A BEAUTIFUL ALIEN

BY JULIA MACRUDER

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Beautiful Alien

I.

On the deck of an ocean steamer, homeward bound from Europe, a man and girl were walking to and fro. Their long march of monotonous regularity had lasted perhaps an hour, and they had become objects of special attention to the people scattered about.

A man, who was taking his afternoon exercise alone, and who had accidentally fallen into line directly behind this couple, kept that position purposely, turning as they turned, and, without seeming to do so, observing them narrowly, for the reason that the woman was uncommonly beautiful.

This man—Albert Noel by name—was an artist by instinct and habit, though a lawyer by profession. He painted pictures for love and practised law for money, or conventionality, or to please his mother and sisters, or from some reason which, however indefinite, had been strong enough to predominate over the longing he had always had to go to Paris, live in the Latin Quarter, and be simply and honestly what his taste dictated. Few people, perhaps, suspected his Bohemian proclivities; for he lived an extremely conventional life, was the idol of his mother and sisters, and, being well born, well-off, and sufficiently good-looking, was regarded as an excellent match matrimonially. In spite of this fact he had never been known to be seriously in love; though, being a quiet man, this experience might have befallen him without the knowledge of his friends. He was coming home from Europe now, reluctantly and with regret; but, since he had a profession, it must be attended to.

He observed the tall young woman who walked in front of him on her husband's arm (some instinct told him that it was her husband) from an artist's standpoint only. It had occurred to him that here was a remarkable model for a picture. He furtively studied the lines of her figure, which was clad in a long, tight-fighting cloak, trimmed with fur, and the contour and color of the knot of brown hair, whose living lustre shone richly between the dull fur that bordered her collar and her hat. Every moment the study fascinated him more, as he followed and turned, as they turned. Suddenly it struck him that perhaps his interest in the pair ahead of him might, in spite of him, be observed; and so, rather reluctantly, he took a seat in one of several empty chairs at the steamer's stern. Here he could still observe them, at intervals, as they came and went. They spoke to no one, not

even to each other, though he was convinced they were newly married. Both of them looked very young.

After a few turns the lady complained of being tired, and proposed they should sit down. Her companion assented by a nod, and they took the seats next to Noel. She spoke English, but with much hesitation and with a strong foreign accent. The man was silent still, as they seated themselves and wrapped their rugs about them; for in spite of the full blaze of the sinking sun it was very cold. Noel also kept still, looking and listening. He was a little back of them, and only her pure profile was visible to him. The man's profile, which was also a handsome one, he could see beyond hers.

For a long time there was silence. The wind grew keener. The tarpaulin which covered the white life-boat near by trembled from end to end, as if the thing hid were alive and shivering. The sea-gulls that followed the boat fluttered and dipped about in the cold air. The sun, a great gold ball, was sinking rapidly in a mist of pink and yellow light. The wide stretch of water underneath it was a heavy iron black, except where, near the ship, it was dashed into green-white foam. Noel looked at the face of the woman near him, and, seeing a sudden light of interest in her eyes, followed their glance to where a school of dolphins was rising and plunging in the cold sea water. He heard her call her companion's attention to them by a quick exclamation; but he made no answer, scarcely showing that he heard.

Noel became aware that the face before him was not only beautiful, but sad. There were no lines upon it of either care or sorrow, but both were written in the eyes. These were very remarkable,—almost gold in color, and shaded by thick lashes, darker even than her dark brown hair. They were large, well-opened, heavy-lidded; and no wonder was it that, when he had seen all this, he began to desire to meet their gaze, that he might thereby know them thoroughly.

The sun sank. People began to complain of the increasing cold, and gather up wraps and books and move away; but still the man and woman sat there silent, and Noel did the same. The distant sky was tinted now with colors as delicate as the flowers of spring,—pink and cream and lilac, softening to a rich line of deep purple at the horizon. A slight sigh escaped the woman's lips; and then, as if recollecting herself, she sat upright, and looked about at the objects near her. Her glance passed across Noel, and was arrested with a certain amusement on the little cannon lashed to the side of the deck, which in its cover of white tarpaulin had evidently given her some diverting thought. Then in the most hesitating,

laboriously constructed English, Noel heard her telling her companion what it had made her think of. By using a little imagination with what he heard and saw, he arrived at her meaning. She was attempting to say that it looked like a child on all fours, trying to frighten its companion by throwing a table-cloth over its head. There it was complete,—the head, the hands and feet, the bulky body. Noel caught her meaning, and smiled involuntarily. It was really wonderfully like. He controlled his features instantly, however; and, as her gaze was fixed upon her husband, she did not see him. But her childish idea had awakened no response in the husband. He simply asked her meaning over again, and seemed unable to comprehend it, and not sufficiently interested to make much effort. The few words he uttered proved that English was his native tongue. One would have said he had the ability, but not the inclination, to talk, while with her the contrary was true. Noel, now that he found that she was alive to her immediate surroundings, got up and moved away. He went and looked out at the sea-gulls; but all the time he was seeing her eyes, and comparing them to topaz, to amber, to a dozen things, but without feeling that he had matched, even in his imagination, their peculiar and beautiful color.

It was the first day out; and he liked to think that he could occasionally look at this face for a week to come, and when he got to shore he would paint her. He had a studio in the suburbs, to which he often went and to which his mother and sisters had never been invited. It was often a delight to him to think of its freedom and seclusion.

He was acutely jarred upon, as he stood alone at the deck rail, by the approach of a man who had a club acquaintance with him at home, which he had shown a disposition to magnify since coming aboard the steamer. He was not a man for whose talk Noel cared at any time, but he felt a distinct rebellion against it just now. This feeling was swiftly put to flight, however, by the fact that on his way to him the new-comer passed and bowed to the beautiful girl, receiving in return a bow and a smile. The bow was gracious, the smile charming, lighting for an instant the gravity of her calm face, and showing perfect teeth.

“Ah, Miller! that you? How’re you coming on?” said Noel, with a sudden access of cordiality, making a place for the new-comer at his side.

“All right, thanks, considering it’s the first day out. That’s generally the biggest bore, because you know there are six or seven more just like it to follow. Pretty girl that, ain’t it?”

“Who is she?” asked Noel, refusing to concur in the designation.

“Mrs. Dallas, according to her new name.”

“And that is her husband?”

“That is her husband. He’s not a bad-looking fellow, either; but you don’t look as if you approved him.”

“I?” said Noel. “Why shouldn’t I? He seems a good-looking fellow enough. Do you know her?”

“Yes, I know her. Everybody knew her at Baden. It was not very hard to do.”

“What do you mean?” said Noel, looking at him suddenly very straight and hard.

“Oh, I simply mean that her father, who seems a rather bad type of adventurer, gave free access to her acquaintance to any man who might turn out to be marriageable. He introduced me to her as soon as he saw I had been attracted by her looks, and I used to talk to her a good deal. Her mother, it seems, died in her childhood; and she was put to school at a convent, where she remained until she was eighteen. Her father then brought her home, and began assiduously his efforts to marry her off. It was plain that she hampered him a good deal, but he had a sort of sense of duty which he seemed to fulfil to his own satisfaction by rushing her about from one watering-place to another, and facilitating her acquaintance with the young men at each.”

“And what was the girl thinking of to allow it?” said Noel.

“The girl was absolutely blind to it,—as ignorant of the world as a little nun, and apparently quite pleased with her father, who was avowedly a new acquisition. She must have had good teaching at her convent; for she sings splendidly and is a pretty fair linguist, too. I tried her in English, however, and found her so uncertain that my somewhat limited conversation with her was carried on in French. My French is nothing to boast of, but it’s better than her English.”

“What is she?”

“An Italian, with a Swedish mother. She seems awfully foot-loose, somehow, poor thing; and I hope the marriage which her father suddenly contrived between her and this young American will turn out well for her. He’s an odd sort of fellow to me, somehow.”

“Where does he come from?”

“I don’t know,—some misty place in the West somewhere, I believe. I tried to talk with him a dozen times, but I never got so little out of a man in my life.”

“Was he so deep or merely forbidding?”

“Neither. He was good-tempered enough, and would answer questions; but he seemed to have nothing to give out. He is a quiet man and inoffensive, but somehow queer.”

“Does he play cards?”

“Not at all.”

“Seem to have money?”

“Yes, as far as I could judge, he appears to have enough to do as he chooses and go where he pleases, though I should say he was not extravagant. He seems to care too little for things.”

“He cares for her, it’s to be supposed.”

“Yes. He could hardly help that, and yet he showed very little emotion in his courting days. I used to see them walking together or sitting on the piazza for hours, and they seemed a strangely silent pair under the circumstances. I got some key to that mystery, however, when I found that he doesn’t know a word of French or Italian; and I had already discovered her limitations in English.”

“Why, good heavens! how can she know the man then? It is not possible. And he may turn out to be anything! Do you think her father could have forced her into this marriage against her will?”

“No, I’m sure he did not. I thought of that, but I’m certain it isn’t so. I think she was in love with the man, as she understood it, in her convent-bred sort of way. He’s good-looking and has a certain gentleness of manner. It may be dulness, but it’s what women like. I think her father, though he felt her a great burden, wanted to do the best he could for her, without too much trouble. He saw plainly the dangers she was surrounded by, and was glad to get her married to a quiet young American, who had no vices and would probably be kind to her. He told me he wanted her to marry an American, because they made the best husbands. Look at them now. It is always the same thing,—either silence or that difficult sort of

talk. She has to do the most of it, you see, and in English. He literally knows not a word in any other tongue.”

II.

It was beautiful weather; and Noel, being a good sailor, spent much of his time on deck. Wherever he went about the ship, his eyes continually sought Mrs. Dallas. Her beauty and singular history interested him much. He also made a close study of the husband. So far he had not cared to avail himself of the opportunity of making their acquaintance, which he knew Miller would gladly have given him.

On the afternoon of the second day out he looked up from his book, and found Mr. and Mrs. Dallas seated near him. He was partly hid by a pile of rope, over which, however, it was easy to see them. He folded his paper noiselessly, and, leaning back, began to watch them furtively. As usual, they were silent. The man was smoking cigarettes one after another, and looking apathetically at the water. The woman's eyes were on the water, too; but their expression was certainly not apathetic. Noel had never been so puzzled to read a face. He was not only an artist, but also a very human-hearted man; and he longed to go beneath that lovely surface, and read the thoughts of this woman's mind. Now and then she turned a puzzled gaze upon her husband, who seemed completely unconscious of both it and her. Once she spoke, and the strong accent in her painstaking English was fascinating to Noel's ears. She only inquired if her husband were comfortable and satisfied to stay here. When he answered affirmatively, she spoke again,—this time so low that Noel caught only the last word, "Robert." It was pronounced in the French manner, and came from her lips very winningly.

"Can't you say Robert?" said her husband, bluntly. "People will laugh at you if you talk like that."

"I vill try," she answered, and turned her eyes away across the water. Noel fancied he saw them widen with tears for a moment; and he looked to see if her companion were watching her, but his whole attention was given to the cigarette he was rolling. In a few moments, at the man's suggestion, they rose and walked away.

Noel noticed that she looked at no one as she passed along on her husband's arm; but he interpreted this to be not shyness nor self-consciousness, but rather a sort of instinct against giving any one that opportunity of looking into her heart

through her eyes.

One morning a new mood came over Noel, and he asked Miller to introduce him. The latter complied with alacrity. Noel had no sooner bowed his acknowledgments than he looked at Mrs. Dallas, and addressed her in the Italian tongue. The light that came into her face at the familiar sounds made his heart quicken. They stood some time by the railing, the group of four,—Miller talking in a desultory way to Dallas, while Noel spoke, in animated, if somewhat halting Italian, to the young wife. There was quite a strong breeze blowing; and some dark ribbons, which tied her fur collar, fluttered and sounded on the air. She held to the rail with both little smooth-gloved hands; and her heavy cloth dress clung close about her, and was blown backward in strong, swaying folds. They talked of Italy, where Noel had once lived for a while, and of pictures, art, and music, for which she had an enthusiasm which made the subjects as interesting to Noel as his greater knowledge made them to her. He found her a genuine girl in her feelings, and at once perceived her absolute inexperience of the world. Her convent breeding came out frequently in a sort of quaint politeness of manner, and it provoked him a little to find that he was being treated with a sort of deference due to a superior in age or in experience. He felt himself aged indeed in comparison with her vibrating youth and the innocence of her simple little life, which, up to this point, had plainly been that of a child; and he dreaded to think how soon and how suddenly she might grow old. She seemed in a world of mystery now, as one who had utterly lost her bearings, and was too dazed to see where she was or what were the objects and influences that surrounded her. Out of this shadow his presence seemed for the moment to have lifted her; and as he talked to her of these subjects, round which the whole ardor of her nature centred, she seemed a different creature. The restraint and severity disappeared from her manner, she forgot herself,—her recent self that was so strange to her,—and over and over again he looked far into the clear depths of her golden eyes.

More than once he glanced at Dallas to see if he showed any disrelish of this talk, carried on in his presence in a foreign tongue; but he was evidently not concerned about it in the least. He smoked his eternal cigarettes, and answered in monosyllables the remarks that Miller was making. He did not look bored, for that expression implies a capability of being interested; and that he seemed not to possess, at least so far as Noel’s experience went, and Miller’s confirmed it.

III.

Noel had been at home a month. He had opened his law office and gone hard to work, and his friends complained that they saw but little of him. He had learned from the Dallases, before parting with them at the wharf, that they were expecting to go to housekeeping in his own city, and he had asked them to send him their address when they were established.

So far, it had not come, and he was beginning to fear he had lost sight of them when one day he met them on the street. She, at least, was glad to see him, and when she gave the address and asked him to call, the husband, in his dull way, echoed the invitation.

The next evening he went to the house, which was in an unfashionable quarter, but very charming, tasteful and homelike. As he sat down in the pretty drawing-room some living objects caught his eye, and to his great amusement he saw that the rug in front of the open fire was occupied by a picturesque group composed of a Maltese cat and four kittens. The mother, who was an unusually large and imposing specimen of her kind, was seated very erect, her front feet straight before her, evidently making an effort to enjoy a nap, which her offspring were engaged in thwarting, after the most vigorous fashion. They were all exactly alike, distinguishable only by the ribbons—blue, green, yellow and red—which ornamented their necks and were tied in bows under their chins. The mother had a garland composed of these four colors around her neck, upon which hung a little silver bell. Noel had been watching this pretty sight, with a fascinated gaze, and was so preoccupied with their gambols that he failed to hear a soft footstep approaching, and did not turn to look until Mrs. Dallas was standing quite near him, holding out her hand.

She was dressed in a gown of a peculiar dim shade of blue that fell in free, straight folds about her, confined by a loose silver girdle round the waist. It clothed her beautiful body in a way that satisfied the soul of the artist who stood and looked at her, uttering light words about the cat and kittens and inaugurating a conversation that immediately put them at ease.

It was evident that she was glad to see him. She told him so at once. Her husband, she said, had wanted her to go to the theatre, but she had been every

night for so long that she was tired of it, and had just decided to stay at home. Was Mr. Dallas then such an infatuated theatre-goer? Noel asked. Oh, yes, he always wanted to go every night, she said. It seemed to be a confirmed habit with him, and she was sorry to say she did not care for it much, though she usually went with him. Noel knew that the season was not fairly opened yet, and reflecting upon the bills advertised at the various theatres, he could but wonder at the man's choice of entertainments.

Presently Dallas entered and greeted him civilly, though with his usual apathetic manner, and said he was glad he had come in, as he could keep Mrs. Dallas company, as he was going to the theatre. Mrs. Dallas looked a little surprised at this announcement and suggested his postponing the theatre, so that he might not miss Mr. Noel's visit, but he answered that Mr. Noel he knew would excuse him, and turned to leave the room. As he did so he stepped on one of the kittens which cried out pitifully. It had been an accident, of course, but he might have shown some compunction, which he utterly failed to do. The little creature hopped away on three feet, and Mrs. Dallas, with pretty foreign words of pity, followed it and brought it to the fireside where she sat down with it on her lap, and stroked and soothed it, laying the wounded little paw against her lips and making, what seemed to Noel, munificent atonement for the injury inflicted by her husband.

As the kitten settled down contentedly purring in its mistress' silken lap, the front door closed behind Mr. Dallas, and turning to his hostess, Noel for the first time addressed her in her native tongue, asking the abrupt question, "How are you?"

She lifted her golden eyes to his a moment, and then dropped them under the scrutiny of his gaze, which he felt, the next instant, to have been inconsiderate.

"A little homesick, I dare say," he went on, looking down at the kitten, "that was to be expected."

"Even when one never had a home?" she asked. "The nearest thing to it that I have had was the convent where I was educated. The sisters were very good to me. It was a sweet home, and of course I do miss it at times."

"Perhaps you had a dear friend there among the sisters, or possibly the pupils."

"Oh, yes," she said, "a dear girl friend—Nina her name was. She was a year younger than I, and was not permitted to leave the convent to see me married.

She was heartbroken. We had always planned that the one first married was to take the other to live with her. Her parents are both dead."

"Ah, then when she leaves school she will come to you, no doubt," said Noel. "That will be delightful for you."

"I don't know. It is not certain. No, I don't think she will do that," said his companion, evidently in some confusion. "The fact is I have not written to her—I couldn't. I don't know what she will think of me, but I cannot write to her. I have tried in vain. I fear she will be hurt, but I have done no more than send her a brief note to tell her she must not judge me by the frequency of my letters—that I love her just the same—but I seem really not to know what to write. It is all so strange—the new country and the changes—and everything being so different—and I feel she would want a full and interesting letter, which I cannot yet compose myself to write. This seems very strange, but it will be different in time, will it not? You don't think this feeling of being in such a strange, strange land, as if it couldn't be real, and couldn't be I—myself—will last always, do you? It will surely pass away. Oh, if you knew how I long to feel at home—to feel it is a place where I am to stay! I feel all the time that I must be just on the way to somewhere, and that I have just stopped here a little while. But I have not. It is my home and I am to spend my life here. I try to tell myself that all day long and make myself believe it, but I cannot. I often fear it will distress my husband that I feel so, but he has not found it out, I'm glad to say. He seems so quiet and satisfied, that I feel ashamed to feel so restless. It will go away in time, will it not? It is perhaps because I am a foreigner and this is a strange land that the feeling is so strong, but it was almost the same when we were in Italy. Sometimes I am afraid I have not a contented disposition, and that I will make myself unhappy always by it, and perhaps my husband too, if he should find it out. Sometimes I cry to think how wrong it is of me. My father told me it was my duty to be happy, with a kind, good husband to take care of me, and I know I ought, but I feel so homesick—for, I don't know what—for Nina and the sisters and the convent. Oh," she broke off suddenly, "I do hope you will forgive me. It is very silly to talk to you so, all about myself, but I have had no one to speak to—at least no one but my husband, and I could not tell him all these feelings that I ought to be ashamed of. I know it is my duty to be satisfied and not feel homesick, but you think it will pass away after a while, do you not?"

What was he to say? The truth was very plain to him that it would never pass, but go on growing worse and worse, as gradually she came to know her own soul better and to understand herself, in the light of the new relationship she had

entered into. In the case of most women the revelation she had so unconsciously made to him of the insufficiency of her marriage would have been unwomanly, and perhaps it was even so in her, but it was so only in the sense of being childlike. She was really no more than a child, and more ignorant of the world than many a child of ten. What did she know about marriage or the needs of her own soul? Evidently nothing, and some day he saw before her a terrible awakening from this trance of ignorance. His heart literally ached for her as he sought diligently in his mind for some way to help her and could find not one. The only thing was to let her talk freely, to encourage her by a gentle friendly interest, such as a girl friend might have shown, and to give her the relief of expression for these vague troubles and perplexities which, when uttered, seemed intangible and entirely inexplicable to her. Not once did she so much as imply any reproach to her husband, and it was plain that she felt unconscious of any ground for complaint. She alluded to him frequently and always most kindly, and laid at her own door the entire fault of her discontent.

Noel spoke little, but led her gently on to talk as freely as she chose. Often she would pause and remind herself that she was doing wrong to take up his whole visit with talk about herself, but it was evident it never once occurred to her that she had been guilty of any self-betrayal which she should not have made. He saw her utter loyalty to her husband, even in thought, and it made his blood boil to think of his stupid insensibility to the possession he had in such a wife.

