like a bell. If George Barstone could have seen her at that moment, I doubt if he would have known again the calm-eyed, gentle-voiced girl of Mrs. Howard's parlor.

Old Rachel sighed heavily. She knew it was all very wicked and unwomanly, this wild talk of revenge; but she knew, too, the indomitable nature of her nursling. When she spoke, her words were commonplace, and far from the subject.

"You must be very tired, my dear, after your day's travel. Hadn't you better go to bed?"

The twilight had faded out in the pale gray blank, and on the edge of a turquoise sky glimmered palely the new moon. She rose, to draw the curtain and light the lamp, as she spoke.

"No," replied Magdalen, abruptly turning away; "I am going out."

"My dear! At this hour! Where?"

"To Laura's grave."

With that answer, the girl left the room and went up-stairs. Five minutes later, and she passed out the front door, dressed for her walk. The old nurse sighed, and shook her head forebodingly.

"I wish she didn't remember so well," she said to herself. "She will ruin her whole life with this mad, unchristian scheme of revenge! I know that he deserves punishment, if ever man deserved it; but it is madness for her to think she will meet him, and know him, and inflict it. I wish she would ever forget!"

Vain wish! Magdalen Allward would never forget, never forgive. You could read that in the white rigidity of her face, in the dusky fire of her eyes, as she walked along in the silvery moonlight, to her sister's grave. Like sheeted ghosts in the solemn light rose up the ghastly grave-stones; but there was no superstitious fear in her brave nature, and she walked steadily on, to the three graves under the firs.

"My poor Laura! my poor sister!" she sadly murmured, the slow tears welling up. "What a weary time you have lain in your unavenged grave! I have tried, oh, heaven knows how ardently! to meet the man who wronged you so cruelly, and tried in vain. But some day, sooner or later, I will cross his path—I will stand before him, his accuser, your avenger! And then, Laura—and then!"

Nearly an hour after, while she still knelt there, heedless how the moments sped, a hand fell upon her shoulder, and looking up, she saw her faithful nurse.

"Thinking still, my dear?" Rachel said, kindly. "Your poor brain will get dazed, Magdalen. What is it all about?" and she viewed with sad, somber eyes.

"I am thinking of the mark on Maurice Langley's arm," she said. "Rachel, I don't know how it is, but I have a presentiment—a conviction—that I will meet that man before long!"

CHAPTER V.

GOLDEN WILLOWS.

Punctual to the moment, on Friday morning Mr. George Barstone made his appearance, in a cab, at the residence of Mrs. Howard, and by that lady (drowned in tears) Miss Wayne and her belongings were given into custody.

If the truth must be told, and the weakness of the most amiable of mankind expressed, Mr. Barstone had been in a fever for the hour to come. The great gray eyes and shining tresses of Mrs. Howard's governess had haunted him strangely and pertinaciously during the intervening time. If he sat placidly smoking his big brown meerschaum, the exquisite face shone on him through the misty vapor like a star through a fog; if he went to the theater or sat down to dinner or sauntered along Broadway, the pale face and fair brown hair rose up before him, and blotted, for the time being, everything else out. But then men naturally take an interest in their aunts' governesses. If she had been the amiable owner of red hair and a pug nose, no doubt it would have been just the same.

The June weather was at its brightest and best when Mr. Barstone and his fair companion started on their "Down-East" journey, and the jocund sunshine was reflected in the gentleman's beaming face. But Miss Wayne, distraught, not to say gloomy, sat with her veil down, gazing out at the sunlit landscape flitting by. Mr. Barstone noticed this presently and gave up trying to be entertaining.

"She has been to see her friends in the country," he thought, "and, perhaps, has found a screw loose somewhere. She seems out of spirits, poor little thing, so I won't bore her talking."

So Mr. Barstone pulled out the morning paper, and got into the politics, and forgot the flight of time and the young lady beside him. But she was too pretty to be forgotten long, and when they reached Hartford and stopped for refreshments, he insisted on her leaving the car and having something to eat.

"Traveling's hungry business," he remarked, profoundly; "it always makes me ravenous, and you've had no dinner."

But Miss Wayne was not ravenous, and only wanted a cup of tea, and then walked up and down the platform by herself until the bell rang. She had thrown back her veil, and her face looked sad and downcast as she resumed her seat.

"She's lonely, perhaps, leaving Mrs. Howard," reflected Mr. Barstone, looking at her with pitying interest; "and she is going among strangers, who may ill use her, for all she knows. I wish she was my sister; it's bad enough for a man—a great, rough fellow like me—to knock about the sharp corners of this crooked world; but for a pretty, delicate creature like that! I do think," mused the young man rather irrelevantly, "she has the most beautiful face I ever saw!"

In the amber haze of the early afternoon the passengers for Millford got out at the junction. There was no conveyance waiting for Mr. Barstone and his companion, but he explained away that little circumstance.

"I know how cramping it is to the energies to sit a whole day in the cars, and I thought you would like to stretch your—I mean," said Mr. Barstone, checking himself, in considerable embarrassment, "as the walk from the junction to the town is only half a mile, you might prefer it."

"And I do," said Miss Wayne, accepting his proffered arm. "How very smoky your Millford is!"

"So many manufactories, you see," replied the Millfordian. "Quite a thriving and bustling place, I assure you, though rather grimy on the face of it. It is a lively sight on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, when the factory ladies turn out and parade the streets. They're in the caterpillar state all week—dirty faces and no crinoline—but on those two days they wash up and come out gaudy butterflies, in glancing silks and artificial flowers. They have hard work, and one pities them sometimes; but, on the whole, they look rather jolly, and as if they enjoyed it."

Miss Wayne found very little to interest her in the noisy, sooty, manufacturing town of Millford. Beyond the sooty streets the blue, bright river flowed, sparkling in the glorious sunshine, as if sown with diamonds.

Mr. Barstone turned out of the black streets, presently, into a more quiet and aristocratic thoroughfare, where trees and shutters were dazzlingly green, and houses and curtains vividly white. Before one of these dwellings a horse and buggy stood waiting, the horse asleep in the lazy sunshine, and the boy who held the reins very little better. This equipage and

the spotless wooden mansion before which it stood Mr. Barstone pointed out with considerable interest.

"That's the trap from Golden Willows, with Sam, the pony, and Bill, the driver, fast asleep. Reminds one of Dickens' Fat Boy, doesn't it? This is my office—behold that door-plate. 'G. Barstone, Barrister-at-law.' A man might do better in Hartford or New York; but what with factory hands breaking each other's heads, and manufacturers cheating one another and their employees, and breach of promise cases, and such odds and ends, business, even here, is delightfully brisk."

Mr. Barstone assisted Miss Wayne into the buggy, took a seat beside her and drove off. Bill, the drowsy, woke up, to take a prolonged stare at the young lady, and then relapsed into a back seat and his former somnambulistic state.

"Has Mr. Philip gone yet, Bill?" inquired Mr. Barstone.

"Went this morning, sir," Bill responded; "7:50 train; Miss Fanny, she got up, she did, and drove him to the station herself. The missis ain't been very well."

"Ah!" said Mr. Barstone, gravely, "I'm sorry to hear that. My aunt, Miss Wayne, has been in delicate health for many years, and unable to leave her room."

Miss Wayne murmured her sympathy. They were bowling along a pleasant country road by this time, with waving trees and swelling fields on either hand and blue glimpses of the sparkling river beyond.

"Pretty road, is it not?" quoth the lawyer. "The Lake Road, they call it. You can't see the lake yet; it is about two miles in length, and our house is at the other extremity. Golden Willows is just five miles from Millford—near enough to be convenient, distant enough to escape the noise and dirt. There's the lake now—seven feet below us."

Miss Wayne looked over the roadside embankment and saw the lake lying between green slopes, like a diamond set in emeralds. Very placid, very beautiful, very lonely—no living thing near. The sunlight lighted the center; the edges were so overhung with pollard willows and sycamores as to be in blackest gloom. Its long white shore dazzled the eyes like sunshine on snow.

"A pretty place," the governess said; "a beautiful place, but, oh! so lonely. Is it always like this?"

"By no means," briskly responded the young man. "You should see it Sunday evenings, after tea, when the young factory ladies and their beaux come here, to do the sentimental in the summer twilight. And you should see it in winter, when it's nicely frosted over, like a huge wedding cake, and the thermometer is tremendously below zero, and half the population of Millford are strapped up in skates! By the way, I hope you're fond of skating, Miss Wayne; if you're not, we'll try and make you fond of it."

Miss Wayne laughed good-naturedly, as they rattled lightly along, and Mr. Barstone proceeded:

"We'll come in sight of our house directly. Do you like old houses, Miss Wayne? because Golden Willows is old, as age goes in New England. It was built before the Revolution by a Mayflower ancestor, and the rooms are low and a trifle dark, with wainscotings and diamond-paned casements. The front door is ponderous enough to stand a siege, and the bedrooms are grand, gloomy and peculiar. It's not haunted, more's the pity; but one wouldn't be surprised if, waking in the dead of night, he saw an old lady sitting at the foot of the bed, in high-heeled shoes and satin petticoat and powdered hair in a pyramid on the top of her head. It looks like that sort of thing, you know."

Miss Wayne laughed once more. It seemed impossible to entertain gloomy thoughts long in the genial company of Mr. Barstone. Being all sunshine himself, it was only natural that a trifle of the superabundant light and happiness of his nature should illumine less fortunate mortals near him.

They were at the house, driving through a tall, clanking gateway, up a straight avenue, where great maples made greenish gloom at noonday. To the right there was an ornamental fish-pond, with trailing yellow willows all around and a willow walk led, away to the left, down direct to the lake. The house itself was long and low and quaint, built of gray stone, with a massive door and peaked porch, all overrun with sweet briar and creeping pine roses.

"Such a pretty place!" Miss Wayne exclaimed, her eyes lighting. "Such a quiet, pretty place! Golden Willows is worthy of its romantic name."

"I thought you would like it," said Mr. Barstone. "There isn't a tree or a stone or a flower about it that isn't worth its

weight in gold to me. Ah, Fanny, my dear, there you are, peeping from behind the curtain and thinking we don't see you! She's gone, Miss Wayne, but she was reconnoitering a second ago!"

Miss Wayne smiled and followed her leader into the house. She had seen the lace curtain raised and a face peeping out, but in a twinkling it was withdrawn, and there was the sound of a piano and a girlish voice singing.

Mr. Barstone led the way into a long, dusky hall, rich in pictures and busts, and thence into a pretty summer parlor—carpet and walls and chairs all white and blue. Canaries sang, flowers bloomed, bouquets, in fragile porcelain vases, were everywhere, and they caught the last verse of the young lady's song as they opened the door.

'Oh, when the bays are all my own,
I know a heart will care;
Oh, when the gold is wooed and won
I know a brow will wear—
Aileen,
I know a brow will wear—"

"Very pretty indeed," remarked Mr. Barstone, remorselessly cutting her short; "but no more at present! Please turn round and welcome the master of the house."

The young lady whirled about on her revolving seat, got up with a faint exclamation and held out one pudgy little paw.

A short, round-about damsel was Miss Fanny Winters, with a prevailing pinkness of skin, flushed cheeks, profuse brown hair, tinged with a strong suspicion of red, brown-like eyes and a prevailing expression of intense good nature.

"I'm so glad you've come back, George," said this young person, kissing him. "You've no idea what a long, stupid day it has been. Old Doctor What-you-may-call-him, in New York, telegraphed for Phil last evening, and, of course, he had to start the first thing to-day. And Aunt Lydia's been ill, and I've had nothing new to read and no permission to open the piano, and I've been wishing for you—oh, dreadfully!"

"As a last resource against blue devils—much obliged to you, Miss Winters. Miss Wayne, allow me to introduce your future pupil, Fanny Winters!"

Miss Winters flirted out her muslin skirts, starched to a painful degree of stiffness, and made Miss Wayne an elaborately graceful bow.

"I'm very glad to see you, Miss Wayne, and I hope we shall be the best of friends, for you've no idea how horribly dull and stupid it is here—has she, George? What with Aunt Lydia sick and George in Millford and Phil in New York, I should have gone stark, staring mad of loneliness long ago, only for the circulating library. And even that is not to be depended on at all times, for the most interesting pages are generally torn out, and you know how provoking that is. I hope you like novels, Miss Wayne, because, if you do, I'm sure we will get along together splendidly."

"Yes," said Mr. Barstone, "if you don't talk Miss Wayne into her grave in a month. Your future pupil, you perceive, emulates your friend, Mrs. Howard. Nonsense flows from her lips in a perennial stream. I give you fair warning, Miss Wayne, cut her short, or she'll drive you to the verge of idiocy."

"Having survived Mrs. Howard a year, I think I am proof against anything Miss Winters can do in that line," said Magdalen laughing. "I am certain we will get on together extremely well."

"And you won't be dreadful about history and geology and rhetoric and things," pleaded Miss Winters, piteously, "because I can never remember old red sandstone and formations and dates and the Gauls and the ancient Romans and all such things Miss Grimwig used to go on so about. It wasn't a bit of use; it only made my head ache, and went in one ear and out at the other. And for music and French—I like polkas when they're easy, and nice little fables to translate, and if I get the spelling and the genders wrong, you won't be cross, will you? And now let's go up-stairs and take off your things."

"And if you can make it convenient, Fan, to order supper an hour earlier than usual," said the young lawyer, "we will be infinitely obliged to you, for Miss Wayne has had nothing since breakfast, and my appetite is always in working condition."

Miss Winters promised, and led her new governess up-stairs, chattering all the way like a magpie. The upper hall was long, dimly lighted, hung with pictures and flanked by many doors.

"These are the chambers," said Miss Winters. "This is Aunt Lydia's. You can't see her to-night, you know, because she feels poorly; but you will to-morrow. This is George's room, this is Phil's, and on the other side is yours and mine. Now take your things off; I must run down and see about tea, but I'll be back directly."

The governess' chamber was a very neat and pretty one, overlooking the orchard and lake. The wide, green prospect, the steel-blue, low-lying lake, the swelling expanse of green earth and azure sky, were all very pleasant after her cramped-up city experience.

"How happy I might be here," she thought; "how happy I would be if I were like other girls of my age—if I had no dark secret to cloud and trouble my life. I like this cheery Miss Winters, I like that agreeable Mr. Barstone. If I could only blot out the dreary past and be simply and honestly happy, as it is in my nature to be. But I dare not—I will not! Laura in her lonely grave, Willie in his gloomy prison, must not be forgotten. I must never give up my search for the double, the treble murderer. I must keep my vow!"

CHAPTER VI.

SUMMER DAYS.

Miss Winters came tripping up-stairs again before the governess had removed her bonnet, her pink complexion a thought deepened by the exercise.

"I have ordered peaches and cream and chocolate for tea," she breathlessly announced, "and I hope you will like sally-lunns, Miss Wayne—our Bridget makes them lovely. What pretty hair you've got, and such a lot of it! Mine's thin; it doesn't look thin, you know, but it is, and I do most of it up in front—corkscrew curls, George calls 'em—and it don't take but little to make one's waterfall. Don't you like the new style?"

Miss Wayne's abundant, glittering locks were worn in a shining coronet, coiled around her stately head.

"I find it more convenient to wear mine like this, Miss Winters."

"And ever so much more becoming. But please don't call me Miss Winters; nobody ever does so except Aunt Lydia when she scolds me. Call me Fanny—and, oh, please! may I call you Magdalen? It is such a sweet, pretty name!"

"Call me Magdalen, by all means; I greatly prefer it to Miss Wayne. I believe I shall not be able to change my dress—my trunk has not arrived."

"It does not matter in the least," said Fanny; "there will be nobody to see you, you know. George doesn't know cotton from brocade; men are as stupid as cows, mostly, about girls' fixings. Who are you in mourning for, Magdalen?"

A dark cloud swept over the fair face of Miss Winters' governess.

"For my father and sister."

"Oh, you've lost your father, then—so have I. Is your mother alive?"

"My mother died when I was a child."

"And so did mine," cried Fanny, looking charmed at the coincidence, "and whatever would have become of me without Aunt Lydia, I'm sure I don't know. I've been here four years, and I was a dreadful little ignoramus of twelve, and I've had at least twenty governesses since."

"Is it possible? Twenty!"

"Well, you see some of them were nasty old pumps, and some of them made love to George, and some didn't know much more than I did myself, and some—oh, we've had a precious time with them, I can tell you. But I feel sure you and I will get along together lovely. You don't look as if you could be cross and fussy and hateful."

"I wonder your aunt did not send you to school."

"No; she likes to have me at home. I'm company for her when she's well, and she's very fond of me and very good to me, although she scolds considerable, and says I'm silly and frivolous. But then, how is one to help being silly and frivolous when one's happy? though goodness knows I'm not happy half the time, mewed up here. It's all very well when Phil's down," said Fanny, turning two or three shades pinker, suddenly; "but that's not often nowadays."

"Who is Phil?"

"Aunt Lydia's other nephew," responded Fanny; "he's a doctor, you know, and he practises in New York. He was here for a fortnight until yesterday when the old doctor, his partner, telegraphed for his return. They say he's like George, but I can't see it, and I like him a great deal better; he's more polite and gallant, and sings and dances better. George has quite a little fortune of his own, but Phil has nothing, and they're orphans like me, and Aunt Lydia brought them up. George is her favorite, and he and Phil are like twin brothers. And now, if you're ready, Magdalen, we'll go down, for we've been chatting till it's six o'clock, and I ordered supper at six."

Magdalen smiled. The chatting had been a very one-sided affair, and Miss Winters had poured forth these little family

details with a volubility it would have been cruel to check.

Tea was waiting, and so was Mr. Barstone, rather impatiently.

"I thought you two young ladies had retired for the night," he said. "Miss Wayne, has Fanny been giving you the autobiography of our family and every other family in Millford during the last hour?"

"Now, George," cried Miss Winters, reproachfully, "how can you! I never said a word about the families of Millford—did I, Magdalen? And I don't think you need be always throwing my talk in my face, because you generally have a good deal to say yourself. Magdalen," whisking suddenly about, "let's take a walk by the lake after tea. It's such a dear, romantic, dismal spot that I love to go there. It makes me always think of lonely murders and suicides and kind of chills one's blood, you know."

"An excellent reason for taking Miss Wayne there," said George Barstone, gravely. "It is suggestive of chills and fever, I think myself. And as for murders and suicides, it has been the scene of more than one tragedy."

Supper over, the trio left the house for their saunter to the lake. The red glory of the June sunset blazed over land and lake and kindled both into luminous splendor.

"Golden Willows—poetical and appropriate," said Magdalen. "I never saw a prettier place."

"But horribly dull," said Fanny. "I thought it sweetly pretty the first time I saw it, too; but after being cooped up four years, its beauties begin to pall a little. Perhaps Mariana thought the Moated Grange a pretty place at first, though she got sick enough of it after, poor thing! But my seventeenth birthday comes in September, and Aunt Lydia shall have no peace until she consents to let me have a party. She doesn't like parties, but she must consent if I keep on tormenting her long enough. I'll begin to-morrow."

They were walking down the green avenue that led to the lake, while Fanny chattered. A delightful avenue, shaded and cool, with birds twittering in the branches, and the red lances of the sunset shooting athwart the greenish gloom.

"A pleasant promenade, is it not, Miss Wayne?" said Mr. Barstone, "secluded and sentimental and that kind of thing. This is where Fanny takes my cousin Phil, when she wants to quote Tennyson and Owen Meredith to him, and get him to make love to her. Did you wring a proposal out of him Fan, before you let him go?"

"Now, George!" in shrill reproach, and reddening violently; "I'm ashamed of you. What will Miss Wayne think? If Phil and I do walk here sometimes, it's because he likes to smoke under the trees, and I don't mind cigar smoke a bit, and I go with him because one must have some one to talk to. I'm sure I wish you and he could change places. He's worth a dozen of you, and so you'll say, Magdalen, when you see him."

"Think better of Miss Magdalen's judgment, Fanny; I don't believe she'll say anything of the sort."

They sauntered along the edge of the lake, lying dark and somber and deserted, until Miss Winters complaining of fatigue, they returned. The early rising moon was lifting its silvery disc over the hilltops, and the white, bright evening star, swung in the azure beside it.

"It's so nice," sighed Miss Winters, with a languishing glance at the moon. "I do not like moonlight, of all things. One could almost fancy it Venice, if these hills were palaces and the trees churches and the lake a canal and the shadows gondolas. It must be lovely to live in Venice—among doges, bridges of sighs and guitars and gondolas and things. Can you sing 'Now Rest Thee Here, My Gondolier,' Magdalen? I dote on Moore's Melodies, though George says they're mawkish and love-sick. But then, George has no more soul than a kangaroo! I dare say," cried Fanny, with a reproachful glance at the gentleman, "he would like to smoke this minute."

"I certainly should," responded Mr. Barstone, promptly, "and, with Miss Wayne's permission, I will. May I? A thousand thanks!"

It was nearly nine when they returned to the house, and Magdalen retired at once—retired with the fag end of a tune on her lips and a happy glow at her heart, to sleep soundly and sweetly as a tired child.

She arose late next morning, and ere she had finished dressing Fanny's voice was heard at the door:

"Are you up yet, Magdalen? Because, if you are, I want to come in."

"Come in, then."

Miss Winters entered, voluminous in clean starched muslin and fluttering with pink ribbons, her face a-shine with good humor, cold water and honey soap.

"How did you sleep?" inquired the young girl; "well, I should think, by your face and the hour you get up. It's half-past eight, and our breakfast hour, and George is waiting; so please hurry—there's a dear!"

They descended to breakfast, to find Mr. Barstone whistling to the canaries while he waited. Immediately after the meal he departed, on foot, for his office in Millford, and Fanny bore off her governess to see "Aunt Lydia."

Miss Barstone—for Aunt Lydia was Miss Barstone at five-and-forty—was seated over her breakfast when they entered the room. A large apartment, more like a library than a sleeping room, pictures and books and busts and flowers and birds everywhere. Miss Barstone—a little body, with a pale, pinched face, keen eyes and a resolute mouth—held out her hand and greeted Magdalen kindly.

"You are Miss Wayne? How do you do, my dear? You are very welcome to Golden Willows. Take this armchair, Miss Wayne."

Magdalen seated herself. The searching look of the bright, keen eyes fluttered her a little, but the frank smile was very like her nephew's.

"I couldn't see you yesterday, my dear—I was poorly, very poorly, indeed. I'm a confirmed invalid, you know. I never quit my chamber, and a little thing upsets me. My nephew Philip's sudden departure was a shock—I had hoped he would stay for the summer. My dear, what a very pretty girl you are!"

Magdalen blushed and laughed.

"George and Fanny both told me, but I really didn't expect—excuse me, my dear, it sounds like flattery; but I don't mean it so. You are a great deal too young and too handsome to be a governess. How old are you?"

"Why, Aunt Lydia," exclaimed Fanny, "you know George told us in his letter. She's eighteen."

"Too young! too young! And you've been a governess over a year? Ah! poor thing! It's a hard life, and you don't look fitted for a hard life. I hope you'll be happy here."

"Dear Madam!" Magdalen said, the tears in her eyes, "I know I shall."

"And you are an orphan, Miss Wayne?"

"Yes, Miss Barstone," very sadly.

"Any relatives, my dear?"

"I have a brother, poor fellow!" Magdalen said, hurriedly; "but I hardly dare hope ever to see him again, and I have a baby niece, with an old nurse, away in New Hampshire, my native State. That is all."

"Poor child! But you and Fanny will sympathize with each other, for she is an orphan, too. Not a very forlorn looking one, though, is she? You must be very strict and severe with her, Miss Wayne, for she's a shockingly idle, heedless girl. You know you are, Fanny!" said Miss Barstone, with a backward frown at the culprit hanging over her chair.

"Yes, I know," said Fanny; "but it's nice to be idle, and you don't like me any the worse for it. Now, if you're done with Magdalen, I'll take her out for a drive. It isn't worth while commencing to study in the fag end of the week."

She bore her off into her own maiden bower, all one litter of albums, novels and half-finished fancy work, while she dressed for the drive.

On their way down she flung open another door, disclosing a large, elegantly furnished room, handsomer than any Magdalen had yet seen.

"This is the spare room," said Fanny; "never to be used until Phil or George get married. It's sacred ground, this—dedicated to the future Mrs. B."

"It is very pretty," said Magdalen, carelessly. "When is it likely to be occupied?"

"I'm sure I don't know," replied Miss Winters, shaking her curls, "George will live and die a crusty, musty, cranky, cross old bachelor, and as for Phil—well, I can't say. Half the girls in Millford are dying for him."

"Fanny Winters among the number?"

"Nonsense!" said Fanny, very pink of face indeed. "There's Bill waiting with the horse and buggy. Come on—I'll show all that's worth showing in the neighborhood."

It was a pleasant day, the first of many pleasant days. And Magdalen Allward's new life began under a summer sky without a cloud—to be all the blacker when the clouds came.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. BARSTONE FALLS IN LOVE.

June passed—July—August came. The days went like placid dreams; Magdalen "sat in sunshine, calm and sweet," and was happy.

They were very good to her at Golden Willows; Miss Barstone was the most indulgent of old maids and employers. Fanny was the laziest and best-tempered of pupils, and Mr. George Barstone—oh! to his mind there was nothing else under the starry sky half so lovely as Fanny's governess! Golden Willows had always been a pleasant place to the young lawyer, but it had never quite been Paradise before.

He had never felt little thrills of delight shooting through his system—a kind of ecstatic ague when his thoughts wandered homeward from the office before she came. He didn't quite understand his own symptoms—he didn't take the trouble to analyze them—he accepted the facts—that the sun shone brighter and the skies were bluer and the State of Connecticut a great Garden of Eden, and never inquired too closely what had wrought the transformation.

But Miss Wayne had other slaves at her chariot wheels, and bade fair to become the belle of Millford. Young men saw her Sunday afternoons sitting in the high-backed pew between George and Fanny, her starry eyes uplifted to the preacher's face and the August sunshine making an aureole around her golden head, and gazed in speechless admiration.

There was nothing half so handsome in all the place as Miss Wayne, and half a dozen rich mill owners were ready to fall at her feet, at one encouraging word, before the end of the third month. But Miss Wayne never spoke that one word. She was gracious to all, in a queenly sort of way—a way that decidedly silenced the mill owners.

There was one gentleman—not a rich gentleman, either—who seemed rather a favorite with the stately Magdalen, however. He had not wealth—he was a dry-goods clerk, only—but he had what, with woman, is very often better—beauty.

He was gloriously handsome, this Mr. Frank Hamilton; for all the world like Count Lara, or the Corsair, or Childe Harold—Miss Winters said—tall and dark, with pathetic black eyes and raven hair.

He had fallen hopelessly and absurdly in love—this young dry-goods clerk—with the fair-haired governess. He haunted Golden Willows like an uneasy ghost, and gave Mr. George Barstone the first real inkling into the state of his own heart.

"The be-scented, doll-faced, dandified jackanapes!" growled Mr. Barstone, with flashing eyes, "with his six hundred dollars a year and his curly pate! I dare say he thinks he has only to open his lanky arms for Miss Wayne to plump into them! The girls of Millford have spoiled that fellow—always sickeningly conceited about his namby-pamby beauty. As if a man had anything to do with beauty, or as if a sensible girl like Magdalen Wayne would make an idiot of herself for a pair of dark eyes and a straight nose!"

Mr. Barstone, with his hands deep in his pantaloons pockets, tore up and down his sanctum like a caged lion. He had just seen Miss Wayne go by the window, with the handsome dry-goods clerk, talking as animatedly as though the scheme of the universe held but their two selves.

"How lovely she looked, and how happy she seemed!" groaned George, in despair; "and, after all, though she may snub mill owners, with sandy hair and pug noses, who knows what effect this noodle's Grecian profile and melancholy, dreamy eyes—as Fanny calls 'em—may have upon her. Hang his melancholy, dreamy eyes! I wish he was ten fathoms deep in the Connecticut! Girls are as silly as geese, and, though Miss Wayne seems sensible, I've no doubt she's as bad as the worst where Grecian noses and black eyes are concerned. I dare say she'll fling herself away on this dry goods Apollo and take a turn at love in a cottage, like the silliest driveler among them! Love in a cottage! two back rooms in a tenement house, bread without butter and weak tea three times a day, patched clothes and half a dozen dirty-faced children! Bah!"

With which expression of disgust, Mr. Barstone flung himself into his office chair and scowled vindictively at the opposite wall.

"And if she does, what difference does it make to me?" he thought; "what business is it of mine if Miss Wayne chooses to

marry the King of the Cannibal Islands? George Barstone, you are a greater fool than your friends take you to be, and you're in love again."

Mr. Barstone emphasized the "again," as he very well might; for being in love had been his normal state ever since he had left off roundabouts.

In New York he fell in love with ballet girls and actresses and all manner of objectionable young women, and in Millford he had succumbed to the charms of at least a dozen, and paid marked attention to Miss Ella Goldham, the greatest heiress and the best-looking girl in town. His suit had been smiled upon—the course of true love ran as smooth as a milldam—so smoothly, indeed, that George Barstone slipped out of love as easily as he had slipped in.

Perhaps Miss Goldham had met him, like Desdemona, more than half way: perhaps the grapes were too ripe, and hung too near. Mr. Barstone hadn't proposed, and had not been in love since. Sense had come to him, he thought, with his seven-and-twentieth year. He had cut his wisdom teeth at last, and lo! here he was going mad because his aunt's governess, whom he had not known over two months, had walked past his windows with a good-looking young dry-goods clerk.

Mr. Barstone spent a miserable and unbusiness-like day, smoking endless cigars and ruminating drearily on Mr. Frank Hamilton's prospects of success.

He had been so happy during the past two months, sliding unconsciously into the abyss; and the bright face and golden hair and glorious eyes of Magdalen Wayne had so lighted up the world that the darkness was ten-fold blacker now. His love was no child's play this time. If Miss Wayne became Mrs. Frank Hamilton, or Mrs. Anybody else, George Barstone gloomily made up his mind that life held no other alternative for him than a double dose of laudanum, or a jump off the bank into Willow Lake, where it was deepest.

The young lawyer walked moodily home that evening, through the amber mist of the sunset, with the darkest shadow on his face that cheery face ever wore. What if Frank Hamilton had proposed that very day and been accepted?

"He hasn't known her half as long as I have," reflected George, "and I daren't do it; but Hamilton is bold enough for anything! If she has said yes, let her go! The woman who could marry that well-dressed idiot isn't worth regretting. I don't want a wife, anyhow. A wife! humbug! A wife's a nuisance! I shouldn't know what to do with one if I had one."

Mr. Barstone, reaching home, saw the garden gate swing open, and Fanny, with several yards of rose-colored ribbon streaming behind her, flew down the path.

"I've such news for you, George!" cried the young lady, all flushed and palpitating: "we're going to have the party! Yes, a party on my birthday, and that's the very next Thursday that ever is—and there's to be music, dancing and a supper, and I'm to ask whoever I please. And, oh, George! I've been dying for you to come home to write the invitations. I'm to have a new dress, and Aunt Lydia's set of pearls; and, oh, George! won't it be lovely?"

Miss Winters paused, her face as radiant as the sunset sky. Mr. Barstone listened, stoically.

"Is supper ready?" he asked.

"Yes, ready this half hour—and Magdalen's in there embroidering me a handkerchief. I wanted her to help me write the invitations, but she said you were the most suitable person. Oh!" cried Fanny, clasping her hands around his arm, and looking up at him with big, shining eyes. "I don't know what to do with myself, I'm so happy!"

Mr. Barstone remained rigidly grim. He went to supper and found Magdalen seated at one of the windows, bending over her work. She looked up with that brilliant smile the young lawyer thought the most beautiful thing on earth.

"I've been telling George all about the party, Magdalen," exclaimed Fanny, as they sat down to supper, "and he's going to write out the invitations directly after tea. Isn't it too bad, George, Phil can't come down? What will you wear, Magdalen? Black?"

"Black, of course—I have nothing else."

"And you know it becomes you, you sly Magdalen. Blondes always look their best in black, don't you think so, George?"

"I think," replied George Barstone, with grave sincerity, "Miss Wayne looks her best in anything."

"Delightful!" cried Fanny, while Magdalen blushed vividly. "I didn't think it was in you, George. I should like pink silk myself; but I'm afraid pink is too pronounced for my complexion and hair. It's red—I know it is—and I hate red hair! All the heroines of novels have golden hair, like Magdalen, or tar black, like Ella Goldman; and the fair ones used to be good, and the dark ones all bad; but they've reversed that rule since 'Lady Audley.'"

Mr. Barstone, still under a cloud, consented to make himself useful after tea and write out Fanny's invitations. After all, poor, imbecile Frank Hamilton was more to be pitied than blamed, for falling madly in love with this starry-eyed divinity who glorified Golden Willows by her presence. It was not in human nature to do otherwise, and he tried to think of him with pitying disdain, and write down the list of names Fanny dictated. It was a lengthy list, and wound up with the obnoxious Apollo himself.

"And Frank Hamilton, Magdalen—handsome Frank—we must have him, of course."

"I object to young Hamilton!" exclaimed Mr. Barstone, suddenly turning crusty. "I don't like the fellow! A conceited, emphy-headed noodle—and you have masculine noodles enough without him! Go on!"

"Not until you put down Frank," said Fanny, resolutely; "you may just as well, George, for I shall have him here if I have to go to the store and invite him myself! And as to his being a conceited noodle, that's all your hateful jealousy, George Barstone, because he's a great deal better looking than you! Write down Frank!"

"I'll do nothing of the sort!" returned Mr. Barstone, violently red; "and if he comes here, I shall not! I tell you, I don't like him, and I repeat it, he is a noodle! good for nothing but measuring out yards of tape and admiring his pretty face in the glass! Write your invitations yourself, Miss Winters, if you insist upon having people I despise!"

With which unprecedented burst of ill temper, Mr. Barstone stalked majestically out of the room, slamming the door behind him. Magdalen stared in boundless astonishment, and Fanny's eyes were like two midnight moons.

"Good gracious me!" ejaculated Miss Winters, with a dash; "who'd ever thought it! It's the first time I ever saw George turn grumpy in my life. But I know how it is," with a shower of mysterious nods; "I know all about it."

"All about what?" inquired Magdalen, very much mystified. "I thought Mr. Barstone and Mr. Hamilton were very good friends."

"And so they always have been, and so they always would be, only for you, you sly, mischief-making Magdalen!"

"Only for me!" cried Magdalen, aghast.

"Good gracious, yes!" exclaimed Fanny, testily; "of course, it's you—any one can see it with half an eye. Frank's in love with you—and George is jealous as a Turk!"

"Fanny, Fanny! What are you saying?"

"The truth, Miss Wayne. Don't you suppose I have eyes in my head; and that's why poor Frank is a conceited noodle, and can't come to the party. He can't, I suppose, if George keeps grumpy—and it's a thousand pities, for he's the nicest fellow I know—except Phil—and so handsome that it's a pleasure to look at him."

Miss Wayne bent suddenly over her work, and her cheeks were the color of Fanny's streamers, and her heart all in a flutter of tremulous bliss. Why, she best knew.

"So we must leave poor, dear Frank out," pursued Fanny, regretfully, "and disappoint heaps of girls. And then there's the old folks—how are we to amuse them?"

"Cards," suggested Magdalen.

"Cards?" repeated Fanny. "It would be as much as my life's worth to mention the word to Aunt Lydia—to George, either, for that matter. And thereby hangs a tale. It's all George's doing—a burned child dreads the fire."

Magdalen dropped her work and looked at her.

"You won't speak of it again, I know," pursued Fanny, delighted to have a secret to tell, "because Aunt Lydia wouldn't like it; but George wasn't always the model he is now. When he was in New York, two or three years ago, he got into dreadful trouble of some kind. I don't know what it was; but gambling had something to do with it, and Aunt Lydia was in terrible distress, and had ever so much money to pay. George came home, awfully ashamed of himself, and penitent, and ever since cards have been utterly abolished."

Magdalen listened to this little narrative with an interest Fanny never dreamed of. Three years ago George Barstone had been in New York, and he had been addicted to gambling. What if he had known Maurice Langley! What if he were Maurice Langley himself!

Her face flushed hotly at the thought; she had brooded on the possibility of finding this man in strange places, and by strange ways, so long that no idea, however preposterous, could seem preposterous to her. "Tall and handsome." George Barstone was both. But the next instant she discarded the wild idea. His frank, handsome face arose before her—genial and honest—the face of a man who might, thoughtlessly, fall into error, never the face of a deliberate villain. She could see him from the window, walking up and down in the silvery summer gloaming, smoking his cigar under the trees and looking up at the red, rising moon.

"No, no, no!" thought Magdalen. "George Barstone never could be a cold-blooded traitor and betrayer. I am a wretch to harbor such a thought for a moment, but he may have known Maurice Langley. If I only dared ask him!"

Fanny's tongue was running on all the while, and Magdalen had to dismiss the subject, and attend to her.

"I'm not going to invite poor Frank, you cantankerous old George," Fanny said, to her cousin, when he came in presently, "so you needn't wear that sulky face any longer. I'm sure you and he used to be good enough friends, but you're quite an altered person lately. He's a great deal more entertaining than you are, and I don't half expect to enjoy myself without him, and no more does Magdalen; but for all that he's not coming, so please stop scowling, Mr. Barstone, and try and make yourself agreeable if you can."

Mr. Barstone's reply to this breathless reproach was a scowl of even deeper malignity, to the infinite amusement of wicked Fanny.

"I've been asking Magdalen," pursued that young lady, bent on tormenting him, "how we are going to amuse the elders, and she suggested cards. Would you mind fetching a pack home from Millford to-morrow, George?"

Magdalen looked up quickly and earnestly, and saw a remarkable change pass over the young man's face at the simple words, and his blue eyes darkened and grew stern as they fixed themselves on Fanny's face.

"I should mind it, Miss Winters," he said, "and you know that perfectly well. Please be a little more careful in your requests, or there will be neither card playing nor party that night."

With which short, sharp and decisive speech, Mr. Barstone strode from the room, and appeared no more that evening.

The eventful day came, and Fanny, in a fever of excitement, robed herself in spotless white, like the heroine of a novel, with Aunt Lydia's pearls gleaming in milky luster on her neck, and her pink complexion deeper pink than ever. Calm and queenly beside her, in black silk and lace, and jet ornaments, Miss Wayne stood, plain and simple in dress, and uplifted and beautiful as a young queen.

Mr. Frank Hamilton, the handsome, was not there, and George Barstone should have been at peace; but, alas! he was not—for if the best-looking man in Millford had been excluded from that festive throng on Miss Wayne's account, the richest man in Millford was there, and obnoxiously attentive.

Mr. Sam Goldham, short of stature, plain of face, dull of brain, but with a hundred thousand dollars at his command, was her most devoted. He hung over the piano when she played and sang; he was her partner when she danced; he persistently sat beside her when she rested. George Barstone, hovering aloof, like your madly jealous lovers, set his teeth in a paroxysm of fury, and longed to take Mr. Sam Goldham by the scruff of the neck and kick him incontinently out of doors. One or two attempts he made to join the golden-haired divinity; but, monopolized by the wealthy manufacturer, the attempts were futile. The millionaire had her, and meant to keep her. Desperate cases require desperate remedies. Mr. Barstone took a desperate and sudden resolve, there and then.

"I'll propose to her to-morrow," thought the young lawyer, grinding his teeth and glaring at the rich man, "if that inconceivable ass, Sam Goldham, doesn't do it to-night!"

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. BARSTONE PROPOSES.

"Man proposes, but God disposes," saith the proverb. George Barstone laid his head on his pillow, at three o'clock next morning, with the invincible resolution of asking the bright-haired governess to be his wife before the day ended, and fell asleep under the soothing influence of that determination. But destiny had decreed otherwise. Awaking late in the forenoon from a dream of his amber-tressed idol, he beheld Bill, the boy, standing by his bedside, like an ugly little guardian angel.

"A letter, Mr. George—jest come, sir; man brought it from the telegraph office in town, and you're to sign your name."

George took it, and read its brief contents with a very blank face. It was from New York, from the elderly physician with whom his cousin, Philip, was connected.

Come here, if you can. P.'s met with an accident—serious, but not fatal.

RICHARD MASTERTON.

George Barstone was very earnestly attached to his cousin. They had grown up together as boys; they had run their college course side by side, and, of late years, separation had rather strengthened than weakened their fraternal attachment. In the first shock and consternation of the news, the lawyer, the lover, absolutely forgot his lady love.

"An accident," George thought, staring blankly at the telegram; "serious, but not fatal! Good heavens! what can have happened to him? I'll run up to New York this very day!"

He sprang out of bed at once, and rapidly began to dress.

"I must tell Aunt Lydia, of course. She isn't up yet, and it seems a pity to awake her, after last night; but it can't be helped. Poor Phil! he must have requested Masterton to telegraph for me—the old bear never would do it himself. He always did want me, whenever he got into a scrape, I remember."

George, having completed his toilet, sought his aunt's room. She was awake, though not up, when he rapped, and answered at once:

"Is it you, George? Come right in. What is it?"

George explained.

Miss Barstone was excessively shocked and startled. She was as fond of her two nephews as a widowed mother might be of her two sons.

"Poor Phil! poor, dear boy! Oh, George, if it should be dangerous!"

"The telegram says not, aunt."

"You must go to New York at once, George. My poor Phil! I shall have no peace until I hear from you. Are you in time for the noon train?"

George looked at his watch.

"It will pass through Millford in an hour and a half—time enough, and to spare. I'll have a mouthful of breakfast, and be off immediately."

But Mr. Barstone, saying this, lingered strangely. An after thought seemed to strike him, and he stood, looping and unlooping nervously his watch-chain, and staring with a disturbed face at the opposite wall.

Miss Barstone watched him intently.

"Well, George?" she said.

George grew very red, turned abruptly, and began pacing up and down.

"Well, George?" this time with a faint, conscious smile.

"Aunt," broke out Mr. Barstone, "there's something I should like to speak to you about before I leave home."

"So I perceive. What is it?"

George, redder than ever, ruffled up his fair hair, and stared very hard at vacancy.

"Well, George? I'm waiting."

George stopped his walk as abruptly as he had commenced it, and turned full upon his relative.

"Aunt," he burst out, impetuously, "I've fallen in love!"

"Indeed!" very placidly. "Nothing new in that, George. Who is the lady?"

"Aunt Lydia," said Mr. Barstone, firmly, "this is something entirely different from the past. I'm aware how often and how egregiously I've made a donkey of myself, but this time I'm in earnest. I love her with my whole heart, and, if she refuses me, I don't care whether I live or die!"

"My poor, dear boy! And who is she?"

"She is Miss Wayne!"

"Fanny's governess? Ah, George, it is not the first time you have fallen in love with Fanny's governess!"

"It shall be the last time, aunt. The happiness of my whole life is involved in this. I meant to ask her this very day. Aunt Lydia, you cannot object to Magdalen?"

"I esteem Miss Wayne very highly, George. She is an excellent governess—a very handsome and high-bred young lady—but, with all that, I should like to know something more of the antecedents of my dear boy's future wife than I do of hers."

Mr. Barstone's anxious face turned radiant.

"Then you don't object, aunt?"

"To Miss Magdalen Wayne personally, no. I dare say I should prefer for you a wealthier bride. I am only mortal in that respect. But, after all, a fortune is not the chief consideration. You have not taken me in the least by surprise, George. I have foreseen all this for some time. If Magdalen loves you, and if there is no other drawback than her poverty, I shall raise no objection. I like her very much—very much, indeed!"

"Then," cried George, with a beaming face, "I'll ask her the moment I return from New York, and, after that, you know, you can question and cross-question her about her antecedents, and find out who her grandfather and great-grandfather were, and come at the history of the whole Wayne race. She'll come forth triumphantly from the whole ordeal, never fear. And, auntie, just own up—isn't she the loveliest creature the sun shines on?"

"Magdalen is very, very pretty!"

"And so gentle and sweet-tempered, and stately and thoroughbred! Aunt," said Mr. Barstone, in a sudden gush of despondency, as all Miss Wayne's manifold perfections burst upon him, "I don't believe she'll have me!"

"She might easily have worse, George. I like to see young men modest; but I wouldn't despair, if I were you. Meanwhile, 'time is on the wing'—the train will soon pass, and here you are."

"By Jove! yes," cried George, bolting precipitately out of the room. "Good-by, aunt! Here I linger, and poor Phil at death's door for all I know. What a selfish brute I am, to be sure!"

The young lawyer crammed the few necessaries requisite into his traveling-bag, swallowed a hasty cup of coffee, and set off.

As he took his seat in the buggy, the fair face of Magdalen Wayne shone on him from an upper window. His heart gave a great plunge as he waved his hand to the bright apparition.

"Good-by, Miss Wayne I'm off to New York. Take care of yourself till I come back!"

Miss Wayne smiled and nodded; then the pony quickly trotted George Barstone out of sight.

The young lawyer reached New York in due time, and found his cousin by no means so alarmingly ill as he had fancied. He was lying on a bed in a darkened chamber, looking uncommonly gaunt and hollow-eyed, it is true, but quite able to devour basins of broth and beef-tea, and talk to his cousin by the hour.

"Why, Phil, old fellow!" George cried, "you're not half so bad as I thought you were!"

Mr. Philip Barstone flounced over the bedclothes with a dismal groan. He was one of those big, strong men who succumb, like the fragile blossoms they are, to the first touch of illness; and, when he lay down and pulled the sheets over him, he wanted all his friends and relatives to stand howling around his bed in a dreary chorus of sympathy.

"It's worse than you think for, George," said the invalid, forlornly; "and I've been cooped up in this hole, with old Masterson feeling my pulse, and a nurse, ugly enough to set up in a corn field, pouring filthy slop down my throat, until I've had serious thoughts of getting up and blowing my brains out to escape them. That's why I made Masterson telegraph for you, old boy. I should have gone melancholy mad if some one hadn't come. I tell you, George, it's rough on us bachelors, when we come to be laid up and left to the mercies of hired nurses. If the nurses were only young and pretty, you know, a fellow might stand it; but they seem to be specially selected on account of their age and ugliness. If I ever get out of this confounded mess, I'll turn over a new leaf, burn the novels of Paul de Kock, resign brandy and soda, fast horses and expensive cigars, become virtuous and happy, and get married. How are they all at Golden Willows?"

"As usual," George answered, rather absently, his thoughts with that wonderful creature with the starry eyes and tinsel hair who had come to glorify his humdrum life.

"Does Aunt Lydia get about much?" pursued Phil; "but, of course, she doesn't."

"No; she has not been out of her room since your departure. By the way, Fanny's got a new governess, you know!"

Despite the studiously careless "by-the-way," the latter clause sounded somewhat inapposite.

"Has she? I didn't know! Has she fallen in love with you, or have you fallen in love with her—which? Fanny's governesses have always been divided into those two classes, since she had a governess—loved and loving. Ah! I see," said Philip, pointing one lean forefinger at poor George's blushes, "you've been and made an idiot of yourself for the fiftieth time! It's astonishing Fan hasn't written me a full, true and particular account long before this! Who is she?"

"Her name is Wayne—Miss Magdalen Wayne—if you mean Fanny's governess."

"Whom else should I mean? Fanny's governess, and the idol of your young affections. How fondly the fellow dwells on her name! Miss—Magdalen—Wayne! It's a pretty name, too! Is she?"

"Beautiful!" exclaimed George, rapturously, "the loveliest girl you ever saw!"

"I don't believe it. Miss Fletcher had sandy hair and freckles, and you called her lovely. I don't believe it! You have no more eye for beauty, George Barstone, than an old he-goat! What's her style—the light or the dark?"

"Miss Wayne is fair," replied George, rather subdued by the sick man's cynicism. "Blue-gray eyes—lovely eyes, Phil—and golden hair—real golden hair. She isn't like Miss Fletcher in the least. She's a lady to her finger-tips. You ought to hear her play and sing. Even you, cold-blooded reptile that you are, would knock under in ten minutes!"

"And where did you pick up this peerless paragon?"

"None of your sneers, Phil! Here in New York; and very sorry the people she was with were to lose her. Don't think this is like my old scrapes. It's another affair altogether, and I never was half so serious about anything in the whole course of my life."

"Indeed! And when am I to congratulate you? Perhaps you have already proposed?"

"I should have, only for you. I'll ask her to marry me, before I'm three hours back to Golden Willows!"

"By Jove! he does mean business!" cried Philip Barstone. "He knows his own mind for once. And the wedding will take place the week after. I'm certain, for the impressible George won't be able to wait!"

"I shouldn't wait long if it depended on me, that's certain; but Miss Wayne may say no."

"Fanny's governess! My dear boy, modesty's a lovely virtue in youth—lovely as rare; but don't you think you're rather overdoing it? Miss Wayne say no? I'm rather short of funds, George, and I want my purse replenished; so I'll lay you ten to one she snaps at you like a cat at a mouse."

George Barstone got up from his cousin's bedside with an impatient frown.

"You don't know Miss Wayne, Phil," he said, walking up and down. "I might lose my temper, only for that. You don't know her. She isn't like Miss Fletcher, and she isn't like any governess we ever had at Golden Willows. If I don't marry her—and mind, such an event is more than doubtful, for the best men in Millford are after her—life won't be worth a brass button! I spoke to Aunt Lydia before I left, and I shall propose to Miss Wayne directly when I get back."

"Just as you please, old fellow," said Philip. "If it be serious, you have my best wishes, of course. Go in and win, dear boy, and my blessing be upon your virtuous endeavors!"

George remained two days in New York, at the urgent solicitation of his cousin.

"It's so horrible lonely here!" Mr. Philip Barstone grumbled. "If you had any bowels of compassion, you wouldn't be in such a deuced hurry to desert a fellow to his fate and his beef tea. But I see how it is. That gray-eyed, golden-haired governess has bewitched you; and a chap like you, in love, is company for neither man nor beast!"

"I dare say I am rather restless, Phil," George said, apologetically. "I promised Aunt Lydia I would let her know how you were as soon as possible, and I know she'll be anxious."

"You couldn't write and tell her, I suppose?" Philip said, rather sulkily. "However, go, and may the gods that watch over fools and lovers smile propitiously upon you! Go home. My unlovely old nurse, and grumpy Masterson, are better and livelier companions than you, sitting yonder staring at the wall, and sighing like a furnace. Go; the sooner the better!"

George Barstone, nothing loth, departed, and reached Millford as rapidly as the "resonant steam eagle" could convey him. The air of the sultry summer afternoon was opaque with amber mist, through which Mr. Barstone drove like the wind.

"I wonder if I shall find her at home? I wonder if I will get a chance to speak to her this evening? Good heavens! if that rich, addle-pated idiot, Goldham, has proposed before me, and been accepted!"

Mr. Barstone set his teeth at the maddening supposition, and lashed Sam, the pony, into a furious gallop. He flung the reins to Bill, when he reached Golden Willows, and entered the house. Ominous stillness reigned. The rooms below were deserted, the piano closed. No one was visible. George rang the bell and the housemaid, dipping and smiling, appeared.

"Where's Miss Winters? Where's Miss Wayne?" said the young man, with startling abruptness.

"Miss Winters and Miss Wayne has gone to a picnic, sir," responded the smiling damsel.

"Gone to a picnic? Where? Who with?"

Excitement unsettled Mr. Barstone's grammar.

"Mr. Hamilton and Mr. Goldham took 'em, sir," said the smiling one, unconscious of the dagger she was plunging in her master's breast. "The picnic at Blueberry Bank, and they've been gone since early morning."

George Barstone glared vindictively at her, and then stalked, in sullen majesty, out of the room and up-stairs. His worst fears were realized. Sam Goldham, the odious, had her, and nothing remained for him but a double dose of prussic acid! He scowled blackly at his own image in the dressing-glass, and savagely twitched his necktie straight.

"I don't set up for a beauty!" George muttered, bitterly; "but I'll be hanged if I'm not a better-looking fellow than that bull-necked, blear-eyed, driveling dotard, Sam Goldham! If she accepts him she is worthy of nothing but my deepest contempt. I'll go to this confounded picnic. I'll see for myself; and, if my fears prove true, I'll send women and matrimony to the deuce for the rest of my natural life!"

He could not wait to see his aunt. He set off at once, and reached the picnic grounds as the sun was setting in a glory of golden light. And through the golden glow, radiant as a vision, he saw Magdalen Wayne coming toward him, side by side with the odious Goldham. But George's heart need not have sunk straight into his boots, for Mr. Goldham's face was by no means lit up with the rapture of an accepted lover, and Miss Wayne looked altogether weary and listless.

"Hallo, Barstone!" cried Mr. Goldham. And there Mr. Goldham paused, aghast at the expression Mr. Barstone's countenance wore.

Miss Wayne's weary face brightened suddenly. She held out her hand with a blush and a smile that made the young man giddy with new-born hope.

"Such an unexpected pleasure, Mr. Barstone! We did not expect you for a week. Fanny will be so pleased!"

Fanny! What did Mr. Barstone care for Fanny? In one instant his face was radiant.

"And your cousin," Miss Wayne went on, drooping a little before that electric glow. "I hope you left him better?"

"No—yes. That is, Miss Wayne, they're going to dance. May I have the honor?" cried George, incoherently.

But Miss Wayne was engaged to Mr. Goldham, and after that they were to go home. But the bright glance with which she told him almost consoled Mr. Barstone for the disappointment.

"I knew she couldn't care for that donkey!" thought Mr. Barstone, moving off in search of Fanny. "And how beautifully she blushed at sight of me! I was a fool and a madman to doubt her for a moment, or fancy she would sell herself to Sam Goldham for his hundred thousand dollars!"

"Good gracious, George!" Miss Winters shrilly cried, as he came up. "You have given me quite a turn! How's Phil?"

"A little off his feed," answered George; "but as well as can be expected. Don't worry about him, Fanny. He isn't worrying about you!"

In the luminous dust of the summer evening the picnickers went home—George, as he came, by himself, Miss Wayne still with Mr. Goldham. Golden Willows was the first house they reached, and there they alighted to partake of tea. The lamps were lit in the pleasant parlors, and a tempting supper laid out under their sparkling lights.

"Oh, hang it!" thought George, eyeing Mr. Goldham in disgust, "will he never let her go? The egregious ninny will stick to Miss Wayne like a leech, I suppose, until midnight."

But for once the Fates smiled on George. A servant handed him a letter as he stood glowering in the doorway.

"For Miss Wayne, sir, and I can't get through to give it to her."

George glanced at the letter.

"From that old nurse in New Hampshire," he thought. "It will get her away from Goldham."

He made his way to where she sat.

"Will you step out into the hall a moment, Miss Wayne? you are wanted. Mr. Goldham will excuse you."

She rose at once and followed him out. He gave her the letter.

"From nurse Rachel!" she exclaimed. "I am so glad! Thanks, Mr. Barstone, for my delivery!"

She ran out, laughing into the silvery twilight. He saw her take the path leading to the walk, and disappear. Half an hour passed. George walked under the trees, smoking and waiting; but Magdalen did not reappear. Another quarter of an hour; then he flung away his cigar, and struck resolutely down the Willow walk.

Magdalen sat on the bank, her hands folded, looking at the solemn, shining water. Her face was very pale in the silvery light.

"You are looking whiter and more mournful than a spirit, Miss Wayne," he said, gently. "No bad news, I trust?"

Magdalen looked up.

"No," she said. "They are all well at home. It is not that. They have sent for me, I suppose?"

She was rising to go; but he made a blind, sudden motion to detain her.

"Magdalen—Miss Wayne—don't go. I want you to stay. I want you to listen to me."

One glance up in his agitated face, and she knew, before he had uttered another word, what was coming. She recoiled a pace, then stood still.

What George Barstone said, heaven knows—he never knew himself. Brokenly, incoherently, he told the story he had come to tell—the story that all the eloquence of a Cicero must resolve into three poor words:

"I love you!"

She shrank away and covered her face with both hands, quick thrills of rapture filling her heart, and telling her that she loved him too. At his passionate pleading, she looked up.

"Don't! don't!" she said, brokenly; "pray don't! Oh, Mr. Barstone."

"Don't say no, Magdalen! For God's sake, don't say no! You don't know how I love you! Don't say no!"

She had grown marble-white and cold. She drew further away, and put out her hands to keep him off.

"I cannot say either yes or no to-night, Mr. Barstone. Give me time to think. Wait until to-morrow, and you shall have your answer."

She was gone with the words on her lips; and George Barstone, dizzy and blind with emotion, stood alone under the shining stars.

CHAPTER IX.

TOLD IN THE TWILIGHT.

Mr. Barstone, in his professional capacity, no doubt had some knowledge of the manner condemned men passed the night before their execution, but he had never known from experience before. Deliriously hopeful, dismally despairing, walking up and down, tossing about in bed, morning mercifully came at last.

Miss Wayne and Mr. Barstone met at breakfast; and if she looked pale, he looked haggard. Miss Winters had the talk all to herself, and, to do her justice, there was very little flagging in the monologue.

"Every one said they never enjoyed themselves so much," chattered the young lady, "and everything passed off lovely. I waltzed all day, and Frank Hamilton—oh, George! if you could only waltz like Frank Hamilton! I don't know any higher bliss on this earth than waltzing with him. That's three 'waltzings' close together, Magdalen; but I suppose it's no matter out of study hours. How silent you and George are this morning, to be sure!"

George looked annoyed. Magdalen blushed, and there was an awkward little pause.

"It can't be that either of you over-fatigued yourselves dancing," pursued Miss Winters, seeing their embarrassment and highly enjoying it, "because Magdalen didn't dance half a dozen times, and George didn't dance at all. And then in the evening—and that reminds me! Where did you two go off together in the evening? Everybody wondered, and poor Sam Goldham—Magdalen, you ought to have seen his distressed face."

Mr. Barstone rose from the table with a frown, and the governess made an imperative signal to her pupil to cease.

"I want you to practise that duet in Massaniello immediately," she said, also rising. "Come! Mr. Barstone, good-morning."

She swept away, leaving George by the window, gazing gloomily out.

A drearily wet day had followed yesterday's sunshine and moonlight. A low, complaining wind tossed the trees, and the flat fields lay sodden under a leaden sky.

The lawyer made no pretense of going to Millford that day. He wandered in and out, like a feverish ghost, lying forlornly on sofas, trying to read, or smoking insanely under the dripping trees. Why did she keep him in suspense? Why did she not pronounce his doom at once? How could she go about her daily tasks with that face of changeless calm? How merciless all women were to the men who loved them!

Magdalen did studiously avoid him. She kept Fanny at the piano all the forenoon, until that tortured young person broke out into an agonized cry for freedom. She chained her down to "Ollendorf's method" and the "Decline and Fall," until Miss Winters turned hoarse, and hated Gibbon and the whole Roman Empire.

The early tea and dinner agreeably diversified these intellectual pursuits; the shades of evening fell, and still the prisoner at Golden Willows was "waiting for the verdict."

"I'll wait no longer," he thought, desperately; "she shall give me my answer after tea."

He never spoke during that meal. Fanny's small talk clattered about his ears like the patter of the ceaseless summer rain, all unheard. It was ended at last, and the girls rose to go. Then Mr. Barstone wielded manhood's scepter and asserted his rights.

"Fanny, go up-stairs and remain with your aunt. Miss Wayne, be good enough to stay where you are; I wish to speak with you!"

There was an imperious ring in the young man's voice, an unwonted fire in his eye, that made him their master.

"Goodness!" interjected Fanny, under her breath, not daring to disobey; and Magdalen paused, paling perceptibly.

Mr. Barstone dashed impetuously into the heart of his subject at once.

"You have persistently avoided me all day, Miss Wayne, and left me in a state of unendurable suspense. You promised me my answer to-day. You must keep that promise."

He was standing before her—very pale for him. Magdalen still lingered by the door, her hand upon the lock, her fair head drooping. The rainy gloaming was just clear enough to show him that slender, bending shape, that sweet, downcast face. The twilight picture never left him in the troubled days to come.

"I should not, I suppose," Magdalen said, falteringly—"I should not have kept you waiting so long. But I meant to speak to-night, and"—still more falteringly—"it is so very hard to say."

A lump rose in George Barstone's throat. Perhaps it was his heart, for that organ seemed suddenly to have ceased beating.

"So very hard to say, Miss Wayne! Then my answer is to be no."

His voice sounded strange, and hollow, and far-off, even to himself, and he knew he was whiter than ashes.

"No, no!" Magdalen cried, impetuously—"at least—that is—I mean I have a story to tell you that may cause you to change your mind."

"Change my mind! Magdalen, I think there is nothing on earth could make me do that."

"Ah, you shall see! I am going to tell you my story, and when you hear how I have deceived you, you surely will. No one could blame you for doing it."

He crossed the room and took a seat by the window—still very, very pale, still strangely calm. There was a chair opposite, upon which the faint light fell strongest. He motioned her to that.

"Deceived me?" he repeated, looking at the downcast face. "How have you done that, Miss Wayne?"

"By that name, for one thing. I am not Miss Wayne. My name is Magdalen Wayne Allward."

There was a pause.

"Your name is Allward. Why then, are you here as Miss Wayne?"

"That is my story. The end I had in view in changing my name is an end unattained yet—an end I may never attain. There is a secret in my life, Mr. Barstone; that life is consecrated to one purpose. I am not like other girls, free and unfettered; I have vowed my whole existence to a purpose that may even stand between me and the man I marry—if marry I should. That is why I could not answer you last night."

Mr. Barstone listened with a face of dense mystification.

"Then it was through no personal dislike, Magdalen? only because of this secret? If it—this strange purpose—did not exist, Magdalen—Magdalen, would your answer have been yes?"

He leaned forward, breathlessly, catching both her hands. Magdalen's drooping head bent lower for an instant, then lifted proudly, with a tender, virginal blush.

"Why should I deny it? You are a good man, Mr. Barstone. Your offer is an honor to any woman, and I love you very dearly. Whatever you may think of me when you hear my story, whatever change it may make in your feelings, believe me, the memory of your goodness and affection will ever be the dearest memory of my life."

