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THE DUCHESS OF POWYSLAND

A Novel

BY GRANT ALLEN

**AUTHOR OF 'IN ALL SHADES,' 'THIS MORTAL COIL,' 'THE TENTS OF SHEM,'
'DUMARESQ'S DAUGHTER,' ETC.**

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

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THE DUCHESS OF POWYSLAND

CHAPTER XV.

FLITTING.

Basil Maclaine said nothing to Douglas Harrison next day about his interview with Cecil. Why should he, indeed? Douglas was already 'more down than enough on him.' Like a prudent young man, he preferred his fellow-lodger should learn of it, if he learnt of it at all, from the lips of the Figginses. He didn't want to have Harrison pitching into him, he thought to himself, about that girl Linda. His moral censor would cut up nasty enough about it when he came to hear of it, anyhow, without any necessity for Basil to anticipate matters and take the bull by the horns prematurely of his own accord. Never volunteer for the lion's den. It was no fault of Basil's, after all, if these Figgins people had taken it into their joint heads that he meant to fling away his chances in the world by marrying so absurdly beneath him. And in any case, right or wrong, what was Douglas to him or he to Douglas? He wasn't bound to answer for his conduct in life to the man he lodged with.

Nor did Harrison, for his part, confide to Basil Maclaine the painful little episode of the folding doors. Honour restrained him. Besides which, he didn't care to minister to his friend's conceit by letting him know how deeply Linda had entangled herself. So when the stipendiary, unwontedly attired in a clean bib and tucker to wait at table, announced at dinner next evening with much flourish of trumpets that Miss Figgins had gone for a week's rest and change into a distant expanse known as the country, and wouldn't be back before Tuesday or Wednesday, both young men assumed an air of well-affected surprise, which did credit to their theatrical powers, and neither said much to the other on the dangerous subject of her mysterious disappearance. None the less, Douglas Harrison, of course, mentally connected her vanishment with that tag-end of conversation overheard the previous day through the folding doors; while Basil Maclaine, looking furtively at Emma, concluded, on his side, that Cecil had told Linda the upshot of their interview in the drawing-room the night before, and that Linda, thus unpleasantly disillusioned, had decided to break the awkwardness of their first meeting on these altered terms by retiring for a few days to the solitude of that indefinite area, the country.

The week passed away in the ordinary humdrum routine; and at the end of it one morning the stipendiary appeared at the breakfast-table once more, with an ineffably mysterious air of expectation embodied in the grave smile on her sphinx-like face. She was bursting with importance. 'They're a-comin' to-day,' she said, directing a nod of esoteric significance towards Douglas Harrison. 'We expect the van round a little afore eleven. Mr. Figgins, he told me to be sure to be in while the men was about the 'ouse with the tables and such. So you needn't be afeard of their takin' nothin'.'

'The van!' Basil Maclaine repeated vaguely, looking up at her in surprise, while dim visions of removal flitted in shadowy outline before his mind's eye. 'Why, what's the van for? Mr. Figgins isn't going to take his furniture and effects away with him, is he, Emma?'

The stipendiary nodded even more mysteriously than before. 'On'y from the dinin'-rooms,' she answered, in a suppressed chuckle, big with her news. 'The drorin'-rooms and seconds is to remain just as they leave 'em. You ain't a-goin' to be disturbed, sir, nor me neither. That's 'ow Miss Figgins arranged it. The new folks has took over the house ezakly as it stands, barrin' the dinin'-rooms. They 'ad their own furniture for their own rooms from their last place; so Miss Figgins, she's a-sellin' the dinin'-rooms by auction at a gentleman's in the City afore she leaves. They was all removed yesterday, unbeknown, while you gentlemen was out, and I wasn't to say nothin' to you, for worlds, about it. The new folks has took us all over, the rest of us, 'ouse and all, just as we stand. You ain't to be turned away, nor me neither.' And the stipendiary rubbed her hands with delight at the secret well kept, and chuckled inwardly.

Douglas Harrison gazed across at Basil Maclaine in blank surprise, and Basil Maclaine gazed back in blank surprise at Douglas Harrison. 'This isn't a removal; this is a revolution!' the barrister gasped out at last in profound astonishment.

And the civil servant repeated slowly after him, 'This is a revolution!'

'I think I can explain it, though,' Harrison murmured to himself, after a short lull.

'And I think I can too,' Basil replied, somewhat penitently.

As for the stipendiary, delighted at the profound sensation her news had produced, and at her own cleverness in thus implicitly obeying instructions and letting the final bomb-shell fall plump upon both young men unannounced and

unexpected, she stood by, hugging herself, and chuckled in huge enjoyment of the scene, with a delicious consciousness that for once in her life she was playing the part of first fiddle in a real, unadulterated domestic drama.

Douglas Harrison was the first to break the moody silence that followed the explosion. 'Where's Miss Figgins to-day?' he asked, turning round almost fiercely upon the startled stipendiary.

'I dunno,' the stipendiary replied with a stolid air of ignorance. 'She went to Liverpool Toosday. She may be there now, and she may be somewhere else. She didn't tell me. Mr. Figgins, he went off himself to meet her by the early train from Euston this mornin'.'

'Liverpool!' the barrister echoed aghast.

The girl grinned once more. This was as good as a play. 'Yes, Liverpool,' she answered firmly. 'I know it was Liverpool, acos I see the label they stuck onto their portmantews.'

'Goodness gracious, this is worse than I thought!' Harrison ejaculated in horror. 'This may mean Canada—America—Australia—anywhere.'

'Ah, that was where he was goin',' the girl interposed, catching quick at the name; 'I remember now—America!'

'I'm afraid,' Basil Maclaine put in, in a voice of about equal parts penitence, regret, and gratified vanity, '*I'm* to some extent the cause of this sudden departure.'

'I'm afraid you are,' Douglas retorted seriously. 'You've done more harm to that poor girl than you ever intended with your misleading advances.'

'Nd he give me some letters for you two gentlemen afore he left,' the stipendiary continued, reverting mentally to the nominative case of her own last sentence, to which she regarded the lodger's remarks as purely in the nature of parenthetical additions. 'I was to give you each this one first; it's marked so, Number One, in the corner; and after you'd read it, I was to give Mr. Harrison the other, as is marked Number Two; but not on any account afore you'd looked at the first one.'

'This thing has been planned,' Douglas Harrison said with profound conviction; 'carefully planned beforehand.'

'Ah, you'd say so if you knowed the trouble he took to get the furniture moved out of the dinin'-rooms unbeknown, when you two gentlemen was away yesterday,' the stipendiary assented, beaming; 'an' to keep the parlour doors closed after you come in last night, for fear you should 'appen to look in and see the things was missin'. He took his own supper on top o' Miss Figgins's printin' machine, what she'd used to copy out with, an' he set on his own box all the time whiles he eat it, acos there wasn't no chairs or that left in the room for him to set upon.'

Douglas Harrison, unheeding her, tore open Number One with trembling fingers, and glanced through it eagerly. It was a plain business letter from Cecil Figgins, explaining the change made in his lodgers' position.

6 a.m., Thursday.

'DEAR MR. HARRISON,

'By the time this reaches you, I shall be well on my way to Liverpool, *en route* for America, whither I hope to sail an hour after arrival, with my sister, who has preceded me, and who accompanies me on my voyage. I trust you will excuse the abruptness of our departure, and the absence of any formal leave-taking. It is not without reason, as you may guess, that we take this hasty and irrevocable step. Some little of our ground for it you doubtless know already; the rest I will tell you in part as briefly as possible.

'For several months past I have come to the conclusion there was a better opening for men of my sort in America than in England. Filled with this conviction, I set about looking for work some time since on the other side of the Atlantic, and after inserting a few advertisements in the *Scientific American*, succeeded in getting a most satisfactory offer of permanent employment from a first-rate firm of mechanics near New York City. That is the primary reason for my departure. I am going out now to take up the excellent post they have assigned me in a most important engineering establishment.

'It was my intention at first to keep on the house in Clandon Street as my own, leaving Linda in charge to manage it, as I knew I left her in good hands, and that you would do everything in your power to make its working as easy as possible for her. But circumstances which have occurred in the past fortnight, and with which you are already doubtless sufficiently acquainted, have decided Linda that it would be better for her, too, to quit England at once and for ever, without any leave-taking. I know you will forgive her. The wrench has cost her much, as you can easily believe; but she felt her own dignity demanded it of her. In this conclusion I entirely coincide. For the same reason we give no address in America. We both wish to begin life afresh in the new world, and to start unencumbered by disagreeable reminiscences of our English experience.

'With regard to practical detail, I have sold the lease of the house to the new tenant, a most responsible party, who moves in his goods to-day, and who I am sure will make you and Mr. Maclaime extremely comfortable. As he was formerly butler in a gentleman's family in Berkshire, and his wife was cook at the same place, you may rest satisfied everything will be done decently and in order. The furniture in your rooms will remain just as it is, and Emma (the stipendiary) goes, like yourself, with the goodwill of the house, so you may feel confident there will be no break in the continuity of your arrangements. Mr. Higgs, your new landlord, will get in the things for his own part of the house during the course of the morning, while Mr. Maclaime is out; and by the time you both return to dinner, everything, I hope, will be going on as smoothly and mechanically as usual. I hope you will be kind enough to excuse the way I have thus handed you over bodily, without consultation, to the custody of strangers—I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't felt fully convinced of their respectability and competence—and that you will always believe me, with thanks for your many acts of kindness towards my sister and myself,

'Yours very faithfully,

'CECIL A. FIGGINS.'

Douglas Harrison laid down the letter with a sniff of infinite displeasure. In spite of a few catch-words, it was a gentleman's letter—written by one of nature's gentlemen—with quiet self-respect and quiet respect for others showing clearly through every line and word of it; but, oh! what a fall was there! from that queenly Linda, with her superb beauty, to the butler in a gentleman's family in Berkshire, and his wife who had been cook at the same place, and would make them both comfortable! He didn't want to be made comfortable. He wanted to sit in sackcloth and ashes. Life without Linda would be a blank indeed. And what was worse, Cecil held out to him no prospect even of the possibility of writing to tell her how much he missed her. The blow was a terrible one. Douglas Harrison could easily realize in a moment its full significance.

For during that one week that Linda had been away, he had missed her already inexpressibly and helplessly. He had looked forward every hour of every day to her return on Thursday. And now Thursday had come, and just at the very moment when he expected her to arrive, came this crushing, annihilating, overwhelming letter. No more Linda, for ever and a day! No more Linda even to write to or to hear from! It was more than he could endure. He almost broke down over it. Mechanically he stretched across and held out a trembling hand to Basil for his letter from Cecil. Basil passed it over to him, with a somewhat shamefaced air. It contained much the same explanations as his own, though, of course, less cordially worded; but it began 'Sir,' instead of 'Dear Mr. Harrison;' it spoke throughout of 'my sister,' in place of 'Linda'; and it ended it with one curt but significant sentence: 'After our interview last week, you can have no difficulty in guessing what has led Miss Figgins to this hasty conclusion.'

Douglas handed it back to his companion without one word of reproach. He was too utterly disheartened and downcast to speak. Then he turned to the stipendiary—who stood, all agog with excitement, observant by his side, holding Number Two in her apron—and put out his hand for it.

Number Two was from Linda. Douglas tore it open and devoured it with avidity:

'MY DEAR MR. HARRISON,

'Do please forgive me. But I *know* you will forgive me. I couldn't bear to bid good-bye either to you or *him*. You were always good to me. I shall remember your goodness with gratitude wherever I go. But it will be best for us both that you shouldn't know exactly where I have gone or what has become of me. I'm not ashamed to tell you now, this shock has unnerved me more than I could ever have believed. I shall bear the marks of it with me down into my grave. I don't easily love or easily forget. But the cruel way my disillusionment burst upon me was almost more

crushing in its suddenness than the disillusionment itself. *He* was so much to *me*, and it killed me to find *I* was nothing to *him*. From the bottom of my heart I thank you most sincerely for all your thoughtfulness, your brotherly care, your unremitting attention. I shall think of you often. I shall remember you always. But I must cut myself adrift from England altogether, and for ever. This is the very last word I must ever write you.

'Yours, with sisterly affection,
'L. A. F.'

Douglas Harrison gazed hard at it, and the tears stood in his eyes. Maclaine stretched out his hand inquiringly. 'May I see it?' he asked. There was no Number Two for *him* that morning.

But Douglas Harrison folded it up with care, and placed it reverently next his heart in his breast-pocket. 'No, I can't show it to you,' he answered in a very husky voice. 'I—I mustn't show it to you. She has said to me things she couldn't possibly ever have said to you. She would never have written it if she thought you would see it. Maclaine, Maclaine, I told you you would do it, and you *have* done it now. She loved you with all her heart; and you've broken her heart for her.'

Basil Maclaine stared hard at the empty grate, and answered nothing. For once in his life his conscience pricked him. To be sure, she was only a London lodging-house keeper, and it was absurd to expect a man who was beginning to mix with the Very Best People to dream of marrying her; but still, in an underhand, half-impenitent sort of way he admitted obliquely to his own soul that he'd, perhaps, behaved a little badly to Linda. Not, of course, that he thought even now he should have married her. Oh no; impossible! But, with a girl of that class, the mistake lay in ever for one moment allowing her to think he could really and truly care a brass farthing for her.

CHAPTER XVI.

SABINE FALLS.

But if Basil for a moment felt a twinge of remorse for his cruel treatment of Linda, the smiles of the people really best worth knowing soon brought balm and oblivion to that wounded bosom. For by the very next post did he not receive with becoming pleasure an elegantly-printed card which bade him to a wedding at St. Peter's, Eaton Square, and were not the principals to the transaction, as set forth with the archiepiscopal blessing in the necessary license, Thorndyke Venables, of Hurst Croft, Leatherhead, in the county of Surrey, Esquire, and Woodbine Weatherley, spinster, of Girton College, Cambridge, and of that parish?

Yes, in spite of Sabine Venables' profound instinctive feeling that this horrible thing couldn't, wouldn't, and must never happen, the wedding-day approached as fast as any other ordinary date, and every preliminary for the ceremony was fully settled. Mr. Venables' face glowed more radiant than ever, and his affability outdid itself during that brief period of happy anticipation. But as the fateful event drew nearer and nearer, Sabine's horror and distress grew deeper and more visible. Bit by bit, item by item, she began, in her own heart, to realize it all—what a total change of prospects it meant for herself, what a dethronement from her position as the great recognised heiress, what a descent to the common level of every-day spinsterhood. Even already, beforehand, she could feel the difference foreshadowed and, as it were, discounted in two ways. She noticed that men of Bertie Montgomery's sort paid her less attention now than formerly, while men of Basil Maclaine's sort paid her more, and more boldly. The one class began to think *her* out of the running at last; the other class began to think *themselves* in it.

Time slipped on, and three days before the wedding Sabine had accepted the melancholy pleasure of a garden-party in some neighbours' grounds—*nouveaux riches* like the Venables themselves, with a sister place of equal magnificence on the gilded slopes of the Leatherhead Downs. The heads of many great firms basked in the sunshine on the rustic seats, while their amiable spouses, plentiful ladies all of them, in silks too rich for their years, and too tight for their figures, sat severely up in wickerwork garden-chairs of doubtful stability for the weight imposed upon them. Hubert Harrison was there, too, not without some deliberate fishing on his own part for an invitation, though it was the *Boomerang's* press day, for he had had few chances of meeting Sabine since the announcement of her father's approaching marriage, and he wanted, if possible, to get a few words alone with her upon that important subject. It had all been so sudden; they had pushed things forward with such haste; indeed, there was no sufficient reason for delay. Woodbine's only home was the Governess's Retreat in London, where she spent her leisure time; and, therefore, as soon as Mr. Venables had once made up his mind to marry her, it was most natural and fitting that the wedding should take place, as the rubric observes, with all decent expedition. And in the hurry of the preparations Hubert Harrison had no excuse for paying flying visits to Hurst Croft, such as he had often paid before, and no opportunities for consulting with Sabine on the altered state of affairs which this new move on her father's part portended.

Sabine was accounted one of the best women tennis-players on the country-side; but, to the great chagrin of her hostess on that particular afternoon, she cried off her set, and elected rather the chance of pacing with Hubert up and down the lawn, with the outer air of one who discusses the current trivialities of society, though inwardly her heart was very full indeed within her.

Mrs. Bouverie-Barton, ever prompt to encourage rebellion against social rule, helped to smuggle the two young people off together into a remote part of the garden. She was a wily widow, Mrs. Bouverie-Barton, and she managed these things always with consummate skill by pretending to disapprove where she most aided and abetted. 'There's Sabine Venables gone off now with that young man Harrison,' she said, with a meaning nod to her next-door neighbour. 'He hasn't got a penny to bless himself with, you know. Son of the dear old archdeacon. How does he live? Oh, he contributes to the *Saturday* or the *Spectator*, I think—no matter which; and he edits a paper they call the *Boomerang*—presumably, because it's sent out on sale or return, and most of the copies come back straight to the office. His brother's worse still. *He* hangs on at the bar, lectures to ladies, takes private pupils at home, extends the Universities, and helps Hubert to correct the proofs of the *Boomerang*. There's a nice sort of life for you! And yet he seems to like it!'

But in her heart of hearts Mrs. Bouverie-Barton was doing her best for all that to find every convenient opportunity for Sabine and her lover.

'Well, what about the Duke, Sabine?' the journalist began, as soon as they had got clear of the prying eyes and ears of

chaperons. 'Has he asked you yet, or hasn't he? For till he's disposed of, one way or the other, I suppose there's no hope of a hearing for an unfortunate commoner.'

Sabine's cheek burnt scarlet at this unexpected dilemma. On the one hand, her promise to the Duke bound her fast to say nothing about the proposal and rejection; on the other hand, she couldn't bear that Hubert shouldn't know how flattering an offer she had refused—for his sake only. For a moment she hesitated. Then she answered evasively, 'The Duke has nothing to do with me one way or the other. I've only seen him once since his brother's death, and I don't suppose now I shall see any more of him.'

Hubert's quick eye took in the situation at half a glance. 'Then I see how it all goes,' he said, with some pardonable elation. 'He came down here to ask you, Sabine, and you sent him about his business—like a brick that you are—to look elsewhere for his Duchess.'

'I never *said* so,' Sabine answered proudly, with just a faint little quiver of those delicate nostrils. 'I don't say so now. I don't want to talk about him; he doesn't interest me. Whether he asked me or not's neither here nor there. But if he *did* ask me, I should unhesitatingly refuse him.'

'Thank you, Sabine,' the young man said simply.

'Thank me for what?' Sabine retorted, turning round and fronting him with a hot, fiery face.

'For preferring to choose where it pleases you best,' Hubert answered, disarming her by his politic vagueness.

Never had he seen that proud girl's dark beauty to greater advantage. Now, in the first flash of her humiliation, she looked prouder and haughtier and more lovely than ever. Whatever else might happen, Sabine Venables clearly didn't intend to abdicate of her own accord. Whoever else thought less of her, she at least thought as well of herself as ever she did—or a trifle better.

'Hubert,' she broke out hastily, turning round to him once more in one of her sudden little fits of relenting tenderness, 'I wanted to see you, oh! ever so much, to talk all this over with you; and now that you're here, I can't bear to break it to you, it's so very, very hard. Oh, I can't bear to break it to you!'

'To break *what* to me, my child?' Hubert asked, astonished.

'Why, this!' Sabine cried, pacing on before the eyes of all that assembled company with her face on fire, but trying to look as if nothing particular was the matter, 'that it can never, never, never be, though I shall break my heart over it.'

'My dear girl,' Hubert interposed, with masculine common-sense, 'you're surely mistaken. So far from this new move making things more impossible for us, it makes them really ten times easier. Especially,' he added, with a rising blush, 'if certain contingencies should occur hereafter.'

'How easier?' Sabine asked, forcing a doubtful smile to hide her confusion.

'Why, before your father's decision,' Hubert answered, 'it would have been almost hopeless for me to try to gain his consent. He looked so much higher—as he judges of high—he never aimed at smaller game than Bertie Montgomery. Even now it'll be hard, of course; your father always treats men in my position as if it were absolutely impossible for them to look upon his daughter with anything but the most distant and dim respect—he dangles you before our eyes like forbidden fruit; he envelops you in a perfect Polynesian taboo—meaning us to regard you much as a groom-in-waiting might regard his princesses. But still it's just conceivable now, where before it was inconceivable. He'll grumble, of course, and he'll refuse, and he'll storm; but by opposing a steady front of passive resistance to all his assaults, you may at last overcome his objections and wring out a consent from him.'

Sabine glanced back at him with a quivering face. She stood too near realities at last to coquet or pretend or play at coyness any longer. 'It isn't that,' she answered sadly. 'I don't so much mind about that. What's a father to me? If I loved a man and meant to marry him—which I never yet said I did in any case—I'd marry him whether a thousand fathers opposed it and objected to it, or whether they didn't. I'd marry him if neither of us had a penny to bless ourselves with. I'd marry him if he and I had to live our lives long in a hovel together. I'd marry him and I'd stand by him. But, oh! Hubert, what I couldn't endure, what I couldn't face, is this—that after never having openly accepted you before all this came, I should make it possible for people to say I accepted you when ... when I'd tried, and failed, to make myself a

Duchess!

'But you've always loved me, Sabine. You've always loved me. You've never admitted it, I know. You've never told me so. But all along, in spite of all your rebuffs, I've felt sure in my heart you really loved me.'

They had turned aside down one of the shady little side-alleys now, and were less seen of men. Sabine looked in his face again, this time unreservedly. The day for coquetry was past, she felt. She stood face to face at last with the need for plain speaking. 'I always loved you, Hubert,' she burst out, with a passionate access of truth. 'Yes, I always loved you; I never meant to do more than play at refusal, at rejection, at indecision. I always loved you, and I meant you all along to see I loved you. But the rest of the world didn't see it or know it. I wish they had. They thought I was trying my best to catch the Duke. And, indeed, I played with him; I liked to draw him on and hold him off at once. I'm ashamed to say it now—it was so mean and small of me—but I wanted the vulgar triumph of being asked, and refusing him. It was wicked of me, of course. I'm suffering my punishment now. But, Hubert, I did it half for you. I wanted to be able to say before him and all the world, "I care for none of these common things—rank, wealth, position, family, title; I care only to throw myself, with my heart alone, into the open arms of the man that really loves me."' "

'And why can't you throw yourself now, Sabine?' the young man asked pleadingly.

Sabine Venables gazed back at him with eyes half dim with tears. 'I can't,' she said slowly. 'I can't ever now. If I was to do it at all, I should have done it before. As things have turned out, my pride won't let me. Not pride for myself alone, Hubert; pride for you and for your sake, too. I feel it like this. I wouldn't let people think I thought you in any way anything less than the highest. I wouldn't let them think I would marry you now when I wouldn't marry you before. I wouldn't do my own heart the cruel injustice of even seeming ever to have slighted you. I wouldn't let you or myself feel that I played fast and loose with you when I was the great heiress of the season, and rushed into your arms as a sort of second choice when I was brought down to the level of a mere ordinary person.'

Hubert Harrison looked at her, seized by a sudden inspiration. 'Sabine,' he said, with a quick resolve, 'I ask you point-blank—now—at once—will you marry me?'

'What do you mean, Hubert?'

'Will you marry me immediately, before anything else happens? Will you take me as I am? Will you go with me this very moment to your father and say you have chosen me?'

The girl's heart fluttered, and her face grew white, but she answered with a gulp, 'No, never now. All that's over. Whatever comes, I must never marry you. Hubert, let me say it just this once—I may say the truth now—I meant to take you, as it were, to do you honour. I meant to let people feel, "She can pick where she will. She's a great heiress. She's rich; she's handsome"—I know I'm handsome—"she's made much of, flattered, the catch of the season. She might have taken money, a title, diamonds, position, influence, a coronet—what she would, almost. But she prefers a Man—a Man for his own sake, because he's the best and noblest and truest she can find, and she honours herself by accepting his offer." That's how I wanted to accept you before all the world; and I would have married you so, and loved you dearly. I shall love you still, Hubert,' and her voice faltered strangely, 'as long as I live. How much I love you, I never told you before. I tell you now, without reserve. But I can never marry you.'

Hubert hesitated. 'Oh, how good you are!' he said, flushing. 'But by-and-bye you'll think better of all this, Sabine. You'll grow accustomed to the change, and in time you'll marry me. When a woman once tells a man she loves him, she has said the last word. I know enough for that. In time you'll marry me.'

'Never,' Sabine repeated firmly. 'For your own sake, never. I wouldn't do you the wrong of seeming to decline upon you, instead of rising towards you. I shall love you always, Hubert—love you till I die—but I can never marry you. And now we must go back, for there are papa and Mrs. Bouverie-Barton looking for me.'

Three days later Thorndyke Venables and Woodbine Weatherley were duly joined together in holy matrimony, by three clergymen abreast, at St. Peter's, Eaton Square, and Sabine looked on with a set smiling face at the hateful ceremony that finally dethroned her.

That afternoon Woodbine, in her going-away dress, flung herself for a moment into Sabine's arms.

'Oh, Sabine,' she cried, with a passionate embrace, 'you *must* love me. You *must* kiss me. If you look at me like that, I

don't know what I shall do. I can't bear to seem like a stranger and an interloper in the house. Sabine, Sabine, you'd forgive me if only you knew how much I loved him.'

She was such a feeble, frail, poor, shrinking little thing, and her cry was so natural, so genuine, so pitiful, that, angry as Sabine was, she couldn't be angry with Woodbine. She clasped the new stepmother in her arms with a mechanical clasp, and tried to soothe and comfort her. 'Woodbine,' she answered, smoothing the frightened girl's hair with her caressing hand, 'you know it's been hard for me, you can understand it yourself; no girl on earth ever liked it; it isn't in human nature not be vexed; but I'll try to get over it. I'll try to be myself with you. You're a gentle little thing, and I always loved you. Forgive me, you too, and I'll try to get over it.'

But more than that she couldn't find it in her heart to say just then, even to that poor, fragile, appealing creature, for, indeed, the blow was a very severe one for her.

CHAPTER XVII.

COUNCIL OF WAR.

A year passed away, with all its trivial events, and much water had run under the bridge before any other great change occurred in the Hurst Croft household. But about twelve months afterwards, one bright summer afternoon, Arthur Roper, Esquire, in his most gentlemanly tweed suit, sat taking his ease, cigarette in mouth, in a private room of a highly respectable London hotel; while opposite him, in a padded chair, with her demure hat stuck far back on her head, and her eminently proper little brown veil tossed carelessly aside on the table, Miss Venables' maid lolled loosely about in a most unbecoming attitude, and bandied repartee of a very doubtful sort with the head of the profession.

An hour or two before, Miss Venables' maid, an austere young person, notable even among her own class for the exquisite precision of the coils and plaits of her back hair, had stood respectfully erect in Miss Venables' presence, and, dropping her sweet, low voice to a deferential key, had asked quietly, on the very best grounds, for the exceptional favour of an afternoon's holiday.

'I had a letter this morning from my aunt in London, miss,' the irreproachable young person remarked, crossing her hands in front of her with the suavity of her kind; 'and she says my poor mother was taken worse again last night with a fresh seizure—worse than she's been at all since she was first paralyzed, in fact; and I thought, if it wouldn't inconvenience you, and you could manage to spare me, I should like so much to run up for a few hours to-day to go home to see her, getting back in good time to do your hair for dinner.'

'Very well, Williams,' Sabine Venables answered, in perfect innocence; 'and if there's anything you'd like the cook to get ready for her, you know—beef-tea, or jelly, or anything of that sort—you can ask her, if you wish, to make some for you to take with you.'

The irreproachable Williams drew herself up with mingled gratitude and dignity. 'Thank you, miss,' she said, 'but my mother has everything she can require at home, of any sort, thanks. My brothers and I take care she wants for nothing that can make her more comfortable. We get her port wine and everything she can need. But we thank you all the same, miss, and I'm much obliged for the leave. I wouldn't have asked you at all, if it weren't that there's a train down from Victoria that'll bring me back in very good time to do your hair; and I couldn't bear to think my dear mother should feel I was any ways neglectful of her.'

