SIR TOM

BY

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CHAPTER I.

THE OPENING OF THE DRAMA.

"COME and sit beside me and tell me everything," said the Contessa. She had appropriated the little sofa next the fire, where Lady Randolph generally sat in the evening. She had taken Lucy's arm on the way from the dining-room, and drew her with her to this corner. Nothing could be more caressing or tender than her manner. She seemed to be conferring the most delightful of favours as she drew towards her the mistress of the house. "You have been married —how long? Six years! But it is impossible! And you have all the freshness of a child. And very happy?" she said, smiling upon Lucy. She had not a fault in her pronunciation, but when she uttered these two words she gave a little roll of the "r" as if she meant to assume a defect which she had not, and smiled with a tender

benevolence in which there was the faintest touch of derision. Lucy did not make out what it was, but she felt that something lay under the dazzling of that smile. She allowed the stranger to draw her to the sofa, and sat down by her.

"Yes, it is six years," she said.

"And ver—r—y happy?" the Contessa repeated. "I am sure that dear Tom is a model husband. I have known him a very long time. Has he told you about me?"

"That you were an old friend," said Lucy, looking at her. "Oh yes! The only thing is, that we are so much afraid you will find the country dull."

The Contessa replied only with an eloquent look and a pressure of the hand. Her eyes were quite capable of expressing their meaning without words; and Lucy felt that she had guessed her rightly.

"We wished to have a party to meet you," Lucy said, "but the baby fell ill—and I thought, as you had kindly come so far to see Tom, you would not mind if you found us alone."

The lady still made no direct reply. She said, after a little pause:

"The country is very dull——" still smiling upon Lucy, and allowed a full minute to pass

without another word. Then she added: "And Milady?—is she always with you?"—with a slight shrug of the shoulders. She did not even lower her voice to prevent Lady Randolph from hearing, but gave Lucy's hand a special pressure, and fixed upon her a significant look.

"Oh, Aunt Randolph?" cried Lucy. "Oh no; she is only paying her usual Christmas visit."

The Contessa drew a sigh of relief and laid her other delicate hand upon her breast. "You take a load off my heart," she said; then, gliding gracefully from the subject, "And that excellent Tom——? you met him—in society?"

Lucy did not quite like the questioning, or those emphatic pressures of her hand. She said quickly, "We met at Lady Randolph's. I was living there."

"Oh—I see," the stranger said, and she gave vent to a little gentle laugh. "I see!" Her meaning was entirely unknown to Lucy; but she felt an indefinable offence. She made a slight effort to withdraw her hand; but this the Contessa would not permit. She pressed the imprisoned fingers more closely in her own. "You do not like this questioning. Pardon! I had forgotten English ways. It is because I hope you will let me be your friend too."

"Oh yes," cried Lucy, ashamed of her own hesitation, yet feeling every moment more reluctant. She subdued her rising distaste with an effort. "I hope," she said sweetly, "that we shall be able to make you feel at home, Madame di Forno-Populo. If there is anything you do not like, will you tell me? Had I been at home I should have chosen other rooms for you."

"They are so pretty, those words, 'at home!' —so English," the Contessa said, with smiles that were more and more sweet. "But it will fatigue you to call me all that long name."

"Oh no," cried Lucy, with a vivid blush. She did not know what to say, whether this meant a little derision of her careful pronunciation, or what it was. She went on, after a little pause, "But if you are not quite comfortable, the other rooms can be got ready directly. It was the housekeeper who thought the rooms you have would be the warmest."

The Contessa gave her another gentle pressure of the hand. "Everything is perfect," she said. "The house and the wife, and all. I may call you Lucy? You are so fresh and young. How do you keep that pretty bloom after six years—did you say six years? Ah! the English are always those that wear best. You are not

afraid of a great deal of light—no? but it is trying sometimes. Shades are an advantage. And he has not spoken to you of me, that dear Tom? There was a time when he talked much of me—oh, much—constantly! He was young then—and," she said with a little sigh, "so was I. He was perhaps not handsome, but he was distinguished. Many Englishmen are so who have no beauty, no handsomeness, as you say, and English women also, though that is more rare. And you are ver-r-y happy?" the Contessa asked again. She said it with a smile that was quite dazzling, but yet had just the faintest touch of ridicule in it, and rippled over into a little laugh. "When we know each other better I will betray all his little secrets to you," she said.

This was so very injudicious on the part of an old friend, that a wiser person than Lucy would have divined some malign meaning in it. But Lucy, though suppressing an instinctive distrust, took no notice, not even in her thoughts. It was not necessary for her to divine or try to divine what people meant; she took what they said simply, without requiring interpretation. "He has told me a great deal," she said. "I think I almost know his journeys by heart." Then Lucy carried the war into the enemy's

country without realising what she was doing. "You will think it very stupid of me," she said, "but I did not hear Mademoiselle—the young lady's name."

The Contessa's eyes dwelt meditatively upon Lucy: she patted her hand and smiled upon her, as if every other subject was irrelevant. "And he has taken you into society?" she said, continuing her examination. "How delightful is that English domesticity! You go everywhere together?" She had no appearance of having so much as heard Lucy's question. "And you do not fear that he will find it dull in the country? You have the confidence of being enough for him? How sweet for me to find the happiness of my friend so assured! And now I shall share it for a little. You will make us all happy. Dear child," said the lady with enthusiasm, drawing Lucy to her and kissing her forehead. Then she broke into a pretty laugh. "You will work for your poor, and I, who am good for nothing—I shall take out my *tapisserie*, and he will read to us while we work. What a tableau!" cried the Contessa. "Domestic happiness, which one only tastes in England. The Eden before the fall!"

It was at this moment that the gentlemen, *i.e.* Sir Tom and Jock, appeared out of the

dining-room. They had not lingered long after the ladies. Sir Tom had been somewhat glum after they left. His look of amusement was not so lively. He said sententiously, not so much to Jock as to himself, "That woman is bent on mischief," and got up and walked about the room instead of taking his wine. Then he laughed and turned to Jock, who was musing over his orange-skins. "When you get a fellow into your house that is not much good—I suppose it must happen sometimes—that knows too much and puts the young ones up to tricks, what do you do with him, most noble captain? Come, you find out a lot of things for yourselves, you boys. Tell me what you do."

Jock was a little startled by this demand, but he rose to the occasion. "It has happened," he said. "You know, unless a fellow's been awfully bad, you can't always keep him out."

"And what then?" said Sir Tom. "MTutor sets his great wits to work?"

"I hope, sir," cried Jock, "that you don't think I would trouble MTutor, who has enough on his hands without that. I made great friends with the fellow myself. You know," said the lad, looking up with splendid confidence, "he couldn't harm *me*——"

Sir Tom looked at him with a little drawing of his breath, such as the experienced sometimes feel as they look at the daring of the innocent—but with a smile too.

"When he tried it on with me I just kicked him," said Jock calmly; "once was enough; he didn't do it again; for naturally he stood a bit in awe of me. Then I kept him that he hadn't a moment to himself. It was the football half, when you've not got much time to spare all day. And in the evenings he had pœnas and things. When he got with two or three of the others, one of us would just be loafing about, and call out, 'Hallo, what's up?' He never had any time to go wrong, and then he got to find out it didn't pay."

"Philosopher! sage!" cried Sir Tom. "It is you that should teach us; but, alas, my boy, have you never found out that even that last argument fails to tell—and that they don't mind even if it doesn't pay?"

He sighed as he spoke; then laughed out, and added, "I can at all events try the first part of your programme. Come along and let's cry, 'Hallo, what's up?' It simplifies matters immensely though," said Sir Tom with a serious face, "when you can kick the fellow you dis-

approve of in that charming candid way. Guard the privilege; it is invaluable, Jock."

"Well," said Jock, "some fellows think it's brutal, you know. MTutor, he always says try argument first. But I just want to know how you are to do your duty, captain of a big house, unless it's known that you will just kick 'em when they're beastly. When it's known, even *that* does a deal of good."

"Everything you say confirms my opinion of your sense," said Sir Tom, taking the boy by the arm, "but also of your advantages, Jock, my boy. We cannot act, you see, in that straightforward manner, more's the pity, in the world; but I shall try the first part of your programme, and act on your advice," he said, as they walked into the room where the ladies were awaiting them. The smaller room looked very warm and bright after the large dimly-lighted one through which they had passed. The Contessa, in her tender conference with Lucy, formed a charming group in the middle of the picture. Lady Randolph sat by, exiled out of her usual place, with an illustrated magazine in her hand, and an air of quick watchfulness about her, opposite to them. She was looking on like a spectator at a play. In the background behind the table, on which

stood a large lamp, was the Contessa's companion, with her back turned to the rest, lightly flitting from picture to picture, examining everything. She had been entirely careless of the action of the piece, but she turned round at the voices of the new-comers as if her attention was aroused.

"You are going to take somebody's advice?" said the Contessa. "That is something new; come here at once and explain. To do so is due to your—wife; yes, to your wife. An Englishman tells every thought to his wife; is it not so? Oh yes, *mon ami*, your sweet little wife and I are the best of friends. It is for life," she said, looking with inexpressible sentiment in Lucy's face and pressing her hands. Then—was it possible?—a flash of intelligence flew from her eyes to those of Sir Tom, and she burst into a laugh and clapped her beautiful hands together. "He is so ridiculous, he makes one laugh at everything," she cried.

Lucy remained very serious, with a somewhat forced smile upon her face, between these two, looking from one to another.

"Nay, if you have come the length of swearing eternal friendship——" said Sir Tom.

Jock did not know what to do with himself. He began by stumbling over Lady Randolph's

train, which, though carefully coiled about her, was so long and so substantial that it got in his way. In getting out of its way he almost stumbled against the slim straight figure of the girl who stood behind surveying the company. She met his awkward apology with a smile. "It doesn't matter," she said, "I am so glad you are come. I had nobody to talk to." Then she made a little pause, regarding him with a bright impartial look, as if weighing all his qualities. "Don't you talk?" she said. "Do you prefer not to say anything? because I know how to behave. I will not trouble you if it is so. In England there are some who do not say anything?" she added, with an inquiring look. Jock, who was conscious of blushing all over from top to toe, ventured a glance at her, to which she replied by a peal of laughter, very merry but very subdued, in which, in spite of himself, he was obliged to join.

"So you can laugh?" she said; "oh, that is well, for otherwise I should not know how to live. We must laugh low, not to make any noise and distract the old ones; but still, one must live. Tell me, you are the brother of Madame—should I say Milady? In my novels they never do, but I do not know if the novels are just or not."

"The servants say my lady, but no one else," said Jock.

"How fine that is," the young lady said admiringly, "in a moment to have it all put right! I am glad we came to England. We say mi-ladi and mi-lord, as if that was the name of every one here; but it is not so in the books. You are, perhaps, sir? like Sir Tom—or you are——"

"I am Trevor; that is all," said Jock, with a blush. "I am nobody in particular,—that is, here," he added, with a momentary gleam of natural importance.

"Ah!" cried the young lady, "I understand —you are a great person at home."

Jock had no wish to deceive, but he could not prevent a smile from creeping about the corners of his mouth. "Not a great person at all," he said, not wishing to boast.

The young stranger, who was so curious about all her new surroundings, formed her own conclusion. She had been brought up in an atmosphere full of much knowledge, but also of theories which were but partially tenable. She interpreted Jock according to her own ideas, which were not at all suited to his case; but it was impossible that she could know that.

"I am finding people out," she said to him. "You are the only one that is young like me. Let us form an alliance, while the old ones are working out all their plans and fighting it out among themselves."

"Fighting it out! I know some that are not likely to fight," cried Jock, bewildered.

"Was not that right?" said the girl, distressed. "I thought it was an *idiotisme*, as the French say. Ah! they are always fighting. Look at them now! The Contessa, she is on the war-path. That is an American word. I have a little of all languages. Madame, you will see—ah, that is what you meant!—does not understand, she looks from one to another. She is silent, but Sir Tom, he knows everything. And the old lady, she sees it too. I have gone through so many dramas, I am *blasée*. It wearies at last, but yet it is exciting too. I ask myself what is going to be done here?. You have heard, perhaps, of the Contessa in England, Mr.——"

"Trevor," said Jock.

"And you pronounce it just like this—Mis-ter? I want to know; for perhaps I shall have to stay here. There is not known very much about me. Nor do I know myself. But

if the Contessa finds for me—— I am quite mad," said the girl suddenly. "I am telling you—and of course it is a secret. The old lady watches the Contessa to see what it is she intends. But I do not myself know what the Contessa intends—except in respect to me."

Jock was too shy to inquire what that was; and he was confused with this unusual confidence. Young ladies had not been in the habit of opening to him their secrets; indeed, he had little experience of these kind of creatures at all. She looked at him as she spoke, as if she wished to provoke him to inquiry—with a gaze that was very open and withal bold, yet innocent too. And Jock, on his side, was as entirely innocent as if he had been a Babe in the Wood.

"Don't you want to know what she is going to do with me, and why she has brought me?" the girl said, talking so quickly that he could scarcely follow the stream of words. "I was not invited, and I am not introduced, and no one knows anything of me. Don't you want to know why I am here?"

Jock followed the movements of her lips, the little gestures of her hands, which were almost as eloquent, with eyes that were confused by so great a call upon them. He could not make

any reply, but only gazed at her, entranced as he had never been in his life before, and so anxious not to lose the hurried words, the quick flash of the small white hands against her dark dress, that his mind had not time to make out what she meant.

Lucy, on her side, sat between her husband and the Contessa for some time, listening to their conversation. That was more rapid, too, than she was used to, and it was full of allusions, understood when they were half said by the others, which to her were all darkness. She tried to follow them with a wistful sort of smile, a kind of painful homage to the Contessa's soft laugh and the ready response of Sir Tom. She tried, too, to follow and share the brightening interest of his face, the amusement and eagerness of his listening; but by and by she got chilled, she knew not how—the smile grew frozen upon her face—her comprehension seemed to fail altogether. She got up softly after a while from her corner of the sofa, and neither her husband nor her guest took any particular notice. She came across the room to Lady Randolph, and drew a low chair beside her, and asked her about the pictures in the magazine which she was still holding in her hand.

CHAPTER II.

AN ANXIOUS CRITIC.

In a few days after the arrival of Madame di Forno-Populo there was almost an entire change of aspect at the Hall. Nobody could tell how this change had come about. It was involuntary, unconscious, yet complete. The Contessa came quietly into the foreground. She made no demonstration of power, and claimed no sort of authority. She never accosted the mistress of the house without tender words and caresses. Her attitude towards Lucy, indeed, was that of an admiring relation to a delightful and promising child. She could not sufficiently praise and applaud her. When she spoke, her visitor turned towards her with the most tender of smiles. In whatsoever way the Contessa was occupied, she never failed when she heard Lucy's voice to turn round upon her, to bestow this smile, to murmur

a word of affectionate approval. When they were near enough to each other she would take her hand and press it with affectionate emotion. The other members of the household, except Sir Tom, she scarcely noticed at all. The Dowager Lady Randolph exchanged with her now and then a few words of polite defiance, but that was all. And she had not been long at the Hall before her position there was more commanding than that of Lady Randolph. Insensibly all the customs of the house changed for her. There was no question as to who was the centre of conversation in the evening. Sir Tom went to the sofa from which she had so cleverly ousted his aunt, as soon as he came in after dinner, and leaning over her with his arm on the mantelpiece, or drawing a chair beside her, would laugh and talk with endless spirit and amusement. When he talked of the people in the neighbourhood who afforded scope for satire she would tap him with her fan and say, "Why do I not see these originals? bring them to see me," to Lucy's wonder and often dismay. "They would not amuse you at all," Sir Tom would reply, upon which the lady would turn and call Lucy to her. "My little angel! he pretends that it is he that is so clever—that he creates these characters.