Something in the sad solemnity of her tone, something in the mournful sweetness of her face, hushed the impetuous words he would have uttered. Magdalen went on:

"Four years ago. Mr. Barstone, I left a happy country home, a loving father, a beautiful elder sister, an honest, gentle brother, a kind old nurse, and went to New Haven to school. I was away barely a year, when I was sent for in haste to return. I knew beforehand that great and sad changes had occurred in my absence, but I was not prepared for the awful bereavement that had fallen upon me. My father was in his grave a heart-broken, disgraced old man; my brother was in a felon's cell, my sister lay dead in the house. Only my poor nurse was left to bid me welcome. And, Mr. Barstone, all this

ruin and death was the work of one man."

George Barstone uttered a faint exclamation, but she never looked at him. Her hands were folded in her lap, her eyes gazing out in their fathomless sadness at the leaden evening sky.

"This man—this demon in man's form—came to our village, to our house, in insidious friendship. He was handsome, elegant and gentlemanly, and easily won my poor sister's trusting heart. How was she to know, poor child, of the wickedness and deceit of this bad world, brought up as she was. She loved him, she believed him, she trusted him entirely. It is the old story, Mr. Barstone, of man's perfidy and woman's blind faith. There were high and mighty relatives away in New York, whom he dare not offend by openly marrying so lowly a bride. If she would but follow him to the city, they would be united secretly and at once. She consented—she followed him, there was a mockery of marriage performed, real and holy to her, and she was as surely that villain's wife, in the sight of heaven, as women ever was yet.

"That was the beginning of the end. My father, as proud a man, in his stainless integrity, as earth ever saw, never lifted his head again. Only her flight was known and believed in—no one credited a marriage. It needed but his son's fall to send him to the grave.

"Willie went to New York to complete his medical studies, and there he encountered the man who had lured away his sister. Instead of seeking justice and reparation for that wrong, he became his friend. The wretch was a professional gambler. Willie was but a boy, weak and easily tempted. He fell a victim to the tempter's crafty wiles, and became heart and soul a gambler, too. The downward race was rapid—a few months, and all he possessed was gone. The terrible spell held him fast—he forged a signature—was detected, arrested, tried and sentenced to Sing Sing for four years."

She paused in her dreadful tale, rigid and tearless and white, and George Barstone spoke suddenly, in a voice that did not sound like his own:

"Do you desire to keep secret this man's name? If you do not——"

"I do not," Magdalen interrupted. "His name is Maurice Langley."

There was a pause. Mr. Barstone drew back into the shadow of the curtains, where his face was hidden.

"Maurice Langley was the name he gave," the girl went slowly on, "but of course, it was assumed. In fact, my sister discovered positively that it was."

"And she discovered his real name?"

"No. Ah, if she had only discovered that!"

"What was he like—this Maurice Langley?"

"Tall and handsome, with dark hair and whiskers, very elegant in address and manner. Why," she asked with sudden suspicion, "do you know him?"

"No," replied George Barstone, "no, I don't know him."

But he still spoke in a strange, constrained voice, and kept his face persistently shadowed by the window-curtains.

"Willie's ruin completed what Laura's flight began," pursued Magdalen; "It killed my father! My poor nurse was left alone in the old homestead, never expecting to see any of her children, save myself, again. When all at once, without word or warning, after weary months of waiting, Laura came home—came home to die, Mr. Barstone, and leave a baby-girl behind her. She had discovered all the falsehood and treachery of the wretch who had lured her away, and maddened by the discovery, she fled from him at dead of night, a crazed and frantic woman. He had a wife living before he ever met her—she had never been that for one moment. She was disgraced and lost; there was nothing left but to die.

"Nurse Rachel sent for me. I returned home. I saw her in her winding sheet. I saw her laid in her grave. On her death-bed she had written me a letter, telling me all—telling me she died with no forgiveness for her betrayer. No! her wrongs were so many and great that even on her death-bed she could not forgive. And, Mr. Barstone, kneeling by her grave, I vowed never to forgive him either. I swore there, alone with heaven and my dead, to devote my life to seeking out the murderer of all I loved best, and bring him to justice for his crimes. I vowed to be avenged on Maurice Langley,

wherever and whenever I should meet him, and if I live I will keep that vow!"

The ringing voice ceased. There was a long, thrilling pause. The rainy twilight was darkness now, through which the girl's white face gleamed. George Barstone sat stonily still—an hour or two, as it seemed to him in that supreme moment. Then he spoke out of the darkness:

"This is all?"

"All!" repeated Magdalen. "You know the story of my life as I know it myself. It is my secret and you must keep it."

"I will keep a thousand secrets, if you will consent to be my wife."

"Mr. Barstone, after all this—can you—will you——"

"I can and I will!" George answered, rising and taking her in his arms. "My own Magdalen, what is there in all this to keep us apart? It is a sad and pitiful story, my dearest, but you have suffered enough already, without letting it blight your whole life. My poor, wronged girl! let me try to make you forget the troubles of the past—let me make you my beloved wife."

"Magdalen's face fell on his shoulder with a sort of sob. She had been alone in the world so long that it was unutterably sweet, this loving and being beloved.

"I will try and make you so happy, my own dear girl, that you will forget this cruel trouble of the past, and this wild avenging vow," George said, holding her close to his heart. "I will love you so dearly that you will forget Maurice Langley and his villainy."

The words awoke Magdalen from her short moment of bliss. She lifted her head and struggled from his arms.

"No!" she exclaimed. "No, George Barstone, I will never forget! Maurice Langley is my deadly foe—I will never forget—never forgive! Heaven helping me, I will keep my vow!"

"Heaven will not help you, Magdalen. There!" pointing upward, "is the only Avenger. Wait, my own dear girl—wait. The mills of the gods grind slowly, but terribly sure. You have been wronged, my darling, but forgetfulness is a duty. This wild talk of revenge sounds monstrous from lips so fair and sweet."

"Yes, yes, I know!" the girl cried impatiently. "I know what you would say—it has all been said to me before. It is unwomanly, it is wicked, it is unchristian! I don't know, I don't care, I don't believe it! I do not ask for revenge—I only ask justice."

She began walking up and down, always her habit when excited.

"See here, Mr. Barstone!" she said, "they were all the world to me—father, sister, brother. He was more fiend than man, who wrought their ruin. He deserves no mercy: he will find none from me!"

"What will you do?" George Barstone's voice sounded cold and a little stern, after those girlish, passionate tones.

"I don't know—I can't tell. He may be dead and buried; he may be alive, and I may never meet him. I may see him tomorrow, and not know him. But if I ever do meet him and know him, I tell you I will keep my promise to my dead sister!"

"As how?"

"I don't know, but I will keep it."

The lawyer smiled, in the dusk, at the feminine impotent vehemence.

"How?" he reiterated. "You won't murder him, I suppose, Magdalen? And what else can you do? The law won't punish him because your sister eloped with him or because he taught your brother to play cards. Those accusations won't stand in a court of law."

"Mr. Barstone," said Magdalen, stopping in her rapid walk, and speaking slowly and impressively. "I am only a girl—a

weak, helpless girl—and there is not one chance to fifty that I may ever meet this man. I have changed my name, so that if we should by chance meet he might not recognize me by that. I resemble my dead sister—that is beyond my power to help. I have never met Maurice Langley, but I have told you all this, lest in the chapter of accidents to come that meeting may be numbered. If I were to take you at your word, and become your wife concealing my life's purpose, I should be doing you wrong. If knowing all, my steadfast, unalterable resolve, you still are of the same mind, then, no matter how soon I meet him, I shall be justified, as far as you are concerned, in keeping my vow. And I would keep it, Mr. Barstone, in spite of fifty husbands!"

"Magdalen! Magdalen! my impetuous, foolish girl. Once again, what would you do?"

"And, once again, I cannot tell you now. But such a man as that must have guilty, hidden secrets that would lay him open to the law. If I could do no better I would spend my days and nights tracking out these. I would dog him like a sleuth hound. I would hunt him down and go to his hanging with pleasure!"

She clenched her hands passionately, and her eyes flashed fire in the deepening dusk. And this was the fair-haired, blue-eyed, low-voiced divinity of his dreams, but one remove or so from an angel.

"Magdalen! Good heavens!" cried her lover aghast.

"I would! I tell you I would! If there were no other way, I think I would tempt him to commit a crime, that I might hand him over for punishment. Oh, Mr. Barstone, you don't know me yet! I tell you I have brooded and brooded over this man's villainy until I have been half mad, and if ever I meet him—no matter how—my heart will be harder to him than this marble!"

She struck the table lightly with her clenched hand, standing up, in her passionate and indomitable resolution, a sternly beautiful young Nemesis.

There was a pause. Poor George stood with a very blank face indeed.

"I tell you all this, Mr. Barstone," Magdalen resumed in a steadier voice, "because I esteem you so highly, and—yes, why should I deny it?—because I love you so well. No man shall ever marry me and think me better than I am."

"There is no need, Magdalen!" He crossed over in one stride and caught her in his arms. "You are mine—mine forever—since you love me! My poor darling! Maurice Langley shall never keep us apart; he has done too much evil already. You shall be my wife—come weal, come woe!"

His voice lowered, a sort of ominous solemnity thrilled in his tone, and for an instant there was a chill at his heart. Gone as quickly as it came—more quickly, for Magdalen Allward's beautiful face lay on his breast—her home for life.

"Dear George! how good—how generous you are!" Ah! how altered her tone from a moment before—so infinitely grateful, loving and womanly now. "I am not half worthy of you! I am a passionate, hot-headed girl; but I love you very dearly, and I will try, with heaven's help to make you as good a wife as a better woman."

And just here the door was flung wide by an impetuous hand, and, with a strong swish of silk, some one bounced in.

"May I come in now?" cried Miss Winters, in shrill sarcasm. "Aunt Lydia's been asleep these two hours, and I've been—good gracious me! there's no one here, and all's in the dark! Where on earth are Magdalen and George?"

Miss Winters found the match box, after a good deal of fumbling, distracted in her search by the upsetting of a footstool, and the swift shutting of the door. But she struck a lucifer at last, lighted the lamp, and beheld George sitting serenely in an armchair, his hands in his pockets, gazing at her.

"Oh, you're here!" exclaimed the young lady, looking blankly around; "where's Magdalen?"

"Where she pleases; she's not here."

"Who went out just now?" demanded Fanny, with asperity.

"It was dark, and I'm not a cat. You ought to know as well as I do."

"Ought I?" with scorn. "I dare say I do, too! I came in too soon, didn't I? I had better go back and stay with Aunt Lydia a

few hours longer, hadn't I?"

"Fanny," her cousin said, placidly, "don't try to be sarcastic—it isn't your forte. And I wish you wouldn't bother me with questions—go away, like a good girl. I want to smoke and look over my notes of the Scroggins vs. Boggs' case, which comes up to-morrow."

Miss Winters smiled sardonically.

"Scroggins vs. Boggs, indeed! It's all very fine and very plausible, Mr. Special Pleader, but it doesn't deceive me! You've been and asked Magdalen, you know, under cover of the darkness, and she ran away when I came in. I'll go and find her. I'll know by her face directly whether it's to be or not—though of course it is, or George would never look so ridiculously blissful. I wonder whether I had best wear pink or blue, as first bridesmaid?"

CHAPTER X.

ENGAGED.

Like the most dutiful of nephews and the happiest of men, as he was, George Barstone sought his aunt, in her room, early next morning, and reported the favorable result of his wooing. It scarcely needed many words, for one look at that illuminated countenance, quite glorified by bliss, at once informed Miss Barstone how matters stood.

"My foolish, love-sick boy," Aunt Lydia said, tapping him on the cheek; "it seems only yesterday since you came running in, with that same beatified face, to thank me for a new humming-top. And so pretty Magdalen has said yes, and our impetuous George is to have his new toy?"

"She has said yes, Aunt Lydia, and she has told me the story of her life."

"Indeed! There is a story, then?"

"Yes; a story of suffering, sorrow and cruel wrong. My poor girl has endured enough in her twenty years for a long lifetime."

And then George sat down beside his aunt and repeated the story he had heard last evening in the twilight. He told everything—the assumed name—the Quixotic vow of vengeance.

"It is very wild, romantic and silly, this scheme of revenge—this girlish Vendetta," the lover pleaded, deprecatingly—"and what one would hardly look for in so sensible a girl as Magdalen. But, as it is the remotest of all remote possibilities, her ever meeting or knowing this Maurice Langley, why let her cherish her foolish delusions. It is really marvelous, the hold this desire of future revenge has upon her mind. It seems to have become a sort of monomania with her."

"And monomanias are very troublesome and dangerous things, George," his aunt said, gravely. "Magdalen is a very resolute young person, and if this absurd infatuation grows and strengthens, the day may come when it will cost you and her very serious trouble."

It was Magdalen herself who, in an interview that morning, had given her lover permission to unfold her cherished secret to his aunt.

"I can trust Miss Barstone with it, George," she said, blushing prettily as she pronounced the name. "I can trust her, but not Fanny, whom I know too well, and not your cousin Philip, whom I don't know at all. I suppose I must be married under my real name, and sign it in the register, but a few words of explanation will suffice for the clergyman. Wayne is my name also, and by it I shall continue to be called."

"Until you have changed it to Barstone, my dearest." George replied, "and the change must be very soon. No need for us to wait. This will be our home, after our marriage, as it is now. Aunt Lydia would not hear for a moment of our deserting her."

Miss Barstone had listened to the story with a very grave and thoughtful face.

"It is, as you say," she remarked to her nephew, "a very remote possibility, the meeting of Magdalen and her enemy; but yet, it is a possibility, and, as such, worth considering. Should she, in the wonderful course of things, ever encounter him, I tremble for your future. She has a powerful will, and seems bent, with all her might, on keeping her melodramatic vow."

"Fully bent now, my dear aunt; but who knows the change time and happiness, and life's new duties may bring? She has been suffering for the past four years from the consequences of that villain's work, and so has been unable to forget. It will be different in the future. We will all make her so happy there will be no room left in her heart for anything but peace with the whole world. Don't wear that foreboding face, my good auntie; all will go well. I feel as though I had taken a new lease of life and joy, this morning, and I don't want you to darken my sunshine by the smallest cloud!"

"And I won't!" said Miss Barstone, with some of his own impetuosity. "Go send Magdalen to me! I like Miss Wayne

very much now, but I intend to love my favorite nephew's wife with my whole heart!"

Magdalen came, blushing and smiling, happy, and maidenly, and gentle; and good little Miss Barstone laughed to herself at the notion of that shy, blushing bride-elect becoming a future avenger.

"George was right," she thought, as she kissed her. "She will soon forget all her past wrongs and troubles when she is his happy wife."

Which conclusion simply went to prove how little the simple-minded old maid really knew of the blue-eyed, fair-haired girl before her.

Dearly as Magdalen loved George Barstone, she would have given him up, then and there, with Spartan resolution, if the choice lay between him and her pledged faith to her dead sister. She was wrong, and absurd, and wicked, of course; but she was only a headstrong girl, and no perfect creature by any means. The cruel wrongs of her brother and sister burned deep in her very soul—too deep for any length of time, or any happiness, however perfect, to efface.

"I am very, very glad, my dear!" Miss Barstone said. "I don't think my boy could have found a better or prettier wife anywhere than my golden-haired Magdalen! Don't blush, my dear; George isn't present, and we may speak the truth to one another. Does Fanny know?"

"Not yet," Magdalen answered; "and she is possessed by a devouring curiosity, I am sure. She will not be greatly surprised, I fancy. She suspected how matters stood before I did myself."

"Poor child! her head never runs on anything else than lovers, and weddings, and new dresses, and party-going! Inform her at once, my dear. I know she is undergoing agonies of suspense."

So Magdalen, going down again, and finding Miss Winters roaming alone and disconsolate about the lower rooms, put her arms around her in very girlish fashion, and whispered her sweet secret in her ears.

Fanny gave a little shriek of pure ecstasy.

"Oh, Magdalen! I'm so glad! I'm so glad! And you'll have me for first bridesmaid—for, of course, there must be half a dozen at least! And you'll wear white silk, and Brussels lace, and orange blossoms, and the bridesmaids shall wear blue!"

"What! Blue orange blossoms!"

"Nonsense! No; dresses. Blue becomes me better than pink, I think; though I like pink best. And Phil will come down, of course, and stand up with George. And one wedding makes many, you know; and who can tell but it may come my turn next?"

And, at the bare idea, Miss Winters went up and down, in little springs of joy, on her chair.

So everybody at all interested in the matter had been told, and everybody, strange to relate, was delighted.

George's course of true love seemed in a fair way of running as smooth as a sunlit lake—not even a ripple on that usually turbid sea. He wrote to his cousin Philip, telling him the jubilant tidings, and exhorting him to "run down and be best man at the wedding."

Doctor P. Barstone wrote back, by return mail, his rather cynical congratulations, promising, if at all possible, to be at Golden Willows on the grand occasion, and inspect the bride, and see the bridegroom taking his "leap in the dark."

Yes, everybody was pleased, except, perhaps, Mr. Sam Goldham, who had had vague ideas lately of taking Fanny Winters' handsome governess to himself, and sundry Millford young ladies, who had long cast the eye of regard on the good-looking, very-well-off young lawyer.

But these exceptions were of no account, and Mr. George Barstone lived by day, and slumbered by night, up in the seventh heaven—"in the Fool's Paradise," as his sarcastic medical cousin termed it—higher, indeed, if there be any higher Elysium.

"And we will be married right away!" he said, impetuously. "Where's the use of waiting? You have no authorities to

consult, or anything of the sort, and the sooner I'm a sensible, responsible married man the better Aunt Lydia will be pleased. Let's get married next month and be a comfortable couple, like Tim Linkenwater and little Miss La—what's her name?"

Of course, Magdalen protested vehemently, quite shocked at such indecorous haste. It would be ridiculous, it would be preposterous, it would be outrageous, such wild hurry! But George was set upon it, and not to be talked down.

"It's very hard if I can't have my way before marriage!" grumbled Mr. Barstone, "as I never expect to, after. I know you'll be a Xantippe, Magdalen (wasn't that her name?), and rule the roast with those flashing blue-gray eyes of yours. You can engage all the dressmakers in Millford, and send for two or three bales of dry goods to New York, and be all ready in half the time. It's absurd, the amount of needlework women require! As if the state of matrimony were in another hemisphere, where milliners were unheard of and dry goods stores unknown."

Thus beset, a compromise was effected with difficulty, and the last week of October fixed for the wedding. The brief interim, of course, was all too short for the bridal preparations, and Fanny's lessons were entirely given up, to that young lady's unbounded delight. Life was all a holiday now, with nothing to do, those long summer days, but revel in silks and laces and muslins, spending the shining hours in long, delightful confabulations with young persons in the dressmaking line. And Phil was coming—ecstatic thought—to be groomsman, and who could tell what might come of it? Phil might hanker after the joys of married life, when he once saw George fairly embarked on that sunlit ocean of delights—and who more likely to be the chosen bride than Miss Winters herself?

"And I do like Phil, Magdalen," admitted Fanny to the bride-elect. "I always liked him better than George! He doesn't know it, of course, and I wouldn't have him suspect it for the world! How nice it would be, if you were married to George, and I to Phil, and we were all living together! Wouldn't it now?"

Magdalen smiled quietly. She was happy—very, very happy, but very undemonstrative in her happiness. She loved this big, gentle-hearted, boisterous George Barstone deeply and dearly. She was grateful to him for all his goodness to her and all his trust in her, and she was earnestly and unspeakably thankful for this great and blessed change in her life. It was so sweet to be loved, and trusted, and cherished, and protected; to feel that there were those in the world who would think it a drearier place without her; and a home that would be desolate, and hearts that would be heavy, if she were lost. It was unutterably sweet to know this—how sweet none can tell but those who have been homeless and hardly treated in the houses of strangers.

September came, whilst yet the wedding preparations went briskly on. Carpenters were at work at the house, fitting up a range of upper chambers for Mr. and Mrs. Barstone's dressing-room, bedroom and parlor, en suite; seamstresses sat and sewed, in the bland sunshine, on silks stiff enough to stand alone for very richness, on gauzy muslins and organdies, fit for the queen of the fairies, and on crepe and lace draperies, in which the Maid of the Mist might have robed herself; and Fanny flitted up-stairs and down-stairs the bright day long, crazy with delight; and Magdalen, in the depth of her new bliss, took a brighter and more radiant beauty than ever, and her happy smiles chased over her fair face in one long dream of joy.

The darkness of the past was for the time forgotten; the shadow of Maurice Langley's guilt never came to darken the glory of the dazzling present.

And Mr. George Barstone—. But the English language is poor and weak to describe that young lawyer's entranced state. The dusty earth was as impalpable air under his boots, the world was Eden, and all the men and women in it wingless angels, and he himself the most blest and beatified of mankind.

The second week of September Magdalen, in the midst of all fuss and bustle, snatched a few days, and went on a visit to Miss Nurse Rachel and little Laura.

"You might fetch them here to live, you know, Magdalen," Mr. Barstone said, before her departure. "There is plenty of room for everybody; and if there isn't, we'll make it. Add a wing here and a turret there, like those old castles we read about in story-books, and all of us settle down sociably together."

Magdalen laughed at the notion of their pretty cottage, with wings and turrets tagged on.

"My old nurse is well and comfortable where she is, George," she said. "In fact, I don't think she would be ever as happy

elsewhere as in the old homestead—so we won't remove her. She can come with little Laura, and make us a visit once in a while, when—"

A pause and a bright blush.

"When we're married," said Mr. Barstone, helping her out. "Just as you please, Magdalen—only don't stay too long when you get there, for the world is a howling wilderness without you, you know."

The autumn leaves were whirling in golden and scarlet drifts, and the yellow October sunshine was sifting its long, sharp lances through the gaunt maples, as Magdalen walked up the familiar road, in the early afternoon. Well-known faces peeped from doors and windows at the stately young lady, so tall and stylish now that she had left off mourning, and opined that Magdalen Allward was growing handsomer every day.

Old Nurse Rachel sat on the kitchen door-step, knitting in the bland afternoon sunshine, with little Laura playing with the bright, fallen leaves. Little Laura was the most charming of all charming little fairies—with the brightest eyes that ever flashed back sunlight, and showers of dancing flaxen curls. She had sat there, in the genial noontime, when Magdalen came round the angle of the house, and stood—a smiling apparition—before them.

"Magdalen!" Nurse Rachel cried, with a little scream of joyful surprise. "Oh, my darling, is this really you?"

"It really is, nurse," the girl said, kissing the wrinkled cheek. "You did not expect me, did you? And it's very nice to get an agreeable surprise, isn't it? Oh, you pet, what a bright little witch you are growing!"

She snatched up Laura, and covered the pretty baby face with kisses.

"My pet! my pet! my darling! You are glad to see auntie, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Laura, with a little nod, "real glad! Did you fetch a doll that opens and shuts its eyes this time, auntie? Your letter said so, you know—'cause nurse read it to me."

"Yes, I brought it, Laura, and lots and lots more things, ever so pretty. Wait until auntie's trunk comes up, and you shall see. Is Laura a pretty good girl, nurse?"

"Pretty good—only too fond of molasses taffy and sitting up after candle-light. Come in, Magdalen, and take off your things. Oh, what a pleasant surprise this is! Are you going to make us a nice, long visit this time?"

"Only three days, nurse. They can't spare me at Golden Willows."

The bright blue eyes sparkled with laughing mischief as they met old Rachel's. Sitting down by the kitchen table, the girl folded her gloved hands thereon, and sat looking at her old nurse with a dimpled, roguish face.

"Can't they, indeed? They are very fond of you?"

"Very fond; uncommonly fond; fonder than you are, Nurse Rachel."

"Ah, I don't believe that; they could not be, my pet. Ah, you—you like them, too, Magdalen; but I know you do."

"Very much, very much—so much that I am going to——"

She broke off, the smiles, and dimples, and rosy glows chasing each other over her bright, young face.

"To what, my dear?"

"Marry one of them, nurse."

"My child!"

Magdalen came over and knelt down before her old nurse, putting her arms around her.

"Yes, indeed, nurse; your child is going to be married. The fairy prince you have been promising so long has arrived at last. Not that he looks so much like one, you know," said Magdalen laughing.

"Oh, my child! my child!" old Rachel cried, breathlessly; "this is a surprise! Who is he? What is his name?"

"He is George Barstone—Miss Barstone's nephew—neither wonderfully rich nor wonderfully handsome, both of which the fairy prince was to be, but the best and dearest fellow in the world wide, and I love him with all my heart!"

Her voice faltered, her eyes filled, and her face drooped forward and hid itself on her nurse's shoulder.

"My child! my child!" It was all Rachel could say, as she patted ceaselessly the bright head. "My own little Magdalen!"

"And I'm going to be very happy, nurse—happy as the days are long—and you and Mistress Laura, here, are to come twice or three times a year and make me a long visit; and we're all going to be just the gayest, merriest people the big sun shines on! Aren't we, Laura?"

She snatched up the little one and went waltzing round and round the room like a giddy school girl just let loose.

"Thank God!" old Rachel said, fervently, "thank God, my dear, that you are going to be at peace at last! Oh, my child, I have been troubled about you, troubled more than I can tell, when I thought of your bitter thirst for vengeance against Maurice Langley; but now I am content. You will have a happy home, a loving husband—no more drudgery, no more battling with the hard world—and you will be at peace and forget him."

"Forget him!" Magdalen's face changed, as you have seen a summer sky change, all in a moment. She set the child down and stood before her nurse with a dark frown, marring all her fair, girlish beauty. "Forget him—forget Maurice Langley—forget the man who murdered my father and sister! Oh, Nurse Rachel, you have known me from my babyhood, but you know me very little if you think I ever can forget that man."

"Then you still—" The old woman paused, dismayed.

"Hate him! hate him! hate him! Oh, how I do hate that man! Look here, nurse, I love George Barstone with all my heart, dearer than my own life, and there could be no bitterer sorrow for me, here below, than to lose him, my plighted husband; but I would give him up to-morrow, freely and unhesitatingly, for the chance of being revenged on Maurice Langley!"

Nurse Rachel sat in dumb consternation; Magdalen trod the floor after her old excited manner, with pale face and flashing eyes.

There seemed a horrible, unnatural discrepancy between her fair, girlish, youthful beauty and the fierce, undying thirst for revenge.

"I will never forgive him. I will never forget while life beats here!" striking lightly on her breast. "Never, Rachel, never! I have told George Barstone my story. I have told him my name. I have told him of the purpose to which my life is vowed. Whatever happens in the future he shall not say I deceived him. He loves me well enough to marry me, knowing all, and please God, I will make him a true and faithful and loving wife; but I will not forego my vow. Never! never!"

"And you have not heard——"

"I have not heard—no—and I may never hear. I may have sat beside him—I may yet. I may hold his hand and look in his face, and yet not know him—that is the thought that drives me to despair. My poor, poor Laura! You lie in your unavenged grave a long time!" Her eyes filled with passionate tears—hot and bitter—and she impatiently dashed them away. "I am almost afraid of my new happiness, Rachel, when I think it may make me less eager to find Maurice Langley. It seems ingratitude to the dead, monstrous and unnatural after all their misery, for me to be so hopeful and light-hearted. But I'm only a girl, you know, and I can't help it."

She took Laura in her arms again—that chubby little damsel staring at this incomprehensible talk with wide open blue eyes of wonder.

"My pretty rose-cheeked baby, do you think auntie has taken leave of her senses? Never mind, nurse shall get us some tea, and we won't talk any more about these disagreeable things. We are going to be just as blithe as the birds for the next three days, little Laura."

And the girl kept her word. No blither creature ever lived on earth than Magdalen, when the great trouble of her life

could be shut down deep in her heart—so deep that no shadow rose to the surface. She rambled with little Laura over hills and fields, and through the woods; she fed the chickens and dressed her dolls, and made up astonishing little romances for her delectation, and was almost as merry and as much of a child as Laura herself.

And so the three days' grace expired, and Magdalen was going home—yes, Golden Willows was home now—never to come back to the old homestead as Magdalen Allward.

"You will come and see me married, Rachel?" she said, wistfully, holding out her hand, to say good-by.

"I don't know, my dear, it's a long way, and I'm not used to traveling. Then here is little Laura. Oh, I don't know."

"But I should like it so much, Rachel."

Still Rachel shook her head.

"I don't know, my dear. I should like it myself, but I can't promise. Still I'll try. The last Thursday in October, you say?"

"Yes, do try! It will make me doubly happy. Good-by, nurse—good-by, Laura. Auntie will fetch her little girl something wonderfully handsome next time."

So Magdalen departed, and went back to her impatient lover—to her plighted husband. Went back to find changes, in her brief absence, which were destined to postpone her marriage.

CHAPTER XI.

FREE FROM SING SING.

Miss Barstone was very ill—so ill that she lay in the shadow of the Valley of Death—and the lamp burned, and patient watchers sat by the bedside the weary night through. Footfalls were hushed, voices were lowered, and a fearful awe sat on every face, as if their mortal eyes could see the dread death angel hovering on their threshold.

Magdalen took her place among the rest, and was the most indefatigable and tender nurse the poor old maid had. Long, weary vigils she kept during the days and nights that were to have been filled with bridal preparations, until her cheek grew pale and her eyes dim in the dusk of the sick chamber.

The snowy robes of glistening silk, and airy muslin, and misty lace, were put away to a more propitious season; and October came, and the wedding day went, and Magdalen was unwedded. November, with its sad, short days and lamentable winds, passed drearily away before the turning point of the weary illness came, and Miss Barstone began slowly to recover.

"It is very hard on you, my poor boy," Aunt Lydia said, one evening, looking up in George's face, which, like the rest, had grown somewhat thin and careworn this trying season; "but you need not postpone your wedding much longer, thank heaven! Let me see—this is December; suppose you are married on New Year's Day?"

Of course Mr. Barstone was only too transported to say yes, and of course he said so.

"Magdalen is the best of nurses and the dearest of girls," continued Aunt Lydia. "I'm certain if your future is not a happy one, it will not be her fault."

Magdalen opened the door softly as she spoke, and came in.

"Is she asleep, George? Shall Fanny come and take your place? You must be worn out."

"Come here, my dear," said Miss Barstone. "I am not asleep. Let me look at you. Ah, yes! you have grown paler and thinner with these long night watches, as well as the rest. You have been very good to poor old Aunt Lydia, and your happiness shall not be postponed an hour longer than is possible. New Year's is very near now; you must make this impatient boy the happiest of husbands on New Year's Day."

George looked very pleadingly, Magdalen blushed, smiled and shyly held out her hand.

"He has been very good, very patient," said Aunt Lydia, "and he has earned his sugar plums, and shall have them. And now, my children, if you will leave me, I will try and sleep. Don't send Fanny up just yet, Magdalen; wait half an hour."

The lovers departed, and went down-stairs. George's supper awaited him in the dining-room. The girls had had theirs while he kept watch in the sick-room.

"I believe I'll take a walk in the garden while you eat your supper, George," Magdalen said. "The night is lovely, and the air of the house oppressive."

"And you are as pale as a spirit, my darling," George answered, kissing the white cheek. "Go and see if this icy December wind will not bring back your lost roses."

"They never were very bright," Magdalen said, laughingly, as she threw a shawl carelessly over her head and went out.

The winter night was indescribably bright and beautiful. Up in a sky of cloudless blue sailed the Christmas moon, crystal clear, silver bright, with countless sparkling, frosty stars. No wind stirred the leafless trees, and the snowy ground glittered and scintillated and flashed back the shimmering luster above.

"And, oh, how lovely it all is!" cried Magdalen, drawing a long free breath. "Sweet and serene as Eden itself! A fairy earth under a magic sky!"

She ran down the steps and entered the willow walk. As she did so the gate latch sharply clicked. She glanced over her

shoulder and saw a man come in. Magdalen paused.

The man paused, too, at the gate and surveyed the lighted front of the house with a strange, irresolute, hesitating manner. Then he walked up the path, slowly and hesitatingly, and stopping often.

"What can that man want?" thought Magdalen. "He acts suspiciously. I'll speak to him."

Quite fearless for herself, the young girl stepped out from the black shadow of the trees and stood clearly revealed in the moonlight.

The man saw her and advanced at once. As he drew near Magdalen saw he was undersized, and slender, and boyish, and shabby. For his face, his coat collar was so turned up and his cloth cap so pulled down that it was effectually concealed.

"This place is Golden Willows?" the suspicious stranger began, inquiringly, touching his cap to the lady with the shawl over her head.

Magdalen gave a wild start. That voice! Surely she knew that voice!

"Yes," she said, her eyes dilating, "this is Golden Willows."

"And there is a young lady—a governess—a Miss Wayne living here?"

"I am the governess," Magdalen said, in a hushed, fearful voice, "and you are——"

"Look!"

He lifted the cloth cap, turned down the coat collar, and displayed a boyish face in the wan moonlight, haggard and hollow-eyed, but handsome still.

Magdalen gave a great cry, and a recoil.

"Willie! Willie! my brother!"

And then the shabby and suspicious stranger was caught in Miss Wayne's arms, in a clasp as strong and lasting as the love she bore him.

"Willie! Willie! Willie!"

It was all she could cry between her raining tears and kisses, holding him as if she would never let him go.

Willie Allward rather endured than returned his sister's caresses. His sharp and haggard face looked sullen and overcast, even in this first moment of meeting, after more than four years.

"Oh, Willie! what a surprise this is! what a surprise this is! To think that I should ever see you again, my darling, darling brother!"

"Then you are glad to see me, Magdalen," said the young fellow, kissing her at last. "The old woman said you would be, but I'll be blowed if I believed her!"

"The old woman! Do you mean Rachel? Have you been home?"

"To be sure I have! How else should I know where to find you? And so this is your home now?" jerking his thumb over his shoulder toward the house, "and you're a governess, Mag? How do you like it?"

"Very well."

"They're good to you, are they?"

"Very good, Willie."

"And you're going to be married, old Rachel says. It seems funny! Little Magdalen going to be married! What's this the chap's name is?"

"George Barstone—the best man I ever knew, Willie."

"Oh! is he? I'm glad to hear that, because I thought you might be making a botch of it, like Laura," Willie Allward said, with a harsh, strident laugh. "Pretty affair, that, wasn't it? She's dead and buried now, and the little one is her very image—not the least like its handsome papa!"

"Willie! Willie! how bitterly you talk! how strangely you have changed!"

"For the better, hey? Where's the Willie in the varnished boots, and superfine dress-coats, and gold studs, and No. 7 French kids, you used to know, I wonder? This fellow here," looking down at himself, "in the rough brogans, and threadbare pants, and greasy, out-at-elbows coat, isn't much like him, is he? But, then, we don't come home from the college I have just graduated at in the height of the style," he laughed—a sharp, mirthless laugh, that made Magdalen shiver.

"It's only one more item down in the long account I've got to settle with my friend Maurice Langley, when I meet him. Don't wear that white, scared face, my lassie. We won't talk about it, if you like. Let's look at you. Why, you've grown a handsome girl, Magdalen—handsomer than ever Laura was, though you're like her, too."

Magdalen put her arm through her brother's, and drew him into the Willow Walk.

"Come this way, Willie; I don't want any one to see us, and you would hardly care to come in, I suppose?" hesitatingly, looking at him.

"Hardly, in this trim. Don't be afraid of hurting my feelings by plain speaking, my dear girl. I have not been used to that sort of thing, you know, for the past four years. I didn't want to go in, and I didn't mean to disgrace you. As you are the only member of the family that has not turned out rather disreputably, the least I can do is to let you keep up the family credit. In fact, I was rather doubtful about coming near you at all, but the old dame insisted on it so strongly, and as I had a hankering that way myself——"

"Willie!" Magdalen broke out passionately, "do you think it necessary to apologize to me for coming to see me? If you had not, I should never have forgiven you! Are we not brother and sister? Do we not stand alone in the world now? Are we not bound together by one common cause? It would have been a worse deed—a baser and more cruel act—than any you have yet committed, if you had not come to see me now."

The lad looked at her, astonished at her unlooked-for welcome outburst.

"By George! how you go it! Well, as you look at it in that light, I'm glad myself I've come. But some girls, you know, Magdalen, respectable themselves, and going to be married to a respectable man, wouldn't exactly care to have a convicted forger, who has just served out his four years at Sing Sing, call upon them, even though that convicted forger chanced to be their brother."

"Then I'm not one of those respectable girls," said Magdalen, shortly. "Don't let us waste time bandying words, for I cannot stay out long without being missed. What are you going to do now?"

"For a living do you mean! Sweep crossings carry a hod, beg, borrow, steal, so that I can get enough to hold soul and body together. No, by the bye, not steal; it won't do to get in the stone jug again. Oh, I'll do, never fear!"

"Where are you going?"

"To New York—to hunt up a friend of mine there."

"Maurice Langley, do you mean?"

"Precisely—Mr. Maurice Langley. I've a score to settle with that gentleman—a long-standing debt, with compound interest. My conscience won't be easy until I pay it."

"Willie," Magdalen said, looking earnestly, "what are you going to do?"

"Settle old scores, my girl—deep and deadly scores! No, no, Magdalen!" laughing harshly at the colorless face, "not commit a murder. I won't stab, or shoot, or poison Maurice Langley—that's a hanging matter, you see—I'll only put him

where I came from—Sing Sing, and hard labor for the best years of his natural life!"

Some of the fierce fire, smoldering duskily in the returned convict's eyes, lighted up suddenly those of Magdalen.

"Willie, can you do it? Can you?"

"I can, and I will! Don't you be afraid, Magdalen—I'll make Maurice Langley curse the day he ever met me as bitterly as he has made me curse it! I'll find him if he's above ground—if the devil has not been before me and come for his own!"

"That's my brave brother! Oh, if I were only a man! I would leave all, and go with you, heart and soul, this moment! I will never rest on the same earth with Laura's destroyer!"

"Hallo!" cried Willie, astonished; "that's how you feel, is it? Don't you be afraid of my letting him escape. The fox runs long, but is caught by the tail at last. I'll find him, never fear—let him hide where he may choose. I would know Maurice Langley's hide on a bush. Oh, my little girl, State Prison for a chap to finish his education. I went in a lamb, comparatively speaking, and I have come out a tiger; but that's enough about it. I don't want to make a tigress of you, and I won't keep you here in the cold any longer. I've seen you and that's enough—you're well and happy and I'm glad of it. Be a good woman, Magdalen. If you can, and make your husband happy, and leave Maurice Langley and plotting and vengeance to me."

"I'll aid you if I ever have the power," said Magdalen, resolutely; "and, as a beginning, you must let me keep you in funds. You can't sweep crossings or carry hods, and you know it. You have no one to borrow of but me. Here is my purse—there are fifty dollars—enough for this month. When you get to New York, write to me—I will send you more—or no—write to Rachel—your letters can come under cover from her. Mr. Barstone is very, very kind and good; but just because he is so kind and good it hurts him to think any one belonging to me should be otherwise. The less he hears of my family affairs, the happier he will feel, and this sort of concealment does him no injury, you understand?"

"All right," said Willie, boyishly, pocketing the purse. "And now, good-by Magdalen. You look half frozen. Thousand thanks for the money, and a merry Christmas to you, and a happy New Year, and many of 'em. Shake hands."

"You will write very soon, Willie, and very often? You know how anxious I shall be."

"Yes, I'll write. Don't you tell Mr. Barstone—isn't that the name? about this visit. It will be of no use. The less said about me the better. I'm going to take some other name and disguise myself with whiskers and wig, and begin my search for Langley at once. If he is alive, he is in New York, and if he's in New York, I'll find him. Good-by."

"Good-by," Magdalen said.

And then, giving her hand a parting wring, Willie Allward slouched his cap over his eyes, turned up his collar, plunged down the Willow Walk and was gone.

Magdalen stood still where he had left her, listening to his footsteps ringing sharply on the frozen ground, and feeling as though she were in a dream.

The icy wind, as the night wore on, roused her to the consciousness that she had been a long time out, and that they would wonder what detained her.

Slowly she turned toward the house. As she emerged from the trees and looked up at the windows, she saw Fanny standing in the bedroom looking out. There was no light in her chamber and Magdalen saw her distinctly.

"And she could see me by this moonlight," Magdalen thought, "if she were up there. I hope she has not seen Willie."

But Fanny had seen Willie and was in a state of wonderment and shocked surprise not to be described.

She had seen the first meeting of brother and sister—seen Magdalen fall upon the neck of the unknown man and kiss him over and over, and over again.

"G-o-o-o-o-d gracious!" cried Miss Winters, mentally prolonging the first word of ejaculation indefinitely in her amazement; "can I believe my eyes? Yes, I can! and there's Magdalen Wayne kissing and hugging a strange man down under the trees, and George taking his supper in the dining-room. It isn't George—that's certain—and I should think

Magdalen hadn't ought to kiss any other man. When a person's engaged to a person," mused the young lady, vaguely, "I should think they hadn't ought to kiss any other person. Aunt Lydia is forever holding Magdalen up as a burning and shining light for me to imitate, and she says I'm frivolous, but I don't believe I would go and act like that. If I was going to be married to Phil, in a month, I'm very certain I wouldn't meet other men in the grounds, by night and by stealth, and kiss them," concluded Fanny, with an evident sense of injury.

The young lady lingered by the window after Magdalen and the strange man had disappeared down the Willow Walk, gazing pensively at the moonlight, and waiting.

She was kept waiting half an hour, and was beginning to grow rather impatient, when the twain in the garden came out in the moonlight and lingered an instant, with clasped hands, before parting.

The man dashed off toward the gate at a swinging pace, and Miss Wayne turned slowly up to the house.

"Who can it be?" mused Fanny. "If it were a father or a brother or a first cousin, even, it wouldn't be so much harm; although, I dare say, George might object to a first cousin. But Magdalen has no relations whatever, except an old nurse and a little niece, that ever I heard her speak about; then I wonder who that man can be? It's very odd; but, I suppose, she'll explain it when she comes in."

Fanny descended at once and encountered her governess in the lower hall. Miss Wayne looked very pale and subdued—otherwise there was no change.

George came out of the dining-room at the same moment, cigar in mouth, book in hand.

"Fanny, are you here yet? I thought I told you, half an hour ago, you were wanted in the sick-room. Magdalen, I began to think you were lost. Why did you linger so? You look pale and half frozen."

"Now!" thought Fanny.

And she held her breath for the answer. But Magdalen, with a little shiver, turned to go up-stairs, with a very evasive and unsatisfactory reply:

"I am cold and a little worn out, I believe. I shall go to my room and lie down. Fanny, if you sit up until midnight I'll relieve you then. Good night, George."

She ran lightly up-stairs and vanished into her own room.

George went back a little disappointed to his book and cigar, and Miss Winters, very slowly and with a preternaturally solemn face, wended her way to the sick-room.

"It's a secret," thought Fanny; "the only secret I ever had to keep in my life, and she doesn't know I know it. She isn't going to tell George, and I shouldn't wonder if it were some youthful lover come back to upbraid her for her perfidy. I ought to tell somebody, because it's wicked and romantic of Magdalen to act so; but I don't like to—it seems mean—and then I should hate to make Magdalen mad."

So Miss Winters, burning to tell, put a severe restraint on herself and resolved to offer up her inclinations on the altar of friendship and keep Magdalen's wicked secret.

CHAPTER XII.

MAGDALEN'S WEDDING DAY.

Over an earth of snow-clad whiteness, in an oriflamme of crimson glory, sank the sun on Magdalen's wedding eve.

A red and lurid sunset—the whole western sky ablaze with black and brassy bars, flaring behind the scarlet splendor, and lingering—prophetic of coming change—when the burning fires of sunset had faded and gone.

The last sun of the old year had set, burning and wrathful, in a sky that was like a sea of blood; the last sunset of Magdalen Allward's maiden life had dipped behind the pine woods and vanished, leaving that lurid, ominous blaze behind, forerunner of a coming storm.

Magdalen Allward stood by the drawing-room window, looking out at the gorgeous glory of that setting sun.

White and high lay piled the snow drifts, this bitter New Year's eve; icy and wild blew the long, wailing blasts; gaunt and bare rattled the skeleton arms of the trees around Golden Willows. A dead world lying in its shroud—dreariness and desolation and the coldness of the grave everywhere—that was what the bride-elect stood looking at on her bridal eve.

She was quite alone in the drawing-room, the pretty, dainty drawing-room of Golden Willows. A new carpet, soft and rich, covered the floor; dainty new draperies shaded the windows; elegant new furniture gleamed and glittered in all the glory of French polish, in the light of the sparkling coal fire. There were festoons of evergreen and brilliant scarlet berries over the doorways and windows, unfaded since the Christmas festivities, and Magdalen stood in one of these green arches like a picture in a frame. On this eve of her new life—for the first time since her sister's death—Magdalen had entirely discarded her mourning.

She stood there, in a floating robe of pearl-colored crepe, that was shot with rosy gleams, and which blushed as she walked; delicate ribbons and laces fluttered about her; a bandeau of pearls—her lover's gift—shimmering in her burnished hair, and on her lovely, uncovered neck and arms—as fair and stately and sweet a bride as that setting sun shone on the wide world over.

The last little pink cloud of that tropical splendor in the western sky faded and died out, and slowly the dull, creeping grayness of early night darkened down like a pall. Out of the cold, somber arch shone, steel-blue and sparkling, the frosty December stars; for the late-rising moon would not be here for hours to light the snowy world.

Slowly the darkness crept up over the hills and the tree tops, and the broad white fields; mournfully wailed the winter wind around the eaves and gables. The house was very still—so ominously still you might have thought it the eve of a funeral—not a wedding.

George was not home from Millford, Miss Barstone was asleep after her late dinner, and Fanny was up in her room, writing a letter to Phil—a torrent of reproaches for his refusal to be present at the wedding.

Outside and inside a solemn, weird hush lay, and Magdalen shivered in the genial warmth of the room, with a sensation which makes people say: "Some one is walking over my grave." Her face, in the pallid starlight, was as colorless as her dress.

"What is it?" Magdalen asked herself, with a thrill and a shiver; "what is it, this nameless, numb foreboding of evil, which is chilling me to the very heart's core? If I am ever to be utterly blessed, surely now is the time; to-morrow is my wedding day—my happy wedding day. And yet I have had this dark presentiment of impending evil all day! Surely nothing is going to separate me from George—surely nothing can have happened to Willie?"

With the thought yet in her head she heard the outer gate sharply unlatch and heard a man's step on the frosty ground.

Another instant and George came in sight, walking rapidly—another and the hall door had opened, and he was stamping the snow off his boots and talking cheerily in the hall.

"Silence and solitude—darkness and dismalness! Here, Jane—Susan—where are you all? Come, one of you, and light

up! Let's see who's here!"

He opened the door of the drawing-room and saw, in the leaping firelight, the tall, white figure, with the shimmering pearls and bright gold hair, by the window.

"Alone, my dearest?" George said with a most lover-like embrace; "and with oh, such a mournful face, my solemn Magdalen! Come, I've got something for you that perhaps will cheer you up, even on the melancholy eve of your wedding."

Mr. Barstone produced a letter in a buff envelope and flourished it before her eyes.

"As the writing is of a particularly hilly character, and as you have but one correspondent, I suppose I may safely set it down as from old Nurse Rachel. Here, take and read it, and let us see if it can charm away your dolefulness?"

He tossed her the letter and walked over to the fire, whistling.

Magdalen tore it open and barely suppressed a cry to see inclosed a tiny note from Willie—a very tiny note, indeed, with only these words:

NEW YORK, Dec. 23, 18—.

DEAR M.:—

I suppose you will want to hear from me, even if I have no news to tell. Well, I have no news, and here I am, like the best of brothers, dropping you a line. I am all right myself, and trying, night and day, to find a clue to the man I want. He hasn't turned up yet, but he will one day, and, when he does, I hold him in the hollow of my hand. You don't understand? No matter. I will be more explicit another time.

Take care of yourself, and I'll take care of

WILLIE.

There was an address at the end—some low place on the East Side—to which she was to write.

Magdalen crumpled the note up and thrust it into the pocket of her dress and glanced over the other epistle.

It was of the shortest, also—writing being up-hill work to poor old Rachel—but it told Magdalen she and little Laura were well.

We are both much obliged to you for our new clothes (wrote Nurse Rachel), and, if we can, we'll come to the wedding on New Year's Day. I want very much, indeed, to see my nursling's husband, but I don't like to say I'll come for certain.

Magdalen drew a long breath of relief as she folded up the letter.

Willie and nurse and Laura were all well, then; and George was yonder, with his back to the fire, whistling and waiting, with the happiest face man ever wore.

Surely, presentiments were very foolish things; surely, she was the silliest and most suspicious, not to say most wicked of creatures, to tempt Providence by these doubts of His goodness.

"Oh," she thought, looking up at the lovely, starlit sky, "how much I have to be thankful for! What a grateful, happy heart I should have this night! What am I that blessings should be heaped upon me—that I should marry the man I love and honor—that I should have a happy home and hosts of kindest friends—whilst so many in this great world suffer life-long martyrdom?"

"My mournful Magdalen!" said George Barstone, coming over; "what a white, sorrowful face you wear! You are as colorless and spectral as your dress:

'Oh, rare, pale Margaret!
Oh, fair, pale Margaret!

My dearest, tell me what it all means?"

"Nothing, George, but I am so happy!"

"A novel reason for wearing a heart-broken face! I had begun to think you were repenting at the eleventh hour."

"I shall never repent. I wonder if you ever will, George?"

Her thoughts went back to the great trouble of her life—to that solemn vow she had taken upon herself. Would it ever come between them to darken their married lives?

"No doubt I shall," Mr. Barstone said, thoughtfully stroking his whiskers. "I'm only mortal, and no more proof against Caudle lectures than the rest of my brethren. I believe big fellows like me were made to be henpecked and snubbed and tyrannized over—abject cringers to petticoat government. I don't pretend to be better than the rest. Very likely I shall repent; but I'll try the matrimonial experiment all the same."

Magdalen smiled, but she also smothered a little pang. She ought to tell him about Willie, she thought. It was wrong even to have that secret from him. And then, Fanny knew. She was certain Fanny had seen that nocturnal meeting, from innumerable hints, and was actually dying of curiosity to know of the stranger.

"If I tell her, I must tell George," Magdalen thought; "and, poor fellow, that great, good heart of his is sensitive where I am concerned. I should like to spare him, if I could. It's no pleasant thing to hear that the convict brother of the wife he loves comes creeping here, like a thief, in the night—afraid to show his face in open day. No! I will spare him this and trust to Fanny's discretion."

As if her thought had evoked her, the door was flung impetuously open, and, enter Miss Winters, with a mighty swishing of silk.

"It's my 'Moonlight-on-the-Lake,'" burst forth the young lady, flirting out her flounces with both hands; "my 'Moonlight-on-the-Lake,' Magdalen, that the dressmaker has just brought home. It fits lovely; and the train's a yard and three-quarters long, and these puffings of tulle on corsage and shoulder straps are perfectly delicious! It's the new color, George, you know! Isn't it the sweetest thing you ever saw in your life?"

"Humph! Very likely it is, to a soul capable of appreciating its beauties. It's rather a wishy-washy affair, in my estimation. Where's the neck and sleeves?"

"Neck and sleeves!" retorted Fanny, with unutterable scorn; "who ever heard of neck and sleeves in a ball dress—stupid! The corsage isn't too low, is it, Magdalen? Aunt Lydia says it is; but then, Aunt Lydia's notions are old-fashioned. Why on earth don't you ring for lights, George?" said Miss Winters, flinging herself into a low chair, her 'Moonlight-on-the-Lake' ballooning splendidly around her. "Engaged people are, for all the world, like bats and owls, eternally mooning in the dark. How sweet your new pearls look, Magdalen! I consider it very shabby on George's part not to have ordered me a set at the same time. I dropped Phil a hint, too, and all I got for it was a rubbishing trumpery garnet ring."

"Phil has no money to spare for gimcracks, Fanny," George said, gravely, as he rang for light; "he is but Masterson's assistant; and then, there are debts, contracted years ago"—with some hesitation—"which he is honorably trying to pay off. Poor Phil has to work hard—so hard, that he cannot spare time to run down for the wedding, now that Masterson is laid up."

"Laid up!" repeated Fanny, scornfully; "I don't believe he's laid up! It's either pure aggravation on his part, or laziness on Phil's! Don't tell me, George Barstone! I know better! It's my usual luck. I never set my heart upon anything yet that——"

"Please, ma'am, tea's ready," interrupted a smiling little maiden, popping her head in; "and Miss Barstone, she's awaiting."

Fanny bounced up at once, forgetting her grievances in the cravings of her appetite, five hours old, and led the way to the dining-room.

Miss Barstone had been conveyed down-stairs to do honor to this festal occasion, and sat at the head of the table.

"For the last time, my dear," she said, smilingly, looking at Magdalen. "To-morrow, and for the rest of your happy life,

you will take my place as mistress of Golden Willows."

"Unless something should turn up between this and to-morrow morning to prevent the nuptials," suggested Fanny, with great evident relish at the idea. "There's many a slip, you know. Now, Aunt Lydia, it's no use your frowning, or George's looking carving knives. My talking about it won't make it happen, will it? And a marriage once postponed is never lucky, and this marriage was to have taken place two months ago. Just suppose, now, for instance, when Magdalen's in the church, and the minister's saying: 'If anybody here present knows anything to prevent this marriage, let them come forward and declare it, or forever after hold their peace!' And suppose some former lover—you must have had lovers, you know, Magdalen—should step out from behind a pillar and cry, in deep bass, 'Hold! I forbid the bans!' Wouldn't it be just like a chapter in a novel now?"

Fanny looked across the table with eager eyes as she launched this poisoned arrow at Magdalen's guilty breast.

"That will smite her in a vital place!" thought Miss Barstone's lively ward, "and she'll blush and betray herself."

But, to Miss Winters' disappointment, Magdalen only laughed, while George scowled blackly.

"I wish to heaven you were a chapter in a novel, Miss Winters, so that I might deposit you in the fire! If you cannot choose a more agreeable topic, be kind enough to hold your tongue."

Fanny sighed resignedly, and held it—for two seconds and a half.

"George must know all about it," she thought, regretfully, "or she'd never look so indifferent. It must have been a first cousin, too poor to be brought in, and she's told George all about it."

Supper over, George wheeled Aunt Lydia into the drawing-room; but, despite her cheery presence, conversation flagged. Great happiness does not make people garrulous, and George and Magdalen sat very silent, both hearts too full of bliss for words or smiles.

Aunt Lydia did her best and Miss Winters' struggles were more than mortal, but still those long, awful blanks would fall.

"Oh, dear!" cried Fanny, with a great and irrepressible yawn, "this is slow! I always thought a wedding in a house was a cheerful thing; but for the future give me a funeral—do! You and Miss Wayne, Mr. Barstone, are about as agreeable company as two graveyard slabs! I should advise each of you to retire to your apartments, and pray for a more Christian and conversable frame of mind on the morrow."

With which bitter reproach, the first bridesmaid sailed over to the piano and essayed a hornpipe. But the mild melancholy of the occasion had infected her and the hornpipe was a failure; so, after a little preliminary strumming, Miss Winters crooned forth a pathetic little song, to a pathetic little air:

I.

The moon looks down from the cloudless skies,
On mountain, vale and river;
And a thousand stars, with pitying eyes,
Forever and forever.
But never a light in the distance gleams;
No eye looks out for the rover.
Oh, sweet be your sleep, love—sweet be your dreams,
Under the blossoming clover—
The sweet-scented, bee-haunted clover!

II.

The birches droop as they drooped of old,
O'er the banks of this lonely river,
Whose waters roll as they have rolled,
Forever and forever.
But never a light in the distance gleams;

No eye looks out for the rover.
Oh, sweet be your sleep, love—sweet be your dreams—
Under the blossoming clover—
The sweet-scented, bee-haunted clover!

III.

I note the flow of the weary years,
Like the flow of this flowing river;
But dead in my heart are its hopes and fears,
Forever and forever.
But never a light in the distance gleams;
No eye looks out for the rover.
Oh, sweet be your sleep, love—sweet be your dreams—
Under the blossoming clover—
The sweet-scented, bee-haunted clover!—

The last lingering notes died away and again that blank silence fell. Is the eve of a wedding ever gay? In that pause for breath between the excitement of yesterday and the joy of to-morrow, a strange hush and awe rested upon the house.

The son, who stands happy and eager yonder, after to-night will be yours no longer, the daughter, who sits, beautiful and beloved, brooding by the fire, after to-morrow will belong, body and soul, to another.

Fanny was right. The eve of a wedding is but a shade less melancholy than the eve of a funeral.

Magdalen's thoughts had gone drifting away, whilst Fanny sung, to Laura's grave "under the blossoming clover;" and that cloud which darkened her fair face ever at her dead sister's memory lay darkly there now. Miss Barstone saw it, and understood. George saw it and wondered, with man's impatient pain, that any one, dead or alive, should come between him and the woman he loved. And still heroically struggling to the last, there clattered about their ears Fanny's irrepressible chatter.

"Heaven help your future husband, Fanny!" said George, in the first pause. "If ever mortal man was to be pitied, it is he!"

That long, peaceful evening—the last Magdalen was to know for such a weary while—how it haunted her in those stormy coming days! She nestled for the last time at Miss Barstone's lap, with a sense of ineffable rest and peace. To-morrow there would be fuss and display and excitement, and a crowd of people; this bridal eve was all their own—sacred to themselves.

George's face was altogether indescribable in its glorified beatitude, and his infatuated eyes rarely wandered from that white-robed, shining-haired vision, leaning against his aunt's great armchair.

"To think," thought Mr. Barstone, with little, rapturous thrills running over him, "that it was my wife I advertised for, that time, in the Herald—my wife, that that talkative English woman bored me talking about—my wife, that lovely, golden-haired, gray-eyed girl—the most beautiful thing, I thought then, and I think now, the sun shone on!"

"I am sorry Phil is not to be here," Miss Barstone said once, as it grew late. "No one else should have stood by your side on your wedding day, George. And now, my children, as it grows late, let us part until to-morrow. Good-night, George, good-night Fanny, good-night Magdalen. God bless you all!"

"I'm sure I don't expect to sleep a wink," remarked Fanny, at her own door; "and I don't suppose you do, either, Magdalen. As for George," with a reproachful glance at that culprit, "I dare say he would sleep if it was the eve of his hanging!"

"I dare say I would," replied George. "I shall make the attempt now, at least; and so good-night, Fan—good-night, Magdalen."

A warm, clinging pressure of the little hand—a last lingering look of infinite love, a bright, shy blush on the exquisite maidenly face—and then Magdalen was alone in her own pretty room. It was almost midnight, by the little jeweled

watch at her belt.

The lamp burned low, the fire glowed bright; a low rocker stood temptingly before it, and through the lace curtains shone in a broad, white belt of moonlight. High in the purple arch rode the midnight moon, flooding the white world with glory. It was beautiful—it was solemn—too solemn, in its death-like hush, its death-like whiteness; and the bride closed the curtains and went to the fire.

Sitting down in the luxurious little rocking-chair, with her lovely light hair all falling loose around her—with the conviction on her mind that it was of no use going to bed, for she could not sleep—Magdalen Allward dropped fast asleep before the fire—slept long and soundly at first—a deep, healthful, dreamless sleep. Hour after hour the "wee sma' hours ayont the twal" struck somewhere below, and the black wintry dawn was growing gray in the sky; then Magdalen's sleep grew restless—she tossed drearily, drowsily, without awaking, and, half asleep, half awake, dreamed.

The gloomy churchyard where Laura lay was before her; the trees, stark, rattling skeletons; the ground all white with snow; a low-lying, leaden sky, hanging above like a pall. She could hear the wailing wind through the ghostly trees; she could feel its icy breath freezing the blood in her veins. No living soul was near her, as she knelt there—alone in the dead, white desolation, with an awful, indefinable horror and expectation creeping over her. Her eyes were fixed on the grave by which she knelt, with that unutterable horror and expectation—and slowly, slowly the grave opened, the coffin-lid raised—and her father in his winding sheet rose up, dead and dreadful, and stood before her.

Magdalen strove to cry out in her sleep, but all sound froze on her paralyzed lips—all faculties were absorbed in the one faculty of seeing. On that dead face was a look of sternest reproach—one flickering finger was raised in warning or menace, and then, keeping his spectral face still toward her, the vision vanished in the twilight.

To be followed by another—Laura—lying cold and rigid, in the little parlor at home, as she had seen her that first night of her return from school. Again she was kneeling by the bier—again that nameless, waiting dread froze her to the marrow of her bones. Again the dead eyes opened, the dead woman sat erect—again Magdalen saw that fixed, frozen look of bitter reproach. The livid lips parted and a hollow voice spoke:

"She has sworn and see how she keeps her vow!"

The dead arms reached out to her. With a wild cry of terror the dreamer started up and awoke.

Awoke to find herself cramped and benumbed, and cold to the heart. The fire had died out, the dismal dawn filled the room, the lamp burned dim and wan on the table, and her wedding day had come. Pale as a spirit, Magdalen rose up, the blank horror of her dream upon her yet.

"Something will happen this day," she said, with a shiver. "I am doing wrong. The ghosts of the dead have come to reproach me."

She could sleep no longer; she was trembling from head to foot with cold and agitation. The minutes wore on, the sun arose with banners of rosy cloud to herald his glory, the house was astir. Fanny was rapping at her door, and the life of a new day was begun—a day that was to be like no other in Magdalen Allward's life.