Gradually he was able to soothe her—or perhaps it was the relief of utterance that made her presently seem more light-hearted. Noel pronounced a great many platitudes in an insincere effort to persuade her that things would get better, and somehow they seemed to give her comfort for the moment. As if to put the subject by, she called the big cat to her, snapping her fine slim fingers, and saying, “Come, Grisette”; and the creature jumped into her lap with the obedience of a well-trained dog. Then she enticed the kittens to follow, one by one, until they were all in her lap playing with her ribbons, catching at her little embroidered handkerchief with their soft paws, and rolling over in high glee. She talked to them as if they had been children, petted and chided them in the prettiest way, and then put them down, one by one, with a kiss on each little soft head that made Noel half angry and wholly pitying. It was so touching to see her tenderness, her longing to expend the great store of love within her—and to see her, too, so utterly without an object for it.

The cat and kittens having returned to their place on the rug, Noel proffered a request he had been wanting to put all the evening and asked her to sing. He had

found out on the steamer that she possessed an extraordinarily beautiful voice. Her face, which had grown brighter, clouded suddenly.

“I cannot,” she answered. “I don’t sing at all. My husband got me a piano, thinking it would please me, but I have not opened it. I was afraid he would be disappointed, but he has not noticed it. I used to be sorry he was not fond of music, but this makes me glad.”

“Do you really mean that you are going to give up singing? If you do you must let me assure you that it would be very wrong, a wrong to others, to let such a voice as yours be silent.”

“Oh, do not tell me that,” she said, “I want not to do anything wrong, but indeed I cannot sing. I have tried it sometimes when I sit alone, and it is always the same thing—I choke so I cannot sing. I will get over it, but don’t ask me to sing yet.”

He could not say another word, especially as the tears were evidently near her eyes, and seeing that the hour was late and her husband, for whose return he had expected to wait, was delayed, he got up to take his leave.

“Vill you not vait for Robert?” she said, speaking for the first time in English and showing already a greater ease in its use. “He vill not be late. I haf not know him to remain so long as this, since I am here.”

Noel smiled to hear her, but shook his head.

“No,” he answered, “I must go now, but first I want to get you to give me a promise.” He put out his hand as he spoke, and she placed hers in it with the confidence of a child.

“You are in a strange land,” he said, “but I don’t want you to feel that you are altogether among strangers. You may have some need of friends—trouble or sickness or some of the things that are always happening in this sad world, may come to you. I trust not. I hope to God they may let you go by, but we can never tell what will come to us, and I want you to promise me that if you are ever in need of a friend you will write to me. Your husband may be ill, or something like that,” he added hurriedly, fearing he had ventured too far, though she showed no sign of thinking so. “And if it is a thing in which you want a woman’s help, I have sisters and a mother and they shall come to you. Will you promise me this?”

“I vill. Oh, I vill promise truly,” she said. “But vill you not come more?”

“Oh, perhaps so, now and then,” he said hurriedly. He could not tell her he had resolved not to, but that was the fixed determination which had been the result of this evening’s experiences. He saw her needs of help and tenderness so clearly and he longed so to answer them that the very intensity of that longing was a warning to him. If he had been a younger man, or she an older woman, he might not have come to this hard resolution, but he was experienced enough to know that there was danger in such a companionship as he was tempted to enter into. If she had been older and better acquainted with the world that also might have made a difference, but it would have been exactly the same thing as taking advantage of the unknowingness of a child. Then again, in the third place, if her husband had been careful of her, or even suspicious and jealous, he might have thought it some one’s else affair than his, and allowed himself the delight of this acquaintanceship, guarding and loving her like a brother, but none of these supposititious cases was so. The matter as it stood threw the whole responsibility upon him, and, as a man of honor, he could see but one course open to him.

So he stood and held her by the hand with a feeling that she was his little sister, struggling with another feeling that she was not, and took a long look at her lovely face. How he yearned to paint it, and perhaps, for the asking, he might!

“One thing more,” he said at last, feeling that he must get it over, “I have never heard your first name, will you not tell me what it is?”

“Christine,” she said, and as he repeated it gently she exclaimed:

“Oh, it is truly a pleasant thing to hear it. I have not heard it since so long a time. Robert do say it is too, vat you call—I forget, but he call me Chrissy, and my own name do seem a thing forgot.”

“Good-night, Christine,” he said, feeling sure he might venture this once, “and do not think I have forgotten you, if you don’t see me soon. I am very busy—my friends claim my spare time—I live very far away, but if you are ever in any trouble, little or big, and you or your husband should need me, send a line to my club, and I will come the instant I receive it. Good-by, be a good, brave girl, and don’t forget me.”

During all these parting words she had let him hold her little hand. He wanted to kiss it before dropping it, for it seemed to him unlikely that he would ever touch it again. He resisted this, however, and merely said good-by again and left her.

Looking back before he closed the front door he could see her in the pretty drawing-room seated on the rug before the fire, her silk draperies crushed beneath her, and holding all the kittens in her lap, the mother-cat sitting by, and looking on contentedly. It was upon this picture that he closed the door.

Just outside he met Dallas, who apologized for being late. He had stayed for the ballet, he said, knowing his wife was not alone. He asked Noel to come again, but got no very satisfactory response.

IV.

During the months that followed Mrs. Dallas did not see Noel again, and the news accidentally reached her that he had gone abroad with his mother and sisters. He had called on her once, probably on the eve of his departure, but she had been ill that evening, and the servant had excused her. It had been reported to her that he had inquired particularly whether her illness was serious and had been informed that it was not. That was the last she had heard of him, until she had made some acquaintances in the society in which he was known, and then she occasionally heard his name mentioned and gained the information alluded to.

Her introduction into this society had come about very suddenly. For a long time she had known absolutely no one, and once, in her intense longing for some one to speak to, she had obeyed an ardent impulse and run across the street to a house where a young girl and her mother lived, the former keeping a day-school for small children, and had begged the little teacher to come over and spend the evening with her. Out of this a friendship had sprung, which had been for a long time her only resource. Her husband’s habit of going to some place of amusement in the evening seemed to be an inveterate one, though he cared little, apparently, for what he saw. She wearied through a great many evenings with him, and then got out of the habit of accompanying him. It was evident he cared little whether she went or stayed.

One Sunday afternoon the little school-teacher persuaded her to go with her to a great church near by. They were given seats close to the choir, and when a familiar piece of music began Christine, in utter self-forgetfulness, lifted up her voice and sang. When the service was over the conductor of the singing came up to her, and pleading the common bond of music, introduced himself and begged that he and his wife might be allowed to call on her to enlist her interest and services in a great charity entertainment which he was getting up. Christine agreed, with the feeling that it would be ungracious to decline, and the next day they called.

The outcome of the visit of Mr. and Mrs. Jannish was an engagement on the part of Mrs. Dallas to sing the leading rôle in an opera which had become a cherished wish among some of the best amateur musicians of the city. The scheme had

halted only for want of a soprano capable of taking the responsibility of the most difficult part. Jannish was an authority in this musical set, and he knew that the acquisition he had made for their scheme would be not only approved, but rejoiced over. It was such an infinite improvement upon the idea of securing the services of a professional—a thing that they had almost been compelled to resort to.

Mrs. Dallas qualified her consent by the securing of her husband's approval, though she said she felt sure he would not withhold it. He was out at the time, but before the visitors left he came in. He was called and introduced and the request put to him by Jannish, in his most elaborate and supplicatory style. Consent was immediately given, with an air of slightly impatient wonder at being dragged into it at all. It was precisely what his wife had expected, and as she looked at him as he spoke, there was a different expression on her face from that which it would have worn a few months back. That vague and wondering look was less noticeable and an element of comprehendingness that made her eyes look hard now struggled with it sometimes.

After the visit of Jannish and his wife other people called, and immediately Mrs. Dallas was drifting in a stream of musical engagements and rehearsals that took up most of her time, and formed a strong contrast to her former mode of life. She had opportunities to indulge her taste for dress and to wear some of the charming costumes which belonged to her trousseau—bought with what girlish ardor, and then laid away out of sight! She soon came to be admired for her dressing, as well as her beauty and her voice, and as is usual in such cases, the men regarded her with more favor and less suspicion than the women. The good will of the latter sex was, however, secured to some extent, when it was discovered that the prima donna, who they all perceived was to make their opera a great success and the envy of all sister cities with aspiring musical *coteries*, was apparently indifferent to the attentions of the men, if not, indeed, embarrassed by them. She never went anywhere, to rehearsals or resorts of any kind, public or private, without her husband, no matter who tried to entice her away. She never left his side, except under the necessity of going through her part, and then she returned to him unvaryingly. He was good-looking and well-dressed, and some of the company of both sexes made an effort to make something out of him, but he always seemed surprised when he was spoken to, and to find it a trouble to respond. He was too free from self-consciousness to be awkward, and would sit passive, twirling his mustache and looking on, and was apparently as satisfied to be a spectator of this performance as to go to see something professional. He had

grown accustomed to sameness, perhaps, for he never seemed to object to it.

To see his wife the object of enthusiastic adulation on all sides, whether sincere or put on of necessity, as it was by some of the company, appeared to arouse in the husband no emotions of either satisfaction or displeasure.

V.

The great occasion came. The evening's entertainment rose, minute by minute, to its climax of glory, on which the curtain fell, amidst an enthusiasm so intense that only the controlled good breeding of the invited audience prevented demonstrations of a noisy character. Christine had been previously seen by very few of them, and as the audience dispersed, her name, coupled with expressions of enthusiastic surprise and admiration, was on every lip.

Fifteen minutes after the curtain went down the theatre was empty and deserted, every light was out, and profound silence reigned where so lately all had been excitement and animation, and the young creature who had occasioned so much the greatest part of it was being driven homeward, leaning back in the close carriage and clasping close the work-hardened hand of the little teacher who was her companion. Her husband sat opposite, silent as usual, and after a few impetuous, ardent words of love and appreciation Hannah had fallen silent too, merely holding out her hand to meet the hard and straining clasp that had seized upon it as soon as they were settled in the carriage.

After the performance people who had leaped from the audience to the stage, privileged by an acquaintance with some of the company, had pressed forward eagerly for an introduction to Christine. Invitations to supper were showered upon her. She might have gone off in a carriage drawn by men instead of horses if she had desired it. But she had turned away from it all. She was in haste to go, and summoning her husband and friend as quickly as possible, she had declared she was tired out, and had made her excuses with an air so earnest, and to those who had the vision for it, so distressed, that amidst the reproaches of some and the regrets of others she had made her escape.

She shivered as the cold night air struck her face outside the theatre, and drew her wrap closer about her as she stepped into the carriage which was waiting. The drive homeward was silent. The two women sat together, each feeling in that fervent handclasp the emotions which filled the heart of the other. Mrs. Dallas had been roused by something to an unusual pitch of excited feeling, and her little friend, by the intuition of sympathy, defined it. The way was long and Mr. Dallas, making himself as comfortable as possible on the seat opposite, took off his hat, leaned his head back and in a few moments was breathing audibly

and regularly.

“He is asleep,” whispered his wife, and then, on the breath of a deep-drawn sigh, she added in the same low whisper, “Oh, God, have mercy on me.”

“What is it?” whispered Hannah timidly, her voice tender with sympathy.

“Hush! I am going to tell you everything. Wait till we get home. I am going to tell you all.”

She spoke excitedly, though still in a whisper, and it was evident that the agitation under which she labored was urging her on to actions in which the voice of discretion and prudence had no part.

Hannah, who had long ago suspected that her beautiful friend—whose face and voice, together with the luxury of her surroundings and dress had made her acquaintance seem like intercourse with a being from a higher sphere—was not happy, now felt an impulse of affectionate pity which made her move closer to her companion and rather timidly put her arm around her. In an instant she was folded in a close embrace, the bare white arm under the wrap straining her in an ardent pressure that drew her head down until it leaned against the breast of the taller woman, and felt the bounding pulses of her heart.

“I am so miserable,” whispered the soft voice close to her ear. “I am going to tell you about it. If I couldn’t talk to somebody to-night I feel as if I should go mad. Whether it’s right or wrong I’m going to tell you. I can’t bear it this way any longer. Oh, I am so unhappy—I am so unhappy.”

Hannah only pressed closer, without speaking. There was nothing that she could say. She felt keenly that in what seemed the brilliant lot of her beautiful friend there were possibilities of anguish which her commonplace life could know nothing of. So they drove along in silence until the carriage stopped at the door. Mr. Dallas was sleeping so soundly that it was necessary for his wife to waken him, and he got up, looking sleepy and confused, and led the way into the house, while the carriage rolled away, the wheels reverberating down the silent streets.

In the hall Hannah looked at her friend and saw that her face, though pale, was perfectly composed, and her voice, when she spoke to her husband, was also quiet and calm.

“Hannah is going to stay all night, you know,” she said. “You needn’t stay up for us. I will put out the lights.”

He nodded sleepily and went at once up-stairs, as the two women turned into the drawing-room. The lights in the chandelier were burning brightly and a great deep chair was drawn under them, upon which Mrs. Dallas sat down, motioning her friend to a seat facing her. She was wearing the dress in which she had sung the last act of the opera—a Greek costume of soft white silk with trimmings of gold. It was in this dress that she had roused the audience to such a pitch of admiration by her beauty, and seen close, as Hannah was privileged to see it now, there were a score of perfections of detail, in both woman and costume, which those who saw her from afar would not have been aware of. Hannah, who had an ardent soul within her very ordinary little body, looked at her with a sort of worship in her eyes.

Meeting this look, Mrs. Dallas smiled—a smile that was sadder than tears.

“Oh, Hannah, I am so unhappy,” she said. “I want to tell you but I don’t know how. Oh, my child, I am so miserable.”

Her utterance had still that little foreign accent that made it so pathetic, although, in spite of some odd blunders, she had become almost fluent in the English tongue. There was still no indication of tears in either her voice or her eyes, as she leaned back in the padded chair, her head supported by its top, and her long bare arms with their picturesque Greek bracelets resting wearily on its cushioned sides.

Hannah looked at her with the tenderness of her kind heart overflowing in great tears from her eyes and rolling down her cheeks. She pressed her handkerchief to her face in the vain effort to keep them back, but the woman for whom they fell shed no tears. She sat there calm and quiet in her youth and beauty and looked at the plain little school-teacher with a wistful gaze that seemed as if it might be envy.

“Tell me, Hannah,” she said presently, when the girl had dried her eyes and grown more calm, “tell me frankly, no matter how strange it may seem to you to have the question asked, what do you think of my husband?”

This startling question naturally found Hannah unprepared with an answer, and after clearing her throat and getting rather red, she said confusedly that she had seen so little of Mr. Dallas, her intercourse with him had been so slight, that she really did not feel that she knew him well enough to give an answer.

“You know him as well as I do,” his wife replied. “As he is to you—as you see

him daily, exactly so he is to me. I have waited and waited for something more, but in vain. I have come at last to the conclusion that this is all."

Hannah, between wonder and distress, began to feel the tears rise again. The other saw them and bent forward and took her hand.

"Don't cry, poor little thing," she said. "Yes—cry if you can. It shows your heart is soft still—mine is as hard as stone. Oh, God, how I have cried!" she broke off, in a voice grown suddenly passionate. "How I have laid awake at night and cried until my body was exhausted with the sobs. I have thought of my little white bed in the convent, where I slept so placidly, for every night of all those blessed, quiet, peaceful years, until my whole longing would be that I might once more lay myself down upon it and close my eyes forever. If an angel from Heaven had offered me a wish it would have been that one. Oh, Hannah, you do not know. You ought to be so happy. You are so happy. Do you know it? I didn't know it, and I was never grateful for it, but always looking forward to being happy in the future, and oh, how I am punished!"

She wrung her hands together and bit the flesh of her soft lips, as if with a sense of anguish too bitter to be borne.

"I always thought," said Hannah, in a husky voice that sounded still of tears, "that a woman who was beautiful and gifted and admired, and had a husband to take care of her, must be the happiest creature in the world. I used to look at you with envy, but I knew, before to-night, that you suffered sometimes."

"Sometimes! Oh, Hannah, it is not sometimes—but always—continually—evening and morning—day-time and night-time, for when I sleep I have such dreams! The things that were my day dreams long ago come back to me in sleep, and when I wake and think of myself as I am, I know not why I do not die of it. Oh, Hannah, if you have dreamed of marriage, give it up. Live your life out as you are. Die a dear, sweet, good, old maid, teaching little children and being kind to them and taking care of your old mother. Oh, my dear, don't call yourself lonely. Don't dare to say it, lest you should be punished. There is no loneliness that a woman can know which can be compared to a marriage like mine. Oh, I am so lonely every moment that I live, that I feel there is no companionship for me in all this crowded world, for the bitterness of my heart is what no one can feel or share."

"Why did you marry your husband?" said Hannah, surprised at her own boldness.

“Why? I am glad you asked me that. I will tell you, and perhaps you may be saved what I have suffered. If my mother had lived it might have been all different. Surely, surely a mother would have known how to save her child from what I have suffered. A father might not—perhaps a father might not be to blame, though sometimes—oh, Hannah, it is dreadful, but my father seems to me a cruel, wicked man. It was he that did it. What did I know? Why your knowledge of the world is great and vast compared to mine! I had had only the sisters to teach me, and they were as ignorant as I. My father told me he had no home to take me to, and that Robert would give me a sweet home, and love and protection and kindness, and that I would be so happy and must consider myself very fortunate. He told me that Robert could not express himself very well, speaking a different tongue from my own, but that he loved me devotedly and that the great object of his life would be to make me happy. And so I married him, glad to please my father, pleased myself, as a child, at the idea of having a home of my own, and ignorant as a child of what I was doing.”

“And without loving your husband?” said the little teacher, with a look that showed she could be severe.

“What did I know about love? I thought I loved him. He was handsome and kind to me and my father said he adored me—he told me himself that he loved me. If his manner was not very ardent, what did I know about ardor in love-making? I knew my not being able to speak English fluently must be a hindrance to him in expressing himself, and I thought he was everything I could wish, and never doubted I should be as happy as a child with a doll-house and everything else that she wanted. As I remember now,” she said reflectingly, as if searching back into her memory, “Robert was different in those days—not an impassioned lover, compared to the tenor who sang in the opera to-night, but compared to what he is now, he was so. There was once that he seemed to care a little—”

She broke off and Hannah spoke:

“I was thinking to-night about you and whether you were not in danger,” she said, with a certain air of wisdom which her somewhat hard experience of life had given her. “How that man looked at you as he sang those words! That wild passion of love which they expressed seemed a reality. I wondered if you could hear them unmoved—and a thought of danger for you made me feel unhappy.”

Christine did not answer her for a moment. A strange smile came to her lips as her eyes rested gently on the little teacher. Eyes and smile had both something of

hopelessness in them, as if she despaired of making herself understood.

“That was sweet of you, Hannah,” she said presently, a look of simple affectionateness chasing away the other. “It is good to think that there was any one, in all that great crowd of people, who cared so much about me, but, my good little friend, never trouble yourself with that thought in connection with me again. My heart is dead—so dead that it seems weary waiting for the rest of me to die, and nothing but the resurrection morning that renews it all can ever give me back the heart I had before I was married. It did not die suddenly at one blow, but it died a lingering death of slow, slow pain. Think what it is! I am younger than you, and already joy and pleasure and hope are words that have no meaning for me. Oh, poor Hannah! I oughtn’t to make you cry, and yet your tears are blessed things. When I could cry I was not so wretched.”

She leaned toward the girl and clasped her close, kissing the teardrops from each eye and soothing her, as if hers had been the sorrow.

“I want to be just to my husband,” she went on presently. “I do believe he is not to blame. He gives me all he has to give, but there is nothing! Oh, when I look into my heart and see its power of suffering, and see, too, how marvellously happy I might once have been, I seem a thousand worlds away from him—my husband, who ought to be the very closest, nearest, likest thing to me! Perhaps he is not happy, but at least he does not suffer, and he is always contented to live on as we are—no work, no friends, no ambition, no interest in life, except mere living. Oh, but it is hard! How long will it go on so, Hannah?” she broke out suddenly, with a ring of fervor in her voice. “Did you ever hear of any one living on and on and on, in a life like this? Could it go on until one got old and deaf and wrinkled, and can anything end it but death? It seems so impossible that I can be the little Christine who used to sit and dream of happiness in marriage, and of the handsome lover who would come some day and carry me off to a beautiful land where all my dreams would be realized. I came out on that stage to-night,” she went on, sitting upright and folding her beautiful arms, “and while the people were looking at me and clapping, a thought came to me that made me feel like sobbing. I wondered in my soul how many broken hearts were covered by those lace and velvet garments, and those smiling, superficial faces. The thought absorbed me so that I forgot everything and the prompter thought I’d forgotten my part entirely and gave me my cue.”