We do not believe him, my Lucy, do we? Ask, them, ask them, *cara*, then we shall judge."

In this way the house was filled evening after evening. A reign of boundless hospitality seemed to have begun. The other affairs of the house slipped aside, and to provide amusement for the Contessa became the chief object of life. She had everybody brought to see her, from the little magnates of Farafield to the Duchess herself, and the greatest people in the county. The nursery, which had been so much, perhaps too much, in the foreground, regulating the whole great household according as little Tom was better or worse, was thrust altogether into the shadow. If neglect was wholesome, then he had that advantage. Even his mother could do no more than run furtively to him, as she did about a hundred times a day in the intervals of her duties. His little mendings and fallings back ceased to be the chief things in the house. His father, indeed, would play with his child in the mornings when he was brought to Lucy's room; but the burden of his remarks was to point out to her how much better the little beggar got on when there was less fuss made about him. And Lucy's one grievance against her visitor, the only one which she permitted herself to perceive, was

that she never took any notice of little Tom. She never asked for him, a thing which was unexampled in Lucy's experience. When he was produced she smiled, indeed, but contemplated him at a distance. The utmost stretch of kindness she had ever shown was to touch his cheek with a finger delicately when he was carried past her. Lucy made theories in her mind about this, feeling it necessary to account in some elaborate way for what was so entirely out of nature. "I know what it must be—she must have lost her own," she said to her husband. Sir Tom's countenance was almost convulsed by one of those laughs, which he now found it expedient to suppress, but he only replied that he had never heard of such an event. "Ah! it must have been before you knew her; but she has never got it out of her mind," Lucy cried. That hypothesis explained everything. At this time, it is scarcely necessary to say, Lucy was with her whole soul trying to be "very fond," as she expressed it, of the Contessa. There were some things about her which startled young Lady Randolph. For one thing, she would go out shooting with Sir Tom, and was as good a shot as any of the gentlemen. This wounded Lucy terribly, and took her a great effort to swallow.

It went against all her traditions. With her bourgeois education she hated sport, and even in her husband with difficulty made up her mind to it; but that a woman should go forth and slay was intolerable.

There were other things besides which were a mystery to her. Lady Randolph's invariably defiant attitude for one, and the curious aspect of the Duchess when suddenly brought face to face with the stranger. It appeared that they were old friends, which astonished Lucy, but not so much as the great lady's bewildered look when Madame di Forno-Populo went up to her. It seemed for a moment as if the shock was too much for her. She stammered and shook through all her dignity and greatness, as she exclaimed, "*You!* here?" in two distinct outcries, gazing appalled into the smiling and beautiful face before her. But then the Duchess came to, after a while. She seemed to get over her surprise, which was more than surprise. All these things disturbed Lucy. She did not know what to make of them. She was uneasy at the change that had been wrought upon her own household, which she did not understand. Yet it was all perfectly simple, she said to herself. It was Tom's duty to devote himself to the stranger

It was the duty of both as hosts to procure for her such amusement as was to be found. These were things of which Lucy convinced herself by various half unconscious processes of argument. But it was necessary to renew these arguments from time to time, to keep possession of them in order to feel their force as she wished to do. She said nothing to her husband on the subject, with an instinctive sense that it would be very difficult to handle. And Sir Tom, too, avoided it. But it was impossible to pursue the same reticence with Lady Randolph, who now and then insisted on opening it up. When the end of her visit arrived she sent for Lucy into her own room, to speak to her seriously. She said:

"My dear, I am due to-morrow at the Maltravers', as you know. It is a visit I like to pay, they are always so nice; but I cannot bear the thought of going off, Lucy, to enjoy myself and leaving you alone."

"Alone, Aunt Randolph!" cried Lucy, "when Tom is at home!"

"Oh, Tom! I have no patience with Tom," cried the Dowager. "I think he must be mad to let that woman come upon you so. Of course you know very well, my dear, it is of her that I

want to speak. In the country it does not so much matter; but you must not let her identify herself with you, Lucy, in town."

"In town!" Lucy said with a little dismay; "but, dear Aunt Randolph, it will be six weeks before we go to town; and, surely, long before that——" She paused, and blushed with a sense of the inhospitality involved in her words, which made Lucy ashamed of herself.

"You think so?" said Lady Randolph, smiling somewhat grimly. "Well, we shall see. For my part, I think she will find Park Lane a very desirable situation, and if you do not take the greatest care—— But why should I speak to you of taking care? Of course, if Tom wished it, you would take in all Bohemia and never say a word——"

"Surely," said Lucy, looking with serene eyes in the elder lady's face, "I do not know what you mean by Bohemia, Aunt Randolph; but if you think it possible that I should object when Tom asks his friends——"

"Oh—his friends! I have no patience with you, either the one or the other," said the old lady. "When Sir Robert was living, do you think it was he who invited *my* guests? I should think not indeed! especially the women. If

that was to be the case, marriage would soon become an impossibility. And is it possible, Lucy—is it possible that you, with your good sense, can like all that petting and coaxing, and the way she talks to you, as if you were a child?"

As a matter of fact Lucy had not been able to school herself into liking it; but, when the objection was stated so plainly, she coloured high with a vexation and annoyance which were very grievous and hard to bear. It seemed to her that it would be disloyal both to her husband and her guest if she complained, and at the same time Lady Randolph's shot went straight to the mark. She did her best to smile, but it was not a very easy task.

"You have always taught me, Aunt Randolph," she said with great astuteness, "that I ought not to judge of the manners of strangers by my own little rules—especially of foreigners," she added, with a sense of her own cleverness which half comforted her amid other feelings not agreeable. It was seldom that Lucy felt any sense of triumph in her own powers.

"Foreigners?" said Lady Randolph with disdain. But then she stopped short with a pause of indignation. "That woman," she said, which was the only name she ever gave the

visitor, "has some scheme in her head, you may be sure. I do not know what it is. It would not do her any good that I can see to increase her hold upon Tom."

"Upon Tom!" cried Lucy. It was her turn now to be indignant. "I don't know what you mean, Aunt Randolph," she said. "I cannot think that you want to make me—uncomfortable. There are some things I do not like in Madame di Forno-Populo. She is—different; but she is my husband's friend. If you mean that they will become still greater friends, seeing more of each other, that is natural. For why should you be friends at all unless you like each other? And that Tom likes her must be just a proof that I am wrong. It is my ignorance. Perhaps the wisest way would be to say nothing more about it," young Lady Randolph concluded briskly, with a sudden smile.

The Dowager looked at her as if she were some wonder in natural history, the nature of which it was impossible to divine. She thought she knew Lucy very well, but yet had never understood her, it being more difficult for a woman of the world to understand absolute straightforwardness and simplicity than it is even for the simple to understand the worldly.

She was silent for a moment and stared at Lucy, not knowing what to make of her. At last she resumed, as if going on without interruption, "But she has some scheme in hand, perhaps in respect to the girl. The girl is a very handsome creature, and might make a hit if she were properly managed. My belief is that this has been her scheme all through. But partly the presence of Tom—an old friend, as you say, of her own—and partly the want of opportunity, has kept it in abeyance. That is my idea, Lucy; you can take it for what it is worth. And your home will be the headquarters, the centre from which the adventuress will carry on——"

"Aunt Randolph!" Lucy's voice was almost loud in the pain and indignation that possessed her. She put out her hands as if to stop the other's mouth. "You want to make me think she is a wicked woman," she said. "And that Tom—Tom——"

Lucy had never permitted suspicion to enter her mind. She did not know now what it was that penetrated her innocent soul like an arrow. It was not jealousy. It was the wounding suggestion of a possibility which she would not and could not entertain.

"Lucy, Tom has no excuse at all," said the Dowager solemnly. "You'll believe nothing against him, of course, and I can't possibly wish to turn you against him; but I don't suppose he meant all that is likely to come out of it. He thought it would be a joke—and in the country what could it matter? And then things have never gone so far as that people could refuse to receive her, you know. Oh no! the Contessa has her wits too much about her for that. But you saw for yourself that the Duchess was petrified; and I—not that I am an authority like her Grace. One thing, Lucy, is quite clear, that I must say: you must not take upon yourself to be answerable—you so young as you are, and not accustomed to society—for *that* woman, before the world. You must just take your courage in both hands, and tell Tom that though you give in to him in the country, in town you will not have her. She means to take advantage of you, and bring forward her girl, and make a *grand coup*. That is what she means—I know that sort of person. It is just the greatest luck in the world for them to get hold of some one that is so unexceptionable and so unsuspicious as you."

Lady Randolph insisted upon saying all this, notwithstanding the interruptions of Lucy.

"Now I wash my hands of it," she said. "If you won't be advised, I can do no more." It was the day after the great dinner when the Duchess had met Madame di Forno-Populo with so much surprise. The elder lady had been in much excitement all the evening. She had conversed with her Grace apart on several occasions, and from the way in which they laid their heads together, and their gestures, it was clear enough that their feeling was the same upon the point they discussed. All the best people in the county had been collected together, and there could be no doubt that the Contessa had achieved a great success. She sang as no woman had ever been heard to sing for a hundred miles round, and her beauty and her grace and her diamonds had been enough to turn the heads of both men and women. It was remarked that the Duchess, though she received her with a gasp of astonishment, was evidently very well acquainted with the fascinating foreign lady; and though there was a little natural and national distrust of her at first, as a person too remarkable, and who sang too well for the common occasions of life, yet not to gaze at her, watch her, and admire, was impossible. Lucy had been gratified with the success of her visitor. Even though she was

not sure that she was comfortable about her presence there at all, she was pleased with the effect she produced. When the Contessa sang there suddenly appeared out of the midst of the crowd a slim straight figure in a black gown, which instantly sat down at the piano, played the accompaniments, and disappeared again without a word. The spectators thronging round the piano saw that this was a girl, as graceful and distinguished as the Contessa herself, who passed away without a word, and disappeared when her office was accomplished, with a smile on her face, but without lingering for a moment or speaking to any one; which was a pretty bit of mystery too.

All this had happened on the night before Lady Randolph's summons to Lucy. It was in the air that the party at the Hall was to break up after the great entertainment; the Dowager was going, as she had said, to the Maltravers'; Jock was going back to school; and though no limit of Madame di Forno-Populo's visit had been mentioned, still it was natural that she should go when the other people did. She had been a fortnight at the Hall. That is long for a visit at a country house where generally people are coming and going continually. And Lucy had begun to look forward to the time when

once more she would be mistress of her own house and actions, with all visitors and interruptions gone. She had been looking forward to the happy old evenings, the days in which baby should be set up again on his domestic throne. The idea that the Contessa might not be going away, the suggestion that she might still be there when it was time to make the yearly migration to town, chilled the very blood in her veins. But it was a thought that she would not dwell upon. She would not betray her feeling in this respect to any one. She returned the kiss which old Lady Randolph bestowed upon her at the end of their interview very affectionately; for, though she did not always agree with her, she was attached to the lady who had been so kind to her when she was a friendless little girl. "Thank you, Aunt Randolph, for telling me," she said very sweetly, though, indeed, she had no intention of taking the Dowager's advice. Lady Randolph went off in the afternoon of the next day, for it was a very short journey to the Maltravers,' where she was going. All the party came out into the hall to see her away, the Contessa herself as well as the others. Nothing, indeed, could be more cordial than the Contessa. She caught up a shawl and wound it round her, ela-

borately defending herself against the cold, and came out to the steps to share in the last farewells.

When Lady Randolph was in the carriage with her maid by her side, and her hot-water footstool under her feet, and the coachman waiting his signal to drive away, she put out her hand amid her furs to Lucy. "Now remember!" Lady Randolph said. It was almost as solemn as the mysterious reminder of the dying king to the bishop. But unfortunately, what is solemn in certain circumstances may be ludicrous in others. The party in the hall scarcely restrained its merriment till the carriage had driven away.

"What awful compact is this between you, Lucy?" Sir Tom said. "Has she bound you by a vow to assassinate me in my sleep?"

The Contessa unwound herself out of her shawl, and putting her arm caressingly round Lucy, led her back to the drawing-room. "It has something to do with me," she said. "Come and tell me all about it." Lucy had been disconcerted by Lady Randolph's reminder. She was still more disconcerted now.

"It is—something Aunt Randolph wishes me to do in the spring, when we go to town," she said.

"Ah! I know what that is," said the Contessa. "They see that you are too kind to your husband's friend. Milady would wish you to be more as she herself is. I understand her very well. I understand them all, these women. They cannot endure me. They see a meaning in everything I do. I have not a meaning in everything I do," she added, with a pathetic look which went to Lucy's heart.

"No, no; indeed you are mistaken. It was not that. I am sure you have no meaning," said Lucy, vehement and confused.

The Contessa read her innocent *distraite* countenance like a book, as she said—or at least she thought so. She linked her own delicate arm in hers, and clasped Lucy's hand. "One day I will tell you why all these ladies hate me, my little angel," she said.

CHAPTER III.

AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER.

In the meantime something had been going on behind backs of which nobody took much notice. It had been discovered long before this, in the family, that the Contessa's young companion had a name like other people—that is to say, a Christian name. She was called by the Contessa, in the rare moments when she addressed her, Bice—that is to say, according to English pronunciation, Beeshée—(you would probably call it Beetchee if you learned to speak Italian in England, but the Contessa had the Tuscan tongue in a Roman mouth, according to the proverb), which, as everybody knows, is the contraction of Beatrice. She was called Miss Beachy in the household, a name which was received—by the servants, at least—as a quite proper and natural name; a great deal more

sensible than Forno-Populo. Her position, however, in the little party was a quite peculiar one. The Contessa took her for granted in a way which silenced all inquisitive researches. She gave no explanation who she was, or what she was, or why she carried this girl about with her. If she was related to herself, if she was a dependent, nobody knew; her manner gave no clue at all to the mystery. It was very seldom that the two had any conversation whatsoever in the presence of the others. Now and then the Contessa would send the girl upon an errand, telling her to bring something, with an absence of directions where to find it that suggested the most absolute confidence in her young companion. When the Contessa sang, Bice, as a matter of course, produced herself at the right moment to play her accompaniments, and got herself out of the way, noiselessly, instantly, the moment that duty was over. These accompaniments were played with an exquisite skill and judgment, an exact adaptation to the necessities of the voice, which could only have been attained by much and severe study; but she never, save on these occasions, was seen to look at a piano. For the greater part of the time the girl was invisible. She appeared in the Contessa's train, always in her

closely-fitting, perfectly plain, black frock, without an ornament, at luncheon and dinner, and was present all the evening in the drawing-room. But for the rest of the day no one knew what became of this young creature, who nevertheless was not shy, nor showed any appearance of feeling herself out of place, or uncomfortable in her strange position. She looked out upon them all with frank eyes, in which it was evident there was no sort of mist, either of timidity or ignorance, understanding everything that was said, even allusions which puzzled Lucy; always intelligent and observant, though often with a shade of that benevolent contempt which the young with difficulty prevent themselves from feeling towards their elders. The littleness of their jokes and their philosophies was evidently quite apparent to this observer, who sat secure in the superiority of sixteen, taking in everything; for she took in everything, even when she was not doing the elder people the honour of attending to what they were saying, with a faculty which belongs to that age. Opinions were divided as to Bice's beauty. The simpler members of the party, Lucy and Jock, admired her least; but such a competent critic as Lady Randolph, who understood what was effective, had a great opinion of and even

respect for her, as of one whose capabilities were very great indeed, and who might "go far," as she had herself said. As there was so much difference of opinion it is only right that the reader should be able to judge, as much as is possible, from a description. She was very slight and rather tall, with a great deal of the Contessa's grace, moving lightly as if she scarcely touched the ground, but like a bird rather than a cat. There was nothing in her of the feline grace of which we hear so much. Her movements were all direct and rapid; her feet seemed to skim, not to tread, the ground with an airy poise, which, even when she stood still, implied movement, always light, untiring, full of energy and impulse. Her eyes were gray—if it is possible to call by the name of the dullest of tints those two globes of light, now dark, now golden, now liquid with dew, and now with flame. Her hair was dusky, of no particular colour, with a crispness about the temples; but her complexion—ay, there was the rub. Bice had no complexion at all. By times in the evening, in artificial light, or when she was excited, there came a little flush to her cheeks, which miraculously chased away the shadows from her paleness, and made her radiant; but in daylight there could be no doubt that she

was sallow, sometimes almost olive, though with a soft velvety texture which is more often seen on the dark-complexioned through all its gradations than on any but the most delicate of white skins. A black baby has a bloom upon its little dusky cheek like a purple peach, and this was the quality which gave to Bice's sallowness a certain charm. Her hands and arms were of the same indefinite tint—not white, whatever they might be called. Her throat was slender and beautifully formed, but shared the same deficiency of colour. It is impossible to say how much disappointed Lucy was in the young stranger's appearance after the first evening. She had thought her very pretty, and she now thought her plain. To remember what the girl had said of her chances if she turned out beautiful filled her with a sort of pitying contempt.