From that moment events hurried on with a rapidity that left her no time to think. The marriage was to take place in the Millford Episcopal Church, at ten o'clock, a wedding breakfast to be eaten after, and the 12.50 train to New York to be caught. There was no time to think, no time to hesitate, no time to tell them why she looked so deadly pale; why she trembled like an aspen leaf. She drank a cup of coffee, and then the bridesmaids were there—a cluster of blooming, rosy girls; and then she was up in her room with them, fluttering around like butterflies around a rose; and then she was all robed in spotless silk and misty laces, and sparkling pearls and virginal orange blossoms, and looking white and lovely as a spirit of the moonlight; and then they were in the carriages, rattling along in the brilliant frosty air to the church—and all the time Magdalen's heart was ringing with the cry, "Something will happen—something will happen." But George was by her side—handsome, happy George—and she looked up in his frank, honest face, full of love and undying tenderness, and drew a long breath and tried to feel safe. And then they were in the little church, half-filled with people, and she was standing before a pale young man, with glasses and surplice, and the magic words were being spoken amid a death-like silence:

"Wilt thou have this man?" etc., and she heard her own voice answering, "I will," as if it were the voice of some one

else; and then the ring was shining on her finger, and the clergyman's voice was repeating the closing words, "What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder." Then the last prayer was read, and there was no Magdalen Allward in the world any more. She was George Barstone's happy wife, and nothing had happened.

They went into the vestry to sign their names, and then Magdalen was walking down the aisle on her husband's arm. At the church door there was a sudden pause and confusion, for some one in the church had screamed out—a wild, shrill scream. The bride almost echoed it—it struck on her heart like the knell of doom. But it was only some woman, the sexton said, who had "got weak and fainted away like."

The bridal party re-entered the carriages and were driven back to Golden Willows. Breakfast waited them and breakfast was eaten and passed off like any other wedding breakfast.

And then it was time for the bride to don her traveling dress and start on the first stage of her wedding tour.

Just then something did happen. The door bell rang and there was a young man from Millford, wanting "most particular" to speak to the bride.

Of course everybody was surprised; but the bride saw him at once and alone.

"I'm a waiter in the Millford House," this young man explained, twirling his hat uneasily in the radiant bridal presence, "and I've been sent by the boss to say there's a elderly party at our house, talking on about you most awful. It's an old woman that came last night, with a little girl, and she went this morning to see you married, and she screeched right out in meetin', and had to be took home. Now she's going on horrid, and says she must see you right away, or something dreadful will happen, and to tell you her name is 'Nurse Rachel,' and to come to her as fast as you can."

The young man was quite out of breath with this long speech, and paused here with a gasp.

Magdalen, white as her dress as she listened, heard her husband calling to her in the hall without:

"Better hurry, Magdalen—time is on the wing—past eleven o'clock."

"Go back," Magdalen said to the young man, "tell her I will be with her in half an hour."

She left the room, ran up-stairs, and in ten minutes was back, dressed for her journey.

The good-bys were said, George handed her into the carriage, sprang lightly in after her, and took his seat by her side.

"Tell him to drive to the Millford House," Magdalen said, "my old nurse is there and wants to see me."

George gave the order. In a quarter of an hour they drew up at the door.

"Wait for me here," Magdalen said, "I will not keep you long."

She followed the waiter to an upper room—opened the door and found herself face to face with old Rachel.

The old woman was sitting over the fire, rocking herself and moaning. Little Laura was perched on a high chair, gazing out of the window at the busy street.

Old Rachel started up with a great cry at the sight of her nursling.

"What is it, Rachel?" was Magdalen's first question.

It had come—that unknown horror she had waited for—she was not even surprised.

But old Rachel's sole answer was to shrink away, with both arms outstretched to keep her off, and a face full of blank, speechless dismay.

"What is it, Rachel?" Magdalen reiterated, taking no heed of little Laura, who had run to her with a gleeful, childish cry.

"Oh, my child! my child! what have you done?"

"What have I done?" repeated Magdalen, slowly. "What?"

"That man! that man! that man you married this morning!"

"Well?" cried Magdalen, with ashen lips.

"Oh, heaven have pity on you, Magdalen Allward! The man you married this morning is Maurice Langley!"

CHAPTER XIII.

AT THE OPERA.

There was a dead pause. Magdalen stood staring at her nurse, utterly unable to move, utterly unable to speak. Amid all the revelations she had expected to hear, she had never expected this.

"It is Maurice Langley!" Rachel repeated, in a frightened, wailing voice. "Oh, my child! what will become of you? Oh, my darling! I am frightened for you! Oh, why did you marry that man?"

With a mighty effort, Magdalen found voice. The first stunning blow of so unlooked for an announcement passed and utter incredulity came to her aid.

"I don't believe it!" she said, slowly—"I don't believe it! George Barstone is never Maurice Langley!"

But old Rachel shook her head and wrung her hands.

"My poor baby! my poor, little innocent Magdalen! How little you know of the wickedness and treachery and falsehood of this sinful world! I would spare you if I could, but—oh, my child! my child! Why were you let marry him?"

"Rachel, for God's sake, hush! This is my wedding day!"

"My poor Magdalen; but I speak the truth—that man was Maurice Langley."

She held up her hands with a passionate gesture—this unhappy bride.

"Rachel—Rachel! have mercy! This is my wedding day! Oh, my God! what is this you are telling me? Are you trying to drive me mad?"

Rachel recoiled in terror before that colorless face.

"Magdalen, don't look like that! My darling, perhaps I ought not to have told you now, when it is too late; but the sight of that man—that Maurice Langley—after all these years, standing by your side—your husband!"

The old nurse paused, for Magdalen had turned upon her, fiercely, and seized her by the arm.

"It is not true! I tell you it is not! You are deceived—strangely, horribly deceived! What crime have I ever committed that I should be thus accursed? The man I have married is the noblest man, the gentlest gentleman God ever made! Come here and look at him and tell me if George Barstone has the face of a murderer!"

She fairly dragged her to the window. There, full in view, sat Mr. George Barstone, animatedly chatting with two or three stray acquaintances, and wearing as happy and careless a face as that New Year's sun shone on.

"Look at him!" cried the girl, excitedly. "Look at that frank, open, honest face, full of nothing but kindness and goodness for all mankind, and tell me, is it the face of a gambler, a seducer, a murderer?"

In her passionate excitement, certainly that genial countenance was a staggerer, even to such conviction as Rachel's, and then Magdalen's frenzy at her revelation frightened her.

"I may have been mistaken, deary," old Rachel whimpered, piteously, "but it's very like him—only he used to wear whiskers under his chin and on his upper lip, and that man's got none. I hope it's not Maurice Langley, I'm sure, but it looks like him!"

"Looks like him!" Magdalen repeated, contemptuously.

She let go her hold of the old woman, and leaned against a table, panting and pale.

"You have frightened me nearly to death, Rachel," she said, laying her hand on her fluttering heart. "How could you do it? Looks like him! Why, innocent men have been hanged, before now, for those accidental likenesses. My poor George! How could I, who know you, be so unjust as to doubt you for one poor instant? No—no—no Rachel! Ten thousand times,

no! I should stake my life, my salvation, on my husband's innocence! I would as soon believe an angel out of heaven could fall as that Maurice Langley and George Barstone were one and the same."

"Perhaps so, my dear," whimpered Rachel, quite overwhelmed by this impetuous harangue. "I'm sure I don't want to believe it. But, oh, dear! dear! he does look awfully like him, to be sure!"

"We won't talk about it, Rachel," said the bride, resolutely; "it is simply impossible. George is truth and candor itself; he has heard my story, and he knows who I am; how my life is vowed against Maurice Langley. Do you think, if your horrible supposition were true, he would dare to marry me after that? No, Rachel; these black-hearted villains are all cowards. He would have been afraid of me, weak girl that I am. Besides, it is the wildest impossibility that I could ever wed my sister's destroyer. Some inward shuddering would warn me when he was near—some secret prescience would tell me of an enemy's presence. Oh, Rachel! It is simply, utterly impossible! I don't want to think of it. I don't want to talk of it! I love my husband with my whole heart! I love him and honor him beyond all mankind. I will not wrong him by one suspicion. George Barstone is above reproach!"

Her face turned radiant with perfect womanly trust and love in the man she had wedded. She laid her two hands on Rachel's shoulders and looked into her tearful old eyes, with the first smile her face had worn.

"You meant well, Rachel, and I forgive you. I will not tell a living soul one word of this, and I will forget it, as if it had never been. And now I must say good-bye. George grows impatient, I can see, and our train starts soon. You can go back to New Hampshire knowing your nursling is as happy as the day is long, blessed in a good man's love. Good-by, dear old nurse; good-by, my little pet Laura; you shall both come and make me a long visit when we return and settle down."

And then, with a kiss to each, the bride was gone, leaving a rustle of silk, a breath of sweet perfume, to tell where she had been.

Old Rachel saw her husband hand her into the carriage—saw her bright smile of undoubting love and confidence—saw his happy answering glance, and all with a dismal shake of her aged head.

Two hours after old Rachel and her tiny charge were steaming back to the old New Hampshire homestead, while Magdalen and her husband were flying along to the Empire City.

There was to be but a brief bridal tour, Mr. Barstone's business and Miss Barstone's health, alike forbidding prolonged absence. They were to remain a week in New York, then journey to Washington, linger there another week, and then return at their leisure—the whole absence not to extend over the first honeymoon month.

Mr. Barstone took his bride to his favorite hotel on Broadway and installed her in his old apartments.

There, in that same sunny parlor, he and his bride took their first tête-à-tête breakfast where he had sat, scarcely eight months before, reading that heap of dainty billets from twenty unknown young ladies.

"To think that it was my wife I was advertising for, after all!" said George, as he related the little coincidence to Magdalen. "To think that, out of the twenty I should have selected Magdalen Wayne, never dreaming I was selecting my wife! Extraordinary, wasn't it?"

Magdalen laughed good-naturedly.

"I don't know about that. By what I have heard, from Fanny and others, I should judge you had rather an inflammable heart, Mr. Barstone, and one very easily ignited. Probably the other nineteen young ladies were as pretty as they said they were; and, no doubt, had you chosen any one of them, the result would have been the same as it is."

"I don't believe it!" said George. "Allah is great, and my time had come. It was my fate, you know; and if I have had a weakness all my life, it has been for blue-gray eyes, golden tresses and the name of Magdalen. Just to think, the last time I breakfasted here, I did not know you! Even in that benighted state, I was tolerably happy! And now my dear, if you have finished breakfast, we'll go out, No doubt New York has altered materially since you and I trod the pave last."

Magdalen arose.

"I thought you were going to visit your cousin, George?"

"All in good time, my dear. I don't suppose Phil is up yet. Always was the quintessence of laziness—that fellow. His business will keep; and, just now, I want to give you a drive to High Bridge in this glorious January sunshine."

Mr. and Mrs. Barstone took their drive and returned to a four o'clock dinner. Then the happy bridegroom, having enjoyed his after-dinner cigar and slightly changed his dress, bestowed an orthodox honeymoon embrace upon his bride and set off to hunt up his cousin Phil.

A Broadway omnibus took him up town to his destination. The early winter dusk was hanging, like a misty gray veil, over the stony streets, and newly lighted lamps were sparkling as he reached it. Up in the frosty blue sky the earliest stars were shining—earth and sky were as jubilant as his own heart, and the bracing air was like exhilarating champagne.

And Mr. George Barstone, after ringing Doctor Masterson's office bell, hummed the fag-end of one of Tom Moore's jovial melodies while he waited:

They may rail at this life; from the hour I began it
I found it a life full of kindness and bliss;
And until you can show me some happier planet,
More social and bright, I'll content me with this!

And just here the door opened and a boy in buttons stood gazing contemplatively at Mr. Barstone, with a face that said, plainer than words: "You're a nice patient—you are—singing on the doctor's door-step!"

"Doctor Masterson in?" asked Mr. Barstone.

"No—sick—chronic rheumatism," tersely responded the boy in buttons.

"Doctor Barstone, then?" pursued the inquirer.

The boy in the buttons nodded and held the door open for Mr. Barstone to pass through, turned the handle of another door, nodded mysteriously again and vanished.

"What a sagacious youth!" thought George, admiringly. "How I should like to own him! I wonder if any one has been telling him speech is silver and silence is gold? And I wonder if Phil has soul enough to appreciate him? Ah, here's Phil, absorbed in a big book, taking his learned leisure. Phil, old fellow, how goes it?"

Mr. George Barstone followed up the remark by a playful, sledge-hammer slap on the shoulder, and the young man sitting before the fire, in smoking cap, slippers and dressing-gown, rose up and faced him.

"How are you, George?" said this young man, with ineffable calm. "When did you arrive?"

He waved his slender white hand toward a chair, as he spoke, and re-seated himself, after carelessly shaking hands.

He was an uncommonly self-possessed young doctor, with cool gray eyes and a thin, sallow face—eyes and face unlike George's—and yet the two somehow bore a striking resemblance to one another.

"You're married, I suppose?" inquired Doctor Philip Barstone, calmly contemplating his cousin; "and on the first stage of honeymoon—immersed to the eyes in the joys of wedlock, and in a state of idiotic happiness, no doubt?"

"Yes, I'm married, Phil," replied George, briskly, "and to the dearest and loveliest girl in the universe! Ah, you wait until you see her, Phil! There isn't her like in the whole world!"

"Of course not," said Phil, languidly, "I expected that and more. What's the name again? You told me and Fanny told me, but, really, I have a wretched memory for names."

"Her name was Wayne—Magdalen Wayne," said George, with some hesitation.

"Ab, yes; I recollect. From the country somewhere?"

"From New Hampshire."

"And where is she now?"

"At the St. Nicholas. We only arrived late last evening and I thought it useless to try and hunt you up sooner. I say, Phil, wasn't it rather shabby of you not strain a point and come down to the wedding?"

"Couldn't possibly," said Doctor Philip, beginning to pare his nails; "the old man's laid up by the legs and likely to be laid up for a month to come. All the patients are consequently thrown on my hands, and I may safely inform you I have my hands full. I really don't remember a season when our business was brisker."

Just here the door bell, which had jingled twice since George's entrance, jingled again, and the boy in buttons thrust in his head.

"Sudden case, sir—you're wanted right off. Old Mrs. Branch is in fits—black in the face, and at the last gasp, the girl says; and now here's a boy says his father's just been brought home on a shutter, with his back and one leg broke, down on First Avenue, and you are to go immediately."

"That will do, Samuel," said Doctor Barstone, blandly; "depart, and shut the door. Tell them I'll go. My dear George, don't hurry yourself—it's only fifteen minutes since I ate my dinner, and I always take an hour after meals to myself, no matter how rushing business may be. Sit down and let us have a comfortable chat. I always find a nice quiet tête-à-tête conducive to digestion—don't you?"

George Barstone stared at his cousin in horror.

"Good heavens, Phil, what a cold-blooded reptile you're getting to be! Why in pity's name don't you go to those poor unfortunates and relieve them, if you can, at once? They talk about lawyers having hard hearts and stony consciences," pursued the Millford barrister, "but I'll be hanged if they're not unweaned lambs—sucking doves—compared to you of the medical fraternity!"

"Really!" responded the young doctor, in the same state of ineffable calm; "is that your opinion? Well, perhaps we do get a trifle hardened after awhile; but then, it's only natural, my dear boy—just like soldiers on the battlefield, you know. Don't let us talk about it. How is Aunt Lydia?"

"Much better, and very much disappointed at not seeing you."

"And Fanny? But, of course, Fanny is well. The amount of innate vitality that girl possesses is absolutely astonishing. If you could see the letters she writes me! I never read them now—I glance here and there, catch her meaning, and send an answer, once a month, of ten lines. Miss Wayne was her governess? Of course she's very pretty—this new cousin of mine? And when am I to see her?"

"To-night, if you come to the opera. Magdalen has never yet been to the Italian opera, and she has a passion for music. And as you won't go see those unlucky patients of yours while I stay gossiping with you here, I'll just take myself off at once. Drop in to see Lucrezia Borgia and you will see my pretty little wife at the same time."

"I hope there is no similarity!" muttered Doctor Barstone. "Why will you persist in being in such a hurry, George, when I tell you I shall not leave for twenty minutes yet? However, as you will persist, until to-night, good-by. Best regards to the pretty Magdalen!"

George Barstone departed, and Philip Barstone, seating himself in his easy chair, smoked out a cigar and gazed placidly into the fire. He had very little curiosity to see this new cousin of his, very little opinion of George's taste or sound sense in feminine matters, and he rarely got excited about anything. The world came and the world went, and Philip Barstone, M.D., slid along with it, up and down, and never got out of his torpid langor for anything under the sun.

His cigar finished, the young physician arose, donned his hat and greatcoat, and entered his waiting gig, to make his evening round of his patients. It was late when he returned, and then there was a light supper to be partaken of, and his dress to change, ere he sallied forth to the Academy.

It was near the close of the second act when Philip Barstone made his way easily into one of the stage boxes, in great style—very elegant and nonchalant and handsome.

Two young men occupied the box alone, and both greeted the newcomer with friendly nods.

"How are you, Barstone?" one of them said. "Late, as usual! Working like a horse, no doubt. Hollis and I have been holding an animated controversy about you. Did you know your double—your wraith—was in the house? Look yonder! Like enough to be your twin brother! Hollis swore it was you, with the moustache and imperial shaved off, but I knew better."

The young man pointed to an opposite box, and ran on:

"You must know the fellow—he looks so absurdly like you. And the pretty, azure-eyed, alabaster-browed maiden by his side—'the Fair One, with the Golden Locks'—who is she?"

Doctor Philip Barstone glanced across, carefully adjusting his lorgnette.

"My cousin George, I take it, and his bride. I haven't had a look at her yet. He says she's pretty."

"She's more than pretty," said Hollis, who had been indulging himself in a prolonged stare; "there isn't a lovelier face in the house. That amber hair is magnificent; she holds her head with the poise of a queen; and she has a mouth like one of Corregio's smiling angels!"

Mr. Frederic Hollis was an artist and a poet, and had a right to rapturize if he chose.

Doctor Philip Barstone raised his glass and brought it to bear on the opposite box. An instant, and he had given a sharp start, a sudden recoil, and dropped the glass, his face growing ashen gray.

"Hallo!" cried the young man who had first addressed him. "What is it? Did you see the Marble Guest, Barstone?"

Philip Barstone's emotions were well under rein. An instant, and he was his cool, negligent self again—a thought paler, only.

"I saw a face I didn't expect to see, in looking for my unknown cousin." He raised his glass again as he spoke. "You're right, Hollis. Mrs. George Barstone is a beauty."

He lowered his lorgnette, and turned to the stage. The curtain was dropping on the second act of the wonderful opera.

"I believe I'll step over and pay my respects. They're just from the country, and it is no more than common decency requires to do the polite thing by one's relatives—particularly when one of them is uncommonly handsome. I never gave George credit for such good taste."

Magdalen was lying back in her chair, talking animatedly to her husband, and looking brilliantly handsome. An opera cloak, blue as her eyes, set off the pearly complexion and gold-tinted hair, and excitement had sent a streaming fire into those starry eyes and a lovely flush to the rounded cheeks. There was a steady fire of lorgnettes aimed at their box—at the noble and lovely head, all unknown; but Magdalen was completely unconscious of this embarrassing circumstance. She glanced over her shoulder, radiant and sparkling, as Philip came in, and recognized her husband's cousin at once.

George nodded, and went off-handedly through the formula of introduction:

"Phil, my wife. Magdalen, my dear, my cousin Phil, of whom you have heard."

"A thousand times!" said Magdalen, holding out her gloved hand, with a brilliant smile. "Cousin Phil is a household word at Golden Willows."

"How eminently self-possessed she is!" thought Philip, watching her covertly, with half-closed eyes. "And, by the beard of the prophet! what an astounding resemblance there is to—— Oh, pshaw! I don't want to think of her!"

Magdalen, as the curtain again rose, was thinking of him likewise.

The opera was over at last. Our party rose with the rest. Dr. Phil saw them to their hack, and then went on his own homeward way, in a dazed and bewildered state.

"It can't be possible such a likeness as this is merely the work of chance; and now I remember there was a sister I never saw, away at school. This girl is taller and handsomer than she was; but good heaven! she is her very image! There was a look in the eyes of George's wife, once to-night, that I saw in her eyes on that last horrible night when we parted

forever. I've turned over a new leaf, and I don't want to go back to the old leaves; but if Mrs. George Barstone were an enemy of mine, I think I should be obliged to. It's all nonsense, I dare say. I never knew any one by the name of Wayne, and she was Miss Magdalen Wayne when George married her."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MARK ON GEORGE'S ARM.

A lengthy string of carriages drew up, this frosty January night, before the stately mansion of Mrs. Moreland, on New York's stateliest avenue.

Mrs. Moreland was "at home" to her dear five hundred friends; and the gas flared high over "lovely women and brave men," and the heavenly melody of wild, melancholy, German waltz music floated and filled the perfumed rooms. It was one of the most brilliant affairs of the season, and everybody that was anybody was there.

Among the rest—fashionably late, most fastidiously attired, handsome, easy, nonchalant—lounged in Dr. Philip Barstone; he was eminently popular, this rapidly rising young practitioner, among the fairer sex, and, perhaps, his white teeth, dark hazel eyes, faultless manners and well-shaped nose had a good deal to do with it. He lounged in about midnight, paid his respects to Madam Moreland, and took up his position against a slender column to reconnoiter.

"Fair beauties in blue, dark beauties in pink and yellow, dashing damsels in all the hues of the rainbow, and timid little angels in snowy gauze and drooping ringlets," mused Doctor Philip, surveying the glittering spectacle, and taking stock. "There are heiresses among those radiant young ladies, worth half a million, I dare say, and the thing for me to do would be to marry one of them, and range myself, and repent, and atone. As if I could ever atone! And that reminds me, it was to see George and his wife I came here to-night, and—ah! there she is! and there is nothing else half so lovely under the gaslight!"

It was Magdalen—a glittering bride-like figure, in rich white silk, under white lace—like snow under silvery mist—and pearls clasping back the golden dropping tresses, and clasping the dazzling white arms and neck—Magdalen Barstone, beautiful and stately as a queen.

"By Jove!" Philip cried, under his breath; "what a radiant vision! And, heavens above, what an unearthly resemblance to one dead and buried! I must hunt up George at once!"

He turned hastily to go, and encountered his friend of the opera box, staring fixedly at the dazzling bride.

"Ah Hollis!" with a cool nod, "turned astronomer? lost in admiration of the Evening Star?"

"What a lucky fellow your country cousin is, Phil," said Hollis, regretfully. "There stands my ideal—the divinity I have been worshiping in dreams all my life, and lo! her earthly name is Mrs. Barstone! I would give half the fortune—I haven't got—for such a model for my new picture—my 'Aphrodite Rising from the Sea.' Ah, it's a thousand pities she's another man's wife!"

"So it is! The goods of this lower world are unfairly divided. Apropos—have you seen that 'other man?'"

"You'll find him below there, dancing; he has been at it incessantly since I came in."

The two men parted—the artist making his way to where Magdalen stood, the center of an admiring circle, and Philip finding George just resting himself, very red and tired, and mopping his face after a frantic gallop.

"Harder work than breaking stones on the road, by George!" said the Millford lawyer, linking his arm through his cousin's, and walking him off. "How they stand it, the goodness only knows! We are fearfully and wonderfully made—particularly women. They call them the weaker sex; but I'll be hanged if the weakest of them can't dance down the strongest man here! How is it? You're a doctor, and ought to know!"

"I don't pretend to understand the marvelous sex, if I am a doctor. If I did, I might comprehend why the prettiest woman I ever saw has thrown herself away upon you."

Mr. George Barstone, red and radiant enough already, turned yet more radiant, hearing this. Where his blue-eyed wife was concerned, the big Millfordian was open to flattery as the veriest schoolboy.

"She is the cynosure of all eyes—I believe that's how the novels put it," went on the artful young doctor. "That fellow Hollis—an artist, you know—raves about her, and I left her holding a little court of all that is best at this crush. Has she

any sisters, and if so, how many? and are those sisters unmarried? and would they be likely to look twice on a rising young physician, of unexceptionable manners and morality?"

Doctor Philip paused in his little catechism, and George laughed—his big, booming, honest laugh—a trifle too loud, but melodious.

"Sisters? No; my pretty Magdalen stands alone in the wide world, and I am selfish enough to be glad of it. She has neither father, mother, sister nor brother,—” Mr. Barstone checked himself with a sudden pull up. He recollected the convict brother of Magdalen's story, and winced under the recollection—”none at least,” in a very subdued tone, ”that ever I saw.”

Doctor Philip noticed the mental reservation at once.

”She may have, for all that—hey?”

”I believe there is a brother—a wild young fellow—Magdalen has not seen him for years. There must be a black sheep in every flock, I suppose, and he is the black sheep of hers. It's an unpleasant subject—let's drop it!”

”With all my heart! And the remainder of Mrs. Barstone's relatives are dead?”

”Every one! There's a little niece, I believe, lives with an old nurse, somewhere up in New Hampshire, in the family homestead. She goes there sometimes—Magdalen does—but that's all.”

”A little niece? The daughter of the family scapegoat, I take it?”

”No, the daughter of my wife's only sister.”

The gray pallor that had darkened Philip Barstone's face at the opera crept slowly over it from brow to chin.

”A sister? She has a sister dead, then—an only sister?”

”Yes,” said George gravely; ”her story is a very sad one. My poor little girl has had hard family trials to endure in her short life. She told me her history, poor child! before she would consent to marry me; a pitiful history of the wrongs and wrong-doing of others, and we agreed not to talk of it. When you are speaking to Magdalen, don't allude to her family or question her about her relatives. The subject, to her, is a very painful one.”

There was no reply. That sickly, grayish hue lay on the doctor's face like a palpable cloud; his lips were dry, and his voice, when he did speak, was husky.

”Was the brother of your wife ever in New York, George?” he asked. ”It strikes me I have seen a face somewhere strangely like hers. I knew a fellow here once, resembling her sufficiently to be her twin brother.”

”Not unlikely,” said George; ”I dare say you knew him. He was rather in your line at that time, I believe. How long ago is it?”

”Four years, or thereabouts.”

”Ah, that's the time; you were riding the high horse then, and he was mounted on a similar lofty quadruped. I dare say you knew him. 'Birds of a feather,' etc.”

”I can't say. The fellow I knew, if he was really her brother, must have gone under an assumed name. He called himself Allward—William Allward.”

”Hush! for pity's sake!” George Barstone grasped his arm, and looked behind in dismay. ”I would not have Magdalen hear you for worlds! You have no idea how she feels on this subject. That was her brother”—lowering his voice—”do you know his fate?”

”Why, yes,” said Doctor Philip, carelessly; ”he committed forgery, and got sent up for four years. By the way, his time ought to be about served out. You'll be having a visit from him, one of these days, I suspect. My dear George, haven't you rather dropped into a hornet's nest?”

"My wife is an angel!—more perfect in soul than in body!" George said, hotly. "Take you care, Phil! Even you might say a word too much!"

"Dear old George, don't be in such a hurry flourishing your cudgels; I won't say that one superfluous word. Without having the same safe grounds to go upon you have, I am ready to swear, by all the gods and goddesses, Mrs. Barstone is perfection, only a little—just a little—unfortunate in her relatives. Still, it can hardly be the same. This Willie Allward had a sister living here in New York at that time—he told me about her—living with some worthless fellow—a professional gambler—more than suspected of having another wife."

George reddened, half in anger, half in shame.

"That is the sister I spoke of. She is dead and buried now, and the little niece is her child."

"She left a child, then?" very slowly.

"She did! How in the name of heaven, Philip Barstone, have you wormed this story out of me? I promised Magdalen faithfully I wouldn't tell, and see how I keep my word!"

"Pshaw! It's no secret. Does Aunt Lydia know?"

"Yes."

"Your wife was honest, at all events, to tell you. Many girls would have tried to gloss over such a history. You say she feels deeply the family disgrace?"

"More deeply than I can tell you. The subject is unutterably painful to her, and God grant she may never meet the man who wrought all the wrong."

"There would be a scene, no doubt," Doctor Philip said, coolly. "I should take her to be a good hater. But she is hardly likely to meet him, I should say, or know him if she did meet him, after all these years. She must have been a child, almost, four years ago?"

"She was sixteen years old. And now, Philip Barstone, have the goodness to finish at once and forever with this subject. One would think I was on the witness-stand, and you were the opposite counsel."

The doctor laughed softly.

"Dear old boy! how sensitive you are growing! Have no fear of my discretion—I will be the last man alive to rake up the dead ashes of the past; and, in token of my cousinly regard, I am going to ask Mrs. George Barstone for the 'german.'"

Mrs. Moreland's ball was a brilliant success, and the queenly bride of the Millford lawyer the undisputed belle of the night. Doctor Philip Barstone did her the honor of asking her to dance more than once; but, rather to his chagrin, Mrs. George was either engaged, or too much fatigued for quadrilles and round dances. She only danced with her husband.

"I can't like him," Magdalen said to herself; "and I don't know why? He is George's cousin, and I ought to like him for that reason alone; but I don't! There's a look in those keen eyes of his that repels me, and an expression around his mouth sometimes that is simply odious."

Mrs. George Barstone spent a very delightful night, despite this little drawback. It was her first ball, and, with the consciousness of looking her best and being faultlessly dressed, she gave herself up to the enjoyment of the hour, and was celestially happy.

It was very charming to be sought after by all the best men in the room, and to see George's eyes sparkling with the knowledge that his wife was the prettiest woman at the ball.

"I always knew you were the loveliest thing under the sun, Mrs. Barstone," George said to her, his honest face one radiant glow; "but I didn't know other people would find it out at first sight. I'm glad to see there is good taste still left in New York. Are you aware you are the reigning belle of the night?"

Magdalen laughed and blushed.

"Don't talk nonsense, George! Do you know I am excessively tired, after five hours' consecutive dancing? If Fanny were only here now, how delighted she would be, poor child! The music, the toilets, this endless succession of dances——"

"And Phil," put in George. "By the by, I forgot to ask you. How do you like Phil?"

"Oh, well enough! Pray don't talk while waltzing, George."

"Well enough," persisted George; "is that all? I was sure you would like Phil."

"And did I say I didn't?"

"Your tone implies it. And then, you wouldn't dance with him."

"Well—I was engaged."

"Not all times."

"Tired, then. Don't be a tease, George! Doctor Philip Barstone is well enough; but I have heard Fanny singing peans in his praise so long that I grew to expect something seraphic, and, finding him only——"

Magdalen paused, provokingly.

"Only what?" persisted George.

"Only a tall young man, very like any other tall young man, with blond hair and mustache. I am a little disappointed, that is all. Now, suppose we drop the subject? Discussing your cousin and waltzing at this rate I don't admire."

Mr. and Mrs. Barstone were among the earliest guests to leave, and George, who had danced without intermission, found himself, at four a. m., completely prostrated.

"Never was so used up in my life before, by Jove," Mr. Barstone said during the homeward drive, "even at a Millford picnic, where they dance on the grass from sunrise to sunset! I expect to sleep until our five o'clock dinner, to-day, and don't you presume to wake me, Mrs. Barstone!"

"It has been a charming ball," Magdalen answered nestling cosily in her wraps. "I never had a more delightful time."

And as she cuddled up by her devoted slave's side, chatting gaily of the ball and the people she had met no warning chill fell upon her happy heart to tell her it was the last blissful night she was to know for such a weary, weary while.

Mr. Barstone conscientiously fulfilled his prediction of sleeping very late next day. The noonday sun streaming brightly in awoke Magdalen, who arose at once and made her toilet. She sang as she dressed, gay little scraps of songs, for very lightness of heart, and smiled back at her own fair image in the glass. She knew she was pretty, of course. Was not that a lovely vision, a beautiful, youthful face, that shone upon her in the tall mirror, encircled with that brightest nimbus of golden hair?

"I am glad I am pretty, for George's sake," she said, blushing brightly there by herself—"dear George—dear, kind, devoted George, who loves the very ground I walk on, and who shows it, in the honesty of his great heart, as simply as a child. Ah! what a happy girl I am, and how thankful I ought to be!"

She had finished her toilet, and stood looking at her sleeping husband. And, though the great gray eyes were dim with thankful tears, Magdalen could hardly resist laughing, too; for poor George was asleep, with his mouth wide open, and his fair hair all tossed and ruffled, and his head twisted into a position exquisitely uncomfortable, even to look at.

"And to think," the smiling bride said, inwardly, "that Rachel could mistake him for Maurice Langley!"

She had almost forgotten her old nurse's incredible announcement on her wedding day, but it came back to her now. At the same instant, like a flash of light, came another recollection.

"The mark on Maurice Langley's arm! I had quite forgotten that! Ah! I can easily prove Rachel's mistake now."

George's left arm hung loosely over the clothes. Very lightly, very skilfully, and smiling at her own little plot, she undid the button and daintily drew up the sleeve. The arm, white as her own and corded like an athlete's, was really superb,

reviewed as a limb in the abstract; but Magdalen stood holding it, with an awful change coming over her.

Rigid she stood, her eyes dilating, every drop of blood slowly leaving her face.

For there, between wrist and elbow, was the very tattooing Rachel had described so minutely. The blue wreath of leaves and grapes, the red heart with the dagger thrust through, and the big, black initial "B."

The arm dropped from her frozen fingers and fell, and still the sleeper did not awake. And Magdalen stood there, as if slowly turning to stone.

CHAPTER XV.

"CURSED WITH THE CURSE OF AN ACCOMPLISHED PRAYER."

It was three hours later.

Magdalen Barstone sat by her parlor window in the great hotel, looking blankly out into the street below. She was scarcely thinking—she was scarcely suffering: She sat benumbed—motionless—like one who had received a great and stunning blow.

The worst had come—the worst that could ever happen. The aim of her life was accomplished—her prayer of years had been heard—she had found Maurice Langley!

George Barstone still slept—slept as soundly and peacefully, in the inner room yonder, as some tired child. This betrayer of innocent girls, this tempter of weak boys, this utterly vile and unprincipled wretch, could still sleep, it seemed, as tranquilly as a babe on its mother's breast. And presently he would wake, Magdalen knew, smiling and jovial and sweet-tempered, with loving looks and caresses for her—for her, the sister of Laura Allward!

She had found Maurice Langley, and old Rachel was right, after all. The aim of her life was realized. She had found the man who had deceived and deserted her sister, and sent her to a premature grave; who had broken her father's heart; who had made a forger, a gambler, a convict out of her only brother! She had found the wretch whom she had vowed to hunt mercilessly down, and that man was her husband! Her prayer for vengeance had been heard; it only remained for her to keep her vow!

She sat there while the short, wintry afternoon wore on, her hands clasped in her lap, her dilated eyes staring straight before her and seeing nothing. Over the smaller troubles of life Magdalen could weep the ever-ready feminine tears with the most womanly, but she had no tears now. The blue eyes had a dry, unnatural glitter; two fever spots glowed red on either pale cheek. She had only one thought, in her mind—one dreadful thought, beating, beating, in her brain—George Barstone and Maurice Langley were one.

Five struck from the city clocks—the gray January dusk was veiling the ceaseless city, whose roar sounded in the girl's dazed brain like the roaring sea. Stars glittered above, lamps twinkled below, and the dinner bell was pealing through the house; George would wake, and be with her very soon now.

She arose and walked over to the glass, with a woman's first instinct—to see how she looked. She could feel the blank despair in her face; she could see it in the gleaming eyes, in the dry, parched lips, in the hectic glow of either cheek—a strange, unnatural face, not her own.

"How ghastly I am!" she thought, "What a wretch I look! and, oh, pitiful heaven! what a lost wretch I am!"

She covered her face with both hands, and stood there doing battle with her despair.

Through all her dull torpor of misery there flashed upon her the conviction that, as she had been deceived, so she must deceive with the same subtle deception of smiles and tender words that had lured her and Laura to their doom—so she must blind and betray him—this matchless betrayer! He was past master of the art of guile; he had listened to her impassioned story of wrong and suffering, knowing himself to be the wretch who had wrought her ruin—the wretch against whom her life was vowed—and, knowing it, had smiled in her face, and betrayed her as Judas had betrayed—with a kiss! He had wronged her more deeply than he had wronged either Laura or Willie—more deeply than man ever wronged woman before—and now her time had come. She knew him now, and she must hide that knowledge and work in the dark, as he had done.

He had been merciless to her, and to all whom she loved, and merciless he would find her now!

"He loves me!" Magdalen thought, with a glow of fierce triumph in the thought; "he loves me—villain that he is—and the bitterest blow that can befall him will be to lose me! I would leave him this hour, but that punishment would be too slight! I hate him! I hate him! The mean, mean, mean scoundrel!"

Her eyes flashed; her hands clenched. She did hate him in that moment, and could have gone resolutely forth and left him

forever; but the reaction was yet to come. She loved the man she hated—a paradox, if you like, but no uncommon case—and when this hot rage burned itself out, and the love, that was as deep as her heart, returned, then her cup of despair would be at its fullest.

She stood there, rigid and cold, while the evening dusk deepened and the chill night fell.

She could hear her husband, in the bedroom adjoining, moving noisily about splashing water and rattling basin and ewer, whistling an air from last night's opera the while.

He could eat, drink and be merry, and Laura, who had loved, even as she loved him, lay dead and forgotten under this winter snow, and Willie's place among good and honorable men was forever lost.

What were the hearts he had broken, the lives he had ruined, to him? The world went well with him, men respected him, wealth flowed in upon him, and the woman he worshiped was his wife. Her heart grew hard and bitter as death as she remembered all.

"As he has measured unto others, so shall it be measured unto him!" she thought, setting her teeth. "Oh, George Barstone! in all God's earth is there another such villain as you?"

The bedroom door opened as she lingered rigidly there, and Mr. George Barstone himself, immaculately dressed and brushed and got up, stood before her.

"I said I would sleep until five o'clock, and I've slept until six. Ordinary men may be as good as their word, but your husband's better, Mrs. Barstone. I don't know how it may be with you, madam, but 'nature's sweet restorer,' etc., leaves me in a perfectly ravenous condition. I feel as though I could eat a boiled alligator this moment. What are you all in the dark for, my dear, and where's Phil?"

Mr. Barstone approached his wife and gave her a sociable kiss. Magdalen drew away from him, shivering from head to foot, with a sick feeling of repulsion.

"Your cousin?" she answered. "I don't know; he is not here."

She strove to speak in her ordinary tone, to begin her new rôle at once; but deception and falsity in any shape were foreign to the girl's nature, and her voice sounded cold and hard.

The quick instinct of love detected the change at once. George looked at her curiously in the dusk.

"What's gone wrong, Magdalen? taken a cold? You look like a stray spirit—so white; you feel like one—so cold. You have been sitting in a draught until you're as hoarse as a raven, gazing at the moon, I'll take my oath. As if a respectable married woman had any business with the moon. Got a match about you, my love?"

"No!"

"No matter, I've got one myself somewhere."

Mr. Barstone lighted the gas, and turned to contemplate his wife; but Magdalen was standing with her back to him, looking out at the lamp-lighted boulevard, and some one was rapping without.

"It's Phil, I dare say. Come in," cried George, and the door opened. Doctor Philip made his appearance.

"Are you up?" Doctor Philip said. "I was afraid to present myself sooner, remembering what a genius you always had for sleep. Good-evening, my pretty cousin. I trust I see you none the worse for last night's dissipation?"

Magdalen had to turn, and both men started and stared at the deadly pallor of her face.

"Good gracious, Magdalen!" George exclaimed, "you are as white as though you were your own ghost. My darling, are you ill? What is the matter?"

"Nothing!" Magdalen said, not looking at him, "except that, perhaps, I have taken cold as you suggested, or that I am the worse for last night's dissipation. We country girls, Doctor Barstone, wilt at once in your city glare."

She turned to him. She knew the honest, loving eyes that were fixed upon her—honest at least in appearance, loving beyond doubt—and she could not meet them. All her strength, and her hate, and her resolves were melting away at the first sound of his voice, at the first touch of his hand. For oh! she loved him, and no power on earth could undo that love now.

"I heard you say a moment ago you were famished, George," she said, trying to speak lightly and turn the attention from herself. "Had you not better go to dinner? For myself, I am not hungry. I will have a cup of tea here, and, as my head aches a little, if Dr. Barstone will excuse me, I will retire."

Doctor Barstone bowed gravely.

"If you had not spoken of it, in my professional capacity I should have prescribed it myself. My dear George, don't look as though you had heard Mrs. Barstone's death-warrant read. It is the very best thing she can do. If my memory serves me, you invited me to dine with you yesterday, at sharp six, and now it is half-past. I don't want to be unpleasantly intrusive, but allow me to suggest that my time is not my own, and that the banquet waits below. Good-evening, Mrs. Barstone; I trust to find your headache altogether gone to-morrow by a good night's rest."

He led George away—George, who seemed as though he would rebel and stay by his wife.

Was this not the second week of the honeymoon, and had not she the headache?

What were all the dinners that ever were cooked and eaten inside the St. Nicholas to this devoted and eight hours' fasting husband now?

"Don't be a donkey, George!" his cousin remonstrated; "she's not dying and she's a great deal better without you. A cup of tea and rest are what she needs, and who's to rest, I wonder, with you tiptoeing about, in your horrid country-made, creaking boots, and that face of blank despair. Wait until you're married two years instead of two weeks, and though your wife were in the pangs of dissolution, you'll go down and eat your dinner, and postpone despair until after the cheese and toothpick. If you don't, by Jove! you'll differ from all the husbands I ever had the pleasure of knowing."

"I shall differ from them," George responded, crustily. "It's been your misfortune, Phil, to see, all your life, the worst side of human nature uppermost, until you're grown cynical and can't believe there's any better side. That day will never come, when I will think more of my dinner than of my wife."

"With all my heart, I don't want to corrupt your morals, I'm sure; but most men think similarly in the honeymoon and afterwards; but you'll call me cynical again, if I go on. Very good soup, this, eh? Is the pretty Magdalen subject to headaches, may I ask?"

"Never knew her to have one before!" George murmured. "She doesn't seem like herself in any way, somehow, this evening. It must have been the party last night."

"No doubt; reaction after excitement, and all that sort of thing. By the bye, isn't yours rather an obsolete way of spending the honeymoon? I thought, when a man committed matrimony, the correct thing to do was to try the rural dodge—bury himself in some nice, dull country village, or go up to the Catskills, or down by the sad sea waves. My ideas on the subject may be a little misty, never having tried the holy estate; but it strikes me that coming to New York and exhibiting a blushing bride at the opera and Mrs. Moreland's evening jams is not the sort of thing fashionable society prescribes."

"Fashionable society be hanged! I've brought Magdalen to New York because we have enough of the country the year round, and I took her to the opera because music is a passion with her. You ought to hear her sing—better than the prima donna last night, by George, sir! and we went to Mrs. Moreland's party because Mrs. Moreland insisted upon it, and my dear girl, herself, thought she would like it."

"Ah, yes!" Phil said, pushing away his soup; "they all like it—and the more they get of it the better they like it. How long do you propose remaining in New York?"

"This week only. I say, Phil, you spoke a moment ago, of having never tried matrimony. Isn't that rather a mistake?"

It did not often happen to Phil Barstone to change color. When he did a gray shade turned his sallow, colorless face the hue of ashes. That gray darkness came palpably over it now, but his voice was quite unaltered.

"My dear George, you never were remarkable for great tact; but even from you I didn't expect that question. I thought we both agreed, four or five years ago, to become good boys and let bygones be bygones?"

"I beg your pardon!" George said, hastily; "but, my dear Phil, why don't you marry? Very best thing you can do, if—if you're quite certain that party is dead."

"That party is as dead as Queen Anne! I'll thank you not to mention her again, Mr. George Barstone. Why don't I marry? My dear fellow, I'm looking out for a wife every day."

"Well—and are they so scarce in New York that you cannot find one?"

"On the contrary, it is the embarrassment of riches. I know fifty girls I could have for the asking—all very nice girls, too, you understand—girls of the period, in short skirts, and sweeping trains, and wonderful chignons, and high-heeled boots—girls who can play all the latest waltzes on the piano, warble all the newest songs, pepper their conversation with well-pronounced French, and talk to you of women's rights and the last popular novel. And then there's Fanny, poor little thing, been dying for me any time these two years. Oh, yes, George; I could find a wife in New York before the next hour strikes, if I chose."

"And why don't you choose? Why doesn't the Great Mogul throw the handkerchief to his adoring slaves?"

"Because there is one requisite none of these nice girls possess which is absolutely indispensable in my wife—fifty thousand dollars in her own right. When I find that golden girl, I shall fall at her feet at once. Still, if nothing better offers before long—My innocent country cousin, don't wear that disgusted face; we all sell ourselves in these latter days. There's your pretty wife, now; she was a poor governess. You're not wealthy, but a well-to-do and good-looking young lawyer. Who is to tell us she didn't marry you to be mistress of Golden Willows and a leader of fashion among the élite of Millford?"

"By heaven, Phil, you're too bad!" burst out George, with flashing eyes. "You're a worldling and a cynic to the core—without faith in man or woman! Why, I tell you, sir, she refused a Goldham—Sam Goldham, worth half a million—worth a dozen like me, as you look at it, I tell you what, I should take it as an insult if any other fellow suggested such a thing of my wife—the best, the most generous, most noble-hearted——"

"Spare me!" Doctor Philip pleaded. "Be merciful! I'll take all the rest for granted. I've had the misfortune to be in company with newly-married men before, and I know the litany you're chanting by heart. Ah! here's that boy of mine, with a note. Somebody's dying, or thinks she is (of course it's a she—we doctors might shut up shop only for the women). Samuel unfold thine errand."

"Mrs. Hatton—took sudden—awful bad—life or death, fellow in livery says. I've run till I'm fit to drop, all the way from the office!"

The boy in buttons delivered a note as he spoke, looking unutterably calm and composed.

"Fit to drop," repeated his master, eyeing that expressionless face. "That will do, Samuel; don't tell any more. Go back, and say to the fellow in livery I'll be there; and don't hurt yourself running if you can help it. Mrs. Hatton—h'm—in extremity? Oh, of course! She'll get over it, though; they always do. Half of these women have more lives than a cat! I've known 'em, by Jove! George, with two dozen different complaints any one of which would kill you and me in a week; and they'll live and live, and swallow pills by the peck, and mixtures by the gallon. Heaven only knows how they do it! And, now, good-night to you, I'll drop in to-morrow, and cast a professional eye upon the pretty Magdalen and prescribe for that tiresome headache."

Dr. Philip departed, and George ascended at once to his own apartments. The gas burned low in the parlor; the inner room was in darkness. In the dark his wife lay on a sofa, her face buried in the cushions, her long, light hair unloosed, falling about her like a veil.

George went softly in, and bent above her. How still she lay! He could not even hear her breathe.

"Magdalen!" he said, gently, with some vague dread at his heart, "are you asleep?"

There was no reply. He lingered for a moment, caressing those lovely blonde tresses, but she never stirred or spoke.

"Asleep!" he whispered to himself. "Poor child! I will not disturb her."

He returned to the outer room, turned up the gas, seated himself in an armchair, took up a book, and waited. It was a novel, and an interesting one, and he read and read on while the hours struck one after another by the city clocks; and midnight had chimed, and still his bride in the next room never once moved.

As twelve struck, he laid down his book and went in again. She remained as he had left her—as still as though she were dead.

"Magdalen!" he said, that nameless feeling of dread returning. "Magdalen, my dearest, awake!"

She was usually the lightest of sleepers. A whispered word, at any time, would suffice to arouse her. But now she did not stir.

"Magdalen!" George repeated, kneeling beside her and kissing her. "Magdalen, awake!"

To his unspeakable relief she stirred restlessly, and pushed away, with a pettish motion, his caressing hands.

"What is it? Please let me alone! Why do you disturb me?"

"My darling! do you know that it is after twelve?"

"Well," impatiently, "what of it? Do, pray, let me alone!"

"But it is so uncomfortable here, and you will catch cold."

"No—I am well enough."

"And your headache, dearest?"

"My headache is no better. For pity's sake, don't torment me now! Go to bed, if you are sleepy, and let me be!"

Her voice was sharp with inward pain. She pushed his hands away again, and turned more resolutely from him. Not once had she lifted her face and looked at him. She lay there as miserable and suffering a woman as all the city held.

He arose at once, quite white—hurt beyond expression. What was the matter—what had he done? how had he offended her? what did it mean? Without a word, he passed to the outer room, re-seated himself in his chair and left her to sleep.

To sleep! Would she ever sleep again?

She lay with both hands pressed hard on her throbbing temples. It was no falsehood to say her head ached—it throbbed wildly under her palms. She lay there suffering mutely, as women do suffer—such anguish as a pitiful God alone ever knows.

The hours of that dreadful night wore on. Ere two had chimed, George was asleep in his chair—unromantically asleep—his head all awry against the back of the chair. So soundly asleep that there was no danger of his waking until broad day.

"He can sleep!" Magdalen thought, bitterly. "Is there anything, or anybody on the earth, for whom he would lose a night's rest?"

She arose, stiff and cold; she could neither sleep nor lie quietly there. She took a shawl, wrapped it around her and began pacing up and down the room.

What should she do? what should she do? She had found Maurice Langley—was she to keep or to break her vow? He had deceived Willie—he had deceived Laura—was she to spare him because, with a more deadly deception, he had deceived her, too? Was she to spare him because he had betrayed her into loving him—become her husband and ruined her whole life? Never! never! ten-fold bitterer let his punishment be for that!

What should she do? She walked to the window and laid her hot forehead against the frosty panes. At last, even Broadway was still. Over it a black, starless sky hung; up and down the wild January blasts whirled; at rare intervals a step echoed loudly on the frozen pavement, and a dark figure flitted by. Oh, the lonely, lonely, lonely city in the dead, black night! Oh, for the lost and miserable women, who flit, like bad ghosts, over its pitiless stones!

The wretched watcher, looking out with such weary, haggard eyes, remembered that dreadful night of Laura's flight from Maurice Langley—that night when she had wandered, homeless and houseless, through these terrible streets until morning, mad with the mad despair only lost womanhood can know.

Laura had found a home where such as she only can find it, and here her destroyer slept, a happy and prosperous man. Should she spare him now? Her heart seemed to grow harder than iron as she stood there.

"I will read Laura's letter," she said; "her voice shall speak to me from the dead once more."

She went to her trunk, opened it and took therefrom a dainty writing case, inlaid with pearl and silver—Doctor Philip Barstone's wedding gift. A tiny key, fastened to her watch guard, opened it, and, from a private drawer, she took forth her dead sister's letter.

There was sufficient light in the room for her to read where she knelt. She began and read it slowly until she reached this paragraph:

"I was not his wife—that ceremony at the hotel was the most contemptible of shams. He had a bona-fide wife living before he ever saw me, and living still—deserted. I had been fooled from first to last."

The fatal letter dropped from Magdalen's hand.

"I never thought of that," she said, in an awful whisper. "I never thought of that! The wife, living four years ago—deserted—may be living still; and then—what am I?"



CHAPTER XVI.

UNPLEASANT FOR A BRIDEGROOM.

Mr. George Barstone awoke at eight o'clock that morning, to find the wintry rain lashing the windows and the January wind shrieking wildly up and down the dreary streets.

He sat up and stared around him, feeling stiff and cramped, and not a little bewildered.

"Have I been sleeping in this un-Christian fashion all night? And there's Magdalen? Oh, I remember, she was ill."

He arose at once. Magdalen sat by the window of the inner room, wrapped in a large shawl, watching the ceaseless rain.

How white and haggard she was! How miserably ill and worn she looked! Her husband gazed at her in real alarm.

"For heaven's sake, Magdalen!" he said, "don't tell me you have been sitting at that window all night! Are you ill? Has anything happened? My darling! my darling! What is the matter?"

His arms were around her—he drew her head lovingly on his breast, and kissed her.

And Magdalen, shivering through all her being, struggled and freed herself, and drew away. The husband of two short weeks stood gazing at her, aghast.

"Magdalen," he said, his ruddy face growing pale as her own, "what is it? Have I offended you? Have I, in my blundering way, done anything wrong? I am but a rough fellow at best, and may have hurt your feelings in some way unknown. God knows I would rather die than cause you one pang! Oh, my wife! my darling! speak and tell me, that I may atone! This silence—this coldness—is torture!"

He knelt before her, his arms about her, his eyes full of mute appeal.

Was this acting? He was quite white and the uplifted eyes gazed at her in speechless pain. If it were but acting, then he was past master of the art. But this bride of a fortnight knew better. Lost wretch, false traitor that he had been and was, he still loved her with a strong and intense love. She felt a sort of savage satisfaction in the thought—in the knowledge—that, through that love, at least, she could stab him to the heart! In these first bitter hours of discovery she could feel neither pity nor relenting.

She sat stonily silent now, not once even looking at him.

"Magdalen!" he pleaded; "Magdalen! Magdalen! Will you not even look at me, not even speak one poor word? Oh, my darling! I love you! I love you! Have a little mercy and tell me what I have done?"

She turned and looked at him now full in the face. How strangely solemn and haggard the great, luminous eyes were!

He remembered and understood that thrilling gaze, and never without some of the keen pain he felt then all his life long.

"Tell you what you have done?" she slowly repeated, "tell you what you have done? Stop and think one moment; look backward, if you dare, and answer your question yourself!"

The red blood surged slowly over his face as he listened. His eyes fell. He got up suddenly and walked away.

"I am answered," Magdalen said, under her breath, and turned her white face to the window once more.

He heard the whispered words and paused on the threshold of the outer room.—"I do not understand you," he said, in a constrained voice. "Who has been talking to you of me?"

"No one."

The words dropped from her lips like ice.

"What, then, do you mean? Why do you allude to the past? Who has wrought this sudden change?"

"No one."

He came back as suddenly as he had left her, face and eyes full of yearning love—of passionate appeal.

"Magdalen," he cried, "you are cruel—you are merciless. As heaven hears me, this is a fathomless mystery. I have committed no crime in the past—none at least that can possibly concern you. Some enemy has been slandering——"

"Ah, hush!" the girl said, with inexpressible weariness, "let me alone, George Barstone. There is the breakfast bell!" She arose slowly. "Forget what I have said, if you like, and let us go down. Don't stare at me in that wild way. Set me down as like all the rest of my sex—changeable, incomprehensible, what you like—only don't drive me mad with questions."

There was a suppressed intensity in her tone, a suppressed passion in her white face and dilated eyes, that might well alarm any one who loved her. It strangely startled this man who idolized her. Without a word he drew her hand within his arm and led her down to breakfast.

The day had been appointed for an excursion to Hoboken; but the weather, if nothing else, precluded all possibility of that. Breakfast was little better than a farce with either, and they returned up-stairs the moment the meal was ended. Perhaps, among all the wretched days that were to come, Magdalen counted none so wretched and hopeless as this. In the after time she had at least a confidant and a sharer in the great trouble of her life; that is, if any one can share the trouble of a wife estranged from her husband.

To-day she had not even that poor comfort. All the weary hours, while the ceaseless rain beat the glass, while the wintry gusts whirled the sleet before it, she sat motionless, gazing at the never-ending stream of human life below. She held a book in her hand, but it was the poorest of excuses—she did not even pretend to read. And all the while the dark, sleety hours wore on, the same thought kept beating in her hot head:

"What shall I do? What shall I do?"

George essayed conversation, but his efforts were miserable failures; it takes two to talk, as he found. Should they go to Washington on the morrow? No, she had no wish to go.

Did she prefer remaining in New York or returning to Golden Willows? She had no choice—she did not care—he would do as he liked—all places were the same to her. She scarcely looked at him once; no need to look to see the piteous expression his face wore.

Doctor Philip called in the course of the dismal afternoon, to find that obstinate headache of Mrs. Barstone's no better. It was true enough, her head did ache—when she had time to remember she had a head—with a dull throbbing pain.

The doctor eyed her with more than professional gravity and insisted upon feeling her pulse.

"High—feverishly high," he said. "My dear Mrs. Barstone—my dear Magdalen, if you will permit the cousinly liberty—you really must take care of yourself, or"—An awful hiatus and a face of owl-like solemnity.

Magdalen snatched her hand away in affright.

"I am not going to be ill," she said, angrily. "I never was ill in my life. I tell you there is nothing the matter with me."

"Excuse me. Do you call that intolerable headache, this rapid pulse, nothing, my dear young lady? No one could regret any illness of yours more than I should—there will be none, I sincerely trust; but do pray be careful of yourself. Keep very quiet—avoid excitement—don't think."

He spoke the two last words with a grave significance that made both husband and wife look at him. But the medical countenance was professionally unreadable.

Magdalen flushed angry red. Did he suspect her already? For George, his ruddy face was strangely pale and anxious. When Philip turned to go he followed him from the room.

"For heaven's sake, Phil," he exclaimed, "what is it? What is the matter with my wife? I give you my honor she is no more like herself than day is like night."

"I can see that," the doctor answered. "Mrs. Barstone is in an abnormal state. When did this change occur, and what has

caused it?"

"Caused it?" repeated George, with a groan. "I wish to the Lord I knew! She returned with me from Mrs. Moreland's party as happy and well as ever I saw her, and next day, by Jove! when we met, just before dinner, she would hardly speak to me. And it's been so ever since. She hasn't eaten or slept and her talk this morning was incomprehensible."

"Ah—what was it?"

"I hardly know how to tell you—some crime I had committed in the past she darkly hinted at. Now, Phil, I have gone awry in the past, as nobody knows better than you; and I would give a year of my life to undo what I have done. But it's all over and gone, and can in no way concern her. And then, between my falling asleep and awaking, who was to tell her? She was alone all the time; and if she had not been, who could tell her? Not a soul knows in the city but yourself."

Philip Barstone listened with a darkly impassive face, but the strangest light of intelligence gleamed in his hazel eyes.

"H'm—m—m!" was his comment, with an oracular nod. "George, has your wife anything on her mind? Dear old boy, don't be afraid of me. Tell me, if you know. No one should have these sort of secrets from their medical man. Is there any subject upon which Magdalen broods—anything in her past life to worry or distress her?"

A light dawned upon George.

"The vow!" he cried—"Magdalen's vow! Great powers! she can't be brooding upon that! The fellow was here in New York. It can't be that she has found him!"

"What vow? Don't be so melodramatic. Who vows vows in these days? What do you mean?"

"See here, Phil, I promised not to tell; but——"

"But where your wife's health, bodily or mentally, is concerned, a rash promise is better broken than kept, and I tell you seriously, my dear fellow, I see grave cause for alarm here. Tell me about this vow."

Very much alarmed, indeed, George Barstone complied. He told the whole story of Magdalen's troubles, of the vow of vengeance against Maurice Langley.

"She would sacrifice her life in keeping it, if necessary," George said. "Her whole soul is bent upon it. If she ever meets that man, my earthly happiness is at an end."

Doctor Barstone laughed, with ever so slight suspicion of a sneer.

"Highly sensational, indeed! What does Mrs. Barstone propose to do? Her sister runs away with him, her brother forges a note; the majesty of the law won't touch this Mr. Maurice Langley for either of these little peccadillos. Sad cases both; but, unfortunately, very common ones. I'm afraid this bombastical vow is only so much blank cartridge. And it is to be hoped she won't turn Nemesis or Borgian and stab or poison him!"

"Heaven knows!" George answered, with a groan. "I can't tell. I only know if this sort of thing continues I shall go mad. What do you advise, Phil?"

"Have you asked her what was the matter?"

"Yes, and she replied nothing, and adheres to it. I asked her if she would go to Washington. She told me she preferred staying here. Phil, what is it you dread?"

"I'll tell you later. I don't want to be precipitate. Let her have her way; humor her; if she prefers silence, be silent; take her out, if she will go; keep her amused. I'll call again to-morrow, and see if this little post-nuptial fit of sulks is dispersed."

Doctor Masterson's assistant departed and George returned, very downcast and distressed, to the parlor.

His wife kept her seat, looking, oh, so haggard and ill, gazing out with darkly brooding eyes that saw nothing.

The storm subsided toward evening and the frosty stars came out. Mr. Barstone invited his wife to accompany him to the

theater, and Magdalen consented, wearily. What did it matter whither she went or what became of her? The world had come to an end. What was left but misery and despair now?

It was a very cheerful scene—the bright-gilded, gas-lighted theater, with its countless gaily dressed ladies, and the play was the most cheerful of comedies, at which even George laughed. But she sat beside him and saw the figures on the stage, as though they had been puppets in a peep show, and the music and the talking were all blended in one confused din.

When she went forth on George's arm she could no more have told you what she had seen and heard than if that pleasant comedy had been Hindostanee.

The light burned dim in the outer room as they reached home and on the table lay a letter—"Mrs. George Barstone," in a big, masculine hand, and postmarked New York.

"A letter for you, my dear," George said, handing it to her; "from some one in the city."

She took it hastily, with a little exclamation, for the writing was Willie's. Without a word of excuse or explanation, she passed hastily into the inner room and closed the door.

She had been thinking of Willie—ought she not send and tell him of the discovery she had made? She tore open his letter now and read with eager, burning eyes:

"156 East —— Street.

"DEAR M:—

"You see, I have found you—I caught a glimpse of your face the other night, as you came out of the Academy of Music. It was only a glimpse, but, of course, I recognized you.

"I tried hard to see who was with you—your husband, of course—but there I failed. The crowd took you and left me behind.

"Now I had a double motive in trying to see your husband—something more than curiosity about my new brother-in-law. I have made a discovery—I have found out Maurice Langley's real name, and that real name is—you will stare when you hear it—Barstone.

"How I have found this out, never mind. I have it from reliable authority. There is nothing in a name—there may be fifty Barstones in New York, but I tell you, Mag, the coincidence gave me a chill. Still you need not be alarmed, the coincidence of a name is nothing, as I have said. I must see your husband, however, and at once. To-morrow, Saturday, I will hang about the hotel from ten until four—come out with him sometime between those hours. Take no notice of me, but if you see me, make your husband turn his face in my direction. He won't recognize me, even if he should be—but that is all nonsense—he can't be, of course. Don't fail—I will be on the watch.

"WILLIE."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FIRST MOVE.

Mr. Barstone waited, with considerable impatience, for his wife to read her letter and reappear. She would tell him who it was from, of course. Gentlemen in the honeymoon don't, as a rule, care to see their brides in receipt of letters from unknown male correspondents. And then, who could there be in New York to address Magdalen? So Mr. Barstone waited impatiently, and whistled and walked up and down.

He was allowed to wait. Half an hour passed—an hour—still no Magdalen—and no sound within that inner room.

George turned desperate. He tapped at the door.