“I saw you. I saw the strange look that came over your face, but I did not know what it meant. And perhaps the people envied you and thought you must be so

happy, to be so beautiful and admired. Oh, poor Christine! I am sorry for you. I wish you could be happy. It seems as if you might."

"*You* might! Everything is possible to you. There is no reason, I suppose, why you may not have all the happiness I ever dreamed of, for, after all, the beginning and end of it was love. And yet I have advised you never to marry—for I often disbelieve in the existence of the sort of love that I have dreamed of—but how can I tell? I know nothing but my own life, and I tell you that is an intolerable pain. I sit here and say the words and you hear them, but they are words only to you, shut off as you are from all the experiences that make up my suffering. Lately there has been a new one. If anything could make my life more miserable it would be the addition of poverty and privation to what I bear already—and that is what I am threatened with—what may probably be just ahead of me. Suppose that should come too! Why, then I should be more unhappy yet, I suppose, although I have thought I couldn't be."

She spoke still with that strange calm which her companion had wondered at from the beginning of their conversation. Her manner in the carriage seemed to be a part of the excitement of the evening's performance, but now the cold calm of reaction had come on and she was very quiet. She had leaned back again in the big chair, and looked at Hannah gravely. Neither of them thought of sleep, and their faces expressed its nearness as little as if it were afternoon, instead of midnight. The last words uttered by Christine had presented a practical difficulty to her friend which her own experiences brought home to her forcibly, while they shut her off from a just sympathy with some of her other trials.

"What do you mean?" she said. "Isn't your husband well off and able to support you comfortably?"

"How do I know? How am I to find out?"

"Ask him. Make him explain to you exactly what his circumstances are. I wonder you haven't done that long ago."

"You will wonder at a good deal more if you go on. For my part, I have wondered and wondered until I have no power to wonder left. I did ask him—that and many other things—and the result is I am as blind and ignorant this moment as you are." She spoke almost coldly. One would have thought it was another and an almost indifferent person whose affairs she was discussing.

"But how can you be ignorant?" said Hannah. "Does he refuse to answer your

questions?”

“No—he doesn’t refuse to answer them, though it is evident he thinks them useless and annoying—but generally he tells me he doesn’t know.”

“Doesn’t know how much money he has, or whether he is rich or poor?”

The other nodded in acquiescence.

“Why, how on earth can that be so? Doesn’t he always have money to pay for things as you go along?”

“Yes—heretofore he has always had. I have needed nothing for myself. All the handsome clothes you see me wear belong to my poor, miserable trousseau.” She smiled bitterly as she said it, but there were no tears in her eyes and her voice was utterly calm.

“What makes you think, then, that he may not continue to have plenty?”

“A letter I read without his permission, though he left it on the table and probably didn’t care. I have been troubled vaguely for some time to find he knew nothing whatever about his business affairs, and that he merely drew on his lawyer for what he wanted, and was always content so long as he got it. Lately, however, although he had been looking for a remittance, the lawyer’s letter came without it, and it was that letter that I read. I saw he looked annoyed, but not for long. He put the letter down and spent the evening playing solitaire, as he always does when he doesn’t go to the theatre. After he went to bed I read the letter. It was from the lawyer in the far West, who had always had charge of the money left by his father—and he said that having repeatedly warned him that he could not go on spending his principal without coming to the end of his rope, he had to tell him now that the end was almost reached. He might manage to send him a remittance soon by selling some bonds at a great sacrifice, and as his orders were imperative of course he would have to do this, but he notified him that there was scarcely anything left, a certain tract of land, which was almost valueless, and that, he said, was the entire remnant of his inheritance, which could never have been very much as he certainly has no extravagant tastes.”

“Why didn’t you tell him you had read the letter and ask him about it?” said Hannah, her rather acute little face animated and serious at once.

“I did.”

“And what did he say?”

“That a woman had no business meddling with men’s affairs, and that he could not help it.”

“But if it is so why doesn’t he get something to do?”

“I asked him and he said he couldn’t.”

“But had he tried?”

“He said he had—several times.”

“What could he do?”

Christine shook her head.

“I have wondered,” she said, “and I can think of nothing. He said he was not trained to any business, and I know no more what to tell him to do than he knows himself. The lawyer advised him to go to work, but did not suggest how. He spoke as if he did not know of his marriage, for he said a man ought to be able to get something to do that would support one.”

“Oh, Christine! and is this all you accomplished?”

“This is all.”

“How long ago was it?”

“About a week.”

“And you have gone through with all that rehearsing and dressing and acting with this weight on your mind? How could you do it?”

“I was determined to do it. It kept me from thinking. I could not withdraw at the last moment. I knew that as soon as the performance was over I would have to look the thing in the face somehow, though I am more helpless than any child. The thought has pursued me through everything. It terrifies me less when I sit and face it calmly, so, than when I put it by and it comes rushing back—as it did to-night while I was singing my last solo. I thought it would take my breath away, but instead it seemed to give an impulse to my voice that made me sing as I had never sung before. I wondered to hear myself, and I was not surprised the people applauded. It was a love song, but what did I care for the stupid man who stood and rolled his eyes at me sentimentally while I sang it? I was in a frenzy,

not of love, but despair. This last knowledge that has come to me has put the final touch. To be an actual beggar, as I may be before long, leaves nothing more but death—and that would be peace and satisfaction and joy."

"But surely your father will help you when he understands."

"He has no money generally. I know he had to borrow some to get my wedding clothes. He explained to me that the last cent of my little inheritance from my mother had been spent on my education. Besides," she added, with a change of tone that made her face harden, "I shall not tell him. I feel bitterly toward my father. He could never have truly loved me: he wanted to rid himself, as soon as he could, of the burden of me. So I am left absolutely without a friend. I don't forget you, Hannah," she added quickly. "You are my friend, I know, and would help me if you could. Your love can help me and it does and will, but we are poor little waifs together—only you can do something to support yourself, and your mother loves you, while I am utterly helpless and have no love in all the world except what you give me. Oh, Hannah, you must never leave me!"

"Where is Mr. Noel—the gentleman you told me of who was so good to you on the steamer, and afterward came to see you and spoke to you so kindly?"

"He has forgotten me—at least I suppose so," she said, shaking her head. "Yes, he was good to me. I think he would be sorry for me. He has gone back to Europe and taken his mother and sisters. Some one was speaking of them and said they all loved him so. You and I are more desolate than most people, Hannah. You have only your mother and me to love you—and I have only you."

VI.

The clock on the mantel struck twelve. Christine rose to her feet with a little shiver. There was a mirror not far away, toward which she turned and surveyed herself from head to foot. As she did so the soft folds of her Greek drapery settled about her, severe and beautiful. The masses of her dark hair were drawn into a loose, rich knot pierced by a gold dagger, and her eyes—so remarkably beautiful in color and expression that no one ever saw them unimpressed—were clear and steady as they gazed at the reflected image in front of her.

“I wonder,” she said, lifting her bare arms with a sort of conscious unconsciousness and clasping her hands in a fine pose behind her head, which she turned slightly to one side, “I wonder if this is the very last of me—the very last of the Christine who loved to look beautiful and wear rich clothes and be admired, and who thought that she would one day be loved.”

Turning away from that long look she held out both fair arms to Hannah.

“Come close, close, Hannah,” she said, as the plain little teacher, in her rough dark gown, was drawn into her embrace. “I want to feel some living thing near my heart to-night, for I am frightened and lonely. I have told myself good-by. Christine is dead and gone and I have buried her. I want some one near me in these first moments of my strange new self. Oh, Hannah, if we could die! Not you—for your mother needs you—but me. Oh, Hannah,” she said, in a strained voice that sounded as if it were only by an effort that she kept her teeth from chattering, “if I hadn’t you to-night I don’t know what would become of me.”

Hannah tried to soothe her with soft words of comfort and assurances of love.

“It will not be so dark and sad and friendless as you think,” she said. “All those people who have admired and praised you so will surely be good to you—” But she was interrupted sharply.

“I am done with them,” she said, “and done with fine dressing, and becoming colors.” Her voice shook, and Hannah, seeing that she was completely unnerved, succeeded in persuading her to go up to her own room. On the threshold she paused.

“Come into the dressing-room with me,” Christine said. “Don’t leave me. He will not wake,” she added, seeing her friend glance toward the door between the dressing-room and sleeping-room. “He sleeps like a stone. I shall lie here on the lounge till morning. I often do. I have lain there, night in and out, and almost sobbed my heart away, and no one knew.”

Hannah braided the lovely hair, unfastened the exquisite white and gold dress, which fell in a rich mass on the floor, and out of it Christine stepped, looking more lovely than ever and more childlike. She caught sight of the ornaments she still wore, and hastily taking them off laid them in a heap on the dressing-table.

“They can be sold,” she said. “I shall never want to put them on again. Oh, Hannah, you are so good to me,” she went on in the plaintive voice of an unhappy child, as Hannah brought a warm dressing-gown and made her put it on, and little soft-lined slippers for her feet. “I am so cold,” she said, shivering. “Some day you will know, perhaps, how unhappy I am. You don’t know half of it now, and I cannot tell you. Oh, you have made me so comfortable,” she added, as Hannah tucked a warm coverlet over her, on the big, soft lounge. “I haven’t had any one to take care of me for so long. Don’t leave me, Hannah. Sit in that big chair and hold my hand and let me go to sleep. I am so tired.”

Her lids drooped and her voice fell. In another moment she was asleep.

Once only Christine opened her eyes, and finding Hannah still there said piteously, “Oh, I am so unhappy,” but the plaintive little tones died away in sleepiness, and in a moment she was drawing in the regular breaths of profound slumber.

By-and-by, without waking her, Hannah drew her hand away, and leaning back in the big chair, threw a great shawl all around her, and worn out by the experiences of the evening, she also fell asleep.

Morning found them so. The rising sun looking in at the window waked them simultaneously, and with a remembering look on both faces, they were clasped in each other’s arms. A long embrace and then a kiss. No word was spoken, and when they met at breakfast and were joined by Mr. Dallas, the manner of all three was as usual. The servant who waited saw nothing to comment upon, except, perhaps, that the unwonted presence of a guest made little difference in the usual silentness of the meal.

VII.

Noel remained abroad a year and a half and came home at last with a new determination, which he promptly put into effect. This was to begin in earnest the practice of his profession. He was tired of travelling, and even his beloved painting was not enough to satisfy the more insistent demands for occupation and interest, which his maturity of mind and character gave rise to.

Not very long after his return he went to call on the Dallases. He was informed, on inquiring at the house, that a family of another name now occupied it, and no one could tell where Mr. and Mrs. Dallas had gone. He made inquiries at several places in the neighborhood, but in vain.

He walked away, with a sad and tender feeling in his heart for the poor foreign girl, whose beauty, youth and childlike charm had taken a strong hold upon his mind. The annoying thought occurred to him that he had been foolishly prudent and apprehensive of danger. He wondered if it hadn’t been a sort of coxcombry in him to think there was any danger to her in free and frequent intercourse with him! As for the danger to himself, that it was cowardly to think about. He wished he had acted differently, and felt unreasonably troubled at having let the girl drift beyond his knowledge. She had looked so young and appealing as he had seen her last, seated on the rug with the kittens on her lap, and so beautiful. No one he had seen before or since was as beautiful. The type seemed almost unique. He knew her to be utterly ignorant of the world, and he hated to think what experience might have taught her of it. He ought to have looked after her more. The reproachful thought stung him. He said to himself that he’d be a little more careful the next time he felt inclined to occupy this high moral platform and be better than other men! He ought to have seen that common kindness demanded a little more of a man than this. He was completely self-disgusted, and registered a sort of mental vow that if he ever found the young creature again he would befriend her, if she were still in need of a friend, and take the consequences. He was not so irresistible, he told himself, as to be necessarily dangerous to the peace of mind of all the women of his acquaintance. He had acted the part of a prig and he was well punished for it.

Noel had altered in some ways since his former return from Europe. For one thing his appearance had changed. He had now a thick, close-trimmed beard,

which made him look older and graver. There were some premature gray hairs, also, in his close-cropped hair.

The weather was very hot, and his mother and sisters had gone at once to their country house, but Noel lingered in town, although, socially, it was almost deserted.

One afternoon of a very hot day, when the neighborhoods of soda fountains alone were populous, and men walked about the streets with umbrellas in one hand and palm-leaf fans in the other, with coats open, hats pushed back and frequent manipulation of their pocket-handkerchiefs, Noel, whose sense of propriety admitted of none of these mitigations of the heat, was standing at a down-town crossing, waiting for a car. He was going to his club to refresh himself with a bath, order a dinner with plenty of ice accompanying it, and then take a drive in the park behind a horse warranted to make a breeze. It was getting intolerable in town, and he had just determined to leave it to-morrow.

As he stood waiting he observed, on the opposite corner, a woman carrying a baby. He had a good heart and it troubled him to see that the child seemed ill. He was struck, too, with the fact that the woman, although closely veiled, had something in her figure and bearing, as well as her dress, which made her present position seem in some way incongruous. His practised eye perceived that her figure was good, and his instinct told him that she was a lady. He looked at her so attentively that his car passed without his seeing it until it was too far to hail. As another car, going the opposite way, came along and stopped, the woman got on it, and a resemblance, which some fleeting movement or position suggested to his mind, struck him so powerfully that almost without knowing what he was doing he found himself running to overtake the car, which had started on. It was not difficult to do, and once having undertaken it, it would have looked silly to stop, so he swung himself on to the platform. The car was full and he did not go inside. He saw the figure his eye was following take a seat high up, and turn the child so that it might get the air from the window. He could see the poor, little pinched face, utterly listless and wan, and by reason of its sickness totally bereft of the beauty that belongs to plump, round, rosy babyhood. And yet the child had wonderful eyes—strange, large eyes of a clear, golden-brown color—the like of which he had seen once only before. Memories, speculations and presentments seemed to crowd upon him. He tried to get a view of the mother, but her back was turned to him, and a fat German woman, with a pile of unmade trousers from a clothing establishment, almost hid the sight of that. Usually he could not see these poor sewing-women, with their great, hot

burdens of woollen cloth on their knees, without a sentiment of pity, but he did not give this one a thought. His mind was wholly absorbed in scanning curiously, though furtively, the baby's poor, little white face, and all that he could see of the mother's dress and figure. Presently the car came to a halt. The German woman got up and labored down the aisle with her burden and got off, but some one quickly moved into the vacant seat. Still he could see better now, and the better he saw the stronger grew the conviction in his heart. Gradually the car thinned out, and he might have gone nearer, but something held him back. He kept his position by the conductor, until he rang his bell and called out the name of a landing from which the excursion boats went out daily. Then the woman rose, lifting her baby with gentle carefulness, and came down the aisle and got out. She passed directly by Noel, but her thick veil was impenetrable, and yet, from the nearer view of her figure and the pose of her head, the feeling he had was deepened and strengthened. He got out, too, and followed her, and as he walked directly behind her, his eyes fastened on the rich coil of her wavy dark hair, he felt sure that this was Christine Dallas.

"Poor thing!" he said under his breath. The tears were near his eyes, but a feeling of rage surged up and overmastered them. Where was the girl's husband? Where were all the men and women that ought to have protected her and given her support and companionship in this hour?

She toiled on in front of him now, her figure braced to its burden. The baby was light, but she carried in addition to it a shawl and a small bag. He longed to go and help her, but he feared to startle or distress her. If he had been a stranger he would not have hesitated, and he wondered at the cruel indifference of the passers-by. They were mostly laborers, draymen and porters, but at least they were men, and it made his blood boil to see them passing her carelessly and almost jostling her.

She got on board the boat, which was not crowded, and he followed a little way behind. It gave him a sense of keen distress to see her threading her way through groups of rough men, who ignored or jostled her, to the little window where she bought her ticket, and it angered him to see how indifferently the man sold it to her, and pushed her her change.

For a while he kept at a distance, observing her, however, as she took her way, with an air of familiarity with her surroundings, to a place on deck sheltered alike from observation and from the strong breeze which was already beginning. Here the stewardess brought her a pillow, handing it without speaking and

waiting significantly. She took it in silence, then got out her purse, a meagre-looking one, and put a little coin into the woman's hand. As she did so she said, "Thank you," and the least little foreign inflection—a lingering difficulty with the "th"—gave Noel the last assurance that he needed. How unforgotten the voice was! He believed he would almost have recognized it without any words.

The woman made no reply, but pocketed her fee and walked away. Then Noel, who had seated himself quite near, with his face so turned that he could see her without the appearance of gazing at her directly, set himself to watch what followed. There was no one else near and it was evident that she had not observed him. Indeed, she did not look about her at all, but kept her eyes on the baby, whose apathetic little face did not change. Shaking and smoothing the pillow she laid it on the seat and tenderly placed her baby on it. The boat had started and the breeze, delicious as it was to a strong person, might yet be too much for a sick child, and this the mother plainly feared, for she hastily hung her shawl over the railing beside the pillow. But this she soon discovered kept off too much air. Noel could note her mental processes and comprehend them as he saw her put up her hand to loosen her thick veil.

His pulses quickened. He was sure already, and yet a figure, a pose, a knot of hair, even a voice and accent might deceive him. So he watched intently as she unfastened her veil and took it off. The brim of her hat was narrow and left her face fully exposed.

It was Christine Dallas—a girl no longer, no longer blooming and childlike and wondering—but saddened, matured, mysteriously changed, with more than the old charm for him in her exquisite woman-face. It was turned to him in profile, distinct against the distant sky, and the remembered eyes were veiled by their dark-fringed lids, as she looked down upon her child.

The veil, ingeniously fastened with a few pins, proved a convenient awning. She laid her arm above it on the rail, as she bent her head toward the baby. Although the eyes were hid, the mouth—in her a feature of extreme sensitiveness—told the story of past suffering and present pain.

What a face! No artist had ever had a model such as that before him, and the pale attenuation of the sick child was almost as interesting a subject. But Noel never thought of it. For once the artist in him became subservient, and he looked on with no feeling but a pity so great that it absolutely filled his heart and left no room for any other.

The mother’s suffering face put on a smile, and she made a little kissing sound with her lips to try to attract the baby’s notice, and rouse it from its apathy.

“Mother’s precious little pigeon,” she said caressingly, and catching the thin little face between her soft thumb and forefinger and giving it a loving twitch. But, instead of smiling back at her, a piteous little tremor came around the baby’s mouth. His thin forehead wrinkled and he began to whimper.

She caught him to her heart with a motion of passionate love and pity, and began to rock her body to and fro as she held him there.

“Did mother hurt her baby?” she said, speaking in low tones of keenest self-reproach. “There, then, mother wouldn’t trouble him any more! Mother was bad and naughty to try to make her boy laugh when he was so sick! Mother loves her baby, that she does, and when her little man gets well he’ll play and laugh with mother then, won’t he?”

The whimper died away, and when the soft crooning and rocking had continued a little while the baby dropped its weary lids and slept. She laid him in her lap, raising her knee to elevate his head, by resting her foot on the round of a chair. He sank into his new position with a tremulous sigh, and slept on. And as he slept she watched him, her great eyes fastened on his thin little face with a look as if she would devour it with love. Afraid to touch him, lest he should wake, she caught the folds of his dress in her hand with a strength that strained its sinews, as if she were afraid he would be snatched away from her.