But the more experienced people were not of Lucy's opinion. They thought well, on the contrary, of Bice's prospects. Lady Randolph, as has been said, regarded her with a certain respectfulness. She was not offended by the saucy speeches which the girl might now and then make. She went so far as to say even that if introduced under other auspices than those of the Contessa, there was no telling what such a

girl might do. "But the chances now are that she will end on the stage," Lady Randolph said.

This strange girl unfolded herself very little in the family. When she spoke, she spoke with the utmost frankness, and was afraid of nobody. But in general she sat in the regions behind the table, with its big lamp, and said little or nothing. The others would all be collected about the fire, but Bice never approached the fire. Sometimes she read, sitting motionless, till the others forgot her presence altogether. Sometimes she worked at long strips of Berlin-wool work, the *tapisserie* to which, by moments, the Contessa would have recourse. But she heard and saw everything, as has been said, whether she attended or not, in the keenness of her youthful faculties. When the Contessa rose to sing she was at the piano without a word; and when anything was wanted she gave an alert mute obedience to the lady who was her relation or her patroness, nobody knew which, almost without being told what was wanted. Except in this way, however, they seldom approached or said a word to each other that any one saw. During the long morning, which the Contessa spent in her room, appearing only at luncheon, Bice too was invisible. Thus she

lived the strangest life of retirement and seclusion, such as a crushed dependent would find intolerable in the midst of a family, but without the least appearance of anything but enjoyment, and a perfect and dauntless freedom.

Bice, however, had one confidant in the house, and this, as is natural, was the very last person who would have seemed probable—it was Jock. Jock, it need scarcely be said, had no tendency at all to the society of girls. Deep as he was in MTutor's confidence, captain of his house, used to live in a little male community, and to despise (not unkindly) the rest of the world, it is not likely that he would care much for the antagonistic creatures who invariably interfered, he thought, with talk and enjoyment wherever they appeared. Making an exception in favour of Lucy and an older person now and then, who had been soothing to him when he was ill or out of sorts, Jock held that the feminine part of the creation was a mistake, and to be avoided in every practicable way. He had been startled by the young stranger's advances to him on the first evening, and her claim of fellowship on the score that he was young like herself. But when Bice first appeared suddenly in his way, far down in the depths of the winterly

park, the boy's impulse would have been, had that been practicable, to turn and flee. She was skimming along, singing to herself, leaping lightly over fallen branches and the inequalities of the humid way, when he first perceived her; and Jock had a moment's controversy with himself as to what he ought to do. If he took to flight across the open park she would see him and understand the reason why; besides, it would be cowardly to fly from a girl, an inferior creature, who probably had lost her way, and would not know how to get back again. This reflection made him withdraw a little deeper into the covert, with the intention of keeping her in sight lest she should wander astray altogether, but yet keeping out of the way, that he might exercise this secret protecting charge of his, which Jock felt was his natural attitude even to a girl, without the embarrassment of her society. He tried to persuade himself that she was a lower boy, of an inferior kind no doubt, but yet possessing claims upon his care; for MTutor had a great idea of influence, and had imprinted deeply upon the minds of his leading pupils the importance of exercising it in the most beneficial way for those who were under them.

Jock accordingly stayed among the brush-

wood, watching where she went. How light she was! her feet scarcely made a dint upon the wet and spongy grass, in which his own had sunk. She went over everything like a bird. Now and then she would stop to gather a handful of brown rustling brambles, and the stiff yellow oak leaves, and here and there a rusty bough to which some rays of autumn colour still hung, which at first Jock supposed to mean botany, and was semi-respectful of, until she took off her hat and arranged them in it, when he was immediately contemptuous, saying to himself that it was just like a girl. All the same, it was interesting to watch her as she skipped and skimmed along with an air of enjoyment and delight in her freedom, which it was impossible not to sympathise with. She sang, not loudly, but almost under her breath, for pure pleasure, it seemed, but sometimes would break off and and whistle, at which Jock was much shocked at first, but gradually got reconciled to, it was so clear and sweet. After a while, however, he made an incautious step upon the brushwood, and the crashing of the branches betrayed him. She stopped suddenly with her head to the wind like a fine hound, and caught him with her keen eyes. Then there occurred a little incident

which had a very strange effect—an effect he was too young to understand—upon Jock. She stood perfectly still, with her face towards the bushes in which he was, her head thrown high, her nostrils a little dilated, a flush of sudden energy and courage on her face. She did not know who he was or what he wanted watching her from behind the covert. He might be a tramp, a violent beggar, for anything she knew. These things are more tragic where Bice came from, and it was likely enough that she took him for a brigand. It was a quick sense of alarm that sprang over her, stringing all her nerves, and bringing the colour to her cheeks. She never flinched or attempted to flee, but stood at bay, with a high valour and proud scorn of her pursuer. Her attitude, the flush which made her fair in a moment, the expanded nostrils, the fulness which her panting breath of alarm gave to her breast, made an impression upon the boy which was ineffable and beyond words. It was his first consciousness that there was something in the world—not boy, or man, or sister, something which he did not understand, which feared yet confronted him, startled but defiant. He too paused for a moment, gazing at her, getting up his courage. Then he

came slowly out from under the shade of the bushes and went towards her. There were a few yards of the open park to traverse before he reached her, so that he thought it necessary to relieve her anxiety before they met. He called out to her, "Don't be afraid, it is only me." For a moment more that fine poise lasted, and then she clapped her hands with a peal of laughter that seemed to fill the entire atmosphere and ring back from the clumps of wintry wood. "Oh," she cried, "it is you!" Jock did not know whether to be deeply affronted or to laugh too.

"I—— thought you might have lost your way," he said, knitting his brows and looking as forbidding as he knew how, by way of correcting the involuntary sentiment that had stolen into his boyish heart.

"Then why did not you come to me?" she said. "Is not that what you call to spy—to watch when one does not know you are there?"

Jock's countenance flushed at this word. "Spy! I never spied upon any one. I thought perhaps you might not be able to get back; so I would not go away out of reach."

"I see," she cried; "you meant to be kind, but not friendly. Do I say it right? Why will not

you be friendly? I have so many things I want to say, and no one, no one! to say them to. What harm would it do if you came out from yourself and talked with me a little? You are too young to make it any—inconvenience," the girl said. She laughed a little and blushed a little as she said this, eyeing him all the time with frank open eyes. "I am sixteen; how old are you?" she added, with a quick breath.

"Sixteen past," said Jock, with a little emphasis, to show his superiority in age as well as in other things.

"Sixteen in a boy means no more than nine or so," she said with a light disdain, "so you need not have any fear. Oh, come and talk! I have a hundred and more of things to say. It is all so strange. How would you like to plunge in a new world like the sea, and never say what you think of it, or ask any questions, or tell when it makes you laugh or cry?"

"I should not mind much. I should neither laugh nor cry. It is only girls that do," said Jock, somewhat contemptuous too.

"Well! But then I am a girl. I cannot change my nature to please you," she said. "Sometimes I think I should have liked better to be a boy, for you have not to do the things

we have to do; but then when I saw how awkward you were, and how clumsy, and not good for anything——" She pointed these very plain remarks with a laugh between each and a look at Jock, by which she very plainly applied what she said. He did not know at all how to take this. The instinct of a gentleman to betray no angry feeling towards a girl, who was at the same time a lady, contrasted in him with the instinct of a child, scarcely yet aware of the distinctions of sex, to fight fairly for itself; but the former prevailed. And then it was scarcely possible to resist the contagion of the laugh which the damp air seemed to hold suspended, and bring back in curls and wreaths of pleasant sound. So Jock commanded himself and replied with an effort:

"We are just as good for things that we care about as you; but not for girls' things," he added, with another little fling of the mutual contempt which they felt for each other. Then after a pause: "I suppose we may as well go home, for it is getting late; and when it is dark you would be sure to lose your way——"

"Do you think so?" she said. "Then I will come, for I do not like to be lost. What should you do if we were lost? Build me a hut to take

shelter in? or take off your coat to keep me warm, and then go and look for the nearest village? That is what happens in some of the Contessa's old books; but, ah, not in the Tauchnitz now. But it would be nonsense, of course, for there are the red chimneys of the Hall staring us in the face, so how could we be lost?"

"When it is dark," said Jock, "you can't see the red always; and then you go rambling and wandering about, and hit yourself against the trees, and get up to the ankles in the wet grass and—don't like it at all." He laughed himself a little, with a laugh that was somewhat like a growl at his own abrupt conclusion, to which Bice responded cordially.

"How nice it is to laugh," she said; "it gets the air into your lungs and then you can breathe. It is to breathe I want—large—a whole world full," she cried, throwing out her arms and opening her mouth. "Because you know the rooms are small here, and there is so much furniture, the windows closed with curtains, the floors all hot with carpets. Do they shut you up as if in a box at night, with the shutters shut, and all so dark? They do me. But as soon as they are gone I open. I like far better our rooms with big walls, and marble that is cool, and large, large

windows that you can lie and look out at when you wake, all painted upon the sky."

"I should think," said Jock, with the impulse of contradiction, "they would not be at all comfortable——"

"Comfortable!" she cried in high disdain; "does one want to be comfortable? One wants to live, and feel the air, and everything that is round."

"That's what we do at school," said Jock, waking up to a sense of the affinities as he had already done to the diversities between them.

"Tell me about school," she cried, with a pretty imperious air; and Jock, who never desired any better, obeyed.

CHAPTER IV.

A PAIR OF FRIENDS.

AFTER this it came to be a very common occurrence that Jock and Bice should meet in the afternoon. He for one thing had lost his companionship with Lucy, and had been straying forth forlorn, not knowing what to do with himself, taking long walks which he did not care for, and longing for the intellectual companionship of MTutor, or even of the other fellows who, if not intellectual, at least were acquainted with the same things, and accustomed to the same occupations as himself. It worked in him a tremor and commotion of a kind in which he was wholly inexperienced, when he saw the slim figure of the girl approaching him, through the paths of the shrubberies, or across the glades of the park. He said to himself once or twice, "What a bore;" but those words did not ex-

press his feelings. It was not a bore; it was something very different. He could not explain the mingled reluctance and pleasure of his own mood, the little tumult that arose in him when he saw her. He wanted to turn his back and rush away, and yet he wanted to be there waiting for her, seeing her approach step by step. He had no notion what his own mingled sentiments meant. But Bice to all appearance had neither the reluctance nor the excitement. She came running to her playmate whenever she saw him with frank satisfaction. "I was looking for you," she would say; "Let us go out into the park where nobody can see us. Run, or some one will be coming," and then she would fly over stock and stone, summoning him after her. There were many occasions when Jock did not approve, but he always followed her, though with internal grumblings, in which he indulged consciously, making out his own annoyance to be very great. "Why can't she let me alone?" he said to himself; but when it occurred that Bice did leave him alone, and made no appearance, his sense of injury was almost bitter. On such occasions he said cutting things within himself, and was very satirical as to the stupidity of girls who were afraid to wet their feet, and estimated

the danger of catching a cold as greater than any natural advantage. For Jock had all that instinctive hostility to womankind which is natural to the male bosom, except perhaps at one varying period of life. They had no place in the economy of his existence at school, and he knew nothing of them, nor wanted to know. But Bice, though, when he was annoyed with her, she became to him the typical girl, the epitome of offending woman, had at other times a very different position. It stirred his entire being, he did not know how, when she roamed with him about the woods talking of everything, from a point of view which was certainly different from Jock's. Occasionally, even, he did not understand her any more than if she had been speaking a foreign language. She had never any difficulty in penetrating his meaning as he had in penetrating hers, but there were times when she did not understand him any more than he understood her. She was by far the easiest in morals, the least Puritanical. It was not easy to shock Bice, but it was not at all difficult to shock Jock, brought up as he was in the highest sentiments under the wing of MTutor, who believed in moral influence. But the fashion of the intercourse held between these

two was very remarkable in its way. They were like brother and sister, without being brother and sister. They were strangers to each other, yet living in the most entire intimacy, and likely to be parted for ever to-morrow. They were of the same age, yet the girl was, in experience of life, a world in advance of the boy, who, notwithstanding, had the better of her in a thousand ways. In short, they were a paradox, such as youth, more or less, is always, and the careless close companionship that grew up between them was at once the most natural and the most strange alliance. They told each other everything by degrees, without being at all aware of the nature of their mutual confidence; Bice revealing to Jock the conditions on which she was to be brought out in England, and Jock to Bice the unusual features of his own and his sister's position, to the unbounded astonishment and scepticism of each.

"Beautiful?" said Jock, drawing a long breath. "But beautiful's not a thing you can go in for, like an exam.: You're born so, or you're born not so; and you know you're not—I mean, you know you're—— Well, it isn't your fault. Are you going to be sent away for just being—not pretty?"

"I told you," said the girl, with a little impatience. "Being pretty is of no consequence. I am pretty, of course," she added regretfully. "But it is only if I turn out beautiful that she will take the trouble. And at sixteen, I am told, one cannot yet know."

"But—" cried Jock with a sort of consternation, "you don't mind, do you? I don't mean anything unkind, you know; I don't think it matters—and I am sure it isn't your fault; you are not even—good-looking," candour compelled the boy to say, as to an honest comrade with whom sincerity was best.

"Ah!" cried Bice, with a little excitement. "Do you think so? Then perhaps there is more hope."

Jock was confounded by this utterance, and he began to feel that he had been uncivil. "I don't mean," he said, "that you are not—I mean that it is not of the least consequence. What does it matter? I am sure you are clever, which is far better. I think you could get up anything faster than most fellows if you were to try."

"Get up! What does that mean? And when I tell you that it does matter to me—oh much,—very much!" she cried. "When you

are beautiful, everything is before you—you marry, you have whatever you wish, you become a great lady; only to be pretty—that does nothing for you. Ugly, however," said the girl reflectively; "if I am ugly, then there is some hope."

"I did not say that," cried Jock, shocked at the suggestion. "I wouldn't be so uncivil. You are—just like other people," he added encouragingly, "not much either one way or another—like the rest of us," Jock said, with the intention of soothing her ruffled feelings. At sixteen decorum is not always the first thing we think of; and though Bice was not an English girl, she was very young. She threw out a vigorous arm and pushed him from her, so that the astonished critic, stumbling over some fallen branches, measured his length upon the dewy sod.