But as she lolled there now in her padded chair, the very picture of careless ease and abandonment, with her hat and her respectability pushed aside together, the closest observer would hardly have taken her for the same demure person who, a few hours earlier, had stood so straight and looked so deferential, with the stereotyped air of the superior upper servant, in Sabine Venables' dressing-room at Hurst Croft, near Leatherhead.

'So you think it'll come off on Monday night, then, Bess?' Mr. Arthur Roper inquired, with profound interest, holding his cigarette in his hand, and blowing out his smoke with pensive attention.

'Oh dear yes—Monday night for certain,' Miss Pomeroy responded, for it was indeed she. 'And the thing'll be as easy as lying, or even easier.'

'You're a good one at a plan, and no mistake,' Mr. Roper went on, eyeing close the sketch Miss Pomeroy had drawn up for him on a sheet of paper. 'Dressing-table there; jewel case here; upon my word, Bess, one would think, to look at it, you'd been articulated to an architect.'

Miss Pomeroy smiled a pleased smile. Praise is always dear to the female heart. 'Well, it *is* a good ground-plan,' she admitted, with modest pride. 'I took some pains over it, especially as to the windows.'

'The windows are devilish handy—there's no doubt about that,' Mr. Roper observed, musing, still gazing at the sketch. 'I had a good look at them all round on Tuesday. I like these new-fashioned Queen Anne houses for that. Progress—progress—the æsthetic revival! They're built with some regard for the convenience of the profession. Always some nice little picturesque ledges and projecting out-buildings to help a man up by, and always some pretty little leaded panes of coloured glass in the bedroom casements you can cut through with your knife as soon as look at 'em. None of that confounded bother about jemmies and centre-bits, which are always compromising; no grinding through plate-glass with

a glazier's diamond, and having the loose bits tumble in on the floor to rouse the household. Queen Anne's the lady! Why, there's many a fine old bare and square country mansion I know of—worst style of art—Elizabethan and so forth—where a man might go prepared with rope ladders, and skeleton-keys, and sectional crows, and all the latest scientific implements and accoutrements of the trade, and he couldn't get inside—no, not if he were to waste the whole blessed night over it. I hate such bad style! There's no doubt in the world at all about it; we've made immense advances of late in England in the art of architecture.'

Miss Pomeroy laughed—a laugh that was easy and free and debonair. 'Well, you'll have no difficulty on Monday, anyhow,' she said, with a good-humoured nod. 'If it comes to that, the Cassowary's so careless of her jewellery (we call her the Cassowary for her stately tread) I could walk off with it any day myself without the slightest trouble, if it weren't for my character. But, of course, my character ain't to be trifled with that way. It's a great deal better, for form's sake, there should be a regular burglary, and everything should be done in the correctest style—window cut through, door locked inside, tools left lying about in a heap on the dressing-room floor, all the open evidences of a forcible entry. That's the sort of thing that takes with the public. No suspicion thrown upon anybody inside. A regular, downright, desperate cut-throat burglary.'

Mr. Roper looked up with an appreciative smile. 'Bess,' he murmured half aloud, 'you're a jewel, you are! You're always the same. I do admire you!'

Miss Pomeroy rose and dropped a small mock curtsy. 'I'm glad to have obtained your approbation, sir,' she said saucily, 'and shall endeavour, by a strict attention to business, to merit in future a continuance of the same.'

'Well, upon my word,' Mr. Roper added, smiling, 'I hardly know how I'd ever get along at all without you.'

'You'd do a great deal better if you'd give up all the others, and make an honest woman of me, and settle down quietly in a respectable way of life as a first-class operator,' Miss Pomeroy said regretfully. 'We're throwing away our talents, that's just what we're doing. We could make much more and be a deal more comfortable if we took up with circulars or something like that—Mrs. Gordon Bailey's line of business, for example.'

The head of the profession eyed his boots thoughtfully. 'The fact of it is, Bess,' he answered, after a long pause, 'I *can't* give up all the others. It goes against my religious convictions, don't you see. You must take a man's religion into count. I'm a Jew by descent, a Christian by education, and a Mohammedan by predilection—so I can't help myself. I've got to go on. No man can be blamed for his religious convictions.'

'Well, there's none of them could be of use to you like I could,' Miss Pomeroy retorted, not without some faint tinge of asperity in her voice. 'But, anyhow, business is business; and here's the way I look at it. We must make sure of details. You get in by this window marked with a cross on the plan; there's no mistaking it. It's the landing window, don't you see; and then you go up these stairs, one flight in front of you. The first room on the right's the one marked A, and the things are all kept in the top left drawer of the dressing-table.'

'There'll be nobody about?' Mr. Roper said, once more inspecting the architectural plan.

'Oh dear no, there'll be nobody about. I can answer for that. They'll all be hanging around loose in Dear Woodbine's part of the house, you may be certain.' And Miss Pomeroy gave the words, 'Dear Woodbine' in Old Affability's own precise manner, for, like all her kind, she was a capital mimic. 'Dear Woodbine's rooms are away over in the opposite wing. The Cassowary took care of *that*, you may be sure; *she* wasn't going to be put too near her mamma-in-law. Old Affability'll be there, too; he'll be hanging about in the Blue Room, rubbing his hands nervously, and talking about Dear Woodbine's intellectual graces. He's a gentleman of a great deal of soul, when you get to know him, is Old Affability. He talks this way.' And Miss Pomeroy went off at a tangent into a delicious caricature of the typical British Philistine's intellectual conversation, when he passed from the consideration of Portuguese Threes and warmed up into flights of wooden eloquence on the subject of the highest charms of female society.

The head of the profession, tilting his chair and laughing, regarded her with eyes of unmixed approval. 'Well, you *are* a rare one, Bess!' he cried, delighted. 'I never did meet anybody so good at rapid changes of front as you are. When you go into a private house to push your inquiries into the number and disposition of the family jewels, you're propriety itself. You look as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouth. I'm sure, when I saw you on Tuesday in the garden at Hurst Croft, walking like Priscilla the Puritan maiden behind the stately Cassowary, and passing me by without so much as a glimmer of recognition in your eye, I said to myself, "That girl's a treasure."'

'I'm always acknowledged to be a Perfect Treasure, as long as I stop,' Miss Pomeroy put in parenthetically, with a graceful smile. 'I've often heard 'em say so, when I wasn't listening.'

'That's just it,' her admirer went on confidently. 'You make 'em believe you're a regular model of all that a prim Prue of a lady's-maid ought to be. And then, when you come back and break loose again into your own nature, hang me if you ain't enough to kill a cat with laughing. You're plastic, that's where it is, don't you see; you're absolutely plastic.'

'You've got to be plastic if you want to earn your living in our walk of life,' Miss Pomeroy replied, her cheek flushing, nevertheless, with ingenuous pleasure at this well-deserved praise. 'But I flatter myself I *do* make up my back hair as well as the best of 'em. Still, the work's hard, there's no denying it. It ain't the Cassowary I mind so much, though she *is* trying sometimes; the way she goes on about *her* back hair's something positively ridiculous. It's not my fault, is it, if there ain't any more of it? But it's the society of the servants' hall that drives me frantic. I don't mind the airs and graces of the drawing-room so much: they've been born and bred to it, and they do it well; but to have to endure the respectabilities and proprieties of all those footmen and coachmen, the faddy little etiquettes of Dear Woodbine's maid, and that reduced gentlewoman, the housekeeper—oh, Arthur, it just sickens me. A man couldn't do it, you know. *He* wouldn't be hypocrite enough. But, thank Heaven, as you say, I'm absolutely plastic. 'Pon my word, I could almost make love to the butler, I believe, if business required it; and I couldn't say fairer than that, I'm certain.'

Mr. Roper smiled a sympathetic smile. 'It *must* be hard,' he said seriously, 'for a person of your tastes and education, Bess, to be mixed up in a house with a low lot of people like that. You're quite right, I admit it: I couldn't stand 'em. There's your butler, for example. I've forgotten the gentleman's respected name—but I'm sure he'd be the death of me. I was brought up genteel, and genteel I shall remain as long as I live, even if circumstances have driven me to be an ornament of the crib-cracking profession. When I go to the work'us, I shall go there in a hansom. Still, it does credit to your head and heart that you manage to get on with these people at all. You must do it at such a complete sacrifice of all your finer feelings.' And Mr. Roper sighed pensively.

'Oh, it's not that they're so low,' Miss Pomeroy answered, rising and assuming the magnificent pose of a powdered John Thomas. 'They're so high; that's the bother of it. One feels the absurdity of the situation so keenly—the grand way they talk, and the airs they give themselves. "Good mawning, Miss Williams. Fine mawning to-day. I 'ope you feel bettah than you did last night. I think you complained of a little headache." That's the sort of thing that makes it dreadful to live with them. However, my poor dear mother's so very ill now,' and Miss Pomeroy jerked her left thumb gracefully over her left shoulder—'that she can't hold out much longer, I'm afraid; and as soon as she's laid to rest, dear soul, under the green churchyard sod, and the yews are waving solemnly——'

'Oh, Bess, you'll be the death of me!'

'Well, when the yews have done their usual duty over the grave, I shall find the work of attending to my young lady more than my impaired health and shattered nerves can stand, and then I'll retire from service on her little property, to go and keep house for my dear kind brother, the national-school master.'

'Bess, Bess,' Mr. Roper ejaculated, eyeing her with admiration, 'I don't wonder you take 'em in. The saintliness of your air, the sweetness of your manner! Why, you'd make your fortune, you would, if you were to go on the stage. You were cut out for an actress.'

'Indeed, I'm sure, sir, it's very kind and thoughtful of you to say so,' Miss Pomeroy chimed in, in her favourite character as the Perfect Treasure. 'If I've earned your approbation, sir, by my humble efforts to please, I'm more than satisfied.' She lifted the corner of an imaginary apron and looked down modestly. 'My one aim in life is to give satisfaction to my kind employers. For securing valuables when the right moment arrives, there's nothing on earth like an unblemished character.'

'How's the lights in the house?' Mr. Roper inquired, with a flash, suddenly recalled from admiration to serious business. He prided himself on being the inventor of the modern early or full gas-lamp system of committing burglary, in contradistinction to the old and more compromising four a.m. principle.

'Electric all over, my dear, thank Heaven,' Miss Pomeroy answered devoutly. 'The newest thing out. This Amberley incandescent that everybody's talking about. It's all Amberley nowadays at Hurst Croft. We're run entirely on the Amberley system. Amberley bosses us. We've the Amberley light in all the rooms, and the Amberley telephone to the stables and garden, and the Amberley alarm to wake us with the early morning cock, and the Amberley motor to work the

lift and the garden rollers. Our governor finances the Amberley syndicate, whatever that may be. But never you mind the light. It's all right. The more the better. It'll be turned on full in every one of the passages. It's much simpler so. You walk straight in with your hat in your hand, in your best Sunday suit, as if the place belonged to you, and if anybody happens to meet you and ask any questions, just you pull your mug and say you're Miss Williams's brother, come down for the night, and Miss Williams has sent you to Miss Venables' room for Miss Venables' smelling-bottle.'

'Is it safe, do you think?' Mr. Roper inquired, with a dubious expression.

'Anything's safe, I should think, with such a dunder-headed lot of blathering idiots as the Hurst Croft servants. You might walk in by the window before their very eyes, and if you said "Good-evening, sir," they'd be perfectly satisfied. You might tell them you were the Queen's Taxes called to inspect the gas-meter, and they'd think it was all right. They'd show you up at once to the dynamos for the Amberley motor.'

'Well, mind you give me time enough to get clear away before you raise the alarm, any way,' Mr. Roper put in. 'I always think you raise the alarm a leetle bit too soon. Some day, if you don't look out, they'll run up, and I'll get lagged at it.'

'Trust me for that. I know my own business. It's indispensable the door should be locked from the inside, and I should raise the house for it before anyone else discovers the loss. That's the one guarantee for my immaculate character. If it weren't for that, inconsiderate fools might actually suspect me of being a confederate or an accessory.'

'Shall I want any shooting-irons?' Mr. Roper asked suddenly with an interested air. 'Because, if not absolutely necessary, it's safest, of course, not to carry 'em about with one. It creates a prejudice against a man in the eyes of the police if he's found walking about with a six-shooter in his pocket.'

'Oh dear no!' Miss Pomeroy answered briskly. 'Not the slightest need in the world for that. There never was a safer plant yet than this one. And, indeed, on personal grounds, I should particularly dislike your being obliged to do anything that might hurt the Cassowary or any member of the family.'

Mr. Roper glanced across at her with a faint curl of disdain upon his sinister lips. 'Why, what a regular sentimentalist you are, Bess!' he exclaimed, with some suppressed amusement.

Miss Pomeroy blushed. 'No, not a sentimentalist,' she answered warmly, as one who repels a disgraceful imputation against his moral character. 'But when you live in the house, you naturally take more interest in the members of the family, with whom you have more sympathies and ideas in common, than in the servants'-hall people, who bore one to death with their inane affectations. Besides, I like the Cassowary. She treats me sometimes almost as if she thought I was human. And now, suppose you order up a bottle of fizz. It's wearing on the spirits, don't you know, this trial of seeing my poor mother so ill; and I don't mind joining you in a glass of cham before I go home again to the Cassowary's back hair and the butler's compliments.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

DISINHERITED.

On Tuesday night, all was bustle and confusion at Hurst Croft. The east wing, where Sabine had her rooms, was altogether deserted, and the whole strength of the establishment was concentrated on the opposite side of the house, where Old Affability stalked nervously about in Mrs. Venables' apartments.

Old Affability was evidently ill at ease. Even his latest toy, the Amberley light, of which he was inordinately proud, having just completed an entirely new installation, seemed to afford but little comfort to his troubled mind. He paced up and down through the silent rooms, and rubbed his hands together in an agitated fashion, in exact accordance with Miss Pomeroy's clever prediction. It was clear he was awaiting important news. Could Unified have declined one-eighth in Paris, or were Argentines being boomed that day in Wall Street? The banker's face wore that unmistakable air of suspense and anxiety which is the outward and visible sign of internal expectancy.

Presently the door opened, and Miss Elizabeth Pomeroy herself glided softly into the Blue Room.

'How is she now, Williams?' Mr. Venables asked with obvious anxiety.

'Pretty much the same, sir,' Miss Pomeroy answered deferentially, in her soft, subdued voice.

What a capital servant she was, to be sure—so much above her station in manners and feelings! She was the very person, Old Affability thought, for a sick-chamber. All her movements were so gentle; all her tones were so low. He did wish to goodness dear Woodbine could only have had such a nurse to take care of her as that very superior woman.

'And where's Miss Venables?' he asked once more, still rubbing his hands vigorously.

'In the library,' the invaluable lady's maid answered, with quiet promptitude. 'Shall I ask her to come to you, sir?'

'No—eh—no, thank you,' Mr. Venables replied, hesitating. 'I—eh—I prefer to be alone, thanks. And she does also.'

Miss Pomeroy glided away with a noiseless tread towards the library door. Her manner was outwardly as calm and unmoved as if she expected nothing. But it was two o'clock in the morning by the great hall clock; and at two sharp Mr. Arthur Roper was due for a professional engagement in the east wing. Miss Pomeroy, however, was too well trained a servant to exhibit her internal agitation by any outer signs. She walked into the library with as firm a step as if Mr. Arthur Roper was snoring peacefully in his London lodging.

'Can I do anything for you, miss?' she asked of Sabine with that unfailing deference that always marked her.

Sabine was pale and very weary-looking.

'No, thank you, Williams,' she answered, looking up. 'But don't let me keep you. There's no need for you to wait. You can go to bed if you like now.'

Miss Pomeroy's face was all polite refusal.

'It's very kind of you, miss,' she said demurely, 'but I couldn't sleep, thank you. I'd rather sit up, if you don't mind, till we know what happens.'

Which was perfectly true, in more senses than the one Miss Pomeroy herself intended it to be taken in.

And she glided away, as noiseless as ever, with that ineffably respectful and respectable air floating like an invisible cloak around her.

As soon as she was gone, Sabine sat down and pretended to look at the magazines on the table. But she couldn't really read; she could only turn over the leaves one by one in listless expectation. Every five minutes or so she looked at her watch, and sighed audibly. This was slow work. Half an hour passed by, five minutes at a time, then Miss Pomeroy's light step approached the door. Sabine's heart beat hard. She knew from some faint difference in her maid's footfall that the great question was now finally settled.

'Well, Williams?' she said, in a deadly cold voice, as her maid entered.

Miss Pomeroy's face gave a dubious smile of respectful assent to the unspoken query.

'Yes, miss,' she answered, more deferential than ever. 'It's all over.'

'A boy or a girl?' Sabine asked, with a chill.

'A boy,' Miss Pomeroy replied, as though she had no idea how much difference the result of that natural toss-up made to Sabine. 'A very fine baby.'

Sabine rose up and moved quickly towards the door.

'Can I go and see it?' she asked, with a choking lump in her throat. For the very worst had come, and she knew now she was really nobody.

'Yes, miss, if you like. It's in Mrs. Venables' boudoir. Mr. Venables is there, and he told the nurse to send me to call you.'

Sabine groped her way, faltering, into Woodbine's boudoir. The rooms were lit up with a dazzling flood of the Amberley system, but her eyes were blinded. In the boudoir her father stood uneasily, rubbing his hands still with the same curious nervous anxiety as ever, and bending over a shapeless little mass of flannel, that the nurse held carefully balanced in both hands. As Sabine entered, he turned round to her with a half-guilty look.

'It's a boy, my dear Sabine,' he said, in his most apologetic manner—'a very fine boy. And our dear Woodbine they tell me's progressing favourably.'

'So I hear,' Sabine answered, as cold as ice. 'Is this the child?'

And she inspected the little bundle of flannel critically.

In its centre lay a tiny brown lump of humanity, with blinking eyes and mottled red face, so soft and small, it looked as if a touch of one finger might crush it out of shape for ever and ever. Sabine gazed at her new brother with a long, stony stare of supreme contempt. Was this atom the supplanter, then? This ridiculous little creature the expected enemy? Why, how could she ever be even angry with it? To think that a putty-like lump of flesh such as that, with its blinking small eyes and its flabby cheeks, had outwitted and ousted her! It was really absurd. There was something almost humiliating in the tininess and ruddiness of the new heir. For so many years she had considered herself the actual or prospective mistress of Hurst Croft; and now, to be superseded by that insignificant red and white mite of flesh there! It was bad enough, in all conscience, when Woodbine took her place; though Woodbine was at least a woman, after a fashion, with views of her own, however cartilaginous, about Æschylus, and evolution, and the Christian virtues; but this insensible little podgy dollop of human dough—why, the very thought of it was ridiculous. She could hardly swallow it.

'He's a very fine child,' her father repeated once more, after waiting in vain nearly ninety seconds for some spontaneous expression of Sabine's critical opinion.

'I dare say he is—as children go,' Sabine answered icily, inspecting the strange object askance with an uncertain air of candid inquiry; 'I don't understand them myself in this stage of development. I've never seriously devoted my energies to the personal study of the human infant. But he's very like a jelly fish.'

'He's a beauty, that he is,' the nurse put in with warmth, in the conventional crowing voice of nursery approbation. 'Did he wonder what it all meant, then, with his pretty little eyes and his dear small nose? Did he wonder what they wanted with him? Did he think it such a curious, funny sort of a world, with all these lights and all these sights, and all these queer sounds, and all these strangers?' And she held him up admiringly.

'Probably he doesn't think about it at all, as yet,' Sabine responded, with crushing common-sense. 'His only distinct idea must be that he finds flannel most unpleasantly tickling. It's a foretaste of the general discomfort of life, and he doesn't seem to like the sample.'

As she delivered herself of this cheerfully pessimistic criticism of human existence to its new adventurer, they were interrupted by a serious face looking in at the doorway from the adjacent room where Woodbine lay ill. Mr. Venables started. It was one of the three doctors in attendance on the case, and his aspect was ominous.

'I'm afraid, Mr. Venables,' he said, coming forward with a very grave air, 'you'd better step in and see your wife at once, for fear of accident. She's in a most feeble condition, and she's asking to speak with you. You must be prepared to find her very weak indeed, after the effects of the chloroform. Her constitution's naturally frail, as you must be well aware, and this sturdy young gentleman here has put a severe strain upon it.'

'She's not in danger?' Sabine asked, alarmed at the gravity of his face.

The doctor raised a deprecating hand in front of him.

'My dear young lady!' he said, very low. 'No such word as danger for worlds, I beg of you. She may overhear what you say. Her nerves are in such a preternaturally exalted state.' He dropped his voice still lower. 'Well, yes, I am afraid it would be useless to conceal from you the fact that her condition's critical—extremely critical. A very weak heart; very weak indeed. I don't say she mayn't pull through; we'll hope for the best; but you should be prepared for a sudden calamity. There's no knowing how soon she may collapse altogether. Mrs. Venables was never in her life very strong, you see; and, between ourselves, like so many of these Girton girls, she's totally unfit for the strain of maternity.'

'Can I see her?' Sabine asked, her lips quivering with remorse.

'Well, she oughtn't to be excited,' the doctor answered, with a doubtful glance towards the door where Mr. Venables had just disappeared. 'She should be kept as quiet and as undisturbed as possible. But it might be as well for you to creep in unobserved and just stand beside the bed behind the curtain. There's no saying any moment now what may or may not happen.'

Sabine slipped into the sick-room with a throbbing heart. She was none too early. Woodbine lay upon the bed, very thin and pale, a strange calm upon her face, with her eyes fixed blankly upon the canopy overhead, and one white hand lying motionless as marble in her husband's. The senior of the doctors, at the head of the bed, was bathing her brow tenderly from time to time with eau de Cologne; his companion was holding her pulse, watch in hand, with one finger on his lip in ominous warning. Nobody spoke. There was a deadly silence.

At last Woodbine murmured in a very faint voice:

'Raise up my head, please;' and they propped it up with pillows.

Again there was silence for one long breathless moment. Then Woodbine spoke once more.

'Bring me my baby,' she said; and Miss Pomeroy, who stood by Sabine's side behind the sheltering curtain, glided noiselessly out like a ghost to fetch it.

When she returned with the nurse, Sabine noticed with surprise that tears were standing in her maid's eyes. Immaculate servant as she knew Williams to be, it astonished her to find she could cry so humanly.

The poor fragile little mother gazed with a long, wistful glance at her child as the nurse held it up before her clouded eyes.

'It's a beautiful baby,' she said slowly in very measured tones. 'Oh, what a beautiful, beautiful baby! How I wish I could have nursed it! Is it a boy or a girl, nurse?'

'A boy, ma'am,' the nurse answered, holding it before her eyes. 'As fine a boy as ever was seen or heard in England.'

Woodbine lay still in one devouring gaze, and smiled a wan smile at that unconscious little mortal.

'A beautiful boy!' she murmured half to herself again and again. 'A beautiful baby!'

For many minutes more, then, she lay as if dreaming, with that placid smile yet irradiating her poor pinched face, and a pallor as of death creeping gradually over her. At last she opened her eyes convulsively, and asked, with a sudden flicker of her ebbing life:

'Where's Sabine? I want her.'

'Here, dear,' Sabine sobbed out, just pushing aside the curtain, and taking her other hand tenderly in her own. 'Is there anything you want to say to me, Woodbine?'

'Before I die? Yes. Hold my hand hard, Sabine. Let me feel you're holding it. I think I'm going. I feel as if I must be. But for my sake, dear, promise me this one thing—you'll be a mother to my baby?'

Sabine bent over her, half speechless with remorse, her eyes all blinded, and her voice choking.

'Yes, dearest,' she answered, with a terrible wave of conscience almost drowning her speech. 'You may trust him to me. I'll watch over him, and take care of him. I'll never move from his side. I'll give up my very life for him.'

As she spoke she pressed Woodbine's hand hard in hers. Woodbine felt the solemn earnestness of that pressure, and smiled once more. It was a long, long smile, that died away faintly. The doctor took her wrist from Sabine's grasp between his finger and thumb. Sabine gazed across at him through her tears with a glance of awe-struck inquiry. The doctor nodded.

'All over,' he said slowly, in a very low voice. 'She's gone, poor lady!'

Sabine fell upon the bed, and hardly knew what followed. She had fainted as she fell, beside poor dead Woodbine. The doctor lifted her up, and carried her to a couch.

'Get some sal volatile,' he murmured in a very quiet tone, turning round to Miss Pomeroy.

But the maid stood transfixed, with tears rolling down her cheeks, slowly, slowly.

'I can't—I daren't,' she cried, in a tremulous voice, all quivering with emotion. 'It's in Miss Venables' room. But I couldn't go up to get it. Call one of the men-servants, please. He won't be afraid. With *her* lying dead there, poor soul! on her bed, I daren't go up to the room to get it.'



CHAPTER XIX.

A RELAPSE.

Next day all Leatherhead was agog with the news how many things had happened together at Hurst Croft in the small hours of Wednesday morning. A son and heir had been born to the house of Venables, and the mother that bore him had died shortly after. Those trivial occurrences, however, made small stir in the town. The higher education of women, that fashionable Moloch and Juggernaut of our time, slays its annual holocaust so regularly nowadays that nobody is astonished when one more Girton girl, unequal to her self-imposed task of defying with impunity all the laws of nature, breaks down and dies in her first futile attempt to fulfil the natural functions of motherhood. The event that agitated the public mind of Surrey to its profoundest depths was a far more uncommon one. At the very moment when Mrs. Venables breathed her last, as Miss Sabine lay fainting on the couch by her side, the butler, despatched post haste to her room for a restorative, had discovered that thieves from London—most expert thieves, so the constable surmised—had taken the opportunity of this most eventful night to break into the house and steal Miss Venables' jewels.

'I went up to my young lady's room,' the butler explained to the police, with many circumlocutions, at the station next day, 'to fetch some salv'lattily. Miss Williams, my young lady's maid, she arst me to fetch it, as Miss Venables was fainting, o' course; so I run and I fetched it. When I got up to the door of Miss Venables' room the door was locked, o' course. "Hello," says I to myself, "who's this inside? Somethin' wrong somewheres." So I knocked and knocked, an' nobody answers. Well, then I gets alarmed, as you may think, and calls out to Robert. Robert he comes and 'elps me, and what with 'ammering and what with bangin' we batters in the door at last. Oh my! such a sight as Miss Venables' room when we'd bashed it in you never see. This 'ere jemmy was a-lying on the floor all in pieces, promixuous like; and Miss Venables' drawer was forced open and broke; and not a jule or a valuable was left about the place that the burglars could lay hands on. They must 'a got in by the first-floor landing while we was all downstairs, and let 'emselves out again afterwards by the bedroom window. But, bless you! they'd 'ad time to get all done and clear out with the swag a good twenty minutes, for when Robert an' me comes up there wasn't no trace of 'em to be seen anywheres. And it's my belief they've got clear off by this time right away up to London.'

As for Sabine and her father, they were too much preoccupied with more important affairs, as luck would have it, to trouble their heads very much about the theft of the jewels. Mr. Arthur Roper had fallen upon his feet; the head of the profession had chosen an exceptionally favourable date for his Hurst Croft experiment. For some weeks after a formal announcement appeared from time to time in the London papers:—'The police are still investigating the loss of Miss Venables' jewellery, but no arrest has yet been made.' After awhile, however, editors seemed to find the paragraph a trifle monotonous, so quietly dropped it. And that was all. Mr. Arthur Roper, safe and snug in his luxurious lodgings in town, held fast to his booty; and the police continued to 'investigate' the case till everybody else concerned had well-nigh forgotten all about it. They may, not improbably, be still investigating it.

A fortnight later, as Sabine sat in her own private room in her deep mourning, with that unconscious little orphan asleep in his cradle by her side, the door opened, and Miss Pomeroy entered, all respectful attention as usual, but with a curiously painful look upon her impassive countenance.

'Well, Williams?' Sabine said inquiringly, for Miss Pomeroy had an air of one who desires to communicate something important.

'If you please, miss,' the model upper servant answered, blurting it out as foolishly as the veriest under-housemaid, 'I've come to tell you I'm very sorry, but at the end of a month, if it's convenient to you, I'd like to go, miss.'

'To go?' Sabine echoed, astonished. 'Why, what on earth's the matter, Williams? You and I have always got on so well together, and I thought you were so comfortable.'