Noel, who had expected every moment that she would turn, had now ceased to look for it. She was evidently unconscious of everything, herself included, except the child. As she bent her head above it, never taking her eyes from its wan little countenance, the look of hungry love that came to her was stronger than any look he had ever seen expressed upon a face before. Presently, as if unable to resist the impulse, she took one of the little hands, blue-white for lack of blood, and held it in her own. He could divine the fact that it cost her an effort not to squeeze it hard. Her eyes fastened on it hungrily, and then looked into the pinched little face. Evidently this sleep was something coveted, for she made these slight movements with the utmost caution, and did not venture to change her constrained position. And as she so watched the baby, Noel, keeping as profoundly still, watched her. He saw that her plain, gray costume, charmingly fashioned as it was, was yet somewhat worn and shabby, as if from over-long usage; that her round straw hat was shabby, too, and one of her little boots, cut

and finished in such a pretty, foreign fashion, had a small hole in it. The long glove on her left hand was ripped at the finger-ends. The right hand was bare, and looked very strong and healthy as it held the little feeble one. With her other hand she was holding a fan between her child's eyes and the sun. She had never ceased a little rocking motion of the knee. Oh, if she could only keep him asleep! her whole attitude and motion seemed to say. Now and then she uttered low, hushing sounds as a pang of pain would contract the baby's face, and threaten to waken him. These little noises came to Noel faintly, and he felt himself sharing with her this intense desire to keep the child asleep. Suddenly, above the soothing monotone of the vessel's motion, there was a sharp steam-whistle. Christine gave a little smothered cry, and the next instant burst into tears. It was too much for her over-strung nerves. At the same moment the baby waked and began to cry weakly. The sound recalled her to herself and she took the little creature in her arms and rocked and hushed it, at the same time fighting with her own sobs, brushing away her tears with a fold of the baby's dress and trying to speak to it soothingly. But she was utterly unnerved, and the tears and sobs kept coming back even while she spoke those calming, loving words.

Noel could bear it no longer. He was afraid of increasing her agitation, but he felt he must go to her aid. So he took quietly the few steps that brought him to her and said gently:

"Christine, give the baby to me. Don't mind my seeing you. Don't mind anything, but just try to be quiet and rest a little. I will help you."

She looked at him an instant without recognition, then a gleam of comprehension came into her eyes, and in a confused, weak way she let him take the baby, and falling back upon the seat she hid her face in her hands and fell to sobbing. Noel, for the first time in his life holding a young baby in his arms, was yet skilful with it, since nothing but strength and tenderness were required, and he had both. He soothed the little creature into silence, walking backward and forward a few steps, and watching Christine intently, without speaking to her. It was only a moment or two that she gave way, and he felt it would relieve her. She wiped her eyes and sat up.

"I don't know what made me do it," she said. "I have never done so before. It is so foolish; but I did so want baby to stay asleep, and I was hoping nothing would wake him, and the whistle scared me so. Let me have him now, Mr. Noel. Thank you, oh, thank you. Perhaps he feels better. He has had a nice little sleep."

Noel would have kept the child, but he saw she was not to be prevented from taking it, and when she had got it in her arms she began to look at it and talk to it and walk it about with every appearance of having forgotten Noel altogether. He had called her Christine under impulse, and he now recalled the fact that she had taken it simply and without any protest. On the whole, he was glad. To have called her by the formal name by which he had known her might have struck some chord of pain. He did not even know that she bore it still. Dallas might be dead or worse than dead to her. A score of possibilities suggested themselves to his mind. But he felt he must try, if possible, to make her understand him.

“Poor little ill baby,” he said, going close to her side, where she stood by the railing with the baby laid upon her shoulder, her head tilted so as to rest her cheek on his. “I hope he is better. I am so glad I saw you, Christine. You must let me help you, exactly as if I were your brother, for no brother could want to help you more. I really think I forgot I wasn’t when I called you by your name just now. But you didn’t mind it, did you?”

“Oh, no,” she said simply. “But where did you come from?” she asked, as if the question had just occurred to her.

“Let us say from the skies,” he answered, smiling. “I think my good angel must have sent me to take care of you. Sit down, if you will hold the baby. Let me make you more comfortable.”

He went and brought a large and easy chair from some unknown quarter and made her sit in it. Then, saying he would be back presently, he walked away. Before he returned the stewardess appeared, smiling and obsequious, making a profuse offer of her services to hold the baby, or to do anything desired of her. She brought a comfortable hassock, which she placed under Christine’s feet, and only the latter’s determination prevented her from taking possession of the baby. She told her exactly where she was to be found in case she should be wanted, and ended by presenting her with a key which, she told her, would open a stateroom at the head of the stairs. As the woman walked away Noel returned. Christine told him how kind the stewardess had been, and said that she had never known there were any staterooms on board, this being an excursion boat.

“Oh, there are generally two or three,” said Noel carelessly, “for the people to go to when they want to rest. If you’d like to, we’ll go now and inspect.”

Evidently the prospect pleased her, so they went together, but she refused to allow him to carry the baby, or even to send for the woman. When they opened

the door everything was clean and fresh, as if just prepared for them. Christine looked about her with an air of relief that it rejoiced him to see. He told her to get a little rest, if she could, and that he would stroll about for a while and come back for her. She went in and closed the door and he turned away. In a few minutes the stewardess knocked, to offer her services, and Christine, as she accepted them, felt a sudden change as to her whole surrounding atmosphere.

Noel, meanwhile, had gone up on deck, and was walking about and looking around him curiously. He was certainly out of his element, but his habits of life had been such as to make him feel at home almost anywhere. What he rebelled at was the thought of Christine being in this place. Her distress of mind and her poverty seemed so indecently exposed to view. He lingered a while in the thick of the crowd, torturing himself with the horrible incongruity between it and the poor, dear woman in the stateroom below. He had contrived to have put at her disposal the best the boat afforded, but it was abominably meagre. What business had she here at all? It was no place for her. His whole nature rebelled at it, and he grew savage as he thought that it was no business of his to put it right.

Throwing his cigar away he went below and knocked very gently at the stateroom door. It was opened by Christine, who had, perhaps, bathed her face, for the traces of tears were almost gone, though enough remained to give her eyes an appealingness that went to his very heart.

“Well,” he said, in that tentative tone which admits of any sort of answer.

She looked immediately at the baby lying on the berth and stood aside to let him see. “He is quiet,” she said. “I don’t think he is in any pain. I am going to take him on deck again. The doctor said the only thing for him was change of air. I couldn’t take him away, so he said to bring him down here on the water every afternoon would do him good, and I’ve been bringing him every day.”

“And is he better?” Noel said, forcing himself to appear to be thinking chiefly of the child. He saw that the idea absorbed her so completely that she had no thought of herself and apparently none of him, and this was well.

“His fever is not so high,” she said. “Oh, he has been so ill. Once I thought—” but she broke off unable to speak, and turning toward the berth caught up the child with the fervor of passion, though she did not forget to touch him tenderly, and held him close against her. Then she put on his little head a muslin cap that perhaps had fitted him once but was now pitifully large, and carried her light burden out into the saloon and up the steps, refusing Noel’s offer to help her.

They went back to their old places, which were quiet and away from the crowd, and when Noel had made her as comfortable as he could, he drew his chair near and sat down. And then the watch began again. He looked at her, and she looked down at the baby on her lap, and apparently the baby was no more unconscious of the gaze bent on him than Christine was of the look with which Noel steadily regarded her. He burned to ask her questions as to what had taken place since he had seen her last, but he feared to waken her from her unconsciousness. It was evident that she accepted him as a simple fact. He had come and here he was. If he helped her to take care of the baby it was all right and she was glad. Not a scruple as to the acceptance of the help had occurred to her. He saw this and was too thankful for it not to be willing to take precautions against interrupting this most satisfactory course of things.

The child would die, he felt sure of that, and his heart quivered to think how she would suffer. And who was there to help her to bear it? He almost wished he was in truth her brother, that his might naturally be that right; almost, but not quite. Well, he wished a great many vain and useless things as he sat there opposite to her, conscious that she had forgotten him. He moved, and even coughed, but she took no notice. The baby's little mouth twitched slightly and her whole being became acutely conscious. She changed its position and words of passionate lovingness crowded upon her lips. But instead of responding to them, it began to whimper fretfully—a sound that brought a spasm of positive anguish across her face.

"There, then, mother's little dear lamb that mother has hurt and troubled! Mother loves her little man, and he'll get well and make poor mother happy again—won't he?"

It was some time before the child could be quieted. The peevish little whine almost angered Noel when he saw how it was cutting into Christine's heart. In the hope of diverting the baby he put out his hand and began to snap his fingers softly in front of its face. There was a ring on the hand that sparkled, and the baby saw it and stretched out his little hand toward it. A gleam of pure delight came into the mother's face.

"He hasn't noticed anything for days," she said, catching Noel's hand in an ardent grasp and holding it so that the baby could see the ring. He felt her fingers close upon it almost lovingly. He knew she could have kissed it, because it had for that second been of interest to her child—and with no knowledge that it was in any way different from the ring upon it. When the baby turned away from it

fretfully she let it drop.

At last the little invalid went to sleep in Christine's lap. The boat, which was not to land but went only for the excursion on the water, had turned and they were going back toward the city. The breeze that played around Christine's bent head blew little curly strands about her face and called a faint flush into her cheeks. Noel noted everything.

Night began to draw on and she could no longer see the baby's face distinctly. She drew the end of a light shawl over him, saying as she did so:

"The doctor says this is the best of all—the coming back in the fresh evening air."

She sat up in her place then, and Noel could see that she kept her hand upon her baby's pulse.

"Do you ever sing now?" he asked abruptly.

She shook her head.

"No—except little songs to baby."

"I heard while I was in Europe of your making an immense hit in the amateur opera. Why did you stop?"

"I was forced to. Those people compelled me. I don't know why, but they looked on me as something apart from them. The women were strange and unfriendly, and the men—I don't know," she broke off confusedly, "but it is all hateful to me to think of. I was glad to get away from them. The night of the opera was the last time. Oh, if my baby will get well," she said, bending to touch his thin hair with her lips, "I will never need anything but him. You believe in prayer—don't you? Will you pray to God to make him well?"

Noel promised with a willingness that seemed to comfort her. Absorbed in the child once more, she soon seemed to forget him and silence fell between them again. It was scarcely broken during the whole return trip. She seemed to have nothing to say to him. When she spoke to him at all her thrilling voice dropped to a whisper, and it was always to give some information about the baby. Once she said with fervent interest, "He is asleep," and once she told him that his skin felt cool and natural. This was all. It must be owned that Noel didn't think very lovingly of that poor atom of humanity as he sat there. It was the baby that had

caused her to be in this false position, which he felt so keenly, and it was terror for the baby which brought that suffering look to her face. And yet something of the same feeling was in his own breast as he palpitated at the thought of this little creature's dying and breaking the heart of its mother, who plainly loved it with the absorbingness of the first passion she had ever known.

When they reached the wharf it was quite dark, and the electric lights and publicity of the place made Noel shrink so from the thought of exposing the girl, in her suffering, to the gaze of such men and women as he saw about him, that, without consulting her, he called a carriage and helped her into it, following and seating himself opposite her. She protested at first, but he said:

"I have a long way to go and need a carriage, and I may as well drop you at home. Where must I put you down?"

She gave a street and number. The door was shut, the man mounted to his box and drove away, and they were alone together. Alone, except for the baby, but that was enough to make him feel that he and all the world beside were thousands of miles away from her. They drove on in silence. Now and then as they passed a bright light, her beautiful face, outlined by its dark hat-brim and darker hair, shone out from the shadow, but for which he might have felt himself in a dream interrupted by no sound, except the monotonous rumble of the wheels. Always as he looked her eyes were lowered to catch each passing glimpse of the baby's face. She never looked at him.

He began to feel it necessary to ask one or two questions that he might know what to prepare for, but as he broke the silence to begin she said warningly, in a low whisper:

"Sh-sh-sh, he is waking," and then fell to rocking and crooning over the baby and coaxing him back to sleep. When he seemed quite quiet again she said suddenly in a low whisper, and in the dark he felt her eyes upon him:

"What makes you so kind? No one is ever kind to me. I thought nobody cared. I had one friend but she went away. She did not want to leave me, but she had to go far off somewhere to make a living for her mother."

"I will always help you if you will let me," Noel said, whispering too, for fear of being silenced. "I will send my sisters to see you, if you will let them come—"

"Oh, no!" she said, interrupting him impulsively. "Don't send any women out of

the world you live in to see me. They are cruel—they have dreadful thoughts of me. They look at me strangely and suspect me. Oh, no—I'd rather take my baby to the end of the earth and hide from them. I beg you not to send any one to see me."

Noel hastened to promise her that he certainly would not go against her wish, and was wondering how he should find out the things he longed so to know, when suddenly the carriage stopped.

The driver got down and rang the bell. As Noel was helping Christine to get out, the door was opened and the figure of Dallas appeared. It was a surprise to him, somehow, and an unwelcome one. How his spirit rose in abhorrence of this man!

Christine went up the steps with the baby, and as he had her bag and shawl Noel followed, telling the driver to wait.

It was a miserable little house, poor and cheap, and empty, and but for the counteracting effect of his anger against Dallas, Noel thought he must have almost sobbed to see Christine here. Dallas himself was not at all discomposed as he recognized his visitor and asked him in, offering a hand which Noel managed to touch.

The baby was still asleep, and when Christine had placed it carefully on a wretched little couch, she seemed, for the first time, free to think of Noel. She turned and asked him to sit down—at the same time glancing about her with a sudden rush of consciousness, which until now a nearer interest had crowded out. The poverty-stricken look of her surroundings was made the more evident by the few objects belonging to other days that lay about—a charming sacque, smartly braided and lined with rich silk, hung on the back of a chair, and a handsome travelling rug was folded under the baby on the sofa. Everything was clean, for Christine even yet had not come to contemplate the possibility of doing without a servant.

There was a small kerosene lamp on a table, over which were spread a lot of cards with their faces up. Some one had evidently been playing solitaire, and as evidently, on the witness of another sense, been accompanying the game by the smoking of bad tobacco. The room reeked with it to a degree that made Noel feel it an outrage to Christine. But what was he to do? There was but one thing. He said good-by and went away, carrying the memory of Christine's face flushed scarlet for shame.

He remembered afterward that Dallas had taken no notice of the baby—not even glancing at it or inquiring for it—a thing which the poor mother had taken as a matter of course. He thought, as he shook hands with her at parting, that Christine had tried to speak—perhaps a word of thanks—but something stopped it and she let him go in silence.

The next afternoon Noel, at the same hour, went down to the wharf and boarded the excursion boat, for the deliberate purpose of having some practical talk with Christine. He soon found her, absorbed so completely in the baby that his coming seemed scarcely to disturb for a moment the intentness of her preoccupation. This, at first, made him feel a certain irritation, but he soon had reason to congratulate himself upon an absence of self-consciousness on her part which made it the easier for him to put certain questions. Everything he inquired about she responded to with absolute honesty and a sort of vagueness which precluded any such feelings as wounded pride. He learned, by his adroit questionings, that they were now very poor, that Dallas had been spending his principal, which was now exhausted, and that their chief means of support was the money she obtained for doing a very elaborate sort of embroidery which she had learned while at the convent. When he asked if she had all the work she wanted she said no, and that she often rang door-bells and asked ladies to give her work and was refused. She told all this with apathy, however, and seemed to have no power of acute feeling outside of her child.

Then Noel, with a beating heart, made a proposal to her which had occurred to him during the wakeful hours of the night, but which he had felt he should hardly have courage for. This was that she should come every day and give him sittings for a new picture he had in mind. When he suggested it, to his delight she caught eagerly at the idea, accepting every word he said in absolute good faith, and showing no disposition to doubt when he told her that every hour would be many times more valuable so spent than in sewing, as good models were rare and very well paid. She thanked him with the simplest gratitude, and when she heard that she would be allowed to bring her child with her she promised to come the next morning to his studio. The baby, she said, was better now, and would sleep for hours at a time, and in the afternoon she could take him on the water as usual. It was evident that there was no one else who made any demand upon her time—a significant fact to Noel.

Accordingly, next morning she came, her baby in her arms as usual. She had made an effort to dress herself attractively, looking upon the matter in a very businesslike way, and so girlish and charming and delicately high-bred did she

look in her French-made gown of transparent black, with trimmings of pale green ribbons, and a wide lace hat to match, that Noel rebelled with all his might against her lugging that absurdly superfluous baby up those long steps. Still it was necessary to accept the inevitable, and he set his teeth and said nothing. When she had laid the sleeping child upon a lounge and turned toward him, her eyes fastened eagerly upon a great bunch of crimson roses in a blue china bowl, which Noel had gotten in honor of her coming. She did not, of course, suspect this, but he saw that here, at least, was a vivid and spontaneous feeling apart from her child, as she bent above the mass of rich color.

“Oh, how good they are!” she said. “I seem to want to eat them, and smell them and look at them all at once.”

She held them off and regarded them enjoyingly a moment and then raised them to her face again, and smelled them with audible little sniffs, even nibbling the red leaves with her white teeth, as she looked at Noel over them and smiled. He went, delighted, and brought a basket of luscious grapes which he held out to her. She took a large bunch, and holding it by the stem began to pick the grapes off one by one and eat them enjoyingly. They were pale green in color, and he noted the effect of her clear pink nails against them and the beautiful curves of the long fingers that held the stem. He poured out some water in a beautiful old Venetian goblet and offered it to her. There was a bit of ice in it, which she tinkled against the side with the delight of a child before she drank it.

“I am sure I am dreaming, perfectly sure,” she said seriously. “I only hope I won’t wake until I have finished this bunch of grapes.”

Then she lifted the glass to her mouth, tilting it until she had got the ice, which she chewed up noisily with her sharp little teeth. Noel felt a keen delight to see that she was letting herself be gay for a brief moment, but he seemed to see into the sadness back of it more plainly than ever.

“Oh, I am very happy,” she said, suddenly throwing herself into a chair where she could see her sleeping child. “My baby is better—a great deal better; he has smiled twice, and is sleeping so peacefully! Yes, I am happy!—and yet the other feeling—the one that has been with me always lately—is here too. It is very strange that one can be at the same time very happy and also the most miserable woman in the world! Does this sound like craziness? I am not crazy. There are some people—did you know it?—who can’t go crazy!—who never would, no matter what happened to them! A doctor told me that, and I believe it. He says it

is constitutional or inherited or something like that—a physical thing—having a very strong brain that couldn't be upset!"

She rose now, and insisted that the sitting should begin. Noel saw again the unforgotten outline of her beautiful head, with its rippling dark hair drawn backward into that low knot behind.

It was in silence that she seated herself, and he began to work. He felt as if some fair saint were sitting to him, and that the picture would never come out right without a nimbus round the head. As he went on with his rapid drawing in charcoal he saw a change settle heavily upon the face before him. Utter sadness seemed to come there as soon as the lines relaxed into their natural look.

At last, when he felt he had done enough to entitle her to feel that she had really rendered service, he threw a cloth over the picture and declared the sitting ended. She did not, however, ask to look at it, but went over at once to where the baby lay, and stood looking down upon him. Noel, who had followed her, stood silently beside her for some moments. Suddenly she said aloud:

"I am very miserable."

He took it in silence, as he had taken her former confession of happiness. Presently she went on:

"I said, a little while ago, that I was happy, and for a moment I seemed to feel it in spite of all the misery. God knows I don't forget to thank Him that my baby is better"—her lips trembled—"but what is his dear life to be? What is mine to be? Always like this? Oh, God help me! My heart is broken."

He thought she was going to cry, but she did not. She only clasped her hands hard together and drew in her lower lip, clenching it in her teeth.

"Perhaps I ought not to speak like this," she said. "I don't know whether it is very wrong or not. But it is so long since any one was kind to me or seemed to care."

"It is not wrong," said Noel, "don't think it. Ease your heart by speaking, if it comforts you. Try to remember what we are to each other—think of me as your brother."

Thus invited, he hoped she would speak freely, but she caught her lip again, as if in the effort of self-repression, and shook her head. Noel was hurt.

“Do you not trust me?” he said.

“I trust you always,” she answered. “You are good and kind and true, and not like other men. Oh, how bad they are! What things they can think of a woman! The world is dark and evil, and I and my baby are alone—alone—alone!”

The vehemence of this outburst seemed to recall her to herself and her surroundings, and by a tremendous effort she managed to attain a manner and expression of calm. The baby stirred and opened its eyes, and in a moment everything else was forgotten.

A few moments later, when, with the child in her arms, she was ready to go, Noel, as he handed her her gloves and pocketbook, slipped something into the latter.

“I don’t know what you will think of the reward of your morning’s labor,” he said, in an off-hand way. “To me it seems miserably little, although you, with your notions, may think it too much. You don’t know, of course, that a model such as the one I’ve secured this morning is hard to get, and can always command a good price. You have fairly and honestly earned it and I hope you will be willing to come again. May I say to-morrow?”

“If baby is as well as to-day. Oh, how good you are! I hope God will bless you for being so good to me.”