"That was not I," she said demurely, as he picked himself up in great surprise—drawing a step away, and looking at him with wide-open eyes, to which the little fright of seeing him fall, and the spark of malice that took pleasure in it, had given sudden brilliancy. Jock was so much astonished that he uttered no reproach, but went on by her side, after a moment, pondering.

He could not see how any offence could have lurked in the encouraging and consolatory words he had said.

But when they reached the other chapter which concerned his fortunes, Bice was not more understanding. Her gray eyes absolutely flamed upon him when he told her of his father's will, and the conditions upon which Lucy's inheritance was held. "To give her money away! But that is impossible—it would be to prove one's self mad," the girl said.

"Why? You forget it's my father you're speaking of. He was not mad—he was just," said Jock, reddening. "What's mad in it? You've got a great fortune—far more than you want. It all came out of other people's pockets somehow. Oh, of course, not in a dishonest way. That is the worst of speaking to a girl that doesn't understand political economy and the laws of production. Of course, it must come out of other people's pockets. If I sell anything and get a profit (and nobody would sell anything if they didn't get a profit), of course that comes out of your pocket. Well, now, I've got a great deal more than I want, and I say you shall have some of it back."

"And I say," cried Bice, making him a

curtsey, "Merci Monsieur! Grazia Signor! oh, thank you, thank you very much—as much as you like, sir, as much as you like! but all the same I think you are mad. Your money! all that makes you happy and great——"

"Money," said Jock loftily, "makes nobody happy. It may make you comfortable. It gives you fine houses, horses and carriages, and all that sort of thing. So it will do to the other people to whom it goes; so it is wisdom to divide it, for the more good you can get out of it the better. Lucy has money lying in the bank, or somewhere, that she does not want, that does her no good; and there is some one else" (a fellow I know, Jock added in a parenthesis) "who has not got enough to live upon. So you see she just hands over what she doesn't want to him, and that's better for both. So far from being mad, it's"—Jock paused for a word—"it's philosophy, it's wisdom, it's statemanship. It is just the grandest way that was ever invented for putting things straight."

Bice looked at him with a sort of incredulous cynical gaze—as if asking whether he meant her to believe this fiction—whether perhaps he was such a fool as to think that she could be persuaded to believe it. It was evident that

she did not for a moment suppose him to be serious.

She laughed at last in ridicule and scorn. "You think," she said, "I know so little. Ah, I know a great deal more than that. What are you without money? You are nobody. The more you have, so much more have you everything at your command. Without money you are nobody. Yes, you may be a prince or an English milord, but that is nothing without money. Oh yes! I have known princes that had nothing, and the people laughed at them. And a milord who is poor—the very donkey-boys scorn him. You can do nothing without money," the girl said with almost fierce derision; "and you tell me you will give it away!" She laughed again angrily, as if such a brag was offensive and insulting to her own poverty. The boy, who had never in his life known what it was to want anything that money could procure for him, treated the whole question lightly, and undervalued its importance altogether. But the girl, who knew by experience what was involved in the want of it, heard with a sort of wondering fury this slighting treatment of what was to her the universal panacea. Her cynicism and satirical unbelief grew into in-

dignation. "And you tell me it is wise to give it away!"

"Lucy has got to do it whether it is wise or not," said Jock, almost overawed by this high moral disapproval. "We went to the lawyer about it the day you came. He is settling it now. She is giving away—well a good many thousand pounds."

"Pounds are more than francs, eh?" said Bice quickly.

"More than francs! just twenty-five times more," cried Jock, proud of his knowledge, "a thousand pounds is——"

"Then I don't believe you!" cried the girl in an outburst of passion; and she fled from him across the park, catching up her dress and running at a pace which even Jock with his long legs knew he could not keep up with. He gazed with surprise, standing still and watching her with the words arrested on his lips. "But she can't keep it up long like that," after a moment Jock said.

The time, however, approached when the two friends had to part. Jock left the Hall a few days after Lady Randolph, and he was somehow not very glad to go. The family life had been less cheerful lately, and conversation languished

when the domestic party were alone together. When the Contessa was present she kept up the ball, maintaining, at least with Sir Tom, an always animated and lively strain of talk; but at breakfast there was not much said, and of late a little restraint had crept even between the master and mistress of the house, no one could tell how. The names of the guests were scarcely mentioned between them. Sir Tom was very attentive and kind to his wife, but he was more silent than he used to be, reading his letters and his newspapers. Lucy had been quite satisfied when he said, though it must be allowed with a laugh not devoid of embarrassment, that it was more important he should master all the papers and see how public opinion was running, now when it was so near the opening of Parliament. But a little veil of silence had fallen over Lucy too. It cost her an effort to speak even to Jock of common subjects and of his going away. She had thought him looking a little disturbed, however, on the last morning; and, with the newspaper forming a sort of screen between them and Sir Tom, Lucy made an attempt to talk to her brother as of old.

"I shall miss you very much, Jock. We have not had so much time together as we thought."

"We have had no time together, Lucy."

"You must not say that, dear. Don't you recollect that drive to Farafield? We have not had so many walks, it is true; but then I have been—occupied."

"Is it ever finished yet, that business?" Jock said suddenly.

It was all Lucy could do not to give him a warning look. "I have had some letters about it. A thing cannot be finished in a minute like that." Instinctively she spoke low to escape her husband's ear; he had never referred to the subject, and she avoided it religiously. It gave her a thrill of alarm to have it thus re-introduced. To escape it, she said, raising her voice a little: "The Contessa's letters have not been sent to her. You must ring the bell, Jock. There are a great many for her." The name of the Contessa always moved Sir Tom to a certain attention. He seemed to be on the alert for what might be said of her. He looked round the corner of the paper with a short laugh, and said jocularly, with mock gravity:

"It is a great thing to keep up your correspondence, Lucy. You never can know when it may prove serviceable. If it had not been for

that, she most likely never would have come here."

Lucy smiled, though with a little restraint. "Perhaps she is sorry now," she said, "for it must be dull." Then she hurriedly changed the subject, afraid lest she might seem ill-natured. "Poor Miss Bice has never any letters," she said; "she must have very few friends."

"Oh, she has nobody at all," said Jock. "She hasn't got a relation. She has always lived like this, in different places, and never been to school or—anywhere; though she has been nearly round the world."

"Poor little thing! and she is fond of children, too," said Lucy. "I found her one day with baby on her shoulder,—a wet day when he could not get out,—racing up and down the long gallery with him crowing and laughing. It was so pretty to see him——"

"Or to see her, Lucy, most people would say," said Sir Tom, interrupting again.

"Would they? Oh yes. But I thought naturally of baby," said the young mother. Then she made a pause and added softly, "I hope—they—are always kind to her."

There was a little silence. Sir Tom was behind his newspaper. He listened, but he did

not say anything, and Jock was not aware that he was listening.

"Oh, I don't think she minds," said Jock. "She is rather jolly when you come to know her. I say, Lucy, it will be awfully dull for her, you know, when——"

"When what, Jock?"

"When I am gone," the boy intended to have said, but some gleam of consciousness came over him that made him pause. He did not say this, but grew a little red in the effort to think of something else that he could say.

"Well, I mean here," he said, "for she hasn't been used to it. She has been in places where there was always music playing, and that sort of thing. She never was in the country. There's plenty of books, to be sure, but she's not very fond of reading. Few people are, I think. *You* never open a book——"

"Oh yes, Jock! I read the books from Mudie's," Lucy said with some spirit, "and I always send them upstairs."

Jock had it on his lips to say something derogatory of the books from Mudie's; but he checked himself, for he remembered to have seen MTutor with one of those frivolous volumes, and he refrained from snubbing Lucy. "I believe

she can't read," he said. "She can do nothing but laugh at one. And she thinks she's pretty," he added, with a little laugh, yet sense of unfaithfulness to the trust reposed in him, which once more covered his face with crimson.

Lucy laughed, too, with hesitation and doubt. "I cannot see it," she said, "but that is what Lady Randolph thought. It is strange that she should talk of such things; but people are very funny who have been brought up abroad."

"All girls are like that," said Jock authoritatively. "They think so much of being pretty. But I tell her it doesn't matter. What difference could it make? Nobody will suppose it was her fault. She says——"

"Hallo, young man," said Sir Tom, "it is time you went back to school, I think. What would MTutor say to all these confidences with young ladies, and knowledge of their ways?"

Jock gave his brother-in-law a look, in which defiant virtue struggled with a certain consciousness; but he scorned to make any reply.

CHAPTER V.

THE BREAKFAST TABLE.

Lucy found her life much changed when Jock had gone, and she was left alone to face the change of circumstances which had tacitly taken place. The Contessa said not a word of terminating her visit. The departure of Lady Randolph apparently suggested nothing to her. She could scarcely have filled up the foreground more entirely than she did before; but she was now uncriticised, unremarked upon. There seemed even to be no appropriation of more than her due, for it was very natural that a person of experience and powers of conversation like hers should take the leading place, and simple Lucy, so much younger, and with so much less acquaintance with the world, fall into the background. And accordingly, this was what happened. Madame di Forno-Populo knew everybody. She

had a hundred mutual acquaintances to tell Sir Tom about, and they seemed to have an old habit of intercourse, which by this time had been fully resumed. The evenings were the time when this was most apparent. Then the Contessa was at her brightest. She had managed to introduce shades upon all the lamps, so as to diffuse round her a softened artificial illumination such as is favourable to beauty that has passed its prime. And in this ruddy gloom she sat half seen, Sir Tom sometimes standing by her, sometimes permitted to take the other corner of her sofa—and talked to him, sometimes sinking her voice low as her reminiscences took some special vein, sometimes calling sweetly to her pretty Lucy to listen to this or that. These extensions of confidence, generally, were brought in to make up for a long stretch of more private communications, and the aspect of the little domestic circle was on such occasions curious enough. By the table, in a low chair, with the full light of the lamp upon her, sat Lucy, generally with some work in her hands; she did not read or write (exercises to which, to tell the truth, she was not much addicted) out of politeness, lest she should seem to be withdrawing her attention from her guest, but sat there with her slight occupation,

so as to be open to any appeal, and ready if she were wanted. On the other side of the table, the light making a sort of screen and division between them, sat Bice, generally with a book before her, which, as has been said, did not at all interfere with her power of giving a vivid attention to what was going on around her. These two said nothing to each other, and were often silent for the whole evening, like pieces of still life. Bice sat with her book upon the table, so that only the open page and the hands that held the book were within the brightness of the light, which on the other side streamed down upon Lucy's fair shoulders and soft young face, and upon the work in her hands. In the corner was the light continuous murmur of talk; the half-seen figure of the Contessa, generally leaning back, looking up to Sir Tom, who stood with his arm on the mantelpiece, with much animation, gesticulation of her hands, and subdued laughter; the most lively current of sound—soft, intensified by little eloquent breaks, by emphatic gestures, by sentences left incomplete, but understood all the better for being half said. There were many evenings in which Lucy sat there with a little wonder, but no other active feeling in her mind. It is needless to say that it was not pleasant to

her. She would sit and wonder wistfully whether her husband had forgotten she was there, but then reminded herself that of course it was his duty to think of the Contessa first, and consoled herself that by and by the stranger would go away, and all would be as it had been. As time went on the desire that this should happen, and longing to have possession of her home again, grew so strong that she could scarcely subdue it, and it was with the greatest difficulty that she kept all expression of it from her lips. And by and by the warmth of this restrained desire so absorbed Lucy that she scarcely dared allow herself to speak lest it should burst forth; and there seemed to herself to be continually going on in her mind a calculation of the chances, a scrutiny of everything the Contessa said, which seemed to point at such a movement. But, indeed, the Contessa said very little upon which the most sanguine could build. She said nothing of her arrangements at all, nor spoke of what she was going to do, and answered none of Lucy's ardent and innocent fishings after information. The evenings became more and more intolerable to Lady Randolph as they went on. She was glad that anybody should come, however little she might care for their society, to break these private conferences up.

And this was not all, nor even perhaps the worst, of the vague evils not yet defined in her mind, and which she was so very reluctant to define, which Lucy had to go through. At breakfast, when she was alone with her husband, matters were almost worse. Sir Tom, it was evident, began to feel the *tête-à-tête* embarrassing. He did not know what to say to his little wife when they were alone. The presence of the Dowager and Jock had freed him from any necessity of explanation, had kept him in his usual easy way ; but now that Lucy alone sat opposite to him, he was more silent than his wont, and with no longer any of the little flow of simple observations which had once been so delightful to her. Sir Tom was more uneasy than if she had been a stern and jealous Eleanor, a clear-sighted critic seeing through and through him. The contest was so unequal, and the weaker creature so destitute of any intention or thought of resistance, that he felt himself a coward and traitor for thus deserting her and overclouding her home and her life. Then he took to asking himself, Did he overcloud her? Was she sensible of any difference? Did she know enough to know that this was not how she ought to be treated, or was she not quite contented with her

secondary place? Such a simple creature, would she not cry? would she not show her anger if she was conscious of anything to be grieved or angry about? He took refuge in those newspapers which, he gave out, it was so necessary he should study, to understand the mind of the country before the opening of Parliament. And thus they would sit, Lucy dutifully filling out the tea, taking care that he had the dish he liked for breakfast, swallowing her own with difficulty yet lingering over it, always thinking that perhaps Tom might have something to say. While he, on the other hand, kept behind his newspaper, feeling himself guilty, conscious that another sort of woman would make one of those "scenes" which men dread, yet despising Lucy a little in spite of himself for the very quality he most admired in her, and wondering if she were really capable of feeling at all. Sometimes little Tom would be brought downstairs to roll about the carpet and try his unsteady little limbs in a series of clutches at the chairs and table; and on these occasions the meal was got through more easily. But little Tom was not always well enough to come downstairs, and sometimes Lucy thought that her husband might have something to say to her which the baby's all-engrossing

presence hindered. Thus it came about that the hours in which the Contessa was present and in the front of everything were really less painful than those in which the pair were alone with the shadow of the intruder—more powerful even than her presence holding them apart.

One of these mornings, however, Lucy's anticipation and hopes seemed about to be realised. Sir Tom laid down his paper, looked at her frankly without any shield, and said, as she had so often imagined him saying, "I want to talk to you, Lucy." How glad she was that little Tom was not downstairs that morning!

She looked at him across the table with a brightening countenance, and said, "Yes, Tom?" with such warm eagerness and sudden pleasure that her look penetrated his very heart. It implied a great deal more than Sir Tom intended and thought, and he was a man of very quick intelligence. The expectation in her eyes touched him beyond a thousand complaints.

"I had an interview yesterday, in which you were much concerned," he said; then made a pause, with such a revolution going on within him as seldom happens in a mature and self-collected mind. He had begun with totally different sentiments from those which suddenly

came over him at the sight of her kindling face. When he said, "I want to talk to you, Lucy," he had meant to speak of her interview with Mr. Rushton, to point out to her the folly of what she was doing, and to show her how it was that he should be compelled to do everything that was in his power to oppose her. He did not mean to go to the root of the matter, as he had done before, when he was obliged to admit to himself that he had failed—but to address himself to the secondary view of the question, to the small prospect there was of doing any good. But when he caught her eager questioning look, her eyes growing liquid and bright with emotion, her face full of restrained anxiety and hope, Sir Tom's heart smote him. What did she think he was going to say? Not anything about money, important as that subject was in their life—but something far more important, something that touched her to the quick, a revelation upon which her very soul hung. He was startled beyond measure by this disclosure. He had thought she did not feel, and that her heart unawakened had regarded calmly, with no pain to speak of, the new state of affairs of which he himself was guiltily conscious; but that eager look put an end in a moment to his

delusion. He paused and swerved mentally as if an angel had suddenly stepped into his way.

"It is about—that will of your father's," he said.