'So I am, miss,' the model upper servant replied with perfect politeness, but in short sharp sentences. 'And you've always been most kind to me, and I'm sorry to leave, and before I go I'd like to thank you very much for all your goodness. But—I feel my nerves are so very much upset'; and with that, to Sabine's utter amazement, the model upper servant, collapsing into a chair, broke down entirely and gave way to a most genuine fit of hysterical sobbing.

'Your nerves are upset, Williams!' Sabine cried, leaning over her, aghast. She had hardly yet realized, to say the truth,

that people in her maid's position in life were provided by nature with such eminently aristocratic anatomical elements as nerves at all. 'Do you mean to say they're upset since you've been here, then?'

Miss Pomeroy looked up with an appealing look. She wasn't acting now. It was all pure nature.

'Yes, miss,' she answered, through a storm of sobs. 'It was that night the dear baby was born, and poor Mrs. Venables died. I was so terribly shattered. It all came over me with such a sort of sudden horror like. I've felt ever since I wasn't fit for service, and I couldn't stop in the house another day as soon as ever my month was up with you.'

'But what will you do for your living?' Sabine asked in amazement. 'You know you'll have to go somewhere else, of course, Williams, and take another place where your nerves may be just as much tried as they were here. Deaths may happen in any family.'

The maid shook her head. 'No, no,' she said with an air of settled determination. 'I'll never go out to service at all again. It isn't necessary for me, and I won't do it any more, miss. You couldn't understand me; you couldn't believe me; you couldn't enter into it; I could hardly explain to you, even; but the strain on my feelings is more than I can bear.' She looked away with a sudden burst of uncontrollable tears. 'Don't ask me any more,' she cried piteously. 'But I can't endure it, oh! I can't endure it one day longer.'

'She must be hysterical,' Sabine thought to herself in her severe, cold way. 'This is pure hysteria. But what a pity it is, too, for a girl in her position! for she's the best and handiest and most obliging maid I've ever had. Nobody else ever did my back hair as nicely as she does.'

For Sabine was still at that primitive barbaric stage of thought when all the rest of the world is of importance only in so far as it directly subserves one's own convenience, use, and comfort.

Still, as there was no help for it, she nodded assent with a very bad grace, and said, 'Very well, Williams.'

It was just a month from that day, accordingly, that Elizabeth Pomeroy, *alias* Williams, sat in a neatly furnished London room once more with Mr. Arthur Roper, the head of his profession. Mr. Roper was preparing his favourite prescription of 'a thimbleful of brandy neat' to restore Elizabeth Pomeroy's shattered nerves, and regarding her out of his terrier eyes with a curious mixture of sympathy, contempt, uneasiness, and suspicion.

'It won't do, Bess, my girl,' the professional gentleman remarked in a brisk, sharp tone, as he handed her across the thimbleful (a very liberal allowance indeed at that), and shook his head slowly with a candid air of a paternal Mentor. 'It won't do at all. This is just pure sentimental stuff and nonsense. That's the worst of your character, you see. You're so devilish uncertain. You ain't to be depended upon. I always said you were a sentimentalist at bottom. For brains and for *nous* you lick the whole lot of 'em, I grant you that. But you're liable to these unaccountable revulsions of feeling, which is a weakness which almost counterbalances all your many good points and makes you at a pinch next door to useless. Hang me if I don't think one of these fine days you'll get a fit of remorse and split upon me for everything!'

Miss Pomeroy drank off the brandy and sobbed like a child.

'Arthur,' she cried, between the sobs, in very genuine distress, 'when I get taken like this, do you know, I almost hate you!'

'So I observe,' Mr. Roper replied with philosophic calm. 'That's what makes me say that in this sort of mood you're a dangerous animal, Bess, and a menace to society. You should have more stability.' He assumed a charming didactic tone. 'It's essential to anything worth calling character,' he observed, with the profound air of a moral preacher, 'that it should be calculable, calculable—that you should be able to say for certain beforehand how it's going to act under any given circumstances. That's George Eliot. Now, the bother of it is that your character ain't calculable. A fellow never knows what you'll be up to next. He don't know how to treat you, you're so confounded changeable.'

'I can't help it, Arthur,' Miss Pomeroy cried vehemently. 'It's all your own fault. It's you that have brought me to it. You've only yourself to blame for it. You moulded me and trained me when I was an innocent girl, and might have been made into anything, for good or for evil; for as you say yourself, I'm plastic, plastic. If a good man had got a hold of me, he might have made me into a saint; but it was *you* that got a hold of me, and you saw I was a clever girl that'd suit your purpose, and, as far as you could, you made me into a devil. The other side comes out in me a bit now and again; but I'm mostly what you've made of me, and that's a devil.'

'Not enough of a one quite,' Mr. Roper retorted, with musing regret. 'The old Adam comes out in you too strong still. That's the worst of women. One can never quite depend upon 'em. Women are a long way too emotional for the profession, that's where it is. You take a man and you educate him to his trade, and you teach him his notions, and you train him up in the way he should go; and jiggered if he don't throw himself into it, body and soul, without ever having any of these blue devils, and fits of remorse, and twinges of conscience, and all that sort of ridiculous feminine nonsense. He'll see a girl die, or a babby either, while he's engaged on his rounds, and think nothing of it at all, except so far as it affects the way of business. He'll take it as it comes, and make the best of it. But a woman ain't built that way. She can't keep her feelings under proper control. You may mould her and train her, and educate her as much as you like, but I'm blowed if you can educate out this confounded fal-lal about babbies and so forth. It's innate in 'em, I suppose. Evolution, evolution—the survival of the fittest! Nature meant 'em to be mothers; and there's a sort of sneaking hankering after respectability, and morals, and a quiet life, and honest livelihood, and all that sort of rot, in the very best of 'em. It can't be helped, I suppose; it's hereditary in the sex; but still it *is* disheartening. When you've devoted yourself for years to the task of eradicating that ridiculous rubbish in a very promising girl, it *is* disappointing to find it crops up again, the moment your back's turned, on the very first convenient opportunity.'

Miss Pomeroy looked up at him with an appealing glance.

'If you'd seen it yourself, Arthur,' she cried, 'as bad as you are—and, I think, you're about as bad as they make 'em—I do believe even you'd have been moved by it. To see that poor little mother—no better than a girl herself—with her small white face lying there dying, all so frail and thin; and leaving that dear little innocent baby, in the nurse's arms, with nobody on earth to take care of it but the Cassowary, and even the Cassowary herself crying and fainting, and the poor old man broken down like a child—and then to think of myself and the life I was leading—to think I was there for nothing on earth but to rob them and prey upon them—to think at the very minute when that poor white thing was passing away with a smile on her lips, looking her last look at her baby that never knew her—you were in the Cassowary's room, with the mask on your face, at your wicked work, breaking open the jewel case; and *I* was there to help you and cover your retreat—oh, it was too horrible, too horrible! I couldn't have gone up to fetch the sal volatile if you'd offered me the world for it. Oh, I couldn't, I couldn't, I couldn't, I couldn't!'

'Well, this *is* disheartening!' Mr. Arthur Roper observed, running his hand through his front hair with a despondent air, and gazing at her as one gazes at a hopelessly naughty child. 'It's downright disheartening, 'pon my soul! It's almost enough to make a man despair of ever getting a woman that's really a helpmeet for him. Here have I been training you, Bess, for years and years, and explaining to you and reasoning with you, and now for a twelvemonth and more you've never had one of these relapses, as I may call it—not a symptom, or a threat of one—but were going on as nice and smooth as a piece of clockwork; and just at the end of that time, when we've succeeded in pulling off between us a really big *coup*, and things are beginning to look up a bit in the cut diamond market—hanged if you don't come home with a fit of the shivers, like a man with D.T., and talk morality in my ears as if you were a street preacher! It's just disheartening! Women are all of 'em respectable in their hearts—respectable to the core—and you never can tell when it's going to burst out in a fresh place, like rheumatism or erysipelas.'

Miss Pomeroy rocked herself up and down in her chair.

'Well, I don't mind stopping at home and helping you in the business as far as one can do with shops and that,' she said, wiping her eyes with her handkerchief. 'I don't want to be rough upon you, Arthur; but I'll never go out to service any more, to introduce myself like a snake into a private house, and then turn against 'em and rob 'em when they're least expecting it. It goes against my nature. Oh! you may say what you like about stability and that, but you never can help my being taken this way. It's part of my character. If I weren't built so I wouldn't be half the use to you. I know I'm a clever one, and I know I'm lady-like, and I know I can get in where nobody else'd have a chance, and I know I can make 'em take me for a regular Methodist. But why? I'll tell you why. Because I'm finer grained to start with than any of your common lodging-house thief girls. Because with good training I might have been turned into something better and honester than I am. Because it's only you that have corrupted me, and made me wicked. The more of a lady I was to start with, the more useful can I be to you as a decoy and a confederate. You've counted on what was truest and best within me, to twist it aside into a bait for your own bad purposes, and you must put up with the consequences.'

She spoke passionately, remorsefully, with one of those sudden outbursts of unwonted emotion which always come when a woman lets the floodgates of her heart stand open.

Mr. Roper gazed at her, and nodded his head.

'Very true,' he said soothingly. 'Very ... true ... indeed. You've been extremely useful to me; and you wouldn't have been half the use if it weren't for your refinement, your education, and your delicacy of perception. I admit it all. I allow my indebtedness to you. You and I are just suited to pull together. The worst of it is, there are drawbacks as well. Your temperament, though good on the whole, has its moments of uncertainty. I never know what you may do in one of these sentimental fits. Perhaps'—and he drew his hand rapidly across his throat—'but there! no matter.'

He poured her out another thimbleful, and handed it across with conspicuous gallantry.

'Toss that off, my dear,' he said, smiling his ugly smile. 'That'll do you good. Nothing on earth so fine for the blue devils. I shall keep you at home for another twelvemonth, till you've got over this bout. Quiet does it. By the end of that time you'll be eating your head off to get to work again. You'll be pawing the ground and longing for action. You ain't one of those that like to lie still and hide your light under a bushel. That's where it is; you must be up and doing, and exercising your talents. You'll have forgotten all about the mother and the babby long before then, and you'll be fresh for work, like a farmer's mare after a jolly good feed of bruised oats. You see if you don't, Bess.'

CHAPTER XX.

A DUCHESS ON THE HORIZON.

Time passed on—summer and winter, summer and winter, and summer again; but Douglas Harrison heard no more of his lost Linda. She had vanished into space, like an unknown comet, and that was the end of her. Over and over again he made inquiries from people who knew New York well; but what's the use of asking aristocratic New York about a stray young woman from Europe, of the lower middle class, or hardly that? Fifth Avenue turned up its eminently respectable nose, and replied with scorn (through the same medium) that it didn't associate with the sisters of mechanics. For frank snobbery, commend me to your American. We clothe ours in Europe with a decent veil of social pretence, but the descendant of the Puritans parades his own variety, like our first parents in Paradise, naked and not ashamed. So Douglas Harrison nursed his regret in secret, and wondered much that Linda herself, after this long lapse of time, should never even have written a line to him.

He and Basil continued still in the self-same lodgings. The butler and his wife made them tolerably comfortable, as chambers go; and Basil Maclaine, for his part, was by no means inclined to quarrel with the constitution of the universe. He had forgotten Linda and the wrong done her in the manifold delights of the Best Society. He had youth, health, strength, and vigour on his side, as well as the joyous, unthinking selfishness that comes of their union; and what with rowing on the river, tennis at the club, an occasional mount in the shires, and dances and flirtations in the West End, the young man about town had but little time to remember or regret his late lodging-house landlady. Moreover, his father's death had left him independent, and enabled him to count upon a secure livelihood apart from the office.

But things had not gone so well, meanwhile, with Douglas Harrison. Few briefs dropped in, and those few unimportant. Whatever he tried somehow seemed to fail. 'If I were to turn baker,' he said despondently one day, 'I really believe bread would go out of fashion.' Basil Maclaine was of opinion that Harrison didn't push himself in Society enough. He wanted Go; and Go is, above all things, indispensable to a barrister. If only he would make up to the solicitors, now, something might be done. But then Harrison had always so just a sense of his own deficiencies!

Nor had Hubert and Sabine made much progress, for their part, during those two or three years in their matrimonial projects. Maclaine declared, indeed, that Miss Venables was growing into a confirmed old maid—she'd devoted herself entirely to the infantile ailments of that precious baby. 'The girl's a mere head nurse,' he said, 'for all Society ever sees of her.' Not that Sabine was in love with the baby even now for his own sake—she could never forget how Arthur had supplanted and dethroned her—but she had promised Woodbine on her death-bed to be a mother to her boy; and so far as a certain dry mechanical routine of maternity went she kept her promise well and faithfully. No baby on this earth was ever better cared for than little Arthur Venables. The faculty debated on his tiniest finger-ache, and a household held its breath when he refused his bottle. Sabine never pretended, indeed, to love him as a sister; but she watched over him like a mother in Woodbine's place through all the endless dangers and trials of speechless babyhood.

This vicarious maternity told upon Sabine. Her care for Woodbine's child turned her before her time from a gay coquette into something very like a staid and sober matron. She became a keen critic of the various brands of condensed milk, and an authority on the rival merits of Mellin's and Mortimer's Food for Infants. She had views of her own upon the treatment of thrush, and held strong opinions as to the proper period for short-coating a baby. In fact, she was a mother among mothers in everything but the name; and Arthur was almost like her own child—except in the one small particular that she never loved him.

It was some two years or more after Woodbine's death that Basil Maclaine dropped into the club one afternoon, big with the latest gossip of fashionable Society.

'Heard the news about Powysland?' he asked of Charlie Simmons, whom he ran up against in the billiard-room. 'Surprising, isn't it?'

'Why, I thought he was in America,' Charlie Simmons answered, with the natural anxiety of his kind to be thoroughly informed as to the movements of the Truly Great. 'Lady Southwater told me so.'

'Well, so he is,' Basil responded. 'That's just where it is, don't you see? He's been looking about him any time this three years for a big enough heiress for him to bestow his heart and hand and funded debt upon, and he's never yet till now

been able to find an investment to suit him. He was on upon Sabine Venables to start with, you recollect, before Old Affability took it into his bald pate to marry that poor little animated broomstick that went and died at last with her first baby; but as soon as Powysland found there was a chance of an heir in that quarter to cut out Miss Sabine—and one's come since, of course, a puling bit of an infant—he saw *that* was no go, and he dismissed the Venables with a polite "No thank you." Well, then he tried that Irish distilling girl, with the auburn hair and the rich Dublin brogue; but *she* didn't suit him, somehow, whether it was her temper, or whether it was her laugh, or whether it was the settlements, nobody knows, but a hitch came in, any way. So after that he had a nibble at a Birmingham indiarubber woman with a vulcanized nose; and some Sheffield cutlery; and the Glasgow shipping trade; and a South Welsh colliery girl; and half a dozen more assorted heiresses. But none of 'em suited. They say the old Duchess wanted too much money, and Powysland himself wanted too much looks—he was fastidious for his part on the matter of appearance—and between them both they never could hit upon the exact thing they stuck out for—a girl who exhibited the ideal combination of youth, position, beauty, accomplishments, the very best education, and a good round figure to her credit at Coutts's.'

'So he went over to America, like all the rest of them, I suppose, on a hunt after the dollars?' Charlie Simmons suggested.

'That's just what he did. Small blame to him too, say I. And he's got them at last, after many days. Lighted on the precise good thing he wanted. He's going to marry Miss Amberley, the sister of this Amberley motor, you know, that they're making such a fuss about.'

'What! not that electric light fellow that's going to cut out Edison on his own ground. You don't mean to say so.'

'Yes, I do, though. The very man. He's rolling in wealth. Syndicates or something. Piled it all up, Yankee fashion, with a sudden spurt, in the last four or five years. But there it is, all the same; realized, realized, as safe as houses. It's not the light only, Colonel Quackenboss tells me—that's a drop in the bucket—though that alone must bring him in thousands. There's the motor, as well, that they're introducing now on all the tramways in America. And there's the telephone improvements that the Post Office here has just signed a contract for. And there's a mine in the West somewhere, Arizona or Colorado, or the Lord knows where; and there's oil wells, natural gas, and the Lord knows what. You understand how it is. Founders' shares, they call 'em. When these fellows in America once begin to pile it up, they've so many irons in the fire before six months are out they can't tell you themselves exactly how rich they are.'

'Talking about Powysland?' an acquaintance asked, breaking in upon the colloquy with a knowing air. 'Well, he's booked this time.'

'Yes, and he needn't regret it,' Basil Maclaine replied, conscious of standing in the very swim of news about the Best People. 'She's enormously wealthy.'

'So I hear. She's a partner in all Amberley's concerns, they say. It's quite a little romance. It seems she risked her all in it. These Yankee women are born gamblers, you know; they've the regular American passion for enterprise and speculation. They're death on contangoes. I'm told in Chicago there's hardly a lady in Society who doesn't dabble on the Stock Exchange and do a thing or two in futures. It's the instinct of the race. They must make money.'

'And this Amberley woman of Powysland's gambled like all the rest?' Charlie Simmons suggested tentatively.

'She gambled like all the rest,' the well-informed person responded with cheerful ease. 'She put her bottom dollar into Amberley's ventures, and went it blind; and, by Jove! at the end of a year or two she turned up trumps and came out a millionairess.'

'Amberley himself's a self-made man,' Basil Maclaine put in, not to be left behind in the purveyance of authentic news. 'He's a Westerner, I believe—what they call a Hoosier.'

'Oh, indeed!' Charlie Simmons responded with a very wise look; though whether Hoosier was a name derived from a trade, a locality, or a religions persuasion, he hadn't the faintest idea; so he thought it best to look wise and adventure nothing.

'Yes,' Basil continued pensively. 'A very rough diamond. Rode into St. Louis on a Mexican mustang, with his inventions in his pocket, and nothing else. Not a red cent to bless himself with, that amusing Colonel Quackenboss told me last night; so he had nothing to fear from the bunco-steerers, any way. And now he's worth fourteen million dollars.'

'*And* his sister the same,' the well-informed person added parenthetically.

'Not a bad haul for Powysland,' Charlie Simmons observed with a gloating expression, looking round him and smiling. 'It's something to talk about money in the millions, don't you know, even if you do it only on a nodding acquaintance.'

'The girl's good-looking, I'm told,' the new-comer remarked, just to keep the ball rolling. 'George, black coffee.'

'If she wasn't, Powysland wouldn't take her at any price,' Basil Maclaine replied, hastily selecting a cue from the rack and chalking it with minute care. 'He stands out for that. He's a stickler for beauty. Have a game with me, Simmons? Fifty up! The Venables girl would have suited him down to the ground, if it hadn't been for that unfortunate mistake of poor Old Affability's in marrying the broomstick. But after he was off with the Venables—ha, good shot!—he could never find anybody to fit his book exactly. "I'll tell you what it is, Maclaine," he said to me one evening at the Die and Hazard—by the same token, I lost to him heavily that night—"I wouldn't give you twopence for a girl if she don't look thoroughbred. I must have the very best, or nothing at all; if I can't, I'd rather go without them altogether." Put me up two, marker! And they tell me this Amberley woman's a regular stunner. American style, you know. Tall, thin, and high-toned. That's what Colonel Quackenboss calls her; extremely high-toned.'

'It's about time Powysland raised some tin somewhere,' Charlie Simmons observed with a confidential air, eyeing his ball sideways. 'How he's managed to hold on so long as he has done without anything to back him up beats me quite. He's been living on the Semitic interest ever since he came into his title, and even *they* were beginning to get tired of supplying him. Bother it. Too much side on! I always miss when I talk as I'm playing.'

And so the conversation wagged on indefinitely, with the usual delightful amplifications of billiard-room gossip.

To be sure, some of these various details, thus glibly vouchsafed on every hand, were, no doubt, as the French newspapers would phrase it, 'inexact'; but they gave so much pleasure to their respective recounters that nobody could grudge them so inexpensive an enjoyment. Not one of them knew the Duke except in the most casual way, but all felt so delighted at imparting to the rest their speculations and opinions on his minute psychology that the veriest cynic on earth would have shrunk from the cruel task of shattering their idol by asking them point-blank the exact extent of their acquaintance with the subject of their conversation. From the familiar way they all alluded to 'Powysland,' indeed, a stray passer-by might readily have imagined him the most intimate friend of all the trio.

'When's it going to come off?' Charlie Simmons asked at last, after some further gossip as to the Amberley antecedents.

'Oh, almost immediately,' Basil answered with importance. 'No legs; yes, it'll do it—kiss, kiss; ha! cannon! We shall see the new Duchess in London this autumn.'

'What an acquisition to our society!' a voice from behind exclaimed with just a faint undercurrent of satire.

Basil turned to look—and missed his stroke. It was Douglas Harrison, who had that moment come in. Basil hardly knew why, but if there was a man on earth whom he would have wished not to overhear the subject of their conversation just then it was his fellow-lodger. Harrison was always so down upon a fellow, don't you know, for wanting to learn all about what was going on among the Best People.

He stifled his wrath, however, and pretended not to notice the sarcastic aim in Harrison's well-directed shot; so he merely answered, in a very dry and matter-of-fact way:

'Yes, these American heiresses are always good fun. And this one, I believe, is a particularly fine and racy specimen. Your stroke, Simmons!'

But he felt as he spoke, that, come what might now, it was a point of honour, since Harrison had cast the gauntlet in his teeth, as it were, that by hook or by crook he must somehow scrape acquaintance with the new Duchess of Powysland as soon as ever she reached the shores of England.

It's no light task, you may be sure, to compass the siege of a real live Duchess, even when her husband, the Duke, has owed you three tenners for three long years; but, high as the quarry might be, Basil meant to attain it. Come one, come all, he must redeem his character and assert his position. He would move heaven and earth for an invitation to meet the newly-married Duchess, sooner than that Harrison should thus have the laugh at him.

He was hardly gone, however, when a sober-looking man, who sat reading his *Punch* in the corner unobserved through all this colloquy, turned to Douglas Harrison with a quiet air of amusement, and remarked:

'What rot! That's the sort of nonsense a man will talk to make himself look knowing. I happen to have heard on the best authority that Miss Amberley's a lady of a good old New York family, in the highest circles, a grand-daughter of President Martin van Buren, and related to the Adamses and all that set. Which shows how people will say anything on earth for the sake of gossip.'

CHAPTER XXI.

OH, WHAT A SURPRISE!

Whenever a man devotes himself wholly and solely with all his energies to one object in life, it must go hard with him indeed if he doesn't attain it. Basil Maclaine had devoted himself for some years with a single mind to the task of mixing with the Best People, and he was beginning now to reap his due reward. Still, 'twas a proud moment indeed when he opened the envelope that contained that magical card, inscribed on its face:—'Lady Simpson at home, Wednesday, Feb. 12th, 10.30 p.m.,' with down in the far corner those inspiring little words, 'To meet the Duke and Duchess of Powysland.'

For, by using Mrs. Bouverie-Barton as the thin edge of the wedge, with himself as the thick one, Basil had dexterously succeeded in getting to know Sir Theodore Simpson. And now, by using Lady Simpson in turn in the self-same well-known mechanical fashion, he was the happy recipient of an invitation to meet a real live Duchess.

All London in those days was ringing with the name and the fame of the great American heiress who had just come over. She was the most beautiful woman in the whole range of the peerage, so gossip averred; and her electric thousands would enable the Duke to restore the tarnished glories of the Powysland title. The society papers had endless paragraphs, more or less true, about the Duchess's belongings, the Duchess's trousseau, the Duchess's intentions, the Duchess's plans, the way she had been received by her mother-in-law, the Dowager, the kiss impressed upon her grace's cheek by the sacred lips of royalty in person. Basil Maclaine devoured all these choice items of fashionable intelligence with an epicure's gusto. He wanted to know all he could about the Duchess at secondhand before being actually ushered, an expectant neophyte, into her august presence.

Authorities differed, however, as to certain minor points in the heiress's history, appearance, and manners. Mrs. Bouverie-Barton simply raved about her beauty. 'Ears like a shell, Mr. Maclaine,' she said enthusiastically; 'delicate hands and fingers, with long almond nails; a most aristocratic face; a charming figure; but I didn't hear her talk, though I'm told her wit is positively refreshing.' Mrs. Bouverie-Barton, however, had a habit of always speaking in the superlative degree. More sober critics gave conflicting notes. Some said she was 'divinely tall and most divinely fair'; some that she walked in beauty like the night, with raven locks and eyes of a correspondingly dusky description. According to one veracious scribe in a fashionable journal, she spoke the purest and most beautiful Bostonian English; according to another, in an equally recognised print, her accent at once betrayed her Iowan origin, while her idiom was marked by all the familiar freedom and raciness of those who dwell beside the setting sun on the boundless prairies beyond the Mississippi. The *Cockroach* would have it that she was raised on molasses and corn-dodger in a log shanty on the shore of Lake Superior; the *Kite* declared its contemporary misinformed as to the facts of her grace's early days, the truth being that her happy childhood had been passed among the babies on Our Block in a New York tenement house, while her education had been picked up in a Bowery beer saloon, where she sang every night as a popular comique in 'It's English, you know, quite English,' till her brother 'struck ile' with the Amberley motor. On three points alone was all the world agreed—first, that the Duchess's manners were queenly graciousness itself; second, that she had lived in Madison Square, at the famed Amberley mansion; and, third, that she meant to pass this winter in Onslow Gardens, pending the thorough redecoration and rehabilitation of Powysland House, to meet the needs and requirements of that most exacting member of our species, an American heiress.

Basil never mentioned his good luck in getting that card to his fellow-lodger. True, it was hard for him to keep silence altogether as to so important an invitation, which filled his horizon and occupied the larger part of his consciousness during those tedious weeks and days of waiting; but he nathless so endured for the sake of the greater triumph he felt it would be to remark casually next morning at breakfast, 'I was presented last night at Lady Simpson's to the Duchess of Powysland—a very agreeable Yankee girl, so lively and unaffected.' For Basil had quite made up his mind beforehand to board the Duchess. He was aiming now at nothing less than the habitual entrée of Powysland House. A Duke must be compelled to acknowledge old scores. Basil meant to make the best of those three tenners and that chance acquaintance of his with Bertie Montgomery.

So he kept his own counsel, as though dukes and he were as thick as thieves—he might, indeed, have been hail fellow well met with half the strawberry-leaves in the British peerage for all he said himself to the contrary.

At last that long-watched-for 12th arrived, and Basil Maclaine, in his best new evening suit, turned back with satin at the flap, and an orchid in his button-hole, drove solemnly off in his own hired brougham to Lady Simpson's party. For on

such an occasion as this Basil thought it a duty he owed his hostess to let it 'run to a brougham,' in anticipation of the honour of meeting a Duchess.

It was a very swell affair—red cloth in the street and canopy over the pavement. All the smartest people in the town were there, so that Basil, gazing round on fair women and brave men, felt himself truly in his ideal element. There could be no denying this was the Best Society—even Douglas Harrison himself must have admitted its Bestness. Baronets hustled against bishops in the hall, and you might have ticked a good quarter of the guests off in Burke or Debrett, while most of the residuum, though not, of course, quite so truly distinguished, had still that minor sort of social importance acquired in such vulgar work-a-day pursuits as medicine, law, art, literature, and science. Basil's bosom swelled with just pride and with a solitaire shirt-front as he looked around him, beaming, and realized the full glory of his present surroundings. He had never before moved in so exalted a company.

Podgy little Lady Simpson, fat, fair, and fifty, smiling right and left, stood in the midst of all, to receive her guests with a gracious inclination of what stumpy neck nature had bestowed upon her. Basil grasped the plump, small hand extended to welcome him to the bosom of society, and adjusting the eyeglass he had lately started to give himself importance, fell back, somewhat awed, into the second line that ranged round the drawing-room.

'Oh, Mr. Maclaine, that's you,' Sabine Venables cried, holding out her hand to him cordially, as he passed her way through the crush, observant right and left (among so much magnificence) of somebody to talk to. 'Do come here and point me out the Duchess when she arrives. I'm just longing to see her. Everybody says she's such a magnificent woman, you know, and so deliciously Yankee.'

'She hasn't come yet, I fancy,' Basil answered, glancing around the room through his eyeglass with a knowing air of universal acquaintance; for he wouldn't for worlds have admitted to his neighbour he didn't know even the very brand-newest of British duchesses by sight. 'I don't see her about anywhere.'