“I hope He would curse me if I were not,” said Noel, and then, restraining his vehemence, he begged her to let him carry the baby down-stairs for her. This she utterly refused, and it cut him to the heart to feel that her reason for doing so was not so much to save him trouble as to prevent his being seen in such a condescending attitude toward his model. So he had to see her go off alone with her burden. He rebelled passionately at the sight. Since the baby was—a stubborn fact in an emaciated form—and Christine could not be happy to have it out of her sight, the situation should, at any rate, have had the mitigations which civilization supplies. A picturesque *bonne*, in an effective cap and apron, should have carried the child for her, and a footman should have held open the door of a comfortable carriage for her on reaching the street. Instead of which he had to meet the maddening possibility that the cabman was careless and insolent and that passers-by in the street stared at her.

With his hands thrust deep in his trousers’ pockets he turned back into the studio, slamming the door behind him with his elbow, and walking moodily over to the

window, where he stood a long while lost in thought. The one satisfactory reflection which the situation suggested was that he had succeeded in making Christine accept, as a natural arrangement, the fact that when artists employed models they always sent them to and from the studios in a cab, which it was the artist’s business to pay for.

VIII.

The next day Christine came again, and although she was comforted by the fact that the baby still seemed better Noel thought he had never seen or imagined such absolute sadness as both her face and manner showed. The picture progressed in long spaces of absolute silence, while Christine sat as immovable as the sleeping child near by. It seemed to Noel, in spite of his inexperience, that the child lay more in a state of stupor than sleep, and that its prostration argued the very lowest degree of vitality, but Christine seemed satisfied when he was asleep and so Noel made no comment.

During the sitting that day he asked Christine if he would prove himself a nuisance to either her or her husband if he sometimes called in the evening. To the first part of the inquiry she replied that she would be glad to see him, and to the latter, with a sort of hopeless wonder, that Mr. Dallas would not mind.

Noel went once, and once only. The visit was too painful to himself, and he felt also to Christine, to be repeated. The hideous barrenness of the place seemed an outrage to her delicacy and made the refinement of her beauty seem cruelly out of place. But more than all, when Noel looked on the untidy negligence and brutal insensibility of the man who was at liberty to call her wife, and whom she acknowledged as husband, he felt it unbearable. He was even worse than he remembered him. Formerly he had, at least, dressed well and kept up the forms of civility. Noel could imagine that he was now glad to be rid of the trouble. He did not even care to be particular about his person since he was now in a position where that bother could be dispensed with.

As soon as Noel began to talk to Christine Dallas filled his pipe and went off to the table to play solitaire. Noel fancied that the smell of the rank tobacco, which was unimproved in quality, made the poor girl sick. It was a relief when Dallas got up after a while, and shoving the cards together in a heap left the room. Then Noel inquired for the baby. Somehow he always shrank from speaking of it before Dallas.

“He is asleep up-stairs. Eliza is with him: He is better,” said Christine, “but the doctor says there is no certainty until the hot weather is over. Oh, it’s selfish of me to want him to live,” she added, with a sudden agitation in her voice, “but it

isn’t that; it isn’t life I want for him—only to keep him with me—to be where he is. If I could—”

She broke off huskily, and Noel, out of pity for her, got up and walked to the other end of the little room. When he got back she had recovered, and said with a smile:

“I am out of patience with myself for being gloomy now. You will think me such a poor coward. The baby is better and I will try to be bright. I said in my prayers to God that if He would let my baby get better I would be happy, and ask for nothing else. But what do you think this is?” she added, with a change of tone, drawing something from her pocket and holding it hid in her closed hand.

“I can’t imagine,” said Noel, full of delight to see that look of interest and amusement on her face.

“A present for you from me! Isn’t that funny? It isn’t anything very valuable and perhaps you won’t care for it, but I have a feeling that I want you to have it. It’s the cross of the Legion of Honor, which belonged to my grandfather. My mother left it to me among some trinkets of hers, which have all been sold. Don’t look sorry about it; you don’t know how little it matters now! This I could never have sold, and besides it is worth very little really—but I felt I wanted you to have it. Will you let me give it to you?”

She opened her hand and held it out to him with the cross lying on the palm. Noel was deeply touched.

“I never really expected to be decorated,” he said, “but there is no possible way in which a decoration could come to me that could give me such pride and pleasure as this. Take it? I should think so! When I used to dream of being a painter I thought perhaps I’d have a great picture in the *Salon* and get a decoration for it. But I assure you this is better.”

“Oh, what pleasant things you say!” said Christine. “You make me feel quite happy,” and she held out the cross for him to take.

“I want you to fasten it on,” said Noel. “I mean always to wear it. Will you pin it here?”

He turned back his coat and Christine came close to him and complied with the utmost willingness. The pin was a little blunt or rusted and it took her several seconds to put it in and fasten it. Their faces were almost on a level, and Noel’s

eyes looked closer than they had ever done before at her youthful loveliness. Hers were bent in complete absorption upon her task.

When she had fastened the pin she drew backward, still holding open the coat that she might see the cross in its new position. All the time she never looked at Noel, but all the time he looked at her.

“Thank you,” she said simply.

Noel seemed stricken with silence. His mind was confused, and he did not know what to say. And Christine, wondering that he did not speak, lifted her large eyes to his face and looked at him questioningly. Then Noel remembered himself, and in perfect recollectedness and self-possession he took her hands and kissed them, first one and then the other.

“You have made me your knight,” he said. “Let me never forget it. I am a knight of the Legion of Honor. I shall carry this cross about me always to remind me of it. Thank you, and bless you, Christine.”

Then he dropped her hands, and they sat down and fell to talking. For the first time in his recent intercourse with her she was able to speak of general subjects. There was a momentary lull in her anxiety about the baby, and in her release from that recent and heavy burden she felt a rebound from the more remote causes of unhappiness too. So they got into a talk that was easy and almost bright. They spoke together of foreign lands familiar to them both, of music and painting, and all the things from which her present life divided her so completely that, as Christine said presently, it was like recalling dreams. And then in the midst of it Dallas came in, with his slovenly dress and horrible pipe, and Christine, with an awful look of recollectedness, came back to reality. It was impossible to take this man into a talk like theirs, and Noel quickly said good-night.

IX.

The next day and the next Christine went to the studio, and the sittings passed in almost total silence. It had become more than ever impossible for them to speak to each other, and they both realized it. Then came a day on which Noel waited in vain for Christine. When morning and afternoon were passed and he got no tidings he could bear the suspense no longer, and went to the house to inquire. Old Eliza, the negro servant, opened the door for him and told him the baby was dying. His heart grew cold within him. What would Christine do? How could she bear it? He asked if the doctor had been, and was told he was now up-stairs. He inquired for Dallas. “Gone to walk,” Eliza said with contempt, and then added that “He might as well be one place as another, as he didn’t do no good nowhar.”

Noel saw the doctor, an elderly, capable, decided man, who, as he soon found, took in the whole situation and sympathized with Christine as heartily as he excoriated her husband. Noel said he was an old friend of Christine’s, who was anxious to do all that was possible for her, and had the satisfaction of seeing that he had inspired Dr. Belford with confidence in him. He soon saw that it was unnecessary to ask the good physician to see that her wants and those of the child were supplied, as his own sympathies were thoroughly enlisted, so he could only beg to be notified of anything he could possibly do, and go sadly away.

When Noel came, early next morning, a scant bit of black drapery, tied with a white ribbon, told him that the thing had happened which deprived Christine of all she loved on earth. The desire of her eyes was taken from her and her house was left unto her desolate.

Eliza opened the door, and he came inside the hall and asked her a few questions. The baby had died about midnight, the woman said. Dr. Belford had stayed until it was over. The child was now prepared for burial, the mother having done everything herself, seeming perfectly calm. She would not eat, however, and was lying on the bed by the baby. He did not need to inquire for the father, for at the end of the hall was the dining-room, where he could see Dallas, with his back turned, seated at the table, evidently making a hearty breakfast, the smell of which smote offensively the visitor’s nostrils. Noel felt he

must get away, and yet the thought of Christine, lying up-stairs alone by her little dead baby, seemed to pull him by his very heartstrings.

He put some money into Eliza's hand, telling her to use it as she thought necessary, and then went away. He next sought Dr. Belford and sent a message to Christine, which he felt would fall as coldly as upon the ear of a marble statue, and then he went to a florist's and sent her a great heap of pure white flowers, which he thought she might care to put about the baby. This done he felt helpless, impotent and miserable.

The next morning he went with Dr. Belford and helped to lower into the earth the treasure of Christine's heart. There were but four persons present, the mother, the clergyman, the physician and himself. Dallas had slipped from the house early in the morning, telling Eliza he would not be back, deliberately shirking the unpleasantness of the occasion. He had never shown any love for the child, but a funeral was, in itself, a painful thing, and he ran away from it. This, at least, was the explanation given by Dr. Belford. Noel felt that the kind old doctor was the being who could best help Christine now, since he had been with her through the worst of her trial. So it was he who sat beside Christine as they drove through the crowded city streets, with the little white coffin on the seat opposite. Noel went in another carriage with the clergyman, to whom he told something of Christine's history, begging him to go see her and try to give her comfort, which he promised to do. It seemed a bitter thing to him that both these men seemed to have some place and position beside Christine—and he none! He looked at her during the short service, which tortured his heart with pain for her, but behind her thick veil her face was quite invisible, and her figure was still and cold as marble. He longed unspeakably to try to comfort her, but he felt he could not take one step until she gave some sign that she wanted him. He knew that Dr. Belford had told her that he wished to speak with her as soon as she could bear it, and now he must wait—no matter how long—until she signified her wish to have him come. She had sent him a message of thanks by Dr. Belford, and said she would see him when she could. With that he had to be content. He felt it useless to deny the plain fact that grief had crowded every thought of him out of her heart now.

Every day he sent her flowers—although he felt assured that they all found their way to the cemetery—and every day he went to Dr. Belford to find out how she was. The report was always the same—calm, uncomplaining, hopeless!

He longed to feel that Christine thought of him with some degree of comfort, but

there was absolutely no foundation for such a hope. He had always felt a certain impatient scorn of the unfortunate, and to him totally uninteresting baby, whom Christine had loved with such idolatry, but now he found himself formulating a passionate wish that he could get back the child’s life for her at the sacrifice of his own. He almost felt that he could consent to it.

X.

About two weeks after the death of the baby Dr. Belford called upon Noel. It was absolutely necessary, he said, to do something to rouse Christine from her state of hopeless lethargy. He had accordingly laid his plans to do this. He had discovered, through Eliza, that all the money furnished for the support of the establishment for some time past had come from Christine, and that Dallas even applied to his wife for money for tobacco and car-fares, pretending he went out looking for work.

“As far as I can understand,” said Dr. Belford, “the creature has no strong vices —he is too bloodless and inane for them. Even when he had money it doesn’t appear that he gambled, and I don’t believe he drinks. He is simply wanting in principle, feeling and everything. Eliza says he has scarcely spoken to his wife, or she to him, since the baby died. Indeed she never speaks a word to any one beyond what is strictly necessary. This state of things cannot go on. I told Eliza yesterday to go and ask her for money, which she did. On the heels of it I went to her and told her you wanted to begin a new picture and could find no model so suitable as herself. I asked her if she would agree. She told me then that Eliza had come to her for money to carry on the house, and that she felt she must, in some way, earn it, as she would not owe tradespeople, who could not afford to lose by her. So she asked me to tell you she would begin the sittings to-morrow.”

“What a friend you are, Doctor, to her and to me!” said Noel, grasping his companion’s hand.

The doctor held his hand in a resolute pressure as he looked at him keenly and said:

“I think I know my man. At all events I’m going to trust you. I haven’t much belief in saints, but unless you’re a double-dyed scoundrel you will never betray this trust.”

Noel answered nothing. The two men grasped hands a second longer and then, each satisfied with each, they parted.

When Christine came the next morning the pity that Noel felt for her almost overcame him. It was evident that the sight of the place brought up the saddest

memories, and she appeared at the door empty-armed, instead of weighted down by her helpless little burden. The look on her face, as she threw back her veil, was almost more than he could bear. By a mute little gesture she seemed to implore him not to speak of what filled the minds of both, and he obeyed her. She gave him both her hands. He felt like falling on his knees before her, and controlled himself only by a strong effort. It seemed inhuman not to do something to help her, but what could he do?

“I’m so sorry for you,” was all he could say.

“Don’t speak. Don’t make me speak. You know I thank you for everything. I can’t talk.”

Then, loosing his hands, she walked off to a window and stood looking out, while Noel chose a different canvas and busied himself with preparations for work. Presently she came and placed herself calmly, and Noel began to draw. Occasionally he said some little thing, and she assented, but they both soon felt that silence was the only thing. There was no suggestion of tears in her eyes, but their look was the sadder for that. When the sitting was ended Noel tried to make her take a glass of wine or some fruit, but she turned from them almost with distaste. As she was leaving, however, she asked if she might have the roses on the table. When Noel eagerly said yes she took the great bunch in her hand and went off—he well knew where!

After that she came daily, and the picture progressed, but she, the beautiful model, remained unchanged in her hopeless apathy and misery.

One day at the close of the sitting Noel, as usual, went from the studio to his law-office. The season was dull and his partner was out of town, so it devolved on him to read and attend to the mail. He had read half through the little pile of letters which he found awaiting his attention when he took up one bearing the name and address of a law firm in a Western town, with whom he and his partner had, from time to time, transacted business. He opened it abstractedly and began to run over the contents rather listlessly, when a name caught his eye that arrested his attention. The lawyers proposed to his partner and himself to cooperate with them in a case of bigamy. They had worked it up satisfactorily, they said, their client being the first wife of a man said to be now living with a second one in the city of Noel’s residence. The man’s name was Robert Dallas.

Noel sprang to his feet, while a dizziness that made him almost unconscious took possession of him. He fell back into his chair again, a chill running through all

his veins. If it should be the man Christine had married so hastily in a foreign country—the father of her child! The horror of it overcame him so that for several moments he remained transfixed. Then he reflected that the name might be a mere coincidence, and took up the letter to finish it.

Every word he read strengthened the conviction that it was the Robert Dallas that he knew. There was a minute description of him, which corresponded perfectly, and the lawyer added that he had sent, by express, a photograph and specimens of his handwriting. Noel looked about him. An express parcel, which he had not noticed, lay on the table. He hastily cut the twine and opened it. There were papers and memoranda, and in an envelope a photograph. He tore it open and the weak, handsome face of the father of Christine's child confronted him. There was no longer a doubt of it; Christine, the innocent, the guileless, the confiding, the pure and sweet and lovely, had been betrayed, and by this creature, this miserable excuse for a man, whose dull and feeble beauty looked to him hideous as leprosy. What would become of her? How would she bear it? Who would take care of her when the great shock fell?

A sudden strength came into him. A force that had lain as silent and reserved as the force of steam in water surged forth at the fiery touch of the thought that had first come to him. He got up hastily and put the lawyer's letters and the parcel of papers into his iron safe and locked it. The photograph only he left out, and this he thrust into the inner pocket of his coat. As he was doing so it caught on something. It was his cross. A thought thrilled him. He was her knight of the Legion of Honor, and he felt that he had kept his trust!

He went out of the office, called a cab, and had himself driven to a street and number in a remote suburb of the city. In a quiet, pretty little house, overrun with vines, and facing a green and grassy public square as fresh and lovely as it was unfashionable, he stayed a long time, and when he emerged from it an elderly lady, dressed in black and with a white widow's cap set above her smoothly-brushed hair, came to the door with him and pressed his hand with a fervent "God bless you" as he was leaving her.

It was evident that he had inspired her with some of the ardent spirit that was animating him, for she looked eager and full of interest, and as she turned back within the house, when he had driven off, she had the manner of a person who had work to do that called forth her best energies and sympathies. Noel had the same air as he caused himself to be driven from place to place, in pursuance of some purpose which kept him occupied until far into the night.

XI.

Next morning when the hour for Christine's sitting came Noel was walking up and down in his studio with a face intensely pale from past sleeplessness and present excitement. He looked at his watch frequently, as if impatient, and yet the least sound made him start as if nervous and apprehensive. At last the sound he longed for and yet dreaded was heard, and he went to the door and threw it open for Christine to enter.

She came in without speaking, and throwing back her veil revealed her pale, sad face, with its look of passionless woe.

Noel took her hand as he closed the door behind her and inquired for her health. It was steadier than his, that little black-gloved hand. He felt reluctant to let it go as she withdrew it and began to take off her bonnet and gloves. When she had laid these on the table she ran her fingers with a pretty motion that he had often noticed through the loose masses of her dark hair, where it curved behind her ears. It was quite mechanical and showed an unconsciousness of self that Noel wondered whether he should ever see in her again.

She poured out a glass of water and drank half of it, and then said she was ready to begin. She looked tired, but she said she was not, and would like to begin if he were ready.

"Sit down, Christine," he said gently, "I am not ready to begin yet. I want to talk to you."

She looked surprised, but sank upon the lounge and he seated himself by her side. The utter lassitude of her expression made his task seem desperately hard to begin.

"I have something to tell you, dear Christine," he said, "but I want you to make me a promise first. If the few poor little services I have been able to render you, and the interest and sympathy I have tried to express to you have done anything at all, I think they must have convinced you that I am your true, devoted friend and that you can trust me. Tell me this, Christine; you do trust me—don't you?"

"More than any one on earth—but that is too little," she said hastily—"as much

as I could ever have trusted any one—as much as I trusted those who have been unworthy—and with a feeling that the knowledge of their unworthiness could never affect a thing so high as my faith in you."

"Thank God that it is so. And now, Christine, I call the God we both adore and fear to witness that I will be true to your faith in me, to the last recess of my mind, no less than to the last drop of my blood. See, Christine, I swear it on my cross," and he drew it out, touching the picture as he did so. "Give me your hand," he said, "and we will hold this sacred cross between my hand and yours, and I will tell you this thing, and you must try to feel that I am not only your knight but also your dear brother, in whom all the confidence you have expressed to me is strengthened by the added bond of relationship. Christine, my sister, I want you to realize that there is an ordeal before you which it will take all the strength that you can summon to bear with fortitude. At first you will think it intolerable—impossible to be borne, and I do not pretend to tell you that the blow will not be awful, beyond words. I only want to say to you now, when you are calm enough to listen, that it is not so hopeless and terrible as it will look at first—that there is light beyond, though at first you may not be able to see it. Try to keep that in your mind if you can."

She had given him her hand and they clasped the cross between them. All the time that he was speaking she looked at him with a calm and unbelieving wonder in her large eyes. As he paused she shook her head with grave incredulousness and said quietly:

"You do not know me, Mr. Noel. I thought you understood a little, but you are wrong if you think there is anything you could tell me for which I should care so much. I do not suppose I could make you understand it, but my heart is dead and buried in my baby's grave, and nothing could make me feel as you expect me to feel. The two or three people that I—know" (Noel knew by the pause she made that she had wanted to say love, but couldn't, in honesty, use the word) "are all well. I have just come from them—even Dr. Belford I have seen to-day—but if you were going to tell me they were all dead I could not care a great deal—at least not in the way you expect me to care—for what you have to tell me. It may be wicked to have so hard a heart, but I cannot help it. There is absolutely nothing in all the world that could make me feel in the way you think I ought to feel at what you have to tell me."

"I did not say ought," said Noel, "there is no ought about it. It is a thing inevitable. Oh, Christine, there is no way to lead up to it. I must just tell you and

beg you, for my sake at least, to try to bear it."

"You had better tell me," she said. "You will see how I can bear it."

The calm security of her tones, the passionless wonder of her quiet face were almost maddening. They made him fear the more the effect of the shock when it should come.

"Christine," he said quietly, though his heart was leaping, "it is something about your—about the man you married."

A faint flush came up in her face, and she averted her eyes an instant. Then she looked at him and said calmly:

"I thought you knew that long ago that became one of the subjects upon which I had ceased to feel deeply. If you think it is wrong of me to say this I cannot help it. He hated his little child. He never thought it anything but a trouble and a burden, and he was not sorry when it died. He is glad the trouble of it is over. He had long ceased to feel any love for me—if he ever had it—but if he had cared a little for the poor little baby I could have forgotten that; but he was cruel toward it in thought and feeling, and if I had not watched the treasure of my heart and guarded it unceasingly he would have been cruel to it in deed, too. I know it and Eliza knows it. Oh, why did you make me speak of it? I ought not to say such things. It is wrong."

"Why wrong, Christine? Why do you feel it to be wrong? Tell me."