"May I come in, Magdalen?" he said.

There was no reply.

He opened the door and entered. The light burned dim; all was quiet. Magdalen was comfortably in bed and asleep—asleep to all appearances, at least—and the mysterious letter nowhere to be seen.

George was a moral young man—as moral young men go—and seldom swore—his sunny temper aiding his morality; but I am afraid he did a little mental swearing to-night.

It was too bad of Magdalen to torment him like this. He loved the very ground she walked on, and she trod him under those pretty feet.

Who was that letter from? What man could there be in New York who could not come to see her, but must write her mysterious epistles? She had told him she had not a single acquaintance in the city. Why did she have secrets from her husband? Had she ceased to love him? Had she never loved him? Was it only to end the drudgery of teaching, and become mistress of Golden Willows, that she had married him, after all?

I fear poor George had but an indifferent night of it, as he tossed about, distracted by that fair young bride, who had hitherto seemed to him a very little lower than the angels. He fell asleep toward morning, to dream feverish dreams, in which his wife and a mysterious man in a cloak, whose face he never could see, were perpetually mixed up.

The early sunshine flooded the room when he awoke and Magdalen, putting the finishing touches to her toilet, stood before the mirror. She was still very pale, and there were dark circles surrounding her eyes, telling of racking care and sleepless nights, but a resolute look of fixed determination had taken the place of the haggard despair of yesterday.

The hand of fate had pointed out her course; Willie's letter took the matter out of her hands. He should know all to-day.

"Dressed, Magdalen?" George said. "And how is your headache this morning, my dearest?"

"Much better—almost entirely gone. A walk after breakfast, in this sparkling air, will complete the cure. You will accompany me, I suppose, George?"

Accompany her! George's face lighted up with the radiance of a rising sun.

"My darling, I am only too delighted to hear you ask me; for walking, or driving, or sailing, I am your most submissive slave. I hope your letter of last night contained no unpleasant news?"

He asked the artful question as Magdalen turned to quit the chamber.

"Unpleasant news?" she said, briefly and coldly. "Oh, no! It was from a friend only recently arrived in the city."

She deigned no further explanation and George arose and dressed, with a very dissatisfied expression of face.

It was a secret, then, and she did not mean to tell him. The green-eyed monster took the bridegroom's heart between its finger and thumb, and gave it a most horrible twinge.

"What am I to think? Why does she make a mystery of this matter? Oh, Magdalen, Magdalen! how strangely you are changed!"

They went down to breakfast together. It was half-past nine, by Magdalen's watch, when they returned up stairs—an hour too soon to quit the house.

"You want your smoke, George, I know," she said, busying herself over the trifles upon the table, "and I have a letter to write to New Hampshire. If you will return for me in an hour you will find me ready."

The hint was not to be mistaken. George took it and departed at once. He did want a smoke to comfort him a little under all this. He sat in the reading-room and perused the morning papers over his consoling Havana, and Magdalen dashed off a few brief lines to nurse Rachel.

She was well, she had heard from Willie, she expected to return to Golden Willows in a fortnight—that was all. She folded and sealed the note and then arose and dressed for the walk. She looked at herself in a sort of weary wonder, as she put on her bonnet.

"How pale and thin I have grown in two brief days," she thought. "Where is all the bloom and beauty he used to praise now?"

"Half-past ten, my love," George cried, briskly opening the door. "All ready? If the wind and sunshine this morning don't bring back your lost roses, then nothing will."

They descended the stairs and passed out of the hotel. Magdalen gave one sweeping, hurried glance around. Many people were passing and there, on the curbstone, stood a young man, his hands thrust deep into his coat pockets, his felt hat pulled over his eyes, a cigar between his lips—aimless and alone.

"My glove has come unfastened, George," Mrs. Barstone said, her clear tones quite audible where this loiterer stood. "Fasten it please."

George obeyed. His face, as he secured the button, turned directly toward the solitary young man on the curbstone.

"There, my dear," he said, and drawing the little hand within his arm, he led her away.

It was a lovely mid-winter morning—the sunshine sparkling, the wind frosty but not piercing, the stores at their gayest, and Broadway filled with people.

In spite of herself, Magdalen's spirits rose. What if after all, there had been some great mistake? What if Willie should say, "Your husband is not Maurice Langley," in spite of everything?

You see we will hope against hope, all of us, where our nearest and dearest are concerned.

The lost color flushed back into her cheeks, the lost brilliance in her eyes. She laughed once more, she chatted in the exuberance of her new and desperate hope.

"Thank God!" George said, in his faithful heart. "Oh, thank God! I knew it could not last!"

The newly wedded pair did not return to the hotel. Down Broadway they encountered Mrs. Moreland, in her elegant barouche, and that lady drew up and insisted upon their getting in.

"You shall dine and spend the evening with me," Mrs. Moreland said. "I was on my way to the St. Nicholas. My dear Mrs. Barstone, not a word of excuse. Oh, your dress? Nonsense! We will be the merest family party; your dress is all that could be desired. Home, James."

Mrs. Moreland's family party, however, turned out to be rather a large gathering and Magdalen spent a very gay and pleasant evening.

Doctor Philip was present—late, as usual, and pleading his professional engagements as an excuse.

"People will have colic and cramps and sudden fits of apoplexy at the most unreasonable and unseasonable hours," he said, plaintively. "We physicians are martyrs—only they won't canonize us. How are you, George, and how's the pretty

Magdalen? That nasty headache all gone? Ah, I see it has."

He sauntered over to where she sat, looking very bright and pretty, talking animatedly with her artist admirer, Mr. Hollis.

She glanced up at her husband's cousin with her animated glance and smile.

"No need to ask how you are, Mrs. Barstone," the doctor said. "Your headache of yesterday is quite gone I see. I knew it by George's radiant face the moment I came in."

He lingered by her side until the hour of departure. There was a singular fascination for him in this fair-haired bride of his cousin's—this gentle-looking girl, who could be so darkly moody at times, and who had avowed her life to a wild and desperate purpose of revenge.

"She doesn't look much like one of the Furies," Doctor Barstone thought, as he watched her glowing face with half-closed, piercing eyes; "but there is an old adage about still water, and your quiet little women are the very deuce when aroused. That pretty smiling mouth is a very determined mouth, and those bright blue eyes can flash steely fire upon occasions, I dare swear. A man might have a safer enemy than you, my pretty Mrs. Barstone."

Magdalen was in very high spirits when, some time after midnight, she drove home by her husband's side. The sudden and unreasonable rebound from despair to hope sent an hysterical glow of excitement to her face—a feverish ring in her laugh and voice.

How beautiful the night was! How brilliant the moon! How countless the stars! How picturesque Broadway looked under the moonlight and gaslight! How pleasant the evening had been! How poor Fanny would enjoy herself here! How much his cousin Phil improved upon acquaintance! He had been quite entertaining to-night; he had made her laugh over droll stories, so drolly told; he spoke with such deep affection of Aunt Lydia! Oh, she liked him ever so much better than at first!

So the girl ran on—feverishly talkative and excited by the sudden reaction she had undergone. She looked half fearfully, half eagerly, as they entered their room, for a note from Willie, but none awaited her. She was to have that night to hope and to sleep once more.

"I will hear from him to-day," was her first waking thought. "Oh, heaven grant I may hear the news I hope for!"

She went down to breakfast with George—happy George once more.

When they returned up-stairs the expected letter lay conspicuous upon the table. Magdalen pounced upon it in an instant, but not before George had seen the superscription, in the same big, masculine fist as before.

"Hallo!" he said, "another letter from your unknown friend in the city. Why the deuce doesn't he come to see you, instead of writing you mysterious letters, Magdalen?"

Perhaps Magdalen did not hear—she made no reply, she carried the letter, as before, into the inner chamber, and closed the door after her.

"Hang it!" thought George, sitting sulkily down by the window. "Confound it! It's a little too bad, by George! What business has Magdalen to receive letters from other men and refuse to let me see them? I'm not a jealous-minded fellow in the main, but if this sort of thing goes on much longer, I'll know the reason why, by Jove!"

In the bedroom Magdalen, with the sealed letter in her hand, stood for a moment gazing at it with a sick feeling of dread. It might be her reprieve or her death warrant—who could tell?

Once, twice, she tried to open it, and stopped; then, with a swift impulse of desperation, she tore off the envelope and read:

"For God's sake, don't say that the man I saw with you this morning is the man you have married! That man is Maurice Langley! I feel half mad with rage and fear! The villain! How dare he do it? Meet me to-day—I must see you! From one o'clock until five I will be in front of the Academy of Music. Meet me without fail. Come veiled and alone.

"WILLIE."

The letter dropped from her fingers—the fatal letter that destroyed her last hope. She slid on her knees; her face fell upon her clasped hands.

"Let me die!" she cried; "let me die before I ever see him again! Oh, God, be merciful and let me die!"

It was a wicked and desperate prayer—wicked and desperate as the purpose of her life. She knelt there in a dreadful, blind despair, and neither on earth nor in heaven could this most wretched wife look for hope or help.

How long she lay there she never knew—she was past taking note of time. A tap at the door aroused her.

"Magdalen," George's impatient voice said, "are you asleep? If so, be good enough to say so, or I will go in and awaken you."

Magdalen arose. Despair might come, but death would not, at her bidding. She opened the door and admitted her husband.

"Have you forgotten our proposed little excursion to——? My dear, what new trouble has happened? You have had bad news?"

"I have changed my mind about the excursion," Magdalen answered, turning away. "I—I do not feel well enough to go. But that need not detain you. You have promised Mrs. Moreland, and they will excuse me."

"Very likely, but I shall not ask them. As if I could leave you alone, and ill! What is it, my dear? That wretched headache again, or did your letter contain bad news? It was not from your nurse, I think."

"No; it was not from my nurse."

"I was not aware you had any other correspondents, my dear. From some one in the city, was it not?"

"It was."

Her hand clenched over it as she spoke.

"From some man?"

"Yes."

"Magdalen, you will show me that letter, will you not? It is not possible you can have any secrets from me?"

"It is quite possible, Mr. Barstone! I dare say, if the truth were known, you have more than one from me."

"Magdalen!"

She laughed recklessly. With that miserable ceaseless anguish at her heart, she scarcely knew, scarcely cared, what she said or did.

"That absurd old-fashioned custom of husbands and wives telling each other everything is obsolete, like other old-fashioned customs, in this enlightened nineteenth century. You keep your own counsel, George, and I, for the future, will keep mine. You had better go with the Morelands to-day, and keep your word. You are kind to propose staying with me, but I assure you I should prefer being alone."

George was very pale—very, very grave.

"Magdalen, I beg of you, show me that note?"

"I will not show you that note, George!"

There was a pause.

"It is a secret, then?" he asked, huskily.

"It is a secret."

"Tell me, at least, who is this man who writes to you? Tell me his name?"

"Not even his name. It is quite useless your asking me questions on this subject—I will not tell you!"

She tore the note into fragments, as she spoke, and let them flutter out of the window. She felt as though she hated the man at her side, who could look so innocent and be so guilty.

"Magdalen! Magdalen! what has come between us?" he cried out. "Do you know that you are driving me wild? Why, why did you ever marry me?"

"Because I was blind and mad. Oh, heaven above—so blind, so mad!"

She wrung her hands with that wail of despair. George Barstone staggered like a man who had received a blow.

"Blind and mad!" he whispered, "blind and mad! Then you never loved me, Magdalen!"

"Loved you!" she cried. She rose up and turned upon him like a hunted animal. "I loved you so well that I was in heaven, not on earth, when you asked me to be your wife. Loved you! Oh, you played your part well! Who could help loving you? My God! why did I not die on my wedding day?"

She broke out into hysterical sobbing, her hands clasped over her tortured face. It was only for an instant. She looked up at him again, with that desperate, hunted glance of some animal at bay in her eyes.

"Will you go?" she said, "will you leave me? What is past is past, and cannot be undone. Let me alone—don't drive me frantic with questions. I have enough to bear without that."

He tried to speak. She would not listen to a word.

"For pity's sake, let us say no more about it. Keep the promise you made last night—go with Mrs. Moreland and her party. If you have one generous feeling left for me in your heart, be merciful and leave me alone."

"Do you really wish it—really wish I should go to this excursion without you?"

"I really wish it. A promise is a promise. Go!"

George Barstone turned on his heel and approached the door.

"I will rid you of my presence, Magdalen, since you desire it so much, but I will not go upon this excursion without you! You may have a motive in thus wishing to send me out of the city for the day; but though I remain—have no fear—I will not play the spy. If you have any friend whom you wish to receive here privately, receive that friend by all means. I may doubt your love, but never your wifely loyalty. The day that sees me doubt that sees us part forever!"

He quitted the room with the words. An instant later and he had taken his hat and quitted the house also. Magdalen saw him pass under her window and disappear amid the throng. For the first time she had thoroughly succeeded in arousing and angering him.

Hours passed; within and without life was at its busiest and brightest; many footsteps echoed in the passages without; doors opened and shut; merry voices and gay laughter reached her—but she sat there more utterly alone, more utterly lonely, than if the great hotel had been the heart of some primeval forest. She was learning the bitter truth of the odd lines:

"And to be wroth with one we love
Doth work like madness on the brain."

So long she lay there in her trance of torpid suffering, that at last, worn out by watching, she fell fast asleep. Do not condemned men sleep on that last awful night, that precedes the more awful to-morrow? Sleep, the merciful, took her, and held her for hours.

The short winter day was wearing fast to twilight when she awoke. She started up in affright, and looked at her watch.

Had she overslept the appointed time? No, it was not yet five, and the distance to the place of tryst short. She threw on her mantle and bonnet, fastened a close mask of black lace over her face and departed on her errand.

The frosty January gloaming, all gemmed with stars, lay like a blue veil of mist over the thronged streets, as she flitted rapidly along.

Where had George been all day, she wondered, and would he return to the hotel before herself, and ask more questions impossible to answer. As she drew near the stately building on Fourteenth Street, a young man, slouching idly before it with his hands thrust deep in his jacket pockets, started forward to meet her.

"Am I late, Willie?" she asked, panting with the rapidity of her walk. "I could not help it. I fell asleep."

"Oh, you fell asleep, did you? You've grown aristocratic, I suppose and turned day into night like the rest of them. If people will enjoy themselves at the opera and theater and balls on Fifth avenue every night, I suppose it is to be expected they will sleep all next day. Still, I think, after the news I sent you, Mrs. Barstone, you might have strained a point and kept awake, and come here earlier. It's not quite so pleasant, loafing about the streets on a January afternoon, in cracked boots and threadbare coat, as in the luxurious chambers of the St. Nicholas. I suppose, then, the gentleman (with sneering emphasis) whom I saw with you yesterday is not your husband, after all. You, improved as you are, no doubt, by your entrance into tip-top society, even you would hardly take the news so coolly!"

"Your news was no news to me," Magdalen said, with that quiet that comes of great despair, "and the man you saw with me is my husband."

Willie Allward stared at his sister in horror.

"Good God, Magdalen! then you have married Maurice Langley!"

"I have married Maurice Langley! Don't speak so loudly, Willie—don't look so wild—people are staring!"

But the brother still gazed at her, as though he could neither believe his ears or eyes.

"My heaven!" he said, "she has married Maurice Langley, and she takes it like this! Her sister's murderer, her father's murderer, her brother's tempter and destroyer—she has married him and she takes it like this!"

"Like this!" Magdalen repeated, with a wild laugh. "How would you have me take it, Willie? Did you want me to come to you, with hair disheveled and eyes in fine frenzy rolling, crying forth my wrongs on the housetops? Like this! Why, Willie Allward, I tell you I love that man—do you hear?—love him with my whole heart and soul, knowing him to be all you say! I tell you we are under a curse, all of us, and God had surely forgotten me, or I would have fallen dead on my wedding day."

"Ah! you can feel! I am glad of that! Here, take my arm and come along; as you say, people are staring at us. Let us talk this bad business over quietly, if we can. How long is it since you first knew the truth?"

"Since the day I was married. Rachel came to the church and recognized in George Barstone the man she had known four years ago as Maurice Langley. She sent for me and told me, but I tell you I was resting under a curse that left me blind. I would not believe her."

"Well, and how have you been convinced since?"

"Willie, do you remember a mark Maurice Langley had tattooed upon his left arm—a circlet of leaves, a heart pierced by a dagger, and the initial 'B'? Rachel told me of it long before I thought of being married, but it had entirely slipped my memory until three days ago. It flashed back upon me like lightning, and while he slept I looked at his arm, and beheld the fatal mark."

Willie Allward drew a long breath.

"I remember! I remember! Then the matter is beyond a doubt. Do you know that, though I recognized Langley at first sight, yet, since, I have had doubts—grave doubts of his identity with the man accompanying you. Langley, when I knew him, over four years back, was much slighter and sallow than he is now, and his hair and mustache were jet black—died, of course. Now he wears no mustache, and you know how the loss of one alters the expression of a man's face. But

the tattooing places the matter beyond a doubt. I recollect the mark perfectly—it was most peculiar, and could never be effaced. And now, Magdalen, what is to be done?"

"Hunt him down!" Magdalen answered between her set teeth. "The blow that strikes him will kill me; but come misery or death, I will keep my vow! Laura shall be avenged!"

"Then I may look to you for help without fail? I began to fear I would have you against me, too, now that you are his wife."

"Because I am his wife, I will aid you to the last. How dare he do it! How dare he do it! I told him my story—I told of the purpose of my life—and he dared to marry me! Hunt him down, Willie, if you can, the false, false, false traitor!"

"Hush-h-h! Not quite so loud on the street. If I can? Oh, I can have no fear of that! I have Mr. Maurice Langley as completely in my power as ever one man had another! The law won't touch him for his crimes against Laura and me, but it will for——"

"For what, brother?"

"Never mind to-night, Magdalen; don't be in a hurry to hear it. It's something you won't like to hear—something a little worse than anything you've heard yet."

"Worse!" the girl said, incredulously.

"Yes, young lady, a great deal worse—something that will send our fine gentleman, until his hair, is gray, up to Sing Sing. No, I won't tell you to-night. I haven't my plans quite matured yet, and I have another person also to consult."

"Another person, Willie? Who can it be?"

"Some one whose acquaintance you will have the pleasure of making also before you are much older, my good sister. How have you acted since you found this out? In such a way, I suppose, that the fellow must have seen his game was up from the first? It would be just like you women."

"Yes, he has seen it," Magdalen said, wearily. "I can't play the hypocrite, Willie. I can't stab in the dark, and smile while I stab. He has seen, plainly enough, that I have discovered his dreadful crimes; but he plays the part of unconscious innocence so well that if there were the faintest glimmer of hope—the faintest possibility that we could be mistaken—I would not, I could not believe him guilty!"

"I dare say not," with a short, scornful laugh. "You don't want to believe him guilty, do you? I only wonder that you will believe him guilty as it is! You women are the most obstinate and besotted fools under heaven where men are concerned! You fall in love with one of them, and all earth, and all the realms above, wouldn't convince you your idol was other than an angel in peg-top pants. You love this hang-dog villain, and, I suppose, he pretends to love you?"

"It's no pretense," Magdalen answered, in the same weary tone, "he does love me."

Willie laughed in unutterable scorn.

"Yes, he loved Laura, too. I wonder what would have convinced her, in those first days, that he didn't love her? Are you to be trusted, Magdalen—or am I to work alone? Will you, in one of your womanish, impulsive fits, throw yourself on his neck some day and tell him all, and make a fool of yourself and a mess of the whole thing? Or will you aid me—will you keep on friendly terms with him, and lull him to security, while I perfect my scheme of revenge? Answer, once and for all, are you to be trusted, or are you not?"

He spoke fiercely and rapidly, clutching her arm, his eyes flashing.

"You may trust me!" his sister answered, firmly; "on the road we are treading there is no turning back. I will keep my vow! I will have my revenge upon Maurice Langley!"

They were passing a corner as she said this, unconsciously raising her voice. Two men stood talking at an open door and one of them paused suddenly in what he was saying, as those ringing words met his ear, and turned around. The light of the street lamp at the corner fell full upon the pale face of Magdalen Barstone. She had flung back her veil in her

excitement—he saw her as plainly as though it were broad day.

"Pretty girl, Barstone," the other gentleman said, laughing. "Do you know her?"

"Yes, I know her," Doctor Philip Barstone replied, deliberately, "and I didn't expect to see her here, and at this time of evening. I'll call around again to-morrow, Fletcher, to see your wife, Good-night!"

He ran down the steps abruptly. His light wagon stood on the street; he sprang in and drove slowly along the street, keeping the pair on the sidewalk well in view. They never once noticed the watcher on the street, they were too entirely absorbed in their vendetta; and he, of course, could not hear a word they said.

"Where's that moon-struck idiot, George, I wonder," thought the doctor, "that he lets his peerless treasure walk about the streets of New York after nightfall with disreputable young men? When he left me, an hour ago, for home I don't think he expected to find little golden-locks taking nocturnal rambles. Of course, the fellow's the returned convict. Ah! they're going to part—I'll keep him in view, I think; it may be useful to know where he lives!"

They parted where they had met—in front of the Academy. The listener in the wagon caught, as he drew boldly close to the curbstone, the young man's last remark:

"Go to Washington for a week if he wishes it—make yourself as agreeable as you can—as if you suspected nothing, you understand? Things done in a hurry are never well done. I mean to work slowly and surely in this matter. You may send me some money to-morrow—thirty or forty dollars. I pick up a trifle at odd jobs, but in a thing like this a fellow can't work without stamps. Tell him it's for new dresses, ear-rings, bonnets—anything; he'll give it you fast enough—isn't this the honeymoon?" he laughed, harshly. "Good night, Mag! I won't say pleasant dreams, because I think they're hardly likely to be pleasant. It won't do for me to be seen with you, you know. You can find your way back, I suppose?"

"Yes—yes—I have lingered too long as it is! I should have been back before George, I'll send you the money to-morrow, Willie—I have more than that of my own—I could not ask him for it, so make it last as long as you can. Good night!"

She walked swiftly and lightly away and Willie Allward slouched more slowly in the opposite direction. He hailed a car on Third Avenue, presently, and was taken a long way down town; but the doctor, in his gig, followed perseveringly, and saw him get out after half an hour's ride. He followed him to an obscure street close by the river, where tall tenement houses and reeking stables cast weird shadows in the moonlight. He entered one of the shabbiest of these shabby dwellings, and disappeared.

"Earthed," said Doctor Philip, smiling grimly all by himself as he trotted briskly away. "I shall know this street and that house again without difficulty. What plot are those two hatching? Has Magdalen Allward found Maurice Langley, or does she only think she has found him?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN WHICH DOCTOR PHILIP DOES HIS DUTY.

Mr. George Barstone, having lost his temper and left his bride in a very unbridegroom-like, not to say unchristian, frame of mind, it would naturally be supposed he passed a very dismal and disagreeable day.

Nothing of the sort, however, Mr. Barstone spent a very jolly afternoon and enjoyed himself exceedingly. For one thing, he was of that sanguine, elastic temperament that throws off trouble as leaves throw off dew-drops; for another, the sunshine and frosty wind were exhilarating as some rare wine; and, for a third, George called upon some very old friends, whom, in his devotion to his fair young wife, he had found no time to look up hitherto—pleasant fellows all—artists, newspaper men—dwellers all in the tents of Bohemia, and all more or less delighted to see their old companion.

"The very man of men I wanted most to see!" our literary gentlemen exclaimed, wringing the Millford lawyer's hand. "I never knew you were married and in the city until yesterday, when Phil dropped in to tell us. How well the fellow's looking—getting stouter, by Jove! And they say you've married a beauty, old boy. Ah, I recollect, you always had an inflammable heart and an eye for a pretty face. Hollis raves about her—don't know Hollis? Artist, you know—mad about fair women, blue eyes and golden hair, and dead in love with your wife. 'Pon my word he is, George. And you'll dine with me, won't you, dear old boy? And oh, by the bye, that reminds me—Lefarge is going to get married—remember Lefarge, don't you?—sculptor—clever fellow, and would be much cleverer if he wasn't so deucedly handsome. He's been the pet of the petticoats since he left off long robes, I believe, and his Grecian nose and long eyelashes have made his fortune at last. He's picked up what better men, like myself, have been all our lives hunting in vain—a hundred thousand dollar heiress. However, Lefarge is going to give us a last symposium to-night—a sort of farewell feast, you understand—before he shakes the dust of Bohemia off his highly respectable boots and goes in for the bloated aristocracy. And you must come, old fellow; Lefarge begged me, only this morning, to hunt you up, and insist upon it. Phil's coming, and a dozen more—not a stupid man among them. I dare say you'd rather be with the little beauty you've married; but, then, poor Lefarge—on the brink of that unknown world, upon which you so bravely have sprung—take compassion upon him, and come."

"Perhaps I may, Dick," he said, "although I promised Magdalen to take her to the opera to-night. At the old work I see!" he motioned with his cigar toward a drift of manuscript strewn wildly over the floor. "How's literature?"

"Lively—uncommonly so—never was so busy in my life. Come along to Delmonico's and dine with me once more."

He led George away and the two friends dined sumptuously; but while he listened and ate, the Millford lawyer's thoughts wandered off, many times, to his bride. What was she doing? How would she meet him when he came back? His literary friend found him unsociably absent and distraught, and released him as they sauntered out smoking their after-dinner cigar.

"When a man asks you the same question thrice over, and he never hears you, it's high time to let you go. You want to go back to your wife, I suppose? I don't think Lefarge will be quite so far gone as that three weeks after matrimony! Ask her if she won't please let you off duty to-night—for once in a way; Lefarge will never forgive her if she doesn't. And so good-by, my dear George. We meet again at Philippi!"

His literary friend, a gentleman who writes his name high among the story-telling Bedouins of his tribe, sauntered away; but George, though liberated, did not return where his heart and treasure were. Had he not promised to rid her of his presence for the day, and it was only five o'clock as yet? So Mr. Barstone trotted along Broadway, and was another unit in that busy thoroughfare, and met two or three men he knew, among others the lucky Lefarge himself—a most remarkably handsome young man!

"What! George? What! Barstone? My dear fellow, I am delighted to see you! I have just come from the St. Nicholas—found you were out, and left my card and an invitation for to-night. Have you seen Phil or Tompkins? I begged them to hunt you up."

"I have just parted from Tompkins; he told me of your great, good fortune. My dear Lefarge, permit me to congratulate you!"

"And you'll make one of us to-night? I'll take no denial. Oh, nonsense! Phil tells me she's the most sensible of her sex,

and the most indulgent; and I know you go out. Haven't you been at the opera, and at Moreland's? Don't tell me! Say you will come."

"Yes, I'll come, if possible. And you are going to marry a three million heiress!"

"Worth her weight in gold, in every respect. Do you think anything less would tempt me into the maelstrom of matrimony: And you've gone in for love and beauty, and all that sort of thing. Well, if you like it; but give me the widow or the orphan, with half a million or so—not tied selfishly upon herself—and I won't ask overmuch love or beauty either. I'm on my way to the Joggins mansion now, George. Come along and be introduced."

So George linked his arm in that of his very handsome friend, who hailed a passing omnibus, that took them to the portals of that most aristocratic brownstone front on Fifth Avenue wherein Miss Joggins resided.

And the two gentlemen were shown into a sumptuous reception-room; and presently Miss Joggins came down in all the plenitude of her charms, with silks trailing, and jewels flashing, and priceless laces perfuming the air.

The happy Araminta, who was neither very young nor very handsome, was yet a good-natured little person, who chattered with much volubility, and even played and sang for her visitors.

The gray of the winter day was lying over the city when the two young men parted, and the stars were bright in the steel-blue sky when George went swinging homeward to his hotel.

"And to think Lefarge can marry that young woman, whose fat fingers are laden with gaudy rubies and emeralds up to the knuckles, whose waist is like a bolster, and who giggles and sings flat! And to think of my beautiful darling, with her starry eyes and golden hair, and regal bearing! I would be the happiest fellow in wide America if this mysterious cloud had not come between us. Is she waiting for me now, I wonder—lonely and longing for my return?"

The bare idea lent wings to his feet. Five minutes later and he had flung away his cigar and gone bounding buoyantly up to his room. He flung wide the door and strode in.

"Magdalen, my dearest," he began, and then he paused abruptly, for all was dark and cold and silent. "Magdalen!" he repeated, but there was no answer.

The starlight shone in with a feeble glimmer and showed him the apartment vacant. He crossed over to the inner room, and that, too, was deserted.

"Gone out!" George said, blankly, "and alone at this hour! Can she be angry with me for staying away so long? But it was her own desire. Or can she be with the writer of those letters? What can it mean?"

He lit the gas and stood an instant, irresolute.

"I can't go in search of her!" he thought. "I haven't the faintest idea where she can be. Stop! Mrs. Moreland's! As I didn't go there to-day she may have called and carried Magdalen off—willy nilly? That's it! I'll go there at once!"

He clapped on his hat, and was rushing impetuously forth, when the door suddenly opened and his wife, in her street dress, stood before him.

"Magdalen!"

George Barstone stood and looked at his wife. The rapid walk had not brought any color to her face; she looked strangely weary and white, as she leaned heavily against the door. Something in the dreary misery of her face turned him cold.

"You have been out, my dear, and alone?"

"I have been out," she answered. "Yes."

She passed him and entered the bedroom to remove her bonnet. He slowly followed her.

"Do you feel quite well to-night, Magdalen?"

"Thanks—yes."

"You were out alone?"

There was no reply—she was absorbed by the fastening of her mantle.

"Were you alone, Magdalen?" George reiterated.

"Who was I likely to be with?" Magdalen responded, coldly. It was a part of her miserable position, this dissimulation. "Is six o'clock so late that you should look so shocked about it? I don't ask you where you spent your day. I don't feel the least anxiety in the matter. I have been alone on the streets of New York before to-night, Mr. Barstone."

"We were to have gone to hear 'Robert le Diable' to-night, Magdalen," he said, offended, in spite of his habitual gentle temper, by her words and tone. "Do you particularly care to go?"

"By no means! On the contrary, I prefer remaining where I am."

"I have an invitation to meet a few old friends this evening. You will not object to my going, I suppose?"

"Not at all—go, by all means!"

The utter indifference of her tone stung him to the heart. How little she cared for him! His outgoings and incomings were matters of perfect indifference to her. She went out to the parlor, took up a book and began to read, and George, hurt and grieved beyond words, silently and rapidly made his toilet. He was ready to go and standing on the threshold of the outer door ere he spoke again.

"You are sure you will not be lonely, Magdalen?"

"Quite sure. Don't distress yourself on my account. I will read until I grow sleepy, and then go to bed. Pray enjoy yourself and good-night!"

"She's only too glad to be rid of me," thought this ill-used married man. "Pray enjoy myself, indeed! I am likely to, I think, all things considered, and I shall be a very agreeable guest at Louis Lefarge's supper!"

Mr. Lefarge's supper rooms looked a very cheerful place, this cold January night. Many old friends greeted George and congratulated him. Mr. Hollis gazed at him in envious regret that he should have won the only woman that ever fully answered his ideal, and Philip Barstone, who was about the gayest gentleman present, and who had arrived very late, watched him furtively and curiously. For the giver of the symposium, he sat at the head of his table, and dipped into his moselle with a tender melancholy upon him, befitting a man about to enter on that unknown and mysterious land called the "State of Matrimony."

Bohemia may not rank high among the nations of the earth, but Mr. Lefarge had always found it a very pleasant country, and those dashing outlaws of the pen, brush and the chisel very delightful companions, indeed! And after to-night he must be an exile from this flowery kingdom to visit it no more forever. And for those loud laughing, reckless, clever brothers of his order, he must go down through the vale of years with Miss Araminta Joggins.

A bridegroom-elect should be a happy man, and no doubt such Mr. Lefarge was; but it required a strong recollection of the Joggins' hundred thousand dollars to sustain his spirit on this occasion. He sat mildly pensive while an artist friend made a flowery little speech anent the happy day so close at hand—gave his host joy that he was so near the blissful altar of Hymen, before whose magic shrine all earthly troubles drop away, and nothing is left, when the church register is signed, but to live happy forever after.

"Perpetual bliss!" grunted Mr. Richard Tompkins, as his eloquent neighbor sat down. "Egad! I should say so, judging by the looks of the only married man in the company."

And the author pointed his fork at poor George's dismal face.

"I asked him four times if he would allow Mrs. Barstone to sit to me for my Aphrodite, and he never once heard me, by Jove!" murmured Mr. Hollis.

"Let him alone, you fellows," said their host. "I know what trouble I had to get him to come. For 'thinking of an absent

wife will blanch a faithful cheek,' as Don Juan, or Childe Harold, or some of those poetical cads, remark. Never mind, George, we'll let you off early, and even Mr. Caudle might risk a curtain lecture on such an occasion as this. Tompkins, we're getting melancholy—sing 'Belles of Broadway,' and raise our spirits. You sang it horribly flat the last time I heard you; but as it is the only thing you know, and as you will be certain to insist upon our hearing it before we separate, we had better get it over at once."

Mr. Tompkins needed no second invitation. He rapped smartly on the table with the handle of his fruit knife, calling those turbulent bachelors to order, and rolled out that spirited song in a big, mellow bass that might have been heard at Castle Garden. Following this eminent author came lesser lights, with their after-supper songs in high tenor or low bass, and as the midnight hours rolled by the fun and jollity grew as fast and furious as the demon dance in "Tam o'Shanter."

The rosey vintages passed—cigar smoke enveloped all things in fragrant fog, and everybody appeared to be talking at once. But through all this revelry George Barstone kept unsociably sober and gloomy, and he and the giver of the banquet were the two death's heads at the board. Mr. Lefarge, indeed, became altogether overcome, probably owing to the cigars, which were disgracefully strong, and was quite dissolved in tears at the parting hour.

He wrung George's hand, a trifle unsteady as to his legs, and more than a trifle watery as to his eyes, and called him the companion of his infancy—the playmate of his happy, happy childhood! And unspeakably affected at this point, Mr. Lefarge sank sobbing upon the nearest sofa, and told them to go—to leave him to his miserable fate.

"Depart! depart!" cried Miss Joggins' affianced, with a wild flourish of his arms. "Leave me, I conjure ye! 'Tis but a passing weakness. I'll be myself to-morrow!"

"Faith, I hope so!" said Dick Tompkins, "for you're anything else now. A man more shamefully disguised in liquor I never saw. I wish Miss Joggins saw you this minute—she wouldn't be sleeping with your photograph pressed to her throbbing heart, as I'll take my oath she's doing. Give his legs a hoist, Phil—let us put this sofa pillow under his head—there! He'll do now. Good night, old boy—I think you'll sleep until morning!"

"Sleep! sleep!" murmured Mr. Lefarge, rolling his disheveled head wildly. "Macbeth hath murdered sleep! Good-ni, ole f'ler—gooni!"

And then the earthly troubles of the bridegroom-elect were ended, and he was as sound asleep as a church. And next day, when he presented himself before his Araminta, very, very pale, and with dark halos surrounding his pathetic black eyes, I don't think she would have been quite so tenderly solicitous about his health had she known that marble pallor was altogether owing to those odious—cigars.

Philip Barstone linked his arm within that of his cousin, as they bade the other men good-night.

"I'll walk up to the hotel with you, George," he said. "The night's lovely, and my head won't stand too much of this sort of thing."

The night, or rather the morning, for the longest of the small hours had come, the stars were slowly paling, and a soft west wind cooled their flushed faces. Very solemn and quiet the great turbulent city lay, waiting the birth of the new day.

"Your wife won't sit up for you, of course, George? How is she, by the way? You seemed out of spirits, I fancied, all evening, I trust she hasn't had another attack of—that very disagreeable headache?"

The pause and the significance of his tone pointed a hidden meaning in his words very plainly. George winced under it.

"No," he said; "she did not complain—in fact she said she was quite well."

"You saw her, then, before you left? She was at home?"

George Barstone looked sharply at the speaker; but the speaker's face was quite impassive.

"I was not aware you knew she had been from home," he said; "she was out, certainly. You met her, I suppose?"

"Not exactly; but I saw her—I even heard her. My dear George, who was that fellow she was with?"

Again George looked at his cousin, the red blood rushing hotly, this time, to his face.

"It's all right, of course," Phil continued, not heeding that startled gaze; "but would it not be better for her to receive him at your rooms? He was—I hope I don't offend you, dear old boy—rather a disreputable-looking companion for the street."

"I don't understand, Phil. She—she did not mention being with any one—in fact, I understand her to say she had been alone. The mistake was mine, of course. Where did you see them, and when?"

"About six. It was quite dark—starlight, though—and the place, Fourteenth Street, a block or two beyond the Academy. I was speaking to a friend on his door-step, and it was your wife's voice I recognized first—she has a peculiar voice, George—not loud, but very clear and sweet. And the words were so remarkable that even Fletcher my companion, turned to look after her."

"What did she say?"

That huskiness made George's voice anything but clear and sweet now.

"The words I heard her say were these: 'You may trust me. On the road we are treading there is no turning back. I will keep my vow—I will have my revenge upon Maurice Langley!'"

There was a dead pause. The face of Magdalen's husband, from red, had grown very white.

"We do not hear such tragical words from chance passers-by on the streets every day," Doctor Philip went on. "I recognized the voice, and, as I turned round, they were passing beneath a corner-lamp. I saw your wife's face distinctly. Fletcher laughed at the melodramatic words. 'A very pretty girl,' he said. 'Do you know her, Barstone?' I give you my honor, George, I never was more surprised in my life."

"And the man?" George said, breathing hard.

"A common-looking fellow as ever I saw—quite disreputable, in fact—in a slouched hat and very shabby coat. I could not see his face, though I tried. I got into my carriage and kept them in sight—not from prying curiosity, mind, George, but because—well, because I did not wish to see my cousin's wife there at that hour, and with such a companion. If it were all right (as, no doubt, it is), there would be no harm done; she need never know if any one insulted her. I was on hand to protect her. They parted on the corner of Broadway, and again, with the best of intentions, I was eavesdropper—I heard his parting words."

"What were they?"

"Very strange ones, too. He told her to go to Washington for a week—to make herself as agreeable as possible, and to send him some money—thirty or forty dollars. 'You can find your way back alone, I suppose?' he said to her. 'It won't do for me to be seen with you.'"

"Well?"

The word came hoarsely; that tightening in his throat nearly strangled him.

"George, she said yes. 'I'll send you the money to-morrow,' was her expression. 'I have more than that of my own. I have lingered too long—I should have been back before George's return.' My dear old fellow, I heard her distinctly, and I give you my honor they have troubled me ever since."

"They parted then?"

"They parted—she hurried along Broadway, and he turned down Fourteenth street again. I kept him in sight and followed him to a low street, close by the East River. That is why I arrived so late at Lefarge's. My dear George, for heaven's sake, tell me you understand this, and that it is all right?"

"I understand nothing of it," George answered, his voice harsh with inward pain; "she has told me nothing. But it is easily enough understood—she is once more on the trail of this accursed Maurice Langley! And I thought she would forget that!"

"And this fellow upon whose arm she leaned—who was he?"

George groaned.

"Ah! who was he? I wish I knew! But I will know—she shall tell me! He has been writing her letters, too. I can understand now why she seemed so anxious to be alone to-day. My God! how deceitful these women are! And I could have staked my soul on her integrity! She seemed the truest, the purest, as I thought her the fairest, of all her kind! And now! But I'll find out—she shall tell me! It may be all right—it must be all right! Stay! I have it! Oh, by George! yes, she had a brother!"

"A brother—a convict—ah, yes, I recollect. And he is free from Sing Sing?"

"I don't know; but it must be he! She is insane on the subject of Maurice Langley. But this man you saw her with is her brother. To-morrow I will ask her. She is incapable of a falsehood—she will tell me all."

"Let us hope so. Here is your hotel. I trust I have not done wrong, George, in telling you this; I meant well, at least."

"No, you have not done wrong. I thank you." But George's voice sounded very cold; he did not offer to shake hands. Othello was not over and above grateful to Iago for the good turn he did him. "Good night, Phil."

The cousins parted. Philip walked rapidly away in the direction of Doctor Masterson's, and George was alone under the bleak morning sky.

The dark shadows that precede the coming day lay, black and cold, over the earth; but darker than these, the shadow of a great trouble lay on George Barstone's soul.

CHAPTER XIX.

FANNY'S GOOD FORTUNE.

George did not even make a pretense of sleeping for the few hours that were left him ere the great hotel was astir. He sat in the outer apartment, and smoked, with a most unwonted energy, beside the open window.

What were the bleak blasts of dawn to him? He had something else to think of. The early morning grew rosy red in the east; the first gold and pearly glimmer of the rising sun gilded the spires and cupolas of the Empire City. The crash of wheels over the stony streets had commenced. It was seven o'clock, and all the world of New York was up and doing once more.

Magdalen slept. The night lamp burned dim when George had gone in to look at her once. How pale she was!—how pale!—how pale! And she had grown thin as a shadow in these few days. He had never noticed it before. All her lovely light hair floated over the pillow and half veiled the sweet, slumbering face. The sadness of her waking hours had not followed her into dreamland; a faint smile flickered around the youthful lips. Was that the face of a guilty woman?

George stooped and kissed her softly.

"My darling!" he said, with unutterable love, "when you are false there will be no truth left on earth! You will tell me all when you awake."

So this trusting, new-made husband went back to his cigars—man's best comforter—and waited, with what patience he might, for his wife to arise and appear, and watched, with considerable interest, the sky change from gray to crimson, from crimson to blazing gold, and all the untold glory of sunrise burst forth upon the world.

Mr. Barstone regarded the phenomenon in much surprise and admiration—it was something he did not see every day, you understand.

"Egad!" he thought, "it's better than the transformation scene in the 'Black Crook!' The only drawback is, we haven't to pay for looking at it—if we had, what hosts would be early risers! I don't think I ever saw the sun rise before since Phil and I used to go bird's nesting in Millford woods, or took matutinal cold baths in the Connecticut. Heigho!"

He didn't say "heigho"—I don't think people often do in everyday life—but he sighed a sigh so deep that it is surprising it did not awaken Mrs. Barstone in the next room.

His thoughts went drifting back to those halcyon boyish days, when a grim old preceptor down in Millford used to trounce him soundly for playing truant, and scrawling surreptitious notes to the pretty little girls; for even at that tender age this young man had a weakness for the fair sex. Those blissful boyish days, when his heaviest troubles were assuaged by ten cents to invest in sweets, and the Fourth of July and unlimited fire crackers the summit of earthly joy.

Dark days had come since then—days when Mr. Barstone had been not only as drunk as a lord, but as intoxicated as a prince, if possible—when he had played cards, and shook dice, and knocked about billiards, and, in short, had been a very black sheep, indeed. There had been one misdeed—even darker still—so dark that it made his face tingle, sitting here alone, even to look back upon. He had reformed and repented, and even atoned for that evil time; but its memory always brought a cloud over his fair, frank face, and must to his dying day.

His tempter and mentor had chiefly been his cousin; but never, even in his thoughts, did honest George blame him.

"Perhaps it would be better to tell Magdalen of that scrape of mine," he thought, moodily; "but, hang it, it doesn't concern her at all, and I hate even to think of it. I don't want her to despise me, and, by Jove! I despise myself whenever I recall it."

George's watch pointed to half-past nine before Magdalen made her appearance, looking very pretty in her fresh morning dress. She glanced in surprise at the quiet figure seated at the window.

"You, George!" she said, faintly. "When did you return?"

George arose and kissed her, and led her to a seat upon the sofa. He was unusually grave and gentle this morning—

unusually pale, too, his wife saw.

"At four o'clock, my dear. You were sleeping very peacefully and I would not disturb you."

"And your party? I trust you found it pleasant?"

She remembered Willie's injunction to "make herself agreeable," but that was not why she spoke to him in the old way. It was hard to remember, at all times, that this gentle-hearted gentleman was a cold-blooded seducer and villain—so impossible to realize it at any time. She felt strangely weary and weak, worn out already with the dreary part she had to play. And she loved him a thousand times more dearly, it seemed to her, now that he was lost to her forever.

"The party was pleasant, Magdalen," George answered, "but I felt little pleasure. I was thinking of you, my dearest, alone, and perhaps lonely, here."

He drew her head down on his shoulder, and stroked caressingly the sunshiny tresses. She let it lie, while the slow tears welled up in her closed eyes. He was so inexpressibly dear to her! and he loved her so tenderly! so truly! and in a few short weeks, at most, she must tear herself from him forever.

"Oh, George, George!" she sobbed, suddenly clasping him in her arms, the hysterical sobs choking her voice. "George, —my husband! my darling! how good you are to me, and I—oh, my God! what a lost, lost creature I am!"

George let her cry her trouble out without a word of inquiry or explanation. He stroked the sunny hair he thought so beautiful, and called her softly by tender names, and presently the wild sobbing and raining tears died away, and she lay exhausted and tranquil. Then this long-suffering husband spoke:

"Magdalen, my love, what is it? What is this trouble that has come upon you? Oh, Magdalen, speak and tell me what is this cloud that has come between us? What have I done in the past or in the present to lose your love!"

A daring question surely for Maurice Langley to ask! But Magdalen was too completely done out to feel even indignation at this barefaced audacity.

"Don't ask me, George," she said, with inexpressible weariness. "Nothing, if you like. I am only a weak, foolish girl—and I have had a great deal of trouble in my life. Don't mind me; I am nervous and hysterical, and out of sorts."

"But not without cause. Something new has happened. That is not the old trouble surely; it is something new—something worse."

"Nothing could be worse. Pray, pray, George, don't talk about it. Let me be at rest, if I can!"

At rest! She drew a long heart-sick sigh, and bowed her face lower on his shoulder. That should have been her resting-place for life; but oh! so soon! so soon she must quit it forever. She forgot her sorrow for Laura in her sorrow for the husband who loved and must lose her.

"Dearest Magdalen! dearest love! dearest wife! you know I would not say one word to pain or trouble you. I would give my very life for you, if necessary. But this is something I cannot so easily drop, for more than life is at stake here—honor!"

She lifted her head swiftly and looked at him.

"What do you mean?" she asked, in an altered voice.

"This: Who was that man with whom you were walking along Fourteenth street last night?"

The color rushed in a red tide to her face. She had been seen then! and one of Willie's last injunctions had been:

"Don't let Langley know I am at large; he is so deep, and subtle, and double-dyed a villain that he would slip through my hands like an eel if he found it out. If he ever asks you of me, let him still think I am in Sing Sing."

She drew herself entirely away at the unlooked-for question, that guilty flush hot upon her face.

"Who was he, Magdalen?" George repeated, "this man who writes you letters I may not see—whom you meet by

nightfall in the streets! Who is he?"

"A—a friend—a person I used to know."

"A friend! But why cannot your husband see the letters your masculine friend writes you, and why not receive him here? Any friend of yours will be heartily welcomed by me."

"He—he is poor—very poor—unable to dress as he would like, and ashamed to present himself before you."

"Magdalen," George said, chilled and pained, "are you telling me the truth?—are you not equivocating? Tell me this man's name."

"His name is Johnstone."

It was the alias Willie had assumed since leaving prison, the better to keep up his disguise; but oh, how Magdalen hated herself as she spoke it! How mean, how base, how utterly despicable all this deception seemed!

George's heart sank. It was not her brother, after all.

"Is he a relative?" he asked.

"Yes," Magdalen answered, with angry impatience, rising from her seat; "he is a relative! Are you jealous, George Barstone? You do well—you, of all men alive—to demand that your wife shall be, like Cæsar's, above reproach!"

She laughed bitterly—she was hysterical still, and half wild with pain and grief, and shame.

"And why not I, Magdalen? I am not jealous as yet, though I am not aware of having forfeited the right to be so. I am only grieved that my wife should have secrets from me—vexed that she should give others an opportunity of speaking of her, by meeting disreputable men in the public streets after nightfall."

"Who saw me?" Magdalen demanded. "It was some one at the party. You didn't know when you went out. Your ubiquitous cousin, Phil, perhaps? I have gone nowhere, as yet, that I have not seen him. Ah! I see I am right. How magnanimous of him to play the part of duenna, and hasten to inform you! I disliked him from the first—think of how I must love him now!"

She spoke rapidly and recklessly. Her blood was up and she was equal to anything.

"This man, with whom Doctor Philip Barstone saw me, is, as I said, a relative—a poor one—a disreputable one, if you like; but blood is thicker than water, and when he asked me to see him, I went, and when he asked me for help, I gave it. He will not come here. Disreputable people are sensitive, sometimes, and these outcasts of society have an instinctive repulsion to meeting eminently virtuous and respectable people like yourself and your cousin. I come of a very bad and utterly worthless family, Mr. Barstone, as I think I told you before. A deceived sister, who, I dare say, deserved the fate she met, for trusting a scoundrel and running away from home with him—a convict brother—a gambler, a forger, for whom Sing Sing is too good and, last, but not least, this shabby fellow, who dares not come here and face the gentleman who has married his—relative, or any other honest and upright man—what can you expect of me, coming of such a race? I am afraid you did a very unwise thing in marrying Magdalen Wayne, the governess, Mr. Barstone!"

She was pacing up and down, with the air of a tragedy queen, her eyes flashing, her cheeks aflame, her voice ringing with excitement.

George sat shocked beyond words.

"Magdalen! Magdalen!" he said, "for pity's sake sit down—calm yourself—be reasonable—don't talk and look in that frantic way! I will ask you no more questions—I will wait—I will love you and trust you through everything; and, some day, I know you will come to me of yourself and tell me all."

Magdalen flung up both arms, and tossed her hair back wildly.

"Take me away!" she cried; "take me away from this horrible city—take me away from this great, pitiless, wicked New York, or I shall go mad! Take me to Millford—to Washington—anywhere! Take me away from myself, George Barstone, if you can!"

He drew her to his heart, and soothed her as he might a child.

"You shall go," he answered, "this very day. We will visit Washington, as we had intended, and return from thence home. Calm yourself, my dearest. You have wrought yourself to an insane pitch of nervous excitement. Calm yourself, my dearest girl, and come down with me to breakfast."

And so George's explanation was at an end, and he was not much wiser or better satisfied than before.

Of his wife's integrity he had not the shadow of a doubt. He was not one of those unhappy men, inclined to be jealous. He believed what he had heard—that this mysterious Johnstone was a needy relative—but that did not by any means satisfy him.

It was no agreeable thing to have his wife receiving letters, even from relatives, that he must not see and stealing out for interviews that he must not overhear.

His open, good-tempered face was still sadly overcast as he strolled out, after breakfast, to pay a parting visit to his cousin.

"I can't leave New York without telling Phil it's all right," he thought. "It won't do to leave a wrong impression on his mind in regard to my poor, nervous girl. And I won't stop in this confounded city upon my return. I've not had a day's peace since I entered it."

The stoical boy in buttons, named Samuel, admitted Mr. Barstone, and jerked his head in the direction of Doctor Masterson's breakfast-room, in reply to that gentleman's inquiry for his cousin.

"Just had breakfast—reading the paper now. Half-past eleven and two dozen of patients waiting, savage, in the office; but Lor,' he don't care. Coming! Oh! darn you, can't you wait?" this to the office bell, which kept up a perpetual jingle.

George tapped at the brown panels, and a familiar voice responded:

"If that's you, Samuel, I'll break your head if you come in! I shan't see anybody, I tell you, for twenty minutes yet."

"As it doesn't happen to be Samuel, I'll venture in," said George, entering. "Perhaps you'll do me the honor of seeing me? Doctoring must be pleasant business, and conducive to easy digestion, I should think, if this is the way you spend your mornings. How many hours out of twenty-four do you work, Phil?"

Doctor Philip was seated before the window, lying back in an easy-chair, his legs elevated upon the sill, a cigar in his mouth, the Herald in his hand. He lowered that sheet, and looked resignedly at the intruder.

"Ah, George! how do you do? I wasn't aware it was your habit to call upon people in the middle of the night. I won't say glad to see you, because I'm not, at this hour. Perhaps you'd better find a seat. I haven't half finished the matrimonial advertisements, but pray don't hurry yourself on that account."

"I won't," said George, taking a chair. "Phil, I wouldn't be so infernally lazy as you are for all the gold in Ophir."

"Wouldn't you, dear boy. All a matter of taste. 'Hurry is the devil's', says an Arabian proverb. I am never in a hurry, I am happy to say. And now, as you are here, unfold your errand. Is it professional? If so, you should have gone round to the office with the rest of 'em. Did the lobster salad and claret cup disagree with you last night, and do you want me to prescribe for you? Put out your tongue."

"God forbid!" returned George, in unfeigned horror. "When I want any one to prescribe for me, don't flatter yourself I'll trouble you, Doctor Barstone. Disagree with me! Nothing ever disagreed with me in my life in the way of eating and drinking. No, I came to say good-by. We're off this afternoon, and uncommonly glad I am to shake the dust of your dirty, noisy, stony city, off my feet."

"I dare say New York won't miss you much, and where are you going, may I ask? To the capital of this mighty nation, to finish your month of post-nuptial banishment? Or, are you going to snap your fingers at Mrs. Grundy and boldly return to Millford—to the smoke and the factories, and all the sweet spots which our infancy knew? Hey?"

"I'm going to Washington," said George, "to remain a week—from thence straight home. So, if you want to say adieu to

Mrs. Barstone, you had better call within the next hour and a half."

"I shall call, most certainly. And how is Mrs. Barstone this morning?"

"Very well—that is, pretty well—a little nervous and hysterical, I think. I—that is—she told me about that little affair of last evening, Phil."

"Oh, she did!" Phil said, with a curious side glance. "And it's all right, I suppose. The fellow was her brother?"

"No—not her brother—but a relative, cousin, or something of that sort."

"Not her brother!" Doctor Barstone repeated, slowly. "A cousin, or something of that sort. It strikes me you all informed me Mrs. Barstone had no relatives."

"Well, perhaps we thought so. She has, it seems. This Johnstone has but lately come to New York, and is very poor and won't visit her at the hotel. He asked her to lend him some money for the present, and she has done so."

George made this explanation with a certain angry impatience in his face. It sounded lame and unsatisfactory, and there was a faint, flickering smile around his cousin's mustached lips that exasperated him.

"And his name's Johnstone—and he won't come to the hotel. Dear! dear! how unfortunate your pretty wife is in her relatives. I hope you did not tell her I was your informant, George? But, of course you did. So loyal a husband and wife can by no possibility have any secrets from each other."

"None of your sneers, Phil. I did not tell her. She asked me point blank if it wasn't you, and I suppose my face told her the truth. She doesn't like you, Phil—I can tell you that."

"Unhappy wretch that I am! And my pretty new cousin doesn't like me. Why, I wonder?"

"I don't know," said George, doggedly, with his hands deep in his pants' pockets; "no more does she, but she don't."

"I do not like you, Doctor Fell, the reason why I cannot tell," murmured the young physician. "But I'm not surprised—it's my usual wretched luck. Ah, George, we can't all be born conquerors of the pretty ones, like you! Why, when you were in pinafores, and made mud-pies down in Millford, I remember little girls in pantalettes used to wash your dirty face for you and kiss you afterward. Even at that tender age, my George, you were irresistible."

"Oh, hang it, Phil!" exclaimed George, getting up, "none of your chaff. If you feel like calling to say good-by—call. If you don't, why it makes no difference. Aunt Lydia would like to see you. When shall I say you will be at Golden Willows?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," the doctor answered, in a despondent tone. "Fanny's there, and Fanny's a little too much for me. I'm poor, but honest. I can't afford to marry that girl, and her intentions are a little too pointed. Girls in New York make love to a fellow when they get a chance, but a fellow can break away from them. At Golden Willows I'm alone and unprotected, and Miss Winters shows no quarter. I should like to go back, to throw physic to the dogs for a month or two; but if Fan asks me to marry her, what am I to do? I give you my word that was why I didn't go to the wedding. I can stand her letters (I don't read them), but herself—no! George give Aunt Lydia my best affection, but my peace of mind is dear to me—I can't go."

The last of this mild appeal was murmured to the walls, for George Barstone had seized his hat and departed in disgust.

"Gone!" Phil said, glancing after him, "and there's been an explanation, has there? and the cavalier of last night wasn't the convict brother, after all, but a party by the name of Johnstone. My dear, gullible George!" he laughed softly; "how the silliest girl in her teens can twist these big, learned, wise men around their dear little fingers. Oh, Delilah! oh, Omphale! you flourish yet, and will while this big world wags. I wish I could see the pretty Magdalen's game clearly, but I don't. I wish I could go down east and keep my eye upon her. She's an interesting study, but Fanny's there, as I said to George, and I'll be hanged if I can stand Fanny. Yes, I'll call and say good-by to this blue-eyed, fair-haired divinity of Mr. Hollis' dreams—I want to see her once more. I wish she didn't look so confoundedly like—" Doctor Philip got slowly up and donned his coat, which lay ready brushed upon a chair. "And she doesn't like me, and she doesn't know why. Odd, that!"

Doctor Barstone went blandly in among the waiting patients, and was kept there over an hour. When he drove away from

the house, his first visit was to the St. Nicholas, where he found his cousin's wife alone, writing a letter.

She put the letter out of sight at his entrance, and received him about as cordially as a statue of ice might have done, listening frigidly to his civil speeches and messages for home, and never once deigning to unbend. The call was necessarily of the briefest—even Doctor Philip's assurance could make little headway here.

The letter Magdalen was writing was to Willie, and was without date or signature.

"I enclose you forty dollars," she wrote. "Make it last as long as possible. I have but little more of my own, and in this matter I can never ask G. for money. We were seen last night. I can meet you no more for the present. We leave for Washington to-day. In a week we will be at home. You can either write or come to me there."

Mr. and Mrs. Barstone departed for Washington, and George did his best to keep Magdalen constantly amused with the sights of that city. Magdalen was very quiet; there were no more outbursts; but day by day she grew wanner and thinner, and the smiles that came and went were no more like the old smiles than starlight is to sunlight. She was glad, when the week drew to an end, to get back to Golden Willows. Once there, this wretched trouble must speedily culminate in some way; and anything was better than this life of deception and forced endurance.

On the day of their departure, as they sat at tea in their own apartments—for Magdalen's head ached—a waiter came in with letters—two for Magdalen, one for George. His was from Aunt Lydia, hers from Willie and Fanny Winters.

She opened Willie's recklessly. It contained but three lines.

"DEAR M.—Received money; thanks. Will follow you to G. W. next week, and tell you all—the darkest part of this dark story.

W."

There was an exclamation from George. Magdalen crushed the note in her hand and looked up. He was staring at Miss Barstone's epistle.

"Look at Fanny's letter, Magdalen," he said. "Here's a streak of luck! She's been left a fortune!"

"A fortune?"

"Yes—sixty thousand dollars. Pretty well, I think. A maternal uncle has died out in Sacramento and made her his heiress. Read her letter and you will hear all about it."

Magdalen opened the pink-tinted, highly-perfumed missive; eight closely written pages, crossed and recrossed—"plaid letters," as George called them.

Fanny's delight was boundless; a whole quire of paper would not have held it. Here was romance all at once! She was an heiress! Sixty thousand dollars to do just what you pleased with! "Oh, Magdalen! Magdalen! wasn't it splendid!"

"I am writing to Phil by this post," said the heiress, in a postscript. "Of course he doesn't care, but I must tell him of it. And I'm going to have a lady's maid, Magdalen, to do my hair, and lace my Balmorals, and button my dresses, and wash my hands and face, if I like. And I hope Aunt Lydia's head won't ache until she gets me to consent to have another governess. When a person has sixty thousand dollars to do just what she likes with, she can get along, I hope, without any help from Murray's Grammar or Webster's Dictionary. Won't we have our 'At Home' when you come home? and won't I have diamonds, and moirés, and as many new novels as I like to read? Do—do hurry back! I have fifty thousand things to say to you, and I am your affectionate

"FANNY."

Fanny had written to Phil. At that very hour, in New York, he sat reading her letter. And this is what Fanny wrote:

"DEAREST PHIL:—

"I suppose I ought to be positive, 'dear,' not superlative, 'dearest;' but oh, I'm so happy I can't help it! No, I don't mean that I'm happy—I'm dreadfully unhappy; but I mean that I've had sixty thousand dollars left me by ma's brother,

out in California. Ma's brother is one's uncle, of course; but one can't be dreadful sorry for an uncle one never saw since they were three months old—now can they? Of course I'll go in mourning; and as it's cold weather, and as black becomes me—my dressmaker says—I don't so much mind. But oh, Phil, I'm not one bit happy! People may think that sixty thousand dollars is happiness, but it isn't. Of course, it's very nice, and I'm awful glad to get it; but there's an aching void in my heart that even sixty thousand dollars—and it's a good deal—can't fill. Don't mention this to George. I would never hear the last of his stupid jokes about it. George has no soul! He thinks, because a person has a very good appetite, and grows fat—not that I'm fat, I only measure twenty-eight inches round the waist, and I used to measure thirty—he thinks, George does, a person has no secret trouble. Oh, Phil, I'm so lonely—so lonely, sometimes! I sit up-stairs and weep by myself; and I wonder what you are doing, moving amid the festal throng, I dare say the gayest of the gay, and never thinking once of poor, lonely Fanny! I picture you, Phil, in the whirl of dissipation, in white vest and white kid gloves, looking oh, so pale and handsome—George says you're yellow; but you're not, you know—and flying through the giddy waltz, with some lovely being in your arms! But oh, Phil, don't quite forget your Fanny—think of me sometimes, in the lonely twilight, sitting desolate at my bedroom window, gazing at the peaceful stars and so dreary, and so sad, and so utterly alone in the wide earth! No, indeed! Sixty thousand dollars is very well in its way, and I'm going to have jewels, and splendid dresses, and French confectionery, and travel over the world; but it cannot restore peace to an aching heart! And if you want money, Phil, you may have it all—yes, every cent—and I'll do without the dresses and things, more than repaid by a smile and a 'Thank you, Fan!' And by and by, when you marry, Phil, some tall, dark, handsome, haughty, beautiful lady, not a bit like me, you'll ask me to come and see you, won't you? And you'll keep a little, tiny corner of your heart, in spite of your beautiful wife, for your loving and lonely (though people may think her fortunate) cousin.