Lucy, gazing at him with such hope and expectation, suddenly sank, as it were, prostrate in the depth of a disappointment that almost took the life out of her. She did not indeed fall physically or faint, which people seldom do in moments of extreme mental suffering. It was only her countenance that fell. Her brightening, beaming, hopeful face grew blank in a moment, her eyes grew utterly dim, a kind of mist running over them: a sound—half a sob, half a sigh—came from her breast. She put up her hand trembling to support her head, which shook too with the quiver that went over her. It took her at least a minute to get over the shock of the disappointment. Then commanding herself painfully, but without looking at him, which, indeed, she dared not do, she said again, "Yes, Tom?" with a piteous quiver of her lip.

It did not make Sir Tom any the less kind, and full of tender impulses, that he was wounding his wife in the profoundest sensibilities of her heart. In this point the greater does not include the lesser. He was cruel in the more important

matter, without intending it indeed, and from what he considered a fatality, a painful combination of circumstances out of which he could not escape; but in the lesser particulars he was as kind as ever. He could not bear to see her suffering. The quiver in her lip, the failure of the colour in her cheeks, affected him so that he could scarcely contain himself.

"My dear love," he cried, "my little Lucy! you are not afraid of what I am going to say to you?" These words came to his lips naturally, by the affectionate impulse of his kind nature. But when he had said them, an impulse, which was perhaps more crafty than loving, followed. Quick as thought he changed his intention, his purpose altogether. He could not resist the appeal of Lucy's face; but he slipped instinctively from the more serious question that lay between them, and resolved to sacrifice the other, which was indeed very important, yet could be treated in an easier way and without involving anything more painful. Sir Tom was at an age when money has a great value, and the mere sense of possession is pleasant; and there was a principle involved which he had determined a few weeks ago not to relinquish. But the position in which he found himself placed was one

out of which some way of escape had to be invented at once. "Lucy," he said, "you are frightened; you think I am going to cross you in the matter that lies so near your heart. But you mistake me, my dear. I think I ought to be your chief adviser in that as in all matters. It is my duty. But I hope you never thought that I would exercise any force upon you to put a stop to—what you thought right."

Lucy had overcome herself, though with a painful effort. She followed with a quivering humility what he was saying. She acknowledged to herself that this was, indeed, the great thing in her life, and that it was only her childishness and foolishness which had made her place other matters in the chief place. Most likely, she said to herself, Tom was not aware of anything that required explanation; he would never think it possible that she could be so ungracious and unkind as to grudge his guests their place in his house. She gathered herself up hastily to meet him when he entered upon the great question, which was far more important, which was indeed the only question between them. "I know," she said, "that you were always kind, Tom. If I did not ask you first it was because——"

"We need not enter upon that, my dear. I

was angry, and went too far. At the same time, Lucy, it is a mad affair altogether. Your father himself, had he realised the difficulty of carrying it out, would have seen this. I only say so to let you know my opinion is unchanged. And you know your trustees are of the same mind. But if you think this is your duty, as I am sure you do——"

It seemed to Lucy that her duty had sailed far away from her on some sea of strange distance and dullness where she could scarcely keep it in sight. Her own very voice seemed strange and dull to her, and far away, as she said almost mechanically, "I do think it is my duty—to my father——"

"I am aware that you think so, my love. As you get older you will, perhaps, see as I do—that to carry out the spirit of your father's will would be better than to follow so closely the letter of it. But you are still very young, and Jock is younger; and, fortunately, you can afford to indulge a freak of this sort. I shall let Mr. Rushton know that I withdraw all opposition. And now, give me a kiss, and let us forget that there ever was any controversy between us —it never went further than a controversy, did it, darling?" Sir Tom said.

Lucy could not speak for the moment. She looked up into his face with her eyes all liquid with tears, and a great confusion in her soul. Was this all? as he kissed her, and smiled, leaning over her in the old kind way, with a tenderness that was half-fatherly and indulgent to her weakness, she did not seem at all sure what it was that had moved like a ghost between him and her; was it in reality only this—this and no more? She almost thought so as she looked up into his kind face. Only this! How glad it would have made her three weeks ago to have his sanction for the thing she was so reluctant to attempt, which it was so much her duty to do, which Jock urged with so much pertinacity, and which her father from his grave enjoined! If it affected her but dully now, whose was the fault? Not Tom's, who was so generously ready to yield to her, although he disapproved. When he retired behind his newspaper once more with a kind smile at her, to end the matter, Lucy sat quite still in a curious stunned confusion trying to account for it all to herself. There could be no doubt, she thought, that it was she who was in the wrong. She it was who had created the embarrassment altogether. He was not even aware of any other cause. It had never occurred

to his greater mind that she could be so petty as to fret under the interruption which their visitors had made in her life. He had thought that the other matter was the cause of her dullness and silence, and generously had put an end to it, not by requiring any sacrifice from her, but by making one in his own person. She sat silent trying to realise all this, but unable to get quite free from the confusion and dimness that had invaded her soul.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ORACLE SPEAKS.

Lucy went up to the nursery when breakfast was over. It was her habit to go and take counsel of little Tom when her heart was troubled or heavy. He was now eighteen months old, an age at which you will say the judicial faculties are small; but a young mother has superstitions, and there are many dilemmas in life in which it will do a woman, though the male critic may laugh, great good to go and confide it all to her baby, and hold that little bundle of white against her heart to conquer the pain of it. When little Tom was lively and well, when he put his arms about her neck and dabbed his velvety mouth against her cheek, Lucy felt that she was approved of and her heart rose. When he was cross and cried and pushed her away from him, as sometimes happened, she ceased to be sure of

anything, and felt dissatisfied with herself and all the world. It was with a great longing to consult this baby oracle and see what heaven might have to say to her through his means, that she ran upstairs, neglecting even Mrs. Freshwater, who advanced ceremoniously from her own retirement with her bill of fare in her hand, as Lucy darted past. "Wait a little and I will come to you," she cried. What was the dinner in comparison? She flew up to the nursery only to find it vacant. The morning was dingy and damp, no weather for the delicate child to go out, and Lucy was not alarmed, but knew well enough where to find him. The long picture gallery which ran along the front of the house was his usual promenade on such occasions, and there she betook herself hurriedly. There could not be much doubt as to little Tom's whereabouts. Shrieks of baby fun were audible whenever she came within hearing, and the sound of a flying foot careering from end to end of the long space, which certainly was not the foot of Tom's nurse, whose voice could be heard in cries of caution, "Oh, take care, Miss! Oh, for goodness sake—oh, what will my lady say to me if you should trip with him!" Lucy paused suddenly, checked by the sound of this com-

motion. Once before she had surprised a scene of this kind, and she knew what it meant. She stopped short, and stood still to get possession of herself. It was a circumstance which pulled her up sharply and changed the current of her mind. Her first feeling was one of disappointment and almost irritation. Could she not even have the baby to herself, she murmured? But there was in reality so little of the petty in Lucy's disposition that this was but a momentary sentiment. It changed, however, the manner of her entrance. She came in quietly, not rushing to seize her boy as she had intended, but still with her superstition strong in her heart, and as determined to resort to the *Sortes Tomianæ* as ever. The sight she saw was one to make a picture of. Skimming along the long gallery with that free light step which scarcely seemed to touch the ground was Bice, a long stream of hair flying behind her, the child seated on her shoulder, supported by one raised arm, while the other held aloft the end of a red scarf which she had twisted round him. Little Tom had one hand twisted in her hair, and with his small feet beating upon her breast, and his little chest expanded with cries of delight, encouraged his steed in her wild career. The dark old pictures,

some full-length Randolphs of an elder age, good for little but a background, threw up this airy group with all the perfection of contrast. They flew by as Lucy came in, so joyous, so careless, so delightful in pose and movement, that she could not utter the little cry of alarm that came to her lips. Bice had never in her life looked so near that beauty which she considered as so serious a necessity. She was flushed with the movement, her fine light figure, too light and slight as yet for the full perfection of feminine form, was the very impersonation of youth. She flew, she did not glide nor run—her elastic foot spurned the floor. She was like a runner in a Greek game. Lucy stood breathless between admiration and pleasure and alarm, as the animated figure turned and came fast towards her in its airy career. Little Tom perceived his mother as they came up. He was still more daring than his bearer. He detached himself suddenly from Bice's shoulder, and with a shout of pleasure threw himself upon Lucy. The oracle had spoken. It almost brought her to her knees indeed, descending upon her like a little thunderbolt, catching her round the throat and tearing off with a hurried clutch the lace upon her dress; while the flying steed, suddenly arrested, came

to a dead stop in front of her, panting, blushing, and disconcerted. "There was no fear," she cried, with involuntary self-defence, "I held him fast." Bice forgot even in the surprise how wildly she stood with her hair floating, and the scarf in her hand still knotted round the baby's waist.

"There was no danger, my lady. I was watching every step; and it do Master Tom a world of good," cried the nurse, coming to the rescue.

"Why should you think I am afraid?" said Lucy. "Don't you know I am most grateful to you for being so kind to him? and it was pretty to see you. You looked so bright and strong, and my boy so happy."

"Miss is just our salvation, my lady," said the nurse; "these wet days, when we can't get out, I don't know what I should do without her. Master Tom, bless him, is always cross when he don't get no air; but once set on Miss' shoulder he crows till it do your heart good to hear him," the woman cried.

Bice stood with the colour still in her face, her head thrown back a little, and her breath coming less quickly. She laughed at this applause. "I like it," she said. "I like him; he is my only little companion. He is pleased when he sees me."

This went to Lucy's heart. "And so are we

all," she said; "but you will not let me see you. I am often alone, too. If you will come and—and give me your company——"

Bice gave her a wistful look; then shook her head.

"I know you do not wish for us here; and why should you?" she said.

"My dear!" cried Lucy in alarm, with a glance at the woman who stood by, all ears. And now it was that little Tom at eighteen months showed that precocious judgment in which his mother had an instinctive belief. He had satisfied himself with the destruction of Lucy's lace, and with printing the impression of his mouth all over her cheeks. That little wet wide-open mouth was delicious to Lucy. No trouble had befallen her yet that could not be wiped out by its touch. But now a new distraction was necessary for the little hero; and his eye caught the red sash which still was round his waist. He transferred all his thoughts to it with an instant revolution of idea, and holding on by it like a little sailor on a rope, drew Bice close till he could succeed in the arduous task, not unattended by danger, of flinging himself from one to another. This game enchanted Master Tom. Had he been a little older it would have been

changed into that daring faltering hop from one eminence, say a footstool, to another, which flutters the baby soul. He was too insecure in possession of those aimless little legs to venture on any such daring feat now; but, with a valour more desperate still, he flung himself across the gulf from Lucy's arms to those of Bice and back again, with cries of delight. These cries, it must be allowed, were not very articulate, but they soon became urgent, with a demand which the little tyrant insisted upon with increasing vehemence.

"Oh, my lady," cried the nurse, "it is as plain as if he said it, and he is saying of it, the pet, as pretty!—— He wants you to kiss Miss, he do. Ain't that it, my own? Nursey knows his little talk. Ain't that it, my darling lamb?"

There was a momentary pause in the strange little group linked together by the baby's clutches. The young mother and the girl, with their heads so near each other, looked in each other's faces. In Lucy's there was a kind of awe, in Bice's a sort of wondering wistfulness mingled with incipient defiance. They were not born to be each other's friends. They were different in everything; they were even on different sides in this house—the one an in-

truder, belonging to the party which was destroying the other's domestic peace. It would be vain to say that there was not a little reluctance in Lucy's soul as she gazed at the younger girl, come from she knew not where, established under her roof she knew not how. She hesitated for one moment, then she bent forward almost with solemnity and kissed Bice's cheek. She seemed to communicate her own agitation to the girl, who stood straight up with her head a little back, half eager, half defiant. When Bice felt the touch of Lucy's lips, however, she melted in a moment. Her slight figure swayed, she took Lucy's disengaged hand with her own, and, stooping over it, kissed it with lips that quivered. There was not a word said between them; but a secret compact was thus made under little Tom's inspiration. The little oracle clambered up upon his mother afterwards, and laid down his head upon her shoulder and dropped off to sleep with that entire confiding and abandonment of the whole little being which is one of the deepest charms of childhood. Who is there with any semblance of a heart in his, much more her, bosom who is not touched in the tenderest part when a child goes to sleep in his arms? The appeal conveyed in

the act is one which scarcely a savage could withstand. The three women gathered round to see this common spectacle, so universal, so touching. Bice, who was almost too young for the maternal sentiment, and who was a stern young Stoic by nature, never shedding a tear, could not tell how it was that her eyes moistened. But Lucy's filled with an emotion which was sharp and sore with alarm. "Oh, nurse, don't call my boy a little angel!" she said, with a sentiment which a woman will understand.

This baby scene upstairs was balanced by one of a very different character below. Sir Tom had gone into his own room a little disturbed and out of sorts. Circumstances had been hard upon him, he felt. The Contessa's letter offering her visit had been a jest to him. He was one of those who thought the best of the Contessa. He had seen a good deal of her one time and another in his life, and she held the clue to one or two matters which it would not have pleased him, at this mature period of his existence, to have published abroad. She was an adventuress, he knew, and her friends were not among the best of humanity. She had led a life which, without being positively evil, had shut her out from the sympathies of many good

people. When a woman has to solve the problem how to obtain all the luxuries and amusements of life without money, it is to be expected that her attempts to do so should lead her into risky places, where the footing was far from sure. But she had never, as Lady Randolph acknowledged, gone so far as that society should refuse to receive her, and Sir Tom was always an indulgent critic. If she were coming to England, as she gave him to understand, he saw no reason why she should not come to the Hall. For himself, it would be rather amusing than otherwise, and Lucy would take no harm—even if there was harm in the Forno-Populo (which he did not believe), his wife was far too innocent even to suspect it. She would not know evil if she saw it, he said to himself proudly; and then there was no chance that the Contessa, who loved merriment and gaiety, could long be content with anything so humdrum as this quiet life in the country. Thus it will be seen that Sir Tom had got himself innocently enough into this imbroglio. He had meant no particular harm. He had meant to be kind to a poor woman, who after all needed kindness much; and if the comic character of the situation touched his sense of humour, and he was not

unwilling in his own person to get a little amusement out of it, who could blame him? This was the worst that Sir Tom meant. To amuse himself partly by the sight of the conventional beauty and woman of the world in the midst of circumstances so incongruous, and partly by the fluttering of the dovecotes which the appearance of such an adventuress would cause. He liked her conversation too, and to hear all about the more noisy company, full of talk and diversion, in which he had wasted so much of his youth. But there were two or three things which Sir Tom did not take into his calculations. The first was the sort of fascination which that talk, and all the associations of the old world, and the charms of the professional sorceress, would exercise upon himself after his settling down as the head of a family and pillar of the State. He had not thought how much amused he would be—how the contrast even would tickle his fancy and affect (for the moment) his life. He laughed within himself at the transparent way in which his old friend bade for his sympathy and society. She was the same as ever, living upon admiration, upon compliments, whether fictitious or not, and demanding a show of devotion—somebody always at her

feet. She thought, no doubt, he said to himself, that she had got him at her feet, and he laughed to himself when he was alone at the thought. But, nevertheless, it did amuse him to talk to the Contessa, and before long, what with skilful reminders of the past, what with hints and reference to a knowledge which he would not like extended to the world, he had begun by degrees to find himself in a confidential position with her. "We know each other's secrets," she would say to him with a meaning look. He was caught in her snare. On the other hand, an indefinite visit prolonged and endless had never come within his calculation. He did not know how to put an end to the situation—perhaps, as it was an amusement for his evenings to see the siren spread her snares, and even to be more or less caught in them, he did not sincerely wish to put an end to it as yet. He was caught in them more or less, but never so much as to be unaware of the skill with which the snares were laid, which would have amused him whatever had been the seriousness of the attendant circumstances. He did not, however, allow that he had no desire to make an end of these circumstances, but only said to himself, with a shrug of his shoulders,

how could he do it? He could not send his old friend away. He could not but be civil and attentive to her so long as she was under his roof. It distressed him that Lucy should feel it, as this morning's experience proved her to do, but how could he help it? He made that other sacrifice to Lucy by way of reconciling her to the inevitable, but he could do no more. When you invite a friend to be your guest, he said to himself, you must be more or less at the mercy of that friend. If he (or she) stays too long, what can you do? Sir Tom was not the sort of man to be reduced to helplessness by such a difficulty. Yet this was what he said to himself.