'Oh no, she hasn't come,' Sabine replied, looking him through and through with those keen black eyes of hers. 'But she's expected every minute. All the world wants to see her. They say she's just charming. She's the sensation of the season.'

'And how's the infant?' Basil asked, not because he really desired to know, but merely to keep the conversation going. 'Flourishing, as usual?' He'd forgotten the name of that disconcerting boy, so he thought it wiser to inquire after him by a safe generalization as 'the infant.'

A faint shade passed over Sabine's face as she answered dubiously:

'Well, no; not quite the thing, somehow. His throat seems bad, and he's a little bit feverish. I oughtn't to have come out and left him at all to-night, that's the truth' (Basil shaped his mouth as she spoke to a conventionally sympathizing circle), 'for papa's away—gone to Paris for a week about what they call a syndicate, I fancy—or is it a contango?—and Arthur's far from well. I ought to have stopped at home with him. I promised poor Woodbine I'd be a mother to him, you know, and I've kept my word to her. But I couldn't resist the temptation just this once to come out, in spite of his being below par, to see the Duchess. Everybody's seen the Duchess, and everybody raves about her; and one doesn't like to be behind the times, of course, does one?'

'Of course not,' Basil responded, with a somewhat crestfallen air; for he didn't like to be told everybody had already been admitted to a privilege which he himself had been ranking so high in his own mind for the last fortnight. He had fancied he was among the very first to be permitted a glimpse of this new star from the West, and it was humiliating to hear from a lady's lips that all the world beside had long since sighted it.

Before he had time to venture on any comment, however, the door opened again, and, amid a lull of voices, the footman announced, 'The Dook and Duchess of Powysland.'

Everybody turned to stare instinctively at the American beauty. There was a hush on all sides. Even the Dean of Dorchester paused in his bland discourse to Miss Lily Watson, and old General Black cut short his famous story of how Hobson's Horse routed the sepoys in the bungalow at Moozuffer-nugger. The whole company was agog to see her grace enter.

The newcomer swept into the room every inch a Duchess. She was tall and dark and exquisitely dressed, as is the common wont of the Transatlantic heiress; and for the first second or two Basil could only note that she was handsomer

and more queenly-looking than he had at all expected. *Nouveaux riches* always despise one another for their sad lack of family antecedents; and Basil, inbred with all the traditions of the Hagley Road, Edgbaston, had rather expected to despise Miss Amberley, of Madison Square, New York, and of the Amberley motor, as not quite coming up, however high-toned Colonel Quackenboss might find her, to the dignity of the society in which he himself was accustomed to mix. But one glance at the new Duchess dispelled all his doubts or fears on that score. In spite of her diamonds and her magnificent dress, he could see in a second she was a Born Lady.

Just at first, that was all. The manner and bearing of the great American beauty took his breath away at one glimpse, and left him only a general sense of hushed surprise and awe at so much grace and graciousness. But she swept across the room towards podgy little Lady Simpson, through the alley formed spontaneously by the other guests, with a quiet dignity which somehow seemed to Basil's eye extremely familiar. Surely, surely, he had seen that tall, lithe figure and that well-poised head somewhere else before! Was it at Nice—or Vichy—or Geneva—or the Netliberg? Then, with a flash, the whole incredible truth burst wildly across his bewildered brain. The great American heiress—the new Duchess of Powysland—was—incredible!—impossible!—none other than Linda!

It took but three seconds for these varying ideas to pass in rapid order through Basil Maclaine's mind; but what a world of wonderment broke over him all at once as he stood there with a reeling brain, and actually realized it! There could be no doubt at all about the bare fact. Altered as she was, by dress and decoration, by three or four years of interval, and the lasting traces of a great sorrow, the American heiress was Linda Figgins still—his old rejected flame of the Clandon Street lodging-house. What it could all mean, his puzzled head could hardly divine. The enigma was too deep for him. So many questions surged up in his mind all at once, as he stood at gaze and stared at her. Had Powysland been palming off some strange lie upon the world? Had he married the girl for her beauty and her figure alone, and then tried to impose her on innocent society as the sister of the great millionaire electrician? Was the Amberley story all a gay and light-hearted fiction, invented to cover a common *mésalliance*? Had a Duke and a fortune-hunter succumbed at last to the mere personal charms which Basil Maclaine, a simple Government servant, of Brummagem antecedents, had been strong enough to resist, in spite of the siren?

But no! Corroborative evidence was there to refute him. The diamonds alone told another tale. Linda must be rich, however or whenever she came by her money. Powysland had neither cash nor credit of his own to deck out his new-married wife in such a truly Transatlantic blaze of splendour. Whether Linda had picked up a new name and a new brother in America he knew not. But one thing at least he knew to a certainty. This girl was Linda, his old lodging-house attendant, who had waited on him in her neat apron a score of times in Clandon Street, who had changed the plates, and washed up the dishes, and lighted the fires, and made beds with the stipendiary. This girl was Linda, dressed up in all the latest style of art to represent a complete Duchess.

Behold, we know not anything—not even the knowing ones. In a moment they had vanished as if by magic into the limbo whence they came, all those shadowy forms—the Hoosier, who rode into St. Louis on a Mexican mustang; the lady who sang in the Bowery beer saloon; the log cabin on the banks of limitless Superior: nay, even the grand-daughter of Martin van Buren, who was connected with all the old Presidential families—while in their vacant place, there, bodily before his eyes, stood the transfigured form of Linda Figgins.

And then, like all the rest of us, Basil thought about himself. How did this strange occurrence affect him personally? Would Linda recognise him? And, if so, how would she expect him to behave to her? What cue must he take? Would she stand aghast at suddenly finding herself face to face in that brilliant company with someone who knew her when she was only Miss Figgins? Or would she try to avoid him and pretend she didn't remember him? Or would she brazen out the recognition, if he forced himself upon her notice, and ignore the past with true feminine effrontery? Which of all these courses would she instinctively adopt? Basil Maclaine was not a good judge of character; so he asked himself, quite needlessly, as the Duchess swept in, all these foolish questions.

But the Duchess swept on, unseeing him, to Lady Simpson's welcome.

'A very pleasing subject!' Mr. Constable Jones, R.A., observed in a patronizing murmur to his next-door neighbour. 'Holds her neck splendidly.'

'Yes, indeed, and carries on it at least £15,000 worth of rubies and diamonds!' Mr. Levy Moss, of the Stock Exchange, replied, with gloating admiration.

'Oh, how beautiful she is!' Sabine Venables whispered, turning towards her companion with genuine delight at the newcomer's graceful figure and queenly movement.

'Well, yes. She *is* very beautiful, certainly,' Basil answered in a maze, hardly knowing what to say next. 'I've always thought so. I ... I've met her before. To tell you the truth, I ... I used to know her.'

He spoke low, but at the vague sound of his voice—that well-known voice, heard above the recommencing buzz of conversation in the room which her entry had temporarily stopped—Linda turned her head and gazed in his direction. Her eyes met his. In a moment they lighted up with quiet recognition. Just at that instant she was going through the ceremony of official welcome. Podgy little Lady Simpson was bowing her best and making known the new Duchess to the particular shining lights of the assembled company. So Linda could do no more at the moment than just bend her head to him distantly and smile her remembrance. For some minutes Basil watched her as one favoured guest after another was brought up and presented. He could hardly believe his own eyes. It was all so wonderful. Linda the central focus of so much admiration, adulation, congratulation, deference! A curious misgiving of his own wisdom in the guidance of his life came over him as he looked. For once he mistrusted his own foresight. After all, had he been so wise in rejecting Linda?

But then when he rejected her she wasn't a Duchess.

Presently came a lull in the current of presentations; and Basil, curious to see how Linda would comport herself under these altered conditions, strolled up with counterfeited indifference towards the brilliant group where the Duchess sat at centre, conversing alternately with a bishop and an ambassador, while Powysland, by her side, leant admiringly over her. So eager was he to reach his goal that he even hustled on his way the Most Exalted Order of the Star of India. But he had his reward. The Duke recognised him at once, with a careless nod and a friendly shake of the hand.

'Hallo, Maclaine,' he cried with that charming air of Christian forgiveness a man always adopts towards his unpaid creditors, 'you here to-night! I hardly expected to see you. Come to meet my wife? Like me to introduce you to her?'

But Linda, even as he spoke, half rising from her chair, held out her hand, and took Basil's with a frank cordiality he had little expected. No trace of awkwardness or of *mauvaise honte* marred her manner as she answered quietly:

'Oh, Mr. Maclaine and I need no introduction, thank you, Bertie. We've met before. We're quite old friends. I knew him long ago, when I was last in London.'

In spite of his surprise and his stammered greeting, that was the proudest moment of Basil Maclaine's life. Only to think that in that crowded drawing-room, before half the best people in London society, a real live Duchess—even though it was only Linda Figgins in disguise—should rise from her seat of her own accord to shake his hand and publicly acknowledge him as an old acquaintance! It was glorious, glorious! Basil felt in heart his fortune was made. He had carved out for himself a niche, and he would take his proper place in it henceforth among the Best People.

And yet, how strange he should owe it all to none other than Linda—the Linda he had rejected in her rooms in Clandon Street as obviously beneath his distinguished consideration!

But the Duke drew himself up with a doubtfully pleased expression of face, and ejaculated, half audibly, under his moustache:

'The deuce you did, Linda!'

It began to strike him for the first time as an awkward possibility that his rich American wife might, perhaps, possess too many friends of the sort among the circle of her old acquaintances in London.

CHAPTER XXII.

WHY DID SHE DO IT?

It was a minute or two before Basil had sufficiently recovered from the first shock of surprise to gather together his scattered wits and enter into intelligible conversation with Linda. Even then he hardly knew where to begin or what to say, so little could he understand the revolution in events that had brought her there like a queen in all her glory that evening. Of course, he was burning to know what it all meant; but among that crowd of bystanders, eagerly listening to pick up the conversational crumbs that fell from the ducal table, he could never ask her the questions that rose most naturally to his lips: 'How do you come to be so rich? and why did you call yourself Amberley's sister?' So he temporized by taking refuge in the commonest formulas of society, and asking her decorously non-committing questions with cautious carefulness.

For naturally Basil, being what he was, didn't want now to destroy for himself the honour and glory of having known a full-fledged Duchess intimately before her marriage by letting all the rest of the world find out the damaging fact that he had known her only as a common-lodging-house keeper in a street in Bloomsbury.

So he satisfied his soul by asking the very safe question:

'And your brother? How is he now? You've left him in America?'

He wouldn't even risk the chance of calling him Cecil, far less Mr. Figgins. He preferred the ambiguous compromise of 'your brother.'

Linda smiled such a frank, easy smile, however, that Basil positively envied her.

'Oh yes,' she answered, as simply as in the old days in the drawing-rooms at Clandon Street, 'Cecil's very well. I never knew him better. He works awfully hard, but he says hard work never killed anybody; and it seems to suit him. He's engaged just now in placing his motor among several big mining districts in Nevada and Arizona. He expects great things from it in the way of ore-crushing.'

'Well, if you know my brother-in-law, Maclaine,' the Duke put in with a good-humoured smile, as if on purpose to cover Basil's ill-concealed surprise and embarrassment, 'you know what a perfect enthusiast he is for everything where electricity's concerned. As somebody once said about Gladstone, he's a glutton for work. There's no getting Amberley away when once he's in his laboratory. Why, he was engaged on the latest improvements to his crusher when I was in New York, night and day; and I really believe, if my wife hadn't kept him well up to the mark, and insisted upon his coming, he wouldn't even have turned out to see his sister married. But his sister took care of that—she crushed the crusher.'

'Mr. Amberley was always wedded to his science,' Basil replied, bewildered and with a swimming brain, but taking his cue obediently from Linda and her husband. After all, in any such matter as that, one can't do better than follow the lead of the Best People. But why on earth Cecil Figgins, of Clandon Street, Bloomsbury, had developed all at once—hi, presto! and there you are!—into Amberley of New York, the millionaire inventor of the Amberley light and the Amberley motor, with a mansion of vast extent in Madison Square, he hadn't, in his own soul, the very faintest conception.

'I'll tell Cecil when I write that you inquired kindly after him,' Linda went on, still without the faintest tinge of embarrassment in her voice. Basil only wished to goodness he was one half as much at his ease as she was. 'I hardly expected to meet you, Mr. Maclaine, when I came to England.'

Basil gazed at her hard. What did those words mean? Some fat lady by the piano began to sing by this time—a great soprano at fifty guineas—and it was a little easier now to converse in a low tone without being listened to. Besides, a skinny old lady with a moustache and an impossible head-dress, understood to be a Dowager of immense pretensions, had buttonholed the Duke, and was whispering aside to him, and tapping him with her fan, so his attention was temporarily withdrawn from his wife and her squire. Basil determined, therefore, under cover of the song, to make a bold stroke for some solution of the mystery. In any case, it looks so well to be seen confidentially conversing in a corner with a Duchess, even if nothing comes of it. He leant forward with some eagerness, and asked, between the lines

of that German ditty, in a very low voice:

'But what does this all *mean*, Duchess? Do please explain to me. How did you come to be called Miss Amberley?'

Linda gazed back at him with the same frank, fearless glance as ever. She had lived down her disappointment long since, no doubt, and knew him now for just what he was, with all the illusion dispelled and destroyed, so she could look him in the face without one qualm of remorse.

'Why, I don't understand you, Mr. Maclaine,' she answered, for all the world as if they were still in the drawing-rooms at Clandon Street. 'There's nothing to explain. I met the Duke in the States, where Cecil and I have been living together ever since we left England, and there I married him—at the little church round the corner. What is there strange in that? So many young Englishmen in our days get married in America.'

'But after all the past,' Basil blurted out, still astonished, and incapable of entering into Linda's simple point of view, 'I—I hardly thought it likely you would marry him.'

He meant he hardly thought it likely the Clandon Street landlady would get the chance of marrying an English Duke. But Linda, true to her ingrained habit of looking at the realities of life rather than at its mere appearances, naturally misunderstood him. She drew herself up, as cold as ice, and looked him full in the face once more.

'Why not?' she answered, with chilling dignity. 'You could hardly have thought, after that past you venture so curiously to allude to, that I would keep myself free for ever for the sake of a man who never really loved me? That would have been most weak of me. I never wished to see you again, Mr. Maclaine. I never expected to see you. I wouldn't have come here to-night if I had thought I should meet you. But having met you by accident, I'm not sorry I came. I married whom I chose, and I don't know what right I ever gave you to comment upon my marriage.'

This vigorous assault took Basil by surprise. Their places were now so completely changed, he hardly knew how to shape his conduct aright.

'Oh, I didn't mean *that*,' he stammered out apologetically, beginning to be conscious of two unexpected feelings—first, that he was ashamed of himself; and second, that he had always been really in love with Linda. 'I meant, how did you come to be called Miss Amberley, don't you know? It was Figgins at Clandon Street. How did your brother spring up all at once into a great electrical swell? How did you happen to be thrown in with Dukes? Well, you needn't look so surprised,' he added, with a knowing smile, gaining confidence as he went on, and trying to remember that this magnificent creature in silk and diamonds was, after all, nobody but Linda Figgins. 'You used not to be thick with—er—many Dukes in Bloomsbury, now, used you?'

Linda handled her fan with a quiet air of self-restraint. 'All that's very simple,' she answered with unruffled dignity, in spite of Basil's very aggressive air. 'There's nothing new in Cecil. My brother was always a great electrical genius. He was a great electrical genius when we were here in London, though very few people in England had the discrimination to appreciate him. He was a great electrical genius when he went to New York, where men are more equally judged and more readily pushed forward into the front rank of things, if they're fit for it. And there's nothing new in our name. It was always Amberley. We were Amberleys in London, if you'd ever taken the trouble to inquire. But you called us Figgins. My mother's maiden name was Figgins, to be sure, and Figgins had always been left upon the door-plate; so when you jumped at the name, Cecil preferred you should call us so while we lived in Clandon Street, partly to keep up the goodwill of the house, and partly because he was proud of the Amberleys, my father's people, and never gave up his hopes of making himself a better position in future. When we went to New York, to start afresh in life, we went in our own right name as Amberley, by which we were always known to our own friends in London. We preferred it so for many reasons, and among others for dear Mr. Harrison's sake.' She paused a moment, while the music sank low; then after a short lull, when it rose once more, as the soprano quivered and shook with emotion, she added quietly: 'I meant, now I was married, to write to Mr. Harrison, but I never expected to meet *you* again, either here or elsewhere.'

Basil drew himself up. 'Since you left London,' he said, with some just pride, 'I've begun to mix with a great many of the Best People.'

'So I see,' Linda answered, unmoved. 'You meant to push yourself, and you've pushed yourself well. Now we've settled all that, how about Mr. Harrison?'

She spoke throughout so quietly, so calmly, so simply, so unaffectedly, that Basil felt for the moment it was all quite natural; he saw it was wholly in the ordinary course of events (as in the 'Arabian Nights') for a London lodging-house keeper to go to New York in search of fortune, to grow enormously rich, as if by magic, to marry a Duke of old Welsh descent, and to return to England in three short years, or thereabouts, as beautiful as ever, but draped in rich silks and covered with big diamonds. Linda seemed to think it so, and why should he doubt it? She was evidently the self-same Linda still as ever, with that calm, strong smile, that sensible air, that capable manner, that imperturbable way of facing all the problems of existence like a real live woman. He could only stammer out in a negligent fashion, 'Oh, poor old Harrison's precisely where you left him—a briefless barrister. He gets no luck, and he makes no business. He's too quixotic for work, that's the fact of it. His conscience is always standing in his way whenever he sees some fair chance of a decent opening.'

'So I thought,' Linda said, folding her fan pensively. 'Too good for this world. I never respected anybody as I respected Mr. Harrison.'

The fifty guineas' worth of song was nearly finished now, and Basil saw his chance of a *tête-à-tête* was drawing to a close. But there was just one more question he felt impelled to put. 'Well, I want to ask you a single thing,' he said, leaning forward confidentially and presuming upon their old friendship, 'how did you come to be in such a position yourself? Cecil has made money, of course, I suppose—no end of money—vast pots at a time—out of the light and the motor. But you yourself?' He gazed at her inquiringly, and paused for a second to think how he should frame his question.

Before he could do so, however, Linda had answered at once, with the same straightforward simplicity and directness as ever, 'Oh, that's easy enough. I had a few hundred pounds of my own,' she said quietly, without any attempt at dressing it up in fine words, 'money that I got for the furniture and goodwill of the house, and had saved while I was keeping it. Cecil wanted capital, so I put my little all into Cecil's business. The business went well, and to-day I'm a partner. That's all. It's quite natural. There's no mystery in it anywhere. I'm part proprietor of the light, and the motor, and the mines, and the waterworks. I belong to the syndicate. Whatever Cecil has started since he went to the States, I've borne an equal share in and drawn an equal dividend. It's my own property.'

As she spoke the music ceased, and the Duke, released by his Dowager, strolled over to join them. Basil noticed there was a keen, cat-like look in his eyes as he came up to where they were talking.

'What's that, Linda?' he asked sharply, with a suspicious glance at Basil, who had been so close in conference with his wife while the song was being sung. 'An equal share in what? Who have you and Maclaine been discussing together?'

'I was telling him of my relation with Cecil's undertakings,' Linda answered, unabashed. 'I was explaining how I came to be connected at first with the light and the motor.'

'Oh, that's it, is it?' the Duke answered, mollified. 'Well, that's all very interesting in its way, no doubt, and I'm sorry to disturb your conversation with a former acquaintance'—he glanced a look of instant dismissal at Basil—'but I want to take you over to a very old friend of my family, the Duchess of Munster, who's anxious to know you—a dear old lady, Linda, so mind you're about as nice as you know how to her.'

'Well, good-evening, Mr. Maclaine,' Linda said, taking her husband's arm to move across the room, like one to the manner born. 'If I don't see you again, remember me to Mr. Harrison.'

But as she went, Basil somehow divined from the movement of the Duke's lips that he was saying to his wife, a trifle huskily:

'What on earth did you mean by talking with that man so long? And where or how on earth did you ever come to know him?'

As Basil Maclaine drove home that evening in his hired brougham his feelings were somewhat mixed and of diverse pleasurableness.

On the one hand, he felt it was a distinct point to hobnob with a Duchess. On the other hand, he felt it was a matter for regret that he had refused to marry that Duchess himself when she was a London lodging-house keeper. And yet, to be logical, if he had married her, then she would never have been a Duchess; and in that case he would never have so enlarged his acquaintance with our old nobility. Once more, it was a point to have refused to propose to a girl whom a

British Duke thought worthy of his exalted alliance. But, per contra, it made a man feel rather a fool that he should have thought a future Duchess a cut or so too low for him. On the whole, Basil Maclaine emerged from his self-examination proud but ashamed. He was one to the good, to be sure, in dignity; but one to the bad in judgment of women.

A single other fact, however, struck him with immense surprise when he came to reflect upon it. Linda had never bound him to a pledge of secrecy. Now, if he himself had been in Linda's place, and had met someone whom he knew in his former larval stage, his very first impulse would have been to beg and implore that person not to expose his past—in short, not to tell upon him. But Linda, poor simpleton! had done nothing of the sort. The idea hadn't even so much as occurred to her. She behaved as if she had always been an American heiress—as if there was nothing to forget, nothing to conceal, nothing to deny, nothing to gloss over. Incredible as it seemed, she wasn't ashamed of herself. Basil Maclaine, who would have died in her place sooner than have it known he had once been connected with a lodging-house, was thunderstruck at her carelessness. But for that very reason he admired and respected her for it.

Whether it was the diamonds, or whether it was the title, or whether it was that magnificent tone of public tittle-tattle, he couldn't quite decide in his own mind; but, for the first time in his life, he felt himself thoroughly in love with Linda.

What a fool he had been! What a chance he had thrown away! That queenly woman that everybody in the room so admired and praised! And she might once have been his, but he pooh-poohed the thought of it.

And he would have done so still—if she were still at Clandon Street.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DOUGLAS WONDERS.

Though it was late when Basil returned to his chambers that evening, resplendent, he found both the Harrisons sitting up over the fire in close conference. Douglas, in his loose old velveteen smoking coat, had been out to a bachelor party in the Temple; and Hubert, hot from the office of the *Daily Telephone*, where he had been dashing off, against time, next morning's leader on the attitude of the Government towards the Cornish Allotments Bill, had dropped round, after hours, at his brother's room, to discuss an important crisis in his own fortunes.

Basil burst in upon them big with his news.

'Well, I've been to the Simpsons!' he cried. 'An awfully swell affair—the crush of the season—and I've seen the Duchess of Powysland—this new one—the American; and who on earth do you fellows think she is? It quite took my breath away. You'll never guess, Harrison!'

Douglas looked up with an amused smile. It was nothing new for him to see Basil Maclaine so engrossed by his latest smart acquaintance. He fancied this effervescence based itself entirely on the bare fact of another introduction to another new peeress.

'According to the journals of our country,' he answered gravely, 'upon whose sources of information, in Hubert's presence, it would ill become me to cast a passing doubt, she's the sister of Amberley, the New York electrician, and the grand-daughter of Martin van Buren, the President.'

'Oh yes,' Basil replied, with the infinite condescension of superior knowledge, caressing his orchid. 'Of course I know all that. She's the Amberley motor, right enough, no doubt. That's common property long ago. But you'd never find out who she really *is* if you guessed till Doomsday. So I won't keep you on tenterhooks. Well, the new Duchess is—Linda, my dear fellow—Linda Figgins!'

If a thunderbolt had fallen into their midst, as they sat there smoking over the embers of their fire, Douglas Harrison could not have been more surprised and astonished than at this startling news.

'Impossible!' he cried, starting up incredulously. 'You must be mistaken, Maclaine. Somebody like her, perhaps; but your eyes have deceived you.'

'Not a bit of it,' Basil answered, proud to show off the full extent of his acquaintance with our magnates, even the newest made, if only the genuine Mint-mark pattern. 'I was presented to her in due form—Powysland himself presented me; and I talked to her confidentially for half an hour, and heard all her past history, and what she's been doing meanwhile over yonder in America. And Amberley himself's just Cecil Figgins, our old gas-pipe landlord! And Linda was graciousness incarnate, in diamonds and rubies, and she sent her very kind regards to both you Harrisons.'

Douglas gasped for breath, and clutched his chair for support.

'You really mean it, Maclaine?' he asked, half inarticulately. 'You're not taking me in? You're not playing tricks upon me?'

'Honour bright, I assure you,' Basil answered, delighted at the sensation his news had caused. 'No ghosts! No doubles! It was Linda herself, not any spurious imitation. They went to New York, and they called themselves Amberley, and then _____'

'Why, I remember, I remember!' Douglas interposed, with a burst of sudden recollection. 'She sometimes signed herself Linda Amberley Figgins. And I fancy she once said something to me implying that Figgins was only her mother's name, but that it went with the goodwill of the house, so to speak, and therefore they'd stuck to it. So it's Cecil, then, who's made all these wonderful discoveries that everybody's talking about! It's Cecil who's invented the light and the motor! Well, I always thought we all of us immensely underrated Cecil.'

'Oh yes, he's made enormous sums of money,' Basil went on with warmth, pursuing the subject from his own point of view, 'and taken quite a leading position in New York society, and got the run of the very best houses, and married his

sister at last at the little church round the corner—which seems, from all I can hear, to be a sort of Transatlantic St. George's, Hanover Square—to an English Duke in search of millions.'

Douglas Harrison sank back in his chair very pale and white. He saw Basil was quite in earnest now, and that his circumstantial report admitted of no possible doubt.

'Tell me all about her,' he cried, with quivering lips. 'She's really married, then—and married to Powysland?'

Basil threw himself carelessly into his own place on the sofa, silk flaps and all, lighted a cigarette from Harrison's case, and proceeded to detail the whole story of his meeting with this new glorified and diamond-bedizened avatar of Linda. Douglas Harrison listened in an agony of regret. As Basil spoke, the one hope of his life faded away from him utterly by slow degrees. Impossible as it seemed, he had always cherished that last faint daydream of going to America, hunting up Linda, when she had recovered from the shock of Basil Maclaine's treatment, and winning her heart in the end, that he might make her happy. And now she was married—inconceivably married—married to a gambler, a rake, and a spendthrift—and his life henceforth was left unto him desolate.

'What on earth could ever have made her do it?' he gasped out at last, when Basil ceased talking. 'I can't imagine Linda marrying such a man as the Duke.'

Basil stared at him, open-eyed.

'What on earth could ever have made her do it, my dear boy?' he cried, astonished. 'Why, even you, though you don't know the world, Harrison, must surely know any girl in her position would simply jump at such a catch as Powysland. "What on earth made her do it!" Why, what on earth would induce her to miss such a chance if once she got it? She's rich, very rich, of course; as rich as Cræsus. She invested her little savings from the beginning in Cecil's concerns—Arizona, Montana, mines, electricity—and now she's a half-partner in the light and the motor, and the ranches and the railways, and heaven only knows how many other first-class investments. She has founders' shares enough to roll in, and she was covered to-night with a perfect blaze of the most lovely diamonds. Well, what has she left to wish for, then, but position, title, rank, a settled place in society? All those an English Duke could best give her. At that precise juncture of affairs, Powysland steers the waterlogged craft of his fortunes across to America in search of an heiress, and heaves in sight of Linda, gilded all over with the Amberley millions. He falls in love with her, of course; what on earth could be more natural? You and I both did the same in our time, without the money. She's a beautiful woman—more beautiful now than ever, I think, and when her complexion's well set off by her improved costume——'

Douglas Harrison shook his head slowly. This was all Greek to him.

'She could never be more beautiful in anything,' he murmured, half to himself, 'than in the simple black dress and pretty white apron we first knew her in, as she brushed the crumbs off this very table.'

'Well, that's a matter of taste,' Basil went on volubly. 'For my part, I think there's no woman in the world who doesn't look the better for a handsome dress and a diamond necklace.' (People of Basil Maclaine's type always genuinely admire diamonds, they're so very expensive.) 'At any rate, she's undoubtedly a deuced fine girl, and lights up well; and she's worth at least half a dozen of that Sabine Venables he used to be such nuts upon.'