FANNY."

"P. S.—Do come down to Golden Willows soon, Phil, and make us a long visit. Why need you kill yourself with horrid hard work, there in New York, when we all want you here so much? Ah, do come, please! I want to see you awfully!

F. W."

Philip Barstone read this letter over very slowly, then deliberately twisted it up, held it over the gas, and lit his cigar.

"The die is cast!" said Doctor Masterson's assistant, puffing away. "Fortune has befriended me at last. Sixty thousand dollars bequeathed to that girl! I'll go down to Golden Willows, court her, and marry her out of hand, and leave the country forever. Aching void in her heart, indeed! We'll set that all right before long, Miss Fanny Winters!"

CHAPTER XX.

"AND YET MY DAYS GO ON, GO ON."

The Ides of February had come. It was the third of the month, very late in the afternoon, when Miss Fanny Winters drove, in the family sleigh, down to the Millford Station, to wait for the 6.50 train. She drove through the starry twilight, as in a triumphant chariot, to bring the bride and bridegroom home.

Miss Winters was elaborately got up in white fur and black velvet, and with her rosy cheeks glowing, and her rather small eyes sparkling, looked quite pretty enough, in herself, to attract the attention of sundry young Millford gentlemen, hanging about the depot, without any aid from a recent fortune. But the news had spread, and Miss Winters and her lucky windfall had created no small sensation in her native town; and those young men flocked around the heiress, and vied with each other in paying her court. This was the realization of Fanny's dreams. This was life! This was bliss! To be surrounded by half a dozen of the best-looking young men in the town, ready to blow each other's brains out for the favor of her smile.

And I am bound to say Miss Winters, for a young lady with a secret sorrow upon her, showered those smiles radiantly right and left, and made herself indiscriminately delightful. Had she been a beauty, she would have been the veriest flirt that ever tormented mankind. As she providentially was not, she made the most of her new accession to power now.

The train came thundering into the gas-lighted station, and the passengers began flocking out. Miss Winters, on the arm of the most devoted of her new-found worshipers, advanced eagerly to meet Magdalen. She did not care in the least to see George. She entertained rather a feeling of contempt for that legal gentleman, who yawned horribly when she tried to read aloud the "Princess," and told her to "stop that rot," when she quoted copiously from the "Revolt of Islam." But to the properly constituted female mind, a bride is the most interesting of earthly objects, except a new bonnet or a new baby, and Fanny pressed excitedly through the throng to fling herself in Magdalen's arms.

"I say, look out, Miss Winters," her conductor exclaimed, "or you'll get trodden down in this crush. Now, then, you old kangaroo, what do you mean by elbowing a young lady in that fashion," and here the offender's hat was tilted angrily over his nose. "Oh, here they are at last!"

"Is that other gentleman one of 'em, Fanny? He looks enough like George to be a long-lost brother."

Fanny uttered a shriek—a shriek of pure joy.

"It's Phil!" she cried, "it's Phil! Oh! Mr. Howard, do let us get through this crowd."

She never once looked at Magdalen now. Was not that tall, sallow, dark-eyed young man standing there, and was not the dull, half-lighted little station turned into glorified, sunlit Elysian fields all at once for this girl in love.

Doctor Philip Barstone had sent no intimation of his intended visit, and had surprised his relatives by walking into the steamer, at the foot of Canal street, upon the evening of their return from Washington, and announcing his intention of returning to Millford with them. It was he who first spied the eager, panting, wildly excited little heiress now.

"There's Fan," he said, coolly, "battling frantically to get at us. This way, George—don't you see her?"

A second later and he was beside her.

With a cry of irrepressible ecstasy, Fannie flung herself into his arms and kissed him on the spot. Was he not a sort of cousin, fourteen or fifteen times removed, and was it not a proper and commendable thing to kiss one's cousin?

"Oh, Phil! Phil! how glad I am to see you! Oh, I thought you would come—I thought you wouldn't forget us altogether. Oh, what a surprise this is, and how glad Aunt Lydia will be!"

"Faith, I think so, if she's half as glad as her niece," said George, coming forward, with Magdalen on his arm. "I say, don't eat Phil alive, and spare a few of your embraces, if possible, for other acquaintances."

Miss Winters flung herself, in a second outburst, into the arms of Magdalen. For the speaker, he was unworthy of notice. Some small boys near grinned, as these small sardonic wretches will, while Mr. Howard stood scowling and forgotten

in the background.

"I thought I should have the trouble of courting her before I married her," reflected Philip Barstone, who had taken Fannie's raptures with constitutional calm. "But, dear, unsophisticated child of nature! I have only to keep quiet and she'll do it herself."

Magdalen smiled as she kissed Fanny—smiled in spite of herself. And that happiest of little heiresses hurried them toward the sleigh, clinging to her beloved Phil's arm.

"You can drive, George—I have ten thousand things to say to Phil," said Miss Winters, skipping nimbly into the back seat and making place for Phil beside her. "And to think I never thought you would come. Oh, Phil! how nice it is of you to come home."

Doctor Phil assented, complacently. It was very nice of him, but then he was a nice sort of person altogether, George took the reins, and away they flew through the starlit night.

"How dear to my heart are the scenes of my childhood," drawled Doctor Philip, "when fond recollections—what's the rest, Fanny? Poetry's rather in your line, isn't it! Would you object to my smoking a mild cigar?"

Object! Not she, indeed! If this sallow young man had required her to smoke a mild cigar herself, she might have made faces over it, but she would have done it or died. Object, not at all!

"Ah, no! I dare say you wouldn't," Philip replied, "but Mrs. Barstone is in the front seat, and she might. Do you know, Fan, she has the bad taste not to like yours truly?"

"Not like you! Not like you, Phil!"

Fanny laughed in utter incredulity. Did that monster, in the shape of woman, really exist who could dislike this pale-faced demi-god by her side?

"If she has told you that, Phil, she does not mean it. I always said to her, if she had seen you she would not marry George."

"My dear little complimentary Fanny! Miss Magdalen Wayne might have lived and died a maiden, to the end of the chapter, for me. No, Miss Winters, there's another pretty little girl whom I like, and whom I think likes me, and I don't want to break her heart. Your tall, flashing-eyed, majestic Junos may suit some men, but not your humble servant. Give me," said Doctor Philip, looking lazily at his breathless little companion, "something plump and petite, 'a creature not too bright and good, for human nature's daily food.' There's more poetry for you, Fanny. By Jove! I didn't think there was so much in me. It must be this nice moonlight and your inspiring presence that does it. I always think you have about the chastest article, as the dry goods gentlemen praise it, in the way of moonlight here that I ever saw."

"Oh, Phil!" Fanny cried. "And you really are—there really is—I mean there is some one you—oh, Phil! there is some one up in New York, after all?"

"Several some ones, my dear young lady. Will you pardon the dullness of my intellect if I tell you I really don't quite comprehend your highly intelligible remark?"

"I mean," said Fanny, in a trembling little voice, looking piteously out at the moonlight and the snow drifts; "I mean, of course. Doctor Barstone, there is a—a young person in New York to whom—to whom"—with a gulp—"you are engaged?"

"Engaged?" repeated Phil, enjoying poor Fanny's misery, as those male monsters will; "well—yes. To a young person—no; I'm engaged to Doctor James Masterson, of that ilk, to return from here in two months; but you can hardly call him a 'young person,' I opine. He was seventy-five last birthday, and his frosty pow, like the notorious Mr. John Anderson's, is like the snow. I'm engaged to him, if you like, but perhaps that wasn't what you were alluding to?"

"Now, Phil," cried Miss Winters, indignantly, her heart beginning to beat again, poor child, "how can you? Not that I care, of course—oh, no! You may marry fifty young ladies, if you like, and I shan't object."

"Shouldn't you? But I'm afraid the law would, my dear. Fifty young ladies! What a delicious idea! But then one would

have to emigrate to Utah. And besides that, I know one young lady who will satisfy every desire of my heart just at present."

"Where?" cried the tormented Fanny; "that's what I meant! Who is she?"

"The dearest little girl in the world, Fanny."

"Little, is she? Do you like little women, Phil? She is taller than I am, of course?"

"By no means, my dear; just your size."

"And she lives in New York, of course?"

"There's 'of course,' again! No, she doesn't. She lives in the country."

"In the country!"—oh, how Fanny's heart was plunging inside her velvet basque!—"somewhere out of New York?"

"Decidedly out of New York. So far out, that it's in—" a dreadful pause.

"Oh, Phil, where?" cried Fanny, half wild with hope deferred.

"Well, then, in—Connecticut."

"Phil!"

"In Millford. Now, Miss Winters, you're such a clever guesser, tell me who she is. Begin with the factory girls, and go on through with them first."

"Oh, Phil, tell me! Oh, Phil, I'm dying to know!"

"So I see. I wish I had kept count of the 'oh, Phils!' since we sat down. They would have been interesting to remember. Well, Fanny—" his arm went easily around her waist, and his blond mustache came very near the round, red cheek in the moonlight, "she's a dear little thing, as I told you before, and I'm very fond of her—uncommonly fond of her, for that matter—and her name is—oh, Fanny! Fanny! can't you guess?"

He drew her toward him and then—but no! I dare say you have been in a sleigh yourself, some moonlight night, with somebody beside you, and you know better than I can tell you.

There was another "Oh, Phil!"—almost a sob, this time, of intense ecstasy. The poor child's face was glorified in the ivory light. She loved him, and she had got him at last. And the married pair in the front seat, if you'll believe me, neither heard nor saw nor dreamed.

"Egad!" thought Phil Barstone, "if this isn't striking while the iron's hot, with a vengeance! Did I do it, or did she? I didn't think there was so much energy and determination in me. What the deuce will Aunt Lydia say?"

Aunt Lydia would not be best pleased, that was certain. She was very fond of her medical nephew; but she knew what that nephew's past life had been, which was more than Fanny did, and would have hesitated before intrusting the happiness of any one she wished well to his keeping. Even Fanny, I think, fond and foolish as it is in the nature of silly eighteen in love to be, would have drawn back from his side in horror, to-night, had she known all that lay in that dark record of the past.

"I hope Fan won't go and tell I've proposed, as soon as we get to the house," he thought. "It's going a leetle too fast, even for me. I don't think she can construe a kiss into a proposal of marriage, and I haven't said, plump, 'Miss Winters, will you be my wife?' Why the deuce need I care, though? The little idiot would go through fire and water, if I told her—would jump into Willow pond yonder, if I said 'Go'—and her consent is all that is necessary, I take it. I hope the Sacramento uncle hasn't tied up the money in any absurd way! For the rest, Fan's of age, and would run away with me to-morrow, if I said 'Come!'"

And then a memory of the past—a memory of another girl, as young and far fairer, who had left father and friends and home, to follow him, when he said, "Come!" obtruded itself sharply and suddenly. He looked at the white face of George Barstone's wife, gleaming through the pearly night as if cut in marble.

"What the devil makes me think of her at this time?" he thought, with an inward oath. "She would have died just the same if I had left her—died because I left her. Great heaven, if I could only forget those two dead women! They have haunted me since I saw the pale face of this girl in the seat there, as they never haunted me before. I'll marry Fanny, and go to Paris, and never return. Surely one may find the waters of Lethe in that far distant city. The sooner I look my last upon Magdalen Barstone's marble face the better."

They reached Golden Willows—the dear old homestead brightly lighted up, and sending a streaming welcome far over the snow.

George threw open the front door and led Magdalen in.

"Welcome!" he said, "to Golden Willows, my own dear wife."

Her heart swelled; she could not speak. The drawing-room door stood wide and Aunt Lydia, in satin gown and lace cap, sat there in her great chair, a happy smile of greeting on her sweet, calm face.

"Welcome home, my children," she said. "What! Phil, too! My dear boy! what a surprise! My dear Magdalen! my dear daughter! I am heartily glad to get you back, Golden Willows is not itself when your sunny face is absent."

She held her to her and kissed her fondly. Magdalen's face dropped, without a word, on her breast.

"Let me look at you," Aunt Lydia said. "Let me see how New York and Washington have agreed with you. Why, Magdalen!"

For the first time she had full view of the girl's face—that fair face, so sadly changed in one brief month—so wan, so thin.

"Why, my darling, what is this? You are gone to a shadow. It is not possible you have been ill?"

"Ill? Oh, no, except for an occasional headache. Traveling disagrees with me, I suppose. Just now I feel fagged to death."

She strove to speak lightly—to look like herself—before this patient, gentle woman, whose life had been so full of suffering. But Lydia Barstone's clear, earnest eyes saw through that bootless effort. She glanced at George. Dark on his face lay the shadow of trouble, too.

"So soon!" Aunt Lydia thought, with a sigh—"so soon! and I hoped—I was sure they would have been so happy. What can it be? Oh, the trail of the serpent surely overlies all that is best on earth!"

"I declare, Magdalen, you have grown thin," cried Fanny, waking out of the egotism of her own great bliss to the worn change in her governess' face; "and I'm sure you didn't need it. If it had been me, now! But it's always the way—everybody can get thin but me. And that reminds me—I'm pretty nearly starved, and we have oysters and cold turkey, and jellies and chocolate for tea. Come up-stairs, Magdalen, and let us take off our things. I don't know how it may be with you, but I never was so hungry in my life."

Miss Winters danced away up-stairs, to add a few more adornments to an already florid toilet, in honor of Phil's arrival.

Magdalen went wearily to her own rooms. How pretty they were in their bright new furniture—cheerily the fire blazed. How cozy and homelike and pleasant it all was. There were the pictures she liked, the draperies she had fancied, the carpets she had chosen, the little soft nests of rocking chairs, the tall mirrors, the gleaming statuettes. How pretty and tasteful it all was—how happy she had thought to be. And now! She turned away from it, sick at heart. What did the loss of all these pleasant and pretty things signify, since she had lost the husband she loved?

"And I am so young!" she thought, with a dreary despair, "and likely to live so long! A month ago I would have thought death a dreadful thing, but how much worse than a thousand deaths is such trouble as this!"

A tidy, smiling housemaid came in to assist her unpack and dress. She changed her traveling costume for a trailing evening robe of bright blue, and against its deep tints her gold hair gleamed, and her neck and arms shone like snow.

Miss Winters, quite gorgeous in mauve silk, with the winding train so dear to her heart, rosebuds and ribbons in her hair,

and necklace and bracelets and ear-rings of sparkling stones, flashing splendidly in the lamplight.

"I don't suppose they're real, you know, Magdalen," Fanny said, alluding to her jewels, "because I got them down in Millford, and the whole set only cost thirty dollars; but they're awful pretty, I think, and glitter lovely. Dear me! how pale you are! I wish I could look pale and interesting; but I can't. I suppose it's on account of my appetite, and it's of no use drinking vinegar! I've tried it and it only makes me sick, and doesn't do one particle of good. Don't tell Aunt Lydia; but she can't understand why the vinegar cruets are always empty. Do let's hurry down to supper."

The cosy dining-room of Golden Willows looked a very pleasant and cheerful apartment, its bright anthracite fire, its mellow lamplight, flooding the snowily-draped table, all a-sparkle with old silver and fragile china, and groaning, if tables ever do groan, with fragrant creature comforts.

Aunt Lydia presided and Fanny chatted about her wonderful good fortune, and Phil came out of his constitutional indolence and talked as he could talk when he chose. A stranger passing without and glancing in at that picture might have thought, "What a happy family party!" And yet black care stood grimly behind more than one chair back, and a skeleton grinned under the festal roses. Perhaps, of the five persons there gathered, Fanny Winters was the only one really happy.

Magdalen went to the piano, after supper, at Aunt Lydia's request, and her devoted husband sat near and watched—as he never wearied of watching—that pale, lovely face, and drank in the music those slender fingers evoked. It was melancholy music, too, in which the passionate pain of the girl's heart breathed.

She sang the plaintive little ballad Fanny had sung on her wedding eve, a weird pathos in the faintly sighing words:

I note the flow of the weary years,
Like the flow of this flowing river;
But dead in my heart are its hopes and fears
Forever and forever.
For never a light in the distance gleams
No eye looks out for the rover.
Oh, sweet be your sleep, love—sweet be your dreams—
Under the blossoming clover
The sweet-scented, bee-haunted clover!

Her voice died away almost like a sob.

The pair in the distant corner paused in their billing and cooing, and Aunt Lydia looked at the singer in pale anxiety.

"My dear," she said, "you have chosen a mournful song, and your singing is sadder than weeping. I think Fanny will have to come and give us one of her rattling polkas to dispel our melancholy."

"I am very comfortable where I am, thank you, Aunt Lydia," Fanny retorted, nestling a little more comfortably beside Phil, "and I don't feel in the least melancholy. Play us some German waltzes, Magdalen, and don't be so dreadfully dismal, if the honeymoon is over."

The heiress kept her idol by her side during the whole of the evening and did her best, in feminine fashion, to wring a proposal out of him.

"He as good as told me he was in love with me, in the sleigh," she thought, "but still he didn't say plump, 'Fanny, will you marry me?' I wish he would—I'm sure I don't see why he don't. It isn't for want of encouragement, goodness knows!"

Which it certainly was not; but all the young lady's hints and ingenuity could not induce Doctor Barstone to come to the point that first evening.

"I see your drift perfectly well, my dear," he said to himself, "but it won't do. If there's to be a proposal to-night, you must make it yourself. Aunt Lydia and George will know well enough, no matter when it comes, that it's your sixty thousand dollars I'm marrying; still, let's go in for decent delay if we can. There's no especial need for hurry—I'm not likely to lose you, I fancy. You shall wait a couple of weeks at least."

Miss Winters went to her room disappointed that night.

The two young men lingered after the ladies had left them to smoke a cigar under the frosty stars.

"What the deuce is the matter with your wife, George?" the doctor said, abruptly; "that pale, melancholy face—those mournful songs! She has some trouble on her mind and she'll do herself mischief brooding over it. I suppose it's that unpleasant business of Maurice Langley?"

"I suppose it is, hang him!" George answered, with a groan. "I ought to be the happiest and I'm the most miserable beggar alive! I believe that Johnstone is at the bottom of it, too. She had a note from him the day we left Washington."

"Ah, she had? You didn't see it, I suppose?"

"No. She refused in New York to show me his letters, and I could not ask again."

"It's a bad business, old boy," Phil said, "when a wife receives letters from other men, and won't show them to her husband. It's a blue lookout for the future happiness of the pair. Supposing the trouble is concerning this fellow Langley, why should she not take you into her confidence as she voluntarily did before you were married? How have you forfeited her trust in you?"

"How, indeed? Heaven knows! These women are inscrutable, Phil. Before we were married Magdalen Wayne seemed as open as the day—frank, truthful, trusting, confiding—everything woman should be. And now—and now a gulf yawns between us that I cannot cross. I have won her only to lose her. She is up yonder, but she might as well be a thousand miles away—she could not be further. I tell you, Phil, there are times when this mystery and secrecy nearly drive me mad!"

"It will drive her mad, if she doesn't take care," Doctor Barstone answered, coolly; "let her brood perpetually on this subject—let her nurse her morbid melancholy—her Quixotic scheme of vengeance—and she'll bring up in Bedlam before she knows it. I don't want to alarm you needlessly, my dear George, but I tell you your wife's mind is in a bad way."

George removed his cigar and looked at the speaker in horror.

"It's quite true," the physician said, nodding gravely: "she'll become a monomaniac, as sure as we both stand here, if she keeps on like this. She'll fancy, by and by, every strange man she meets is Maurice Langley. I shouldn't in the least wonder if she accused you or me one of these days. Take care of your wife, George—that's my advice to you. Let's go in—the night's a nipper. And, sound sleeper as you are, I don't think you'll sleep over above soundly to-night," he added, mentally, with a grim sort of satisfaction as, night lamp in hand, he sought his old room. "If she only keeps quiet until I have married Fanny and left the country, I shall be eternally obliged to her. I hate a scene as I hate—and, by George! what a scene there would be if the truth ever came out! I'll propose to Fanny, in due form, in a week, and marry her, and sail for Europe before the end of March. She'd marry me to-morrow, if I asked her."

The week of probation went by as all weeks go, long or short; and perhaps, under his placid exterior, Doctor Philip was as impatient as Miss Winters herself to bring the courtship to a head. Fanny chafed and lost her temper and pouted and sulked and made up again; but through it all Philip Barstone smoked serenely and walked with her by moonlight alone, and drove her about and listened to her songs and chatter, and was faithful to his word. He did not propose until the time he had appointed, and, perhaps, Fanny never counted a longer week than that week of waiting, in all her future life.

But the days were long and the impatience of another waiter more intense than her own. It was a period of almost unendurable suspense to Magdalen. Why did not Willie write? Why did he not come? How could he leave her, with her terrible secret, so long? She longed for the end to come—the bitter end—anything was better than the life she led now. That end came very soon.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LULL BEFORE THE STORM.

Philip Barstone had been eight days at Golden Willows and Philip Barstone had not proposed. I think Miss Winters had some right to be aggrieved. Miss Winters was aggrieved—annoyed—indignant. When a gentleman puts his arm around your waist in a sleigh the first time he meets you and kisses you and says, "Oh, Fanny! Fanny! Fanny!" in that tone—well, he ought to have intentions, you know. But the long days went by—terribly long to two young ladies in that house—and the long evenings passed and still that obstinate young doctor from New York had not said, "Miss Winters, will you do me the honor to become my wife?"

He escorted her, with the politeness of a Chesterfield, to and from Millford, and made a martyr of himself by doing so; for, being an indolent young man, he hated walking, while a saunter of six miles or so was nothing to his energetic little companion.

He drove her about the country in that dear little shell-shaped sleigh; he stood by the piano when she played and sang, and victimized himself again, for he was fastidious and hypercritical in musical matters, and Fanny's discordant chords set his nerves on edge fifty times a day.

He lay at full length upon the sofas, on cold, blustering days, and read her Tennyson and Owen Meredith; he paid her compliments; he gave her his picture; he improved her waltzing; he did everything, in fact, but what she wanted him to do—come to the point.

Life had gone back very much to its old routine at Golden Willows. George was immersed in business which had accumulated during his absence, and spent his days, from early morning, and sometimes late into the night, at Millford. He bore his trouble with a brave patience—it was a case in which he could do nothing but wait.

Time might dispel the mysterious cloud that had come between him and the wife he loved. He would give her time, not harass her with questions; in the peace and calm of their pleasant home this abnormal state of things would not last. He was very tender and gentle and loving—more than he had been even in the sunny days of his wooing—and there was a yearning, wistful light in the eyes that sought hers every evening upon his return. He hoped for some sudden change—some sudden transition to her old self—but what he looked for did not come. He found her, evening after evening, as he had left her in the morning—very quiet, very pale—with a sort of haggard weariness in the large gray eyes.

"I will hear from Willie to-day," was Magdalen's first waking thought each morning.

But the days passed, as days of trouble and heart-break do, somehow, and she had not heard.

"I will have a letter to-morrow," was her reflection each night.

Oh, those dreary, lonely nights when she lay stark awake—thinking—thinking—until madness would have been a relief! No wonder she awoke haggard and hollow-eyed each morning.

The girlish bloom and brightness had all faded—the old glad sparkle had left the dark eyes—the golden light had faded from the yellow hair. Stately and fair she still was; but the face was like a face carved in marble, and the faint smile that came and went at rare intervals was cold as the pallid starlight glittering on snow.

"Why does he not write—why does he not come?" she cried out, inwardly, in sudden wild paroxysms of pain; "another week of this horrible waiting will kill me!"

You see, if you or I, my brother, were going to be hanged, we would like the day to dawn, and the knot fixed under our left ear, and the cap pulled down, and the signal given, and the unpleasant little operation over as soon as might be. To have died there, loving and beloved, with George kneeling in white despair by her bedside, would have been bliss in comparison with what must come soon; but it must come, and the sooner the fatal hour was over the better.

The family at Golden Willows watched the new-make bride and saw, clearly enough, she was in some great trouble. Aunt Lydia looked at the wan young face and sad, sad eyes in wistful wonder and great sorrow.

"What can it be?" she thought. "Is it George's fault? Surely no—George is all mortal man can be—faithful, loving, gentle. It is that old trouble renewed again—that foolish vow, which I hoped she would forget! It is no groundless, girlish sentimentality, whatever it may be, and George is fretting himself to a shadow."

She spoke to the young man one evening. He had come into her room upon his return, as he always did, to ask how she was, and as he leaned, tired and despondent, against the mantel, staring gloomily into the fire, Aunt Lydia's heart ached for her boy.

"George, my dear," she said, "I want to speak to you about Magdalen. What is this that has come between you—that has changed her so? She left here a happy, blooming bride—she comes back a pale, worn, wretched woman. What is this?"

George groaned. There were times when his trouble seemed almost more than he could bear.

"Heaven knows—I don't! I would give half the years I have to live to comprehend the mystery—to win back my wife's love!"

"You have not lost that?"

"I have lost that—she as good as told me so in New York. There are times when I think she hates me—and I—I would die for her!"

He stopped suddenly. I think, in the flickering firelight, the water gleamed in his eyes.

"My George! my boy!" Aunt Lydia said, with all a mother's yearning love in her face. "It is hard on you, and yet I know Magdalen loves you as dearly as ever. We women can read one another's hearts. She loves you as dearly as she did the day she married you; but I believe she must think you have wronged her in some way. I wish you would tell me how and when this change occurred—I might see through it more clearly."

George told her. There was not much to tell. They had returned from Mrs. Moreland's party as happy and united a husband and wife as New York held. He had gone to sleep in the gray of the dawn, and when he awoke, late in the afternoon, the change that puzzled and mystified them all was there. What had happened in the interval he could not tell; but she had never been like herself since.

"How strange," Miss Barstone said, thoughtfully, "very strange! Magdalen is not secretive naturally—the last, I believe, who would make an unnecessary mystery. Has she given you no inkling whatever of the truth?"

"Well—yes. Not from her, however, did the inkling come; you remember, perhaps, that rash and melodramatic vow of vengeance against the man who wronged her sister—Maurice Langley? In some way or other I believe she connects me with that wretched business. I believe she has found him or thinks she has."

"Connects you with that most miserable affair? My dear George!"

"I don't know—I think so—how else account for this sullen silence and estrangement? And there is a fellow in New York—a distant relative, she told me, named Johnstone—who writes to her and whom she met one evening, on the street. Phil saw them together. Whoever this Johnstone may be, I believe he is the cause of all this trouble."

"Have you seen his letters?"

"No; she refused to show them. That is the worst of it. I would not betray my wife even to you, Aunt Lydia, but Phil knows, and—and I ought to have no secrets from you, who have been more to me than a mother. I wish you would speak to her—she always loved you, and to you she seems still unchanged. Who knows? She is impulsive—in one of those impulsive moods she may tell you what all this wretched mystery, that is driving me half mad, means. It would be easier, I think, to lose my darling by death—mine still, as on my wedding day—than to lose her in life like this!"

Again silence fell. The speaker's voice was husky and not to be trusted too far. Aunt Lydia's heart yearned over her boy; she could have taken him in her arms, as in his childhood, and comforted him in his grief. But demonstration was not in her way—her voice was very quiet when she spoke.

"I will speak to her, George. I believe she will tell me. Keep up heart—trust in God—all will yet be well."

Aunt and nephew parted. George descended, feeling a little more happy after this confidential talk. Hope came easily to sanguine George, and he knew very little medium between the sunlit summit of hope and the black depths of despair. He was on the top of one, or the bottom of the other, at a moment's notice.

Magdalen sat at the piano, playing softly, between the lights, slow, melancholy music of Mozart's. The February wind whistled in shrill gusts around the gables, the trees writhed against the low, leaden sky.

The red coal fire lit up the room with a dull, lurid glow, now leaving the figure at the piano in darkness, now lighting it up with a sudden fiery leap. By the window, talking softly, sat Miss Winters and Doctor Barstone—the young lady splendid of attire, as usual, and ceaseless of tongue.

"Here comes our Darby, to hang devotedly over the chair of his Joan. Do you know, Fanny, it strikes me Joan is in the sulks, and has been ever since I knew her? Perhaps it's her normal state, however; or do you think some old flame of George's turned up in New York and that she's jealous? George was on the verge of madness about at least eight different young ladies in that city, some years ago."

"I don't know, I'm sure," Fanny responded. "She seems dreadfully unhappy about something, and she keeps away from George as much as possible, and looks at him sometimes in the strangest way. I should like to ask her what's the matter; but, somehow, I can't. She isn't the sort of person one can say everything one likes to. She can keep one off when she chooses. And she used to be very fond of George, too, though I'm sure I don't see how she could like any one who laughs so loud and never reads anything but stupid law books, and smokes nasty black pipes, and has large hands and feet! I don't think it can be his fault, because it's quite ridiculous the way he goes on about her. I wish anybody would be half as fond of me!" said the heiress of sixty thousand dollars, with a deep sigh. "I should not treat them in the scornful manner she treats him! But nobody ever will. I'm not tall and beautiful, like Mrs. George Barstone, and nobody cares for little dumpy people, with white eyelashes and freckles, let them be ever so amiable. If I were married I wouldn't behave toward my husband as Magdalen behaves to hers!"

"No, my dear; I don't think you would. She has never dropped you a hint, then, what all this mysterious gloom means?"

"Not a word, though I've given her hints enough on the subject, goodness knows! It's all no use, however. She never pays the least attention. But, of course, that's to be expected. Who ever pays any attention to Fanny?"

"My dear child, I do! I pay you the most marked attention. What would you have?"

Miss Winters looked up eagerly, expectant. She knew very well what she would have.

"You don't care for me, Phil—you know you don't! You said you did the night you came, and I—I believed you, you know, because I always was a goose. If I was tall and had a waist like a wasp and yellow hair and a pale face, you might admire me. Magdalen has, and you admire her. I'm sure you're always looking at her when she doesn't see you, and listening when she talks and sings, and speaking to her when she'll speak to you (which isn't often). I do believe, Phil Barstone, you're half in love with your cousin's wife!"

Miss Winters' eyes flashed through the twilight. This little thorn had been rankling in her breast for the past four days, and she felt considerably better now that she had it out.

"My dear little Fanny," Phil said, rather surprised at the young lady's sharp-sightedness, "and you're a victim to the green-eyed monster! My dear, you do me too much honor; but I assure you, on the word of a gentleman and a moral young physician, I am not in love with George's wife or any other man's wife. And I told you before I didn't affect tall women nor pale yellow hair, nor big, gray, solemn eyes. Lord Byron might hate dumpy women—he did, you remember—but nobody pays any attention to him or his sayings nowadays. And it's of no use saying nobody cares for you, because I care for you very much—so much, my dear little darling Fanny"—here Doctor Philip possessed himself of one chubby palm—"that life without you will be a waste and howling wilderness. Fanny, I idolize you! Might I—may I—dare I ask you to be my wife?"

At last—at last it had come! Fanny barely repressed a scream of delight; but George and Magdalen were over there, and she only gave one gasp—one gasp of pure joy—and said:

"Oh, Phil!"

"Yes; I think I have heard you make that remark before. I adore you, Fanny! I worship you—upon my word and honor, I do! Say—oh say, dearest, you will be mine?"

The last sentence sounded rather Lord Mortimerish. Phil had a vague idea that he had read it somewhere.

Fanny gave another gasp, and would have plumped into his arms, but Phil caught her other pudgy palm and held her off.

"No, don't, Fan; they'll see you, and we're not making love on the stage, where spectators are allowed. Just say, 'I'll marry you Phil,' and make my earthly happiness complete."

"Oh, Phil! I love you with all my heart! I've loved you—oh, this ever so long! And, do you know, I thought you didn't care for me. I thought you would marry some beautiful young lady up in New York and then I should have died—yes, Phil, I may be fleshy, but fleshy people die sometimes—and I know I should have died of a broken heart. And now I'm so glad—oh, so glad—and I'll never snub you, as Magdalen snubs George; and I'm awfully thankful I've got sixty thousand dollars. If I had twice sixty you should have it, every cent. And if you hadn't asked me, I would have lived and died an old maid; and you know, Phil, it's not nice to be an old maid, if one can help oneself, and I've had lots of beaux ever since I've had my legacy—real nice fellows, too, down in Millford—and I needn't be an old maid, if I liked. But I wouldn't listen to them for a minute, because I loved you. And we'll go away, won't we, Phil?—and travel everywhere, and enjoy ourselves, and oh, Phil! Phil! I'm just the happiest girl alive!"

And here Miss Winters was growing hysterical, and there is no telling how the scene might have ended, but for the timely entrance of a housemaid with lamps.

Phil drew a long breath of relief.

"Thank God!" he said, inwardly. "I thought she was going to fall into my arms on the spot. If I don't take a little of this gushing out of you when we're married, my name's not Barstone."

There was a loud knock at the house door. It was a relief to escape from Fanny, and Doctor Philip sprang up and answered the summons.

The postman from Millford stood before him, with a letter in his hand.

"Mrs. Magdalen Barstone," he said, and gave the letter and departed.

The young doctor took it into the drawing-room. It was addressed in a masculine hand, with a big, conspicuous buff envelope.

"For you, Mrs. Barstone," he said, handing it to her, at the piano, superscription uppermost.

George still stood behind her chair. He saw that well-known writing, and his heart turned sick within him.

"From Johnstone again," he thought. "Will these letters never cease?"

Magdalen turned very white as she took the letter.

"Thanks!" she said, hurriedly, as she arose, and at once left the room.

There was an awkward little pause. Even Fanny, in the blind egotism of her own great joy, saw that something very serious was wrong. The two cousins looked at each other, and both knew and understood as well as though they had spoken.

And up-stairs in her chamber George's wife had torn open her letter and read, by the flickering firelight, down upon her knees;

"MILLFORD, Feb. 12.

"DEAR MAGDALEN:—

"I arrived this afternoon. I am stopping at Freeman's boarding house, 33 River Street. I must see you to-morrow, without fail. It is time you knew the worst. You shall know it when next we meet: and prepare yourself for

something a great deal more dreadful than anything you know at present. Drop a line in the Millford post-office, early to-morrow, telling me when and where to meet you. I'll hang about the office all day. Don't fail.

WILLIE."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE OLD MILL BY THE RIVER.

Miss Barstone sat alone in her chamber, musing before the fire, ere she went to bed for the night. It was after ten—long past her usual time—but her conversation with George had banished all present desire for sleep. She sat in her great chair before the grate, musing, with a troubled face, as to how she should broach the subject to Magdalen; for Magdalen was proud and high-spirited, she knew, gentle as she had hitherto found her, and would make no confidant, even of her, unless the wish was her own.

"If, as George says, it is some new trouble about Maurice Langley, why should she make a mystery of it now, when she told the whole story before her marriage? And how on earth can she connect George with it? Poor George! Poor tender-hearted fellow! He deserves better fortune than that. And I thought they would have been so happy."

There was a tap at the door.

"If you're not asleep, Aunt Lydia," an imploring little voice said, "may I come in, please?"

"Come in, Fanny," Miss Barstone answered. And Fanny, in a loose, white morning gown, came in, her abundant red-brown hair falling in a perfumed cloud over her shoulders.

Fanny's eyes were like stars, and Fanny's cheeks like roses, and little, blissful smiles came and went of themselves about her dimpled mouth. For once in a way great happiness had made the little heiress almost beautiful.

"My child, something has happened—something pleasant!" Aunt Lydia said. "What is it? Anything about Magdalen?"

"Anything about Magdalen!" Fanny retorted, with a pout. "No—you're always thinking of Magdalen, all of you. No, it's something about myself."

She slid down in a heap on the carpet at Miss Barstone's side, and buried her hot face in the old maid's dress.

"Oh, Aunt Lydia, I'm so happy, so happy, so happy, I can't sleep. I can't keep still; and I must tell some one, or I shall die. Magdalen is cross and dismal, and has been shut up in her room all the evening, ever since her letter came; so I've come to tell you I'm just the happiest girl in all the world, Aunt Lydia!"

The truth broke upon Miss Barstone. Fanny's infatuation about her medical nephew was no secret to her, but hitherto she had troubled herself little about it. Phil was not a marrying man at any time; and if he had been, little freckled and dumpy Fanny would have been about the last young lady he would have chosen. But Fanny had sixty thousand dollars in her own right now, and the whole case was altered.

"It is Phil," Aunt Lydia said. "Surely, surely, Fanny, he has not——"

"But he has!" Fanny cried. "And oh, Aunt Lydia, I love him so! I love him so! I feel just wild to-night! I am so glad I've got that fortune, because I don't believe he would ever have spoken, but for that."

"Neither do I," said Aunt Lydia, rather shortly. "He ought to be ashamed of himself! Not a week here, either. I thought better of Phil. A mere fortune-hunter! It is a shame! a shame! a shame!"

"It's nothing of the sort!" Miss Winters retorted, spiritedly. "I tell you I love him so well that I should break my heart if he married anybody else! I wish I had sixty millions, instead of sixty thousand, so he might have it all! Oh, auntie! He spoke so beautiful! He said he knew he was unworthy; that he loved me too well to ask me to be his wife while I was poor, for was he not poor, too? and that the whole aim of his life should be to make me happy. And he asked me when I would marry him, and I said just as soon as ever he liked."

"You said that?"

"Of course I did! It was the truth, you know. And we are going to be married early in March, and sail right away for Europe. Won't that be lovely? And oh, I feel as though I were in heaven, not on earth! And he is an angel—don't you say a word against him, Aunt Lydia—he is—and I worship the very ground he walks on! I left him out smoking with George,

now, and I had to come in and tell you, because I couldn't keep it till morning. And now you want to go to bed, dear, darling auntie, so I'll run away and send Susan. I wish you were as happy as I am, but I know it's of no use wishing that. No one on earth could be! Good night, Aunt Lydia, and please wish me joy."

"God bless you, my poor child!" Aunt Lydia said, with a happy sigh. "I hope—I hope you may be happy!"

"Hope she might be happy!" Miss Winters smiled to herself at the thought, and little thrills of song burst from her lips as she tripped away to her own room. She heard Phil and George saying good night and departing to their rooms, and all her heart thrilled at the sound of her idol's voice.

"Oh, my darling! my darling!" she whispered. "I wish it was morning, that I might be with you again!"

There was more than one head that tossed upon a sleepless pillow that night. Aunt Lydia's slumbers were hardly likely to be sweetened by her ward's communication. She happened to know a little more of her nephew Phil's antecedents than Fanny did, and that little was by no means reassuring.

And George—the soundest of sleepers in a general way—found that mysterious letter from Mr. Johnstone which his wife had received that evening anything but an opiate. She had not returned to the drawing-room, and he and Phil had had their smoke and talk out under the black night sky; but neither had alluded, ever so remotely, to that letter.

Perhaps the only two who did sleep were the newly betrothed. Doctor Philip rarely excited himself about anything, and his last waking thoughts were not of Fanny, but of Magdalen.

"The postmark was Millford. So he has followed her here," he mused. "He will be wanting to meet her somewhere—for, of course, he won't come to the house. I'll keep my eyes upon you, Mrs. Barstone, and when you meet Mr. Johnstone I'll endeavor to be there also. Deuce take the fellow! I wish they had kept him in Sing Sing another month or so, until I was safely married and out of the country."

The next morning, ere Doctor Barstone had left his apartment, there came a message from his aunt. "Miss Barstone's compliments, please, and would he step up to her room after breakfast?"

Phil sent an affirmative answer, of course. He understood the whole matter at once.

"Fanny's been telling already. What a hurry she was in! However, it had to be gone through with, and as well sooner as later."

His betrothed was in the breakfast-room, when he entered, waiting for him, with oh! such a radiant face! The February morning was raw and leaden and black, and bitter, but the girl's happy face seemed to fill the room with sunshine.

Poor little Fanny! George was there, reading a crackling morning paper, and George's wife sat beside the coffee urn, waiting to preside, and, in the faces of those two people, Doctor Barstone went over and openly kissed Fanny!

"Good morning, my dear!" he said languidly; "really you are growing prettier every day! Look at those peony cheeks, my dear Mrs. Barstone, and those sparkling eyes, and all those smiles and dimples, and get the recipe. It freshens up an old stager like myself only to look at you."

"The recipe is happiness!" Fanny cried, delightedly; "and Magdalen ought to have it, for isn't she a bride, just completing the honeymoon? They say brides are always happy; but I am sure they can never be half so happy as I am!"

There was rather an awkward little pause. Mrs. Barstone went steadily on with the business of pouring out coffee. Mr. Barstone gazed steadily into his roll and Doctor Barstone inwardly enjoyed their discomfiture.

"I am afraid it is going to be a snow storm," Fanny continued; "and I wanted so much to go to Millford this morning. I shall go in any case. You'll drive me down, won't you, Phil?"

Phil professed his readiness, and, breakfast over, went at once to his aunt's room.

He found her much as Fanny had found her last night—sitting dejectedly over the fire.

"Good morning, aunt. I trust I find you well to-day. You wished to see me, I believe."

"Yes—come in, Phil—sit down. It's about this wretched affair of Fanny's."

"Wretched affair? I don't understand. Has Fanny come to grief in any way?"

"She is likely to, I think. It's not possible, Phil, you really have asked her to be your wife!"

"Oh!" said Doctor Phil, "that's the 'wretched affair,' to which you allude, is it? My good aunt, it is quite possible. I asked Miss Winters last night to marry me, and Miss Winters said yes upon the spot."

There was a certain quiet defiance in his tone—a certain latent glitter in his hazel eyes that Aunt Lydia had often seen there in his boyhood when he meant mischief. It warned her that entreaty or reproach would be equally thrown away now.

"You are marrying her for her fortune, of course?" she said quietly.

"My dear lady, no—not at all. Really, such plain speaking is barbarous. By no means! I am very much attached to Miss Winters, I assure you. She is an amiable little person, I believe, as it is in the nature of little girls with light eyes and freckles to be. At the same time, men, as a rule, don't marry young ladies because they are freckled and amiable; and though, as I said before, I am deeply attached to Miss Winters, still, perhaps, I might not have proposed upon the present occasion had there not been sixty thousand dollars in the background."

"Phil! Phil! have you no sense of honor? It is base! It is cruel! It is inhuman! And this unfortunate child loves you so!"

"Exactly; and this unfortunate child will consider herself more unfortunate if I don't marry her. Have I no sense of honor? My dear aunt, it is purest philanthropy to make her my wife. She will break her heart (she says so, at least, though looked at professionally, the statement is absurd) if she doesn't."

"Philip, I cannot countenance this match!"

"My good lady, I haven't asked you, have I? Miss Winters is of age—her fortune is her own—she is ready to run away with me to-morrow if I ask her. I am an eminently respectable young man now, and mean to get married in an eminently respectable manner. My good aunt, look at it rationally. If I don't marry Fanny for her money, some one else will. She isn't a beauty—isn't a genius—she's a dreadful little bore as a rule; and whoever marries her will have an eye to the main chance, guard her as you please. I mean to be very good to her when she is Mrs. Philip Barstone; and I think, even if I weren't very good to her, this love-sick little girl would still be happy as my wife. I must be a fascinating fellow, no doubt, to——"

"Oh, Phil!" his aunt cried, in a pained voice, "don't! How heartless, how cynical, how worldly you have grown! There was a time when you had some affection and respect for me."

"That time is yet," her nephew answered. "You are the only woman on earth whom I do respect very greatly; but still, in this matter, you will permit me to judge for myself. Look here, Aunt Lydia, George was always your favorite nephew; as a boy he possessed the larger share of your affection, and plum cakes and taffy and pocket money. As a man you like him about ten times as well as you do me. Well, so be it. I don't make a howling over it. He deserved it! He was always the good boy of the family, and I the black sheep. He slipped once, perhaps, but he picked himself up very quickly, and I think you were rather fonder of your repentant prodigal than ever, weren't you? George has married, with your full approbation, a tall, stately young lady, without a penny to bless herself with, who comes to you under a false name, and whose relatives, so far as we can hear of them, are about as bad a lot as you will easily find. Your favorite, George, marries her, I say, with your free consent, and now that I wish to marry your ward, you will approve or not as you see fit; but—I shall marry her all the same."

The gleam in his brown eyes, the hard compression of his mustached mouth, were very familiar to Aunt Lydia.

"I have nothing more to say," she answered, quietly. "If George has been my favorite, you know whose fault it has been also."

"Mine, of course. Have I not said so? Have I not owned to being the black sheep of the flock? I don't complain. You are quite right, as you always are; only I hope you will permit Fanny to be married from Golden Willows, and outwardly, at least, with your approbation."

Miss Barstone bent her head. There was a pause. Her earnest eyes were fixed upon her nephew's cold, hard, handsome face, in which no sign of softening came.

"I want to ask you a question, Phil," she said, with hesitation—"a question which, perhaps, you won't like."

"Better leave it unasked, then, my dear aunt."

"It is concerning your—your wife."

Philip Barstone turned upon her almost fiercely.

"My wife!" he said. "What wife? I have no wife!"

"I mean your late wife. Where did she die, Philip—and of what?"

The gray darkness that, at rare times, overshadowed the young man's sallow face, overshadowed it now.

"What do you mean by speaking of her?" he demanded, with a suppressed intensity. "George had to bring up her name in New York, and now you do. What do either of you wish to learn about her? Is it not sufficient to know she is dead, without dragging her out of her grave upon every occasion. I tell you I won't have it! She died in Bellevue Hospital—there! I have seen her grave. Will that satisfy you? Now, let's drop the subject at once, and forever."

He took out his handkerchief and wiped his face, upon which great drops stood.

Miss Barstone sat looking at him in mute amaze.

"I beg your pardon for this violence," he said, after a moment, "but I hate to look back—I hate to think of that horrible time. Do you suppose it can be pleasant to recall the mad folly of a mad and reckless youth? I am doing my best of late years to lead the sort of life I wish to heaven I had led always, and I want to forget the rash folly of past years, if I can. You haven't spoken to Fanny of—of this, surely?"

"Do you think I should not speak of it?" his aunt asked, gravely, "or has she not the right to know?"

"She has no right to know; it can in no wise affect her. I deny that any man's wife has any concern with his past. Let him be faithful to her; the most exacting wife can require no more. I don't suppose George has taken Magdalen into his confidence about that little lapse of his, past and gone. He says, and rightly, it is nothing to her. No more it is; no more is my past to Fanny. No, Aunt Lydia, I refuse giving my permission to inform her of this. She would be none the happier for knowing, and now, as I am going with her to Millford, I will take my leave, if you have quite finished what you sent for me to say."

Doctor Philip's haste, however, was by no means upon Fanny's account. He had determined to watch Magdalen closely, something more than curiosity to gratify being at stake here. It was past ten, by his watch, as he descended the stairs and encountered Fanny in the lower hall, gazing at the dull prospect without.

"Oh, you have made your escape!" Miss Winters said, advancing to meet him. "I thought Aunt Lydia meant to keep you with her all day. What was it about? About me?"

"Well, yes—I believe your name was mentioned. I thought you wanted to go to Millford—why are you not dressed? Go—hurry up, like a good girl. I want to run in myself for a fresh supply of cigars. Get Mrs. Barstone to help you titivate. She is up in her room, I suppose?"

"No, she isn't; she's taken the cutter and driven herself into Millford. She said she wanted to visit her dressmaker, but I know she is going to post a letter, because it dropped from her pocket as she pulled her handkerchief out. I suppose she's been writing an answer to that letter she got last night—to her old nurse, most likely. But she said she would be back by eleven, at latest; so come into the breakfast-room and let's have a nice sociable talk."

Philip Barstone thought a moment and followed her. He would have given a good deal for a glance at that letter George's wife had gone to post. We, more fortunate, can break the seal and peep in. There was no date or signature.

"Half mile from your boarding house, on the bank of the river, there stands an old, disused sawmill. The spot is lonely; there is no house near, and no one approaches it after nightfall, as, like all disused places of the sort, it is popularly

supposed to be haunted, I will be there this evening, at six o'clock, if possible."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THAT NIGHT.

Mrs. Barstone, true to her promise, returned to Golden Willows ere eleven o'clock, and Miss Winters and her lover departed for the town.

"She will not quit the house in our absence," Phil thought. "She will not leave Aunt Lydia alone, and she cannot very well receive him here, in broad day. To-night will be the earliest time she can possibly meet him."

Doctor Philip, therefore, departed in very good spirits. All things were settled now. Nothing remained but to marry Fanny and go abroad and forget all the little unpleasantness of bygone days in fair foreign lands. He followed his affianced, with a ready good nature George could not have surpassed, from one dry goods store to the other, toning down her gaudy fancies and correcting her gorgeous taste by his own grave one. They lunched at a saloon and the wintry afternoon was at its coldest and grayest ere they returned home, the little sleigh quite freighted with parcels.

"There's George," exclaimed Fanny. "What on earth brings him home at this hour?"

Mr. Barstone, since his return, never made his appearance at Golden Willows from eight o'clock breakfast until the six o'clock dinner. He was kept very busy at Millford, and mostly dropped into some restaurant there for a mid-day meal. Now, however, at four in the afternoon, he was standing on the door-step, drawing on his gloves.

"Something new, this, isn't it?" Phil said. "We don't often see you at this time of the day! What brings you up?"

"Client of mine dying, has sent for me to make his will. I've made it five times before and every time he's got better and changed his mind. Now he's dying again, or thinks so, and I must draw up a sixth. He lives fifteen miles out of Millford, so I shall have to remain all night. Now, Peter, my man, as I want to catch the 4.20 train, jump in and drive as if the deuce was after you. By-by, all, until to-morrow."

He sprang in and was driven away, his last backward glance directed to the drawing-room window, where a quiet figure sat. But the quiet figure never moved nor answered that farewell look. She was only thinking:

"Is he really going, or does he suspect, and is it only a ruse to watch me?"

Fanny burst in upon her reverie, with her innumerable parcels, and a glory of dry goods was at once unfolded for Magdalen's inspection.

The time had been—and not so long ago—when Magdalen would have had all a woman's keen interest in such things—when the hue of a ribbon, the shade of a silk, the pattern and texture of the laces, would have absorbed her most vivid attention. But that time was past, and, divided from the present by a dark and heavy trouble, the happy girl sat, a haggard and wretched woman. She beheld blue silk and pink silk, and green silk spread on the carpet, in vague splendor of coloring; but the hopeless eyes never lit up, and the words that answered Fanny's raptures were very brief and indifferent.

"I declare it's too bad!" Fanny cried at last, losing all patience, and gathering up the rich textures in a heap; "I don't know what's come to you, Magdalen! You're not a bit like you used to be. I'll fetch them up to Aunt Lydia—she'll take a little interest in me and my wedding clothes, perhaps? If marriage changes everybody for the worse as it has done you, married ladies must be nice people to live with! You've grown fifteen years older in five weeks, and I don't believe it's George's fault, either; because it's quite ridiculous the way he goes on about you! Perhaps you met some old lover in New York, and are breaking your heart for him now that it's too late?"

Magdalen smiled faintly, but the smile faded as quick as it came.

"I beg your pardon, Fanny," she said. "The dresses are very pretty, and I wish you every happiness. My—my troublesome headache is back again. While you show the things to Miss Barstone I will go up to my room."

She arose slowly, leaving the doctor alone in the drawing-room, with his book, over the top of which he had been steadfastly regarding her. She lingered for a moment in the hall, looking out through the side lights at the rapidly

darkening sky.

It was hardly five, but already almost night. The sky lay low and leaden, the bleak wind tossed the bare trees. Moonless, starless, the night was falling, and already a few feathery flakes whirled through the opaque air, prescient of the coming storm.

As she lingered there, Peter drove rapidly up from the gate. She opened the door and spoke to him.

"Peter!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Was Mr. Barstone in time for the train?"

"Plenty time, ma'am—ten minutes too soon."

"You saw him off, then?"

"Yes, ma'am," Peter answered, and the girl drew a long breath of relief.

It was no ruse after all; he had really gone.

"It is three miles from here to the old mill," she thought. "If I start at once, I will be there before the appointed time. But the storm is increasing, and Willie will be in waiting, I know."

She went up to her room, put on her warmest jacket and a Berlin hood, and took an umbrella.

"If I can only leave the house unseen?" she thought.

She opened her door, and paused to listen. All was still. In Miss Barstone's room she could hear Fanny's shrill voice. She was safe there, and Doctor Phil was probably absorbed in his book. She went swiftly and lightly down-stairs, and standing where she had stood five minutes before was Doctor Phil!

"We are about to have the heaviest snow-storm of the winter. What! my dear Mrs. Barstone—not surely going out?"

"I am going out," Magdalen answered, curtly. "A walk will do my headache good."

She hated herself for the falsehood she told—she hated the man who made her tell it—not but that her head did seem to ache with a dull, perpetual pain, of late.

"But in this rising storm?—and see how it increases every instant! My dear Magdalen, what would George say?"

The man was always odious to her—doubly odious when he called her by her name. Her eyes quite flashed in the twilight as they met his sinister hazel orbs.

"He would say I was free to do as I pleased—as I shall!"

With that reply, she opened the house door and walked rapidly out into the whirling storm.

Doctor Philip looked after her until the falling snow and deepening darkness hid her tall, slim, graceful figure from his sight.

"You are going to meet Mr. Johnstone, my dear Magdalen, and, as the cousin of your husband, it is my duty to protect you, even against your own will. If you can brave this storm, I dare say I can; though, upon my soul I had much rather you had chosen a finer night!"

He took down his hat and overcoat, drew on his gloves, and taking a stout walking stick of George's, opened the door in turn, and was plunging resolutely out into the storm, when Fanny's high voice accosted him from the head of the stairs.

"Phil! Phil! where on earth are you going this time of evening? Don't you know it's snowing cats and dogs?—and dinner will be ready in half an hour!"

"Oh, confound you!" muttered Fanny's betrothed, between his set teeth. "The Old Harry seems to send that girl always in

my way! I'll tell her, however. Here Fan! look here a moment."

Fanny came down in a rush.

"I say, Fanny," her lover said, in a confidential undertone, "I am going after George's wife. She has left the house, dressed for a walk, mind, at this hour, and in this storm alone. A person who does such a thing as that is worth watching. I'm going after her, to see she comes to no harm. If you're hungry, dine with Aunt Lydia—don't wait for me."

He gave Fanny no time to reply—he departed at once. And Fanny, agape with wonder and consternation, went straight back to Miss Barstone's room and imparted to her the tidings.

"Magdalen must be going crazy, I think," she said to the alarmed mistress of the house. "Nobody in their senses ever went on as she goes on. She used to be fond of George—now she can't bear him. She used to laugh and talk with him, and say funny things, and be lovely about the house—now she mopes like an old owl in the daylight. She won't even look at my new dresses, and she never once asked me how many bridesmaids I mean to have, or whether my wedding-dress was to be white moire, or white satin, or white cotton cloth. Do you suppose she can have some old lover she's pining after, Aunt Lydia?"

"Nonsense, Fanny! how dare you suggest such a wicked thing!"

"Oh, it's wicked, is it? to suggest it only. And Magdalen's perfection, of course—she wouldn't do a wicked thing. Now, suppose I went out into the garden to-night, and met a strange man there, and kissed him, and walked with him, and came in and never told Phil or nobody, what would you call that?"

Miss Winters spoke defiantly, tossing her red-brown head. She had kept Magdalen's secret a long time; now it was out, after all.

"What do you mean, Fanny?" Miss Barstone demanded, sternly. "Magdalen never did this."

"Oh, didn't she? I suppose I didn't see her from my bedroom window, either! It was just before she married George—when you were ill, you know, and she did meet a man, and she did kiss him, and she did walk with him in the garden for half an hour, and I never spoke of it before to a creature. Maybe she told George but——"

Miss Winters pursed up her lips in a way that showed she didn't believe it.

Miss Barstone extorted from Fanny all Fanny had to tell of that memorable night. And while Fanny told, the unhappy culprit herself was speeding rapidly through the double darkness of night and storm to the place of tryst.

The road was very lonely—the darkness intense; but Magdalen knew it well.

How often, in the first days of her arrival at Golden Willows, she had strolled away with Fanny to sketch the picturesque old mill, the flowing, rapid river. The cold was bitter, but she was warmly clad; she never felt it. The icy wind sent the frozen snow sharply into her face, but she flew on before it almost as swiftly as the wind itself. It gave Doctor Philip, coming after her with his long, man's strides, enough to do to keep her in sight. The falling snow muffled their footsteps; his keen eyes could just discern, athwart the white darkness of the snow-storm, the rapidly moving figure ahead. It haunted him, that weird night scene, for many a day to come. The roar of the angry river blended with the shrieking of the wind at last. The lights of Millford gleamed lurid through the whirling drifts; the great factories all ablaze, their tall chimneys vomiting black smoke and showers of fiery sparks. Turning from these, Magdalen took the deserted pathway leading down to the river. The old mill loomed up black in the luminous darkness. The way that led to it was slippery and dangerous; but she plunged resolutely ahead, pausing only when very near its yawning entrance.

"Willie!" she called.

"Hallo?" answered a voice.

The same instant a figure emerged from the doorway and stood before her. The figure held a dark lantern, and its red ray illuminated the face of Willie Allward.

"I am here, you see, Magdalen, though I didn't think you would come in this confounded storm. You're a trump, by George!—plucky enough for anything. Give us a hold of your hand—look out—it's dangerous—this way. I suppose

you're about frozen."

"Frozen! No, I have felt no cold. For pity's sake, Willie, put that lantern out of sight—some one may pass."

"Well, if they do, it will only help to convince them that the old mill is haunted." Willie set the lantern in a corner. "No one can see it now, and this is a horrible place and such a horrible night. Sit down. How did you manage to get off at all in such a tempest?"

"I came—I asked no one's permission. George is absent for the night, fortunately, though had he not been, I would have still kept my word and came."

"What a brick you are, Magdalen!" Willie repeated admiringly. "It's a pity you're not a man. And you'll require all your pluck, I can tell you, to hear the story you'll hear to-night."

"I can bear it. There is nothing you can tell I cannot bear now."

"Ah, you think so, but this is the worst yet! I tell you there isn't such another villain on God's earth as the man you have married."

"Will you go on?"

She had seated herself upon a pile of old lumber, her hands clasped hard on her lap, her large luminous eyes fixed upon the blackness beyond. The dull red glimmer of the lamp in the corner lighted up her cold, rigid face, while Willie's was shaded. And through the ruinous old mill the wild wind of the winter night shrieked, and above its cries came the roar of the river, swollen and rapid. A fitting scene, a fitting time, for the story Willie Allward had to tell.

Slowly, stealthily, surely, the man who had dogged Magdalen from the house dogged her to the very entrance of that old mill. He stood boldly in the dark doorway now, leaning against the rotting beams, seeing the girl's white face, and straining every nerve to catch the words Willie Allward spoke above the uproar of the storm.



CHAPTER XXIV.

TOLD IN THE DARKNESS.

"Before you left New York, Magdalen," Willie Allward began, "I told you what you had to hear was worse than anything you had heard yet. I say so still. It is infinitely worse. Are you fully prepared for what I am going to say?"

"And, I repeat, it cannot be worse," Magdalen's voice answered out of the pitch blackness. "Nothing can—nothing—no, not if he had committed a murder with his own hand!"

"You have guessed it!" her brother said, with unusual solemnity. "He has committed a murder—a horrible murder—a double murder, in intention, at least. Good God, Magdalen! what a fiend incarnate he is!—a man who has murdered his own child—who thinks he has murdered his wife!"

"His wife?"

"His wife! Oh, heaven help you, Magdalen Allward! you have never been that for one poor hour, since the wife he wedded six years ago still lives! You are what your sister was before you—betrayed, dishonored, wrecked in reputation as well as in happiness! You have never, for one instant, been really Maurice Langley's wife!"

A low, wailing cry broke through the darkness and the storm. At last she knew he had spoken the truth. She had not known the worst.

"Perhaps I should have told you all about this in New York; but I knew if I did you would have left him at once, and our game would have been up. He is the most subtle, the most infernally cunning, as he is the most deeply-dyed of earthly villains. And, besides, I wanted to consult Caroline."

"Caroline!" The voice of his wretched sister spoke out of the darkness once more—so hollow, so hoarse, he scarcely recognized it. "She is the wife?"

"She is. Her name is Caroline Reed, and she's at present waiting my summons to come down here and confront the murderer of her child. But I will begin the story at once. The cold is bitter. You will perish if I keep you here."

Magdalen laughed—a blood-curdling laugh. The listener in the doorway shuddered as he heard it. The words he was far too distant to catch through the turmoil of the storm.

"Cold!" she said. "I wonder what cold or heat would affect me now! Yes, Willie, begin the story you have to tell. Let me hear what a vile wretch I am, and how low I have fallen!"

"You have Laura's letter," Willie began, hastily, drawing nearer. "Rachel told me of that; and in that letter she has told you, of course, how an anonymous note first informed her she was not Maurice Langley's wife; that his wife lived, and was ready to prove the validity of her claim. Laura may have suspected before. Langley was never sober in those days, and when very drunk used to babble like an idiot—his own secrets, and all. She ran away that very night, as you know, returned to the poor, deserted homestead, and died there. All this you know?"

"Yes," Magdalen's hollow voice said.

"It was the next day—rather, the next night—before the news reached me, and then not through Langley, you may be sure. I was waiting for him in a well-known gambling hell, wild to retrieve my losses and save myself from arrest for forgery—for the fatal deed that has ruined my life had been already done, through his instigation—when Burns, another gambler, and drunkard, and profligate and heretofore the closest crony of Langley swaggered up to me as I stood sullenly alone.

"I say, Allward," he said, with a tipsy wink, "how's our Damon, our Jonathan, the friend of our bosom, our well-beloved Maurice, to-night, eh? Not got here yet, hey?"

"I growled out surlily that I had not seen him. I was in no mood for idle talk, and I had always felt an aversion to this man.

"Burns laughed, a diabolical gleam of malice in his little green eyes.

"I'm afraid our Maurice has been out of sorts to-day, and I think I've my revenge for all the insults I've put up with from him lately. The fat's in the fire; the cat's out of the bag: the little party from the country has vamoosed the ranch.'