"Because he is my husband," she said sternly, "and I took solemn vows to love, to serve and to obey him. I said 'for better or for worse.' I said 'till death us do part.' The God who will judge me knows whether I have kept them. The love one cannot control; but one can force one's self to serve and obey, and that I have tried to do."

"And you have done it. I have felt that I could kneel and worship you for it—but, Christine, the truth is too evident to be avoided. He is unworthy of you. Suppose you could be free from him?"

"Divorce?" she said with a sort of horror. "Never! I scarcely know what it is—but marriage seems to me a thing indissoluble and inviolate. I cannot forget that he is the father of my child. I could never wish, on that account, to be free from him."

“Christine, there is another way. Oh, my poor, poor child, you have never even thought of it, and it breaks my heart to tell you. But there is a way you might be free from him without divorce—a sad and dreadful way, my poor little sister, but remember, I implore you, that there is light beyond the darkness. Oh, cannot you think what I mean?”

She shook her head.

“I know he is not dead,” she said; “there is no other way that I know.”

“Suppose—my poor girl, try to be brave now, for you will have to know it—suppose your marriage to him was not legal—was no marriage at all?”

Her face got scarlet.

“That is not possible,” she said, “and if it were, it would make no difference. If he did it without knowing—”

“Christine, Christine, he did not! He knew it, my child. Prepare yourself for the very worst. He deceived you wilfully. Oh, Christine, when he was married to you there was an impossible barrier between you. It was such a thing as you could not dream of. Give me your hands and try to feel that your brother bears this sorrow with you.” He caught her other hand also and pressed them both between his own.

“Christine, he was married already. When he married you, he had already a wife and child.”

She wrenched her hands away and sprang to her feet. A low cry broke from her. Noel felt that it was he who had applied the torture, and he saw her racked with agony and utterly heedless of the comfort he had offered, and had fondly hoped to give her.

“Have you proof for what you say?” she cried, her wild look of confusion and terror making her so unlike her usual self that he seemed not to know her. “I will never believe it without the strongest proof. It is too horrible, too awful, too deadly, deadly shameful to be true. Be quick about it. If there is proof, let me have it.”

“Christine, there is proof. I have it here on the spot, but spare yourself, my poor, poor girl. Wait a little—”

“Don’t talk to me of waiting. Let me see what you have got. Oh, can’t you see that I can bear anything better than not to know? Show me what you have and if what you say is true—”

But she turned away as if his eyes upon her hurt her, and raised her arm before her face. In an instant she lowered it and said entreatingly:

“Oh, show me what you have. Have pity on me.”

Noel took the envelope containing the picture from his pocket.

“This has been sent me by a lawyer,” he said. “The woman is his client. She says he gave her this picture soon after they were married. Oh, Christine, don’t look at it—”

But she walked toward him steadily and took the envelope from his hand. He could not bear to see her when her eyes rested on it, so he turned away and walked off a few paces, standing with his back toward her.

There was a moment’s silence. He heard her slip the picture from the envelope, and he knew that she was looking at it. He heard his watch tick in the stillness, and her absolute silence frightened him. It lasted, perhaps, a moment more and then he turned and looked at her. She was standing erect with the picture in her hand. He saw that she had turned it over and that it was upon the reverse side that her eyes were fixed. There was some writing on it which he had not seen.

She held the photograph out to him, with an intense calm in her manner, but he saw that her nostrils quivered and her breath came short. Her hands were trembling, too, but her voice was steady as she said:

“I am convinced.”

He glanced down at the picture and saw written on the back in a weak, uncertain hand which Christine had evidently recognized, “To my darling little wife, from Robert.”

He felt her humiliation so intensely that he could not look at her, but he took a step toward her and was about to speak when she turned away and, with a tottering step, went toward the sofa and fell heavily upon it, her face buried in her hands. A long breath that was almost a groan broke from her, and then she lay very still, except that now and then a violent shiver would run all along her frame. Poor Noel! He felt the bitterness of the false position he had tried to

occupy. If he had been indeed her brother, this awful grief might have spent itself, to some extent, in his arms. He felt that he was nothing to her, but his heart was none the less soft toward her for that.

Thrusting the picture back into his pocket, he drew a chair near to her, and sat down by her side. He wanted her to feel that he was there, in case she should find it in her heart to turn to him for a help he did not venture to intrude. It seemed a long while that they remained so, but at last Christine sat up, turning upon him a face so strange and terrible that he trembled at the look of it. Sorrow had seared it like a blight. She had been lying upon a seam in the lounge and it had left a red mark across her face. He thought it looked like the wound upon her heart made visible.

“I can never see him again,” she said. “I cannot go home. Oh God, I have no home! It never was a home to me, except when my baby was in it. Oh, my baby boy!—my baby boy!—my little child that loved and clung to me! Oh, God was merciful to take you. My God, I see it now! I thank Thee, I thank Thee, I thank Thee!”

She fell on her knees on the floor, and then she threw herself forward on the couch, and hiding her face again shook from head to foot with great, tearless sobs.

“Oh, I am so glad he is dead! It is so sweet to me to think it! I would have had to look into his big, clear eyes that used to seem to read my very heart, and think of this! Oh, if only I could go and lie beside my baby, in the deep, still ground where the cruel eyes of men and women could not see us, I would want no other home. I have been lonely and miserable, lying in my bed at night, without him, and I have felt that he missed and needed me, as I did him. Oh, if only God would let me go to him, I would be willing to be put into his grave alive and wait for death to come! It would be easier than life with this thing branded on me.”

“Branded on you! Oh, Christine, you must not say it. You will not be branded; you will be, as you have always been, best and purest and truest among women —to me at least. What have you ever been but an angel of nobleness and heroism and devotion to duty? Oh, Christine, I could worship you.”

She rose to her feet and stood before him.

“I believe God will reward you in Heaven for those words,” she said. “You are a man who can see as He sees, in truth and clearness, and you know, as He does, I

have tried to do right. But what you do not know, what He alone can know, is how I have suffered—how every sacred feeling of my woman's heart has been torn and desecrated, and dragged to the earth, and how I endured it all, because I thought it was my duty—and all the time it was—Oh, I feel as if I don't know what may happen to me next to drag me deeper down in misery and sorrow. I thought the worst had come when my baby died, and now a thing so terrible has come as to make that the comfort that I hug to my soul."

She sank to a seat on the couch again, and Noel came and took the place at her side.

"Give me your hand," she said tremblingly. "Oh, I feel so frightened. Now that this has come I feel that the air is full of awful horrors that are waiting to fall upon me."

Noel took her hands in both his own, and she clung to them with a pitiful intensity.

"The worst is over," he said gently. "You have only to let me manage and think for you now—"

"Tell me," she said, "tell me all there is to know—how you found this thing out, and what will be done about it. You must tell it every word to me. I can bear it better now than ever to speak of it again."

And Noel told her, as mercifully and gently as he could, all that he had learned from the lawyer's statements. He wanted to show her how convincing and certain the proof was, that she might be justified in acting on it. She held his hands in a hard grasp and looked at him with excited, distended eyes as she listened to it all. The mixture of wildness and calm in her manner and looks positively terrified him. He feared her reason might be temporarily disturbed, and would have given worlds to see her cry and complain, but she heard him through with the same excited stillness.

"I have a safe and pleasant refuge for you for the present, Christine," he said. "I have arranged everything. A lady—a dear friend of mine, whose son was my friend and a man I loved devotedly—this lady will take you and care for you as a daughter. I have told her everything and she is waiting for you now, longing to love and comfort you. Her son is dead and she has often told me that I, as his friend, came next in her affections, and that she would do anything on earth to serve me. I was able to help him once and she never forgot it. So I went and told

her all the truth. She has a mind as clean and simple as your own, Christine, and she is longing to love and comfort and take care of you. You will let me take you to her—will you not?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "God bless you for it. I could never go back there again," she added with a shudder, "but I must write a letter."

She rose hastily and Noel, wondering, brought her writing materials.

She wrote a hasty note, and sealing it, asked him to have it sent at once. To his surprise he found it was addressed to Dallas.

"I will give it to the janitor as we go down," he said. "Do you feel able to go now, Christine? A carriage will be waiting for us and I will take you to that dear woman who will make you feel as if your mother's arms were around you."

Christine was trembling in every limb, but she reached for her bonnet and tried to tie it on. Her hands shook so that she let it fall. Noel picked it up and held it a moment, saying soothingly:

"Don't hurry. We can wait a little while, if you wish. Try not to be too despairing. When you drive away from here to-day you leave the past behind you, and enter into a new and different life. Your new friend, Mrs. Murray, will know you only as you are now, and you may meet no one unless you wish to. She has very few friends herself, and she will tell them what she chooses of you. You will see she is not a woman that people will dare to ask questions of."

He stopped. A look so dreary, strange and full of anguish had come into Christine's face that he was alarmed and said quickly:

"What is it?"

She struck her hands together and uttered a low cry.

"What is my name?" she said, in a tone so wild and vacant he thought her mind was wandering. "It used to be," she said, passing one hand across her forehead, as if in an effort of memory—"it used to be Verrone—Christine Verrone, but I am not that happy-hearted girl the nuns used to call by that name. This is not Christine Verrone. The very flesh and blood and bones of this body are different—and surely in this mind and heart and soul there is no tinge nor remnant of that old Christine. How, then, can I be she? Oh! I have no home, no country, no dwelling-place on earth; I have not even a name to be called by!"

Noel could bear no more. Taking her hands in his, he held them firmly, and looking in her eyes, said fervently:

“Then take my name, Christine. Let me give you a home and friends, and call you by the name I bear. God knows I would feel honored in bestowing it upon you. If you will commit your precious life into my keeping—if you will marry me—”

The look of her eyes checked him. The meaning of his words had dawned upon her slowly, and to his infinite distress he saw that they filled her with pain.

“You are speaking out of pity for me. You think I would die beneath it, unless you sacrificed yourself and gave me the protection of your name,” she said, speaking almost eagerly. “Tell me this is so. But you do not know how I feel. I can bear it somehow, or else I can die. I could never accept such a sacrifice from you, and, oh, I could never think of marriage again, even to the best and noblest creature on God’s earth, without a shrinking that is pain intolerable.”

Noel saw he had made a mistake. He saw, too, that the only way out of it was to let her put this interpretation on it. So he merely soothed and comforted her, and told her things should be as she chose, and then he tied her bonnet under her chin as if she had been a little girl, gave her her gloves, lowered the veil before her face and asked her if she were ready.

“You will take your sweet girl-name,” he said, “and be known as Mrs. Verrone. Only Mrs. Murray and I will know anything of your past, and we will now turn that page, Christine, and go forth into a new world—and a brighter one, please God.”

XII.

Christine was ill for many weeks, with Dr. Belford in daily attendance, and her faithful old Eliza to help Mrs. Murray with the nursing. All during the long fever, the gentle, little old lady, to whom Noel had confided her, watched and tended her with a mother's devotion and love. The patient was far too ill to protest, and very soon she learned to lean upon and love Mrs. Murray as though she had indeed been her mother. Again poor Noel felt himself banished, ignored and excluded, as he alone was kept away from her, but his care for her was so supremely above his care for himself that he never made a complaint.

He had learned from Eliza—whose mouth was shut so tight to the other servants that she went among them almost like a dumb woman—that on the day of his making the announcement concerning her husband to Christine, a messenger had brought Dallas a note, after reading which he had hurriedly put a few things into a valise and left the house. Since then he had not been heard from. Evidently Christine had warned him in her note and he had run away to escape the suit for bigamy. Noel had not suspected the poor girl's motive in writing, but, on the whole, he was glad. It was the simplest and surest way of getting rid of him.

At last Dr. Belford had pronounced the patient convalescent, and she was sitting up and even moving about the up-stairs rooms.

One afternoon Noel came to the house, as usual, to make inquiries. As he mounted the steps he saw that by some accident the door had been left ajar. He bethought him to go in softly, in the hope of finding Mrs. Murray in one of the lower rooms and taking her by surprise. He had bought a big bunch of crimson roses on the way. He crossed the hall softly and made his way to the cozy little sitting-room, attracted by the flickering light of a wood fire, which looked cheery and comfortable on a day like this. It was burning rather low, but the room was still partly lighted from without, and as he was about to cross the threshold he saw a picture which made him pause.

On a deep lounge half turned toward the fire a girl in white was lying fast asleep. It was Christine. Her dark hair was all gathered loosely back and coiled in a large knot low down against her fair throat, from which the white lace of her gown fell backward, leaving its beautiful pureness bare. There was a charming

air of foreign taste and fashioning about the whole costume. Poor Christine! She had put it on obediently when Mrs. Murray had brought it to her, selecting it from among the contents of her trunk as the most comfortable and suitable thing for the convalescent to wear. It had been long since she had worn or even looked at it, and it had brought back sad memories of her pretty wedding outfit, but all her clothes had sad associations for her, and the ones she had worn more recently would have been worse than this. So she put it on unquestioningly, too listless to care much what she wore, a fact which did not prevent its being exquisitely suitable to her.

She was very white, and the long black lashes that lay against her cheek made a dark shadow under her eyes that made her look the more fragile. Her face was infinitely sad; the corners of the mouth drooped piteously, and a look of trouble now and then slightly contracted the brows.

Noel, who had cautiously drawn near, was seated in a low chair near her feet, scarcely daring to breathe for fear of waking her, and breaking the spell which seemed to hold him, also, in a sleep of enchantment. He made up his mind deliberately that he would remain and be near her when she waked. He had kept himself away from her long enough. Now he must see and talk with her. He sat so for some time, the red roses in his hands, and his steady, grave, intense dark eyes fastened upon her face. Presently a long, deep sigh escaped her, and the fair figure on the lounge moved slightly, and then settled into more profound repose. It was evident that she was sleeping soundly. A thought occurred to Noel, and moving with infinite cautiousness and slowness he took the roses one by one and laid them over her white dress. One of her arms was raised above her head, so that her cheek rested against it, and the other lay along her side, the hand relaxed and empty.

As he was putting the last rose in its place, he observed this little, fragile left hand particularly and saw a thing that made his heart throb: the wedding-ring was gone from it. Christine was free indeed! Here was the sign and token before his very eyes. Being free he might win her for his own. The force of his love in this minute seemed strong enough for any task. Oh, if he could only be patient! He felt it very hard—the hardest task that could beset him, but he gathered all the strength that was in him for a great resolve of patience. The sacredness of it rendered it a prayer.

And Christine slept on profoundly. He had known each moment that she might wake and discover him, but he felt himself prepared for that. He looked at her

and realized that she was well, for in spite of her pallor, she had the look of youthful health and strength, and he said to himself that his banishment was over and the time to set himself to the task before him was come.

As he kept his eyes upon her lovely face a sudden little smile lifted, ever so slightly, the corners of her mouth, as if there were pleasure in her dream. The man's heart thrilled to see it. If a dream could make her smile—if the power to smile remained to her—reality should do it, too. If he could just be patient! If he could keep down the longing in his heart that clamored for relief in uttered words!

A piece of wood upon the fire fell apart, sending up a bright little blaze. The sound of it wakened Christine. Still with the memory of that dream upon her she opened her eyes, and met Noel's gaze fixed on her in sweet friendliness and gladness. For an instant neither spoke. Christine's large eyes, clear as jewels in the firelight, gazed at him across the bank of crimson roses that seemed to send a red flush to her face.

Noel spoke first.

"All right again, at last!" he said, with a cheering smile. "Have you had a pleasant nap?"

And he leaned forward and held out his hand.

A rush of sad remembrance came over Christine's face. The lines of her mouth trembled a little and she dropped her eyes as she took his hand in both her own and pressed it silently. Noel knew the touch meant only gratitude, and it left him miserably unsatisfied, but he felt himself strong to wait. She dropped his hand, and for a moment covered her face with her own, as if to collect herself thoroughly. Then she sat upright in her seat, scattering the roses to the floor. Noel knelt to gather them up for her, and when he had collected the great mass into a gorgeous bunch he knelt still as he held them out to her.

She took them, hiding her face in their glowing sweetness, and Noel, rising, walked a few steps away, feeling it impossible to speak, unless he allowed himself the words he had forsworn.

At this instant a cheery voice was heard in the hall.

"Who in the world left the front door open?" it said, in energetic, matter-of-fact tones, at the sound of which Noel felt suddenly fortified.

Mrs. Murray had entered just in time, for the sight of Christine here alone had been almost too much for the resolutions of reserve in which he had flattered himself he was so strong.

XIII.

In a little while the lives of Mrs. Murray and Christine had settled into a calm routine of work and talk, and the simple recreations of reading and house-decorating which were the only ones that Christine ever seemed to think of. She never went out, and worked with as much application as Mrs. Murray would permit at the embroidery which, at her earnest request, the wise old lady had got for her. She and Christine had a frank and loving talk, in which one was as interested as the other, in Christine's making her own living, and in which it was settled, to the joy of each, that their home in future was to be together. They were days of strange peace and calm for poor Christine, and her heart would swell with gratefulness for them, as she sat over her beautiful embroidery, which was in itself a pleasure to her.

But the evenings were the best of all, for then Noel invariably came—sometimes to look in and say a bright and cheery word, on his way to keep an engagement, sometimes to give them the benefit of the bright stories and good things he had heard at a dinner, and sometimes to spend a whole long evening, talking, laughing and reading aloud from new magazines and books which he brought with him in abundance. These were the sorts of delights utterly unknown to Christine before. She had read very little, and the world of delight that reading opened up to her was new, inspiring and enchanting. Noel read aloud his favorite poets, their two young hearts throbbing together, and their eyes alight with feeling at the passages which left the matured heart of Mrs. Murray undisturbed.

It had been in vain that Mrs. Murray had tried to induce Christine to sing. It occurred to her at last to put it in the light of a favor to herself, and when she told Christine that she loved music very dearly, and rarely had an opportunity to hear it, the girl went at once and played and sang for her, and then Mrs. Murray used the same argument—that of giving a friend pleasure—with regard to Noel. At first it was difficult and awkward, but before very long Christine and Noel were singing duets together, and music now became a delightful part of their evening's entertainment. How dull the evenings were when Noel did not come! —for sometimes there were engagements from which he could not escape. Mrs. Murray missed him much herself and it pleased her to be sure that Christine did also. Sometimes he would come late after a dinner, and if it were only a brief half-hour that he spent with them it made the evening seem a success, instead of

a failure.

After a little while Mrs. Murray succeeded in inducing Christine to take walks with her along those quiet unfashionable streets, in the bracing air of the late autumn afternoons. She would return from these expeditions so refreshed, with such a charming color in the fair, sweet face to which peace and love and protecting companionship had given an expression of new beauty, that Mrs. Murray would be half protesting at the thought that the people that passed it, in the street, were deprived of a sight of its loveliness by that close, thick veil, which it never seemed to occur to Christine to lay aside. It seemed an instinct with her, and her good friend felt hurt to the very heart when she thought what the instinct had its foundation in.

In proportion as the influence of these days and weeks brought peace and calm to Christine, to Noel they brought an excited restlessness. He was under the spell of the strongest feeling that he had ever known. All the circumstances of his intercourse with Christine, the difficult self-repression to which he had compelled himself so long, and the sudden sense of her freedom which made vigilance harder still—all these things together brought about in him a state of excitement that kept him continually on a strain. It was only in her presence that he was calm, because it was there that he recognized most fully the absolute need of calmness and self-control. Away from her, he sometimes rushed into rash resolves, as to a resolute manly sort of wooing which he felt tremendously impelled to, and in which he felt a power in him to succeed. He would even make deliberate plans, and imagine himself going to the house and insisting on seeing Christine alone, and then his thoughts would fairly fly along, uttering themselves in excited words that burned their way to Christine’s heart and melted it.

But when, in actuality, he would come to where she was, all these brave and manful purposes faded, like mist, before the commanding spell of her deep and solemn calm. She seemed so tranquil in her assured sense of his simple friendliness that he often thought she must have forgotten entirely, in the excitement that followed, that he had offered her his heart and hand and name, or else that she was so convinced of the fact that it had been done in pity that she had never given it a second thought.