It was Hubert's turn to draw himself up internally now, and assume an air of offended dignity.

'I beg your pardon,' he said stiffly, for he didn't care to hear Basil Maclaine describe his own particular possession by her Christian name, 'that, also, is a matter of taste, and I beg leave to say of very bad taste on your part, my dear fellow. Miss Venables can hold her own against all comers.'

'Oh, I forgot your fancy in that direction,' Basil answered with a light smile, knocking off his ash and consulting his timepiece. 'Well, we won't quarrel about comparisons. They're known to be odious. But, anyhow, Powysland saw Linda in New York to great advantage—very great advantage. She was rich, she was beautiful, and she had untold money. They met at the Vanderbilts'. He couldn't do better for himself anywhere than there, and he asked her to marry him. Of course she jumped at it. It isn't every day that a girl, however rich, gets a chance of becoming an English Duchess; and I wouldn't think much myself, I'm bound to say, of any girl that looked twice at it.'

'Probably not,' Hubert Harrison answered with cutting coldness.

'But that can't be how it came about, you know,' Douglas put in earnestly, with his face still white as death, and his lips still quivering. 'I'm sure it can't have been like that. I'll never believe it. Linda wasn't at all the sort of girl to marry any man for position or title. There must be some other explanation—something else at the bottom of it. One can hardly suppose she married Powysland for *love*! what is there in Powysland for a girl like her to admire or cling to? But that she married him or any man for anything else, I, for one, will never believe it.'

Hubert leaned back on his tilted chair, with the poker in his hand, and stared long at the fire.

'Perhaps,' he suggested at last, giving it a vigorous dig, 'she may just have been carried away by the first flush and glory of the thing. After all, she's a woman. Remember, Douglas, she'd got rich by magic, as they often do over yonder in America. Her head must have been turned by it—though I grant you Linda's wasn't what you call an easy sort of head to turn; it had too much ballast. Still, from what Maclaine says, she must have got at once into the very thick of New York society. Young men by the score must have flattered her and nibbled round her. She'd hold them all off at arm's length with a certain haughty disdain—"Hands off, gentlemen!" Then the Duke went over—with all his faults, a high-bred English gentleman, well-spoken, well-mannered, and undeniably handsome. Look the thing in the face and consider the position. He was the great catch of the season—an English magnifico of the first water, known to have come out in search of a wife, and every heiress in New York must have set her cap at him, all agog for his attentions. To which would his magnificence choose to throw the handkerchief? that was the question. Linda came upon the scene, and the Duke was taken with her—perhaps even fell in love with her. Recollect that open admiration counts for much with women. There's no woman on earth'—and Hubert spoke with feeling, for he was thinking of poor Sabine—'who isn't flattered in her inmost heart, whether she likes him or not, by a Duke's attentions. Well, suppose the Duke singled out Linda from all that wealthy society for his special admiration, what more rational than that Linda should feel flattered and pleased accordingly? She imagined she loved him: she imagined he loved her; the glamour of rank blinded her eyes; and the rest's natural.'

'I'm not so sure about that,' Basil Maclaine put in with an unconvinced air, glancing complacently down at his evening shoes and red silk stockings. He was quite ready to believe Linda had married to wear a coronet; but it hurt his self-respect deeply to think, after *him*, she could have fallen in love with such a man as Powysland.

Douglas Harrison, however, shook his head once more.

'Oh no, Hubert!' he exclaimed. 'It can't be that. I'm sure it can't be. Linda's not a girl to be so easily pleased. Only two things in the world are possible. Either she married the man because she loved him—which is absurd; I don't see how she *could* love that fellow—or else there was some other powerful reason at the back that we can't get at, and what it can have been is a mystery to me—a perfect mystery.'

'Well, for my part,' Basil repeated, 'I see no mystery in the matter at all. She wanted to be a Duchess. That's the whole secret. Nothing else, I'm convinced'—and he straightened his back with a self-conscious air—'would ever have led her to marry anyone.'

Douglas Harrison gazed at him hard. What extraordinary callousness! Why, he was actually pluming himself! Had the man no remorse, then, for the pain he had caused her? Did he look back only with conceited self-satisfaction on his conduct to Linda?

'There's a mystery in it,' he said, sighing, 'an obvious mystery. I'll see her myself, and I'll get the whole truth from her.'

It would be a hard trial for him, indeed, to face Linda married—the downfall of his own hopes, the grave of his future—but, for Linda's sake, he would nerve himself and see her.

They sat up late, talking it all over, each from his own point of view, as is the wont of humanity, and naturally getting no nearer a solution or a consensus of opinion between themselves than ever, for each was at cross-purposes with both his neighbours. Basil could only see that Linda had married another man, after being in love with himself, and must therefore clearly have married him for the sake of his title. Hubert could only see that the Duke had married Linda, after having seen Sabine, and that Linda must have been momentarily dazzled by the splendour of his position, precisely like Sabine. And Douglas could only see that his peerless Linda had thrown herself away upon the Wrong Man, and must obviously have had some sufficient reason in the background for doing so.

At last, after many searchings of heart, Hubert rose to go. 'Well, good-night,' he said, as he put on his ulster, 'I must run

home and try for a little sleep in between whiles; for I shall have to be out all day to-morrow hard at work canvassing.'

'Canvassing for whom?' Basil asked languidly, for this was an election sprung upon him unawares.

'Oh, I forgot to mention it to you,' Hubert cried. 'Haven't you heard the news? That was what I came round to tell Douglas. A lift in life for me—but your Duchess supervened to change the current. There's an unexpected vacancy to-day in South Hampstead. Lord Chard is dead—killed in India, pig-sticking—and Beattie-Ellis, the sitting member, goes to the Lords, of course, to replace him. We had no candidate ready, Chard being so young and vigorous; but this afternoon the Prime Minister's private secretary called round at the office of the *Daily Telephone*' (the Liberal-Conservatives under Gladsbury being then in office), 'and asked if I'd undertake to contest the constituency. It's an uphill fight for us, for we're weak in South Hampstead; but I mean to try, and if I succeed my fortune's made, for they'll give me the first good thing that's going under the present Cabinet.'

'You don't mean to say so,' Basil exclaimed, astonished, and beginning to feel he must be polite to Hubert, if Hubert was so soon to be a member of Parliament. It's very good form, don't you know, to be hand in glove with members of Parliament.

'Yes, I do,' Hubert answered. 'And, what's more, I ride to win! After which I shall marry and settle down in life as a professional politician.'

'And there's no reason,' Douglas added, in a dreamy sort of way, 'why he shouldn't get a place in no time in the Cabinet.'

CHAPTER XXIV.

A SUDDEN ATTACK.

Meanwhile, Sabine Venables had driven home by herself in her own carriage to her father's town house, having dropped her chaperon by the way at a fashionable square in Westminster.

Sabine's thoughts as she went were not wholly unpleasant ones. She was half inclined to relent at last and give up her pride. Things were turning out so differently from what she had expected. So the Duke was married at last to that beautiful woman whom Mr. Maclaine had known before! Well, Sabine hardly envied her her bargain after all, for how keenly he looked, and how closely he watched her! A jealous man at heart, Sabine felt sure, as she thought it all over; there was a quick, suspicious air in the Duke's eye, as of a caged tiger, every time he glanced across the room towards his newly-married wife in her superb beauty, that didn't escape Sabine's sharp observation. All the Montgomeries were devoured by a perfect demon of jealousy, she remembered to have heard; and Adalbert Montgomery, ninth Duke, was no exception to the rule, she felt certain, from the evidence of her own senses to-night. He had watched the Duchess with such cold, hard eyes as she sat talking to Mr. Maclaine all through that pathetic song of Madame Van Zandt's. Sabine really pitied the Duchess when she came to think of it all. She was glad she herself had met Hubert in time—well, in time to save her from becoming Duchess of Powysland.

For Basil was mistaken in supposing they would all jump at it.

But the Duchess herself was simply charming. She greeted Sabine so warmly, as Hubert Harrison's friend, and as Thorndyke Venables' daughter. 'Mr. Venables is head of Cecil's European syndicate, you know,' she cried quite affectionately; and though Sabine hadn't the very faintest idea in her own mind what manner of wild beasts these syndicates her father talked about might be, she could plainly see that to the Duchess, at least, they were a genuine introduction.

At the vestibule the footman met her with a very serious face.

'If you please, miss,' he said, as he opened the door, 'Master Arthur's worse. He's been took awfully bad since you've been gone. Nurse has sent for the doctor, and he's been and seen him. He says it's a very serious case indeed, and he's coming round again fust thing in the morning.'

In a moment Sabine had forgotten the Duchess, the party, the guests, the music—everything, in fact, but her neglected duty.

'Worse, William!' she cried, with a terrified face. Poor Tata! poor Tata! And I've gone out and left him! Oh, dear little lamb! How could I ever have done it? What does the doctor say's the matter with him? Did he call it anything particular?'

'Well, he says, miss,' the servant answered, with some hesitation, 'Master Arthur has got a bad attack of the dip-theria.'

'Diphtheria!' Sabine repeated, aghast. 'Oh no, William; not diphtheria! You can't mean to tell me it's really that.'

'Well, that's what he said it was, miss,' William replied stolidly, assuming the injured air of a man who resents being doubted.

Sabine clasped her hands together with a gesture of despair.

'And papa's in Paris!' she cried. 'And I don't even know where to find him, for he hadn't decided when he left what hotel he was going to. This is too, too dreadful! Poor dear Tata! Oh! whatever shall I do, whatever shall I do for him, the sweet little darling?'

In a moment she had rushed upstairs in her evening dress and light wrap as she stood, and burst eagerly into the nursery where her little brother lay ill. The nurse held up a warning finger as she entered, and whispered low to her: 'He's sleeping a bit now, miss; dozing like, off and on. But he's been very bad, and he's very bad still. It looks as if it'd throttle him every now and again. He wakes up with a start and sets to crying and choking. He don't seem able to catch his breath, somehow. I'm so glad you've come, for I didn't rightly know what I ought to do with him.'

Sabine gazed upon her small charge as he lay half asleep in his cot, drawing his breath hard, in a perfect agony of remorse, despair, and horror. In a second she took it all in. There was no possibility of mistaking it. Little Arthur lay in the very grip of death. While she had been away, amusing herself at the Simpsons', that helpless child, Woodbine's motherless baby, to whom she had promised to be a mother indeed, had been seized with one of the most terrible and rapid of known diseases, and had been fighting for life with all his feeble little might—for he was Woodbine's child, and had inherited the weakness of Woodbine's constitution. Sabine flung herself down on the bed in her utter despair. Arthur was dying—and her father was in Paris.

Oh, how could she ever have been foolish enough to go out and leave him, with that sore throat coming on? What a breach of trust she had committed! How could she ever forgive herself for it? Poor Woodbine's child, and Woodbine had entrusted her with it!

She lay there gazing hard at that helpless mite, who, through no fault of his own, had unwittingly supplanted her. For two long years and more, in a certain serious, mechanical, half-official way, she had watched over him and tended him with all her might. After all, he was her brother; and as far as she could she had always tried very hard to love him. But love is a difficult feeling to pump up to order; she could never quite get rid of the abiding sense that Arthur had come as an interloper and an intruder in the family. Ever since Arthur was born he had been everything in the house, and she had been nothing. He was the heir, and she was only Miss Venables. It was natural, of course, as such things go in England; but still it galled her. Sabine would hardly have been human, indeed, if she had felt otherwise. She couldn't see herself superseded without a lasting pang by Woodbine's child, her own half-brother.

Well, yes, if he'd come earlier, when she herself was younger and understood things less, it might, of course, have been all very different. She might have adapted herself then to the change while her ideas were still plastic. But as it was, she'd grown accustomed to her position as the heiress of Hurst Croft before Arthur was dreamt of to oust and supplant her. And it had been hard, very hard, to give up all that—with Hubert into the bargain—to a tiny, sprawling, speechless newcomer.

But now, as she lay there watching her poor, frail little charge in his uneasy sleep, while he started and coughed, and turned on his side wearily, she knew she loved him, and all else was forgotten. The bitterness passed away from her like an ugly dream. One thing alone she remembered: Arthur was ill—desperately ill, and she had promised Woodbine to be a mother to that motherless child of hers. As she leant her head on her hand and watched him tenderly, tears stood in her eyes—big tears that gathered but never fell. Oh, darling Tata! She felt for the first time now in all his poor small life how much she loved him.

Some little tin soldiers lay loose upon the floor. Her eye fell on them sadly. Yes; she had learned to love him. Harboring all the while in her heart that undying grudge; feeling towards him every day as to a supplanter and an interloper; remembering in the midst of her most careful and tender nursing that he had robbed her of her birthright, and, what was ten thousand times more to her, of Hubert as well; she had still slowly and unconsciously grown to love him. Day after day she had busied herself about his food, his dress, his childish ailments. Day after day she had seen him expand and watched his mind grow; she had kissed him the first thing in the morning and the last thing at night; she had done for him all that a mother could do for him. Day after day the gentle feeble little thing had clung to her with something of Woodbine's tenacious clinging. And now that there was a chance of her losing him for ever—now that that tiny life lay wavering in the balance—now that that faint, small lamp flickered and fell—she was conscious only of a great hungry love for him. The mother that dwells instinctive in all good women was aroused within her. She felt her whole existence hang upon a single thread. Come what might, she must save Tata.

Just at first, she thought most of her father being away; of her own seeming neglect; of her fault in leaving him; of the blow it would be to that lonely old man if he were to lose Arthur. For he loved his boy—poor Woodbine's boy—with an exceeding great love; and the bare thought of losing him would, she knew, be terrible. But as time wore on, and she lay there watching the child longer and longer, the sense of her own love for him grew deeper upon her each moment. It was for her own sake now that the tears, breaking bounds, were trickling slowly, slowly, one by one, down her cheek. What on earth would she ever do if she were to lose Arthur!

The little tin soldiers lay there idle still. Tata would never want them. The broken drum stood silent in the corner. Tata would never try to beat it again. The thought drove her wild. In watching and tending him, she had learnt all unawares to feel almost like a mother to him. She realized now how that pale-faced, shrinking, timid little creature had wound the tendrils of his love round her woman's heart, and how terrible a blow it would be to her to lose him. She could see he

was ill—seriously, dangerously ill. She wrung her hands in her despair as she watched him convulsed with those terrible throes. If Arthur died, all the world would indeed be a blank to her.

At last the poor little morsel woke up with a sudden start of pain. He was fighting fiercely for breath. The final throes of the disease were fairly upon him. For a moment he gasped out a few childish words. 'Has Sabine come home?' he asked. 'Tata wants Sabine.' Then he caught sight of her familiar face by his side, leaning over the cot, and stretched out his little arms to her with a smile of recognition. It was a painful smile, and his arms were so thin. Sabine felt as if her heart would break at that pathetic gesture. Poor wee motherless mite! He was a lovable little soul, for Woodbine's spirit was in him. How could she ever have felt anything but the purest love and the tenderest pity for him?

'Oh, Tata dear,' she cried, 'Sabine's come; Sabine's come to you. She'll never forgive herself, darling, for having left you!'

The child smiled a satisfied smile once more, and fell back, gasping. Sabine caught him up in her arms, all in the wraps as he lay, and carried him over by the fire, and laid him on her lap, and cried and sobbed as if her heart would break over him. She had forgotten everything now—her father, and Paris, and Hubert, and the Simpsons' party, and her own neglect, and her remorse, and every feeling on earth, save that one wild yearning to save him—to save him!

Oh, that long, long night! Would day never dawn? She looked at the clock. It was close on four. The doctor had said he would come again at seven. She whispered to the nurse:

'Does he seem much feebler?'

And the nurse, nodding her head, answered low under her breath:

'Well, I think he's pretty bad. He can't ketch his breath. He doesn't look to me as if he'd live till morning.'

At those words, confirming all her own worst fears, Sabine clasped her bloodless hands together in an agony of anguish.

'Oh, send for the doctor again!' she cried. 'Maria, Maria! send quick—send quick for him!'

It wasn't a moment too soon, for the child lay choking and struggling now in her arms in the violent effort to breathe through the hideous growth that was slowly strangling him. He reached out his little arms, and called, 'Sabine! Sabine!' but Sabine could do nothing for him. Unless help came at once, all would soon be over. Sabine felt convinced the critical instant had just arrived. The disease had matured with alarming haste, and if they waited till morning they might wait for ever.

She whispered again to the nurse. One of the servants went out in breathless haste. Sabine waited for his return in a torment of suspense. It was so terrible to see that helpless little creature writhing and battling in the very clutches of Death, and to know one could do nothing to save or relieve him. She pictured to herself terrible pictures of what must happen if Arthur died. Her love for him grew fervent and unspeakable now. She clasped her hands hard, and held her breath with sympathy. No mother ever watched her own child more tenderly. Oh, why could she do nothing to save or relieve him?

It was hours, whole hours, before the doctor came, though the clock marked it as only twenty minutes. Sabine sat anxiously awaiting his footstep on the stairs. Would he never come? For if only he came she felt all might yet go well with them. In these great emergencies human nature falls back for relief upon such secondary resting-places. The doctor's arrival becomes in itself the proximate end on which we fix our attention, and beyond which we dare not fear or hope or long for anything.

A hundred times at least she cried, 'Oh, I wish he would come!' And a hundred times she thought to herself, with a groan, how foolish, how futile!

As she waited, Arthur looked up at her once and found words a second time. She bent over him and listened.

'Tata's dying,' the child murmured with quivering lips. 'Sabine, Tata's dying.'

Sabine pressed him to her breast and felt her heart breaking.

At last a sound of wheels; a creaking of the door; a noise on the landing! That heavy tread resounded in the corridor.

Sabine drew a deep breath, a sigh of relief; and the doctor entered.

He pursed his lips as he adjusted his glasses and gazed at the little patient with professional calmness.

'So, so!' he said, puckering his eyebrows as he looked. He felt the tiny pulse; he watched with a critical eye the convulsive movements. Then he shook his head gravely, and looked medically wise. 'You must prepare your mind for the worst, I'm afraid, Miss Venables,' he murmured with some decent show of polite sympathy. 'It's my painful duty to tell you the poor little fellow has a very slight chance indeed of living more than a few minutes.'

Sabine burst into a wild flood of hysterical tears. 'Oh, don't say that!' she cried, pressing the child to her breast. 'Don't say that, I implore you! He mustn't die! He mustn't! Is there nothing, nothing at all we can do to save him?'

'Only one thing,' the doctor answered, looking her full in the face with a very doubtful air, as his brow gathered. 'And that's a thing I dare hardly even suggest to you.'

Sabine sprang at his words with almost a mother's intuition.

'Oh, I know what you mean!' she cried, all aglow with the thought that there was still some hope. 'I've heard of it before; and if you'll tell me how to try, I'm not afraid to try it.'



CHAPTER XXV.

HEROIC REMEDIES.

Below stairs, meanwhile, two or three of the household, sleepily hanging about in the servants' hall through the small hours of the morning in expectation of orders from the sick-room, were discussing among themselves, with their wonted frankness towards the affairs of their betters, the chances and changes of the situation.

'What I say is,' the butler remarked with the air of a person well skilled in diagnosis, 'Master Arthur he'll never pull through. He can't, don't you see. He ain't got the constitootion for it. He takes after his mother; that's where it is. She was a feeble thing, and there ain't no stamina in him.'

'He won't live till morning, I'm afraid,' the housekeeper responded, shaking her head gloomily, and sipping the tea she had brewed for their joint refreshment. 'You're quite right, there, Mr. Sampson. The poor little thing! He won't live till morning.'

'An' a jolly good job too,' the butler went on, in an argumentative vein, stirring the fire with a vigorous hand. 'Then things'll come round as they'd ought to have come round from the very beginning.'

'Oh, Mr. Sampson, how *can* you talk so?' the housekeeper interposed, scandalized, readjusting her head-dress. 'And the poor dear babe lying dying upstairs there this very minute! Well, there! I do believe you men have no hearts in you.'

'No, ma'am; I don't mean to say,' Mr. Sampson explained, in an apologetic tone of voice, 'but what I don't pity the poor little chap, as far as that goes, for his sufferings and such-like; though, as Reece says, he'd never be able to sit a horse right, even if he was to live—he ain't got the knees for it. But what I do say is this,' and the butler looked exceedingly wise and oracular, as he eyed the poker sideways. 'He'd never ought to have come into the family at all, that's where the truth of it is. He'd never ought to have come into the family at all,' he repeated slowly, with that love of feebly enforcing an opinion by mere iteration which is instinctive in people at a certain grade of intelligence. 'He'd never ought to have come into the family at all, upsetting arrangements that was made and done for before he was born, and throwin' Miss Sabine, as is worth a round dozen of him, into the shade, as you may say—into the sere and yellow leaf, in the manner of speaking.'

'Miss Sabine's never complained of him, I'm sure,' the housekeeper answered with an aggrieved air, as the self-appointed champion of infant innocence, 'and it ain't our place to complain for her neither.'

Mr. Sampson paused, and eyed the poker once more.

'Miss Sabine's never complained,' he replied forensically, after a rhetorical lull. 'She's too much the lady for *that*, you may be sure, let alone being so proud and reserved, and haughty-like. *She* wouldn't say nothing to demean herself openly; not likely, ma'am, not likely. But before Master Arthur came, you look how it was: Miss Sabine was everybody in the house: it was "Miss Venables wants this," "Miss Venables would like that," "Miss Venables will require the carriage at four," "Miss Venables will ride in the park this morning." Then this fuzzy-wigged little governess woman—she was trained for a governess, you know, no better nor that, before Mr. Venables married her—this fuzzy-wigged little governess woman, she comes into the house, with her fads and her fancies, and upsets everything, and takes Miss Sabine's place, and gets Miss Sabine's position, and makes Miss Sabine, as you may say, into a mere nobody—makes her just nobody. It was "Mrs. Venables wants this," "Mrs. Venables wants that," "Mrs. Venables will require the carriage at four," "Mrs. Venables will not go out this morning." You may ask what you like, ma'am—you may say what you like'—and the butler glowered at her—'but it's a precious come-down in life for a high-spirited young lady like our Miss Sabine, I can tell you, brought up in the very lap of luxury, as the saying is, to have to play second fiddle in her own father's house to a reduced gentlewoman, with a fuzzy wig, brought up for a governess.'

And Mr. Sampson poked the fire once more, this time quite viciously.

'Reduced gentlewomen have their feelings as well as the rest of the world,' the housekeeper remarked, with proper pride; for she had *ex-officio* pretensions herself to that dubious honour.

'Well, I don't say as they haven't,' the butler replied, temporizing. 'In their proper place, I don't say as they haven't.'

Redooiced gentlewomen is all very well in their proper place, and in their proper sphere, and *there* one respects 'em. But to see a common little tuppenny-ha'penny thing of a girl, as was brought up for a governess, with a fuzzy wig, lolling and leaning back on the cushions of the Hurst Croft carriage, with Old Affability hisself a-lolling by her side, while our Miss Sabine sits bolt upright on the second seat with her back to the hosses, why, it's enough to sicken a man of the hollowness of society, that's what I say about it—enough to sicken a man of the hollowness of society. And then what does she do?' the butler continued, delighted with his own phrase. 'She goes and dies, and leaves this little beggar behind out of spite, just to worry Miss Sabine. It's enough to sicken any man of the hollowness of society.'

'Well, that wasn't *her* fault, anyhow, poor dear!' the housekeeper interrupted with virtuous indignation.

'Who's a-saying it was?' the butler responded in a tone of great dignity. 'An' who's a-saying it wasn't? She goes and dies, I say. That's all plain and natural. Nobody can't be blamed for going and dying, except it's a suicide. An' a good thing, too, I says at the time; for she's kep' Miss Sabine a sight too long out of her own, an' that's the truth of it. We shall see our young lady riding now where she'd ought to ride, with her face to the hosses. And so she'd ought to, ma'am; so she'd ought to—so she'd ought to. But what does the fuzzy-wigged governess go and do but leave this sickly little mortal behind her, to cut out Miss Sabine still, and be the heir to the family. Ever since he come, things have been wuss than ever. It's Master Arthur this, and Master Arthur that, and Master Arthur here, and Master Arthur there, till I'm clean sick and tired of him. It ain't my place to go waiting on a baby. And now there's some chance of things coming right again, thank Heaven! as they'd used to be in the beginning. That's one comfort.'

'Perhaps it's providential,' the housekeeper suggested with an air of resignation; 'it may be ordered so on purpose.'

'Perhaps it may,' Mr. Sampson answered, somewhat dubiously; 'but, anyhow, there it is, providential or otherwise. Master Arthur, he won't live through till morning; and Miss Sabine, she'll come into her own at last, as she'd always ought to have done.' And the butler drained off his cup of green tea at one gulp, defiantly.

'Oh, Mr. Sampson,' one of the women servants said, with face aghast, 'how ever can you talk so, with your feet on the fender, and that poor dear little soul a-dying all the time in his room up above there? Ain't you afraid it'll be visited upon you?'

'Well, look at the difference he's made to Miss Sabine,' the butler responded loyally, for he stuck to his first love with creditable persistence. 'Before the little governess woman came, she had dooks and lords and earls and barrowknights always a-browsing around her. She might a-married who she liked, the noblest in the land, as the saying goes, as soon as look at 'em. She was always made more of than any young lady in town, and always had the pick of the peerage dangling about after her apron-strings when we went down into Surrey. And now what's her position? Nobody knows. She ain't neither an heiress, nor yet not an heiress. Nobody can tell where she stands, one way or the other. But there ain't no more dooks hanging around after her nowadays. The Dook of Powysland, him as was Bertie Montgomery when he'd used to come so much to Hurst Croft, he's married an American, same as they all does latterly. And Miss Sabine, she's left to wither on the bough, in the manner o' speaking. That's what's made her take up with being ladies' secretary to this here Gordon League that young Harrison manages. Depend upon it, when a young lady takes to charity in a regular way, it means she's given up her chances of marrying.'

'Well, it won't be for long,' the housekeeper said with a sigh, 'for Master Arthur won't live till morning.'

'And then Miss Sabine'll come in to her own again,' the butler repeated with a yawn, for it was sleepy work, this sitting up and waiting. 'She'll be her own mistress at last, and marry as she ought to do. I don't pretend I wouldn't like to see it. I'd like to see our young lady properly married.'

As he spoke, another of the women servants, straight from the sick-room, entered the hall in search of warm water. All the others turned eagerly to hear the latest news. 'How does he get on now, Amelia?' the housekeeper asked with official sympathy.

'Oh, he's a little better just this minute,' Amelia answered carelessly: 'he seemed to have took a turn. The doctor's done something to his throat with a instrument, and Miss Sabine, she've sucked out the stuff from the bad place, and the doctor says she may have saved his life for him.'

The butler started up with a look of genuine alarm. 'Miss Sabine's sucked out the stuff from the throat!' he cried in a tone of unfeigned horror. 'You don't mean to say that, Amelia! Well, I call it shameful. However could the doctor go and let

her!

'The doctor told her it was dangerous,' Amelia went on, in the same unconcerned and matter-of-fact voice, 'but she said that didn't matter; it was nothing to her; if anything gave her a chance of saving his life, she was bound her best to try and save it. The doctor warned her she might catch the dip-theria herself, and very likely would; but she looked at him as white as a sheet, and said she wasn't afraid. "I promised Woodbine I'd be a mother to Tata," she says, "the dear little lamb! and I must keep my promise. And, besides, I could never forgive myself if Tata was to die, for I love him," she says, clasping her hands like this—"oh, I love him! I love him!" and with that she just took the instrument in her hand, and did at once as the doctor told her.'

'And I say,' the butler cried, rising up in his horror, 'it's a sin and a shame they should ever have allowed our own young lady to throw away her life like that for the governess woman's child; an' if I'd been there to see, she shouldn't have done it neither. And the governor in Paris, never knowing nothink at all about it. And him to come home and find Miss Sabine dead and gone. Why, whatever does the doctor mean by going and allowing it?'

'Perhaps it won't hurt her, poor dear!' the housekeeper put in. 'The good Lord would never let her suffer for what she did to save her brother's life, surely!'