"What do you mean, you drunken vagabond?' I cried, savagely.

"I knew he was not aware Laura was my sister. I knew, too, that she was 'the little party from the country,' of whom he spoke.

"Drunkard, am I? vagabond, am I?' he replied, insolently. 'I am not a forger, at least. You see it's "kiss and tell" with our dear Maurice. You know the pretty little girl from down East Langley's had with him the past eight months? Think she's his wife—poor little green gooseberry! His wife, indeed! Ha, ha! I wonder how many such wives he's had? Now, Allward, you may know what an ungrateful brute the beggar is, when I tell you I played parson for him that time, and did it so well that the little person from New Hampshire never once suspected the truth. She found it out last night, though, and made off at that minute, by George! Spunky little Yankee girl, wasn't she?'

"I shook the beast off. He had one filthy paw on my shoulder, and his reeking breath blew in my face.

"Faugh!' I said. 'Keep your distance, you sot, and tell me what you mean?'

"If you weren't a blockhead you wouldn't need to ask, but the verdancy of the clover and the hay fields sticks to you, my daisy! Don't you know the party in Green street? You've been there with Langley. He's fleeced you there more than once.'

"Yes, yes! What of her?'

"Run away, my lad—cut her lucky—left Langley in the lurch. Not that he cares. He was sick of her before the end of the honeymoon. Honeymoon! Ha! ha! I wonder how many honeymoons he's had?'

"Why did she leave him?' I said, in an agony. 'You scoundrel! do you mean to say the marriage was a sham one, and that you performed it?'

"Yes, my daisy. You've guessed it. I married 'em, and a neater knot was never tied. But Langley insulted me last week—threw a decanter at my head, by Jupiter! and I swore I'd be revenged. So I hunted up Caroline—Caroline is his wife, you understand—married two years ago, by a regular white choker, and got a kid nine months old—very image of its fascinating papa. I found out Caroline, as I told you—horrid little hole over in Brooklyn—and told her the whole story of the little party from New Hampshire. Lor'! how rough she cut up! These here wimmin beat the doose. Now there was that girl, Caroline. Langley hadn't done a blessed thing for her for a year—never been near her, you may say—left her to starve with the kid—and she bore it all like a what-you-may-call-'em, an angel, and treated him like a dook, sir, when he did come. But, Lor' bless you! no sooner does she hear he's got another wife, than she carries out and goes on most awful—was for flying over to New York that minute, and tearing Missy Laura's eyes out. I cooled her down presently, got her to write a note to wife No. 2, and dropped it in the post for her. Little New Hampshire received it, and there was the devil to pay when Maurice came home. It was the middle of the night: but what's the middle of the night to a young woman when she gets her back up? Poor Maurice is a widower to-day. Ha! ha! ha! that's why you don't see him.'

"He was swaggering away, with a drunken wink and leer, but I caught him and held him fast. I believe I was half choked with rage and fear for Laura.

"You beast!' I cried, 'stand still, or I'll throttle you! Tell me where Laura has gone?'

"Don't know, Allward. 'Pon my word I don't. I say don't tear a man's coat, and don't glare in that insane fashion. What the deuce was little missy to you?'

"She was my sister, you cold-blooded wretch! By heavens! if you weren't drunk as a fool and old enough to be my father, I'd strangle you where you stand. Tell me, you hoary reprobate, where I'll find Langley, or I shall be tempted to do it yet.'

"I had the strength of a giant—boy though I was—the feeble old drunkard was a child in my grasp.

"I don't know, Willie,' he whimpered, 's'elp me if I do. Let go—there's a good fellow. Perhaps he's gone to Brooklyn to blow up Caroline.'

"Give me her address this moment,' I said, 'or—'

"Yes, yes, here it is. Let go, Allward! How the dickens was I to know that missy was anything to you. I say, let go!"

"He gave me the woman's address, and I released him. Not upon him should vengeance be wreaked. If I had met Langley that night, I would have had his life.

"I started for Brooklyn at once. The street was one of the poorest and most remote; the house, when I found it, little better than a hovel, standing apart in some swampy land. It was almost two o'clock when I came upon it; but a light still gleamed from its wretched windows. All was still around. The other houses up the street were distant and dark. I drew close to the door and heard the voice of Langley distinctly. He spoke loudly and recklessly, as he always did when intoxicated, and a female voice answered him, passionate and defiant:

"'I've borne starvation, and brutality, and desertion from you, Maurice Langley!' I heard her cry. 'I tell you I will not bear this! Yes, I wrote that letter, and Burns told me the marriage was of his own making. Oh, you villain! You villain, why did I not die before I ever saw your wicked, false face! False! doubly, trebly false! False in name, for your name is— (the name I could not catch). False to the aunt who loves and believes in you? But I will expose you—I will hunt her out—I will tell her all—I will——'

"She never finished the sentence. An imprecation, so horrible that I cannot repeat it, broke from Langley. I sprang to the window, and dashed it in; but too late. There was a shriek—a crash—another and another. He had lifted the heavy wooden chair upon which he sat, a huge, old-fashioned hardwood chair, and struck her down, with that tremendous oath. Her child was in her arms. It gave one cry—no more—as mother and child went crashing down. The first blow had fractured its skull. Twice he dashed the heavy chair upon them as they lay. Before it fell the third time, the smashing of the casement and my cry for help reached him. He dropped the chair, threw open an opposite window, leaped out into the darkness and disappeared."

Willie Allward paused. Cold as the night was, great drops stood on his face as he recalled that horrible scene. He tried to see his listener's face, as it gleamed like marble through the gloom.

"You are listening, Magdalen?" he said, chilled by her unnatural quiet.

"I listen—go on."

"My shout had reached a policeman's ear. He sprang his rattle, and was by my side as we leaped into the room. Child and mother lay weltering in blood—the child stone dead—its brains dashed out; the mother still faintly breathing. The little cottage filled as if by magic—a dozen men started in pursuit of the murderer, but he had doubled like a hare in the darkness. The search was fruitless.

"The woman could speak. She clasped her dead child to her, and looked up at me as I stooped and whispered the name of Maurice Langley.

"'He has done this,' I said; 'denounce him before it is too late.'

"'No,' she said, or rather whispered; 'I will never denounce him! He was mad with rage and liquor—the fault was mine. Let him go. I only want to die.'

"She fainted clear away as she finished. I tell you, Magdalen, it was a blood-curdling sight—the dead child, the dying mother. Many there knew her—her name, they said, was Mrs. Reed, a decent sort of person, who went out washing for herself and child. She had a husband, somewhere, who once in a rare while came to see her. That was all that was known.

"They took her to Bellevue Hospital, and the story was in the papers, and search was made for the murderer, but all in vain. They did not even know his name—it was supposed to be Reed. I called the next day at the hospital and saw the nurse who had care of Caroline. She was still alive, the nurse said, but sinking fast. I gave the woman five dollars, and asked her to do what she could for the unfortunate patient. I wanted to see her, but that was refused. I never went again, for on that day came my arrest, imprisonment, trial and sentence, and four years at Sing Sing.

"Why did I not denounce Langley then and tell all I knew? Because that would not have been half revenge! Langley was

in safe hiding, somewhere; if denounced, he would fly the country, and, perhaps, escape punishment altogether. And Burns, who would have proven against him, was dead—had been stabbed on that very night in the gambling hell, in a brawl. I waited, Magdalen—I bided my time. 'I will serve my term out,' I thought, 'and then for you, Mr. Maurice Langley!'

"Laura's death reached me—it was only another item added to the long reckoning. I went to prison and served my four years—four years of infinite, endless misery, and came out to find—what? to find Maurice Langley a happy and prosperous man, and my sister Magdalen his wife! No, not his wife, for Caroline Reed lived, and lives, and will be here to-morrow."

Once more there was a pause. Once more Magdalen's voice broke it, hollowly, out of the darkness.

"Go on," she said, "go on to the end. The wife did not die?"

"No, she did not die. I had found and had an interview with her before I paid you that visit at Golden Willows. Had I known then that Langley's name was Barstone, and his home in this State. I might have saved you, but it was only within the past two weeks that Caroline Reed told me her story, and then I had to extort it from her by threats. She has been an altered woman since that fatal night; all womanly spirit seems to have left her—she is but the poor, pale, frightened shadow of herself now.

"I hastened to the hospital, the first thing after my release, and inquired for Mrs. Scott, the nurse in whose charge Caroline had been placed. Mrs. Scott still retained her situation, and came to me at once, but I had some difficulty in recalling myself to her recollection. I asked her for Caroline Reed—a patient who had been in her charge four years back—could she recall her? Yes, Mrs. Scott recalled her perfectly.

"Did she live or die?' I asked.

"Well, young man,' the nurse answered, 'one of 'em lived, and one of 'em died, and I don't know which you want. You see I shouldn't remember so easily, for four years is a long time, but my own name is Caroline, and there happened to be two Caroline Reeds here, that time, together. One was a shocking accident, the other was galloping consumption. Which is the one you want?"

"The accident,' I said, eagerly; 'it was a brutal attempt at murder. Her child was killed. Do not tell me she is the one who died!"

"No,' said the nurse, 'she's the one that came round, though nobody ever thought she could come round. Her head was smashed dreadful, and her ribs were broke; but la! she's as well as you or me to-day, and a most respectable party, though poor. She does plain sewing—she sews for me. I'll give you her address if you're a friend.'

"She wrote the address in pencil and handed it to me.

"She was a peculiar young woman,' Mrs. Scott remarked; 'never would tell of the man who had so near killed her—her husband, of course, the brute! And he's not been found. There did come a man here one day, about six months after, to inquire for a Caroline Reed, but I didn't see him. It was another nurse—one who had charge of the consumption case—and she told him Caroline Reed was dead and buried. She didn't know of the other, you see, and I make no doubt it was Reed himself.'

"I sought out Langley's wife at once, and found her, in a little room in the very poorest part of the city, half starved—not able to earn enough to keep soul and body together. She looked at me with such a white, terrified face as I came in, that I had to hasten to reassure her.

"Don't be alarmed,' I said, 'I am a friend. Don't you remember me? It was I who broke in that night when Langley so nearly murdered you.'

"She uttered a cry, and covered her poor, thin face with both hands, at the sound of his name.

"I haven't heard it for four years,' she said, 'and it makes me tremble to hear it now! Oh, sir! for the love of God! don't tell him I am alive!"

"I will not—don't be frightened—I hate him as much as you can possibly do!"

"She looked up at me with great, hollow, wild black eyes.

"'Hate him,' she repeated, mournfully; 'oh, no, I don't hate him. Once I loved him, and he loved me, but that is, oh, such a weary, weary while ago! I think that Caroline Reed is dead and buried, and that this is some other miserable wretch who bears her name and her broken heart. But I don't hate my husband.'

"'You don't hate him,' I said, incredulously, 'and he murdered your child!'

"She rocked herself to and fro, in hard, tearless misery.

"'He did not mean that—he was drunk—I was wicked and taunted him, and rage and brandy drove him mad. The fault was mine—he did not know what he was doing. Oh, my baby! my baby! my baby!'

"She sobbed, but shed no tears. She still rocked ceaselessly to and fro, with sunken, glittering, dry eyes.

"'He thinks you're dead,' I said. 'You have never met him since then?'

"'Yes, I have met him; passed him so closely on the street that my rags brushed his coat. He did not know me. I wore a veil, but he would not have known me in any case. See sir! I am only twenty-six years old, but my hair is gray, and my face is fleshless and old. Six years ago, when he married me, I was a pretty girl—yes, sir! You may not believe it, but I was a pretty girl. I had long black ringlets down to my waist, bright, black eyes—brighter than the stars of heaven, he has told me—roses and dimples, and all the bloom and freshness of happy twenty years. And I loved him, ah, so dearly! so dearly! and we were married, and my heaven was on earth, and no angel up there could be happier than I. Do you think he would know me now? He is a gentleman—he is young, handsome and well dressed still. Perhaps he is happy—I don't know. He killed his child, and he thinks he has killed me. I wonder, if, in the dead of night, when his rich and gay friends are gone and the stir of life is hushed, our faces do not rise up to haunt him? I wonder if he dare sleep in the dark? Young man,' she fixed her spectral black eyes solemnly upon me, 'are you his friend or enemy?'

"'His enemy!' I answered, between my set teeth, 'his deadliest enemy on earth! If I had him here I could throttle him as I would a serpent. I am the brother of the woman he did to death!'

"'The woman to whom I wrote? Ah, poor child! Tell me your story and hers.'

"I told her all—all, Magdalen. Laura's death, my imprisonment, and my oath of revenge.

"'I call upon you to help me,' I said, 'it is our right—it is not revenge, it is justice. Such monsters should not pollute the earth! I call upon you, Caroline Reed, to help me avenge my sister!'

"'I will help you,' she answered, to my surprise. 'What is it you want?'

"'Tell me his real name—tell me where and how I may find him. Sooner or later I will do it of myself, so surely as heaven is above us! but if you will aid me, the day of reckoning will come all the more speedily.'

"She seemed greatly disturbed. She still rocked herself backward and forward, with knitted anxious brow.

"'I cannot decide now,' she said, at length; 'give me a little time to think it over. Come to me in a fortnight—not sooner—my head is all wrong at times. You must give me a fortnight, at least. When you come back you will find me here. I will say no more now.'

"We parted. I sought you out at Golden Willows, returned to New York, and waited. The fortnight passed. I went back to Mrs. Reed, but she was still undecided. She asked more time, and I had to be contented and wait. Then followed your marriage, and your temporary sojourn in New York. The third time I went to Caroline I got what I wanted.

"'I am not sure that I am doing right, but I will tell you. Langley's name is BARSTONE, and he has a rich aunt in Connecticut somewhere. I found it out by the merest accident, and it was my mention of his real name that so enraged him that dreadful night.'

"'Barstone! and your husband's name was Barstone, and he had a rich aunt in Connecticut. It startled me terribly. I wrote to you at once. You met me and made my terror a certainty. Maurice Langley had crowned his villainy by marrying you. He knew your story—knew you were Laura's sister—knew you were vowed to avenge her—and still dared to marry

you! What mercy does that man—no, that demon in the form of man—deserve? When he and you left for Washington, I went to Caroline and told her of this last crowning rascality. It aroused her as nothing I thought could have aroused her.

"The vile, vile wretch!" she cried. 'Another lost and ruined through his baseness! Take me to him! I fear him no more! Accuse him of murder—I will aid you! Send him where his atrocious wickedness can blight no more innocent lives. He deserves no mercy, and we will show him none! He is a murderer and a bigamist! As such, let the law of the land deal with him.'

"I have no more to say. I am here. Caroline only waits my summons to follow. To-morrow she will come. Before another sun sets the wretch you have married will pay the penalty of his crimes, and Laura Allward will be avenged!"

CHAPTER XXV.

"PAST HOPE, PAST CARE, PAST HELP."

The tragic story was finished—the story Willie Allward had come so far to tell—the story Magdalen Allward had braved the double darkness of night and storm to hear. A thrilling pause followed. Wild and high shrieked the wintry wind, and deep and hoarse the river roared rushing by. The listener in the doorway strained every nerve, in vain, to overhear, above the deep diapason of the tempest. He could not catch a single word.

"You have told me all?" the hollow voice of Magdalen said, out of the darkness; "and to-morrow George Barstone's lawful wife will be here? Why to-morrow?"

"Why should he be spared beyond to-morrow? Why not strike him at once? Why not to-morrow as well as a month hence?"

"He is absent from Millford. I do not know that he will be back to-morrow. But he may be; and it is well to be ready. Send for the wife. I want to stand face to face with George Barstone's wife before the end of all arrives."

"You?"

"I! Before the end of this miserable story comes, I must see the woman who is what I should be. O, my God! to think that I should sit here and hear such horrors, and live!"

"We can live through more than that," Willie Allward said, cynically. "It is only in novels that hearts break and people die of trouble. We eat and sleep, let our misery be ever so great, and drag out existence until our heads are gray. You shall see Caroline, if you wish it, and hear her story from her own lips, if you like. Perhaps to-morrow would be rather premature, even if he does return. You shall fix the time, if you wish."

There was no answer. Magdalen sat, rigid, with white face and dilated eyes.

"I cannot believe it! I cannot believe it!" she said, slowly, in a strange, dull voice. "George Barstone a murderer? It cannot be! it is impossible! There is a terrible mistake somewhere. I tell you, Willie Allward, there is a frightful mistake—we are all wrong—George Barstone is not the man we take him to be!"

She arose to her feet with a sudden flash of inspiration—a swift, prophetic conviction of the truth.

"It cannot be, I repeat! We are all wrong, Willie. There is a dreadful mistake! George Barstone is one of the noblest, the gentlest of men. You paint a devil. We are 'far wide,' from first to last. I tell you, Maurice Langley and George Barstone are not one and the same man!"

Her voice rose, her eyes flashed, the color came back to her cold face, as she stood there erect in the darkness.

Her brother listened contemptuously.

"There is no mistake," he said, resolutely. "I wish there was, for your sake. Maurice Langley and George Barstone are the same man. Think of the proofs! Rachel recognized him—I recognized him. There is the unerring mark upon his arm—the secret in his life. Do you ask any more than that?"

She put both hands, in a blind sort of way, to her head—dizzy, benumbed.

"You shall have more," Willie said, answering his own question; "and I will postpone the dénouement until you are fully satisfied. You expect Barstone home to-morrow?"

"Yes."

"Then, here, take this. It is Caroline Reed's picture—a living likeness. Place this where it will meet his eyes, and watch him well when he first sees it. If he shows no guilt or surprise, then we will have Caroline down to look at him on the quiet. Will that satisfy you? If this last crucial test fails, why, then—why, then, I will own there is a mistake, and begin at the beginning again. And now I think you had better start for home, or you will have them scouring the town after you.

Come, rouse up! Take my arm. I will see you safely through the storm to the house."

She obeyed him mechanically, her hand closing hard over the picture he had given her. She was so stunned by long suffering that the horrors of this night only benumbed her. Her soul was full of a dull despair, and she moved blindly forward, like a woman walking in her sleep.

The watcher on the threshold, who had not caught one word of their conversation, heard them as they stumbled forward, and saw the moving spark as the lantern advanced. He drew closer into the embrasures of the woodwork, and Magdalen's garments brushed him as she passed from the ruined entrance of the old mill out into the stormy night.

When they reached the road Willie extinguished his lantern and they plunged forward through the wild, white drifts. The snow still fell, but the wind had gone down; the roads were ankle-deep already.

"We are likely to have a pleasant walk of it," Willie muttered. "Cling to me, Magdalen, or you will fall. What will they think of you at Golden Willows?"

"What does it matter," was the weary answer, "since, in a few days, I will have left them forever? Let them think what they please—they will soon know all."

"I shall keep quiet until I hear from you again," her brother said; "that will be immediately after he has seen the portrait. In any case, I shall then send for Caroline. If he be her husband, she will make no mistake, whatever we do."

They went on in silence after this, as much as they could do to make headway at all through the snow. Some yards further on, a man went by them, and gave them a gruff "good-night," in passing. The man was Philip Barstone, who could pass and speak with impunity, in the deep darkness. His long strides measured off the ground with double the swiftness of those he left behind in the storm. A vague alarm filled him. What could they mean? What did this strange meeting portend? If he only could have heard!

The lights from the drawing and dining-room windows streamed far over the snow as Golden Willows came in view—the double lights of fire and lamp. The blinds were up, the curtains drawn. He could see the brightly glowing rooms, the table glittering with china and glass and silver, and the restless figure of Fanny roaming about.

He opened the hall door and stood before that young lady, a walking Arctic avalanche—snow from head to feet.

Miss Winters gave a little shriek at sight of him, and held up her flowing robes.

"Lor', Phil! I thought you were a burglar! Where on earth have you been? and oh! for gracious' sake, where is Magdalen?"

"Mrs. Barstone will be here in fifteen minutes. Where have I been? Do you know the old mill by the river, near the town? I have been there."

"And what on earth took you there?—not Magdalen?"

"Magdalen, most certainly! She mustn't know I followed her, though. She wouldn't like it, I dare say. She went there to keep an appointment."

"An appointment! Oh, Phil! With a man?"

"With a man, most decidedly! He is escorting her home at this present moment. He was waiting for her at the old mill, and he had a lantern there—all prepared, you see; and she sat talking to him one good hour. It's very mysterious; and, if I were George, I think I should put a stop to it. Mind! not a hint that I was a 'looker on in Venice.'"

"But, oh, Phil!" Fanny gasped, "what can it mean? And to meet a man! and on such a night! Oh, Phil! it must be the same man she met that night, and kissed, in the garden."

"What night?"

Doctor Philip had removed his snow-covered overcoat, stamped the snow off his boots, and led the way into the dining-room, followed by Fanny.

"I haven't had a mouthful of dinner yet," the young lady said, glancing at the table, "except some sandwiches and pound-cake she gave me. I know everything will be spoiled."

"Tell me about that night you spoke of, Fan, and the man she kissed in the garden."

Fanny repeated the tale she had told Aunt Lydia. When she had concluded, the house-door opened for the second time, and Magdalen, pale as death itself, and covered with snow, stood before them.

"My dear Mrs. Barstone," the doctor said, starting up, "you are perished. Why in the world did you persist in going out such a night? Take off your wet clothes and come to the fire immediately. You may have caught your death."

Fanny gave him a look of admiration. Here was clever acting. But his cousin's wife declined his friendly offer.

"I will go to my room," she said, turning away, "there is a fire there. Good night."

"But, good gracious, Magdalen, you must have your dinner. Don't you know it's nearly eight o'clock. You must be going crazy, I think, to go out such a dreadful night. Where on earth have you been?"

But Magdalen was already up the stairs, heedless of Fanny's cry.

"Do not wait for me," she said. "I want no dinner. Good night."

She disappeared with the words into her own room, and turned the key in the door. Fanny might officiously intrude presently, and Fanny's chatter to-night she felt would drive her mad.

Her pretty rooms looked prettier and brighter than ever, by vivid contrast with the wild, drifting tempest without. The fires burned redly, the yellow lamplight flooded the chambers, and a low, soft-cushioned chair, a footstool and slippers were in order before the steel grate.

She dropped off her snow-covered garments in a heap on the carpet and sank down in this chair, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes staring with blank intensity into the red heart of the cinders.

What horrors she had listened to this night! George not her husband—George the murderer of his own child, the would-be assassin of his wife! Everything swam before her eyes in a hot mist. There was a dull, throbbing pain in her head that benumbed her and left her no power to think. George a murderer! George's wife alive! Those two ideas kept beating, beating in that hot brain. She had lost all control of her own mind—it worked on and on like a machine.

Hours passed while she sat there—she never heeded their flight. She still held the miniature tightly clenched in her hand, unconscious that she held it. Its dropping upon the floor drew her attention to it at last. She picked it up, opened it mechanically, and gazed long and steadfastly upon the pictured face.

It was an old-fashioned ambrotype, in a case, but undimmed by time, and soft and clear as an engraving. The face within was very young, very pretty; a bright, brunette face, with black hair rippling off a low forehead, smiling, dimpled lips, and large luminous eyes. The pretty, heedless face of a girl of sixteen, untouched by sorrow and unmarred by earthly passion.

Magdalen gazed at it long—then slowly closed and put it in her pocket. A great sense of weariness was stealing over her—the fatigue of her long walk, the reaction of so much excitement, were beginning to make themselves felt. Sitting there in her chair before the fire, her head dropped, her troubles ended in a merciful oblivion. She fell heavily asleep. She slept for many hours—deeply, dreamlessly—and opened her eyes to find the fire long dead, the room chill, and flooded with pale February sunshine. She looked at her watch—it was past ten—she had slept nine hours. That long death-like sleep had changed her strangely. The dull, throbbing torture of head and heart were gone, and a great calm had taken their place. It was the calm that comes with supreme despair; but its deep weariness left her power to think, and blunted the edge of her anguish. Memory brought back, word for word, Willie's terrible story of last night, and she no longer doubted its truth. She was no wife—she was the most lost and wretched of women; and George Barstone was the vilest of all vile scoundrels. She took the ambrotype out of her pocket, half opened it, shrank from it as though it had been a viper, and replaced it with a sick shudder.

"If I cannot bear to look upon the pictured face, how will I look upon the living one," she thought. "And to-morrow I will see her! To-day George will be here! I will show him this, and then—and then the sooner the end comes and all is over,

the better."

There was a sharp rap at the door, and Fanny's impatient voice spoke without:

"Magdalen! Magdalen! are you dead? Please say so, if you are, and Phil will break open the door. If alive, unlock it and let me in."

Magdalen arose at once and turned the key, and Fanny bounced impetuously in.

"This makes the fourth time I've come rapping. I thought I would succeed at last. Why, goodness me, Magdalen Barstone, you've never been to bed at all!"

"No," Magdalen said, quietly. "I was tired and fell asleep before I knew it, in my chair."

"And you look like a ghost—worse than any ghost I ever saw. And you've had no dinner, and no tea, and no breakfast. I wonder what George will say to your ghastly looks when he comes home, and he's coming home this very morning?"

"This morning?"

"Yes; we've had a despatch; he is coming in the 12.30 train. So, if you have any regard for his feeling, and you used to have, goodness knows, just wash your face and comb your hair, and put on one of your pretty morning dresses, and come down and have breakfast, and try not to look quite so much like a galvanized corpse when he sees you."

Magdalen arose with strange calmness, and began to obey. She bathed her cold face, and loosened her abundant golden tresses. Fanny took the seat she had just vacated, determined to have it out, there and then.

"Magdalen, look here! What is the matter with you ever since you came home? What has George done that you snub him so dreadfully? You used to be fond of him; I think, though you were never the kind to show it much, but I could see it in your eyes when you looked at him, and in your smile when you smiled on him, and in your voice when you spoke to him. But it's all different now. Now you never look at him at all; you never speak to him, if you can help it; you never smile. You look like one of the statues in the Marble Heart. It's romantic, but it's uncomfortable. Is there a secret, Magdalen? Oh, do tell me—do—I'll never mention it, not even to Phil—never, never!"

Yesterday, and all the days preceding, Magdalen could not have endured this. To-day she listened in a dull sort of lassitude, without a trace of anger or impatience. She caught somehow at the last word.

"Phil!" she repeated. "What has he to do with it?"

"Oh, nothing, of course—that is, with you—only he feels uneasy, like the rest of us. But he has a great deal to do with me. We're engaged."

"Engaged?"

"Yes, my dear—to be married," answered Fanny, with a sparkling face. "We've been engaged for the past ten days; but you've been so dreadfully melancholy and stupid, there was no telling you. We're engaged, and oh, Magdalen, I am so happy I feel almost crazy! I can't realize it at times. I idolize him. I love him beyond everything! And he's so gentlemanly and so agreeable, and he knows so much, and he's so handsome. Isn't he handsome, Magdalen, and don't you adore pale young men, with dark eyes and hair, and white teeth, and a black mustache. Phil's isn't black just now; but he used to dye it, and then it was. I shall have him dye it again when we're married."

"Married!" Magdalen again repeated. "Has it come to that? Does Miss Barstone know?"

She forgot her own great sorrow for the moment, in her affection for this little girl, whose round, rosy face glowed before her, almost beautified with the delight of love's young dream.

"Oh, yes, she knows, of course," Fanny replied. "And would you believe it, Magdalen? she didn't like it a bit. Now wasn't that heartless? and her own nephew, too? George married you, and see how pleased she was; but then, George was always her favorite. I don't see what sort of tastes some people have, for my part, and I can't help saying it, if you are his wife. George is a very good fellow enough, I dare say, for people who like that style; but it ain't my style, and they're no more to be compared than the moon's to be compared to a mouldy cheese. We're going to be married in a

month, and sail for Europe at once. Oh! Magdalen! Only think of seeing Paris, and London, and Venice, and the Bridge of Sighs, and prisons and palaces, and the empress and the Tower of Pisa, and gondolas and real brigands, and things! Magdalen, it's so splendid, I don't believe it can ever come true."

Miss Winters opened her eyes very wide, and her chubby face grew all at once grave and solemn, as she made this last remark.

"Oh, my dear," Magdalen said, "take care! take care! Are you sure he loves you, or is it only—" she paused.

"My sixty thousand dollars!" cried out the heiress, indignantly. "There it is again! Everybody throws my sixty thousand dollars in my face. Of course he loves me, and of course, he couldn't marry me if I didn't have the sixty thousand dollars. You see he is poor, and he loved me so well. He never dared come here because he was afraid I would find out his love, and he would not ask me to marry him, and share his humble lot. And he meant to have lived single all his life, Magdalen—all his life—for my sake and on his death-bed he would have to send for me, and with his dying breath tell me all. I would have been married to somebody else, but in spite of ten thousand husbands he would have had me at his dying bed, and told me then how all his life he had worshipped me! Oh, Magdalen! You ought to hear him go on! It's twice as beautiful as any novel I ever read!"

A faint, cold shadow of a smile flitted over the listener's face—a smile of utter scorn—but Fanny did not see it. She did not speak, and the girl kept on:

"The things I tried to show you yesterday were the first of my wedding clothes, and you would not even look at them. I shouldn't have thought it of you, Magdalen,—after the interest I took in your wedding things, too!"

"I had other matters to think of."

"Yes, I dare say! You've done nothing else but think ever since your bridal tour. What is it all about? And oh, Magdalen! where were you last night, in the storm."

"I have told you—out for a walk."

"Oh, bother! Out for a walk on such a night! I don't believe it!"

"Disbelieve it, then. I am going down to breakfast, now."

Fanny followed.

Mrs. Barstone's morning meal awaited her, and she ate it in silence.

Doctor Phil was smoking a cigar in the frosty sunshine, and his happy little bride-elect ran out and joined him. She thrust her arm in his, and walked and chattered by his side, her eyes upraised to his face with a love that strove for no concealment.

"Another," Magdalen thought, "another to be made miserable. He is marrying her for her money, and he will break her heart with his coldness and dislike. Poor child! she deserves a better fate!"

She ate little, but she drank the strong coffee eagerly. It nerved her for what was to come, and for the meeting with her husband, now so near.

It was past eleven when she arose and went into the drawing-room. The piano stood open, and, obeying an impulse, she sat down and began to play. She strove to banish thought—to forget for one brief hour at least. She might never sit here and touch those white keys again. It was a new and very fine piano—one of George's many wedding gifts. Ah, how good he had been always to her, and how happy she had been here! Tears rose to her eyes for the first time; a quiet sadness filled her heart. She had an unutterable horror of his crimes but for him she felt nothing now but a great compassion. She played softly on—mournful melodies from Mozart—and the lovers outside paused in their talk to listen to the weird sweetness. She played on until the merry jingle of sleigh-bells reached her ear. The bells approached, turned in at the gate. She arose and looked out. Yes, George had come!

Her heart gave one great throb and then stood still. An instant later and he had strode in, his face glowing, his eyes sparkling.

"My darling!" he said, "here I am, back again, and never in my life was I so glad to get home. I saw you at the window, and never waited to answer Fanny or Phil."

He folded her in his arms, and kissed her after his own impetuous fashion. She made no resistance. She stood white and still.

"What, Magdalen!" he said, reproachfully. "No word of welcome, and I have thought every hour a month that held me from you?"

"I am glad you have come back, George," she said, slowly. "I have been wishing for your return, too."

"That's my good little wife! Hallo, Fan! Come in here, and get me something to eat. I've had nothing since six this morning, and the commissariat is always in your way. I'll run up and take off these things. Have it ready when I come down."

He dashed up the stairs. Fanny gave the necessary order, and went out, and rejoined her Phil. One of the housemaids came along the hall in a very few minutes, bearing a tray with a delicate luncheon, and laid it out in the dining-room. She had everything arranged, and had quitted the apartment, ere George descended.

The instant she quitted the dining-room, Magdalen slipped in, laid the ambrotype beside his coffee cup, and disappeared behind the long, green window-curtains. She would see George plainly, but he would not see her.

Mr. Barstone made an expeditious toilet, and clattered down-stairs, whistling a jig. He was on the heights of bliss once more. Had not the wife he worshiped told him she was glad he was home? He looked in the drawing-room; she was not there. He entered the dining-room; she was not to be seen. He called; there was no reply.

"Odd!" thought George, a trifle disappointed. "Where's she gone to? Where's Mrs. Barstone, Susan?"

This to the girl who entered to wait upon him.

"I'm sure I don't know, sir," Susan responded, pouring out his coffee and adjusting the plates. "Anything else?"

"That will do, Susan. Ha! what's this? something to eat?"

He took up the ambrotype carelessly enough, and opened it. The instant after, he rose to his feet, with a startled exclamation. Magdalen turned cold as death. He stood holding the case from him, and gazing at it much as if that young, fair face had been a death's head. A second or two he stood; then he closed it sharply, and strode at once out of the room.

Magdalen leaned heavily against the window, sick and faint unto death. There was no mistake then—he recognized, beyond all doubt, the picture of Caroline Reed. She glided out from her hiding-place and encountered Fanny entering the hall.

"What is the matter with your husband, Mrs. Barstone?" the heiress demanded, with some asperity. "What is he in such a flurry about, and what does he want of Phil? Ordering me into the house after such an imperative fashion! I should not have stirred a step only Phil seconded it! What's the matter?"

Magdalen made no reply. She went straight to her room, and, without an instant's delay, sat down and wrote to Willie:

"He has returned—seen the picture, and recognised it. There is no longer room to doubt. Send for C. R. as soon as you like now, and let the end come as speedily as you please.

"MAGDALEN."

She sealed this note, dressed for a walk, glided down-stairs and out of the house. No one saw her. Her husband and his cousin were in the Willow Walk, and Fanny was flattening her little pug nose against a side window, watching them.

What they would think of this sudden flight, the first moment of George's arrival, she never paused to consider. What did appearances matter now?

And in the Willow Walk the two men stood talking with strangely startled faces. It was Doctor Phil who held the ambrotype now, and that dull, grayish pallor had blanched his face from brow to chin.

"Found it, George, on the dining-room table," he was repeating, in a sort of whisper; "her picture! How, in God's name, could her picture have got into this house?"

"Don't know, I'm sure," responded George, who looked by no means so horrified as his cousin; "let's ask."

"Ask!" Philip Barstone repeated, looking at him in a sort of horror. "Are you mad? I mean"—hastily—"would you set inquiries on foot, and let Fanny know the truth? No, no, no! Besides, I fancy I see through the mystery."

"You do? Well, hang me, if I can! Who the deuce was likely to fetch Caroline's picture here?"

"Hush-h-h!" the doctor's face turned quite livid at the sound of the name. "I will tell you later—give me time to think. Where's your wife?"

"My wife! What's my wife to do with it?"

"A great deal. It's my belief she has placed it there. If she isn't in the house she's gone to Millford again to meet that man."

"What man?"

"Johnstone, George, old boy, I've a long and very disagreeable story to tell you. Fanny knows—Aunt Lydia knows—give me a moment here alone, and I will join you in the house and tell you all."

He walked away. George returned slowly to the house. The moment he was out of sight, Philip Barstone, who had walked to the bank, hurled the ambrotype, with all his force, far into the frozen lake below. He saw it shivered there in a dozen pieces.

"She knows all," he thought, "and she still believes it George. Good God! if the truth comes out, after all these years, and by means of Laura Allward's sister!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

"I'LL NOT BELIEVE BUT DESDEMONA'S HONEST."

George Barstone strode up and down the drawing-room, with a very pale and startled face, listening to the story his cousin had to tell. He heard, in blank dismay, of that long walk, through night and storm, to the old mill by the river, and of the suspicious interview held there.

"The man was the same I saw her with in New York," Philip said. "I had a glimpse of him by the light of the lantern. It was Johnstone, of course, and the letter she received, the night you left, must have been to appoint the meeting. It is my belief she has gone into Millford now, to meet him again."

For Magdalen was not to be found, and one of the servants informed them she had seen Mrs. Barstone quit the house, attired for a walk, over fifteen minutes before.

"You say you were at the door during the interview," George said, at length: "Tell me what you saw and heard."

"I neither saw nor heard—the place was pitchy dark, and the uproar of the storm was deafening. The interview lasted over an hour, and he accompanied her back to the house. I passed them on the road, unknown, under cover of the storm and darkness. George, it is no common motive that would take any woman three miles from home on such a night, and to keep such an appointment."

"What do you suspect?" George asked, very coldly.

"I should suspect, as Fanny does, that it was some old sweetheart, by Jove! We don't need all this mystery and secrecy to meet our poor relations."

"Fanny! What does Fanny know of this matter?"

"Oh, by the bye, I had forgotten," the doctor exclaimed, "she never told you of what she saw, one night, some two months ago—before you were married!"

"No; what did she see?"

"It was during Aunt Lydia's illness. You were dining alone, she was up in her own room, and Miss Wayne, who had been watching in the sick room, went out in the garden for a walk. It was a clear moonlight night, and Fanny's window overlooks the Willow Walk. In the Willow Walk she saw Magdalen meet a man—a little man with a cap, she describes him—and Miss Wayne flew into his arms, and kissed him again and again. They had a long interview, and when Miss Wayne returned to the house she was as white as a sheet. She went straight to her room, and never spoke of the meeting after. Fanny felt delicate about alluding to it; she took it for granted Magdalen had told you, and that it must be all right."

"Magdalen did not tell me; nevertheless, it must be all right. It was her cousin, most assuredly, and it was her cousin, again, whom she met last night. As to your other supposition, or Fanny's, it is nothing—from Fanny's novel-reading brain—from you, Phil, if repeated, I shall consider it an insult. My wife is pure as heaven. This is all very strange, very mysterious; but with her, at least, there is no guilt. The man she meets is her near relative, and never has been, and never will be, her lover."

He spoke bravely, but his cheek was ashen white, and his heart seemed torn within him.

Doctor Phil shrugged his shoulders.

"Not a doubt of it, George. Cæsar's wife is above reproach. Still, if this matter gets wind——"

"The matter is hardly likely to get wind; but, considering all things, you might have been a trifle more discreet, Doctor Barstone. There was no need, that I can see, of taking Fanny into your confidence."

"Fanny knew that she had left the house, and that I followed her. I do not see that I am called upon to invent lies to cover your wife's very remarkable conduct. When Fanny asked me where she had been, I told her the truth, and that led to her telling me what she saw. I congratulate you, my dear fellow, upon your freedom from the green-eyed monster's power;

but egad! if she were my wife, I would keep a sharp eye upon her."

"Thank you for your advice, Phil. If I remember rightly, when you had a wife, you very seriously neglected keeping an eye upon her at all, sharp or otherwise. And that brings us back to the picture. I shall speak to Mrs. Barstone upon that subject the moment she appears."

The young doctor's sallow face blackened. He arose from his seat.

"You mean you will tell her all?"

"By no means. I shall tell her nothing of you. And, for the future, I will relieve you of the duty of watching my wife. You do not like her and she heartily dislikes you. Be kind enough to interfere in no way with her, from this day forth."

Doctor Philip turned to quit the room.

"I was a fool," he said, "and I have received a fool's reward. Rest easy, my good cousin, Mrs. Barstone may go unwatched to her nocturnal meetings to the end of the chapter, for me."

He stalked out of the room. It was the first serious quarrel the cousins had ever had, and that thought did not tend to soothe George's irritation. How entirely he had trusted this woman, and how bitterly he had been deceived.

"I could have staked my very soul upon her fidelity and truth," he thought, with a groan, "and now!"

Meantime Magdalen had reached Millford. But a walk to the post-office was rendered unnecessary, for at the entrance of the town, pacing slowly along one of the most unfrequented little streets, she came face to face with Willie. She clutched his arm and looked at him with gleaming eyes.

"Well," he said, "the man's come back?"

"He came not an hour ago, and he has seen the picture and recognized it at once. I saw amaze and horror in his face, I tell you. There can no longer be the shadow of a doubt. Send for Caroline Reed as soon as you please."

"But what did he say?" Willie demanded.

"Nothing to me. I was hidden from view when he looked at the picture, and he rose up and left the house. I ran up to my room, wrote a note to you, and was on my way to post it now. He is the man, Willie. Let his wife come when she likes."

"I will telegraph to-day—she will be here by this time to-morrow. If you want to see her, you can come, to-morrow afternoon, to Freeman's boarding-house and ask for Mrs. Reed."

"And then?"

"And then I will take her before a magistrate, and she will make her deposition; and then we will go to the house and confront the murderer of his child. I will have him placed under arrest at once. As for you, my poor Magdalen—what do you mean to do when all is over?"

Magdalen smiled—a smile that startled her brother.

"Never mind me," she said. "I know what will become of me."

"What do you mean? Why do you look so queerly? Magdalen——"

"Let us say no more about it—'unto the day, the day.' I must return to Golden Willows. To-morrow, at five o'clock, I will call at Freeman's and see Mrs. Reed. Until then, good-by."

She left him and walked rapidly homeward. As she passed Willow Lake she paused and looked down, and the smile that had startled Willie returned to her pale face.

"Yes," she said, under her breath. "I know what will become of me."

The afternoon sunshine was flinging long red lines over the snow before she reached the house. George met her as she entered the door.

"My dear," he said, very quietly, "where have you been?"

"To Millford."

She passed him swiftly as she spoke and hurried up stairs. He followed her and closed the door.

"Magdalen," he said, "I have a few words to say to you, and as business compels me to go to the office I will say them at once. You were out last night in the storm?"

"I was."

"You went to the old mill by the river?"

"I did. I was watched, then, it seems."

"You were watched and followed. You went to meet a man there and remained with him an hour. Magdalen, who was that man?"

"I have told you before—a relative."

"The same you met in New York?"

"The same."

"But, great heaven! Magdalen, what does all this secrecy and mystery mean? Why did you brave the night and the tempest to meet any relative, in such a place?"

"That is my secret."

"There is a secret, then?"

"There is."

"Which you will not tell me?"

"Which I will not tell you to-night. But rest easy—you will know it before the week ends."

"I will!" he took a step eagerly toward her. "You promise me this, Magdalen. I will know it all before the week ends?"

"All, I promise."

"I knew it!" George cried. "I told him so. But you should not have been so imprudent, my own dear girl—you might have caught your death. And now there is but one thing more—about that picture?"

"What picture?" she turned upon him with eager eyes. "What picture?"

"The ambrotype left on the dining-room table," he answered, quietly. "Left there by you; was it not, Magdalen?"

"Yes—I left it there."

"And why? How came you to possess that picture?"

"That is another secret. I need not ask if you recognized it?"

"I recognized it, certainly—poor, unhappy creature! Magdalen, do tell me what you know of her story, and how you came by the portrait?"

She looked at him in wonder. His face puzzled her—it was grave and full of concern; but that look was hardly a look of guilt. Was he so hardened—so utterly dead to fear and remorse as all this?

"I cannot tell you now," she said, slowly; "but I repeat you will know all ere the week ends. I placed the picture there to see whether or not you would recognize it, and I saw you did. How I came by it, and what I know, you will learn later, or——"

She turned resolutely to leave him, but he spoke again:

"One last question, Magdalen—you went to Millford just now to meet that man, Johnstone, again?"

"I did. I suppose Doctor Barstone, who followed me last night, will be anxious to know. You can set his mind at rest as you go down."

She passed into one of the inner rooms and turned the key in the door. And George turned heavily and slowly to quit the house, with a heart that lay like lead in his bosom. Wonder and doubt filled him. What strange mystery was this that had come to darken their humdrum country home?

CHAPTER XXVII.

AT THE LAST MOMENT.

The 12.30 train from New York, on the following day, brought a lodger to Freeman's boarding-house—a pale little woman in black—who gave her name as Mrs. Reed. It was the stranger, Johnstone, who had been stopping there for some days past, who presented her to the landlady as his sister, and requested that a cup of tea might be served at once in her room. When the tea and toast came, he left Mrs. Reed to partake of these refreshments by herself, and lounged, in an aimless sort of way, up and down the dreary little back street. The uproar and smoke of the neighboring factories filled it, but few people passed, and those few took no notice of the shabby young man in the slouched hat, who paced restlessly up and down, evidently waiting impatiently.

The town clock tolled the afternoon hours sonorously, and with each the shabby young man grew more and more impatient. Four struck—five; it was rapidly growing dusk, and the sun was setting redly far off behind the hills, when she for whom he waited came, lightly and swiftly, into the dismal little street. She was closely veiled, but there was no mistaking that tall, slim, supple figure—that rapid, graceful walk.

"At last!" Willie Allward said, discontentedly. "I've been waiting about here for the last four hours, and was just going to give you up."

"I could get away no sooner," his sister answered, breathlessly, from her long walk. "I waited until Doctor Barstone, my husband's brother, took Miss Winters out for a drive. He has played the spy on me more than once. I did not want him to follow me here. Has she come?"

"Yes—by the noon train. I say, Magdalen, she's a scarey sort of thing—never quite got over the horror of that night in Brooklyn—so be gentle with her. Don't go off into tantrums and frighten her out of the few senses she has left."

"You need not be alarmed. My tantrums, as you call them, are at an end. I will not frighten her and I will stay but a few minutes. I have no anger against her."

But her teeth set as she said it. No anger against the woman who was George Barstone's lawful wife!

She followed Willie into the house and up-stairs to a door in the landing, at which he knocked. It was opened instantly, and the two women, who had such good reason to hate George Barstone, were face to face.

Magdalen stood and regarded her with the merciless scrutiny one woman bestows upon another who is her rival.

Mrs. Reed drooped before it, her eyes fell, and she drew instinctively a step nearer Willie, as if for protection from this tall, fair-haired, handsome woman, who looked at her so sternly out of those dark, beautiful eyes.

She was a little creature, very wan, and faded, and thin, with hollow eyes and sunken cheeks, and a sharp, hacking cough. Yet she had been pretty, when those melancholy black eyes had shone with the happy sparkle of youth; when those ashen cheeks had bloomed rosily with health, and those thin, dark locks had fallen in abundant black ringlets down to her girlish waist. The small, wan face looked very appealing and piteous now. It touched even Magdalen.

"Don't be afraid," she said, gently answering that imploring look. "I don't blame you; I pity you with all my heart. Will you sit down? I can remain but a few minutes."

There was a queenliness always about Mrs. Barstone that made people obey her unconsciously.

Little Mrs. Reed collapsed into a sofa, in a state of nervous terror, looking helplessly anywhere but into that stonily pale face.

"My brother has told me your story; but, somehow, I would like to hear it from your own lips. You will tell it me, will you not? How you first met and married Maurice Langley—all?"

"It seems so long ago—so long ago!" Caroline Reed murmured, rocking to and fro in her seat, her hands clasped together; "a score of years, instead of eight. It is a very common story—we read of such things in the papers every week. I was a simple village girl, knowing no more of the great world outside our hamlet than a baby, and he was the

handsomest, almost the only, gentleman I had ever seen. He had come to our village to fish, two other gentlemen with him, and he fell in love with my pretty face. I was pretty then, though never half as beautiful as you. Ah! how could he do it? How could he do it?"

"He is capable of doing more than that, Mrs. Reed. Go on! He married you there, I suppose, under his assumed name?"

"He did. I have our marriage certificate here," tapping her breast; "and the minister who married us is still alive. He brought me to New York, and, for nearly a year, loved me and was good to me, and gave me a lady's life. But, when my baby was born, it all ended. He hated children—he never could endure to look at it. Then, gradually, he ceased to visit me. I left the comfortable lodgings in which I had spent that one happy year and took a poor little room and went out to work. Once in a rare interval he visited me still and I forgave him and loved him, and thanked heaven when I saw him. I loved him so dearly that neither desertion nor abuse nor blows could quite kill it. It was only when I heard from his confederate, Burns, who had been groomsman at our wedding, that he had another wife in New York, that all the love died out and anger and hatred took its place. I wrote that unfortunate young lady a letter. You know what followed for her, and me, and my child. It has made me what you see—an old, broken-down woman, at twenty-six, who looks forward with hope to nothing but a speedy death."

She swayed herself to and fro in the same dreary way, her large black eyes tearless and blank.

Magdalen's womanly heart went out to her in a great compassion, poor little frail waif, tossed about on the bitter sea of life! And the pity that softened her heart for the betrayed wife hardened it to stone for the man who had done this dastardly deed.

"The villain!" she said. "The coward! Oh, mighty God! where sleep Thy thunderbolts when such base, base wretches live and prosper! Let vengeance fall upon him, heavy and bitter! I will never lift a finger to save him. You are sure you will know him again, Mrs. Reed, after all those years?"

"Sure!" she said, lifting her melancholy eyes. "Can a wife forget her husband? But, before I stand face to face with him as his accuser, I should like to look at him once more, all unseen. It will make certainty doubly sure."

"It can be done," Magdalen answered, "very easily, as it happens. You have heard me speak of Miss Winters, Willie? Yesterday, after I went home, she met me, in a great state of delight, and announced that a surprise party was to be held to-night, at the house of a friend here in Millford—Miss Ella Goldham's. George Barstone, his cousin, Miss Winters and myself are to be of the party. If you know where the house is, Willie, you can fetch Mrs. Reed there and see us as we enter."

"I know the house," Willie answered, "a large brick house, on the bank of the river, with a long garden and lots of trees in front. The garden runs down to the very water's edge."

"Exactly. The entrance hall will be lighted, of course, and there is nothing to hinder you and Mrs. Reed from concealing yourselves behind the trees and seeing all who go in. It will probably be half-past nine when we arrive, and there is a full moon."

"We will be there," said Willie; "and the grand exposure shall come to-night. When the merrymaking is at its height, which will be, I suppose, a couple of hours after your arrival, I will enter with Caroline, accuse him of bigamy and murder—I will denounce him before his assembled friends—and our dead sister will be avenged!"

There was a pause. The twilight filled the room now, and, through the dusk, the faces of the two women gleamed like marble.

"To-night he shall be exposed—to-morrow he shall be arrested. And then, Magdalen, what becomes of you? You can come here and stop with Caroline, you know."

His sister rose up.

"Don't trouble yourself about me, Willie. I will find a refuge. I leave you now. Good-by until we meet again!"

There was a solemnity in her tone, a look in her rigid face that startled him strangely. She held out her hand, first to him; then, after a little hesitation, to Caroline.

"Farewell!" she said. "On the road we are treading there is no turning back. To-night I will have kept my vow and Laura will be avenged!"

She flitted out of the room as she spoke. Her brother followed her uneasily.

"Magdalen," he said, "let me accompany you home."

But she only waved her hand in farewell and denial, and was out of sight in a moment.

She left the forlorn little back street and made her way to the center of the town, where the stores were already ablaze with gaslight. Before one of these stores a sleigh stood and Dr. Philip Barstone was in the act of helping Miss Winters into the seat.

"Can you make room for me, Dr. Philip?" a voice at his elbow said. "I walked in and I don't feel disposed to walk back."

"Why, Magdalen!" cried Fanny in wonder, "you here! What brought you in, pray, and why don't you wait for George? Peter is coming for him the moment we get back."

"Then you cannot accommodate me in the sleigh?"

"Most certainly we can!" Doctor Philip answered, "and I will sit bodkin between you. And so you walked in? What famous pedestrians you country ladies are! But you should have come with us and not used yourself up, with four hours' hard dancing in store for you."

"What did you come for?" demanded blunt Fanny; "shopping? You haven't got any parcels. Perhaps you were at the office to see George?"

"No, I was not at the office, nor was I shopping. You were, though, I am certain."

"That she was!" exclaimed the doctor, "as I know to my cost! She has been in every dry goods and milliner's store in the town and purchased a few dollars' worth in each. What you ladies contrive to do with all the yards of silk and lace and ribbons you buy is a perpetual mystery to me."

"Wear 'em, of course, and look pretty!" said Fanny. "I have got the loveliest wreath for to-night, Magdalen—ivy, you know, and crystalized grasses,—and the most beautiful black beetle you ever saw perched on the center cluster! You will wear white to-night, being a bride still, though, of course, we can't dress much, seeing it's only a surprise party."

"That will be no restraint upon you, my dear," the doctor said. "You will array yourself more magnificently than Solomon in all his glory. Look at the moonlight on Willow Lake yonder, Mrs. Barstone—with the black shadows of the trees thrown across."

"Moonlight on the lake," murmured Fanny; "it always reminds me of the lovely new shade in dress goods. I wish we didn't have to wait dinner for George—shopping always makes me so dreadfully hungry."

They reached the house; Magdalen had spoken scarcely a word at all during the homeward ride, and a look of deep-settled sadness lay upon her face. "If any calm, a calm despair." Such a calm had fallen upon her tortured heart. The end had come—her resolution was taken—a wicked and desperate resolution, to which that blind despair had driven her.

This night, that brought exposure and disgrace to George Barstone, would be her last upon earth. Better death, she thought, speedy and painless, than live to go mad with misery. She was mad already, though she did not know it. She could not see how terrible was the crime she meditated—far deeper and more deadly than ever her wild and sinful vow. There seemed no alternative left; she accepted her doom with the quiet calm of despair. She went up to her room and began, with strange, unnatural composure, to dress. She brushed out the burnished masses of hair and twisted roses through the glittering braids and bands. She chose a dress of white tissue that floated about her like a misty cloud—soft, rich lace draping the exquisite bosom and polished bare arms.

Perhaps she had never in her life looked half so beautiful as when George Barstone opened the door and stood before her.

"Dressed!" he said, gazing at her with eyes full of love and admiration, "so soon! My darling, how lovely you look! A

very lily queen—so pure, so white, so beautiful!"

Magdalen smiled. An indescribable change had come over her—a change in voice and face and smile—a change George saw but could not understand.

"I am a bride, you know," she said, with that soft, inward smile, "and brides should wear white. Hark! Is that Fanny calling? I leave you to make your toilet and pray do not linger."

She floated from the room ere he could detain her and went to Fanny's. Miss Winters had impressed the two housemaids into her service, and was, as Phil had predicted, splendid to behold. Green silk, fabulously long, a lofty waterfall and the crown of ivy and crystalized grasses shining amid her braids.

"Will I do?" demanded the heiress. "Does green become me, Magdalen, or am I too red? How sweet you do look—don't she, Susan? So pale and cool and Maid-of-the-Mist-like! I never can look half as nice as you, dress as I choose!"

"You are all the better for not being like me in any way," Magdalen answered, "and your dress is very becoming. While you finish I will step in and see Aunt Lydia."

It was to say good-by; but Miss Barstone did not know that, as she held out her hand and kissed her favorite nephew's wife. There had been no opportunity for that talk she had promised George, and there was no time now. She looked anxiously into the cold, white face of this bride of two months, who kept her troubles buried out of sight in her heart.

"How pale you are, my child!" she said, tenderly. "Your face is as colorless as your dress. You look hardly fit for this party to-night."

"I am quite fit for it," Magdalen answered. "I will be entirely well when you see me again. I ran in to say good-by before leaving. There are the sleigh-bells now. Good-by, dear Aunt Lydia, good-by! good-by!"

She kissed her twice, and hurried out of the chamber. Fanny, shawled and hooded, stood at the head of the stairs, and the gentlemen were putting on their overcoats.

Magdalen hastened into her own apartments, threw on her heavy cloth mantle and pretty, fleecy, white hood. One last backward glance she cast—a glance of sad farewell.

"Good-by!" she said, softly; "good-by, my own dear room! Good-by, forever!"

George drew her hand within his arm and followed the other pair to the sleigh. She kept her face averted slightly, lest he, too should notice the deathly pallor that lay on it.

There was no anger in her heart toward him to-night; somehow, it had all died out. His retribution was close at hand, and all the unutterable misery of the past two months must end to-night for her.

There was not even a chance for thought once they left the house, much less for private conversation. A large three-seat sleigh stood outside the gate, filled to overflowing with laughing girls and noisy young men.

The young ladies all talked and laughed together, and a jollier surprise party never made Millford ring. Their four fleet horses brought them, in fifteen minutes, to the residence of Miss Ella Goldham, and the big sleigh drew up, with a vast deal of laughing and chatter, to the gate.

The full February moon shone silver-bright in the sky, and made the night almost as clear as noonday. Magdalen glanced, and—yes, there under the chestnut stood the dark figures of a man and a woman, only half hidden by the stripped trees. No one else saw them; all were too full of the night's frolic, as they rapidly paired off and bustled up to the front door.

Again George drew her arm within his and led her on, all unconscious of the fatal eyes upon him. Her heart seemed to cease its beating as they passed the spot where the two watchers stood; but Phil and Fanny were behind, and she dared not even look. She fancied she heard a faint cry at the moment. It caught the quick ears of Doctor Phil, too!

"What is that?" he said, glancing sharply around.

"What is what?" said Fanny, hurrying him on. "The wind, of course, among the trees. Look! there is Ella, got up regardless for the occasion. Our surprise party isn't much of a surprise to her."

An instant later and they were all in the house, receiving a cordial welcome from its youthful mistress. The gas burned low in all the apartments and speedily the house was flooded with light, and the young ladies had removed their wraps and were clustered in the drawing-room, and some one was at the piano playing a waltz; and then, two by two, they were revolving to the slow, sweet music. Miss Ella Goldham's party was in full swing.

"Will you waltz, Magdalen?" George said, bending over her chair.

He hardly expected she would, but she arose at once, with a faint smile. It was her farewell, though he knew it not. She floated around the long room in his encircling arms, his tall shoulder hiding her pale face; such deadly resolve in the sore heart beating so close to his own.

She looked at her watch—the dance concluded—only half-past ten as yet. Before midnight Willie would be in their midst with that woman, and George Barstone would be branded, before all present, as a murderer. His wife would confront them, and she herself be known for the wretched, betrayed creature she was.

"Death is easier," she thought, with a great calm; "what will my life be to me after to-night, that I should cling to it? It is my fate—I have been under a curse from first to last!"

"They want you to sing, Magdalen," Emma Goldham said, coming over. "Come along."

She arose immediately, and crossed over to the piano. She sang, from memory, a little melancholy song that George liked best. There was a deep pathos in the voice of the singer, a solemn sweetness that went home to every heart. A profound stillness fell, and, as she arose, so deathly-white, with such a far-off vacant look in her eyes, her listeners looked at one another in strange, expectant silence. Doctor Philip's ringing tones broke the hush.

"Very pretty, my dear Mrs. Barstone, but rather too dirge-like for this festive occasion. Suppose we have something lively to dispel the gentle melancholy o'er us stealing."

He sat down himself, rattled off an accompaniment, and shouted forth "Limerick Races" in a fine, resounding tenor, that speedily dispelled all signs of gravity. Then came more dancing, two or three sets of quadrilles—and the merriment was at its height. George was dancing with Miss Goldham—Magdalen had slipped away unobserved. Now was her time, if ever; it was almost eleven—in half an hour, at the farthest, Willie would be here.

She made her way to the dressing-room, concealed her white dress beneath her long, dark mantle, and passed unnoticed out of the house. Her face was set in rigid resolve—her eyes looked blindly, blankly forward in great despair, and saw nothing. She flitted swiftly as a spirit down the avenue, out of the gate, and along to the river bank. Far below it flowed silvery in the moonbeams—one leap, and earthly pain would end.

She stood still as a statue, gazing down at its tranquil flow under the white winter moon. Her heart felt dead in her breast—every thought, every feeling, every sense was benumbed. She seemed slowly turning to stone—she never heard the rapidly approaching footsteps flying over the frozen ground. It was a voice calling her own name that aroused her first. With a low cry she turned for the fatal spring, when a hand clutched her shoulder and tore her back.

"In God's name, Magdalen, stop! There has been some terrible mistake here; George Barstone is NOT Maurice Langley!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

LEARNING THE TRUTH.

She turned around and faced the man who had saved her from death. It was Willie, pale as herself, with wild face and startled eyes.

"Have you gone mad, Magdalen?" he demanded, savagely. "Is this the way you meant to confront and accuse the destroyer of your sister? Coward! to rush to self-destruction to escape trouble! An instant later and you would have been beyond mortal help. Are you mad, I repeat?"

He shook her, in his impatient anger. She put her hand to her head in a bewildered sort of way.

"I don't know—perhaps I am! I have undergone enough to make me mad. What was it you said about a mistake?"

"We have been wrong from beginning to end! Your husband is not Maurice Langley!"

"Not Maurice Langley!" she could just repeat the words, breathlessly—"not Maurice Langley!"

"No, I tell you! I am certain of it, for I have seen the real Maurice Langley to-night. Magdalen, I am as glad as though somebody had left me a million of money, for your sake! Your husband is your husband! Go down on your knees, if you like, and beg his pardon, for we have both done him a great wrong."

"Not Maurice Langley!" Magdalen said once more, in the same dazed way. "What do you mean? George not the husband of that woman, but my own—my very own?"

"Your own! Caroline Reed has no claim upon him—never set eyes on him until to-night. You mad girl! to think of your meditating suicide, and the truth coming out at the eleventh hour! Your husband is not Maurice Langley, I say again; but Maurice Langley, for all that, is in yonder house."

She grew so faint as she listened that she would have fallen but for Willie's encircling arms. The roar of the river was in her ears—the stars danced dizzily before her—the earth seemed reeling under her feet.

"Don't faint!" the brother cried, fiercely; "don't faint, I tell you, Magdalen! This is no time for it. We have found our man, beyond the power of mistake, this time; and I want you to tell me all about him before you go back to the house. You must get back, you know, before you are missed, or we will have them here, confound them, looking for you. Here! I brought this for fear Caroline might get chilled, standing waiting in the snow. She is a sickly thing, at best. Take a pull—it won't hurt you."

He put a flask to her lips. Magdalen obeyed mechanically. It was brandy; but she tasted it no more than though it had been cold water. It revived her, however; and she stood erect once more, and looked at Willie.

"Tell me all," she said. "I shall not faint—I am better now—joy does not kill. But oh, thank God! my darling! my darling!"

The endearing epithets were not for him, Willie knew. The face upturned to the starlit sky was glorified with wifely love and joy.

"Tell me all," she repeated. "George is not Maurice Langley! Ah! my love! how could I ever doubt you? Tell me, Willie, who is?"

"Do you recollect the man who followed you and your husband into the house, with that fat little girl on his arm? A tall fellow, with a blond mustache—enough like your husband to be his brother. That is the man."