It vexed him, however, that Lucy should feel it so much. He could not throw off this uneasy feeling. He had stopped her mouth as one might stop a child's mouth with a sugar-plum; but he could not escape from the consciousness that Lucy felt her domain invaded, and that her feeling was just. He had thrown himself into the great chair, and was pondering not what to do, but the impossibility of doing anything, when Williams, his confidential man, who knew all about the Contessa almost as well as he did, suddenly appeared before him. Williams had

been all over the world with Sir Tom before he settled down as his butler at the Hall. He was, therefore, not one who could be dismissed summarily if he interfered in any matter out of his sphere. He appeared on the other side of Sir Tom's writing-table with a face as long as his arm, the face with which Sir Tom was so well acquainted—the same face with which he had a hundred times announced the failure of supplies, the delay of carriages, the general hopelessness of the situation. There was tragedy in it of the most solemn kind, but there was a certain enjoyment too.

"What is the matter?" said Sir Tom; and then he jumped to his feet. "Something is wrong with the baby," he cried.

"No, Sir Thomas; Mr. Randolph is pretty well, thank you, Sir Thomas. It is about something else that I made so bold. There is Antonio, sir, in the servants' hall; Madame the Countess' man."

"Oh, the Countess," cried Sir Tom, and he seated himself again; then said, with the confidence of a man to the follower who has been his companion in many straits, "You gave me a fright, Williams. I thought that little shaver—— But what's the matter with Antonio? Can't

you keep a fellow like that in order without bothering me?"

"Sir Thomas," said Williams solemnly, "I am not one as troubles my master when things are straightforward. But them foreigners, you never know when you have 'em. And an idle man about an establishment, that is, so to speak, under nobody, and for ever a-kicking of his heels, and following the women servants about, and not a blessed hand's turn to do"—a tone of personal offence came into Williams' complaint; "there is a deal to do in this house," he added, "and neither me nor any of the men haven't got a moment to spare. Why, there's your hunting things, Sir Thomas, is just a man's work. And to see that fellow loafing and a-hanging on about the women—I don't wonder, Sir Thomas, that it's more than any man can stand," said Williams, lighting up. He was a married man himself, with a very respectable family in the village, but he was not too old to be able to understand the feelings of John and Charles, whose hearts were lacerated by the success of the Italian fellow with his black eyes.

"Well, well, don't worry me," said Sir Tom; "take him by the collar and give him a shake. You're big enough." Then he laughed unfeel-

ingly, which Williams did not expect. "Too big, eh, Will? Not so ready for a shindy as we used to be." This identification of himself with his factotum was mere irony, and Williams felt it; for Sir Tom, if perhaps less slim than in his young days, was still what Williams called a "fine figger of a man;" whereas the butler had widened much round the waist, and was apt to puff as he came upstairs, and no longer contemplated a shindy as a possibility at all.

"Sir Thomas," he said with great gravity, "if I'm corpulent, which I don't deny, but never thought to have it made a reproach, it's neither overfeeding nor want of care, but constitootion, as derived from my parents, Sir Thomas. There is nothing," he added with a pensive superiority, "as is so gen'rally misunderstood." Then Williams drew himself up to still greater dignity, stimulated by Sir Tom's laugh. "If this fellow is to be long in the house, Sir Thomas, I won't answer for what may happen; for he's got the devil's own temper, like all of them, and carries a knife like all of them."

"What do you want of me, man? Say it out! Am I to represent to Madame di Forno-Populo that three great hulking fellows of you are afraid

of her slim Neapolitan?" Sir Tom cried impatiently.

"Not afraid, Sir Thomas, of nothing, but of breaking the law," said Williams quickly. Then he added in an insinuating tone, "But I tell them, ladies don't stop long in country visits, not at this time of the year. And a thing can be put up with for short that any man 'd kick at for long. Madame the Countess will be moving on to pay her other visits, Sir Thomas, if I might make so bold? She is a lady as likes variety; leastways she was so in the old times."

Sir Thomas stared at the bold questioner, who thus went to the heart of the matter. Then he burst into a hearty laugh. "If you knew so much about Madame the Countess," he cried, "my good fellow, what need have you to come and consult me?"

CHAPTER VII.

THE CONTESSA'S BOUDOIR.

THE east rooms, in which Madame di Forno-Populo had been placed on her arrival at the Hall, were handsome and comfortable, though they were not the best in the house, and they were furnished as English rooms generally are, the bed forming the principal object in each chamber. The Contessa had looked around her in dismay when first ushered into the spacious room with its huge couch, and wardrobes, and its unmistakable destination as a sleeping-room merely: and it was only the addition of a dressing-room of tolerable proportions which had made her quarters so agreeable to her as they proved. The transformation of this room from a severe male dressing-room into the boudoir of a fanciful and luxurious woman was a work of art of which neither the master nor the mistress of the

house had the faintest conception. The Contessa was never at home; so that she was—having that regard for her own comfort which is one of the leading features in such a life as hers—everywhere at home, carrying about with her wherever she went the materials for creating an individual centre (a *chez soi*, which is something far more intimate and personal than a home) in which everything was arranged according to her fancy. Had Lucy, or even had Sir Tom, who knew more about such matters, penetrated into that sacred retirement, they would not have recognised it for a room in their own house. Out of one of the Contessa's boxes there came a paraphernalia of decoration such as would turn the head of the æsthetic furnisher of the present day. As she had been everywhere, and had "taste," when it was not so usual to have taste as it is now, she had "picked up" priceless articles, in the shape of tapestries, embroideries, silken tissues no longer made, delicate bits of Eastern carpet, soft falling drapery of curtains, such as, artistically arranged in almost any room, impressed upon it the Contessa's individuality, and made something dainty and luxurious among the meanest surroundings. The Contessa's maid, from long practice, had become almost an artist

in the arrangement of these properties, without which her mistress could not live; and on the evening of the first day of their arrival at the Hall, when Madame di Forno-Populo emerged from the darkness of the chamber in which she had rested all day after her journey, she stepped into a little paradise of subdued colour and harmonious effect. Antonio and Marietta were the authors of these wonders. They took down Mrs. Freshwater's curtains, which were of a solid character adapted to the locality, and replaced them by draperies that veiled the light tenderly and hung with studied grace. They took to pieces the small bed and made a divan covered with old brocade of the prosaic English mattress. They brought the finest of the furniture out of the bedchamber to add to the contents of this, and covered tables with Italian work, and veiled the bare wall with tapestry. This made such a magical change that the maids who penetrated by chance now and then into this little temple of the Graces could only stand aghast and gaze with open mouths; but no profane hand of theirs was ever permitted to touch those sacred things. There were even pictures on the wall, evolved out of the depths of that great coffer, which, more dear to the Contessa even than her ward-

robe, went about with her everywhere—and precious pieces of porcelain; Madame di Forno-Populo, it need not be said, being quite above the mean and cheap decoration made with fans or unmeaning scraps of colour. The maids aforesaid, who obtained perilous and breathless glimpses from time to time of all these wonders, were at a loss to understand why so much trouble should be taken for a room that nobody but its inmate ever saw. The finer intelligence of the reader will no doubt set it down as something in the Contessa's favour that she could not live, even when in the strictest privacy, without her pretty things about her. To be sure it was not always so; in other regions, where other habits prevailed, this shrine so artistically prepared was open to worshippers; but the Contessa knew better than to make any such innovation here. She intended, indeed, nothing that was not entirely consistent with the strictest propriety. Her objects, no doubt, were her own interest and her own pleasure, which are more or less the objects of most people; but she intended no harm. She believed that she had a hold over Sir Tom which she could work for her advantage, but she did not mean to hurt Lucy. She thought that repose and a temporary absence from the usual scenes

of her existence would be of use to her, and she thought also that a campaign in London under the warrant of the highest respectability would further her grand object. It amused her besides, perhaps, to flutter the susceptibilities of the innocent little *ingénue* whom Sir Tom had married; but she meant no harm. As for seizing upon Sir Tom in the evenings, and occupying all his attention, that was the most natural and simple of proceedings. She did this as another woman played bezique. Some entertainment was a necessity, and everybody had something. There were people who insisted upon whist; she insisted only upon "some one to talk to." What could be more natural? The Contessa's "some one" had to be a man, and one who could pay with sense and spirit the homage to which she was accustomed. It was her only stipulation—and surely it must be an ungracious hostess indeed who could object to that.

She had just finished her breakfast on one of those gray mornings—seated before the fire in an easy-chair, which was covered with a shawl of soft but bright Indian colouring. She had her back to the light, but it was scarcely necessary even had there been any eyes to see her save those of Marietta, who naturally was familiar

with her aspect at all times. Marietta made the Contessa's chocolate, as well as arranged and kept in order the Contessa's boudoir. To such a retainer nothing comes amiss. She would sit up till all hours, and perform marvels of waiting, of working, service of every kind. It never occurred to her that it "was not her place" to do anything that her mistress required. Antonio was her brother, which was insipid, but she generally managed to indemnify herself, one way or another, for the loss of this legitimate method of flirtation. She had not great wages, and she had a great deal of work, but Marietta felt her life amusing, and did not object to it. Here in England the excitement indeed flagged a little. Williams was stout and married, and the other men had ties of the heart with which, as has been seen, Antonio ruthlessly interfered. Marietta was not unwilling to give to Charles the footman, who was a handsome young fellow, the means of avenging himself, but as yet this expedient for a little amusement had not succeeded, and there had been a touch of peevishness in the tone with which she asked whether it was true that the Contessa intended remaining here. Madame di Forno-Populo was a woman who disliked the bondage of question and reply.

"You do not amuse yourself, Marietta mia?" said the Contessa. She spoke Italian with her servants, and she was always caressing, fond of tender appellatives. "Patience! the country even in England is very good for the complexion, and in London there is a great deal that is amusing. Wheel this table away and give me the other with my writing things. The cushion for my elbow. Thanks! You forget nothing. My Marietta, you will have a happy life."

"Do you think so, Signora Contessa?" said the girl, a little wistfully.

The Contessa smiled upon her and said, "Cara!" with an air of tenderness that might have made any one happy. Then she addressed herself to her correspondence, while Marietta removed into the other room not only the tray, but the table with the tray which her mistress had used. The Contessa did not like to know or see anything of the processes of readjustment and restoration. She glanced over her morning's letters again with now and then a smile of satisfaction, and addressed herself to the task of answering them with apparent pleasure. Indeed, her own letters amused her even more than the others had done. When she had finished her task she took up a silver whistle and blew into it

a long melodious note. She made the most charming picture, leaning back in her chair, in a white cashmere dressing-gown covered with lace, and a little cap upon her dark locks. All the accessories of her toilette were exquisite, as well as the draperies about her that relieved and set off her whiteness. Her shoes were of white plush with a cockade of lace to correspond. Her sleeves, a little more loose than common, showed her beautiful arms through a mist of lace. She was not more carefully nor more elegantly dressed when she went downstairs in all her panoply of conquest. What a pity there was no one to see it! but the Contessa did not even think of this. In other circumstances, no doubt, there might have been spectators, but in the meantime she pleased herself, which, after all, is the first object with every well-constituted mind. She leaned back in her chair, pleased with herself and her surroundings, in a gentle languor after her occupation, and conscious of a yellow novel within reach should her young companion be slow of appearing. But Bice, she knew, had the ears of a savage, and would hear her summons wherever she might be.

Bice at this moment was in a very different scene. She was in the large gallery, which was

a little chill and dreary of a morning when all the windows were full of a gray indefinable mist instead of light, and the ancestors were indistinguishable in their frames. She had just been going through her usual exercise with the baby, and had joined Lucy at the upper end of the gallery, that sport being over, and little Tom carried off to his mid-day sleep. There was a fire there, in the old-fashioned chimney, and Lucy had been sitting beside it watching the sport. Bice seated herself on a stool at a little distance. She had a half affection, half dislike for this young woman, who was most near her in age of any one in the house. For one thing, they were on different sides and representing different interests; and Bice had been trained to dislike the ordinary housekeeping woman. They had been brought together, indeed, in a moment of emotion by the instrumentality of the little delicate child, for whom Bice had conceived a compassionate affection. But the girl felt that they were antagonistic. She did not expect understanding or charity, but to be judged harshly and condemned summarily by this type of the conventional and proper. She believed that Lucy would be "shocked" by what she said, and horrified by her freedom and absence of prejudice. Yet, not-

withstanding all this, there was an attraction in the candid eyes and countenance of little Lady Randolph which drew her in spite of herself. It was of her own will, though with a little appearance of reluctance, that she drew near, and soon plunged into talk; for to tell the truth, now that Jock was gone, Bice felt occasionally as if she must talk to the winds and trees, and could not at the hazard of her life keep silence any more. She could scarcely tell how it was that she was led into confessions of all kinds and descriptions of the details of her past life.

"We are a little alike," said Lucy. "I was not much older than you are when my father died, and afterwards we had no real home; to be sure, I had always Jock. Even when papa was living it was not very homelike, not what I should choose for a girl. I felt how different it was when I went to Lady Randolph, who thought of everything——"

Bice did not say anything for some time, and then she laughed. "The Contessa does not think of everything," she said.

Lucy looked at her with a question in her eyes. She wanted to ask if the Contessa was kind. But there was a certain domestic treachery involved in asking such a question.

"People are different," she said, with a certain soothing tone. "We are not made alike, you know; one person is good in one way and one in another." This abstract deliverance was not at all in Lucy's way. She returned to the particular point before them with relief. "England," she said, "must seem strange to you after your own country. I suppose it is much colder and less bright?"

"I have no country," said Bice; "everywhere is my country. We have a house in Rome, but we travel; we go from one place to another —to all the places that are what you call for pleasure. We go in the season. Sometimes it is for the waters, sometimes for the sports or the games—always *festa* wherever we go."

"And you like that? To be sure, you are so very young; otherwise I should think it was rather tiresome," Lucy said.

"No, it is not rather tiresome," said Bice, with a roll of her "r," "it is horrible! When we came here I did not know why it was, but I rejoiced myself that there was no band playing. I thought at first it was merely *jour de relâche;* but when morning after morning came and no band, that was heavenly," she said, drawing a long breath.

"A band playing!" Lucy's laugh at the absurdity of the idea rang out with all the gaiety of a child. It amused her beyond measure, and Bice, always encouraged by approbation, went on.

"I expected it every morning. The house is so large. I thought the season, perhaps, was just beginning, and the people not arrived yet. Sometimes we go like that too soon. The rooms are cheaper. You can make your own arrangement."

Lucy looked at her very compassionately. "That is why you pass the mornings in your own room," she said; "were you never, then, in a country house before?"

"I do not know what is a country house. We have been in a great castle where there was the chase every day. No, that is not what *la chasse* means in England—to shoot, I would say. And then in the evening the theatre, tableaux, or music. But to be quiet all day and all night too, that is what I have never seen. We have never known it. It is confusing. It makes you feel as if all went on without any division—all one day, all one night."