The butler took a more severely causative view of the situation. 'If she sucks out the disease from the little one, she stands to catch it herself, of course, in the regular run,' he retorted half angrily. 'The good Lord don't guard people against the consequences of their own actions, does He? And to think she should a-done it for a mite of a child like that! It ain't right, that's what I say of it; it didn't ought to be permitted. A grown person didn't ought to throw away her life for a infant of that age. I call it just suicide. An' her father'll say the same, too, I'll be bound, when he comes to hear of it.'

'Well, I don't know about that,' Amelia remarked coolly, turning off the tap of the boiler in the kitchen beyond as she spoke. 'He spoils Master Arthur so. But I can't stop now, for I've got to go up at once and take 'em this hot water.'

But upstairs in the sick-room, meanwhile, Sabine Venables was sitting back, pale as death, on the sofa, and murmuring to the doctor in an agonized tone of suspense: 'Do you think he's better now? Do you think it's succeeded? Oh, do tell me, do tell me, for heaven's sake! you think he's getting better.'

And the doctor, watching him with a judicial eye, gave an affirmative nod. 'Well, yes, I think so,' he answered slowly. 'It seems to have relieved him. It's difficult to tell, of course, just at first, in these critical stages; but he's breathing more freely. You've saved his life, I believe. He may go on all right now.... It's yourself we shall have to think most about next, Miss Venables.'

CHAPTER XXVI.

SUCCESS—OR FAILURE?

While the free and independent electors of South Hampstead were still being wooed in due form, Sabine never let Hubert Harrison know the terrible risk to which she had subjected herself. Why mar his chances of success by an additional anxiety? She wrote him a little note early next day, to be sure—such notes were diurnal—but in it she avoided all mention of her own heroic remedy for Arthur's illness.

'My darling little brother was taken suddenly with a severe attack of diphtheria, dear Hubert,' she wrote with simple directness, 'while I was out last night at the Simpsons' party (where I more than half expected to meet you). I ought never to have gone, as he complained of sore throat early in the evening. When I got home, I found him in terrible danger, and have sat up all night—an awful night—with him. More than once we despaired of his poor little life, and even Doctor Mortimer feared nothing could save him. But this morning, thank heaven! he's a trifle better, and we begin to hope he may yet be spared to us. Oh, Hubert, I never knew till now how much I loved him. If *he* were to be taken away, life would be all a blank to me.'

Hubert Harrison read the note not without a certain secret sense of satisfaction. 'If she feels like that,' he said to himself, 'she's coming round at last. She's recovering from the blow. If I can win this election, and ask her again as a new M.P., perhaps she'll pocket her pride after all, dear girl, and consent to marry me—without the fortune. What pluck she's got! I declare, I wouldn't like her half so well if she didn't lead me such a dance with that indomitable will of hers.'

So he turned all the more heartily to court the shy and many-headed nymph of South Hampstead.

The election was hurried, as elections under such circumstances usually are. During the course of it Hubert saw nothing of Sabine in any way. Once or twice she wrote to him—as usual on the Gordon League paper—to explain why she was unable to help him in his contest, as Arthur still needed constant watching; but she never said a word about her own danger or the anxiety with which she waited for signs of that terrible disease to develop itself. How terrible it was, she thoroughly understood now, after having seen Arthur through it; and no one who had once known the full horrors of such an attack could await, without apprehension, the results of such an experiment. However, Sabine was determined not to hamper Hubert in his canvassing by fears for her safety. She would let him go on, and win or lose as fate might will, without being handicapped in any way by a knowledge of her danger.

A London election in one of our great overgrown popular constituencies is always hard work and always exciting. Hubert worked so hard through those few crowded days that he scarcely had time in between for eating, drinking, or sleeping. He had an uphill fight, too, to wage, as he said at the outset; for his party (which was, of course, the reader's) was weak in the borough, and needed all the strength a fresh young candidate and his friends could give it. Day after day and night after night, accordingly, Hubert rushed about from hall to hall, speaking, canvassing, answering questions, giving or avoiding pledges, satisfying this man's scruples, or renouncing that man's fads, till he hardly knew what he thought himself about anything on earth, so carefully had he been compelled to hedge and to qualify, to draw distinctions here, and make concessions there, and reconcile conflicting claims in the other place. Before the end he had delivered himself succinctly on local option, and female suffrage, and anti-vaccination, and the contagious diseases of cattle; he had been heckled about vivisection, and bullied about the importance of foreign Jews; he had explained at some length his varying views on socialism, tithes, the Eight Hours Bill, the London County Council, the incidence of the income tax, the teaching of religion in denominational schools, Civil Service trading, the costermongers' carts, and the rights of the public in the Grove Road footpath. Such a changeful phantasmagoria almost turned his head. But at last the polling day itself arrived, and the ballot began. Yellow and blue pervaded the borough. Carriages of all hues brought voters up in endless shoals from unknown lanes and alleys. The public-houses did a roaring trade in beer. It rained *Boomerangs* towards the close. Rival organizers counted each vote separately. One side was as confident of victory as the other. All the day through Hubert rushed wildly from point to point, on foot or by cab, encouraging his supporters with unceasing vigour, till he began to feel that the Premiership itself would be but a poor return for so much arduous expenditure of animal energy.

In the evening the votes were counted, and the candidates and their friends waited, breathless and anxious, in front of the building whence the result was to be declared.

Oh, how long they took over their counting, those cool official enumerators! With what slow deliberation they must have examined each individual paper! With what needless care they must have checked and scrutinized each individual total!

But after long vigil a fat little man, with a stentorian voice (understood to be the returning officer) appeared all at once in front of the hall, and holding up his plump round hand for silence, which fell instantly in a deep hush on all that expectant crowd, proceeded to read out the result of the election:

'Harrison, 3,280; Cholmondely-Jones, 2,973—majority for Harrison, 307.'

There was a moment's lull, then a roar of satisfaction went up from Hubert's supporters, followed by a loud growl of defeat from his opponent's party; after which three ringing cheers for the successful candidate surged towards heaven wildly, and Hubert knew he was in very fact member of Parliament for the metropolitan borough of South Hampstead.

The rest that ensued, he scarcely understood. He was vaguely aware that somebody called upon him to speak, and that he spoke accordingly in a very loud voice, though with profound trepidation, and declared this to be a Glorious Victory; and that he was very polite to the candidate on the other side; and that he rejoiced in having had so honourable an opponent; but that he saw in his return a triumphant vindication of the policy of the Government. At which the crowd cheered, and the opposition and the vivisectionists hooted. And then he sat down, with his brain whirling.

After which, it seemed to him in a vague sort of way that a shadowy form, representing to some extent the defeated candidate, rose and said in a hollow voice this was hardly a defeat at all, but a Moral Victory; and that their majority had only been converted into a minority by anti-vaccination and other extraneous circumstances, quite alien to the politics of the hour or of this kingdom, and that they would have won had it not been for local option and the Grove Road footpath; and that the costermongers had done their duty like Englishmen; and that the tactics of the foreign Jews were simply disgraceful; and that, in fact, he had hardly been beaten at all, except from a merely numerical point of view, whatever that might mean; and that he wasn't in the very least degree cast down by his licking, which was no licking in any way, if rightly regarded; but that he confidently anticipated being returned next time, in spite of the Grove Road faction, by a thundering majority. Whereupon, both parties cheered their own men lustily, and both seemed almost equally satisfied with the result of the poll—but especially the side that had got in their member.

And when all was over, and the crowd had slowly melted away, the member himself got limply into a hansom, with his brother Douglas, and drove off, amid cheers, to Mr. Venables' town residence.

He was determined to be the first himself to announce his victory to his future wife—for so he considered her now. He rang the bell hard. A strange servant answered it. Could he see Miss Venables?

The strange servant stared at him, the stony British stare of the silk-stockinged footman. Oh dear no. Miss Venables could see nobody. But if the gentleman liked he could see her father.

Wondering what it could all mean, the newly-made member, with brain reeling even now from that orgie of congratulations and wild shaking of hands, mounted the stairs to the drawing-room, with Douglas still by his side, and found himself in the presence of Old Affability.

Hubert had never quite hit it off with Sabine's father. The owner of the Venables millions had always looked somewhat askance upon the penniless journalist who filled, as he well knew, so large a place in Sabine's consideration, to the exclusion of other and more suitable claimants for his daughter's affections. But this time, to Hubert's immense surprise, Old Affability advanced to greet him with unwonted cordiality, though with a very anxious look upon his benign features.

'We've been expecting you before, Mr. Harrison,' he said politely and with obvious kindness. 'Sabine's been asking every minute to see you.'

'Then you've heard of my success already?' Hubert asked, somewhat crestfallen, for he had wanted to be the bearer of the good news himself. 'You've heard that I'm elected?'

Mr. Venables gazed at him with a blank stare.

'Elected to what?' he asked stonily. 'Your success where? I'm behind the times, perhaps. I've only just returned to-day from Paris, where I've been floating Amberleys, and know nothing about what's been passing meanwhile in London.'

'Why, I'm member of Parliament for South Hampstead, that's all,' Hubert answered modestly; 'and I've come round to tell Sab——Miss Venables——of my success in person.'

'Then *you* haven't heard,' Mr. Venables answered in return, in a very grave voice. 'I should have thought she would have written to you—that is to say, I imagined my daughter corresponded with you occasionally about the Gordon League. She's secretary to your ladies' branch, I fancy. You've not heard about Miss Venables?'

He said it so seriously that Hubert's face fell and his brain reeled once more. It was clear the voice portended evil tidings. Could Sabine have accepted Somebody Else, and was that why Old Affability was so particularly affable to him?

'No, I've heard nothing from her for the last two days,' Hubert blurted out, taken unawares, and unwittingly admitting the fact that so long a silence was a phenomenon calling for special comment. 'There's nothing the matter, I hope. My visit isn't unpleasant to her?'

'On the contrary,' Mr. Venables said, with a very grave smile, 'I was expecting you hourly, and so was Sabine. To tell you the truth, she's dangerously ill; in fact, she's caught it. It was a heroic thing to do, though I say it myself of my own daughter; a most heroic self-sacrifice, and we only fear the consequences this moment of her devotion to Arthur.'

'Ill!' Hubert ejaculated in surprise. 'Not diphtheria, surely! You don't mean to say she's caught it from her brother?'

'Yes, I do,' Mr. Venables answered, unable to conceal his mingled pride and concern. 'But what else would you expect? With such conduct as hers, she could hardly hope to be spared the consequences of her noble self-sacrifice.'

'I don't understand you,' Hubert cried, bewildered. 'You're talking of something I know nothing about. Is Sabine ill? Is her life in danger?'

'What! You haven't read about it?' Mr. Venables exclaimed, with a little annoyance in his tone. 'Why, it was in half the public prints this morning. All London's ringing with it. Such is fame! It's the most heroic act I ever remember. See, here's the report. I wonder you haven't seen it.'

'I've read nothing for the last week but the election news,' Hubert answered apologetically, taking the paper from his hand, and skimming the paragraph in haste. 'I've been so awfully busy.' Then he laid it down with a sudden outburst of emotion. 'Just like her!' he cried, surprised. 'She's a brave, brave girl! But she shouldn't have risked her own life—her precious life—for that child's, all the same, Mr. Venables.'

The father answered nothing. 'Twas not for him to decide.

'Will you go up and see her?' he asked. 'She's been waiting and wondering that you didn't come to her.'

'Yes, at once,' Hubert answered, moving hastily to the door. 'My poor, poor Sabine! To think she was suffering in silence like this, while I was speechifying over there at the hall in South Hampstead!'

They went upstairs and entered the room together, Mr. Venables and Hubert. The father led the way to the sofa where Sabine was lying in a dainty dressing-gown. She was dangerously ill. She could hardly speak. The fingers of the disease were gripping hard at her throat. But, as Hubert entered, she half raised herself as she lay, with a flash of joy in her eye, and held out her arms to him in a wild outburst of welcome. Never before had she embraced him so. Hubert yielded at once, without a second's hesitation, to the impulse of the moment, and flung himself into her arms. Mr. Venables, standing by, stickler for delicacy as he had always been, made no attempt to prevent him. For some minutes Hubert sat there, clasping her hand to his bosom, with the tears in his eyes. Then he gazed into her face, and cried out in a wild access of mingled emotions:

'Sabine, for my sake, you must live—you must recover.'

Sabine raised her head, and looked at him with a look of unwonted tenderness. The proud girl had thoroughly melted now.

'What news from South Hampstead?' she gasped out with difficulty.

'Elected!' Hubert answered. 'But don't let's talk about that, Sabine; you *must* get well. If I do as you did yourself, I *must*

save you—I *must* save you.'

Sabine shook her head, and trembled violently.

'No use, Hubert,' she answered. 'I feel it's no use. Nothing will save me now. It's got too firm a grip of me. It's choking at my throat like a hand strangling one. But if *you* have put your foot on the first rung of the ladder that leads to success, I don't care for anything. I love you, Hubert. I shall die happy.'

CHAPTER XXVII.

A SLIGHT MISUNDERSTANDING.

We don't always die, somehow, when we're most certain of dying. It was a short and sharp attack; but nevertheless, contrary to her own expectation, Sabine outlived it. On the whole, to say the truth, she was glad of this; for while she was ill, it began to strike her she would rather like to live—to marry Hubert Harrison.

Nature and instinct are too strong in the long-run for the proudest soul. Sabine had almost had enough by this time of nursing her pride; and now, since she had given public proof, as it were, that she bore no ill-will to poor little Arthur for depriving her of her birthright, she began to feel she might fairly indulge her own taste in life by accepting the lover who had so long been faithful to her.

Besides, as things stood, the step would be open to less misapprehension. There was a great difference now (since this last election) in Hubert's position. It was one thing to have people say she had declined from the pursuit of a Duke's brother to a penniless journalist, who edited the *Boomerang*, and quite another thing to have them say she had accepted after mature consideration a rising M.P., with all the world before him where to choose, and the hopes of his party bound up in his future. Not that Sabine herself really thought much of all these things just then. While she lay ill in her room and all but dying, with her doctor by her side, and her maids around her, it somehow occurred to her that to wreck your own happiness in life and the happiness of the man you love best in the world, for fear of what other people will say or think about you, is a proof, not of pride or self-confidence at all, but of weakness and self-depreciation. The more she thought of it, the clearer it loomed forth. She rose from that illness armed with a new resolve. In future she would mould her life to suit her own convenience. She would be bold enough to act as she thought best in her own soul, and let the rest of the world say or think what it liked about her. In short, she would have the courage of her opinions, and marry Hubert.

Strange to say, too, when once she had arrived at that very sensible and natural conclusion, she could not imagine to herself how she had so long escaped it. It seemed so obvious, when one came to look the matter fairly and squarely in the face, that the right thing to do, if one wished to keep one's own self-respect, was to follow the promptings of one's own heart, without regard to the irresponsible babble of all or sundry. After all, she was prouder ten thousand times of Hubert Harrison than she could ever have been of the Duke of Powysland, even if she had loved him; and why should she be afraid to proclaim that faith aloud to the world for fear people should say she had only married Hubert after she had failed to secure a ducal coronet? She herself knew better; Hubert knew better; and what mattered to them two all the shrugs and hints of all the scheming mammas in Belgravia and all the cynical bachelors of Pall Mall and St. James's?

So, thus resolved, a day or two after her recovery, Sabine made up her mind, not without sundry misgivings of that brave little heart of hers, to go down of her own accord to her father's study, and make a clean breast of her intentions, without even consulting Hubert beforehand, to that ambitious financier.

It was a difficult thing to do, of course; brave as she was, Sabine fairly shrank from it. She knew her father had long ago set his heart on her 'marrying well,' as he himself would have phrased it—that is to say, on her marrying a man with a handle to his name and a position in society. Old Affability wished to say before he died, 'My son-in-law the Duke,' or 'My daughter the Marchioness.' Ever since the days when he gave up all hopes of Bertie Montgomery, and the first rank in the land, he had constantly been playing at her some new courtesy lord or some Irish viscount, and had been disappointed each time at her obvious inability to see in any of these young gentlemen the virtues and excellencies which he himself invariably detected in all whose names are written in the Book of the Peerage. All this Sabine knew very well in her own mind; and, as she was a dutiful daughter, and, in spite of occasional annoyances at his superficial view of men and things, really loved Old Affability with all her heart, it grieved her not a little to think she must, with one mad blow, so sadly destroy his whole hopes for her future.

She did *not* know, however, that Old Affability himself had long begun to perceive the drift of Hubert Harrison's frequent letters, and to suspect that they bore at times upon other things than that Gordon League which formed their ostensible object. Being a man of the world, he shrewdly guessed his daughter's heart was too deeply engaged now for even the most eligible of dukes to shake its fidelity. Still less did Sabine know that the first person who had directed the Premier's attention to Hubert Harrison's brilliant articles in the *Daily Telephone*, and to the probability of his making a good Parliamentary debater on the Government side, was Old Affability himself. For the typical British Philistine was a shrewd man of business in his own way, and being accustomed always to hedge against contingencies and make all sure

behind him, he determined that if Hubert Harrison must at last be openly recognised as the favoured suitor for his daughter's heart, he should at least have some respectable qualifications beforehand for so high an honour, and not put wholly to the blush the ten-year-old traditions of the house of Venables.

Sabine, however, was naturally ignorant of these undercurrents of parental thought, and knew only that papa had always thrown cold water, as far as possible, upon poor dear Hubert's visits. It was only natural, therefore, she should hesitate a little before knocking at the study door—nobody ever entered that private chapel, sacred to the genius of Eries and Egyptians, without a preliminary knock—and that her heart should beat hard with suspense and timidity while she waited for an answer. Papa would be awfully angry, she knew, but still she'd brave it.

'Come in,' Old Affability said, in his most affable voice; and Sabine entered.

'What! you, my child!' her father exclaimed, laying down the *Economist*, as she stood nervously near the door. 'What do you want with me, Sabine? Is it anything particular? For—eh—to tell you the truth, I was just expecting a visit;' and he hesitated visibly.

'Oh, any other time would do just equally well, papa,' Sabine blurted out timidly, her usual boldness forsaking her altogether under these trying circumstances. 'Don't let me interfere with Imperial Ottomans. I only wanted to speak to you about—about my own private business.'

Old Affability glanced up at her with a curious smile. He was sitting by the desk in his revolving oak chair, and he swung it round quickly to face her as she spoke. '*Not* about Hubert Harrison?' he said, his lips relaxing ever more and more widely.

Sabine's voice faltered and stuck in her throat.

'Yes ... about Hubert Harrison,' she answered, all crimson. She had no idea till that moment she could blush so deeply. 'But it doesn't matter now, if you're expecting a visitor. There's no hurry. Any other time'll do just as well, of course. I'd better run away, in fact, before—your visitor, whoever he is, comes in and catches me.'

Old Affability's mouth broadened slowly at each word till nothing but a smile was left of his countenance. 'Well, if you must know,' he said at last, unable to conceal his amusement at the odd coincidence, 'the visitor I'm expecting *is* Hubert Harrison.'

'Hubert Harrison?' Sabine repeated, bewildered. 'Why, he never comes here.'

'Well, yes,' her father answered, leaning back in his chair, before the big leather-covered desk, and twirling his solid thumbs reflectively upon his ample knee, like a prosperous British financier that he was; 'I'm expecting Hubert. We may as well call him plain Hubert in the bosom of the family now, I suppose, Sabine, after that unrehearsed little episode I witnessed the other night when he came to see you. Of course there was no mistaking what all that pointed to. You'd arrived at an understanding together already privately. So I wrote to ask him, yesterday, if he could spare time from his multifarious duties, now he's a politician as well as a journalist, just to step round and look me up this morning, as there are one or two little questions of detail—unimportant detail—I'd like to talk over with him at leisure beforehand.'

'Beforehand!' Sabine echoed, astonished, observing mutely the surprising fact that papa was blushing, actually blushing. 'I—ah—I don't quite understand you.'

'Well ... eh ... before we commit ourselves to anything definite, you know,' Old Affability replied, looking up at her nervously. As a matter of fact, he felt just as shy about the subject as she did.

'But ... he's never exactly *proposed* to me,' Sabine cried, aghast.

'He may not exactly have *proposed* to you,' her father retorted with a bashful smile: 'but, at any rate, I—well, I regarded your performance the other night, when we all thought you were at death's door, as a sufficient proof that, proposal or no proposal, you two young people had arrived already at a tolerably certain Mutual Understanding.'

'Oh, you thought so, papa?' Sabine murmured very low, her heart standing still in her breast within her.

Her father rose and took her two hands gently in his with unwonted tenderness. 'My child,' he said, looking down into her eyes with fatherly pride, 'I always loved you; I always admired you; I was always proud of you. But I never loved you or

admired you, or was so proud of you in my life—no, not half so much as I've been ever since this terrible illness of our dear Arthur's. And when I saw you that night rush, as it were, into young Harrison's arms, I said to myself, "This girl of mine loves him. What right have I, then, to stand in her way one minute, knowing what she is and how much I owe to her? More than that, even, I can see she's a long way too proud herself to take the one and only course to make herself happy. Very well, then. I'll take it instead, for her. If she lives and gets well, I'll arrange all this myself with Harrison." Mr. Venables paused and looked anxiously into her eyes. 'And so he's coming round this morning,' he went on, half abashed, 'to arrange it with me accordingly.'

'To arrange what?' Sabine cried, feeling the solid earth almost falling beneath her feet at this sudden removal of all her doubts and difficulties.

Her father gazed hard at her with an abstracted air, and twirled his thumbs more deliberately than ever. 'Well, when a great heiress gets married,' he said, humming and hawing a little, 'one naturally expects there will be a certain amount of business arrangements, don't you know, to settle between the families. There's the Property to consider, of course; there's the Property—there's the Property.'

'But I'm not a great heiress, papa,' Sabine burst out, unable to conceal her astonishment—'at least, not any longer. I was, I know, before dear little Arthur came. But that's all over now, and Hubert doesn't want to marry me for the sake of the property.'

Mr. Venables gazed at her in a maze of surprise, with a sort of wondering pity. 'Not a great heiress now!' he repeated to himself, as if he hardly understood her. 'That's all over since Arthur came! Why, what on earth do you mean by such nonsense, Sabine, my child?... There's some mistake somewhere. Why, dear, you're a bigger heiress to-day than ever you were in your life before. Arthur has never made any difference in any way to you.... Perhaps I ought to have spoken to you clearly about all this long since, but a certain natural delicacy'—he twirled his thumbs faster than ever now—'you understand me, Sabine?'

'Oh, please, papa, don't say anything more about it,' Sabine cried, feeling most uneasy. 'I can't bear to hear it. I can't bear you to talk about it. I can't bear you to think Hubert was looking out for money.'

Her father sat silent for half a second; then he went on in a very deliberate tone: 'No, I think I ought to tell you,' he said. 'I ought to explain it all to you. There's clearly been some misunderstanding on both your parts, which might have given rise to unpleasant results. Of course, Sabine, I didn't care to proclaim to the world what my intentions were towards you, or what I meant to do for you. I didn't care to say to Lord This or Lord That, "My daughter's worth her half-million any day." I didn't care to advertise you, as it were, because, my dear child, I don't think you stand in need of any extraneous advertising. And so, perhaps, through natural delicacy in the matter—perhaps even through excessive delicacy'—men of Mr. Venables' stamp, one may observe, are always extremely strong on the delicacy point—I may have overdone it a little, and abstained from telling you what I ought to have told you.' And saying this, Mr. Venables gazed at his daughter once more with an expansive smile of abstract benevolence.

'I see, papa,' Sabine murmured, taken aback and trembling violently.

'Well, the fact is,' her father went on, still regarding her fixedly, and picking his words with great deliberation, for he felt this was an important domestic economy, 'before I married my poor lost angel, Woodbine, and before I even thought of marrying her at all, I had made a will, by which I left one moiety of my property to you, and as to the other moiety, I bequeathed it in equal shares to my brother Arthur's two girls in Australia. So that originally you would have benefited, you see, by one half my fortune—which was as large a sum as I thought necessary for any girl's happiness, Sabine. You follow me, don't you?'

'Perfectly, papa,' Sabine answered, all crimson; 'but I'd really rather you didn't tell me.'

'Well, then,' Mr. Venables went on, disregarding her protest, 'when I married my poor dear Woodbine, that will became naturally null and void. You're aware, of course, that any will made before marriage becomes *ipso facto* null and void by the mere performance of the wedding ceremony.'

'I dare say,' Sabine answered dutifully, with her head swimming.

'Oh yes,' her father continued, gaining increased confidence as his explanation went on, and he reached the more familiar

business details, 'it becomes *ipso facto* null and void by the contracting of marriage. So, then, I naturally drew up another to supersede it. By that second will I gave and devised one half of my fortune to you, as aforesaid, and one half to my poor dear Woodbine, leaving only small legacies to your uncle Arthur's two girls, who by that time, as you recollect, had married well in Melbourne, and no longer needed bolstering up by external assistance. That was Will Number Two, my dear, executed within three days of my marriage to Woodbine.'

'I see,' Sabine responded dutifully once more, not knowing very well what other comment she could make upon these interesting disclosures.

'Well, then,' Mr. Venables went on, staring hard at the fire and trying to keep his eyes clear from tears, 'my poor darling died—you know what a blow that was to me, Sabine—I shall never recover from it—I shall never recover—and left us our dear little Arthur, to whom you've always been, as you promised to be, a perfect mother.'

'I love him so,' Sabine cried spontaneously, with a sudden outburst of affection. 'Oh, papa, till the other night I never knew how much I loved him!'

'So when dear little Arthur came,' her father went on, making hardly any decent effort now to restrain that rising moisture, 'I drew up and executed Will Number Three—the will that is still in force, and that I pledge myself, so far as you are concerned, my child, never any further to modify or alter. And by that will—now here in my desk for Hubert's inspection—I gave and devised one half my estate to my dear son Arthur, if he should survive me, with remainder—but we needn't go into that at present; and the other half to my beloved daughter Sabine, dividing and apportioning the whole to the best of my ability between the two impartially, as seems to me fair and common justice.'

'Oh, papa,' Sabine cried, flushing fiery red with a sudden sense of the wrong she had so long been doing him in her own mind, 'you didn't really do that! You didn't really make me from the very first an equal sharer with Arthur!'

'Why not, my dear child?' her father asked demonstratively. 'Here's the will to prove it, date and all as stated.'

'Why, nobody does it, papa,' Sabine exclaimed, astonished. 'It's just and right, I know; it's what ought always to be done; but nobody ever does it, and least of all people in your position; they leave it all to the eldest son. They're so anxious to become the founders of a county family.'

A shade of positive pain came over Mr. Venables' face. 'My dear,' he said gravely, taking her hands in his, 'you misunderstand me very much if you think the desire to found a family, or any other desire of the sort, would ever for one moment interfere in my mind with the plain demands of nature, right, and justice. Arthur and you are both my children; my duties towards both of you are equal and similar. At this moment, my affairs are worth more than they've ever been—considerably more, through my connection with Amberleys—and so at this moment you're a greater heiress than you were before dear Arthur was born; and under these circumstances I had hoped you might have made a match of proportionate splendour and dignity, such as my position in the county now entitles you to. However, in that I've been disappointed—I've been disappointed, and I mean to bear my disappointment like a man. You have chosen otherwise, and in many ways, Sabine, I can't help admiring you for your disinterested choice. My dear, I'm proud of you. On the day when you marry Hubert Harrison, I will settle on you precisely the self-same sum which I intended to settle upon you if you'd married my friend the Duke of Powysland.'

Sabine rushed into his arms in a torrent of tears. It wasn't the money—she was far too true a woman to care twopence just then about that, for no girl of her age is ever really mercenary; it was her father's unexpected goodness and tenderness that overcame her. She could hardly have believed it of the typical British Philistine. All these long years, brooding over it to herself, she had taken it for granted that Mr. Venables would follow the almost universal habit of his kind, and leave the vast bulk of his fortune to his only son, so that Arthur's birth had reduced her practically from the position of a great heiress to that of a nobody; and now she learnt for the first time from his own lips, not only that her father had never, at any moment, contemplated such a cruel course, but also that he intended to treat her wishes now with the rarest and profoundest respect and deference. Till a week or two since she had never known how much she loved Arthur; till that moment she never knew how much she loved and respected her father.