"What!" Magdalen gasped.

She stood an instant, gazing upon her brother in blank surprise. Strange! She had never once thought of him, and now a conviction of the truth burst upon her like a flash of sunlight. She saw it all—the resemblance—the name—the effect of the picture—the whole tragedy of errors into which they had fallen ever since their wedding day.

"He's the man—curse him!" Willie said. "Why don't you speak? Who is he? You ought to know."

"I know!" Magdalen said, clasping her hands. "Oh, Willie! I see it all! Why did I never suspect this? I distrusted that man and disliked him from the first; but I never knew why. Now, I know. Oh, why did I not suspect him? I see it all! I see it all!"

"Do you? Then perhaps you will be good enough to let me see it, too. Allow me to remind you, Mrs. Barstone, time is on the wing. Who is he?"

"He is Philip Barstone."

"Barstone! Whew! Then it is a Barstone, after all."

"He is my husband's cousin—Doctor Philip Barstone. Tell me, Willie, how you discovered your mistake."

"Why, by seeing him, of course. Caroline and I both recognized him in a moment. Your husband looked so unfortunately like him that I may be pardoned for making the mistake. Had I ever seen them together, I would have known the difference at once. Didn't you hear Caroline cry out at sight of him and he turned around and asked what was that? Then I knew him; his hair and mustache used to be dyed black—as his heart—the scoundrel; but I knew his face again directly. That is our man, Magdalen. Is he stopping at Golden Willows?"

"Yes, and is to be married, in three weeks, to the girl you saw on his arm. She has come into a fortune lately. That is why he is marrying her. Oh, save her, Willie! Expose him at once, and save Fanny!"

Willie Allward laughed harshly.

"I'll save her, never fear; you just leave this matter to me, Magdalen. Going to be married, in three weeks time, is he? Very well—I'll wait a little. On his wedding day, when he stands before the clergyman with his bride, I'll be there, too, with his lately deceased wife! Died in Bellevue, did she? He'll see! Won't there be a tableau, Magdalen? Sensational enough for the Bowery Theater."

"Oh, Willie! For pity's sake don't talk so! Don't wait! Think of that poor girl's feelings—spare her—expose him at once—come to-morrow to the house with Mrs. Reed—don't let things go any farther! She has done no wrong—poor little Fanny! Think of her—think of George—my generous, wronged husband—think of poor Miss Barstone, who loves him—and tell the truth to-morrow!"

Willie Allward's face set in dogged defiance and resolution.

"I will think of no one! I will spare no one! I will show him the mercy he has shown me, Laura and Caroline! The accursed villain! the double, treble, four-fold murderer! Spare him! not if an angel came from yonder starlit sky to plead for him! And my curse upon you, Magdalen Barstone, if you frustrate my scheme!"

She wrung her hands. Her heart went out in infinite compassion to the poor little confiding girl, who had loved him so long and so well. And George and Aunt Lydia—how they would suffer—what disgrace would be theirs, for her sake.

"Oh, Willie!" she cried, wildly, "be merciful—not to him—but to them! He will feel the blow as deeply now, but they will not! It will kill poor Fanny, if you dragged him from her side on her wedding day!"

"Young ladies are not so easily killed!" Willie retorted with a sneer. "I tell you I shall think of no one—spare no one! I will show him no more mercy than if I were a bloodhound on his track! How dare you plead for him—you of all women alive? Think of your dead sister, your broken-hearted father, your felon brother, your vow! Think of your vow, and ask me to spare him if you dare!"

She dropped before him; her hands fell.

"Heaven help Fanny!" she almost sobbed, "since I cannot!"

"You will leave this matter entirely to me!" persisted Willie. "I shall not ask your help. Only remain neutral, and hold your tongue. Caroline and I will remain here until the wedding day. Upon the wedding day we will be there. Mind, not to your husband, not to a living soul, must you breathe a word of the truth. When the cup is at his lip, when a rich bride

stands by his side, I will tear her and her wealth from him, and show him to all there as the murderer and villain he is! On your wedding day, Maurice Langley, I think Laura and William Allward will be avenged!"

His eyes glowed, his voice rang. His whole frame seemed to grow taller in his exultant, savage triumph.

His sister shrank from him. His burning thirst for revenge seemed a horrible thing, seen in another. In herself it had appeared but righteous justice.

"I think you had better get back to the house now," Willie said. "They'll miss you presently, and that won't do. Caroline is waiting yonder, too, and will be about frozen. The sight of that scoundrel has upset her altogether. You women are odd cattle. I believe she'd forgive Langley to-morrow, if he asked her. Come, I'll see you safe to the house; and don't look so wild and white, if you can help it."

He seized her arm and hurried her along. On the way a thought struck him, and he stopped.

"I say, Magdalen, look here! The mark on the arm, you know. How do you account for that?"

Magdalen had never thought of it.

"I don't know," she answered, hopelessly. "My head is in a whirl. I can account for nothing!"

"It must be that they both have it, you know. They lived together as boys, I suppose?"

"Yes—I believe so."

"Then they both have it, depend upon it. It was done in boyhood, Langley told me. You must find out in some round-about way; but, mark or no mark, your Philip Barstone is Maurice Langley! Now hurry along!"

They reached the house. The sound of music and dancing feet came merrily to them where they stood in the solemn winter night. Willie shook his clenched fist at the glowing windows.

"And he is there—curse him—enjoying it all—and I stand here—the felon he made me! And you ask me to spare him! If he were to be hanged to-morrow I'd be hangman, and plead for the privilege on my knees!"

She broke away from him wildly and fled up to the house. She was like a woman beside herself—frantic for the time—with all she had suffered. She rushed along the lighted hall and into the brilliant ball-room, her mantle trailing behind her, with wild, white face, dilated eyes and outstretched arms.

"George! George!" she cried, "save me! help me! forgive me!"

He was standing at a little distance, bending over the chair of his hostess and a group of gay girls. At that wild cry he sprang forward; but, before he could catch her, she had reeled blindly forward and fallen in a dead faint at his feet.

CHAPTER XXIX.

IN THE SICK ROOM.

At Golden Willows Mrs. George Barstone lay very ill, and in Millford gossip was rife as to the mysterious cause of that illness. A lady cannot quit a gay party, absent herself for half an hour, and rush in at the expiration of that period, screaming wildly, and fainting dead away, without exciting considerable comment. It had eked out before now that Mrs. Barstone had been a changed person ever since her marriage. She had returned from her bridal tour a haggard, careworn woman, who had left a happy blooming bride. Who was to blame? Not George—surely—the sweetest temper, the kindest heart in the place. Was there some secret in Miss Wayne's past life, and was it remorse that was wearing her to a shadow? People talked in Millford, and up at Golden Willows the object of all the clatter lay in her darkened room, tossing restlessly on a fevered pillow.

They had taken her home in dismay from Miss Goldham's party, still in a state of semi-unconsciousness. Under the care of Doctor Philip she had been brought round at last, and she had started up on her elbow, pushed her flowing hair back from her face, and gazed wildly around. She was in her own room at home; there was Fanny, crying and frightened; there was George, pale as a ghost, and beside her, holding a glass to her lips, Philip Barstone. As her eyes rested on his face, a wild shriek rang through the room, and she would have sprung from the bed but that her husband had caught her.

"Take him away!" she cried, "take him away! Oh, George! It was he who did it!—he! he!"

The shriek ended in wild laughter—Magdalen was in violent hysterics. Before morning she was raving wildly in delirium, and Doctor Miller, of the town, had taken his place by her side, vice Doctor Barstone, deposed.

Magdalen lay very ill for a week, and Doctor Miller looked grave, and came three times every day to see her. But she was young and strong, and the fever gave way very speedily, and she lay pale and prostrate, but quite out of danger, in her darkened chamber, and very seldom, either by night or day, did that devoted husband of hers quit her bedside. Business! what was all the legal business on earth to his darling's life? He forgot to eat or sleep—he grew almost as pale and thin as herself, in those nine days and nights during which her life hung trembling in the balance.

She knew it all, as consciousness and memory returned, and she lay very still, with closed eyes, and her wasted hands clasped in his. She knew of all the sleepless care, the sorrow so deep in his heart that no words had ever expressed it—dumb agony in the faithful eyes that so seldom left her face. She knew it all, and she remembered, with the keen intensity of a sensitive nature, the cruel wrong that had been done him—her coldness, her bitter words, the misery she had made him suffer. She realized it all now, and the slow, miserable tears stole down her white cheeks, and she turned her head away from him—and he thought she slept—tears of shame and remorse. On that sick bed Magdalen Barstone learned to pray—truly, perhaps, for the first time. Death had been very near, and in the solemn light she knew at last how wicked she had been—how sinful her vow of revenge. She had rested in her own feeble hands the great attribute of the Most High—vengeance. She had committed a crime, and the penalty must be borne. George loved her still; but how he must hate and despise her when all became known.

At the end of the second week Magdalen was permitted to sit up. George carried her in his arms over to the cozy rocker near the fire, his honest face full of great joy. March was at its close now, and going out like a lion, with high winds and cold, dreary rains. The contrast with the dismal morning made her fire-lit, pretty room, seem trebly cozy. George placed the footstool under her feet, adjusted her pillows and shawls, and looked at her as a mother looks at her first-born.

"Are you quite comfortable now, dear? Is there anything else I can get you?"

She looked up at him with a smile very sad to see.

"If I wanted the clouds out of yonder sky, you would try and get them for me—wouldn't you, George? Yes, there is something else. I want you to forgive me."

"There can be no such word between you and me, Magdalen. I have nothing to forgive!"

"Nothing! Nothing for all my coldness, my cruelty, my scornful words—the suffering I have made you endure all these weeks? Ah, George! I can understand now what is meant by heaping coals of fire on the wrong-doer's head. Sit down

here beside me, and tell me—to please me, if nothing else—that you forgive me for the unhappiness of your married life."

He took a low stool beside her and kissed the wasted hand that lay on the arm of her chair.

"Out of my heart, my darling, I forgive you! Only be happy and well and kind to a poor fellow who loves you, and I will forget that time has ever been!"

She tried to smile back, but a great lump arose in her throat and choked her. She knew what was coming—what was so near—the shame and disgrace and sorrow she had no power to avert. It was a moment before she could master her voice and speak.

"Whatever the future may bring, George, we will be happy together, to-day, at least. It is very sweet to be petted and nursed and loved so devotedly as you love me. But I am not worth it—I am not worthy of you! No, George, I never was!"

"That will do, Mrs. Barstone! Permit me to be the best judge of my own wife's worthiness! As for myself, I am next door to an angel; but you might spare a man's modesty, and not cast it up to him. Do you know what I am going to do with you when you get well, Mrs. B.? Carry you off for a three months' tour through the Southern and Western States, and perhaps to Canada, if you behave yourself."

His wife smiled a little, and ran her fingers through his clustering brown hair.

"Yes, dear," she said, absently. She was thinking how to begin her task. "George!" she exclaimed, abruptly, "why don't you ask me about that night—that horrible night of the party at Millford?"

She shuddered as she spoke, and trembled nervously. She remembered, with horror, how near she had been to that one crime for which the Giver of life has no forgiveness.

"Because I'm not a woman," the lawyer answered, "and therefore not endowed with curiosity, and because you must not talk much, and, above everything, are not to excite yourself. It will all come in good time; we won't mind it to-day."

"But I had rather, George—much rather. It will not excite me. It will comfort me to tell you all I may."

"All you may? Does that mean you are not at liberty to tell everything?"

"Yes—the mystery that has made you so wretched, George, all along, must be a mystery for a short time still. It is the secret of another, and I cannot disclose it. But what I am at liberty to tell, I will. George, on that night of the party I discovered I had done you a great and cruel wrong—that I had mistaken you for another, and misjudged you beyond reparation, almost. That knowledge excited me so much that I fainted at your feet."

George looked rather puzzled. It was not the most lucid explanation in the world, certainly.

"Magdalen! me! Mistaken me for another?" he repeated. "Mistaken me for whom? And what did you think I had done, pray?"

Magdalen bent forward, took both his hands in hers, and looked earnestly into his eyes.

"George, if I tell you this, will you give me your promise never to repeat to anyone—not Aunt Lydia—not Fanny—not a creature in the world—not your cousin?"

"Certainly, Magdalen. Why should I tell them?"

"Because, dear—I don't intend this as a reproach, mind—you didn't quite keep your promise of secrecy in a former case. You told your cousin all about me, in New York."

"He surprised it out of me," George said, penitently. "He asked me point blank if your name was not Allward, and he knew all about your sister and brother. He took me so much by surprise, I give you my word that I let him find out almost before I knew it. I have been very sorry for it since, I assure you; but, you see, you resemble your late sister, it appears, and he recognized your resemblance at once."

"It does not matter," Magdalen said, quietly; "but what I am going to say to you now does. He must not know it."

"He shall not! Trust me, Magdalen."

"Then, George, I took you to be—Maurice Langley!"

George sat and stared at her, the whole meaning of her words not striking him at once.

His blank face, even in that moment, made Magdalen smile.

"Gracious powers! took me to be Maurice Langley! Me the betrayer of your sister—the tempter of your brother! How, in the name of all that is wonderful, could you have made such a mistake?"

"That is one of the things I may not tell you—it would involve the discovery of the real criminal. I thought so, and only on the night of the party did I find out my error."

"Who told you that night?"

"The—the person who has been in the habit of writing to me of late—who is here."

"Oh! Johnstone! Well, I owe him one good turn, at least. How came he to know anything about it?"

"He has discovered Maurice Langley, the real criminal. He takes as much interest in this matter as I do. I told you he was a relative. It is on this subject, and no other, that he has written me—that I have met him secretly two or three times."

"Why didn't you have him at the house? I never distrusted you, Magdalen; but then, you see, it looked queer, and others might find it out, and talk. And I don't want my wife talked about."

"I am afraid you will not be able to prevent it, my poor George. He was poor and ashamed of his poverty. He would not have come. And my vow obliged me to meet him."

"Oh, confound the vow!" George said, with an inward groan. "I hope that won't crop up again." Then aloud: "I wish you would tell me how you first came to mistake me for that matchless scoundrel, of all people in the world? I may have gone a little awry in the past, but, by Jove! how you could suppose me capable of such crimes, I can't understand. Come! I'll make a clean breast of it! A little before your family misfortunes I was in New York, a wild member of a wild company of lawless Bohemians. I was entrusted by Aunt Lydia with six hundred dollars to be paid over to a person in the city. I got to drinking and gambling—led, I am bound to say in self-defense, by others. I got deeply involved in debts of honor, as they call them, and still tempted by another, I appropriated Aunt Lydia's money. There is the one crime of my life, Magdalen. And I have been ashamed of it ever since. Aunt Lydia forgave me—bless her!—and I have done my best, ever since, to atone. I kept it from you—I thought it could not concern you. Perhaps I should have told you long ago!"

"I think I know who your tempter was," observed his wife; "his name was Philip Barstone."

"Hush, my dear! Phil has sown his wild oats, and reformed, too. And, speaking of Phil, do you know whose picture that was you placed on the dining-room table, sometime ago?"

"Yes; it is the picture of his wife!"

"Was, you mean—she's dead. In the name of wonder, Magdalen, how did you find that out?"

"That must be another secret. You saw her, then, and knew her?"

"I never knew her, and I only saw her once, when he pointed her out on the street to me. Very few ever knew of that foolish marriage. How you came by your mysterious knowledge is a puzzler. You must not tell Fanny; she wants her kept in the dark. Very wrong, I think, but that's his business."

There was a brief pause.

"You know now, George," Magdalen resumed, "the reason of my coldness and secret trouble, the cause of my meeting that—that man, and receiving his letters. I wronged you, and I ask your pardon from the bottom of my heart!"

"You have it from the bottom of mine!" and he kissed her tenderly. "But it was not fair, Magdalen; you should have accused me openly, and let me clear myself. You said, a moment ago, you had found the true Maurice Langley; will you

tell me who he is, or is this a third secret?"

"It is a secret. We have found him, and he shall be made to atone for the past! It is too late to draw back now. I am bound by a vow I must keep. Remember, George, if in the future you are disposed to blame me very much, that I warned you. I told you before our marriage of my vow, of the purpose of my life—and that nothing, not even a husband's love and devotion, should stand between me and my vengeance. Try and recall that when I denounce my great enemy."

George looked very grave, very much troubled.

"You have found him, and it is your intention to denounce him? Does that mean you will take retribution in your own hands, or that you will yield him up to the law?"

"To the law, of course. What could I do, poor, weak woman like me?"

"Weak bodily, perhaps, but terribly strong in this relentless purpose. And how will the law avenge you? He has done your sister and brother great wrong; but, as I told you before, that revenge does not place him within reach of the law."

"I am aware of that," Magdalen said, in a somber voice; "it is not of those crimes he will be accused. In his past life there lies another, known but to myself and one other—a crime for which many years' imprisonment and life-long disgrace must atone. For that crime he will be denounced and given up to the law."

George arose, very much agitated.

"Magdalen! Magdalen! what is it you are about to do? This man deserves his doom, no doubt, but let yours not be the hand to wreak it. Crime should not be hidden from punishment; but you—my gentle Magdalen, my cherished wife—for you to turn Nemesis, and work the ruin of any man—oh, my love! my love! for my sake, desist!"

"I have vowed," Magdalen answered, in the same gloomy tone.

"An impulsive, girlish, romantic act, not only foolish in the doing, but sinful in the keeping. Think of the notoriety for you—how you will be dragged through a trial—through newspapers, over the length and breadth of the land! Oh, Magdalen, stop and think, while there is yet time."

"There is no longer time; the power to desist has passed from me, George!" she cried, starting up, "let me tell you one other secret. The man who writes to me—whom I meet—whose alias is Johnstone—is my brother! my brother, free from prison before our marriage, and bent on revenge. It was he who discovered all this; it is he who will denounce Maurice Langley—not I!"

George Barstone drew a long breath of intense relief. Magdalen was one thing; Magdalen's brother was quite another.

"Oh, so he is the avenger!" George said; "that's quite a different thing. I shouldn't mind helping him myself, only it will be an ugly business dragging your domestic troubles before the public. May I ask what is the crime of which your brother will accuse him?"

"Murder!" Magdalen said, in a low, awe-struck tone. "A most foul and unnatural murder. Oh, George! spare me—I have told you all I may tell—let us talk of this no more. Soon—very soon—you will know all."

Her look and manner were so wild that George grew alarmed. He hastily replaced her in her seat and strove to soothe her. "Certainly, we will cease to speak of it; only tell me, is your brother still in Millford?"

"He is, I have every reason to believe."

"And may I not see him, Magdalen—my wife's only brother? I may be able to advise him—to help him."

"Not for worlds!" she said. "You don't know what you ask. There is Fanny's rap at the door, George. Go and leave me for a little—you have been in this close room all day. And mind, all this is a secret between us."

"Inviolable!" He stooped and kissed her. "I wish you could trust me fully, Magdalen. When will the day come when there will be no more secrets between us?"

"Very soon—very soon now. Rest easy, George. Before the end of two weeks you will know all."

"All?" he said, abruptly.

"All!"

"Thank heaven for that."

Magdalen trembled at that fervent thanksgiving.

"If he only knew!" she thought—"if he only knew!"

A moment later and Fanny was in the room, voluble in her inquiries regarding the patient's health; and George with rather a rueful face, went out into the wet March morning for a smoke and a constitutional.

CHAPTER XXX.

BEFORE THE WEDDING.

Mr. George Barstone might be very anxious for the recovery of his wife, but he was not one whit more anxious than one other person at Golden Willows—Miss Winters. If Mrs. Barstone saw fit to have a tedious illness, or to die, she must, in common decency, postpone her wedding—and which of us would like to postpone our wedding? Fanny was a great deal too fond of Phil and too eager to be off upon that delightful wedding trip—"to the place all good Americans go when they die." Philip had his own private reasons, also—very different, indeed—for dreading delay.

Philip Barstone was Maurice Langley, and, ever since the night of the party, he knew his cousin's wife had known it. He was not a cowardly man, but from the first time he had seen her he had a superstitious dread of his cousin's wife. She had come upon him, with her youthful beauty, her golden hair, and her blue eyes, like a ghost that first night; like the ghost of the girl he had done to death. He knew of the purpose of her life—he understood the mistake she had made in confounding him with George—he knew that the man she met in New York and in Millford was her brother, whom he had made a felon. He knew that the instant she discovered him she would denounce him, and then adieu to all hope for Fanny and her fortune. Fanny was devotedly and sentimentally fond of him, and not over wise, but Fanny was a pure-hearted girl, also, who would shrink from so base a villain as he. He never dreaded, for an instant, that the darker secret which lay in his life was in the possession of brother and sister. Had he known the truth, indeed he would have seen how deeply he had reason to fear her.

Philip Barstone had been a thoroughly bad and unprincipled man—a drunkard, a gambler, a libertine. Willie Allward was not the only youth whose feet he had first led into the road to ruin, nor were Laura Allward and Caroline Reed the only women whose lives he had blasted.

That was all past now, and he had reformed. Yes, but through no remorse for his crimes, through no horror of his own guilt. Villainy had proved a losing game, and, inwardly cursing his luck, he had taken to honesty as the best policy, and at heart was as evil as ever. The hour of fruition had come, after long waiting, and a fortune was within his grasp.

He might leave the country and in far-off Paris enjoy life, after his views, to his heart's content, always supposing his identity, as Maurice Langley, were not discovered until after the wedding day.

"A fig for her then," he thought. "Fanny will be mine, and her fortune, which is the chief consideration, beyond all power of yours, my tall, handsome Mrs. Barstone."

But now he was sure she had discovered the real culprit. He understood that wild cry for forgiveness to George—the horror with which she had turned from him. She knew all. Would she suffer him to wed Fanny, and hold her peace? When the fever was at its highest he had ardently hoped that either life or reason might go, but when both came back he nerved himself to face the worst.

"Fanny is a fool," he mused, "and would lay her head under my feet if I asked her. Who knows? She may marry me in spite of all—in spite of Aunt Lydia's interdiction. If I am accused, it is of no use denying. They can bring incontestable proofs, but if I can persuade Fanny to run away with me, what will it signify? Why the deuce couldn't she die, like better women?"

Doctor Phil devoted himself more than ever to his betrothed, and pushed on the preparations for the wedding with feverish haste. It was fixed for the fifteenth of April, and it was now the last week of March.

"Mrs. George won't die, Fanny," he said, "not a fear of it, and we won't postpone our marriage nor the preparations. Keep the dressmakers and milliners at work all the same. There shall be no postponement in our case."

"I hope not, I am sure," Fanny responded, with a very serious face. "It's so dreadfully unlucky, you know, Phil. There was Magdalen. Her wedding was postponed, and see what comes of it. She has been just as miserable ever since as ever she can be. And now she's got a mysterious brain fever—nobody knows why. I think if I lost you, Phil, I should have a brain fever too. They always have one in books, you know—such nice, interesting complaints—brain fever, or throbbing headache, or fall dead, like a flash, of heart disease, or pine away in a decline, and die with an unnatural flush upon their cheeks and unnatural luster in their eyes. You never hear of a heroine having toothache or smallpox, or yellow jaundice,

or those nasty complaints. I am certain I should have a brain fever if I lost you, Phil."

"Are you quite certain you love me enough for that, Fanny?" Doctor Phil asked, with a pathetic glance of his dark eyes. "I wonder what you really would do and dare for my sake?"

"Anything—everything! I'd go through fire and water for your sake, you know I would, Philip—though what good going through fire and water would do any one I can't see. I've loved you—oh, for ages and ages—and I would die—yes, I'd drown myself, or take laudanum—if I lost you now. But there is no fear of that, is there, Phil?" his devoted slave inquired, nestling under his wing.

Doctor Phil put his arm around her and gave her a kiss.

"No fear, I hope; but who can tell, Fan? There is many a slip, and I have enemies who would injure me if they could. Suppose, for instance, some one came and told you I had behaved very badly in the past—I have sown my wild oats, you know, my darling, like other fellows—suppose they told you very shocking stories about that past, what would you do?"

"Slap their faces, if I could!" answered Miss Winters, promptly, "and not believe a word of it."

Phil half laughed.

"But suppose the wicked stories to be true—suppose I couldn't disprove—what then?"

"Then I should tell them to mind their own business, and forgive you and never think about it again, so that you were always good to me and fond of me. I love you so dearly, Phil, that I could forgive you anything, excepting being false to me."

"You are quite sure, Fanny—anything?"

"Well, of course, excepting murder, or something awful like that, which is ridiculous to think about. Only love me, and keep true to me, and all the slanders in the world will not part us."

The gray darkness that shadowed the young man's sallow face at times fell on it as she spoke, and he released her suddenly and walked over to one of the windows.

Murder! The faces of a woman and a child arose before him as vividly as he ever had seen them. The sun-lighted drawing-room faded away. He saw a miserable hut, a glimmering tallow candle, a man in drunken frenzy, a pale woman, with a sleeping child in her arms. He saw the blind rage of the man, the horrible blow that felled mother and child; he heard again that wild, deep shriek, and the cold drops stood thick on his ghastly brow. Murder! The white face of Laura Allward—white with woman's utmost woe, as she had stood before him that last night—came back as plainly as in that very hour. Caroline and her child slept in one grave; Laura Allward lay under the waving grass and clover in her distant country home. Oh, God! how black and awful was the record that lay behind him! Murder! Not one murder, but three!

Fanny followed him to the window and looked up in his face with anxious eyes.

"How pale you are, Phil! What's the matter? What makes you say such things to-day? Oh!" clasping her hands tragically, "nothing is about to happen, surely—nothing is going to part us now?"

"Nothing," Philip Barstone said, resolutely setting his teeth and turning to her—"nothing, Fanny, so that you love me and trust me. We will be married on the fifteenth of April, in spite of the world and all therein! By the bye, I have written to a friend of mine in New York to come down and be groomsman on the occasion. You have heard of him, I dare say. He is a novelist—tremendous fellow with pen and inkstand. His name is Tompkins."

"Oh, Phil!" cried Fanny, "An author—a real author—and that author Mr. Tompkins! Why, I'd give all the world to see him! His stories are the loveliest I ever read. But I won't dare to speak to him, and I'm sure he won't deign to look at poor little me. A man whose ideal is so perfectly lovely, so tall, so magnificent, so majestic, must despise such a commonplace creature as I am. What's he like? Very tall and very, very handsome, with great solemn black eyes and long hair—isn't he?"

Phil laughed.

"Tompkins is—no, wait until you see him. Here's his answer—perhaps you would like to see it?"

Fanny seized it eagerly. It was only a half sheet of note-paper and written in a great slap-dash, atrociously unreadable writing:

Dear Phil:—

Got yours—wish you joy. Any more heiresses where she came from? Will be down, of course. Look for me next week. Yours, etc.,

R. T.

Miss Winters was a little disappointed. There were two big blots, and for an eminent author there wasn't much in this epistle. And then Phil went out to saunter away to the town, and Fanny went up to Magdalen's room.

It was the young doctor's habit to visit Millford every day and keep a sharp lookout for Willie Allward; but he never saw him. Willie remained within doors until after nightfall, when he took Caroline out for a little walk, quietly biding his time.

George left the sick room as Fanny entered and Miss Winters, taking his vacated stool, told the invalid wife all about her trousseau, in active preparation, of the day they had appointed, of the coming of the celebrated Mr. Richard Tompkins, and even of Phil's mysterious remarks that morning.

"I wonder what he meant, Magdalen? Perhaps he didn't mean anything. I don't half understand Phil at times; but I think I like him all the better for that. He's been dreadful wild in the past, I'm afraid," said Fanny, with great relish; "but do you know I like wild young men! Lord Byron was wild, and I adore him—and Edgar Poe used to get tipsy, they say. When we're married, perhaps he'll tell me all about it."

"Fanny," said Magdalen, putting the question point blank, "did you ever see that odd mark George has tattooed upon his left arm?"

"Why, yes," answered Fanny, at once, "of course I have! Phil's got another exactly like it!"

"Indeed! On the same arm, and exactly like it?"

"Precisely the same! They both had them done, when boys, by a sailor at Millford. I've seen them and heard Aunt Lydia tell how angry she was. Why?"

"Oh, nothing—the thought struck me. So Dr. Barstone has been talking of losing you, has he? Would it make you very, very unhappy, Fanny?"

"I should die!" answered Fanny solemnly.

"No!" said Magdalen; "no, Fanny, we don't die so easily; and it is only in novels that people break their hearts, or their blood vessels, and fall dead with trouble. You'd lose him and live, and forget him altogether, by and by, in the love of a better man!"

"A better man! Mrs. Barstone, how dare you!"

"I beg your pardon, Fanny. He owns himself he has been wicked and so do you. If he was shown to you as a villain—a villain steeped in crime to the lips—I am only putting a case, remember—would you not scorn and cast him off and forget him?"

"Oh, dear, no! I don't think so—I couldn't, you know. I tell you I should die, or go mad if I lost him! I love him with all my heart, and couldn't live without him! Don't let us talk about such horrid things! I shall be dreaming all night that he is a Eugene Aram, and that he has been torn from me, and taken to prison with 'gyves upon his wrists.' You'll be down-stairs to-morrow, Magdalen, I suppose?"

Magdalen said yes, and kept her word. She came down-stairs the following evening on George's arm—George looking so unspeakably proud and happy—and was installed in the great cushioned chair before the fire.

George lingered, looking at her with admiring eyes. How fair, how pure, how sweet she looked, he thought, in her flowing white robes and freshly curled amber hair—the old tender smile for him back again on the dear face. But all the tender light vanished presently when Philip Barstone came in and approached her chair, with outstretched hand and ready words of greeting upon his facile lips.

"My dear Mrs. Barstone! My dear Magdalen! I am more than rejoiced to see you among us once more. The house has been like a tomb and you have been sadly missed by more than George!"

Magdalen's eyes flashed—flashed blue fire upon the audacious miscreant. She glanced at the outstretched hand and turned her back upon him in dead silence.

In spite of himself a livid red flush crossed his sallow face and the gleam in his dark eyes was an evil gleam to see. George gazed blankly and Fanny, in the doorway, flashed indignant fire upon the invalid, who thus deliberately insulted her demi-god. But no one spoke and the pause which followed, Philip Barstone might well remember to the day of his death!

"Come and practise 'Limerick Races,'" his betrothed said. "Ella Goldham, her brother and a few other friends are coming to-night. Come!"

She opened the piano, played the symphony and Philip crossed over, mechanically, and stood beside her. His face had changed again to the dull gray pallor it took at times, and he looked quite ghastly in the glimmer of the lamp light. She knew all then! All! That meant she knew him for Maurice Langley—the destroyer of her sister and brother. Not only that, but knowing that, he had great reason to fear her now.

"The game with Fanny has been too easy," he thought. "There can be no such luck in store for me. I have held winning cards ere now, but the game has never been mine; something will happen before the wedding day. Let her take care! If she balks me in this, let her take care!"

The expected guests arrived by the time Philip had sung his song twice and a very pleasant evening followed. Through it all Philip watched his cousin's wife with furtive, ceaseless eyes; but he never approached or addressed her. She knew him as he was. Of all those present who had known him from boyhood up, this pale, golden-haired invalid alone knew him for the villain he was.

Magdalen retired early and kept her room until late next day. When she descended to the drawing-room, near noon, she found it deserted by all save Miss Winters.

Fanny was seated at a table near the window, bending with pursed-up mouth and knitted brows over a sketch in water colors. She looked up despondently as Magdalen came in.

"It's horrid!" broke out the artist, looking vindictively at her own production—a gentleman in a fly-away cloak and a cocked hat, with the whites of his eyes up-rolled in an alarming manner, striking a guitar beneath a lady's lattice. "It's horrid! and I wanted it to look particularly nice, that Phil might see how I've improved. My figures never will stand steady on their legs as yours do, Magdalen, and this grass is the color of brown paper; and I don't believe there ever was a sky as purple as this is! It's no use—it's like my usual fate—everything goes wrong with me!"

She pushed the work of art away with an impatient sigh and looked out at the drear and dismal morning.

"I used to think it was a lovely thing to be unhappy," pursued Miss Winters. "I used to think there was nothing on earth so nice as to be haughty and handsome and miserable, like the heroine of a novel. I ain't handsome and I can't be haughty, though I've tried hard enough before now, goodness knows; but I'm just as miserable as I can be, and I don't take the least comfort in it. It's all Phil's fault! I don't know what's come over him. He's as silent and sulky when we're alone together, as though he were a Manfred, or a Corsair, or something. If he had a secret sorrow or a murder on his mind, he couldn't be more grumpy. And, in books, grumpy men are so nice! There was Mr. Rochester, you know, Magdalen, just as hateful as he could be, and who could help loving him? But it's different in real life, and I don't believe Phil cares for me a bit. It's just my fortune he wants; and, I dare say, I shall be a neglected, wretched and broken-hearted wife as soon as we're married."

Dr. Barstone's betrothed produced her handkerchief and snuffed a little behind it, but, after all, there was a dismal sort of enjoyment in thus reviewing her woes.

She was engaged to the "idol of her soul," so Miss Winters called him, mentally, and he snubbed her unmercifully, at times, and she was unhappy and a heroine at last.

Miss Winters plumed herself rather on the distinction, and took Edith Dombeyish airs, and posed herself à la Medora, waiting broken-hearted for Conrad, while that wretched man enjoyed himself with Gulnare.

Magdalen listened wearily. She had her own troubles, many and heavy, but she was always gentle and patient with Fanny.

"It's only your fancy, dear," she said. "Doctor Philip is very fond of you, I dare say, though it may not be his way to show it. He sat by your side all last evening."

"Oh, he did!" Fanny retorted. "Much good that did me! Do you know who he looked at, from the first moment he sat down? You! Yes, Mrs. George Barstone—you! And it's my belief he's a great deal more in love with you than with me. You ought to hear all the questions he used to ask about you, until I got mad and refused to answer any more. I have flirted, just as hard as I knew how, with Frank Leigh, afore now. What did he care? I don't believe he ever saw me. And that's why I am so dreadfully wretched," concluded Miss Winters, again producing her handkerchief. "I don't so much mind his being crusty and snappish, and silent, and mopish, but I do mind his falling in love with a married woman, and that woman his own cousin-in-law! How do I know he hasn't told you he loved you, and very likely asked you to elope with him? He'd do it as soon as look! Why else should you insult him as you did last night? You wouldn't shake hands with him—you wouldn't answer him—you looked at him with what books call 'ineffable scorn'—and you gave him the cold shoulder. People don't treat their husband's first cousin like that for nothing! He's in love with you, Mrs. Magdalen Barstone, and you know it; and you both ought to be ashamed of yourselves! What would George say, I should like to know, to such goings on?"

In spite of herself Magdalen had to laugh at the absurd mistake and Fanny's indignant face.

"My dear Fanny, what a supremely silly idea! Don't you know how insulting to me your horrible accusation is? Philip Barstone and I have very little love for each other, I assure you. Ah, Fanny, if I could only make you listen to reason—if I only dared tell you—but what is the use? Every word that I say you will repeat to him five minutes after; and, if he told you white was black, you would believe him, in spite of your own eyesight. Don't you know, you foolish child, that he is only marrying you for your fortune?"

"Of course I know it!" cried the heiress, shrilly. "Didn't he tell me so? People can't live on air, even if they are married to their soul's idol; and if he had nothing, and I had less,

'Would that flame that we're so rich in
Light a fire in the kitchen,
Or the little god of Love turn the spit, spit, spit?'

Of course it wouldn't! But, when I came into my fortune, that was quite a different thing. I don't care for the money. He might have it and welcome. But I do wish he loved me as I love him! Sometimes he's as good as he can be, and I'm happy; and then again he turns dismal and sulky and hasn't a word to fling at a dog. And, if it's so before marriage, what will it be after?"

"What—indeed!" Magdalen eagerly said. "Oh, Fanny! pause while there is yet time. Discard this man! He is base and mercenary, and will make you miserable. Send him away and forget him. Show him you have proper womanly pride and spirit. George is going to take me south. Come with us. Wait a little and some good man who really loves you for yourself will come along and make you a happy wife. Don't marry Philip Barstone! He is a bad, bad man! Oh, Fanny! for your own sake, send him away before——"

Fanny's round light-blue eyes were fixed in wonder on the excited speaker's face.

"Well—before what?" she demanded, suspiciously. "What do you know of him? Who told you he was a bad, bad man?"

"I know it—that is enough. Give him up, Fanny; he is unworthy even to touch your hand!"

"Mrs. George Barstone," said Miss Winters, rising, and swelling with dignity, "enough upon this subject! Doctor Barstone is my betrothed. Even from you, his first cousin-in-law, I cannot hear these disparaging remarks. If you ever

repeat those words in my presence—mine, his plighted wife—I'll never speak to you again as long as I live! Oh, good gracious! here he comes, and a strange gentleman with him! I'll bet you anything!" clasping her hands and Hying to the window, "it's the author, from New York! But no, it can't be—he don't look a bit like an author."

It was, however. Doctor Philip came in and presented a tall, light-haired, light-eyed gentleman, in glasses, as Mr. Richard Tompkins, of New York City.

Mr. Tompkins was near-sighted and the glasses were the only literary feature about him. He had wisps of straw-colored whiskers and a feeble mustache (you might have counted the hairs), and he had large ears, and a pug nose, and a few freckles amid his complexion. And this was the author of "Lady Rosabella," and "The Bandit's Seven Brides!"

He bowed to the two young ladies, taking Magdalen to be the doctor's affianced, made the remark that the day was fine, and that he hoped he saw them well.

Mr. Tompkins had a great deal to say for himself, indeed, and kept the house in a very lively state, aided by Fanny, who fraternized with the gentleman from New York at once. She had not much time to devote to him, for it was now the first week of April, and the wedding day was drawing rapidly near.

There were two seamstresses, with flying needles, in one of the upper rooms, and every morning Miss Winters drove into Millford, and returned with the sleigh freighted with parcels. If perfect happiness is ever to be found on earth, I think Fanny's state, just at this time, approached it very closely.

It would seem but natural that the bridegroom should share this beatitude. Was not the dream of his life about to be realized? Was he not about to marry an heiress? But ever since the episode of the ambrotype he had known no rest. What if Magdalen and her brother knew all—all? What if the man who had dashed into that solitary cottage, upon that horrible night, five years ago, were Willie Allward?

He had wondered, many times since, who that man could have been. He had not caught the least glimpse of his face, and had set him down as some neighbor, or passing stranger. What if it had been Willie Allward, and that his cousin's wife knew of his hidden crime, and meant to denounce him at the very altar? The cold dew stood upon his brow at the thought; it haunted him day and night; he could find no rest anywhere. He grew moody and sullen and silent, day by day, and spent his whole time in watching, with eager eyes, his cousin's wife. He grew thin as a shadow—the old, cynical smile never appeared on his sallow face now—Fanny's frivolous prattle drove him nearly mad. If the worst came, and he were denounced, what then? The exposure—the arrest—the trial—the sentence! What would that sentence be? He had committed a double murder—unpremeditated, and done in a moment of drunken frenzy, it is true, but men had been hanged for less. The sword hung over his head, and the thread that held it was awfully frail. If ever retribution came home to any wrong-doer, it came home to Philip Barstone in those days of his greatest success. Laura Allward's sister was hourly avenging her now—he dreaded that pale, quiet, resolute girl as he had never thought to dread any one in his life.

George, busy every day in the town, and the least suspicious of mankind at any time, saw nothing of all this. Mr. Tompkins, a student of character by necessity, watched him, with sleepy, half-closed eyes, and saw that something was seriously wrong, and chaffed his friend upon the subject.

"Don't be an ass, Dick!" was Doctor Philip's reply. "All this fuss and bustle is enough to try any man's nerves. I wish to heaven the thing were all over and that a thousand leagues of the Atlantic lay between me and this place!"

He said it with such suppressed intensity of tone that Mr. Tompkins eyed him askance.

"It's something deeper than I fancied," he thought. "Are some of his wild oats cropping up at this unreasonable time of day, or is it that he's in love with George's wife? She's as handsome as a picture, and as cold as an icicle, and just the sort of woman men go mad for. He watches her as a cat does a mouse; but whether it's for love or hatred, is not so clear. One thing is plain enough—she heartily dislikes him!"

The doctor certainly watched her with feverish eagerness. He dreaded strangely to see her quit the house. While she remained at home, passive, he felt a sort of security; and she made no attempt to leave it.

She passed her time with Miss Barstone, or in her own apartments. He rarely saw her, except at table. She wrote no letters; she showed no inclination to go to Millford; she received no more notes from there. Had her brother departed? he

wondered. He scoured the town himself, but never came across him. Was it just possible, after all, that he was alarming himself needlessly—that they knew nothing of his greatest crime—that her possessing that picture was only some wonderful chance? Oh, that the wedding day were come and gone, and this suspense at an end!

And Sunday, the eleventh of April, came, and nothing had happened. On Thursday, the fifteenth, the marriage would take place, and a few hours after, he would be away and safe. Would the intervening days pass and nothing happen?

CHAPTER XXXI.

DRAWING NEAR.

If Philip Barstone suffered all the tortures of terror and suspense which guilt upon the brink of discovery must ever suffer, she whose vow of vengeance was on the verge of such signal fulfilment suffered hardly less. Not for his sake. Never for one instant, at any time, did her heart soften, with the faintest feeling of pity for him. He deserved the worst that could possibly befall him, and she would not have lifted a finger to save him. But those others who loved him—Fanny, George and that patient, womanly martyr up-stairs, whose life had been so full of suffering. How keenly they would feel the shame, the disgrace, the exposure! how they would hate her when they discovered she had been working in the dark all this time, that she might have told them weeks before; that she had held her peace and waited for her revenge until the very last moment. They would never forgive her. Through her Fanny's life would be blighted, and shame and sorrow fall upon their peaceful home. What ought she do? Go to George and reveal all while there was yet time. She had started up more than once with the confession upon her lips, but ere the words were uttered, the memory of what Willie had said would return—"My curse will be upon you if you come between me and my revenge"—and her sister, as she saw her last, cold in death, would arise before her, to hold her back from that better course. And her vow—her vow was upon the eve of realization—should she break that oath to the dead and the wronged now?

Philip Barstone's keen, ceaseless eyes saw the daily and hourly struggle, and more than half understood it. She knew all, and for George's sake she feared to tell. What if, after all, he were torturing himself for nothing? What if, for George's sake, she would keep the secret to the end?

"There are women who can keep a secret," he thought, "and this is one of them. She loves George well enough to commit any act of self-abnegation for his sake, if that cursed brother of hers will only let her alone. Good God! to think that every ambition of my life should be so near fruition, and that one word from that pale, inscrutable young woman should have power to end all and send me for life to a convict's cell!"

Mr. Tompkins, accustomed to make human nature, in its various phrases, the study of life, watched Doctor Philip with sleepy, half-closed eyes, and drew his own deductions.

"The cad's in love with his cousin's wife, for certain," mused the writer of fiction, "and she's aware of it. But that's no reason why he should be afraid of her and he is afraid, by George, almost to speak in her presence. He watches her as a terrier watches a rat, and with much the same amiable expression of good will; or, has he a secret, etc.? And does she know it? Who'd think of finding a romance in real life in a dull country house, in a dull country town, and on the prosaic occasion of a wedding? And George, like a model husband, is blind as a bat and sees nothing."

Mr. Tompkins, interested in the case purely from professional causes, watched George Barstone's wife and George Barstone's cousin, and became more convinced with every passing hour that his surmise was right. Dr. Phil was afraid of that pale, fair-haired girl, who never by any chance spoke to him, if she could possibly avoid it. She held some secret of his—unknown to the rest of the household—and he dreaded her horribly, and was falling away to a shadow.

The sunny spring days were gliding away fast—horribly fast, it seemed to Magdalen—bringing the fatal wedding day near.

Thursday, the fifteenth, was fixed for the ceremonial, and it was now the evening of Sunday, the eleventh. She sat by the drawing-room window, alone, looking blankly out at the silvery twilight and at the figures walking about, near the waving willows—George and Dick smoking their cigars, and a little beyond, Fanny, in white muslin, a sailor hat on her head, a cluster of roses on her breast, clinging to the arm of her lover and gazing up in his face with radiant eyes. He looked worn and moody and unutterably bored as he listened and answered; and ever and anon his eyes would turn to the window, where the solitary watcher—the Nemesis of his life—sat. What was she thinking of there alone? he wondered; plotting his ruin as likely as not. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday—four endless days of suspense and mental torture ere Fanny could be his wife, and miles of sea and land lie between him and his cousin's wife. Those four days looked an eternity. He felt as though the uncertainty was driving him mad. She had not seen her brother, he was convinced, since her illness, and he augured favorably from that. But the stranger Johnstone was still in Millford—he had never rested until he had convinced himself of that—still stopping at Freeman's boarding-house with a woman whom he called his sister. He had even met them face to face, one cloudy night, in a deserted street, and he and Willie Allward,

for one instant of time, had looked straight and steadily into each other's eyes and passed on. It was a mutual glare of hatred, defiance, and the woman upon the lad's arm had uttered a faint cry and clung closer to her protector. A thick veil hid her face, but a vague something in that cry, in her shape and size, haunted him strangely after they had passed by. He stood in the dull, deserted street and looked after them. Who was the woman? and what was young Allward's motive in keeping her here and passing her off as his sister? He had no sister, Philip knew well, but George's wife; and what other motive could he have at all in remaining in Millford, save the motive of exposure. On all sides danger and discovery menaced him; it seemed madness even to hope for escape.

"Would to God I had never seen Laura Allward's baby face!" he thought, bitterly. "Would to God I had walked in the straight way! I should not now, in the supreme crisis of my life, be hedged around with enemies."

More than once, unseen himself, he had haunted the humble boarding-house, where Willie Allward dwelt—sometimes, in the bleak, wintry dusk, rewarded by seeing him come out with the veiled and shawled woman—his mysterious companion—upon his arm, he watched them while they took their evening walk, and returned to the house, never venturing near enough to hear what they said. An indefinite something about this veiled and shawled woman thrilled him strangely with the conviction that, somewhere and at some past time, that walk, that figure, had been familiar.

"Who can she be?" he wondered. "Young Allward has no wife, no sister, no female relative whatever, except George's wife. The only motive he can have in remaining here is my exposure. Can that woman be in any way necessary to his plot? and for what does he wait so long?"

He was thinking such thoughts as these while he walked by Fanny's side, while he answered at random her frivolous talk about the wedding clothes and bridesmaids. His face looked pale and worn in the starry twilight—his eyes moody, and with a far-away look in their dark depths.

"How dull you are, Phil!" his bride-elect murmured, reproachfully; "I don't believe you've heard one word I've been saying. A person might think, to look at you, you were in love with somebody else, and quite heart-broken at the thought of marrying me! You say you like me, and all that, but I'm sure you don't go on much as if you did! I don't believe you care for me one pin!"

"My dear Fanny," the doctor said, impatiently, awaking from his trance, "for heaven's sake, let us have done with your jealous nonsense! 'Go on,' indeed! How do you want me to go on? Must I kneel perpetually at your feet à la Romeo, swearing deathless devotion, with George and Tompkins to applaud? For mercy's sake, Fanny, don't be a baby always! I'm as fond of you as it's in my nature to be of any one; but I don't take the same absorbing amount of interest in white moire for you and pink grenadine for the bridesmaids, and the rest of it, that you do. I have other things to think about, now that I am on the eve of leaving this country, most likely forever!"

Fanny looked at him, almost angry with her idol for once.

"Other things to think about. Yes, I know that. I'm the last thing you think much about. Suppose we go in, Doctor Barstone. Yes, Magdalen is still sitting by the window, and ever since we came out here, when you were not staring with all your might at nothing, you've been staring at her. There's something between you two! Oh, you needn't deny it! I mayn't be clever and that, as you and she are, but I can see some things! I don't know what it is. You may be in love with her, but I can tell you, for your comfort, Doctor Philip Barstone, she hates you like poison! There!"

The little outburst of jealousy passed quite unheeded—he only heard the last words.

"Ah!" he said, "Mrs. Barstone talks of me to you, does she? What does she say? If she hates me so intensely, I only wonder she doesn't endeavor to prevent your marrying me."

"She does!" responded Fanny, promptly "she has! She says you're a bad man, a fortune-hunter, and that I will be unhappy as your wife. Phil, she wouldn't hate you so without some reason; what is it? She hardly speaks to you, you know, and she turned her back upon you the last time you wanted to shake hands with her. It's enough to make any one suspicious and jealous, I think!"

"Then you need be neither. The reason of Mrs. Barstone's dislike is patent enough, I should say. I have found her out!"

"Found her out? What do you mean? What has she done?"

"She keeps assignations with an unknown man—she receives letters from him, and I have discovered her in the act, both here and in New York. Don't you recollect the night of George's absence, her visit to the old mill in the snow-storm? Have you forgotten what you saw yourself, before she ever married George? What Mrs. Barstone's secret may be, I don't pretend to say; but, as I told you, I have found her out, and she hates me accordingly. I should not be at all surprised—it would be quite like your sex—if she trumped up some cock and bull story of past murders of mine to frighten you. I watch her—yes, I don't deny it. Her unconcealed aversion amuses me; but, my dear little foolish Fanny, be jealous of all the rest of the world, if you choose, only leave George's wife out of the reckoning. I would go to her funeral to-morrow," concluded the doctor, truthfully, "with the greatest pleasure!"

And then, it being quite dark by this time in the Willow Walk, and the two smokers out of sight, the doctor kissed his betrothed, and whispered a few words in her ear that set her smiles, dimples and good humor once more in full play; and then, as the dew was falling, he led her in.

"Thank heaven! this time next Sunday we shall have left your insufferably stupid Millford miles behind us, and be on our way to a fairer land, where spiteful young women can come between us no more, and my Fanny will be all my own. Every hour will seem like a century to me until Thursday has come and gone."

Which was perfectly true, though not quite in the flattering sense Miss Winters received it. Would Thursday come and go in safety for him and make Fanny and her fortune all his own?

Magdalen sat at the piano when the lovers entered playing solemn, sweet melodies of Mozart for George, sitting near her. Fanny drew Phil into a window recess, where she could watch the moon rise, listen to the plaintive melodies and Phil's tender protestations at once. Like all young women in love, her appetite for sentimental declarations was insatiable, and the more it was fed, the more it craved. It bored him horribly, but he was in for it, and must play the love-sick farce to the end, which meant, with him, the day after the wedding.

Magdalen could see them from where she sat, and Fanny's happy face smote her with a sense of keen physical pain.

She glanced up at her husband, the honest, blue eyes were bent upon her, full of that trustful love she had learned to know so well, blindly faithful and dog-like. And up-stairs, Aunt Lydia was quietly content at last, that this wedding should take place. And she—she was about to change all this domestic peace to misery and shame—about to break that poor child's heart—about to blazon the story of Philip Barstone's crimes far and wide over the country—about to let the world know the bitter story of her own family disgrace. George's love would turn to hatred. Her home could be no longer here. It was the last Sunday, perhaps, of all the Sundays of her life in which she should sit thus, by his side, beloved. In one brief week she would have left all this, and him, forever; and they would have good reason to hate the hour that first brought her across the threshold. And still she played on, the solemn, plaintive airs George liked, never stirring from the sonatas until the evening was far gone.

Long after the household were asleep that night, Magdalen lay broad awake. Was it too late yet, she thought? Three days still remained. She had no thought of sparing Philip Barstone; but Fanny—George—Aunt Lydia—the public disgrace, at least, might be saved them. Fanny's wedding must not take place, of course, and Fanny's sorrow and disappointment and mortification would be very bitter; but better sorrow for a few weeks than life-long misery. She had only to tell George the whole story to-morrow, to bring forward Willie and Caroline, to prove her words, and Philip Barstone would leave Golden Willows to cross its threshold no more. To lose friends, home and fortune, surely that were punishment enough. Let him go and hide his guilt and despair in some distant land, renounce all claim upon Fanny, and—her vow would have been kept sufficiently. Some story could be got up to account for the broken-off marriage, and neither Miss Barstone nor George could very greatly blame her for her part in hunting him down. They would be grateful, instead, that she had saved Fanny. Why should she condemn herself to life-long suffering even to punish him? And she wanted justice, not revenge. It was very well for Willie to talk of sacrificing everything to avenge Laura and himself. Was she to lose her happy home, her beloved husband, to bring eternal shame and sorrow upon all who loved her most, to bring about his public theatrical dénouement? By only exposing him to his family, he certainly would escape the punishment he so richly deserved—that of the law—but better one bad man should escape than a whole innocent family be made to suffer. Yes, there was yet time—time to save herself and those she loved so dearly; and they should be saved. To-morrow she would see Willie, beg him, on her knees, if necessary, to come with her to George's office and reveal all—to-morrow, Philip Barstone, branded and an outcast, should leave Golden Willows forever.

The new day—the to-morrow that was to save her and them all—was growing gray in the eastern sky, as she lay there

and thought. She dropped asleep at last with the momentous word upon her lips and heart:

"To-morrow! to-morrow!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE WEDDING WEEK.

"I will see Willie to-day! Before night Philip Barstone will have quitted Golden Willows, to return no more!"

Magdalen descended to breakfast with the thought in her mind. She looked somewhat haggard with the past night's vigil, but there was an eager light in her eyes that made her husband turn and look at her as she entered.

The others were there—Fanny, in voluminous white wrapper with azure girdle and fluttering blue ribbons in her hair, very fresh and bright and almost pretty. Mr. Tompkins, Philip and George—and the instant Magdalen had taken her place at the head of the table Miss Winters opened the day's campaign briskly.

"Magdalen, I want you to come with me to Millford to-day and help me decide among some lovely shades of silk they have down in Bentley's. Quiet shades, you know—pearl-gray, mouse color, ashes of roses, and steel. I shall have a traveling suit of one of them and I can't make up my mind which. And then we must visit the green-house and order a supply of natural flowers for—for"—with a maidenly droop of the eyelids—"Thursday evening."

Magdalen assented, of course; not best pleased, however. It jarred her horribly, this lending herself to and countenancing the preparations for a wedding that would never take place. But just at present it was not to be avoided.

Philip, looking askance at the pale, grave face of his cousin's wife, thought it boded well for him, this calm quiescence. Whatever she knew, she was not going to expose him, surely, or she would never aid and abet Fanny in preparing for her marriage with him. If she meant to speak at all, she would surely have spoken ere matters went thus far.

His spirits were unusually high as he drove them into Millford. He strove assiduously to make himself agreeable to Mrs. Barstone, in no pointed or officious way, but still markedly.

Magdalen's brows had contracted angrily when she found who was to be their escort; but she had accepted the situation in silence.

They reached Millford as the town clocks were chiming eleven, and drove to Bentley's emporium. And here, amid pearl-gray and mouse-color silks, Miss Winters managed to pass two mortal hours, comparing shades, selecting trimmings, etc. Then they visited a ladies' saloon and had luncheon, Miss Winters declaring herself fit to drop from exhaustion; then to the green-house, to order flowers wherewith to decorate the house on the bridal night; then to sundry milliners and dressmakers, all at work for the heiress, and then it was five o'clock, and high time to return home.

There had been no possibility of escape for Magdalen. Philip had never quitted them; and, unless she told a deliberate falsehood, invented for the occasion, she could not have broken away. A deliberate falsehood Magdalen was incapable of. Fate had ruled it, and, in an inward fever of intolerable anxiety, she was forced to return, nothing accomplished despite all her resolves.

Another day gone! But two now until the fatal wedding day. What if, after all, it were written—if it were too late—if her wicked vow of vengeance were wreaking its own retribution, and if she must perish with the man she had sworn to destroy?

She came down looking so worn and white on Tuesday morning that all George's fears for her health were renewed. The business of yesterday had been too much for her—she was still weak from recent illness—Fanny must find some one else to decide upon her grays and her mouse colors—Magdalen must remain quiet, and not worry herself over the wedding preparations in any way, or they would have her laid upon their hands again.

After which exordium, George kissed his wife and departed, whistling briskly. He, like Aunt Lydia, had become reconciled to the marriage, though he had been hugely indignant at first, and had undertaken to remonstrate with Phil.

"You go fast, my friend," he said; "your game is a little too palpable this time. Why didn't you permit Fanny to enjoy her fortune one month, at least, before proposing to take it from her? You are marrying the sixty thousand dollars, of course, and you care as much for Fan as I do for yonder crow sailing over the tree tops. The poor child's fate is likely to be a happy one!"

"My dear George," his cousin retorted, with the drawl he always assumed when about to say something unusually impertinent, "you are two or three years my senior, and you are a married man, but for all that, the character of Mentor is not the rôle a beneficent Providence ever intended you to play. I marry Fanny because she has inherited sixty thousand dollars, if you like, and I'm not what sentimental people call in love, I dare say—indeed, that amiable weakness always was more of a failure of yours than of mine. You and your wife married for love didn't you? Well, of course, poor Fanny and I need not look forward to such perfect happiness and confidence as you and Magdalen enjoy—it would be too much to expect—but in a humdrum and unromantic way—with no mysterious poor relations in the background—I have no doubt we will jog on together contentedly enough."

And Philip looked his legal cousin full in the eyes, with a smile of insolent meaning.

George winced under his well-aimed blow, as Philip sauntered off humming a tune. And Mr. Barstone, the elder, interfered in other people's concerns no more.

Fanny had to visit Millford again that morning. It was to be her last visit before becoming invisible until Thursday night, and she took her slave and adorer with her. The house was very still; Aunt Lydia was breakfasting in her room; Mr. Tompkins was writing in his; her way to Millford and Willie was an easy way enough to-day. As ten struck, closely veiled and wearing a water-proof mantle, Magdalen left the cottage and set out on foot for the town.

The April morning was gray and overcast, with a fitful wind and a lowering sky. Magdalen hurried along, feeling no fatigue, and reached the shabby boarding-house before noon. She was shown up-stairs, and found Caroline alone, sitting forlornly by the window. She arose, turning very pale at sight of her unexpected visitor.

"Don't be alarmed, Mrs. Reed," Magdalen said; "I only came to see my brother. Where is he?"

"Out for the day. He said last night he was growing as nervous as an hysterical girl from being cooped up here, and before daybreak this morning, was off for a day's ramble through the country. He will not be back until after nightfall."

Magdalen sank into a chair. Fate, then, was against her; another day must go, and every instant was unspeakably precious now.

"I must see him!" she cried. "I must see him to-night. Tell him to come to Golden Willows—yes, Mrs. Reed, he must come—tell him to be in the Willow Walk, if possible, by ten to-night. Tell him, from me, to be there without fail!"

"I will tell him. Mrs. Barstone, has anything occurred?"

"Nothing has occurred. The wedding is fixed for Thursday night. I must not linger now. The moment Willie returns send him direct to Golden Willows, whether the night be stormy or no."

She hastened away for her weary homeward walk. Would Fanny and Philip be home before her? she wondered. Yes, as she opened the outer gate the first object she beheld was the doctor smoking his cigar under the trees. He was looking at her full, at the close veil, at the long mantle, at her dusty boots and dress, and knew, as well as she knew herself, that she had been to town—to Willie. She hastened past him, not pausing to glance his way, and appeared no more until dinner.

There was a dinner party this Tuesday evening at Golden Willows—Fanny's bridesmaids were all there, and two or three of George's most intimate friends. Magdalen, in pale green tissue and fleecy tulle and lace, with one real white rose in her golden hair and a faint flush, born of inward fever, on either cheek, looked beautiful. For Fanny, she was rustling in a trailing robe of dove-colored silk, with jeweled violets wreathing her hair, curled, elaborately, to her waist.

The cloudy morning had ended in a night of fine, drizzling rain and raw, easterly winds. Magdalen, forced to smile and talk to their guests, sat, with a fire in her veins, her temples throbbing, her pulses at fever heat. Yonder sat Fanny, radiant in smiles and happiness and full dress, beside Philip Barstone. Great heavens! what a farce, a mockery, it all was! and what a cheat, an impostor, she felt herself to be!

They were all young people, and after dinner, in the drawing-room, there was a carpet dance. Magdalen declined dancing on account of her recent illness; she played a waltz and a cotillon for the others: then, professing fatigue, she resigned her place at the piano to Ella Goldham, and waited while they formed a quadrille—George, Philip, Fanny and all who were likely to miss her, were standing up to dance. It was already a quarter past ten; with the first note of the Lanciers, she glided from the drawing-room, threw a shawl over her head, opened the hall door and disappeared in the

wet darkness.

The rainy night was pitch black, the brightly-lit front windows alone casting a fitful light athwart the gloom. She gathered up her flowing silken drapery, and, heedless of the thin shoes she wore, made her way over wet grass and gravel to the Willow Walk.

Deepest darkness was there. She paused at the entrance and softly called:

"Willie!"

"All right!" a boyish voice answered. "Here I am." And a figure stepped from under the trees—a figure she could but dimly see. "I've been waiting a full half-hour. What's gone wrong, Magdalen?"

"Nothing has gone wrong. Do you know I have been very ill since I—since that night, Willie?"

"Since the night you tried to drown yourself," Willie said, sardonically, "Yes, I know it—and precious frightened I was, I can tell you. What fools you women are! going to drown yourself because you thought your husband was a villain and falling into a brain fever because you discovered he wasn't. If nothing's the matter now, what did you frighten Caroline into fits for, by coming to Freeman's to-day and ordering me up here in such beastly weather as this?"

"Because, Willie, you must speak to-night—yes, this very hour! I can keep the secret of Philip Barstone's guilt no longer. You must see George and tell him all to-night—all—all!"

She laid her cold hand on his arm; she raised her pale, imploring face to his in the darkness. Willie shook her roughly off, his eyes flashing angrily.

"I thought so!" he said. "More of your feminine foolery and fickleness Good Lord! what inconsistent idiots you are! One hour vowing eternal vengeance—the next, whimpering and begging mercy for your victims! The man's a fool who trusts the best of you!"