Bice laughed, but Lucy looked somewhat grave. "This is our natural life in England," she said; "we like to be quiet; though I have

not thought we were very quiet, we have had people almost every night."

To this Bice made no reply. But at Lucy's next question she stared, not understanding what it meant. "You go everywhere with the Contessa," she said; "are you out?"

"Out!" Bice's eyes opened wide. She shook her head. "What is out?" she said.

"It is when a girl begins to go to parties—when she comes out of her home, out of the schoolroom, from being just a little girl——"

"Ah, I know! From the Convent," said Bice; "but I never was there."

"And have you always gone to parties—all your life?" asked Lucy, with wondering eyes.

Bice looked at her, wondering too. "We do not go to parties. What is a party?" she said. "We go to the rooms—oh yes, and to the great receptions sometimes, and at hotels. Parties? I don't know what that means. Of course, I go with the Contessa to the rooms, and to the *tables d'hôte*. I give her my arm ever since I was tall enough. I carry her fan and her little things. When she sings, I am always ready to play. They call me the shadow of the Contessa, for I always wear a black frock, and I never talk except when some one talks to me. It is most

amusing how the English look at me. They say, Miss——? and then stop that I may tell them my name."

"And don't you?" said Lucy. "Do you know, though it is so strange to say it, I don't even know your name?"

Bice laughed, but she made no attempt to supply the omission. "The Contessa thinks it is more piquant," she said. "But nothing is decided about me till it is known how I turn out. If I am beautiful the Contessa will marry me well, and all will be right."

"And is that what you—wish?" said Lucy in a tone of horror.

"Monsieur, your brother," said Bice, with a laugh, "says I am not pretty, even. He says it does not matter. How ignorant men are, and stupid! And then suddenly they are old, old and sour. I do not know which is the worst. I do not like men."

"And yet you think of being married, which it is not nice to speak of," said Lucy with disapproval.

"Not—nice? Why is that? Must not girls be married? and if so, why not think of it?" said Bice gravely. There was not the ghost of a blush upon her cheek. "If you might live

without being married, that would understand itself; but otherwise——"

"Indeed," cried Lucy, "you can—indeed you can; in England, at least. To marry for a living—that is terrible."

"Ah!" cried Bice with interest, drawing her chair nearer, "tell me how that is to be done."

There was the seriousness of a practical interest in the girl's manner. The question was very vital to her. There was no other way of existence possible, so far as she knew; but, if there was, it was well worth taking into consideration.

Lucy felt the question embarrassing when it was put to her in this very decisive way. "Oh," she cried, with an Englishwoman's usual monosyllabic appeal for help to heaven and earth, "there are now a great number of ways. There are so many things that girls can do; there are things open to them that never used to be—they can even be doctors when they are clever. There are many ways in which they can maintain themselves."

"By trades?" cried Bice—"by work?" She laughed. "We hear of that sometimes: and the doctors—everybody laughs; the men make jokes and say they will have one when they are ill.

If that is all, I do not think there is anything in it. I should not like to work even if I were a man, but a woman——! that gets no money, that is *mal vu*. If that is all! Work," she said, with a little oracular air, "takes up all your time, and the money that one can earn is so small. A girl avoids saying much to men who are like this. She knows how little they can have to offer her; and to work herself, why, it is impossible. What time would you have for anything?" cried the girl, with an impatient sense of the fatuity of the suggestion. Lucy was so much startled by this view of the subject that she made no reply.

"There is no question of working," said Bice with decision, "neither for women, neither for men. That is not in our world. But if I am only pretty, no more," she added, "what will become of me? It is not known. I shall follow the Contessa as before. I will be useful to her, and afterwards—— I prefer not to think of that. In the meantime I am young. I do not wish for anything. It is all amusing. I become weary of the band playing, that is true; but then sometimes it plays not badly, and there is something always to laugh at. Afterwards, if I marry, then I can do as I like," the girl said.

Lucy gave her another look of surprised awe, for it was really with that feeling that she regarded this strange little philosopher. But she did not feel herself able to pursue the subject with so enlightened a person. She said, "How very well you speak English. You have scarcely any accent, and the Contessa has none at all. I was afraid she would speak only French, and my French is so bad."

"I have always spoken English all my life. When the Contessa is angry she says I am English all over; and she—she is of no country—she is of all countries; we are what you call vagabonds," the girl cried, with a laugh. She said it so calmly, without the smallest shadow of shame or embarrassment, that Lucy could only gaze at her and could not find a word to say. Was it true? It was evident that Bice at least believed so, and was not at all afraid to say it. This conversation took place, as has been said, in the picture gallery, where Lady Randolph and her young visitor had first found a ground of amity. The rainy weather had continued, and this place had gradually become the scene of a great deal of intercourse between the young mistress of the house and her guest. They scarcely spoke to each other in the evening. But in

the morning, after the game of romps with little Tom, by which Bice indemnified herself for the absence of other society, Lucy would join the party, and after the child had been carried off for his mid-day sleep the others left behind would have many a talk. To Lucy the revelations thus made were more wonderful than any romance—so wonderful that she did not half take in the strange life to which they gave a clue, nor realise how perfectly right was Bice's description of herself and her patroness. They were vagabonds, as she said; and, like other vagabonds, they got a great deal of pleasure out of their life. But to Lucy it seemed the most terrible that mind could conceive. Without any home, without any retirement or quietness, with a noisy band always playing, and a series of migrations from one place to another—no work, no duties, nothing to represent home occupations but a piece of *tapisserie*. She put her hand very tenderly upon Bice's shoulder. There had been prejudices in her mind against this girl; but they all melted away in a womanly pity. "Oh," she said, "cannot I help you in any way? Cannot Sir Tom——" But here she paused. "I am afraid," she said, "that all we could think of would be an occupation for you; something to

do, which would be far, far better, surely, than this wandering life."

Bice looked at her for a moment with a doubtful air. "I don't know what you mean by occupation," she said.

And this, to Lucy's discomfiture, she found to be true. Bice had no idea of occupation. Young Lady Randolph, who was herself not much instructed, made a conscientious effort at least to persuade the strange girl to read and improve her mind. But she flew off on all such occasions with a laugh that was half mocking and half merry. "To what good?" she said, with that simplicity of cynicism which is a quality of extreme youth. "If I turn out beautiful, if I can marry whom I will, I will then get all I want without any trouble."

"But if not?" said Lucy, too careful of the other's feelings to express what her own opinions were on this subject.

"If not, it will be still less good," said Bice, "for I shall never then do anything or be of any importance at all; and why should I tr-rouble?" she said, with that rattle of the r's which was about the only sign that English was not her native speech. This was very distressing to Lucy, who wished the girl well, and altogether

Lady Randolph was anxious to interfere on Bice's behalf and put her on a more comprehensible footing.

"It will be very strange when you go among other people in London," she said. "Madame di Forno-Populo does not know England. People will want to know who you are. And if you were to be married, since you will talk of that," Lucy added, with a blush, "your name and who you are will have to be known. I will ask Sir Tom to talk to the Contessa—or," she said with reluctance, "I will speak to her if you think she will listen to me."

"I am called," said Bice, making a sweeping curtsey, and waving her hand as she darted suddenly away, leaving Lucy in much doubt and perplexity. Was she really called? Lucy heard nothing but a faint sound in the distance, as of a low whistle. Was this a signal between the strange pair who were not mother and daughter, nor mistress and servant, and yet were so linked together? It seemed to Lucy, with all her honest English prejudices, that to train so young a girl (and a girl so fond of children, and therefore a good girl at bottom, whatever her little faults might be) to such a wandering life, and to put her up as it were to auction for whoever would

bid highest, was too terrible to be thought of. Better a thousand times to be a governess, or a sempstress, or any honest occupation by which she could earn her own bread. But then to Bice any such expedient was out of the question. Her incredulous look of wonder and mirth came back to Lucy with a sensation of dumb astonishment. She had no right feelings, no sense of the advantages of independence, no horror of being sold in marriage. Lady Randolph did not know what to think of a creature so utterly beyond all rules known to her. She was in such a condition of mind, unsettled, unhinged, feeling all her old landmarks breaking up, that a new interest was of great importance to her. It withdrew her thoughts from the Contessa, and the irksomeness of her sway, when she thought of Bice and what could be done for her. The strange thing was that the girl wanted nothing done for her. She was happy enough so far as could be seen. In her close confinement and subjection she was so fearless and free that she might have been thought the mistress of the situation. It was incomprehensible altogether. To state the circumstances from one side was to represent a victim of oppression. A poor girl stealing into a strange house and room in the

shadow of her patroness; unnamed, unnoticed, made no more account of than the chair upon which she sat, held in a bondage which was almost slavery, and intended to be disposed of when the moment came without a reference to her own will and affections. Lucy felt her blood boil when she thought of all this, and determined that she would leave no expedient untried to free this white slave, this unfortunate thrall. But the other side was one which could not pass without consideration. The girl was careless and fearless and free, without an appearance of bondage about her. She scoffed at the thought of escaping, of somehow earning a personal independence; such was not for persons in her world, she said. She was not horrified by her own probable fate. She was not unhappy, but amused and interested in her life, and taking everything gaily, both the present quiet and the tumult of the many "seasons" in watering-places and other resorts of gaiety through which, young as she was, she had already gone. She had looked at Lucy with a smile which was half cynical, and altogether decisive, when the anxious young matron had pointed out to her the way of escaping from such a sale and bargain. She did not want to escape.

It seemed to her right and natural. She walked as lightly as a bird with this yoke upon her shoulders. Lucy had never met anything of this kind before, and it called forth a sort of panic in her mind. She did not know how to deal with it; but neither would she give it up. She had something else to think upon when the Contessa, lying back on her sofa, almost going to sleep before Sir Tom entered, roused herself on the moment to occupy and amuse him all the evening. Instead of thinking of that and making herself unhappy, Lucy looked the other way at Bice reading a novel rapidly at the other side of the table, with all her young savage faculties about her to see and hear everything. How to get her delivered from her fate! To make her feel that deliverance was necessary, to save her before she should be sacrificed, and take her out of her present slavery. It was very strange that it never occurred to Lucy to free the girl by making her one of the recipients of the money she had to give away. She was very faithful to the letter of her father's will, and he had excluded foreigners. But even that was not the reason. The reason was that it did not occur to her. She thought of every way of relieving the too-contented thrall before her except that way.

And in the meantime the time wore on, and everything fell into a routine, and not a word was said of the Contessa's plans. It was evident, for the time being at least, that she meant to make no change, but was fully minded, notwithstanding the dullness of the country, to remain where she was.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TWO STRANGERS.

THE Contessa did not turn her head or change her position when Bice entered. She said, "You have not been out?" in a tone which was half question and half reproof.

"It rained, and there is nothing to breathe but the damp and fog."

"What does it matter? it is very good for the complexion, this damp; it softens the skin, it clears your colour. I see the improvement every day."

"Do you think so?" said Bice, going up to the long mirror, which had been established in a sort of niche against the wall, and draped, as everything was draped, with graceful hangings. She went up to it and put her face close, looking with some anxiety at the image which she found there. "I do not see it," she said. "You are

too sanguine. I am no better than I was. I have been racing in the long gallery with the child; that makes one's blood flow."

"You do well," said the Contessa, nodding her head. "I cannot take any notice of the child; it is too much for me. They are odious at that age."

"Ah! they are delightful," said Bice. "They are so good to play with, they ask no questions, and are always pleased. I put him on my shoulder and we fly. I wish that I might have a gymnastique, trapeze, what-you-call it, in that long gallery; it would be heaven."

The Contessa uttered an easy exclamation meaning nothing, which, translated into English, would have been a terrible oath. "Do not do it, in the name of ——; they will be shocked, oh, beyond everything."

Bice, still standing close to the glass, examining critically her cheek, which she pinched, answered with a laugh, "She is shocked already. When I say that you will marry me well, if I turn out as I ought, she is full of horror. She says it is not necessary in England that a young girl should marry—that there are other ways."

The Contessa started to her feet. "*Giove!*" she cried, "*Baccho!* that insipidity, that puritan.

And I who have kept you from every soil. *She* speak of other ways. Oh, it is too much!"

Bice turned from the glass to address a look of surprise to her patroness. "Reassure yourself, Madama," she said. "What Milady said was this, that I might work if I willed, and escape from marrying—that to marry was not everything. It appears that in England one may make one's living as if (she says) one were a man."

"As if one were a man!"

"That is what Milady said," Bice answered demurely. "I think she would help me to work, to get something to do. But she did not tell me what it would be; perhaps to teach children; perhaps to work with the needle. I know that is how it happens in the Tauchnitz. You do not read them, and therefore do not know; but I am instructed in all these things. The girl who is poor like me is always beautiful; but she never thinks of it as we do. She becomes a governess, or perhaps an artiste; or even she will make dresses, or at the worst *tapisserie*."

"And this she says to you—to you!" cried the Contessa, with flaming eyes.

"Oh, restrain yourself, Madama! It does not matter at all. She makes the great marriage

just the same. It is not Milady who says this, it is in the Tauchnitz. It is the English way. Supposing," said Bice, "that I remain as I am? Something will have to be done with me. Put me, then, as a governess in a great family where there is a son who is a great nobleman, or very rich, and you shall see it will so happen, though I never should be beautiful at all."

"My child," said the Contessa, "all this is foolishness. You will not remain as you are. I see a little difference every day. In a little time you will be dazzling; you will be ready to produce. A governess! It is more likely that you will be a duchess; and then you will laugh at everybody—except me," said Madame di Forno-Populo, tapping her breast with her delicate fingers, "except me."

Bice looked at her with a searching, inquiring look. "I want to ask something," she said. "If I should be beautiful—you were so before me—oh, more, more!—you we——are very lovely, Madama."

The Contessa smiled; who would not smile at such a speech? made with all the sincerity and simplicity possible—simplicity scarcely affected by the instinct which made Bice aware before she said it that to use the past tense would

spoil all. The Contessa smiled. "Well," she said, "and then?"

"They married you," said Bice with a curious tone between philosophical remark and interrogation.

"Ah!" the Contessa said. She leaned back in her chair, making herself very comfortable, and shook her head. "I understand. You think then it has been a—failure in my case? Yes, they married me—that is to say, there was no they at all. I married myself, which makes a great difference. Ah yes! I follow your reasoning very well. This woman, you say, was beautiful, was all that I hope to be, and married; and what has come of it? It is quite true. I speak to you as I speak to no one, Bice mia. The fact was, we deceived each other. The Conte expected to make his fortune by me, and I by him. I was English, you perceive, though no one now remembers this. Poor Forno-Populo! He was very handsome; people were pleased to say we were a magnificent pair—but we had not the *sous;* and though we were fond of each other, he proceeded in one direction to repair his fortunes, and I—on another to—*enfin* to do as best I could. But no such accident shall happen in your case. It is not only your interest I have

in hand, it is my own. I want a home for my declining years."

She said this with a smile at the absurdity of the expression in her case, but Bice at sixteen naturally took the words *au pied de la lettre*, and did not see any absurdity in them. To her forty was very much the same as seventy. She nodded her head very seriously in answer to this, and turning round to the glass surveyed herself once more, but not with that complacency which is supposed to be excited in the feminine bosom by the spectacle. She was far too serious for vanity—the gaze she cast upon her own youthful countenance was severely critical, and she ended by a shrug of her shoulders as she turned away. "The only thing is," she said, "that perhaps the young brother is right, and at present I am not even pretty at all."