She fell on his neck and cried like a child. Mr. Venables, pleased at her confidence, soothed her tenderly with his hand. It was not in human nature that he should not feel a certain self-satisfaction at her reception of his statement. He drew himself up with conscious pride, and patted himself mentally on the back for his paternal rectitude.

And as they two stood there, father and daughter, in that outburst of fresh confidence, on one another's necks, a sharp little ring at the electric bell, breaking in upon the silence, announced the sudden arrival of Hubert Harrison.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DOUBTS AND FEARS.

From the moment when that briefless barrister, poor Douglas Harrison, heard Linda Figgins was once more in England, and married to the Duke of Powysland, one fervent desire alone possessed his soul. At all hazards he must manage to see her and speak with her.

In a certain sense, of course, this ought to be easy enough. What just cause or impediment could be urged why Douglas, who had known the Duchess so intimately before her marriage, and who had even met the Duke himself as well at the Venables' at Hurst Croft, should not call upon her openly any day, like any other friend, at her temporary address in Onslow Gardens? Certainly the recluse of Bloomsbury was the last man on earth to be deterred from visiting Linda in her new home by mere considerations of the immense change that had taken place so unexpectedly in her worldly position. To Douglas Harrison, at least, Linda would always be Linda still, were she twenty thousand times a British peeress. He had loved and respected her so much for herself in the lodgings at Clandon Street, that he couldn't possibly respect her one atom the more because she had thrown herself away, against all reasonable probability, upon Adalbert Owen Trefaldwyn Montgomery, ninth Duke of Powysland.

But then other difficulties and dangers blocked the path. Douglas hardly felt sure himself how far Linda would be prepared to receive his visit. Her marriage with such a man as her new husband had taken him so completely by surprise that he couldn't just at first make up his mind in what relations they really stood to one another. Had Linda told the Duke the whole truth about Clandon Street? Had he married her merely as the brilliant comet of a New York season, or did he know her also as the former mistress of the London lodging-house? Douglas couldn't believe, of course, that Linda had accepted the man under false pretences; his knowledge of her character was far too deep and too clear for that; but then, he couldn't have believed, on the other hand, if it hadn't been forced upon him by the undeniable facts of the case, that she could ever have married the Duke at all. His whole conception of Linda was so upset by the event, that he hardly knew how to reconcile her action in any way with his preconceived ideas of her nature and feelings.

Perhaps she might have thought a certain amount of reticence as to her past history justifiable under the circumstances. If so, would it be wise of him to call at her house, where he might meet the Duke, and awkward questions might be asked, which he had no means of knowing how he ought to answer? Decidedly, until he understood Linda's position in this matter, it would be unwise and unkind of him to risk an open visit.

But, more than all that, Douglas Harrison could not conceal from himself the fact that he wanted to see Linda above all things alone, to be able to ask her about her marriage and her feelings; to clear up this mystery, which, so far as he was concerned, enveloped her relations with her impossible husband. He wanted to ask her plainly, in so many words, 'Why did you marry that man?' The question is perhaps an unconventional one to put to a bride; but till he got his answer to it, Linda could never be to him quite the same old, unapproachable Linda as ever. If he thought she could have sold herself to a Duke for a coronet—but no, the bare idea was, to Douglas Harrison, perfect sacrilege.

For it was as Linda's lover, as Linda's devoted admirer, that he wished to see her still, in spite of everything. The mere fact that Linda was married to somebody else could never make any difference to his absolutely pure and chivalrous devotion. He had loved her once, and he must love her for ever. To Douglas Harrison, indeed, Linda was as a beautiful unattainable gem, which he might not possess, but which he could at least admire and worship from a distance.

Yet, disinterested as was his love for her, Douglas nevertheless felt a certain natural reluctance—not unknown among men—to calling openly at any man's house with the deliberate object of asking his wife what on earth she could ever have meant by marrying him. The question is a delicate one, and involves its responsibilities. A certain amount of respect and a little law is due to husbands, even when they have deprived you of the one peerless woman you had chosen beforehand for your own partner in life. It's rough on your fellow-man to use his undoubted castle (in Onslow Gardens) as the theatre of your interrogatories, addressed to his wife, on her reasons for venturing to accept him instead of you.

So after mature deliberation Douglas came to the conclusion that as a man of honour he could hardly call at the Duke's temporary home for the express purpose of trying to find a chance of a *tête-à-tête* with Linda. That he had a right to an explanation he didn't for a moment doubt; but Onslow Gardens was hardly, he felt, the proper place in which to angle for it.

He waited impatiently, therefore, turning over in his own mind the chances of meeting Linda in this house or that, till some weeks had elapsed since the Simpsons' party and Basil Maclaine's astounding discovery. But no chance came, and he held on, helplessly, lecturing to ladies, as was his wont, and correcting, as of yore, the proofs of the *Boomerang*.

At last one morning Douglas was sitting disconsolate in the old chambers in Clandon Street, lazily glancing over the leader of the day, and wondering in his heart how long a time must elapse before he could see Linda. It was the day after Hubert's interview with his future father-in-law on the question of settlements, and Hubert had come back all jubilant with the news of his approaching marriage, and of Old Affability's unexpected compliance. The typical British Philistine, indeed, had belied all his fears and surpassed all his hopes: he had frankly assented to Sabine's marriage, and had astonished and even somewhat dismayed Hubert by insisting upon making the new M.P. into a rich man offhand by his unbounded generosity. In all this Douglas saw a chance for himself. Old Affability, as European representative of the Amberley syndicate, would be sure to ask the Duke and Duchess to Sabine's wedding, which was shortly to take place, under distinguished patronage, and there he would no doubt see Linda once more. Of course, such a meeting would be gall and bitterness to him; but it would at least enable him to arrange some other under more suitable circumstances in the near future.

As he mused thus to himself, he heard a curious and unusual sound in the street below, as of a carriage drawing up short at the door of the lodging-house.

Those who know Clandon Street intimately do not need to be reminded that that convenient thoroughfare is neither a very wide nor a very aristocratic one. Carriages seldom stopped at the doors round about on any errand whatsoever; and this particular specimen, as Douglas observed, casting his glance casually down, was a landau and pair of the most lordly description, with powdered footmen. The children ran out to the steps all round to feast their eyes on so much unwonted grandeur. Douglas smiled good-humouredly at their eager curiosity.

Presently, to his still greater surprise, a footman rang the bell at that very door. The stipendiary answered it, for she was still on hand. Douglas wondered languidly what such doings could portend. Surely no one who drove in a carriage, manned with such gorgeous flunkeys as those, could desire to take lodgings from the eminently respectable Mr. Higgs and his wife, who had been cook in a gentleman's family. Some mistake somewhere, he ventured to believe; unless, indeed, Basil Maclaine, in some unguarded moment, had given his card (with number and all) to some of his fine acquaintances, and was now receiving a morning call from the Very Best People.

As he wondered, however, a familiar voice struck strangely on his ear—a voice he had heard a thousand times before in that very passage.

'What, you here still!' it exclaimed, with some quiet surprise. 'Well, that's an additional unexpected pleasure. So you've been stopping on all this time with Mrs. Higgs, have you! How's your cough? I was afraid you'd find the work too hard. I hope the place suits you.'

Douglas could almost depict the girl's look of astonishment as she drew back, dumfounded, and exclaimed in a tone of inexpressible awe:

'Why, Lord have mercy upon us, if it isn't Miss Figgins!'

'Not Miss Figgins any longer,' Linda corrected, laughing in her own old pleasant, good-humoured manner. 'I'm the Duchess of Powysland now. Doesn't it sound grand? That's what they call me since I got married, Emma.'

Douglas could hardly restrain himself from rushing to the top of the stairs and calling out 'Linda, Linda!' in the good old style at the top of his voice, but he managed to keep himself still with some difficulty. After all, she might perhaps not wish to see him. She might have come to inquire after Basil Maclaine, who had always, he reflected bitterly to himself, been a great deal more to her than ever he had been. So he held his breath to hear, and listened, with his very heart standing still with interest.

'A Duchess!' the stipendiary murmured slowly, in an awe-smitten voice. 'And in a carriage like that! Oh my, how fine! Why, what do it mean, miss?'

Linda laughed once more, with almost childish glee, at the amazement her altered fortunes inspired.

'Well, it means I've married a Duke, Emma; that's all,' she said merrily. 'And Mr. Cecil's done very well, too, and made

his fortune with his electrical machines in America. You remember the machines, don't you?—the things you used to be so dreadfully afraid to touch, that gave you shocks when you dusted them, and stood up yonder by the book-case.'

'Yes, I mind them well,' the girl answered, in a dazed sort of way; 'but, Lor' bless your heart, miss! I never thought there was much good in 'em, anyhow.'

'The place isn't looking quite so neat as when I was here, Emma,' the Duchess went on reproachfully, with the air of one who casts a glance around at small misdemeanours of her subordinates. 'Those panes in the fanlight, for example—they haven't been cleaned at all, as they ought; and, oh dear, how dreadfully dull and dirty the stair-rods have got, my child! I'm afraid you've never used Jones's soap to them.'

'Well, you see, Mrs. Higgs, she ain't so young nor so active as you were, miss—that is to say, my lady,' Emma responded apologetically (her views as to the proper mode of address to be employed towards Duchesses being vague in the extreme, and open to correction from Basil Maclaine); 'and it all falls upon me like, the housework and everything, and I can't keep things quite as nice, with the cooking an' that, as we'd used to keep 'em in your time, somehow. But, Lord bless your 'eart! the gentlemen don't seem to notice the difference, any way. They're both of 'em living 'ere still. Did your ladyship 'appen to want to see 'em?'

Douglas's heart gave a distinct pause as he waited for the reply. Then it thumped aloud as Linda answered clearly:

'Not Mr. Maclaine, please, Emma; I won't go up if *he's* in the house. But if Mr. Harrison's here, alone, I should like to see him.'

What happened exactly after that Douglas never knew. He was only aware in a very dim way of feet on the stairs—patter, patter, patter. Then the rustle of a dress, an open door, a moment's pause, a divine presence. Something thrilled through him down to the very finger-tips. Next instant he was standing with a pair of small gloved hands each held in his own, outstretched to take them, and was murmuring in a very low voice, almost under his breath:

'Why, Linda, Linda!'

For, do what he could, he couldn't find it in his heart to speak to his recovered love as 'Duchess.'

What kindness! What condescension! Of her own accord, then, she had come after all to see him!

CHAPTER XXIX.

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL.

For a minute or two neither spoke any further. Linda stood with both her hands laid lightly in Douglas's, gazing straight into his face, her eyes fixed on his, but saying nothing. He was a very dear friend, and in her frank, calm way she was glad indeed to see him again. As for Douglas, his heart was too full for words. Linda's condescension in coming to visit him of her own accord struck him dumb with gratitude. He could only hold those two dear hands clasped hard in his, and feel his heart beat, and gaze at her mutely.

At last Linda dropped his hands with a sudden movement, and broke the eloquent silence.

'And you never came to call upon me, Mr. Harrison,' she exclaimed reproachfully.

In a moment a new difficulty stared Douglas in the face. Here was indeed a dilemma. How could he defend himself against this obvious attack without saying more than in honour he ought to say to Linda? How repel the charge of neglect without more open expression of his inmost thoughts than was meet or just in talking to one who was now another man's wife? Douglas was a man of honour, and it was hard indeed for him to shape his course aright without seeming either too cold on the one hand or too warm on the other—to conceal his love, and yet give sufficient expression to his heartfelt friendship. He stammered out an answer as best he might.

'Why, you see, Linda—I mean—well, now, tell me, what am I to call you?'

Linda sank down with an air of much content in the familiar old armchair, still covered with the tulip-pattern cretonne sewn on by her own deft fingers, and answered, laughing:

'Why, Linda, of course, Mr. Harrison. What else should it be?—just the same as ever. You don't suppose because I've married a Duke it need make any difference between old friends like you and me, do you?'

Her answer, kind as it was, and meant to reassure him, went like a knife to Douglas's heart. Ah, no, it made no difference to *her*, of course, for it had only been as a friend she had ever liked him; but to him! why the difference was something too deep to realize; it cut at the very roots of all his hopes and all his thoughts and day-dreams for the future. Linda for *him*—though Linda still—was now, in one crushing, overwhelming sense, the Duchess of Powysland.

'You're very good, Linda,' he answered, his voice all trembling. 'How kind of you to remember old friends so heartily! But you were always kindness itself to me. Well, the truth is, I didn't come to call—partly because I didn't feel quite sure in my own mind whether or not you wanted to see me.'

'Mr. Harrison!'

She said it in the tone of one who is genuinely hurt and surprised at a base insinuation. Douglas regretted at once he had let the words slip as he did.

'At any rate,' he added hastily, correcting himself as fast as he could, 'I didn't exactly know what footing we stood upon, and what attitude I ought to assume towards your husband, if—well ... if you can understand my difficulty.'

'No, I don't understand it,' Linda answered, rising, and drawing her pocket-handkerchief from her pocket with a familiar gesture. Douglas knew what it meant; he remembered the action so well from the dear old days. A speck of dust on a vase upon the mantelpiece had arrested her attention, and pure force of habit made that born housewife wipe it off at once with the only duster then and there available.

'Emma doesn't keep the room quite so nicely as she used to do,' her grace went on slowly, regarding the smear on the handkerchief with considerable discomfiture. 'Just look at this smudge now. Unpardonable, isn't it? Luckily, I've got another one in my muff, or I don't know what on earth I'd do with this.... Well, no, Mr. Harrison; I *don't* understand your difficulty at all. Why didn't you come and call? I've been so surprised at it—and even hurt, for ever since that evening I met—Mr. Maclaine—at the Simpsons' at home, I've been expecting daily to see you drop in upon us.'

'No, you don't mean that!' Douglas cried, delighted, yet rather taken aback by Linda's vigorous way of carrying the war

into Africa. 'How very good of you! But I didn't call for various reasons. In the first place, I'm not accustomed to dropping in upon Dukes; and, in the second place, I thought, if you really wanted to see me, you'd drop in yourself to look me up, don't you know, Linda.'

Linda's face grew grave.

'It isn't usual for women to take the initiative in that way,' she answered more seriously. 'And besides, how could you possibly expect me to come ... where Mr. Maclaine was living? That wasn't like you!'

'Of course not! How stupid of me!' Douglas replied with sudden conviction. 'I never thought of that. But then, I really didn't know whether you wanted to see me or not; for, remember, you haven't written a line to me all this long time; and you didn't even tell me of all your good fortune. Till I heard of it from *him*, I knew nothing about it.'

Linda looked grave once more. Looking grave became that dignified face of hers, dignified now more than ever in its appropriate surroundings of fur cloak and bonnet.

'But there was a good reason, then,' she answered. 'Of course you can guess it. That reason disappeared when I married Bertie. I sent you a message by Mr. Maclaine which I thought you would understand. Surely you must have known and felt how much I wished to see you, and what a sacrifice it was to me never during all that long time to write to you. For you can't help recognising, I'm sure, Mr. Harrison, how deeply I've always valued and cherished your friendship.'

Douglas's heart gave a little jump of delight. Pure and unalloyed as was his affection for Linda, how could he avoid a burst of gratification at that kindly avowal?

'Well, the real reason I didn't call,' he said candidly, at last, thus driven into a corner, 'that is to say, the most real reason of all, the true truth, as Hubert would call it, was because I wasn't quite sure in what relations you stood with the Duke; how far it would be agreeable to you, for example, that he should learn the facts about ... about your previous life over here in England. He married you, I suppose, as the rich, unattached New York heiress; I didn't feel certain, you see, to what extent you had spoken to him of the days when—eh—when you were not yet a queen in society.'

For a second Linda looked at him with a curiously inquiring look. Then she burst into a sudden peal of merry laughter.

'Why, Mr. Harrison,' she cried, much amused, 'I'm really half angry with you. I couldn't have believed it of *you*, of all men. Did you actually think that of me? Well, now, I should have thought that you at least knew me a great deal better. I should have thought you'd have known I would never want to conceal anything of any sort from anybody—far less from my husband. I've nothing to be ashamed of, and I'm ashamed of nothing. When I met Bertie first in New York, and saw he was paying me marked attentions, I told him plainly I was English born, and of no particular antecedents. I told him I'd lived more than half my life in London. I told him how Cecil had worked his way up, and how I'd made money by helping Cecil. I'm proud of Cecil's achievements, and I'm proud, too, of my own belief from the first in Cecil. (Mrs. Higgs ought really to have Aspinalled that bookcase long ago! It's fearfully shabby!) I feel that without my aid and encouragement during his struggling days, great mechanical genius as he is, he'd never have brought his grand inventions to a satisfactory conclusion; and that without the money I'd saved in the house, he'd never have been able to go to America or to float them financially to such splendid advantage. I have a part in his success, and I pride myself upon it. Instead of being ashamed of our self-made rise, I openly glory in it.'

Douglas Harrison looked at her with honest admiration. To be sure, it was just what he might have expected from her. There spoke the Linda he had always known and loved. How on earth could he ever for one moment have doubted her? He was ashamed of himself now for even supposing such a base thought possible to Linda. If she had married a Duke, she had married him at least without one thought of concealing or of suppressing anything. She was Adalbert Montgomery's natural superior, and she never pretended to ignore the fact. But how, then, did she come to marry him at all? That was still the mystery that puzzled and baffled Douglas.

So they fell soon into talk of Cecil's success, and of the good old times, and of his plans and his models, and how hard he had worked at them in the parlours at Clandon Street—talk which the new-made Duchess varied from time to time by quite naturally gliding across to pull the curtains straight at the window, or rearrange the vases on the painted deal overmantel, or sweep up the cinders from the fender with the groggy little hearthbrush, as if she had only just come back to town after a week's absence from her accustomed avocations. She told him how Cecil had worked and worked at the models in England till he had got them quite perfect; how he had despaired, after much inquiry, of ever floating his

schemes on the London market, except by making them over on ruinous terms to a syndicate of capitalists; how he had found that, in order adequately to protect his own interests as inventor, he must go to America, ever more receptive of new ideas and discoveries than our conservative Britain; how he had secured a good post with the New York firm, and immediately on his arrival had got them to take up his valuable patents; how from the very first moment success had been assured, local rights had been bought up, new uses had been developed; and how they found themselves millionaires in the end, with true American rapidity, almost before they knew it.

'It rained stocks and shares,' Linda said. 'Cattle kings and big bonanzas were really nothing to it.'

To all which financial detail Douglas Harrison listened with interest indeed, but none the less with some little impatience, so anxious was he to come to the central core and heart of the mystery—why had Linda, his peerless, fearless Linda, ever consented to marry the Duke of Powysland?

When at length he did arrive at it, by dexterous side-issues, he was positively ashamed of himself once more for the ease and simplicity with which Linda solved that seemingly insoluble problem. The world, that to the rest of us is so full of twists and turns, seemed always to her mind so astonishingly straightforward.

'And you met him first in New York then?' Douglas suggested tentatively, when Linda again brought up her husband's name, anxious, if possible, to turn the conversation into that more congenial channel.

'Yes, I met him in New York,' Linda answered, 'at a big dance up town at the Vanderbilts'. Everybody was there, and he was the guest of the evening. He waltzed with me three or four times the very first night. He was very much taken with me, I suppose, for he talked to me incessantly. And a few weeks later, after meeting me once or twice more, he suddenly proposed to me—and I accepted him.'

A faint ray of light broke across Douglas's brain. Linda, with her frank and unmercenary nature, had evidently never even suspected the fact that any man could want to marry her for her money alone, or even largely for her money. She thought merely 'he was very much taken with her.'

And so he well might be, Douglas thought to himself as he gazed at her. For if the Duke wanted to marry money, where, on this planet, could he find money combined with so much ability, and freshness, and character, and queenly beauty, as in that incomparable Linda?

'And you accepted him?' he repeated slowly twice over to himself. 'But why, Linda, why did you accept him? Did you love him?'

Linda glanced back at him, frank and fearless as ever.

'I really don't know whether I ought to discuss that question with any man except my husband, Mr. Harrison,' she answered simply; 'at any rate, I wouldn't discuss it with any other man on earth but you. I ought, perhaps, to tell you that's my own affair. But you've always been so kind to me—like a brother, in fact—and you know so much about that other matter, that I'd rather tell you the plain truth outright. You were always my father confessor, weren't you? Well, at first, perhaps, I hardly exactly loved Bertie. I told him so myself. I told him I had once loved another man so much that I never could love anyone else in this world equally. And then he said to me that was no matter; he had love enough for the two. And he pressed me so hard, and was so very attentive and anxious I should take him, that I couldn't bear to disappoint him. I thought to myself, "Why should I sacrifice my life and all my chances of usefulness in the world to a mere sentiment, for a man whom, though I loved him too much, I now know to have been utterly unworthy of me? Why should I go on nursing a foolish grief for years, as some weak women do, instead of holding up my head in the world, and daring to live it down, and making the best of what is left in life to me?" It had been a cruel blow, as you know, and the marks of it I shall carry about with me as long as I live. I'm not one of those who forget easily. But all the more reason, then, that I should throw it off as much as possible, and do my best to live my life and make myself and others happy. Cecil quite agreed with me, and thought if I married the Duke my time might be of more use and worth to humanity. And, besides, I liked him very much; he was so kind and attentive.... And now I'm married to him, you know, I'm extremely fond of him.'

She spoke with charming candour. In a moment Douglas saw, as if by instinct, exactly how it had happened. After all, there was really *no* mystery. The Duke, on the look-out for money, had lighted suddenly and unexpectedly on beauty, grace, and character as well. In an unguarded moment he had fallen in love with Linda. He had been specially attentive

to her, even in the midst of all that wealthy Duke-worshipping Fifth Avenue society; and Linda herself, being human after all, must have been susceptible to the flattery of being so selected from so many beautiful and attractive girls by the man whom every one of them would gladly have married. He had shown her he loved her, and love and admiration go a very long way with even the best of women. Linda, on her part, had frankly told her suitor the whole truth; and the fact that that truth made no difference to his ardour must have impressed her favourably. At last, half out of pure goodness of heart, half out of growing inclination, she had yielded the point; she had consented to give him her hand, if not her heart; and she had done it, not because he was a Duke at all, but because she believed he loved her and longed for her. She had known what unrequited love meant herself; she would do her best to make up for it to that handsome, fascinating, high-born Englishman. For, indeed, to do the Montgomeries justice, they were all handsome, and all, when they chose, exceedingly fascinating. They might have won a harder heart than Linda's by judicious pleading. And the Duke had pleaded very hard, no doubt, for, at the moment he married her, he was really in love with her, and he fully appreciated the obvious advantages of combining so admirably a marriage for love with a marriage for money.

And now that she was married, then, she was 'extremely fond of him'!

CHAPTER XXX.

UNSTABLE EQUILIBRIUM.

Late that same night the Duke returned in a rather perturbed humour to his temporary home in Onslow Gardens.

The moment he entered Linda saw at once something was the matter. Her husband's eyes had a queer look about them she had never before noticed. It seemed as though a film had gathered over them externally, through which the man himself gazed out, as it were, with dim and uncertain ken, upon the outer universe. His cheek was pale, and his mouth shut hard, like one who means to keep his own counsel. The whole expression of his face shocked and alarmed her.

'Why, where have you been, Bertie?' she asked with some anxiety, as he entered the drawing-room, and flung himself down like a log upon the sofa.

'At the club,' her husband answered curtly, shutting his lips hard once more, and with the glaze in his eyes growing deeper and more inscrutable.

'At *what* club?' Linda asked, for she had learned already to discriminate between those houses of entertainment.

'*My* club,' the Duke replied, in the settled voice of one who closes a discussion. And then Linda knew, with a little tremor of her heart, he had been to the Die and Hazard.

'Bertie, you've played!'

'I didn't say I hadn't.'

'Have you lost much?'

'I didn't say I'd lost anything.'

Linda came over to him with a gesture of wifely horror.

'And you promised me you wouldn't play again!' she cried, in a disappointed tone.

'I promised you I wouldn't play *high*,' the Duke retorted, fumbling uneasily at his watch-chain. 'Not to play at all, for a man in my position, would be simply impossible. Everybody plays when he goes to the club. And I didn't mean to play high ... at first, at any rate. It was only after the stakes got up bit by bit that the fellows there drew me seriously into it.'

Linda gazed at him in horror.

'How much have you lost, dear?' she asked, bewildered.

The Duke replied by a still blanker stare. He fixed his eyes on her long, like one astonished at a piece of incredible impertinence. Then he rose and rang the bell.

'I want a brandy and soda,' he answered coldly.

If she was going to keep a check upon his spending in this way—there was no other course possible—she must be promptly demolished.

That moment a blank horror seemed to seize upon Linda's soul. It came across her in a flash. After all, had she thrown herself away, out of pure good nature, on a commonplace, gambling, fast English gentleman?

Tears rose slowly, one by one, to her eyes, but she said never a word. She was unaccustomed to such treatment, and knew not how to meet it. She merely threw herself down on the other end of the sofa, and waited till his brandy and soda was brought up by the servant.

The Duke drank it off at a single long pull. It was a stiff glass, and Linda shuddered to see it. Then he leaned back in his place, stuck his hands deep in his pockets, and pushed his legs apart in a despondent attitude.

'Where did you go this morning?' he asked aggressively. 'I happened to inquire of Blake where he'd driven you to-day—'

purely by accident—and he said her grace had made a long call at a small house in a back street in Bloomsbury. What the dickens did he mean? He grinned when he said it; and I gave the fellow a look that'll cure him of grinning in future, I fancy. But I'd like to know, all the same, what there was in the house for that confounded image to snigger and grin at.'

Linda paused a second. Guileless and frank as she was, she yet felt that it was an unfortunate moment for him to put such a question. Then she answered quietly, 'I drove to Clandon Street, where Cecil and I used to live together before we went to America. I wanted to call upon some dear old friends of mine there.'

The Duke turned round to her with an insolent look. He had been hard hit that night at baccarat—very hard hit—and, besides being angry for his loss, and feeling foolish at having gambled away what was, after all, Linda's money, he wanted to find some fair excuse which might cover his ill-humour. 'Look here, Linda,' he said in a somewhat irritable voice, 'I don't want to interfere between you and your friends in any way, of course; but, still, I should imagine the less you see of people who live in back streets in Bloomsbury, the better—eh! don't you think so?'

'No, I don't, Bertie,' Linda answered quietly, but with some internal trembling. 'I can never give up my dear old friends whom I knew long ago, whatever may happen. I should be ashamed of myself if I were ashamed of them. And besides, in this case, there's nothing on earth for anyone to be ashamed of.'

'Oh! who was your friend then?' the Duke asked pointedly, with just the faintest suspicion of a suppressed sneer.

'Mr. Douglas Harrison,' Linda responded, unabashed. 'You must remember having met him at the Hurst Croft theatricals. He's brother of Mr. Harrison who's just been elected member of Parliament for South Hampstead, and who's going to marry Sabine Venables.'

The Duke started and stared at her; his manner altered. 'Oh, a gentleman!' he replied with a certain frigid surprise. 'That's quite another matter. I imagined you'd been to see some of your women acquaintances—some amiable old lady of the tabby cat order. But it seems I was mistaken. We men are so innocent! And you say this man Harrison lives in the house in Bloomsbury where you and your brother used to live formerly. Mysterious, to be sure! I ... I don't quite understand it.'

'He has lived there for years,' Linda answered, flushing up. 'He was our tenant, you know. I thought you knew about it, Bertie; I told you so in New York. I told you we used to let part of our house, didn't I?'

An unexpected light burst in upon the Duke. He could hardly frame the proposition in words, so much did it disturb his fluttered equanimity; but he was almost forced to do so by a devouring curiosity. 'You don't mean to imply, Linda,' he cried, 'that you—eh—excuse my saying it, but that you actually *let lodgings*?'

'Why, certainly I did,' Linda answered, not in the least disconcerted, being unable for her part to see anything to be ashamed of in so honest an occupation. 'I fancied you understood as much when I spoke to you at New York about the matter.'

The Duke leaned back again, stuck his legs out still straighter, and shut his eyes for a moment. This discovery had stunned him—it was too much for a Montgomery to take in at a single hearing. He hardly knew how to comport himself under such novel, such astounding circumstances. Beer he knew, and banking he knew, but how about lodgings? Electric motors, and oil wells, and founders' shares, and ranches, he could swallow easily enough—they were part of the established routine of business as revealed to his experience—but furnished apartments for gentlemen were a problem in life he had never before been called upon to grapple with.