So perplexed, bewildered, overwrought did he become with all these thoughts that he forced himself to make some excuse and stay away from Christine. When at last he went again, it was late in the evening and his time, he knew, would be

short. It was three days now since he had been, and his blood flowed quick with impatience. He had thought of little else as he sat through the long dinner, eating the dishes set before him while he talked with a certain preoccupation to the beautiful *débutante* whom he had brought in, and who made herself her most fascinating for him, Noel being just the sort of man to represent such a girl's ideal—older, graver, more finished in manner than herself, and possessed of the still greater charm of being thoroughly initiated in all the mysteries of the great world, across whose threshold only she had seen. She was exceedingly pretty, and Noel was too much an artist not to be alive to it, but as he looked at the fair, unwritten page her face represented to him, he was seeing, in his mind's eye, that far lovelier face on which the spiritualizing, beautifying hand of sorrow had been laid. He had not gone thus far on his journey of life without deep suffering himself, and the heart that had suffered was the one to which he felt his true kinship. At the close of the dinner the whole party adjourned to the opera, Noel alone excusing himself, at the door of the *débutante's* carriage, on the plea of an important engagement. The lovely bud looked vexed and disappointed, but Noel knew his place at her side would be abundantly filled, and got himself away with all the haste decorum permitted.

When he rang at Mrs. Murray's door Harriet ushered him into the little drawing-room where Christine was seated at the piano singing. Mrs. Murray was not present. Motioning the servant not to announce him he took his position behind a screen, where he could see and hear without being seen. Christine had heard neither his ring nor his entrance, so she was utterly unconscious of any presence but her own, and indeed most probably not of that, for there was a strange abandonment to sway of the song as her voice, rich and full and deep, sang softly:

"I am weary with rowing, with rowing,
Let me drift adown with the stream.
I am weary with rowing, with rowing,
Let me lay me down and dream."

Noel knew the little song well, and in his fancy the full, pathetic voice gave it a sound and meaning that his longing heart desired to hear in it. The thrilling voice sang on, low and deep and full:

"The stream in its flowing, its flowing,
Shall bear us adown to the sea.

I am weary with rowing, with rowing,
I yield me to love and to thee.
I can struggle no longer, no longer,
Here in thine arms let me lie,
In thine arms which are stronger, are stronger
Than all on the earth, let me die."

The sweet voice trembled as the song came to an end, and Christine, with a swift, impulsive movement, put her elbows on the keys of the piano, making a harsh discord of sound, and dropped her face in her hands. She remained so, without moving, for several minutes, while Noel, thrilling in all his senses to the power of that subtly sweet song, kept also profoundly still. He felt it was his only safety. If he had moved, it must have been to clasp her in his arms.

At last she rose to her feet and began to put the music in order. It was a moment when life, for each of them, seemed very hard. And yet, to one who looked and saw them so, it seemed as if the best that earth could offer might be theirs, and that they were made and fashioned to have and to enjoy it.

The pretty room was a soft glow of firelight and lamplight mingled. The rich harmonies of dark color made by carpets, hangings and furniture were lighted here and there by an infinite number of the charming little things that are the perfecting touches of a tasteful room. A bunch of freshly-gathered autumn leaves was massed under the light from the shaded lamp. Near by sat Christine. She had taken up a strip of gorgeous embroidery in her hands, and was bending above it and trying hard to put her stitches in with care. To-night there was a steady flush in her cheeks that made her look more beautiful than he had ever seen her. He advanced a step or two, and stood, unseen, at a little distance from her, making unconsciously a complement to the picture. He took a step forward—and she heard the sound and lifted her head. He came nearer and his voice was sweet and thrilling as he said her name:

"Christine."

She raised her eyes and looked at him; but they dropped before his steady gaze, and she did not answer.

"Let me speak to you a little, dear Christine," he went on, taking a seat near her. He had himself well in hand and was determined not to blunder. Christine sat opposite and drew her needle through and through, saying neither yes nor no. "I want to be very careful not to hurt you," Noel went on, "but I have had it on my

mind a long, long time to talk to you about yourself. Do you intend to lead always, without change or variation, the isolated, dull, restricted life you are leading now?”

“Oh, don’t speak to me of any change!” she said entreatingly. “You have been so good to me. Be good to me still. Let me stay here, as I am, in this heaven of rest and peace. Mrs. Murray will keep me. She is not tired of me. She loves to have me, and it is my one idea of blessedness and comfort and rest.”

Her voice was agitated almost to tears, and she had dropped her work and clasped her hands together with a piteousness of appeal.

“No one will hinder you, Christine,” he said. “Mrs. Murray is made better and brighter and happier by your presence every day, and it would be only the greatest grief to her to part with you. This is your sure and safe and certain home as long as she lives, unless, of your own choice, you should choose to change it.”

Christine shook her head with a denial of the thought that was almost indignant.

“Never,” she said, “oh, never, never! I only ask to stay here, as I am, until I die.”

“Christine,” he said, and she could feel his strong gaze on her, through her lowered lids, “try to be honest with your own heart. Listen to its voice and you will have to own you are not happy.”

“Happy! How could I ever expect to be? It would be a shame to me even to think of it. Oh, you do not know a woman’s nature, or you could not talk to me of happiness.”

“I know your woman’s nature, Christine—well enough to reverence it and kneel to it, and I am not afraid to tell you you are outraging and wronging it, by shutting out happiness from your heart. What is there to hinder you from being happy? And oh, Christine, I know at least, there is no happiness but love.”

A silence, solemn and still as death, followed these fervent, low-toned words. He could see the fluttering of her breath, and the look of deep, affrighted pain upon her face made his heart quiver.

“Christine,” he murmured in a voice grown softer and lower still, “try not to be frightened or distressed. I cannot hold back my heart any longer. I love you—dear and good and noble one. If you could only love me a little, in return, I could make you so happy. I know I could, Christine, and as for me—why my life, if

you refuse me your love, is worthless and wasted and dead. Oh, Christine, you are the very treasure of my heart, whether you will or no. Be my wife. You can make my happiness, as surely as I, if you will let me, can make yours."

He would not venture to take her hand, but he held out his to her, saying in a voice that had sunk to a whisper:

"Only put your hand in mine, Christine, in token that you will try to love me a little, and I will wait for all the rest."

He had bent very close to her, and she felt his breath against her hair as his passionate whisper fell upon her ear. Her heart thrilled to it, but she got up stiffly to her feet, bending her body away from him and covering her eyes, for a moment, with her hand.

Noel, who had risen too, stepped backward instantly. He saw her lips compressed convulsively as if in pain, and, for her sake, he thrust down into his heart its great longing, and forced himself to think of her alone. It cut him like a knife to see that she drew away from him.

"Don't shrink from me, Christine," he said. "If it distresses you for me to speak I can be silent. I was obliged to tell you, but there it can stop. I have laid the offering of my love and life before you and there it is for you to take or leave. Perhaps I have startled you. If you will only think about it and try to get used to the idea—"

But Christine had found her voice.

"I cannot think of it!" she cried. "I utterly refuse to think of it. Oh, I am more miserable than ever I have been yet! If I am to make you unhappy—if I am to spoil your life—"

"You have beautified and glorified and crowned it with love, Christine. I should have gone to my grave without it, if you had not given it to me. It is a godlike thing to feel what I feel for you. Come what may I shall never be sorry for it. You have nothing to reproach yourself with."

Christine was very pale. She felt herself trembling as she sank into a chair and clasped her hands about her knee. Noel too sat down, but farther away from her than he had been before.

"I entreat you not to be distressed—" he began, but she interrupted him.

“Oh, I feel—I cannot tell you what I feel,” she said. “Was ever a woman at once so honored and so shamed? How could I give to any man a ruined life like mine, and yet God knows how it is sweet to me to know you have this feeling for me—to know that I may still arouse in such a heart as yours this highest, holiest, purest, best of all the heart can give. Oh, I pray God to let you feel and know the joy it is to me—and yet I’d rather cut off my right hand than listen even to the thought of marrying you.”

Noel could not understand her. The look in her face completely baffled him.

“Christine,” he said, “there is but one thing to do. On one thing alone the whole matter rests. Look at me.”

His voice was resolute, though it was so gentle, and in obedience to its bidding Christine raised her eyes to his.

“Answer me this, Christine. Do you love me?”

And looking straight into his eyes she answered:

“No.”

Noel rose from his seat and crossed over to the fire, where he stood with his back toward her. He did not see the passionate gesture with which she strained her clasped hands to her breast a moment and then stretched them out toward him. In a second she withdrew them and let them fall in her lap. Her heart reproached her for the falseness of her tongue, and this had been a passionate impulse of atonement to him for the wrong that she had done. But stronger than her heart was the other voice that told her to make her utmost effort to keep up the deceit, for in the moment that the knowledge came to her that her heart, for the first time, was possessed by a true and mighty love an instinct stronger than that love itself compelled her to deny it—to give any answer, go any length, do anything sooner than make an admission by which she might be betrayed into doing a great and ineradicable wrong to the man she loved. Yes, the man she loved! For one second’s space she let the inward flame leap up, and then she forced it back and smothered it down, with all the power that was in her.

When Noel turned, his face was calm and he spoke, too, in a controlled and quiet voice.

“We will not be the less friends for this, Christine,” he said; “the best that is left to me is to be near you when I can. You will not forbid me this?”

He saw that her eyes consented. To save her life she could not deny him this—or deny herself. Which was it that she thought of first?

“I think it best that Mrs. Murray should not know of it,” he said, and again she consented without speaking.

“I shall come as usual,” he went on, “and, Christine, never reproach yourself. Never dream but that it is more joy than I could ever have had in any other way, only to come and see you and be near you and hear you speak sometimes. Good-night,” he added, taking her cold, little hand in a gentle clasp. “It is the last time. You will see how faithful I will be. But once for all—Christine, Christine, Christine!—let me tell you that I love you with as great and true and strong a love as ever man had for woman. You seem to me a being between earth and Heaven—better than men and women here, and only a little below the angels.”

She felt the hand that held hers loose its hold, the kind voice died away, a door far off shut to, and Christine, rousing herself, looked about her and found that she was alone.

XIV.

Two evenings later Noel called again, finding Mrs. Murray recovered and able to join the group around the table as usual. There was no consciousness expressed in the eyes of either Christine or himself as they met. At first she was very grave and silent, but under the influence of his easy talk her manner became perfectly natural, and at the close of the evening she found herself wondering if the exciting occurrences of their last meeting could be reality. Noel read aloud most of the evening an agreeable, unexciting book, and Christine thanked him from her heart that he did not ask, as usual, for music.

As for Mrs. Murray, as the days went on she found herself continually wondering that such a state of things could last. She was perfectly sure of Noel's feeling, and she thought its continued entire suppression very strange. She was often tempted to make some excuse to leave them alone, but a fear of the consequences held her back, for she was absolutely unable to calculate upon Christine. She had not the courage to lift a finger in the matter.

Almost imperceptibly a change was coming over Christine, and by degrees Mrs. Murray became aware of it. She grew more silent and fond of being alone. She even went out now and took long, companionless walks, coming home exhausted and preoccupied. "Poor girl!" thought her kind, old friend. "She is very unhappy, and for a little while, in her deliverance from a worse unhappiness, she had managed to forget it partly."

On one occasion Noel rather urgently pressed the matter of being allowed to bring his mother and sisters to call. He did so in the hope that time might have somewhat modified Christine's feeling in the matter, but he found it absolutely unchanged and was obliged to withdraw his request.

As the days and weeks went by Noel became every day more restless and gloomy. He was unhappy if he stayed away from Christine, and yet to be in her presence merely as a friendly visitor was often galling and depressing to an almost intolerable degree. He scarcely ever saw her alone for a moment, and he had a certain conviction that while Mrs. Murray did some gentle plotting to leave them *tête-à-tête* Christine managed ingeniously to thwart her plans.

About this time he was compelled to go away for a week on a business

expedition, and so, for more than that space of time, he had not called at Mrs. Murray's. When he rang the door-bell on the evening of his return Harriet, who answered it, left him to find his way alone to the pretty sitting-room, warm and lighted and empty, as he thought. The next instant, however, his heart gave a bound, as he saw at its opposite end Christine, tall and slight and young and beautiful, standing, with her back turned, before a table against the wall, on which a large engraving rested.

It was heavily framed and he knew he had never seen it there before. The fact was Mrs. Murray, who had a very romantic heart, had seen it in a shop-window and impulsively bought it, and it had just been sent home.

Noel, stepping with the utmost caution over the thick carpet, came near enough to look at the picture over Christine's shoulder. He knew it well. It was Frederick Leighton's "Wedded."

As the man and woman stood before it each was under the spell of that beautiful representation of abandonment to love—the deep and holy wedded love which is the God-given right of every man and woman who lives and feels.

Christine was utterly unconscious of his nearness as she bent toward it eagerly. He could see by the movement of her throat and shoulders that her breaths were coming thick and fast and her heart was beating hard. As for him the fact that he was near to her was the supreme consciousness of that moment to him, and all the meaning of this consciousness was in his voice, as he whispered her name:

"Christine!"

She started and turned. His eyes caught hers and held them. For a moment she found it impossible to release them from his compelling gaze. She was under the spell of the picture still. It had broken down the habitual barriers of restraint and self-control, and sent an exultant gleam into her heart, which her face reflected.

"Christine!" he said again in that thrilling whisper.

The sound of his voice recalled her. That strange, exalted look gave place to another, which was as if a withering blight had crossed her face, and she turned and looked at Noel. He met that look of desolation and anguish with firm, unflinching eyes.

"I love you," he whispered low, but clear.

“Then spare me,” she whispered back.

“Once more, Christine,” he said. They kept their places, a few feet apart, and neither moved a muscle except for the slight motion of their lips, from which the faint sounds came forth like ghostly whispers. “Once more, Christine—answer me this. Do you love me?”

And again she answered:

“No.”

The tone in which she said it was strong and steady in spite of its lowness, and the eyes confirmed it.

The suspense was over. With that strange recollectedness which human beings often have in the sharpest crises of their lives Noel suppressed the great sigh that had risen from his heart, and let the breath of it go forth from his parted lips, with careful pains to make no sound.

It was a relief to both that at this moment Mrs. Murray came into the room. They turned abruptly from the picture, and in the cordial greeting which the hostess bestowed upon her guest the moment’s ordeal was successfully passed. Not, however, without the watchful eyes of Mrs. Murray having seen much, and conjectured far more. Whether her impulse in buying the picture had done good or harm she was puzzled to determine.

XV.

Noel, during the sleepless hours of the night which followed, looked the whole situation in the face and made his resolutions, strong and fast, for the future of Christine and himself. His love for her, which she had not forbidden and could not forbid, must be enough for him henceforth, and because all his soul desired her love in return she should not, for that reason, be deprived of his friendship. When he thought of loving any other woman, and being loved by her in return, and contrasted it with the mere right to love Christine and be near her, forever unloved, he felt himself rich beyond telling.

That evening, determined to put into effect at once this new resolution and conveying some hint of it to Christine, he went to Mrs. Murray's. He rang the bell and entered the house with a strong sense of self-possession, which was only a very little disturbed when the maid again ushered him into the little drawing-room where he found Christine alone.

He could see that his coming was utterly unexpected. The lamp, by which she usually sat at work, was not lighted, and the gas in the hall cast only a dim light upon her here, but the fire lent its aid in lighting up the figure. She was lying on the lounge before the fire as he came in, but she rose to her feet at once, saying, in a voice whose slight ring of agitation disturbed a little farther yet his self-poised calm:

"Mrs. Murray has gone to see a neighbor whose daughter is very ill. They have just moved to the house and have no friends near, and she went to see what she could do. She will be back very soon. She did not think you would come to-night."

Noel heard the little strained sound in her voice, and fancied he saw also about her eyes a faint trace of recent tears; but the light was turned low and she stood with her back to it, as if to screen herself from his gaze. A great wave of tenderness possessed his heart. He felt sure he could trust himself to be tender and no more, as he said gently:

"Christine, have you been crying—here all alone in the darkness, with no one to comfort and help you to bear? The thought of it wrings my heart."

“Oh, it is nothing,” she said, her voice, in spite of her, choking up. “I sometimes get nervous—I am not used to being alone. It is over now. I will get the lamp—”

But he stopped her. He made one step toward her and took both her hands in his.

“Wait,” he said, in a controlled and quiet tone. In the silence that followed the word they could hear the little clock on the mantel ticking monotonously. Noel was trying hard, as they stood thus alone in the stillness and half-darkness, to gather up his suddenly-weakened forces, so that he might tell her, in the hope of giving her comfort, of the resolute purpose he had entered into. But in the moment which he gave himself to make this rally a sudden influence came over him from the contact of the cold hands he held in his. At first it was a subtle, faint, indefinite sensation, as of something strange and wonderful and far away, but coming nearer. The very breath of his soul seemed suspended, to listen and look as he waited. The clock ticked on, and they stood there motionless as statues. Suddenly a short, low sigh escaped Christine, and he felt her cold hands tremble. The swift consciousness that ran through Noel was like living ecstasy injected in his veins. He drew her two hands upward and crushed them against his breast.

“Christine,” he said, “you love me.”

She met his ardent, agitated gaze with direct, unflinching eyes.

“Yes,” she said distinctly, “I love you,” but with the exertion of all her power she shook herself free from his grasp, and sprang away from him to the farthest limit of the little room.

“Stop,” she said, waving him back with her hand. “I have owned the truth, but I must speak to you—”

As well might Christine have tried to parley with a coming storm of wind. The chained spirit within Noel had been set free by the words, “Yes, I love you,” that Christine had spoken, and his passionate love must have its way. He followed her across the room, and with a gentle force, against which she was as helpless as a child, he compelled her to come into his arms, to put down her head against his shoulder and to rest on his her bounding heart. He held her so in a close, restrictive pressure, against which she soon ceased to struggle, but lay there still and unresisting.

“Now,” he said gently, speaking the low word softly and clearly in her ear, “now,

speak, and I will listen."

"I love you," she said brokenly.

Their full hearts throbbed together as he answered:

"That is enough."

"It is all—the utmost," she went on. "I can never marry you. When you loose me from your arms to-night it will be forever. Hold me close a little longer while I tell you."

Her voice was faint and uncertain; her frame was trembling; he could feel the whole weight of her body upon him, as he held her against his exultant heart, while the power that had come into him gave him a strength so mighty that he supported the sweet burden as if its weight were nothing.

"Go on," he murmured gently, in a secure and quiet tone, "I am listening."

"I only want to tell you, if I can, how much I love you. I want you to know it all, that the torment of having it unsaid may leave me."

Of her own will she raised her arms and put them about his neck, laying down her face on one of them, so that her lips were close against his ear.

"At the first," she said, "I liked and admired you because I saw you were good and noble. Then I trusted you, and made your truth my anchor in the awful seas of trouble I was tossed in. Then I came to reverence and almost worship you for the highness that is in you, and then, oh, then after my baby died and my other dreadful sorrow came, against my will, in spite of hard fighting and struggling and trying, I went a step higher yet and loved you, with a love that takes in all the rest—that is admiration, and trust, and reverence, and love in one. Oh," she said with a great sigh, "but it is all in vain! I cannot tell you—I cannot! I say the utmost, and it seems pale and poor and miserably weak. You do not understand the love you have called into being in my poor, broken heart. I thought I should have the comfort of feeling I had told you. I feel only that I have failed! Oh, before we part, I want you to know how I love you—how the stress of it is bursting my heart—how the mightiness of it seems to expand my soul until it touches Heaven. Oh, if I could only ease my heart of its great weight of love by finding words to tell you."

He put his lips close to her ear.

“One kiss,” he said softly, and then turned them to meet hers.

Christine gave him the kiss, and it was as he had said. The stress upon her heart was loosened. She felt that she had told him all.

“You are mine,” he said, in a calm, low voice of controlled exultation, although, even as he said it, he loosed her from his arms and suffered her to move away from him and sink into a chair. He came and sat down opposite her, repeating the words he had spoken.

“No,” she said, “I am my own! I am the stronger to be so, now that the whole truth is known to you. Mr. Noel, I have only to tell you good-by. To-night must be the very last of it.”

“Mr. Noel!” he threw the words back to her, with a little scornful laugh. “You can never call me that again, without feeling it the hollowest pretence! I tell you you are mine!”

The assured, determined calm of his tones and looks began to frighten her. She saw the struggle before her assuming proportions that made her fear for herself—not for the strength of her resolve, but for her power to carry it out. She could only repeat, as if to fortify herself:

“I will never marry you.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Because—ah, because I love you too much. Be merciful, and let that thought plead for me.”

“It is for the same reason that I will never give you up. It is no use to oppose me now, Christine. You are mine and I am yours.”