"I don't ask mercy for him, Willie!" Magdalen cried, in a voice of suppressed intensity. "Expose him—drive him from this house—I ask nothing better. It is mercy for George, for Fanny, for myself, I ask. Oh, Willie! think of the shame, the eternal disgrace, the public exposure, you threaten to bring! Think of that poor girl's broken heart! Think how our history will be dragged over the land! Think how they will hate and despise me, who have plotted in secret to bring about this disgrace! I do not ask you to spare the guilty, but the innocent, the public exposure. Tell all to-night, and let him be banished from this house, with loss of name, home, friends, fortune, wife. Surely that is punishment enough!"

"Not half punishment enough! I tell you no, Magdalen—no! no! no!—not if you went down on your knees and begged for it! Punishment, indeed! Banish him from this house, and how much worse off will he be than before? He has his New York home, and his profession, and by and by you will hear of his marriage to some other fortune. Will that avenge Laura, Caroline, myself? Are we all to suffer in silence because, forsooth, his relations will be mortified by his crimes being made known? He is the murderer of your father and sister; through him my life is ruined, my character blasted, and you stand there, selfish to the core, afraid to lose your respectable husband and your respectable home, and plead for the villain! Spare him for Fanny's sake, indeed! What is Fanny, or a million Fannys, to me—to you, either, who only cloak your own selfishness by her name? Your husband will despise and cast you off, will he? Let him! Laura was worth a dozen of you, and this precious husband's cousin cast her off without much compunction. And you knelt by her grave and vowed vengeance, did you? I wonder her unavenged spirit does not rise from that grave to pursue you—spiritless, abject coward that you are! I tell you no, Magdalen Barstone—no! and again and again no! If an angel came down from yonder sky with the same prayer, I would spurn her—as I do you! And my curse upon you if after this you take the matter in your own hands and betray me!"

She staggered back, her last hope gone, appalled by the passions she had aroused. He strode past her, out of the walk.

"You had better go in the house and not stand there in the rain to get your death. And send for me on no more fool's errands! On Thursday night, when the wedding guests are assembled, and they stand before the minister, Caroline and I will be there to denounce him! And if you forestall me, it had been better for you you never were born!"

He strode away—she heard the crash of his footsteps on the wet gravel—the opening and shutting of the gate—and then she knew the rain was falling heavily upon her, and that her feet were soaking through. Mechanically she turned and

walked back to the house.

She had been gone some twenty minutes—the quadrille was almost finished when she re-entered the drawing-room. The shawl she had worn had saved her from the rain—she left it outside, and went in. Her thin-soled slippers were wet through, but she never heeded her cold feet—she stood, shivering slightly in the warmth and light of the room. Tomorrow was Wednesday—the next Thursday—and then—"after that, the deluge!" She could get no further—darkness lay all beyond!

Her absence and return had not been unnoticed. The eyes of love are keen, but George went conscientiously through his steps and saw nothing—it was the keener eyes of fear. Philip saw her glide away, and all through the dance, while he wore that inscrutable face, he was possessed of a haunting terror. Had she gone to meet her brother? Were they plotting his final ruin even at that moment? Every interest of his life was at stake, and he must move through this abominable dance, and simper and bow; and, at its conclusion those two might enter and brand him, before all present, as the scoundrel he knew himself to be.

He saw her re-enter, alone. The instant the quadrille finished George was by her side, wiping his flushed face. Dancing was not a business in which the Millford barrister shone.

"Warm work, my dear," he said. "I'd rather walk to town and back than dance one quadrille. You are looking pale to-night, Magdalen—you are always pale of late—but you are quite ill-looking, now. When I say ill-looking, my love, of course you know what I mean."

She strove to smile as she made place for him beside her.

"I am not ill—a little chilly, somehow—that is all. They are going to dance again. George, I think I will go up and see if Aunt Lydia is asleep—none of us have been in her room this evening."

"Very well, my dear—only don't stay too long even if she should be awake. The room is empty," Mr. Barstone added, gallantly, "when the prettiest woman present leaves it!"

Magdalen went up to Miss Barstone's apartment, found Miss Barstone still awake, listening to the distant sound of the music, and remained with her nearly an hour. They were too gay to miss her below stairs, and that very gayety jarred upon her horribly to-night. She laid her head wearily on the bedside, with a long, heart-sick sigh, as though she never cared to lift it again.

"There is something on your mind, my dear," Aunt Lydia said, quietly. "I wish I could help you, Magdalen."

"No one can help me," the girl said, with a quiet despair sadder than tears; "my trouble is past help—past hope! Oh, Aunt Lydia, if we could only make our own lives, what happy creatures we should be! But our lives are what others make them—we are but puppets in the hand of inexorable Fate, and all our struggles are but fruitless! Some day—ah, very soon now—you will hate me, and wish you had never seen my face; and yet, and yet, I don't see how I could have helped being what I am."

"What you are! My dear Magdalen," inexpressibly startled, "what do you mean?"

"I cannot tell you. Dear friend—best friend—I am far beyond any help of yours. My own hand—my own wicked and unwomanly act—first raised a barrier between myself and the rest of the world; and now another and stronger hand than mine renders that barrier insurmountable. Do not ask me any questions—the time when you will know all—all"—with a choking sob—"is very near! Love me, if you can, until that time comes, and I go forth into the outer darkness, where such wretches as I belong!"

Aunt Lydia looked at her. The golden head lay against the bed—the youthful face was white and worn and haggard in the lamplight. More than one of Phil's hints came vividly back to her. Was George's wife, indeed, going mad?

"I will ask you no questions, my dear; but, if you have any trouble on your mind, why do you not go to George—to your husband? He loves you so dearly, my child, that I think, if you had even committed a crime, he would forgive you, and love you all the more for having something to forgive. You are very dear to us all, Magdalen, and it pains me more than I can say to see you like this. My daughter, go to your husband—where else should a wife go?—tell him all, whatever your trouble may be, and believe me, he will not love or cherish you less."

Magdalen sighed.

"He will know all soon—soon—this very week. But he will not forgive me—it is past that!"

And then silence fell and the moments went by. Magdalen had fallen in a trance from which Aunt Lydia's gentle voice aroused her.

"It's half-past eleven, my dear; your friends will be going presently, and will wonder if you are not there to bid them good-night. Kiss me, and go down."

Magdalen bent over the worn, tranquil face, beautiful in its patient suffering, and then hurriedly descended the stairs. The bustle of cloaking was going on—the guests were dispersing. Again Philip Barstone was the first person she encountered—again had he been on the watch—what had his life been lately but one prolonged and anxious watch? Was this night, too, to pass in safety for him? Yes, the good-nights were said—Fanny was leaning out into the rainy darkness to watch the last carriage away, and George's wife had her night lamp in her hand and was already on her way to her own rooms, and nothing had been said. But one day more to intervene between him and his wedding day, and he was still safe.

"I wish I had insisted upon the ceremony taking place early on Thursday morning, at Millford, in church," he thought as he sat in his own room, "and departed immediately after. Every hour spent in this place is an hour of prolonged torture."

But the bride had ruled it otherwise. The marriage was to take place on Thursday night at ten, in the drawing-room, and to be followed by an old-fashioned wedding party. Fanny, a great stickler for fashion on other occasions, was determined on this to be a heroine as long as possible, and display her lovely wedding dress for the last time in Millford.

Wednesday dawned, still wet and gloomy, filling Miss Winters with apprehensions for the morrow.

"I wouldn't, for countless worlds," that young lady said, at breakfast, "be married upon a wet day! One's life is sure to be like their wedding day; so you can see what prospect of happiness one would have, married on a miserable, sloppy, soaking day like this."

"Then, if it rains," observed George, "you'll postpone the nuptials. Were you aware of the interesting fact in natural history, of which Fanny has just spoken, before, Tompkins?"

Fanny shook her head.

"Postpone the marriage! No, George—bad as a wet day may be, a postponed marriage is worse. Yours was postponed, by the way—don't you remember?"

An awkward silence fell. Philip looked maliciously at Magdalen and Tompkins looked steadfastly at his plate, and George reddened.

"If the weather is to be emblematic of our wedded happiness, my dear Fanny," Philip said, "you may take my word for it, the day will be without precedent in the way of fineness. George, I shall walk in with you to Millford this morning. The house will be in such a state of bridal preparations, for to-day and to-morrow, as to be intolerable."

The bridal preparations were, indeed, at their height. The bride's trousseau had arrived from New York, with the exception of the wedding dress and veil, expected by this evening's train. The bridal presents were many and handsome, and were to be displayed, in all their splendor, on Thursday night; the traveling trunks stood up-stairs, ready to be packed; the handsome traveling suit was in active completion in Millford. There were two seamstresses still at work in the house—judging by the amount of needlework Fanny was having done, her whole future life was to be one prolonged Sunday, and the dry goods stores closed. And the rooms were to be decorated, and the fitting on process to be undergone at least half a dozen times before night.

A restless demon seemed to possess Philip Barstone from this morning—a walking familiar, that gave him no respite. He walked into Millford with George, dawdled away an hour or two through the town, visiting, more than once, that dull little back street, where Mrs. Freeman kept her shabby boarding-house. Then, all at once, a fever of impatience to see what Magdalen was about seized him, and he hurried bank to the cottage so rapidly that the perspiration stood in beads on his face. She was doing nothing. He found her sitting by one of the windows, a book in her hand, but not reading—

looking blankly out at the gray, dull day.

"I never thought she could be so selfish and so unkind!" Fanny cried, when her lover joined her; "She won't do the least thing. Her taste in decorating a room is not to be surpassed, but to-day she will not even offer a suggestion. She says her head aches. I don't believe it; it's downright ugliness and nothing else!"

Miss Winters had very little time even to talk to Philip—a summons from one of the seamstresses took her away, even while she spoke. He quitted the house again, and joined Mr. Tompkins, smoking a placid pipe under the dripping trees.

"Better is a thorough drenching and peace, than a luxurious apartment and general topsy-turviness," the author remarked. "I couldn't stand so much sweeping, dusting and decorating, so I have sought refuge here. Mrs. Barstone is the only sensible female in the house. She takes things quietly and does nothing."

"Mrs. Barstone is rather a remarkable young woman," said the doctor. "I don't pretend to understand her!"

"She appears a victim to green and yellow melancholy, doesn't she?" said Mr. Tompkins, with a side glance at his companion. "Is it chronic low spirits, or liver complaint, or a mysterious secret horror?"

"Chronic sulkiness, I should say," answered Doctor Phil; "she has been like that ever since I met her first. Defend me from your clever women, with a soul above millinery and the temper of the deuce."

A summons to luncheon recalled the two gentlemen—a meal at which Mrs. George did not appear. Magdalen's headache was worse, Fanny said, and she had gone to lie down. If people must have headaches, Miss Winters added, with a sniff that told she had no belief in the ailment, they might select more convenient seasons than bridal eves. But it was interesting to be an invalid, she supposed, and some people like to make themselves interesting.

Philip's walking familiar took possession of him again, the repast concluded, but he seemed to have no power to go beyond sight of the house. He smoked furiously. He wandered about the grounds, down to the lake, along the Millford road, and then back in hot haste again. Would the day never end, he wondered; never had hours lagged as those lagged. It seemed a week, at least, since breakfast time, that morning. Would this day and night pass, too, and nothing happen?

Yes! Evening fell—still dark, starless, overcast. George returned, dinner was announced and he went in. Would George's wife appear? he wondered, feverishly. Yes, there she sat, dressed in black silk, the white shoulders and arms gleaming like marble against its lusterless darkness; a cluster of white roses on her breast and a spray of geranium leaves in her bronzed hair. The beautiful face was set in stony calm; a fathomless quiet looked from the blue eyes. Beyond a certain point pain is its own anesthetic; she had reached that point now; a sort of dull apathy to all things had taken possession of her. She had battled fiercely, suffered intensely; but she battled and suffered no more; let the worse come—she was powerless.

She played and sang for nearly two hours, in the drawing-room, after dinner; no falter in her voice, no tremble in the supple fingers that flew over the keys. And while she played and sang, with her husband by her side, she believed it to be the last night she would ever spend under that roof; the last night he would ever look upon her with those loving, trustful, tender eyes.

Fanny sat in a low rocker near Philip's chair, the lamplight falling on her pretty evening dress, her loose brown hair and happy face. For once she was silent—her joy was too great, too complete for words! She was thinking of her wedding dress! It had come down from New York in charge of a first-class female artist, and it had been tried on, and no words are strong enough to describe its beauties or the bride-elect's raptures. It fitted beautifully. It had a court train that swept for yards behind her; it was of white velour silk, with puffings of tulle, and flounces and overdress of duchesse lace. There was a long tulle veil, a wreath of most delicate and beautiful orange blossoms, forming a coronet in front, and with trailing buds, blossoms and sprays behind. There was a fan of pearl and point lace, with the bride's monogram beautifully wrought. It was all lovely, lovely, lovely! And the traveling suit of steel-gray, frilled and paniered, with its coquettish hat and veil, its gloves, its gaiters, and everything to match, was perfect also. There had not been a single misfit, from first to last. And there were dinner dresses, ball dresses, morning dresses, street dresses and carriage costumes, and each suit more exquisite and more expensive than the other.

"And," mused the blissful bride, "no one in Millford ever had such a trousseau or so many beautiful and costly presents before. How they will gaze and wonder to-morrow evening! Oh, I do hope—I do hope it may only be fine!"

She sat with downcast eyes, flushed cheeks and lips half parted in a tender, dreamy smile—the very ideal of a happy bride—with no thought save of the man she was about to wed. Fanny was very fond of Phil, but just at present he was a very secondary consideration, in her mind, to her new clothes. And in this I don't think Miss Winters was by any means an exception to much more sensible women.

"That's so pretty, Magdalen," Fanny said, with a fluttering sigh, as Magdalen finished some plaintive little song. "Doesn't this remind you of the night before you were married, when George, you, me and Aunt Lydia sat silent and sort of dismal, like this? Do you remember the song you sang that night, 'Forever and Forever'? I like that song; it always makes me feel so delightfully melancholy, and brings thoughts of graves and dead people and that! Sing it, please!"

"A suitable song on the occasion of a wedding, I should say!" Philip said, with a laugh. "Does not the thought of to-morrow make you melancholy enough, Fanny, without any external aid? Let us have your melancholy song by all means, Mrs. Barstone!"

Magdalen sang it, as she had sung the rest, without hesitation or falter. As he listened, there rose up before Philip Barstone, with horrible vividness, two graves, green now with the spring grass and the "blossoming clover," the graves of Laura Allward and Caroline Reed:

I note the flow of the weary years,
Like the flow of this flowing river;
But dead in my heart are its hopes and fears,
Forever and forever!
For never a light in the distance gleams—
No eye looks out for the rover.
Oh, sweet be your sleep, love—sweet be your dreams—
Under the blossoming clover,
The sweet-scented, bee-haunted clover!

There was always a wearied pathos in this song, as Magdalen sang it. Her thoughts, too, were with Laura in her nameless grave. Philip Barstone rose up abruptly and walked out of the room as she left the piano. He did not care to meet the gaze of those blue eyes just then. He went out into the hall and stood looking absently through the side lights at the night and whistling softly. He stood there so long that Fanny joined him presently.

"What are you doing here?" the bride-elect demanded. "Looking at the weather? And what's the weather like?"

Phil put his arm around her waist and drew her to him.

"The weather will be all that can be desired, Fanny. Look yonder—the clouds are breaking and the stars are coming out. Let us take it as a good omen. What! Mrs. Barstone retiring so soon, and it not yet eleven o'clock!"

Magdalen, lamp in hand, had appeared on the threshold and saw that tableau. He rarely addressed her, but he did so boldly now, holding Fanny still. If she had any sinister designs against him, what more likely to move her, he thought, than seeing Fanny—so.

"Eleven o'clock is my usual hour. My departure need hasten no one else. Good night, Fanny!"

She spoke with marked coldness; she did not bid him good-night. She had looked him full in the face for one instant, with a glance of merciless contempt, then passed on and disappeared.

"How implacable she is—how she does hate you, to be sure!" Fanny said. "Shall I ever know what is between you two?"

He made no reply. He dropped his arm suddenly from about her and turned away.

"As you will be very busy all day to-morrow, and intend to dance all night, I should strongly advise you to follow Madam Magdalen's example. I am going to smoke. Good night, Fan, for the last time."

Fanny looked after him a minute, rather inclined to resent this cavalier and unlover-like dismissal. Her habitual good nature, however, got the better of the momentary irritation. She took her night light off the tray, peeped in to say good

night to the other two and went up-stairs. She turned the handle of Magdalen's door and found it locked.

"It's me, Magdalen—I mean it's I! Let me in, please; George won't be up for ever so long. The three of them are going to have a sociable smoke, and you know what that means! I don't feel a bit sleepy, and I want to come in and talk to you."

But the door did not open. Magdalen's voice spoke inside, sounding hoarse and strange, the girl thought.

"Not to-night, Fanny. I—I don't feel inclined to talk to-night. Go to bed, dear, and go to sleep."

Fanny's eyes flashed. How unkind everybody was, and she going away on Friday morning, never, perhaps, to return. Magdalen was a selfish, cold-hearted creature who made everybody wretched about her—George, Phil and now herself. In spite of the heavenly bridal robe and trousseau, Miss Winters went to bed in a very bad temper on her bridal eve.

The gentlemen did linger long, as Fanny had prophesied, over their pipes. It was past one when Philip Barstone entered his room—for his last night there. In any case his last, whether things went ill or well; whether Friday morning saw him in safety, with his rich bride beside him, on the first stage of the trip to Paris, or whether—he faced the alternative unflinchingly—he was blown up and ejected, toward night, as a felon and a scoundrel, from the house that had been his boyhood's home. It was useless to think of going to bed; he could not sleep, and he dreaded the thoughts that came with darkness and the pillow. He lowered his light, opened the window wide, lit a cigar and sat down to keep vigil until morning.

The storm had cleared entirely away, the stars shone gloriously above, the early rising moon already was setting. Was he, indeed, to take it as a good omen? The dawn grew gray, then rosy, in the east, and while he sat there, pale, haggard, sleepless, the sun arose brilliantly on Philip Barstone's second wedding day.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE WEDDING NIGHT.

Doctor Barstone did not appear at breakfast on that eventful Thursday morning. Neither did Mrs. George. It was very possible her night had been as sleepless as the bridegroom's, and both were sleeping the sleep of exhaustion now. Neither did Miss Winters. It was proper for the bride to keep her room, and the bride did it. George and Richard breakfasted by themselves, and Mr. Tompkins enlivened the meal by his agreeable flow of spirits.

"I presume you cut the shop upon this auspicious occasion, Mr. Barstone," remarked Dick, gravely, "as the head of the family——"

"As the head of the family I shall take the liberty of attending to my business," responded the Millford barrister, decidedly. "I have a very interesting case in court to-day—a breach of promise—'Peter vs. Piper'—all the lady's letters to the gentleman read aloud yesterday—all the gentleman's letters to the lady to be read to-day. Such letters! I'm for the plaintiff—Miss Arethusa Piper—a gentle maiden of five-and-forty summers. I wouldn't miss it if I were going to be married myself, and I won't get back before seven o'clock. Perhaps you had better look in in the course of a day. They won't want you here, and you may get a wrinkle for your next novel. Good morning."

George dashed off at a swinging pace—he always walked into Millford when the weather permitted, and the weather to-day was glorious. The sun shone with the warmth of June; the birds chanted their morning gloria all along the leafy woods; the sky was as blue as the sky of Naples. George glanced up at it as he lit his pipe.

"Nice weather for the wedding-day," he thought. "'Blessed is the bride that the sun shines on,' etc. I wonder what ails Magdalen? She is far from well—falling into chronic low spirits and headache. I must take her away for a trip somewhere. If I were an imaginative man, I might fancy it was Phil's approaching marriage that weighed on her mind. It's not, of course. It's that confounded scoundrel, Langley, hang him!"

The invisible ones made their appearance in the course of the day—Fanny, who, under any circumstances, could not confine herself to one spot long, arriving down-stairs first, then Philip, then Magdalen.

It was past noon before Magdalen came. Philip and Richard had sauntered out, and Fanny and the two housemaids were busy as bees putting the last touches to the decorations of the rooms.

As usual, Miss Winters had quite forgotten last night's little temper, and was radiant with good health and good spirits.

Magdalen was impressed into the service at once, filling vases with flowers, arranging furniture, draping curtains—no one's taste was like hers. The bridesmaids would arrive at nightfall; the remainder of the wedding guests later.

Fanny's hair was up in a forest of pins; the barber was expected late in the afternoon to dress it. Just at present, in the pins and a gingham wrapper, with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, the bride was working energetically, wreathing evergreens and tying up bouquets.

From the moment she left her room Magdalen found no time to think—no time to pause. Events hurried on with breathless rapidity. The hours seemed to fly. She let herself drift with the current, and made no effort to stem it. She arranged the flowers, saw to the decorations of the drawing-room, to the arrangement of the dining-room, the placing of the silver and crystal, and the tall bouquets for a feast that she knew would never be eaten. She inspected the arrangement of the dressing-rooms—she did everything it was her duty as mistress of the house to do—and all in a dead, mechanical sort of way, without smiling, without speaking.

The servants in the house looked at her stony face, and whispered. They remembered that fixed rigidity of countenance long after.

If the power to feel thankful for anything had been left her, she would have felt thankful that George and Philip were away. It was her last day at Golden Willows—her last day as George's wife. She never for one second forgot that, during the fast flying hours of that strange day.

"The last! the last!" She thought of it as she arranged Fanny's bridal presents in a little room opening off the drawing-

room—as she knelt beside her, later, assisting her to pack the vast traveling trunk. "The last!" and she was going through this dreary farce busy with the last preparations for a wedding and a journey that would never be. Fanny's smiling, rosy face beamed radiantly upon her now, and she knew that, in a few hours, the smiles and radiance would be struck out of it, perhaps forever.

The sunny April afternoon drew to a close; the silvery twilight fell. All was ended. The bustle of preparation, everything was in order, and the bride was in her room dressing. The forest of pins had disappeared—the red-brown tresses were built in a superb chignon, with little ringlets down to her eye-brows, and long ringlets trailing over her shoulders. The two seamstresses and the smartest of the housemaids were arranging the bridal toilet, with Mrs. Barstone by, to superintend—Mrs. Barstone, with that face of stone—that unsmiling mouth—those burning, bright-blue eyes.

The first carriage came—Miss Winters' three bridesmaids had arrived. Five minutes later they had fluttered up to the bridal bower—all exclamations and pink tissue—a second loud ring at the bell came.

"Look out, Rosie," Fanny said, nervously, "and see who it is. I don't see what on earth keeps those tiresome creatures!"

"Those tiresome creatures"—otherwise her bridegroom and his cousin and groomsman—were there. Some haunting terror had kept Philip away from the house the whole day. He had left Dick in court, and paid a visit to Mrs. Freeman's boarding-house—to the street, rather. But its dingy front told him nothing. Willie Allward was nowhere to be seen. He returned to the court house, sat out the trial of Mr. Peter for trifling with the affections of Miss Piper, and never heard two words from beginning to end. The hour had come—would it pass?—and would his sentence be life or death?

The three men returned to the house together as the moon rose over the tree tops and flooded earth and sky with its yellow light. He noted all things with preternatural distinctness—the countless stars, the blue night sky, the full white moon, the brightly lit façade of the house, the heavy perfume of flowers as he entered, the hush that seemed to reign.

A light supper awaited the gentlemen—he could taste nothing. He drank half a tumbler of brandy and went up to his room to dress. In the upper hall he came face to face with George's wife, and obeying some uncontrollable impulse, he stopped and looked full in her eyes.

She was dressed for the evening in a mist-like robe of white tulle over pearly silk, and puffing and flouncing, the neck and arms gleaming white and fair and cool as marble against the fleecy softness of the drapery. He saw blush roses nestling in the foamy lace at her breast; the strings of pearls clasping back the amber hair; the marble whiteness of the face; the eyes that looked at him with the cold glitter of sapphire stones. She had never looked more beautiful than to-night, and she was dressed for his wedding—for his! Would she do that if that wedding were never to take place? Would she stand and look at him like this if she meant to denounce him to-night?

They both stood still, those mutual enemies, on the verge of a duel to the death, and looked each other straight in the eyes. It was but for three seconds—Three hours it seemed to Philip Barstone. He tried to smile—he strove to make some light apropos remark. The smile froze on his lips—the words died there unsaid. A second more and she had floated past him, in her noiseless drapery, and he stood on the landing alone.

The guests were beginning to arrive, early though it was. Mrs. Barstone descended to receive them. She scarcely felt pain, or dread or suspense. A horrible numbness had seized her—a dull apathy. She was powerless for good or evil. Her rôle in this farce which had all the elements of a tragedy, must be played out quietly to the end.

It was past nine; at ten the wedding was to take place. George made his expeditious toilet in half an hour, and joined his wife. The drawing-room was filling fast. The Rev. Mr. Harding had arrived, with his wife and daughters. George saw Magdalen standing talking to him, looking very beautiful, but with a deadly pallor overspreading that beauty—a strange, far-away look in her eyes. More than one had noticed that singular look, and commented upon it already.

"How white and rigid Mrs. Barstone seemed! How stern and unsmiling! What a strange look she had in her eyes! What was the matter?"

People remembered Miss Ella Goldham's party, and Mrs. Barstone's singular fainting fit upon that occasion. Was there something wrong? A chill fell upon the guests. They waited breathlessly for something unusual to happen, gathering in groups and talking in mysterious undertones.

George's frank face and genial manner thawed the frost a little, but could not quite dispel it. People glanced by stealth at

their watches, and wished ten o'clock would come. The last guest had arrived, and Mrs. Barstone, with a terrible disregard of the proprieties, had deserted her guests and taken her place near one of the windows, gazing steadfastly out with that face of stone.

Five minutes to ten—ten! The Rev. Mr. Harding book in hand, had taken his place; there was a breathless hush and flutter. Every one looked at Mrs. George. Mrs. George never stirred; she seemed frozen to her seat. Her husband approached and bent over her anxiously.

"My dear Magdalen," he whispered, "do rise up. They are coming in!"

She never stirred; she never spoke; her fixed eyes never left the moonlit prospect without. They were coming, and Willie was not here! They were entering the room, and Willie was nowhere to be seen! Had the lives of all in the house depended on it, she could not have spoken—could not have uttered one word to prevent this marriage. She felt as though all human power, but the power of gazing blankly out of this window, had left her.

A soft flutter of women's skirts, a soft waft of perfume, a low murmur from the guests, and the wedding party were in the room—Fanny leaning on Philip's arm, flushed with deep excitement and expectation, he pale as death itself. He glanced once at that motionless figure by the window. Oh, God! would the next five minutes pass and nothing happen?

No! At that very instant the garden gate opened swiftly, and a man and a woman hurried, almost at a run, up the walk to the house. The woman was unveiled; no need of disguise now. A scream almost broke from Magdalen's lips; her hands locked convulsively in her lap. As the bride and bridegroom took their places, as the minister opened his book, a loud knock that shook the door startled them all.

The avenger was here!

Philip Barstone turned and looked at Magdalen. She had arisen from her seat, with so horror-struck, so ghastly a face, that all eyes turned upon her. In that instant he knew that his doom was sealed. He set his teeth like a bulldog and braced himself to meet what was to come.

Every one was standing up. They were not to be disappointed—something was going to happen!

Mr. Harding closed his book. A servant opened the house-door, and a man and woman came in.

"Am I too late?" the man demanded, in a hoarse, breathless way. "Is the wedding over?"

The servant stared and fell back. Without waiting for an answer, the man pushed his way into the drawing-room. The woman, pale and trembling in every limb, sank on the nearest chair. And Philip Barstone saw what he expected to see—the face of Willie Allward.

"Am I too late?" Willie Allward repeated, loudly and sternly. "Has this marriage taken place?"

He strode in and addressed the clergyman. Bride and bridesmaids shrank away, but forgot to scream, so intense was the scene. The clergyman mechanically answered:

"The marriage has not taken place. Who are you?"

"A man whom Philip Barstone has wronged beyond reparation! A man who comes to avenge the living and the dead! A man who comes to forbid this marriage!"

"A madman, who ought to be in a strait-jacket!" Philip Barstone broke in, with a sneer. "The moon is at the full, I believe! I never saw this lunatic before in my life!"

The gray hue of death lay on his face, but the savage blood within him was rising to meet and brave the danger he could not escape.

"You lie, Philip Barstone, and you know it!" his accuser cried, dauntlessly. "I charge you with murder and bigamy—or attempted bigamy! Philip Barstone is a married man!"

There was a gasping cry from Fanny. George strode forward and confronted the intruder.

"How dare you force your way here, sir, and raise this scandalous scene? What you say is false. Philip Barstone is a single man—a widower, if you like, but a single man."

"What I say is true!" Willie answered, unflinchingly. "He is no widower, and no single man. I can prove my words. Mrs. Philip Barstone, come here!"

All eyes turned to the door; a death-like silence fell. And slowly, as if evoked from the grave, a woman appeared upon the threshold—a pale, slender woman, dressed in black, with loose, dark hair, and large, wild, black eyes. Slowly she appeared, and stood there stock still, those great, dark eyes turning full upon Philip Barstone.

A cry broke the stillness—a man's cry—a dreadful, sobbing sound of unspeakable horror—and Philip Barstone staggered back, speechless, livid, horror-struck.

"Look at him!" Willie Allward cried, pointing to the ghastly wretch. "Look at him, all of you, and see whether I speak the truth! This woman is his wife—his wife whom, six years ago, he tried to murder—whom, until this moment, he thought he had murdered—whom he believed dead and in her grave! This woman is Caroline Barstone, his lawful, wedded wife, ready and willing to prove my words. And I accuse him of the crime of infanticide—of the murder of his own child!"

There was a second cry—this time the roar of a wild beast. With glaring eye-balls, Philip Barstone sprang forward upon his merciless accuser. But quicker than thought Willie drew a pistol from his pocket, its sharp click echoing through the room.

"I expected something like this, and came prepared. Stand off, you murderer, or I'll shoot you like a dog!"

But the man he addressed was mad—mad with rage. Before the warning words were uttered he had grasped Willie by the throat with one hand, and with the other struggled for the pistol. And then the wild shrieks of the women rang through the house, and the men closed around the grappling foes. And then there was a stilled exclamation from Philip Barstone as he wrenched the pistol from Willie's grasp; then a loud report, a second mad cry, and a crash. The combatants were separated, Willie Allward standing, black in the face, and Philip Barstone going headlong to the floor.

"Bear witness all," Willie cried, "that the pistol went off in his own hand! Philip Barstone has shot himself!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AVENGED.

Yes, he had shot himself! They bent above him as he lay, one hand pressed to his right side, the pistol laying close by, his eyes shut, a horrible expression of pain, rage and terror on his face. He opened his eyes and looked at his cousin.

"It's all up, George—I'm done for! That fellow has had his vengeance—curse him!"

The spectators had crowded around, stunned. The screams of the women—Fanny loudest of all—echoed now through the house. Only two among them never moved nor spoke—Magdalen and Caroline Barstone. Even in that supreme moment George looked at his wife, and saw her standing where she had stood from the first—pale, cold, rigid. He turned away and exclaimed:

"Help me take him to his room; and Mr. Harding, for heaven's sake try to clear the house of these people, all but that man and woman! Doctor," to the old family physician, standing gravely by, "come with us and do what you can."

They carried the wounded man—lying with closed eyes and groaning at intervals—up to his room. With difficulty his clothing was removed and he was placed in bed. As the doctor began his examination, George hastily quitted the bedroom and crossed to Aunt Lydia's apartment. The report of the pistol and the women's screams must have reached her. She must hear the truth, though it killed her.

She was sitting in her armchair, ghastly and straining every nerve to listen. As briefly as possible, her nephew told her what had happened.

"Whether the wound is fatal, or even very serious, I do not yet know. As soon as it is possible you shall be taken to his room. In the meantime I will send Fanny to you. Poor child!"

He turned to go. Miss Barstone, ashen white to the lips, laid her hand upon his arm.

"And Philip is the Maurice Langley of your wife's story?"

"So it would seem," George answered, bitterly.

"And she has known this, and plotted for this all along?"

"It appears so. The man who has caused it all is her brother."

His aunt looked at him—at his face set like stone—at his colorless, compressed lips.

"My poor George! May God forgive her, and God help you! You did not deserve this. Go! Be merciful, if you can. Send Fanny to me. I will wait here as patiently as may be."

He stooped and kissed her, and left the room. Outside the door he stood for a moment, covering his eyes with his hands, so sick at heart that he could not stir. Magdalen had done this; the wife he had loved and trusted had plotted and wrought their ruin!

The house was very still; after the late tumult a dead calm had fallen. While he stood there, Philip's bedroom door opened and the doctor looked out. He saw George and came to him at once.

"Well?" asked George in a suppressed voice.

"I'm afraid of the worst, George. I'm afraid he's got his death-wound, and he's afraid of it too. He told me to telegraph to Masterson. He is quite calm now, and Mr. Harding is with him. I'll write out the telegram and dispatch it at once. Those people are below, waiting for you."

George nodded and passed on. And Philip had got his death-wound! The words rang like some horrible refrain in his ears. He had loved his cousin in a way few brothers love, and now he had got his death-wound. And, indirectly, his wife had done it. There was that in George Barstone's face that no living being had ever seen there before, as he strode into the drawing-room and confronted those who were assembled there.

He took all in at one glance. His wife stood as he had seen her last. She had never stirred; her colorless face and wide open eyes had never altered their fixed, blank look. The woman who claimed to be Philip's wife had sunk upon a chair, her face hidden in her hands, crying silent, miserable tears. Ah! poor Caroline! silent, miserable tears had been her portion since first she had seen and loved Philip Barstone's false, handsome face. Willie Allward stood, also, as he had left him, hat in hand, gazing sullenly at the door. And in a far corner—forgotten, neglected, huddled together in a strange, distorted attitude of pain, was poor little Fanny. George crossed to her directly and lifted her up like a child.

"This is no place for you, Fanny. Go up to Aunt Lydia at once."

He led her to the door. Fanny obeyed that tone of authority like a frightened child. Only once she looked up and spoke, piteously:

"Oh, George! will he die?"

"I don't know. Go to Aunt Lydia."

She toiled slowly up the stairs. He watched her out of sight—then came back, closed the door and looked at the three who had wrought this ruin. And still Magdalen stood like one petrified, like one blind and dumb.

He spoke to the woman first—Caroline. She had looked up and met his stern, pitiless eyes.

"You say you are Caroline Barstone—once Caroline Reed. Are you prepared to prove it?"

She arose and drew a paper from her bosom.

"It is my marriage lines," she said, simply. "I have his letters to me in my pocket. There are plenty of people who can prove my identity."

"How is it he, and I, we, all thought you dead? I have been given to understand Caroline Barstone died in Bellevue Hospital."

"He thought I died there, sir, but it was a mistake, as you see. I can tell you how it was, if you will listen to the story."

"I am here to listen. Go on."

She began. And told him all. Her desertion—the episode of Laura Allward, which had goaded her to desperation—Philip's midnight visit, maddened with drink, and its tragical termination—the mistake at the hospital—the death of her child.

"Then your child—his child—was really killed, and by him?"

Her trembling lips answered:

"Yes."

"That will do. I am convinced you are his wife, and wronged beyond all earthly reparation. Magdalen"—he turned upon her abruptly and without any change of tone. "How long have you known all this?"

She strove to speak; the words died away upon her lips. Willie came a step forward and tried to answer for her. George silenced him with an imperious wave of his hand.

"Not a word, sir, from you; let your sister speak for herself; she is quite capable of it. Answer me, if you please. You have known this ever since our wedding trip to New York?"

"No."

"No? Ah! I see! You thought I was Maurice Langley, in New York; you discovered your mistake on the night of Miss Goldham's party?"

She bowed her head.

"And ever since that night you have known all this—that Philip was a married man and the murderer of his own child?"

"I have."

"And knowing this, you aided Fanny to prepare for her marriage?"

There was no reply.

"You plotted with your brother and this woman to bring about the public exposure of to-night. You worked in the dark; you let things go on to the very last minute; you deliberately deceived us all—all; you had neither womanly compassion for Fanny, nor wifely respect for me. Magdalen Barstone, I have been deceived in you as, I think, no living man ever was deceived in a wife before. I thought you little lower than the angels—a perfect woman, a loving wife. I find a merciless, pitiless avenger, with a heart of stone—a soul without one spark of womanly pity or love. Indirectly you have caused a murder to-night; you have broken a young girl's heart—blighted her life. Magdalen, God may forgive you—I never can!"

He turned his back upon her. She never moved from her rigid attitude—she never spoke. Her blank eyes stared straight before her, in an awful, sightless stare. Again Willie tried to speak; again the husband prevented him.

"Not a word, sir, for her; I am her husband; it is for me to judge her. For you, your plot has ended as tragically, as melodramatically as you and your accomplices can wish. The man who has wronged you is dying up-stairs; the family are as deeply disgraced as even you can desire. If you had come to me when you first discovered all this shameful story, yonder woman would have been provided for, and the man who was once her husband would have been banished from this house forever. My wife would have been nearer and dearer to me than before, for the wrongs she had endured at his hands. But such a vengeance as that would be poor and tame to you; nothing less than a young girl's life-long misery, a household publicly disgraced, a wretched man's life taken, would satisfy you. There is the door; leave this house, and cross its threshold no more. If Philip Barstone lives, I need not tell you to do your worst. You will do it. If he dies, he will have passed beyond even your revenge. Go!"

He threw open the door with the last word. The Rev. Mr. Harding stood upon the threshold.

"He has asked for—for his wife," with a glance at Caroline's shrinking figure. "Bring her up."

He hastened away. The face of that most wretched wife lighted at the words with indescribable rapture.

"For me!" she whispered; "for me!" She stretched out her hands to George. "Take me to him, sir," she said, with a sob. "I am his wife."

His face softened for the first time as he looked at her. This was womanhood—bearing all things, forgiving all and loving to the end! Without word or look for the other two, he took her hand and led her up to the wounded man's room.

Willie went over and took Magdalen by the arm.

"Wake up, Magdalen," he said, impatiently, yet with a touch of pity in his tone, "and come with me. He doesn't want you—can't you see that?"

She looked at him—passing her hand across her brow.

"He doesn't want me," she repeated. "Yes, take me away, Willie—take me away!"

"Go and put a shawl on, then. Oh, here is one, and a hat." He wrapped the shawl about her, put the hat on her head. He had espied them in the hall. "Come with me to Millford; you can stop in Caroline's room, and to-morrow you shall go home."

"Home!" Magdalen said, in a voice whose pathos went to Willie's heart. "Home!" She crossed the threshold as she spoke, looking back as Eve might have looked her last on Eden. "And an hour ago this was home. Oh, my God! what have I done?"

The piercing agony of that cry frightened him. He drew her with him out into the chill, moonlit night.

"Done your duty, nothing more! Don't make a howling about it; now it is too late."

"He called me a murderer. He said I broke Fanny's heart, and oh, Willie, it is true—it is true! Philip Barstone is dying, and through me!"

"Nonsense! Stuff! Nothing of the sort! Through himself, and serves him right. I only hope he may not die. That would be too good for him! I want to see him in Sing Sing—consigned to the living death to which he consigned me. Don't be maudlin, Magdalen. Come along."

He was horribly afraid of hysterics; he pulled her with him roughly, yet looking in mingled fear and compassion in her tortured face.

She said no more; she walked straight with him to Millford, her rich white dress trailing the roads—her heart sick—her head dizzy. It was a walk never to be forgotten by either. They reached the house; Willie's latch-key opened the door, and they ascended the stairs unobserved. He threw open the door of the room that had been Caroline's, drew her in after him and struck a light. The lamp stood on the table: Magdalen remained where he had left her, in the middle of the floor. Suddenly she spoke in a hushed whisper:

"God may forgive you; I never will. I never will."

She repeated George's words, and, without a cry to warn him, fell senseless on the floor.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"I AM A SINNER VILER THAN YOU ALL."

George led Caroline up to his cousin's room. The lamp burned dim—the doctor and clergyman still stood near. They drew back at the entrance of the wife, looking at her curiously. She was a heroine of a romance, a real heroine, and romance of any kind was the rarest of rare occurrences in their prosaic lives. The wounded man lay very still, breathing laboriously, his dark eyes wide open and fixed upon the night lamp. Caroline trembled from head to foot as she clung to George's arm.

"Courage!" he whispered, "he is not angry with you."

She dropped on her knees by the bedside with a stifled sob and kissed the hand lying helpless there. He had used her brutally—more than brutally—he had tried to take her life—he had killed her child; but she was a woman; she had been his wife—she had loved him dearly, passionately, once. And he was dying now. To the dying and the dead all things are forgiven. In that hour her lost youth came back to her—the lover who had been so fond of his pretty, black-eyed, rosy-cheeked bride, lay helpless here—not the brutal husband. And Caroline's dead heart waked to life and love, and the infinite pain love brings to woman in that sob and kiss.

He drew the hand away as if the touch of her lips burned him; he looked at her a long, steady, frowning gaze.

"It is Caroline!" he said; "and I saw her grave six years ago!"

"Not mine; oh, Maurice! not mine! I would not have deceived you then, and after—I—I was afraid to tell you! Forgive me, Maurice—" Her voice died away.

Forgive her? He? He turned from her, the keenest pang of remorse he had ever felt piercing his heart.

"Don't kneel there!" he said, roughly; "don't kneel to me! Sit down; I want to hear the whole story."

She sat down beside him, and in broken accents told her pitiful tale. He listened, frowning harshly, with mental and physical pain.

"You know I thought you dead? When you heard I was about to marry again, why did you not come forward at once? Why did you wait till to-night?"

"It was not as I wished. I had promised to obey Willie Allward, and I kept my word. He was very good to me, Maurice, when I needed a friend, and I never dreamed of this!"

"Don't call me by that name!" Philip Barstone said, almost savagely. "Where is young Allward now?"

"Down-stairs with his sister."

There was a pause. He lay, still with that heavy frown on his face, still breathing painfully.

"See here, Caroline," he said, after that pause, "I know I've got my death-wound—there, hold your tongue—you ought to be thankful, and are, no doubt, but if you can do it, I want you to stay here to the last. I'm glad you're alive—I am, I swear—though it has cost me my life. I've been the greatest scoundrel on earth to you, and I don't ask you to forgive me, mind—that's impossible; but I wish you would stay. It's a sort of comfort to me to see your face. For the sake of the old times, long ago, before I brought you to New York, and when we were fond of one another, you will stay till all is over."

Her stifled sobs interrupted him. He looked at her with real anxiety in his face. She caught his hand and covered it with tears and kisses.

"Stay with you? Oh, my darling forever and ever. And I do forgive you! You were mad that night, and I goaded you to it, and you did not know what you were doing! Oh, my husband, I do forgive you! I love you and forgive you with all my heart!"

The doctor interfered, sternly, authoritatively.

"This won't do," he said. "You must control yourself, madam, or you must leave the room!"

The wounded man looked up at him with something that was almost a smile. He took Caroline's hand for the first time.

"She is my wife, doctor," he said; "a man's wife is privileged to cry a little when her husband is going out of the world. She shall cry as much as she pleases, and I won't have her sent out of the room. It doesn't disturb me in the least—I like it!"

"You talk a great deal more than is good for you!" growled the physician. "If your wife has any influence over you I wish she would exercise it to make you hold your tongue!"

She came close to him; she laid her hand softly on his forehead. Infinite love, infinite forgiveness, made her worn face almost angelic in its light at that moment. Philip looked at her in a sort of wonder—at her brightest, in the days of her happy childhood, she had never seemed so beautiful as now.

"Don't talk, Maurice," she said, softly; "oh, I beg your pardon, I mean Philip. Rest if you can. I will never leave you again—never."

He pressed her hands faintly, closed his eyes and lay still; then softly called "George!"

George, standing gloomily apart, with folded arms and compressed lips, advanced and stood beside him.

"Where's your wife?"

"Down-stairs in the drawing-room."

"Don't be too hard on her, George. It's all true and she's served me right. I don't set up for a saint, now that I'm done for, forgiving everybody and all that bosh; but she's just done by me as she ought—as I would do in her place. She's got the better of me, and she's not to be blamed. If I could have taken her life yesterday without fear of detection I'd have done it—I would, by Jupiter! I tell you it's all fair, George, and you must not be hard on her when I'm gone. I hated her from the first, because I feared her. I've done with fearing now, and hating, too. It's all over. Fetch her here, if you like, and I'll tell her so."

"Thank you, Phil," George said, coldly. "I'd rather not fetch her here just at present. I suppose she has served you right, as you say so, and I suppose, some time in the future, I may learn to forgive her, in a sort of way, but that time is not yet. I will go to her, however, and for you—don't excite yourself; try to sleep."

"Try to sleep," Caroline, sighed like a soft echo; "try to sleep."

George left the room. Before descending the stairs he tapped at Miss Barstone's door and went in. Aunt Lydia sat as he had left her, with Fanny, in her bridal dress and veil and orange blossoms, sobbing at her feet—sobbing and scolding alternately. She looked up eagerly.

"Any news, George?" his aunt asked. "How is Phil? May I go to him?"

"Phil is no worse, and I think it would be as well not to go to him to-night. He hasn't asked for you, and his wife is with him. They are reconciled, and she is to stay with him to the—last!"

Fanny burst out into loud, hysterical weeping. His wife! and reconciled to him; and to stay with him to the last! It was the unkindest cut of all! She was excluded; nobody thought of her or wanted her. She was a miserable, broken-hearted girl, whom no one cared for or pitied.

"I wish I was dead!" Fanny sobbed, wildly. "I wish I was dead and buried! Oh! why was I ever born? Oh! what have I ever done that I should be treated like this? Oh! dear me!"

The hysterics grew wilder. She jumped up, the sobs almost a screech. She tore the wreath from her head and trampled it under her feet and fell into George's arms in the most frantic hysterics.

The servants were summoned, the doctor was called and George made his escape. This time he descended to the drawing-room. He hardly knew what he meant to say to Magdalen—not forgive her, certainly; but not reproach her, either. He would take her to her rooms, he thought, and desire her to remain there for the present. He sighed bitterly as he

thought of her and went in.

The drawing-room was empty; his wife was gone!

He looked around bewildered; he searched the small inner room, the dining-room—in vain. He went up to her own rooms; they, too, were deserted. As he stood, not knowing where to look next, Susie, the housemaid, passing from Aunt Lydia's room, addressed him respectfully.

"I beg your pardon, sir; are you looking for Mrs. Barstone?"

"Yes. Where is she?"

"I don't know, sir; she has left the house."

"Left the house!"

"Yes, sir; with that strange young man. I saw her go away with him five minutes after you came up-stairs with the lady. I heard him tell her to come, and she put on a shawl and hat and went."

"Thank you, Susan; that will do."

He spoke quietly. He returned to the bedroom and sat down. She had deserted him, then, and gone away with her brother—the brother whom she loved far more than she had ever loved the husband. After all, perhaps it was as well. Her position in the house, just now, would be little short of daily torture. He felt himself that he could hardly bear to see her at present. She would probably stay at her brother's lodgings to-night, and to-morrow go back to her country home. Better so—yes, better so. In a few weeks, when all had ended one way or other, he would follow and reclaim her and forgive her, if he could.

Morning came. Another jubilant April day. The sun shining, the birds singing. There was little change in the sick man—some rising fever, no more. George took a cup of coffee and went to Millford and Mrs. Freeman's boarding-house. There was a note for him there—from Willie. It ran:

Mr. George Barstone:—

Sir—I have taken Magdalen home—your house is no place for her now. I will be back in Millford to-morrow night in case I should be needed. Yours, to command,

WILLIAM ALLWARD.

The day passed—the fever had increased—Philip was growing delirious. With the evening came Doctor Masterson—before midnight the ball was extracted. But the fever was steadily increasing—the vital power to rally seemed lacking. Before morning he was raving incoherently—with the day he seemed to sink—to sink in spite of every effort—by night he was at the lowest.

Through all the faithful wife sat at her post, heedless of sleeping, of eating, of all earthly things but the man whose hand she clasped, whose damp brow she bathed, whose wild words she listened to.

She had the reward most men give most women. Through it all he never spoke of her—his thoughts seemed perversely centered upon another.

"Don't go out to-night, Laura," he would cry, over and over again; "it's past midnight—don't go to-night."

He spoke of many things, but this was the burden of his cry. "Don't go to-night, Laura—don't go to-night." The seared wounds of his wife's heart bled afresh as she listened—it was her rival—of Laura Allward, dead and gone, his every thought was now; he had forgotten her. It was but one more stab to that patient heart, but it seemed the bitterest of all.

The fever left him as night fell. He opened his eyes, and they rested on Caroline. He smiled faintly—he tried to speak—the power to speak was gone. He motioned for a drink, smiled in her face again, closed his eyes and lay still.

The fluttering breath was there, and no more. Fainter and fainter it came—lower and lower sank the pulse—he hardly seemed to breathe. Doctor Masterson sat on the other side of the bed, holding his wrist, gazing steadfastly at the corpse-

like face. They were all in the room—the windows were wide open—the night air was fluttering the curtains—the broad, white moonlight shone in. Fanny knelt at the foot of the bed, her face hidden, weeping incessantly, Miss Barstone sat at the head; George stood behind her chair; the Rev. Mr. Harding and Richard Tompkins stood together at a little distance.

The hours wore on. Did he sleep? No sign of life was there, but life still lingered. It was close upon twelve, by the doctor's watch, when he suddenly opened his eyes wide and looked full at the moonlit window.

"Don't go to-night, Laura," he repeated; "it is past midnight—don't go to-night."

His voice failed—they saw him shudder from head to foot. Then he lay still. Asleep again? Doctor Masterson bent over him, his ear to his mouth. He was dead!



CHAPTER XXXVI.

FORGIVEN.

Nurse Rachel sat on the front door-step of the solitary cottage nestled among the New Hampshire hills. The May afternoon was warm and still—very still in that green, secluded spot, remote from every other habitation.

Over the distant mountain peaks a golden gray sky spread—a faint, southerly breeze stirred the rose bushes under the open windows and fluttered softly the muslin curtains. In the little grass-grown garden Laura raced, with the house-dog at her heels, her light hair flowing loose, her childish laugh pealing out sweet and merry.

Rachel's sewing lay in her lap; it had fallen there, unheeded, as she sat and thought. A neighbor from the village, passing along and pausing at the gate, aroused her.

"How is Mrs. Barstone to-day?" the woman asked.

"Much the same—no better. Won't you come in?"

"No. Is she out of her mind still?"

"Out of her mind and talking about everything under the sun. Laura, child, less noise—remember auntie is sick."

The neighbor passed on—the child subdued her gleeful laugh. Five minutes later and Rachel, about to rise and return to the house, saw a man—a stranger—hastily approaching the house. One glance was enough; it was Magdalen's husband.

She sat still and waited. He came on, opened the little white gate and drew near. He was very pale and careworn and dressed in mourning.

"My wife is here?" he said. "I am George Barstone."

Rachel slowly arose.

"Your wife has been here two weeks. It is rather late in the day to come for her now."

He grew ashen white—she saw his lips tremble.

"What do you mean? Magdalen is here—is well?"

"Yes, well," Nurse Rachel retorted, bitterly; "so well that she will soon be in heaven! Your wife lies in yonder room—dying!"

He uttered a cry; he staggered as if she had struck him a blow.

"Dying!" he repeated, in a whisper; "dying! Magdalen dying!"

The words died upon his lips. The white horror in his face moved even Rachel, bitterly though she still spoke.

"Aye, dying, for what I know—for what the doctor knows to the contrary. You have done well between you, sir—you and your cousin! He broke her sister's heart, as you have broken Magdalen's!"

"He is dead!" George Barstone said, in a hollow voice; "let him be!"

"Dead! Maurice Langley dead at last!"

"At last. If he wronged—and he did wrong greatly—Laura Allward, at least he has paid the penalty with his life. Let me see my wife—living or dying, she is still mine."

Rachel moved into the house at once, awed by the expression of his face. She opened the door of the little parlor where, years before, Magdalen, a school girl of sixteen, had knelt beside her dead sister—a friendless orphan.

The little room was darkened now as then—now, as then, was spotlessly pure and clean—and on the bed, white as that dead sister, Magdalen lay heavily asleep. Her husband crossed the room and stood, hat in hand, gazing down at that

death-like face. Rachel looked at him once, and with that look forgave him all. He had loved her—he loved her still—the unutterable anguish she read there told her that. She laid her hand upon his arm with a woman's first pitying instinct—to comfort.

"She has not slept like this since she was taken," she whispered. "It's a good omen. I have hope to-day for the first time."

"What is it?" he whispered back.

"Typhus—malignant typhus. No one sets foot inside this door but myself. She was taken down the very day she came."

"And her brother returned to Millford and never told me. I asked him if he had left her safe and well, and he answered 'yes.'"

He sank in a chair by the bedside and covered his eyes with his hands.

"Has the doctor been here to-day?" he asked, after a pause.

"He was here this morning."

"And what does he say?"

"That this sleep will, in all probability, be her salvation, if the trouble that has weighed on her mind from the first can be removed. You have only to say, 'I forgive you,' and that will be done."

He held out his hand to her.

"Thank you, Rachel," he said. "What would have become of her but for you? Where is her brother?"

"Gone West, to push his fortune. He meant to send for Magdalen as soon as he could. And you tell me, sir, Maurice Langley is dead and buried?"

"Dead and buried."

"And did he die repentant? Did any remorse for the wrongs he had done haunt him on that death-bed?"

"Laura's name was the last upon his lips. He forgave those who had been his enemies—my wife and her brother. His wife forgave him, and was by his side until the last. She is at Golden Willows still. She will never leave it now."

"And the poor young lady, sir?"

"Fanny has left Millford and gone to New York. A friend of ours—Mr. Richard Tompkins—induced his mother to come and fetch her for a long visit. She will do well enough. Had I deemed, ever so remotely, Magdalen was ill, I would have left everything and come to her at once."

"I believe you, sir," old Rachel answered. "I don't deny that it was hard—your cousin's crimes visited upon you. Your married life has not been, hitherto, a very happy one. Magdalen's secret and Magdalen's vow have stood between you and happiness. All that is over now. When you are reunited, and your new life begins, there will be nothing to come between you. The past will be atoned for and forgotten when she recovers."

She left the room to prepare for her unexpected visitor. George looked despairingly at the corpse-like face.

"When she recovers!" he repeated. "My wife! my wife! my wife!"

It was the day after, early in the forenoon. With the May sunshine streaming in, the birds singing outside the window, Magdalen opened her eyes, the fever gone—death-like, exhausted, but safe.

George sat by her bedside. Her eyes fell upon him. A faint, sweet smile parted her lips; then, a second after, she was asleep again.

Late in the afternoon she awoke again, hungry for the first time. It was George's hand that administered the beef tea and the cooling drink—George's voice that spoke with tremulous tenderness in her ear. She smiled again; she felt no surprise at seeing him there; she was still too utterly weak even to think.

Another jubilant morning, and again she awoke from a long, sweet, health-giving sleep, stronger in body and mind—strong enough, at least to think.

It was Rachel who watched by her now—Rachel who bathed her face and hands and prepared her slender morning meal.

She looked wonderingly at her own wasted hands, and spoke for the first time.

"I have been sick, Rachel? How long?"

"Nearly three weeks, my dear. You mustn't talk yet; you're not strong enough."

"What was the matter?"

"A fever. You're doing nicely now."

"Where is George?"

"Gone for a walk. Drink your tea like a good child, and don't talk any more just now."

Magdalen obeyed. She ate and drank with the avidity of convalescence, and lay back on her pillow, with closed eyes, thinking. And slowly it all came back—that dreadful night—her flight from Golden Willows—George's cruel words—her falling ill here.

"God may forgive you, but I never will!" George had said that, and yet George was here, and watching by her sick-bed. What did it mean?

The door opened softly, as she thought, and George came in. Weak as she was, she started up on her elbow, the dark, large eyes looking unnaturally dark and large and dilated now. She grasped his wrist as he drew near and looked wildly up in his face.

"You said you would never forgive me?" she exclaimed, "and yet you are here. Oh, George! why did you not let me die?"

He drew her to him and sealed the pale lips with a fervent kiss.

"That is why, my darling! Because I love you; because I cannot live without you. Forget those harsh words of mine, my love. I was beside myself when I spoke them—and don't agitate yourself now!"

She still sat and gazed at him, her eyes wild, her face incredulous.

"And after all—after that night—after what I have done—you can still love me, still forgive me? Say it again, George! I can't believe it—I can't realize it! Say it again!"

"Again and again, and ten thousand times again, my own dear wife—my poor, tortured, half-maddened girl! I forgive you; I love you—I never knew how dearly until now! I know all, Magdalen—how you strove to save us at the last. I know the exposure was Willie's doing, not yours. And Philip deserved it. He owned it himself and died knowing his sentence to be just."

"And he is dead?"

"Dead, and forgiven, let us hope. Died with his wife beside him, thankful to have her there. And I have come here, never to leave you again, my darling—never to let anything come between us more."

She covered her eyes with one wasted hand, her heart too full for words. She had not deserved such mercy as this.

"And Fanny?" she whispered after a pause.

"Fanny is in New York with the Tompkins family. She won't break her heart, believe me!" George answered, rather

cynically.

"And Aunt Lydia?"

"Bears it as she has borne all the sorrows of her life, nobly. Caroline is with her—will never leave her now, and when you are sufficiently restored to leave this, Rachel and little Laura will find their future home at Golden Willows. With Laura in the house, she will be almost happy. And we will leave her with them, my own Magdalen, and start for that trip to the old land we have looked forward to so long. Think of Venice and Naples and Rome, and the rest of it, Mrs. Barstone, and make haste and get well! This shall be our wedding-tour—a happier one than our last."

Three weeks later, and with Rachel and Laura safely transplanted to Golden Willows, George and Magdalen found themselves in New York, their passage taken in the steamer that was to bear them away on the first stage of their long pleasant tour.

They had called upon Miss Winters at the residence of the paternal Tompkins, and found that young lady looking very nice and fresh and rosy in her new mourning. It was a little awkward, the first meeting between Magdalen and Fanny; but it wore away presently, and Fanny was expatiating in the old, breathless way upon the delights of the Empire City.

"I never could live in the country again, after being here, Magdalen; not that I go into society as yet, of course," glancing at her crape and jet. "But still it's splendid, and Mrs. Tompkins is so kind, and so are the Misses Tompkins—just like sisters—I'm sure; and Richard is such a genius. And, oh! Magdalen, authors and artists and poets are as plentiful in this house as blackberries on the bushes at home."

"Richard," Mrs. Barstone repeated, demurely, "Richard is——"

"Oh, Mr. Tompkins, of course," Fanny answered, blushing. "I get into the way of it, hearing the girls call him so. It's very kind of George and you to wish to take me with you, but," twisting her bracelet nervously and looking down, "but I don't care for traveling just yet. I like New York, and I haven't half seen it; and besides, Mrs. Tompkins won't hear of my leaving."

"Well," George asked his wife, when they left the house, "what do you think of Fanny?"

Magdalen smiled.

"Fanny will do very nicely. I am more thankful than I can say to see her like this. I haven't deserved to be so happy after all my wickedness. Forgiven by all—Fanny, Aunt Lydia and you—and loved and trusted so entirely once more! Oh, George, can anything ever come between us two again?"

And so, with the dawn of her new life, we leave Magdalen, the great trials of the past ended, a wiser, a tenderer, a better woman. She has acted wrongly and suffered greatly, and no secret will ever part her from her husband's heart more.

And Fanny? Well, it is eight months since that tragical April night, and Fanny is plumper, rosier and more talkative, if possible, than ever. I received a letter no longer ago than last week from Mr. Richard Tompkins for whom I entertain the warmest sentiments of fraternal friendship, in which he more than hinted that one of the ambitions of his life was on the eve of realization. An heiress worth sixty thousand dollars has consented to marry him.

In justice to my friend, I must state that he is very fond of his little heiress—her name is Fanny—and that she looks up to and venerates the famous author.

And at Golden Willows they await the return of Mr. and Mrs. Barstone, in anticipation of a certain happy event. Little Laura, seems to have brought new life to Aunt Lydia. In the years to come other children may make the dear old homestead merry, but if they are nearer and dearer to the hearts of George and Magdalen, Laura's child will never know it.

[THE END.]

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Transcriber's Note

Punctuation has been corrected.

The following printers errors have been addressed.

Page 30 'works' to 'words'
'her words were commonplace'

Page 36 'procelain' to 'porcelain'
'in fragile porcelain vases'

Page 72 'monamias' to 'monomanias'
'And monomanias are very troublesome'

Page 93 missing 'be' added
'have to be thankful'

Page 101 'taking' to 'talking'
'talking on about you'

Page 104 'ange lout' to 'angel out'
an angel out of heaven'

Page 106 'Magadalen' to 'Magdalen'
'Magdalen laughed'

Page 107 'Materson' to 'Masterson'
'Doctor Masterson in'

Page 118 'delihful' to 'delightful'
'a more delightful time'

Page 130 'paragrigh' to 'paragraph'
'she reached this paragraph'

Page 139 'crubstone' to 'curbstone'
'young man on the curbstone'

Page 140 'now's' to 'how's'
'and how's the pretty'

Page 146 'likes' to 'like'
'she takes it like this'

Page 150 'me' to 'my'
'more than that of my own'

Page 162 missing 'in' added
'even in his thoughts'

Page 166 'too' to 'to'
'wrought yourself to an insane'

Page 192 'offce' to 'office'
'in the Milford post-office'

Page 213 'her your' to 'you her'
'I'll give you her address' (correction based on context)

Page 214 'himself' to 'herself'
'rocked herself to and fro' (correction based on context)

Page 241 'encirling' to 'encircling'
'in his encircling arms'

Page 255 'Madalen' to 'Magdalen'
'Magdalen trembled at that'

Page 279 missing 'in' added
'up here in such beastly weather'

Page 299 missing 'of' added
'There are plenty of people'

Page 307 'Though' to 'Through'
'Through all the faithful wife'

[End of *Magdalen's Vow* by May Agnes Fleming]