'It's very disconcerting,' he said at last, after a long pause. 'I don't quite take it in. Were there many of these lodgers? Is one liable to have them sprung upon one by instalments at every street corner in London, so to speak?'

Linda laughed in spite of herself. 'Oh dear no!' she answered, with some amusement. 'People who came to our lodgings once always stayed for ever. We had only three sets, all told, in my time; the first two sets stopped on till they died—they were both old ladies—and the third set was Mr. Harrison.'

'The member and his brother?'

Linda hesitated a moment. 'The brother, not the member,' she answered a little nervously, after a short pause.

'But you implied there were at least two,' the Duke went on, looking hard in her face. 'A set means several.'

Linda winced. It was hateful to her to be so cross-questioned, especially on such a subject; but to decline to answer her husband altogether would be equivalent to giving up her own secret. 'Yes, there were two,' she said, in a low voice, at last; 'Mr. Douglas Harrison and Mr. Basil Maclaine, of the Board of Trade, whom we met at Lady Simpson's that night, you remember.'

'I remember,' the Duke repeated, less pleased than ever. 'I knew him before. A conceited snob! And you went to Bloomsbury, then, to see these two men, Linda?'

His face was black now, and he was getting very angry.

Linda hesitated once more. 'Not two,' she said, after a second short pause. 'One only, Mr. Harrison.'

The Duke looked her through and through with a piercing glance. The glaze seemed to have disappeared from his eyes by this time, and a strange light gleamed in its place from his pupils. 'Then it was this man Harrison,' he said in a slow emphatic way, like one who reads another's mind at sight, 'you were once so fond of.'

'No, it was not,' Linda answered promptly. 'If it had been, I would never have gone. I'd have stopped away. I don't desire to see that man again. It was not Mr. Harrison.'

She rose as if to go; but her husband, springing up, seized her wrist in his hand, with no unnecessary violence, and seated her once more, gently though firmly, in her place on the sofa. 'Not yet,' he said with calm decision. 'I want to get to the bottom of this Bloomsbury business now we've once started it. You went to see Harrison, then. Now, why did you want to see him?'

'Because he's a very dear old friend of mine,' Linda answered, with a round red spot burning bright in the middle of her cheek; 'and when all that happened that I told you about, he was very, very kind to me.'

'So he knew about all that?' her husband asked again, standing over her watchfully.

'Yes, he knew about all that,' Linda assented, with a pang, feeling she had given him one clue too many; for, if possible, she would still have wished to guard her own secret.

'And it was the other one you were in love with?' her husband went on, with a touch of scorn in his voice. 'That confounded cur! Linda, if you hadn't as good as acknowledged it yourself, I could hardly have believed it. A woman like you in love with that Brummagem Maclaine fellow!'

The spot in Linda's cheek burned brighter than ever. She felt in her own heart that Bertie was right. Basil Maclaine had never been a fit mate for her. And yet it made her vexed to hear Bertie speak so of him. She felt, in some dim unacknowledged way, it was constructively contemptuous to herself and her order; and that was a sort of insult Linda could never have brooked, even from her husband.

'I took my affections in my own hand,' she answered gravely, with some old-fashioned stateliness of manner. 'I asked nobody else's approval. He sufficed for me then, and that was all I cared about. I found out afterwards how unworthy he was of me.'

The Duke rose, and moved half angrily towards the door.

'Well, I know who it was now, anyhow, and I can govern myself accordingly,' he said with warmth, a deep undercurrent of the hereditary Montgomery jealousy giving some rasping hoarseness to the tones of his voice. 'I shall remember with whom I have to deal in future in this matter. I should have thought you would have consulted better your own dignity as a woman, and your own position as my wife, if you had avoided altogether your friends at the lodging-house. You appear to have felt otherwise. I suppose by this time this disgraceful story of the way you became acquainted with Maclaine and Harrison, and the way you fell in love with the man who refused to marry you, is all over every club in London. Everybody but myself has, no doubt, heard of it. If you'd told me all this earlier, we might have avoided complications. As it is, you've dragged the pride of the Montgomeries in the mud by going back as a Duchess to the rooms where you used once to rub your hands as a landlady. This is intolerable—intolerable! I should have given you credit for better taste and more common-sense. It seems I was mistaken. Good-evening, Duchess.'

Linda started up in an agony of horror.

'Bertie, Bertie!' she cried, running after him, all the woman within her aroused at last. 'What do you mean by this? Are you going to your room without even kissing me?'

'No,' the Duke answered, turning round to her with a stern and deadly white face. 'I'm going back to finish up the evening at the Die and Hazard.'

CHAPTER XXXI.

FRICITION.

From that evening forth things ran less smoothly in the hired house in Onslow Gardens. There was obviously something wrong with the works. The Duke went down oftener and oftener by night to the Die and Hazard, and, though he never said so at first to Linda, lost more and more heavily with continuous ill chance to his fellow-clubmen. Luck went against him. Baccarat or lansquenet, roulette or blind poker, it was all one: losses, losses, losses. Not that he had much cash of his own to play with; Cecil had taken care that Linda's money should be strictly settled upon herself; and though he had allowed a large lump sum down to extricate the Duke from his current difficulties, he had firmly set his face, like a sensible business man that he was, against permitting Linda's husband to squander away at will her future income. So the Duke had to play for the most part on imaginary hundreds; and 'Powysland paper' began to be as familiar an object of quotation in the smoking-room of the Die as Bertie Montgomery's had been at an earlier stage of his existence in the same exalted chamber. The more he played, the more deeply involved the Duke became. The bad luck of the Montgomeries seemed to pursue him throughout. He floundered at last in a perfect slough of complicated embarrassments, and was at once too proud and too nervous to ask his wife's assistance in disentangling him once for all from his intricate engagements.

The Montgomery jealousy, too, was aroused every whit as much as the Montgomery love of high play. Linda grew gradually and shamefully aware of the disgraceful fact that her husband was watching her. His first outburst of affection was cooling down now, and he was reaching the second stage of married life with men of his type—the stage in which hatred and fear of a rival begin to usurp the place of actual love for the woman they have chosen. This new cancerous growth seemed to spread apace, like some huge shapeless fungus, through the Duke's brain. Though he spoke of it to no one, it entered into the very marrow of his bones, and filled the larger part of his waking thoughts from morning to night. He escaped from it for awhile to play—to play and lose; and then returned again to lie awake in his bed all night and think of it. Even before, this hateful feeling had begun to rise in his breast; it was characteristic of the Montgomeries that, as soon as their passion for a woman was once gratified and their point carried, a reaction set in, and jealousy alone remained of what had once been desire and worship. But since the Duke had learned the true facts about Basil Maclaine and Douglas Harrison, his fiery emotion knew no bounds. He was devoured and consumed by the eternal flame. He ate his own heart out with suspicious watchfulness.

Indeed, the situation was one which touched profoundly in different ways every leading chord in his complex nature. The man's pride as well as his virility was deeply concerned. That his Duchess should still live and move in the same society as a man, or two men, with whom (as he conceived the matter), she had once carried on a vulgar flirtation, as a social inferior, in a London lodging-house, wounded him to the quick in his tenderest instincts. How could he, a Montgomery of Powysland, a scion of the oldest and noblest stock in the whole of wild Wales, ever have exposed himself before all the world in such a humiliating position? When he married Linda Amberley across sea in New York, he understood, of course, that she was a girl who had risen; one expects all that, naturally, when one agrees to sell one's title and coronet to an American heiress for prompt cash; but then, she was beautiful, she was graceful, she was well educated, she was well read, she was intellectual, she was a lady, and he supposed he would never any further be troubled with her friends or acquaintances, good, bad, or indifferent, except, to be sure, her brother, Cecil, who was an American millionaire, and, as such, respectable, even if he hadn't been, as he was, absolutely presentable and a genius also. It had never occurred to the Duke's mind, when Linda spoke of having lived in London, that she had come into contact at all with the sort of people one would be likely to meet with in his own society. He had taken it for granted their orbits lay in different planes. And now to find that she had kept a lodging-house in Bloomsbury, where Basil Maclaine, the greatest gossip-monger in Pall Mall, and Douglas Harrison, brother of that clever and sarcastic young man who was member for South Hampstead, had actually been her inmates—oh, it was too, too horrible!

The blow to his pride was a very bitter one. If he had loved her once for six weeks, he was beginning now to be ashamed of her, and before many months were out he might easily hate her.

Basil Maclaine, of all men! That wriggling snake, that society ferret, who wormed his way up in the world by getting in the thin edge of the wedge here, and using it as a lever to raise himself further there; who knew all the small talk of all the tea-tables in Belgravia; who retailed slanderous gossip of the clubs in ladies' boudoirs, and carried candid tittle-tattle of the boudoirs to the smoking-rooms of the clubs. It was hateful, hateful! Basil Maclaine, beloved of dowagers

and welcomed of old maids, who knew every spiteful story in town, and who studied the society papers with diligent care, as expositors study a Scripture text, to get out of their words every hint or innuendo! And to think that this man had it in his power now to go round all London with a sneer in his sleeve, and tell the whole world that laughable story how he had jilted the Duchess of Powysland himself, when she waited at table on him in a common lodging-house! The bare idea of such a possibility ahead was gall and wormwood to the last of the Montgomeries.

If only Linda had told him when he first met her in New York! She ought to have told him; but she had kept it back from him. And the worst of it was, he felt in his own heart she had kept it back, not of malice prepense, nor from any mean and deceitful desire to conceal it, but simply and solely because it meant so little to her that it never occurred to her at all to explain it in full. The whole thing seemed so simple and ordinary to her mind that she hardly thought it worth wasting a second word upon. How little she could enter, with her bourgeois ideas, into the exalted feelings of a Montgomery of Powysland!

Whoever a Montgomery marries he ennobles and raises at once to his own rank. The Duke wouldn't have been ashamed had he married a flower-girl. It wasn't that he minded. It was this hateful Maclaine man. That the fellow should be able to go about town whispering how he had refused as beneath him the very girl whom a Montgomery married—there was the sting of it. That was the point that the Duke could never get over.

As a matter of fact, of course, Basil Maclaine was far too wise to say anything to anybody about Linda's former occupation in life. Linda herself was much more likely to commit that simple indiscretion. Basil saw at a glance, in his worldly-wise way, how greatly it would redound to his own glory and credit to have it generally believed that he had stood on terms of family intimacy with the Duchess of Powysland before her marriage; and he certainly wasn't going to throw away the *kudos* of such an immediate connection with a ducal house for the mere gratification of retailing a petty piece of boarding-house gossip. On the contrary, his cue was now to magnify the Amberleys to the very best of his ability; to explain how he had known that distinguished engineer well when he was engaged in perfecting his great inventions in his laboratory in London; and how, owing to an unsuspected change of name (connected presumably with inheritance of property and the Heralds' Office), he had failed to recognise them at first as the dear old friends of his youth when the announcement of the Duke's marriage was made in England.

Indeed, in a week or two after the meeting at the Simpsons', Basil Maclaine, by sheer hard talking, had succeeded in revolutionizing opinion at all the clubs about the American heiress, who, it was now generally understood, was really a lady of gentle English birth, well known to Maclaine, and Hubert Harrison, and lots of other people in London society, whose brother had merely gone over to America in order the better to float his valuable patents, which had originally been designed, perfected, and worked out in the dignified repose of his English study. The general impression society carried away at last from Basil's vague talk amounted to an indefinite notion that Linda was probably the outcome of some snug country rectory, in a midland shire, and that Cecil, her brother, the inventor of the famous Amberley motor, and the owner of endless mines or ranches in Bret-Harteland or elsewhere, had in all likelihood come out as senior wrangler and Smith's prizeman at Cambridge in some forgotten decade. So much may be done without violation of the strict truth, by deft suggestion.

The only thing that bothered Basil in this matter was the obvious difficulty of making the best of his acquaintance with Linda. He could hardly find many opportunities of meeting the Duchess now; and without them, his proud boast of previous acquaintance would be worth to him but little in the eyes of society. However, all things come to him who knows how to wait—even an answer to his letters to the present writer; and Basil Maclaine's opportunity came at last at Sabine Venables' wedding.

It was a splendid function, of course. That goes without saying. Old Affability, having once adopted Hubert Harrison as his second best choice for Sabine's husband, was determined nobody else in the world should ever suspect he was less than amply satisfied with his daughter's selection. So he made the most of Hubert's Parliamentary position, and his own big friends, and succeeded in producing 'a very smart affair, indeed,' as all society said of it at their tea-tables that evening. Everybody was there, the Powyslands included. Foreign ambassadors congratulated the bride; literature, science, and art smiled responsive on the bridegroom; and high finance stood in a solid phalanx to see the member for South Hampstead properly tied to one-half of the famous Venables inheritance. And when all was over, and people lounged about in the rooms after the breakfast, while the bride was putting on her going-away dress, Basil Maclaine found a chance at last to stroll up, as if by accident, and engage in conversation with Linda, Duchess of Powysland.

From the far corner of the room, where he stood talking lightly to a bejewelled old dowager, the Duke kept his keen eye

fixed firmly on Linda. He had been silently vigilant and suspicious of late; and what was worse, Linda knew it. She saw for herself that her husband was watching her. Now, though she loved him still as much as she had ever done, Linda was the very last woman in the world to endure being spied upon. She *must* be free, she *must* be individual, she *must* be herself and spontaneous, come what might of it. And, besides, her womanly pride was at stake here. Not for worlds would she have let Basil Maclaine see that she shunned him or was afraid to meet him. So she held out her hand with all the old frankness and cordiality, in spite of her husband's uneasy glances; and she kept Basil talking there for half an hour, to his immense delight, without one sign of the wound he had so cruelly inflicted upon her. Basil himself was in the seventh heaven. The Duchess had talked to him familiarly about Cecil and his plans like an intimate friend, and all the world around, straining its eager ears, had overheard with interest many significant scraps of their intimate conversation. Nay, they had even learned that he could venture to chaff a Duchess.

Ah, how altered their positions were from those good old times when he had felt hurt at the bare idea of Linda Figgins being considered good enough for him! And now he was proud she should single him out at Sabine's wedding for half an hour's small-talk. Nay, more; as he looked at her in her magnificent dress and her queenly beauty, he felt again, as he had felt that night after the Simpsons' party, that he was really in love with her.

As he looked and talked, looked and laughed, looked and admired, looked and listened, the feeling deepened on him. Ever deepened and deepened. He was over head and ears in love with Linda now. Oh, what a mistake he had made in not marrying Linda! To think she might once have been his—that queenly woman; willingly his; gladly his; and he had been fool enough, mad enough, insane enough, to reject her! What could he ever have been made of? Flesh and blood, or adamant? Why, as a woman alone, she was matchless, matchless. Such eyes, such lips, such a bust, such a figure! And when she warmed up with the conversation, and answered him back quickly with her ready wit, held her stately head erect, and smiled at him proudly, he cursed himself in his heart for his foolish blindness. So potent are diamonds and coronets in opening one's eyes to the real inner worth of unsullied womanhood!

And this was the Linda who had folded the tablecloth, queenly even then, with himself to hold the other end, in the lodgings at Clandon Street!

Douglas Harrison, relieved at last from his duties as his brother's best man, and wandering away for awhile from those attentive bridesmaids, looked into Basil's face as he passed once or twice with a bitter smile. It was impossible not to see, from the light in Basil's eyes and the open show of Basil's pearly teeth, that now, at last, too late, he was really in love with Linda.

And somebody else saw it too. The Duke of Powysland, away over in his corner, tied helplessly to his Dowager, and smiling his stereotyped society smile, interposed a mechanical 'Yes' or an automatic 'No, really,' at random every now and again; but he was fretting and fuming inwardly. He could see Basil Maclaine was talking with unusual animation for many minutes together to the beautiful Duchess. He could see the Duchess was talking with unusual frankness to that unmitigated cur, Basil Maclaine. All the passionate jealousy of the Montgomery nature kindled fiercely within him at the hateful sight. 'If this happens again,' he said to himself through his clenched teeth—smiling cat-wise all the while at his Dowager as he said it—'I shall make them both pay for it, and pay for it dear. She shall never disgrace the Montgomeries for nothing.'

CHAPTER XXXII.

A CRISIS.

The Duchess drove home alone. Of late, her husband had seldom accompanied her, and this afternoon, he said, he was going down to the club—to attend a committee meeting on an important matter. Committee meetings occurred with abnormal frequency at the Die and Hazard, Linda fancied, but she made no comment. She was waking up fast to the reality of her position. In a moment of weakness she had yielded to a man's passing passion for herself and lasting desire for the Amberley millions; and now she was beginning to pay the penalty. Henceforth, she felt, she must lead a life apart. Thank heaven! at least, she was strong enough to bear it.

At Onslow Gardens, she was told, as soon as she entered the door, a young person was waiting to see her grace. 'I think,' the gorgeous ducal footman added deferentially, 'it's the young person who was recommended to your grace last week for a place as lady's-maid.'

'Send her up to my room,' Linda said with her imperturbable manner. 'I've half an hour to spare, and then I must go out to that East-End mission meeting.'

The gorgeous flunkey bowed and disappeared. Two minutes later the young person came up and entered the Duchess's room with a noiseless tread. She was a delicate and extremely modest-looking girl of twenty-five or thereabouts, in a plain dark dress and a very neat, almost Quakerish bonnet. Her voice was soft and low as she said 'Good-morning, your grace,' in answer to Linda's greeting; and the moment she appeared, Linda had some vague recollection of having seen her before, though where exactly it might have been she couldn't just then remember. But those narrow coils of back hair, plaited with a perfectly Puritan precision and trimness, struck her somehow as strangely familiar. The young person was slight but distinctly pretty, and she gave her name, when Linda asked for it, as Elizabeth Woodward.

'Where have I met you before?' Linda inquired sharply, turning her full frank eyes upon the rather shrinking lady's-maid.

The girl looked her back in the face with a scrutinizing glance almost as keen as her own. 'I don't think I've ever seen your grace till this moment,' she answered confidently. 'I have a very good eye for faces; when I've seen a face once I never forget it, and your grace has features one couldn't easily mistake, either.'

'Curious,' Linda went on, searching her memory in vain. 'I'm sure I've met you somewhere, though I can't recollect where. And I, too, have a very good eye for faces.'

The girl smiled a pleasant, graceful smile. 'You may have seen me somewhere that I've been in a place,' she answered respectfully, but very frankly. 'I've been maid in several good houses in town where your grace is likely to have visited the ladies.'

Linda was taken at once with Elizabeth Woodward's appearance and manner, the girl was so free from the habitual servility of the trained upper servant; so she interjected at once with her customary frankness, 'Oh dear no! It's not likely to have been that. I've hardly ever visited at any big houses in England till quite lately—since I married, I mean; and my recollection is rather of having seen you somewhere when I was in London before, at least two or three years ago. However, it doesn't matter. What was your last place, and have you brought your character?'

When it came to character, Elizabeth Woodward's record was so exceptionally good, not to say immaculate, that Linda, after glancing at the papers she brought, had no hesitation in immediately engaging her. She had lived, it seemed, in 'all the best families,' and was recommended by all as a perfect paragon of upper domestic virtue. But what specially attracted Linda was not the recommendations, but the girl's own quiet and lady-like manner, as well as her perfect freedom from servants'-hall affectations. Self-respecting herself, Linda liked to see self-respect in others. She would have been incapable of passing on anyone that strange and inhuman criticism that they were 'too independent.' She hated the new-born necessity for having a maid at all: nothing but the absolute needs of her position could ever have reconciled her to that constant presence of another woman in her own private room. It sinned against her sense of the dignity of womanhood. Before she was rich, she had never been accustomed to such continual attendance; and she regretted her freedom so much now that she could never quietly submit to the slavery of the upper servants. But Elizabeth Woodward seemed so much the best specimen of her class Linda had yet seen, that she felt she could endure this woman better than any other. So in less than ten minutes the new lady's-maid was duly engaged, and had made all needful

arrangements about coming into residence that very evening.

'One more point before you go,' Linda said, as the girl was turning to leave the room. 'You're usually called Woodward, aren't you—by your surname alone, I mean: just so, "Woodward"?'

'Yes, your grace, that's how my ladies generally address me,' the girl answered, smiling.

'Well, I don't like that way,' Linda went on, with a quiet little nod. 'I'm too democratic for such distinctions. It grates upon me to hear a woman addressed by her surname just like a man. We don't do it to our friends, and I don't know why we should do it to those who wait upon us. I shall call you plain Elizabeth.'

'Thank you, your grace. I like it much better, and I quite agree with you.'

Linda smiled her acquiescence. This new maid pleased her. So few servants would have had the boldness to venture upon agreeing with her. 'And stop—just one other thing,' she added, calling her back a second time from the half-open door. 'You and I understand one another, I think, Elizabeth. You must call me "your grace" before the other people in the house. I'm afraid the Duke wouldn't like it, you see, if you didn't—but alone with me in my room here, if you *must* call me anything, call me simply Duchess. You follow exactly what I mean, don't you?'

'Perfectly, Duchess. And I shall remember to do so.'

Linda was pleased once more at the girl's quick apprehension of her wishes and ready acquiescence in her unusual request. If there was anything on earth she hated, it was an animated machine, and Elizabeth Woodward was certainly not mechanical. 'We shall get on very well together, I can see,' the Duchess said, with a nod and a smile. 'We know each other already.'

'We do, Duchess,' Elizabeth Woodward answered promptly, and, with a self-respecting bow, descended, well pleased, from her grace's presence.

Her grace, left alone, leaned back on her couch, and half laughed to herself at the absurdity of this little domestic comedy. How much happier she would have been, after all, if only she could have had for her maid that dear old awkward, clumsy-fingered Emma from the rooms in Clandon Street!

Later in the evening, while she sat waiting for Bertie in the library before dinner, a servant brought in a letter for her from Douglas Harrison. She broke the seal hastily. It was only a hurried note to give some final messages from Sabine Venables, or rather Sabine Harrison, to her friend the Duchess; for Sabine and Linda, when once they met, had struck up almost at first sight an instinctive friendship. They had that likeness in fibre that makes acquaintance easy. But the note began, as Douglas Harrison's notes were always wont to begin, 'My dear Linda.' He at least could never forget the woman in the Duchess. To have called her anything else would have sounded to him absurd; and being above all things natural, he wrote to his lost love exactly as he would have spoken to her.

As Linda stood reading the note, with her arm on the mantelshelf, her husband came in and glided across to her. He had had bad luck again—on the racecourse this time. A telegram had come into the club while he was lounging there that afternoon from the meeting which he had been compelled to miss, much against his will, in order to attend Sabine Venables' wedding. A friend had put him upon 'a safe thing' for the Two-Year-Old Cup; and he had backed the safe thing to the tune of some monkeys, as he himself phrased it. Strange to say, however, the horse of his choice had been badly beaten. He had been in an ill-humour all the day, for things generally were out of joint. He hadn't wished to attend the wedding at all, in the first place; for he had some feelings of remorse about Sabine Venables (especially now all the world was saying how exceedingly well Old Affability had behaved to her), and some feelings of dislike towards Hubert Harrison, as being the brother (confound his impudence!) of that other objectionable Clandon Street fellow. But the Duchess had insisted; and her husband, being now very short of funds, and feeling the necessity for humouring her, had obeyed accordingly. He meant to tell her that evening that he must raise money somehow; and that being so, he thought it best to miss the race, sorely against his will, and put in an appearance, as he said, at the wedding. But all the same, he did it with a very bad grace, and felt angry and annoyed all the rest of the day for it.

Then came this further blow of his horse being beaten—a horse in which the trainer had felt such perfect confidence—and a fellow at the club had bothered him with hints about an I O U; and that fashionable Pall Mall money-lender with the glass eye had sent in another of his politely minatory little notes about 'further unpleasantness'; and altogether the

world was going awry for the star of Powysland. But he forgot all these things in a moment when, stepping across the room with a very light tread, and glancing quietly over his wife's shoulder, he read to his surprise these astounding words:

'Clandon Street, Thursday.

'MY DEAR LINDA,

'It was such a pleasure to me to see you again at the Venables' to-day; and though I had hardly any opportunity among all that vast crowd of really speaking to you——'

He read no more, for as he skimmed the page Linda looked up and saw him; and, folding the letter abruptly with a disdainful smile, popped it into her pocket.

The Duke's face was livid to look upon. The demon of the Montgomeries distorted his features into terrible shapes. 'Good God!' he cried, clasping her wrist in his hand with an iron grip. 'What does this mean, Linda? It's dated Clandon Street. Do you mean to tell me that confounded Maclaine fellow has actually the impudence to write like that to you?'

Linda was growing accustomed now to rude treatment from her husband, but she wasn't the sort of woman to answer a question much more mildly put while he held her arm so.

'Let go my wrist,' she said quietly, biting her lip to keep down the tears, he was gripping her so hard with his sinewy fingers, 'and then perhaps I may consider your question.'

The Duke started back and let her wrist drop at once, but in anger, not in penitence.

'Perhaps you'll consider it!' he echoed. '*Perhaps* you'll consider it. Pray, do you mean to tell me, then, you expect me to bandy words with you over a question like that? If you do, all I can say is you very much misunderstand me. "Yes" or "No" is the only answer I can take from you on such a subject.'

Linda stood back a pace too, and looked him straight in the face with unflinching eyes.

'The letter is from Mr. Harrison,' she said, fiery red by this time. 'Not the one who was married this morning. My friend his brother.'

'Your friend!' the Duke repeated, white in the face with jealous anger now. 'Your friend, Mr. Harrison! Show me the signature this minute, if you dare. You know it's not from him. You know you are telling me a deliberate lie. I can see it in your face. It's from that damned Maclaine man!'

He was fuming with rage; Linda stood in front of him in her stately beauty, all trembling with shame that her word should be so doubted.

'Duke,' she said angrily, not even deigning to call him Bertie, as she usually called him, 'the letter, as I tell you, is from Douglas Harrison. I will *not* show you the signature. I will *not* be doubted. That's a matter of principle. If you can't believe me, I'm not fit for you to live with. You must take my word for it—or disbelieve me if you like. But in such a matter I don't condescend to give proofs to any man. I speak the truth, and I will not be mistrusted.'

Her husband glared back at her with that same glazed expression in his eye she had noticed once or twice before when he was most suspicious.

'Very well,' he said doggedly. 'We shall see. It's a bargain. Till you show me that letter, I will have nothing more in any way to say to you.'

His manner, was insolent—nay, maddening in its contempt. Linda walked straight across the room to where the red wax candles were burning on the side-table. It was a foolish thing to do, perhaps—burning her own boats—but in her righteous indignation that any man should so doubt her word she did it unhesitatingly. She lighted the note at the candle, and held it as it blazed, watching it hard till it scorched her fingers. Then she let the charred remnant fall in the fireplace, and marched out, indignant, to her own bedroom.

'Very well,' the Duke said in a low voice as she went, 'I know where I stand now. I know how you've betrayed me.'

The door stood open behind the Duchess as he said it, and on the landing without a gorgeous ducal flunkey was turning up a gas-lamp that flared above the console-table.

For a minute or two after she left the room the Duke paused, irresolute. It occurred to him in a flash what an awkward fix he'd managed to get himself into. His temper had done this—and that confounded Maclaine man. He had meant to ask Linda for money that very night, or, rather, to suggest obliquely that she must somehow find him some; but now—sooner than take that woman's money! Why, he hated her, he hated her! The Montgomery demon was strong in him that minute. For the turn of a coin—heads or tails—he could have choked her or shot himself.

He staggered across blindly towards the empty fireplace, reeling with wrath as he went, and let his eye fall by accident on the smouldering embers of the burnt letter. As he looked, a curious effect came out in the charred sheets. A little rim of fire that ran along and glowed through the black mass had halted for a second against a line of ink, so that he could read two words standing out, as it were, in black against a glowing background. They seemed to be the signature. He stooped down and examined them. The two words read distinctly 'Basil Maclaine.' Next instant the line of fire ran across the spot; they had faded away, and all were crumbling ashes.

He strode from the room in a perfect transport of jealousy. She had lied to him then, after all; and Maclaine had written it!

END OF VOL. II.

Transcriber's Note: Hyphen variations within and between volumes left as printed.

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