“But if you know that you make me suffer—”

“I know, too, that I can comfort you. I know I can make you happy, beyond your highest dreams. I know I can take you away from every association of sadness, far off to beautiful foreign countries where no one will know us for anything but what we are—what alone we shall be henceforth, a man and woman who love each other and who have been united in the holy bond of marriage, which God has blessed—just a husband and wife, Christine—get used to the dear names and thought—with whose right to love each other no one will have anything to do. If

the idea of the past disturbs you we will get rid of it by going where we have no past, where no one will ever have heard of us before. As for ourselves, Christine, I can give you my honor that there is nothing in the past of either of us that disturbs me for one pulse-beat, and I'll engage to make you forget all that it pains you to remember. Why, it is a simple thing to do. We send for a clergyman, and here in this room, with Mrs. Murray and Eliza and Harriet for witnesses, we are married to-morrow morning! In the afternoon we sail for Europe, to begin our long life of happiness together. You know whether I could make you happy or not, Christine. You know whether your heart longs to go with me—just as surely as I know that my one possible chance of happiness is in getting your consent to be my wife."

"I cannot!" she said, "I cannot! We must think of others beside ourselves. If you are willing to sacrifice yourself, think of your mother and sisters!"

"Sacrifice myself! I sacrifice myself only if I give you up. You must feel the falseness of such a use of the word. As for my mother and sisters, I ask you to test that matter. Agree to marry me and I promise that they will come to our wedding, and my mother will call you daughter, and my sisters will call you sister, and they will open their hearts to you and love you."

"Because your will is all-powerful with them," she said.

"Yes, partly because they trust and believe in me, and will sanction what I do; and also because—in spite of a good deal of surface conventionality and worldliness—they are right-minded, true-hearted, good women, who will only need to know your whole history, as I know it, and to realize my love for you, as I can make them realize it, to feel that our marriage is the right and true and only issue of it all."

Christine felt herself terribly shaken. She did not dare to look at Noel lest her eyes might betray her, and she would not for anything have him to know how she was weakened in her resolve by what he had said of his mother and sisters. The conviction with which he spoke had carried its own force to her mind, and she suddenly found the strongest weapon with which she had fought her fight shattered in her hands. He saw that she was weakening, but he would not take advantage of it. She was so white and tremulous; her breath came forth so quick and short; the drawn lines about her mouth were so piteous that he felt she must be spared.

"I will not press you now, Christine," he said; "take time to think about it. Let

me come again to-morrow morning. I will leave you now and you must try to rest. Talk freely to Mrs. Murray. Ask her what you must do. Remember that I consent to wait, only because I am so determined. Listen to me one moment. I swear before Heaven I will never give you up. You gave yourself to me in that kiss, and you are mine."

"Yes," she said, as if that struggle were over with her now, "I am yours. I know it. Even if we part forever I am always yours. I will tell you what I will do. Your mother shall know everything and she shall decide."

He was at once afraid and glad, and Christine saw it.

"I must see your mother," she began.

"I will see her for you. I will tell her everything and you shall see she will be for us. But if she should not, I warn you, Christine, I will not give you up for any one alive."

"Listen to me," said Christine calmly. "This is what you must do. You must go to your mother and tell her there is some one that you love. Tell her as fully and freely as you choose. Convince her of the truth and strength of it as thoroughly as you can, and tell her that woman loves you in return, but has refused to marry you, for reasons which, if she would like to hear them, that woman herself will lay before her. I cannot let you do it for me," she went on earnestly. "I know you would wish to spare me this, but only a woman's tongue could tell that story of misery, and only a woman's heart could understand it. You think she will love me for my misfortunes, as you have done in your great, generous heart. I do not dare to think it, but I will put it to the test. You must promise me to tell her nothing except just what I have told you. Do you promise this?"

"I promise it, upon my honor; but remember, if my mother should decide against me, I do not give you up."

"No, but I will give you up."

"Christine!" he cried. "And yet you say you love me!"

"Oh, yes, I say I love you—and you know whether it is true."

She stood in front of him and looked him firmly in the face, but the look of her clear eyes was so full of crowding, overwhelming sorrow that love, for a while, seemed to have taken flight.

In vain he tried to put his hopeful spirit into her. She only shook her head and showed him a face of deep, unhoping sorrow.

“If your mother consents to see me, appoint an hour to-morrow morning and let me know. I will take a carriage and go alone—”

“I will come for you. I will bring my mother’s carriage—”

“No, I must go alone, and I prefer to go in a hired carriage. You must see that no one else is present—neither of your sisters. It is to your mother only that I can say what I have to say.”

“Everything shall be as you wish. But, Christine, don’t be hurt if you find my mother’s manner difficult, at first. She has had a great deal of trouble, and it has made her manner a little hard—”

“Ah,” she said, “I can understand that.”

“But it is only her manner,” Noel went on, “her heart is kind and true.”

“Don’t try to encourage me. I am not afraid. If she has known the face of sorrow that is the best passport between us. Perhaps she will understand me.”

“Promise me this, Christine—that whatever happens, you will see me to-morrow evening—and see me alone.”

“I promise, but it may be to say good-by.”

He repressed the defiant protest of his heart, secure in his strong resolve.

“Good-night, Christine,” he said.

“Good-night,” she answered. Her eyes seemed to look at him through a great cloud of sorrow, and her voice was like the speaking of a woman in a dream. There was a great and availing force in the mood that held her. Noel knew she wished to be alone and that she had need of the repose of solitude. So he only clasped her hand an instant, in a strong, assuring pressure, and was gone.

Exhausted, worn out, spent with sorrow, Christine retired at once to her room, and went wearily to bed, wondering what the next day would bring. She soon fell into a deep sleep, and slept heavily till morning, waking with a confused mingling of memory and expectancy in which joy and pain were inseparably united.

XVI.

Noel’s note came early. It announced that his mother would be ready to receive her visitor any time after eleven. It was full of the strongest assurances of love and constancy, and Christine knew it was meant to comfort and support her in her approaching ordeal. She felt so strong to meet this, however, that even Mrs. Murray’s earnest protest that harm would come of the visit failed to intimidate her, and she turned a deaf ear to all her good friend’s entreaties to her to give it up. Mrs. Murray’s advice was for the immediate marriage and departure for Europe, but Christine’s mind was made up, and could not be shaken.

She was feeling strangely calm as she drove along through a part of the great city she had never ever seen before, where there were none but splendid houses, with glimpses, through richly-curtained windows, of luxurious interiors, and where all the people who passed her, whether on foot or in handsome carriages, had an air of ease and comfort and luxury that made her feel herself still more an alien. She did not regret her resolution, but she felt quite hopeless of its result. It would make matters simpler for her, at all events.

When the carriage stopped she got out with a strange feeling of unreality, closed the door behind her, careful to see that it caught, spoke to the driver quietly and told him to wait, and then walked up the steps and rang the bell. During the moment she stood there a boy came along and threw a small printed paper at her feet. It was an advertisement of a new soap, and she was reading it mechanically when the door was opened by a tall man-servant who stood against the background of a stately hall, whose rich furnishings were revealed by the softened light that came through the stained glass windows. Christine was closely veiled, and coming out of the sunshine it all seemed obscure and dim. She asked if Mrs. Noel was at home, and when the man said yes, and ushered her in she desired him to say to Mrs. Noel that the lady with whom she had an appointment was come.

Then she sat down in the great drawing-room and waited. The silence was intense. She seemed to have shrunk to a very small size as she sat in the midst of all this high-pitched, broad-proportioned stateliness. As her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness the objects about her seemed to come out, one by one—beautiful pictures, graceful statues, rich draperies and delicate, fine

ornaments of many kinds. A carriage rolled by outside, one of the horses slipping on the thin coat of ice with which the shady side of the street was covered. The driver jerked him up sharply, with a smothered exclamation, and went on. As the sound of wheels died away she could hear a street band far off, playing a popular air. Then that too ceased and the silence without was as profound as the silence within. Christine felt precisely as if she were dreaming. It seemed to her hours that she had waited here, though she knew it was only a very few minutes, before the servant returned. Mrs. Noel requested that she would be kind enough to come up-stairs, he said.

Christine followed him silently up the great staircase, and was ushered into a room near its head. She heard the door closed behind her, and saw a small, slight figure, dressed in black, standing opposite to her.

“Good-morning. Excuse my asking you to come up-stairs,” a clear, refined voice began; but suddenly it broke off, and perfect silence followed, and the eyes of the two women met. Christine was very pale, and those beautiful eyes of hers had dark rings around them, but they were marvellously clear and true, and, above all, they were eloquent with sorrow.

The elder woman advanced to her and took her hand.

“Oh, my child, how you must have suffered!” she said.

“Ah, you know what it is. You have suffered, too. We shall understand each other better for that.”

“My dear, I seem to understand it all. Don’t be unhappy. You need have no fear of me. If you love my son as he loves you, you have my consent. I will not ask to know anything.”

“You must know. I have come to tell you. You will probably change your mind when you have heard.”

The elder woman, who was pale and delicate, and yet in spite of all this bore some resemblance to her strong young son, now led her tall companion to a seat, and sitting down in front of her, said kindly:

“Take off your hat and gloves, my dear. Try to feel at home with me. I love my son too dearly to go against him in the most earnest desire of his life. He has told me nothing, except that you love each other, and that there is something which you consider an obstacle to your marriage, but which he utterly refuses to accept

as such. Tell me about it, dear, and let me set your mind at rest."

Christine took off her gloves, because they were a constraint to her, and now, as she gave her two bare hands into those of Mrs. Noel, she said calmly:

"You think it is some little thing—that lack of fortune or a difference in social position is the obstacle. I would not be here now if it were no more than that—for I do love him!"

The last words broke from her as if involuntarily, and the impulse that made her utter them sent the swift tears to her eyes. But she forced them back, and they had no successors.

"And he loves you, too—oh, how he loves you! I wonder if you know."

"Yes, I know—I know it all. He has shown and proved, as well as told me. We love each other with a complete and perfect love. Even if I have to give him up nothing can take that away."

"My dear, you need not give him up. I asked my son one question only: 'Is her honor free from stain?'"

"And what was his answer?"

"'Absolutely and utterly. She is as stainless as an angel.' Those were his very words."

"God bless him for them! God forever bless him!" said Christine. "I know, in his eyes, it is so."

"In his eyes!" repeated Mrs. Noel. "Is there any doubt that it would be so in any eyes?"

"Yes," said Christine, "there is great doubt."

It was well for her that she had not hoped too much—well that she had kept continually in mind the awful value of the revelation she had come to make. If she had been sanguine and confident the look that now came over the face of Noel's mother would have been a harder thing to bear. But Christine was all prepared for it. It wounded, but it did not surprise nor disturb her perfect calm. There was a distinct change in the tone with which Mrs. Noel now said:

"If you have been unfortunate, poor girl, and have been led into trouble without

fault of your own, as may possibly be, no one could pity you more than I. I can imagine such a case, and I could not look at you and think any evil of you. But if you know the world at all, you must know that these things—let a woman be utterly free from fault herself—carry their inexorable consequences."

"I know the world but little," said Christine, "and yet I know that."

"Then, my dear child, you cannot wonder that the woman so unfortunately situated is thought to be debarred from honorable marriage."

"I do not wonder when I meet with this judgment in the world or in you. I only wondered when I found in your son a being too high for it—a being to whom right is right and pureness is pureness, as it is to God. You will remember, madame, that it was your son who claimed that I was not debarred from honorable marriage, and not I. Oh, I have suffered—you were right. No wonder that the sign of it is branded on my forehead for all the world to see. I have suffered in a way as far beyond the worst pain you have ever known as that pain of yours has been from pleasure. You have known death in its most awful form when it took from you your dearest ones, but I have known death too. My little baby, who was like the very core of my heart, round which the heartstrings twisted, and the clinging flesh was wrapped, was torn away from me by death, and it was pain and anguish unspeakable—but I have known a suffering compared to which that agony was joy. There can be worse things to bear than the death of your heart's dearest treasure—at least I know it may be so with women. And it was because you were a woman, with a woman's possibilities of pain, that I wanted to come to you—to tell you all, and let you say whether I am a fit wife for your son."

Ah, poor Christine! She felt, as she spoke those words, the silent, still, impalpable recoil in her companion's heart. She knew the poor woman was trying to be kind and merciful and sympathetic, but she also knew that what she had just said had rendered Noel's mother the foe and opposer of this marriage, instead of its friend.

"Go on, tell me all," his mother said, and that subtle change of voice and manner was distincter still to the acute consciousness of Christine's suffering soul. "I will be your friend whatever happens, and I honor you for the spirit in which you look upon this thing. I will speak out boldly, though you know I dislike to give you pain. But tell me this: Do you think yourself a fit wife for my son?"

Christine raised her head and answered with a very noble look of pride:

“I do.”

Her companion seemed to be surprised, and a faint shade of disapproval crossed her face.

“I know it,” said Christine. “I know he did not say too much when he spoke those blessed words to you and said I was stainless. God saw my heart through everything and He knows that it is so, but the world thinks otherwise. The world, and his own family, perhaps, would think your son lowered and dishonored by marrying me, and I never could consent to go among the people who could think it; so, if he married me, he would not only have to bear this odium, but to give up too, forever, his home and relatives, and friends and country, and it was for these reasons I refused to marry him—not for an instant because I felt myself unworthy.”

It was plain that these earnest words had moved her companion deeply, and that she felt a desire to hear more.

“Tell me the whole story,” she said. “This you have promised to do, and you have made me eager to hear it. Remember how little I have been told. I do not even know your name.”

With the full gaze of her sorrowful eyes upon the elder woman’s face, she said quietly:

“My name is Christine.”

There was an infinite proud calm in her voice, and in the same tone she went on:

“I bore throughout my childhood and my young girl days another name that seems in no sense to belong to me now. That child and girl, Christine Verrone, is not in any way myself. It seems only a sweet memory of a dear young creature, nearer akin to the birds, and the winds, and the flowers than to me. I cannot feel I ought to take her name, and pass myself for her. For three years I bore another name, but it is one my very lips refuse to utter now, and I never had a right to it. The one name that I feel is really mine is just Christine—the name that was given to the little baby, on whose forehead the sign of the cross was made soon after she came into this sad world, to taste of its most awful sorrow and to grow into the woman that I am. I have always loved it, because, in sound, it seemed to bring me near to Christ—the dear Christ who has never forsaken me since I have borne His sign, who has been through all my loving, dear Brother, knowing and

understanding all and grieving that I had to suffer so. He is with me still. He will stay with me if I have to give up earthly love and all that can make life happy. I know He has let it all happen to me, and that it must be for my good. I know I am as pure in His eyes as when I was that little baby, baptized in His name, bearing the humanity He bore. You may decide my earthly happiness as you choose. I am not comfortless. I know now the extent of His perfect power to comfort, since I find that He can support me through the supreme trial of giving up the man I love. It is in our darkest hour He comes closest," she said, as if in a sort of ecstasy. "He is here right with me now, strengthening and blessing me. I can feel His hands on my head. They actually press and touch me."

The fervor of her voice, the exaltation of her look, and the extreme realism of the words she used were indescribably awing and agitating to her companion, to whom such evidences in connection with religious feeling were utterly unprecedented. She saw that the source of this deep emotion was utter despair of earthly happiness, as, in truth, it was. From the moment that Christine had noted the change in her companion, which had followed her partial confession, she felt that her doom was sealed, and it was under the influence of this conviction that she had spoken. She felt anxious now to finish the interview and get away, that she might look her sorrow in the face, without the feeling of strange eyes upon her, and that she might gather strength for her parting with the man she loved.

Her last words had been followed by a thrilling silence which the other felt herself powerless to break. It was Christine who spoke.

"I promised your son that I would tell you the history of my life," she said. "I can give it to you very briefly. I was as innocent and unknowing as a little child when I was taken from the convent where I was educated, and married by my father to a man I scarcely knew. I suppose I was a burden to my father and he wanted to get rid of me. He told me that the whole of my mother's little fortune had been spent on my education, and that he had no home to take me to, and that I must marry. The young man he chose for me was good-looking and kind, though he did not speak my language, and I knew almost nothing of his. My father did everything. He assured me this man adored me and would do everything to make me happy—would always take care of me and give me a beautiful home in his land beyond the sea. I was ignorant of marriage as a baby. It was easy to get up a girlish fancy for the young man thus presented to my childish imagination, and I consented willingly. I had a lot of charming clothes ordered for my trousseau, and I was as delighted as a child. In this way I was married—"

“Ah, you were really married!” interrupted her companion, the cloud on her face beginning to clear away. Christine saw it with a tinge of bitterness in her gentle heart.

“No,” she said, almost coldly, “I was not really married. I thought so, and for three years I struggled through pain and woe and horror to do my duty to the man to whom I believed myself bound by the holy and indissoluble tie of marriage. I was ignorant, but somehow I had imbibed from every source ever opened to me a deep sense of the sacredness and eternity of that bond. So I fought and struggled on, feeling that truth to that obligation was my one anchor in a sea of trouble. I thought when I came here I could tell you some of the things I felt and endured, but I cannot. There would be no use. The bare fact is enough for a woman’s heart. When my child came I fixed my whole soul’s devotion on him. He was always delicate and feeble, but I loved him as, perhaps, a strong and healthy child could not have been loved. His father never noticed him at all, except to show that he thought him a burden. That was the final touch of complete alienation. Love—or what I had once called by that name—was gone long ago. We had become extremely poor—every cent of the principal had been spent in the most reckless way—oh, I can’t tell you all that. Your son will tell you if you ask him. I think a sort of mental lack was at the back of it. I must hurry; I can’t bear to go over it all now. I met your son on the steamer coming over, and he was kind to me then, suspecting, perhaps, how things were tending. Long after I met him again, accidentally, and he found out how wretched and poor I was, with my baby ill, and in need almost of the necessaries of life. He gave me sittings at his studio, then, and paid me for them—larger sums, I suppose, than they were worth. At any rate, he and a good doctor and an old servant helped me through my trouble when my baby died and was buried. Then—oh, I am almost done with it now, thank God!” she said, with a great sobbing breath—“it came to your son’s knowledge, professionally, that another woman claimed the man I supposed to be my husband, and he was about to be tried for—” she hesitated before the word, and could not utter it. “Then—it was months ago—he took me to Mrs. Murray, who took care of me through all the misery and wretchedness of those first weeks, and afterward got me work to do that I might make my own living. There I have been, in my sad peace and safety, ever since—a broken-hearted, wretched, nameless woman, and as such your son loved me. I returned his love with all the fire and strength of an utterly unexpended force. I had never loved before. I never felt the power of that love so mighty as now, in this moment that I give him up.”

“You shall not give him up! I know it all now, and, in spite of everything, I tell you you shall not. Christine, listen, I give my consent. I declare to you that you honor him supremely when you agree to marry him. My child, if you had had a mother all this would not have come to you. I rejoice to take you for my daughter. Look at me, Christine, and try to feel that you have a mother at last.”

It was almost too much for the strained nerves of the girl. She could have borne denial calmly, seeing that she was ready for it, but the great rush of joy that surged into her heart at these unexpected words confused and agitated her. A strong voice spoke to her words of comfort and cheer, and loving arms embraced her. Sweet mother-kisses were pressed upon her cheeks and eyes, and she was gently reassured and calmed and strengthened. Her mind was still a little dazed, however, and she did not quite know how it was that she found herself now standing alone, near the middle of the room.

The door opened. Some one entered and closed it softly. She felt that it was Noel. He paused an instant near the threshold, and she turned her head and looked at him. He held out his arms. They moved toward each other, and she was folded in a close embrace. They remained so, absolutely still. Her heart was beating in full, thick throbs against his, which kept time to it. Her closed eyes were against his throat, and she would not move so much as an eyelash. She gave herself up utterly to this ecstasy of content.

“Don’t move,” she whispered. She was afraid this perfect moment would be spoiled; a kiss, even, would have done it. But he seemed to understand, and except to tighten slightly the pressure of his arms he kept profoundly still. She could hear his low, uneven breathing and the faint, regular ticking of his watch. They seemed enclosed in a silence vast as space, and sweeter than thought could fathom. A great ocean of contentment flowed about them, stretching into infinity. Neither could have thought of anything to wish for. They seemed in absolute possession of all joy.

A sound—the striking of a clock—broke the spell of silence. They moved a little apart, and so looked long into each other’s eyes. Then Noel bent toward the face upraised to his, and their lips met.

There were tears in Christine’s eyes as she sank back from that kiss, but her happiness was complete, absolute, supreme. God had given to them both his richest gift of pleasure after pain.

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