The Contessa had a great deal to think of during this somewhat dull interval. The days flowed on so regularly, and with so little in them, that it was scarcely possible to take note of the time at all. Lucy was always scrupulously polite, and sometimes had little movements of anxious civility, as if to make up for impulses that were less kind. And Sir Tom, though he enjoyed the evenings as much as ever, and felt this manner

of passing the heavy hours to retain a great attraction, was at other times a little constrained, and made furtive attempts to find out what the Contessa's intentions were for the future, which betrayed to a woman who had always her wits about her a certain strain of the old bonds, and uneasiness in the indefinite length of her visit. She had many reasons, however, for determining to ignore this uneasiness, and to move on upon the steady tenor of her way as if unconscious of any reason for change, opposing a smiling insensibility to all suggestions as to the approaching removal of the household to London. It seemed to the Contessa that the association of her *débutante* with so innocent and wealthy a person as Lady Randolph would do away with all the prejudices which her own dubious antecedents might have provoked; while the very dubiousness of those antecedents had procured her friends in high quarters and acquaintances everywhere, so that both God and Mammon were, so to speak, enlisted in her favour, and Bice would have all the advantage, without any of the disadvantage, of her patroness' position, such as it was. This was so important that she was quite fortified against any pricks of offence, or intrusive consciousness that she was less welcome than might

have been desired. And in the end of January, when the entire household at the Hall had begun to be anxious to make sure of her departure, an event occurred which strengthened all her resolutions in this respect, and made her more and more determined, whatever might be the result, to cling to her present associations and shelter.

This was the arrival of a visitor, very unexpected and unthought of, who came in one afternoon after the daily drive, often a somewhat dull performance, which Lucy, when there was nothing more amusing to do, dutifully took with her visitor. Madame di Forno-Populo was reclining in the easiest of chairs after the fatigue of this expedition. There had been a fresh wind, and notwithstanding a number of veils, her delicate complexion had been caught by the keen touch of the breeze. Her cheeks burned, she declared, as she held up a screen to shield her from the glow of the fire. The waning afternoon light from the tall window behind threw her beautiful face into shadow, but she was undeniably the most important person in the tranquil domestic scene, occupying the central position, so that it was not wonderful that the new-comer suddenly ushered in, who was somewhat timid and confused, and advanced

with the hesitating step of a stranger, should without any doubt have addressed himself to her as the mistress of the house. Lucy, little and young, who was moving about the room with her light step and in the simple dress of a girl, appeared to Mr. Churchill, who had many daughters of his own, to be (no doubt) the eldest, the mother's companion. He came in with a slightly embarrassed air and manner. He was a man beyond middle age, gray haired, stooping, with the deprecating look of one who had been obliged in many ways to propitiate fate in the shape of superiors, officials, creditors, all sorts of alien forces. He came up with his hesitating step to the Contessa's chair. "Madam," he said, with a voice which had a tremor in it, "my name will partly tell you the confused feelings that I don't know how to express. I am come in a kind of bewilderment, scarcely able to believe that what I have heard is true——"

The Contessa gazed at him calmly from the depths of her chair. The figure before her, thin, gray haired, submissive, with the long clerical coat and deprecating air, did not promise very much, but she had no objection to hear what he had to say in the absolute dearth of subjects of

interest. Lucy, to whom his name seemed vaguely familiar, without recalling any distinct idea, and who was a little startled by his immediate identification of the Contessa, came forward a little and put a chair for him, then withdrew again, supposing his business to be with her guest.

"I will not sit down," Mr. Churchill said, faltering a little, "till I have said what—I have no words to say. If what I am told is actually true, and your ladyship means to confer upon me a gift so—so magnificent—oh! pardon me—I cannot help thinking still that there must be some extraordinary mistake."

"Oh!" Lucy began, hurriedly making a step forward again; but the Contessa, to her surprise, accepted the address with great calm.

"Be seated, sir," Madame di Forno-Populo said, with a dignity which Lucy was far from being able to emulate. "And, pray, do not hesitate to say anything which occurs to you. I am already interested——" She waved her hand to him with a sort of regal grace, without moving in any other way. She had the air of a princess not deeply concerned indeed, but benevolently willing to listen. It was evident that this reception of him confused the stranger

more and more. He became more deeply embarrassed in sight of the perfect composure with which he was contemplated, and cleared his throat nervously three or four times.

"I think," he said, "that there must be some mistake. It was, indeed, impossible that it should be true; but as I heard it from two quarters at once—and it was said to be something in the nature of a trust—— But," he added, looking with a nervous intentness at the unresponsive face which he could with difficulty see, "it must be, since your ladyship does not recognise my name, a—mistake. I felt it was so from the beginning. A lady of whom I know nothing!—to bestow what is really a fortune—upon a man with no claim——"

He gave a little nervous laugh as he went on—the disappointment, after such a dazzling giddy hope, took away every vestige of colour from his face. "I will sit down for a moment, if you please," he said suddenly. "I—am a little tired with the walk—you will excuse me, Lady Randolph——"

"Oh, sir," cried Lucy, coming forward, "forgive me that I did not understand at once. It is no mistake at all. Oh, I am afraid you are

very much fatigued, and I ought to have known at once when I heard your name."

He put out his hand in his deprecating way as she came close to the chair into which he had dropped. "It is nothing—nothing—my dear young lady: in a moment," he said.

"My Lucy," said the Contessa, "this is one of your secret bounties. I am quite interested. But do not interrupt; let us hear it out."

"It is something which is entirely between Mr. Churchill and me," cried Lucy. "Indeed, it would not interest you at all. But, pray, don't think it is a mistake," she said, earnestly turning to him. "It is quite right—it is a trust —there is nothing that need distress you. I am obliged to do it, and you need not mind. Indeed, you must not mind. I will tell you all about it afterwards."

"My dear young lady!" the clergyman said. He was relieved, but he was perplexed; he turned still towards the stately lady in the chair —"If it is really so, which I scarcely can allow myself to believe, how can I express my obligation? It seems more than any man ought to take; it is like a fairy tale. I have not ventured to mention it to my children in case—— Thanks are nothing," he cried, with

excitement; "thanks are for a trifle, a little everyday service; but this is a fortune; it is something beyond belief. I have been a poor man all my life, struggling to do my best for my children; and now, what I have never been able to do with all my exertions, you—put me in a position to do in a moment. What am I to say to you? Words can't reach such a case. It is simply unspeakable—incredible; and why out of all the world you should have chosen me——"

He had to stop, his emotion getting the better of him. Bice had come into the room while this strange scene was going on, and she stood in the shadow, unseen by the speaker, listening too.

"Pray compose yourself," said the Contessa in her most gracious voice. "Your expressions are full of feeling. To have a fortune given to one must be very delightful; it is an experience that does not often happen. Probably a little tea, as I hear tea is coming, will restore Mr. —— Pardon me, they are a little difficult to catch, those your English names."

The Contessa produced a curious idiom now and then like a work of art. It was almost the only sign of any uncertainty in her English; and

while the poor clergyman, not quite understanding in his own emotion what she was saying, made an effort to gulp it down and bring himself to the level of ordinary life, the little stir of the bringing-in of tea suddenly converted everything into commonplace. He sat in a confusion that made all dull to him while this little stir went on. Then he rose up and said, faltering, "If your ladyship will permit me, I will go out into the air a little. I have got a sort of singing in my ears. I am—not very strong; I shall come back presently if you will allow me, and try to make my acknowledgments—in a less confused way."

Lucy followed him out of the room; he was not confused with her. "My dear young lady," he said, "my head is going round and round. Perhaps you will explain it all to me." He looked at her with a helpless appealing air. Lucy had the appearance of a girl of his own. He was not afraid to ask her anything. But the great lady, his benefactress, who spoke so regally and responded so little to his emotion, alarmed him. Lucy, too, on her side, felt as if she had been a girl of his own. She put her arm within his and led him to the library, where all was quiet, and where she felt by instinct—though she was

not bookish—that the very backs of the books would console him and make him feel himself at home.

"It is very easy to explain," she said. "It is all through my brother Jock and your son, who is at school with him. And it is I who am Lady Randolph," she said, smiling, supporting him with her arm through his. The shock would have been almost too much for poor Mr. Churchill if she had not been so like a child of his own.

The moment this pair had left the room the Contessa raised herself eagerly from the chair. She looked round to Bice in the background with an imperative question. "What does this all mean?" she said in a voice as different from the languor of her former address as night from day. "Who is it that gives away fortunes—that makes a poor man rich? Did you know all that? Is it that chit of a girl, that piece of simplicity—that—*Giove!* You have been her friend; you know her secrets. What does it mean?"

"She has no secrets," said Bice, coming slowly forward. "She is not like us, she is like the day."

"Fool!" the Contessa said, stamping her foot —"don't you see there must be something in it. I am thinking of you, though you are so ungrate-

ful. One knows she is rich, all the money is hers; but I thought it had gone to Sir Tom. I thought it was he who could— . . . Happily, I have always kept her in hand; and you, you have become her friend——"

"Madama," said Bice with ironical politeness, "since it happens that Milady is gone, shall I pour out for you your cup of tea?"

"Oh, tea! do I care for tea? when there are possibilities—possibilities!" said the Contessa. She got up from her chair and began to pace about the room, a grand figure in the gathering twilight. As for Bice, some demon of perversity possessed her. She began to move about the tea-table, making the china ring, and, pouring out the tea as she had said, betook herself to the eating of cake with a relish which was certainly much intensified by the preoccupation of her patroness. She remembered well enough—very well—what Jock had told her, and her own incredulity; but she would have died rather than give a sign of this; and there was a tacit defiance in the way in which she munched her cake under the Contessa's excited eyes, but this was only a momentary perversity.

CHAPTER IX.

AN ADVENTURESS.

"WHEN he told me first, I was angry like you, I would not believe it. Money! that is a thing to keep, I said, not to give away."

"To give away!" Few things in all her life, at least in all her later life, had so moved the Contessa. She was walking about the pretty room in an excitement which was like agitation, now sitting down in one place, now in another, turning over without knowing it the things on the table, arranging a drapery here and there instinctively. To how few people in the world would it be a matter of indifference that money, so to speak, was going begging, and might fall into their hands as well as another's! The best of us on this argument would prick up our ears. Nobody cared less for money in itself than Madame di Forno-Populo. She liked not to

spend it only, but to squander—to make it fly on all hands. To be utterly extravagant one must be poor, and the money hunger which belongs to poverty is almost, one might say, a disinterested quality, so little is it concerned with the possession of the thing coveted. "Oh," she said, "this is too wonderful! and you are sure you have not been deceived by the language? You know English so well—are you sure that you were not deceived?"

Bice did not deign any reply to this question. She gave her head a slight toss of scorn. The suggestion that she could be mistaken was unworthy of an answer, and indeed was not put in seriousness, nor did the Contessa wait for a reply. "What, then," the Contessa went on, "is the position of Sir Tom? Has he no control? Does he permit this? To have it taken away from himself and his family, thrown into the sea, parted with; oh, it is too much! But how can it be done? I was aware that settlements were very troublesome, but I had not thought it possible. Bice! Bice! this is very exciting, it makes one's heart beat! And you are her friend."

"I am her—friend?" Bice turned one ear to her patroness with a startled look of interrogation.

"Oh!" cried the Contessa once more; by which exclamation, naturally occurring when she was excited, she proved that she was of English race. "What difficulty is there in my meaning? You have English enough for that. What! do you feel no impatience when you hear of money running away?—going into a different channel —to strangers—to people that have nothing to do with it—that have no right to it—anybody—a clergyman, a——"

Her feelings were too much for her. She threw herself into a chair, out of breath.

"He looked a very good man," said Bice with that absolute calm which is so exasperating to an excited woman, "and what does it matter, if it has to be given away, who gets it? I should give it to the beggars. I should fling it for them, as you do the *bajocchi* when you are out driving."

"You are a fool! you are a fool!" cried the Contessa, "or rather you are a child, and don't understand anything. Fling it to the beggars? Yes, if it was in shillings or even sovereigns. You don't understand what money is."

"That is true, Madama, for I never had any," cried the girl, with a laugh. She was perfectly unmoved—the desire of money was not in her as

yet, though she was far more enlightened as to its uses than most persons of her age. It amused her to see the excitement of her companion; and she knew very well what the Contessa meant, though she would not betray any consciousness of it. "If I marry," she said, "then perhaps I shall know."

"Bice! you are not a fool—you are very sharp, though you choose not to see. Why should not you have this as well as another?—oh, much better than another! I can't stand by and see it all float into alien channels, while you—it would not be doing my duty while you—— Oh, don't look at me with that blank face, as if it did not move you in the least! Would it be nothing to have it in your power to dress as you like, to do as you like, to go into the world, to have a handsome house, to enjoy life——"

"But, yes!" said Bice, "is it necessary to ask?" She was still as calm as if the question they were discussing had been of the very smallest importance. "But we are not good poor people that will spend the money *comme il faut*. If we had it we should throw it away. Me also—I would throw it away. It would be for nothing good; why should it be given to us?

Oh no, Madama. The good old clergyman had many children. He will not waste the money—which we should. What do you care for money, but to spend it fast, fast; and I too——"

"You are a child," said the Contessa. "No, perhaps I am not what people call good, though I am poor enough—but you are a child. If it was given to you it would be invested; you would have power over the income only. You could not throw it away, nor could I, which, perhaps, is what you are thinking of. You are just the person she wants, so far as I can see. She objects to my plan of putting you out in the world; she says it would be better if you were to work; but this is the best of all. Let her provide for you, and then it will not need that you should either marry or work. This is, beyond all description, the best way. And you are her friend. Tell me, was it before or after the boy informed you of this that you advised yourself to become her friend?"

"Contessa!" cried Bice, with a shock of angry feeling which brought the blood to her face. She was not sensitive in many matters which would have stung an English girl; but this suggestion, which was so undeserved, moved her to passion. She turned away with an almost tragic scorn,

and seizing the *tapisserie*, which was part of the Contessa's *mise en scene*, flung a long strip of the many-coloured embroidery over her arm and began to work with a sort of savage energy. The Contessa watched her movements with a sudden pause in her own excitement. She stopped short in the eagerness of her own thoughts, and looked with keen curiosity at the young creature upon whom she had built so many expectations. She was not an ungenerous or mercenary woman, though she had many faults, and as she gazed a certain compunction awoke within her, mingled with amusement. She was sorry for the unworthy suggestion she had made, but the sight of the girl in her indignation was like a scene in a play to this woman of the world. Her youthful dignity and wrath, her silent scorn, the manner in which she flung her needle through the canvas, working out her rage, were full of entertainment to the Contessa. She was not irritated by the girl's resentment; it even took off her thoughts from the primary matter to watch this exhibition of feeling. She gave vent to a little laugh as she noted how the needle flew.

"*Cara!* I was nasty when I said that. I did not mean it. I suffered myself to talk as one

talks in the world. You are not of the world —it is not applicable to you."

"Yes, Madama, I am of the world," cried Bice. "What have I known else? But I did not mean to become Milady's friend, as you say. It was by accident. I was in the gallery only to amuse myself, and she came—it was not intention. I think that Milady is——"

Here Bice stopped, looked up from the sudden fervour of her working, threw back her head, and said nothing more.

"That Milady is—what?" the Contessa cried.

A laugh so joyous, so childish, that no one could have refused to be sympathetic, burst from Bice's lips. She gave her patroness a look of merriment and derision, in which there was something tender and sweet. "Milady is—sorry for me," she said.

This speech had a strange effect upon the Contessa. She coloured, and the tears seemed to flood in a moment to her eyes. "Poor child!" she said—"poor child! She has reason. But that amuses you, Bice mia," she said in a voice full of the softest caressing, looking at her through those sudden tears. The Contessa was an adventuress, and she had brought up this girl after her own traditions; but it was clear, as they

looked at each other, that they loved each other. There was perfect confidence between them. Bice looked with fearless laughing eyes, and a sense of the absurdity of the fact that some one was sorry for her, into the face of her friend.

"She thinks I would be happier if I worked. To give lessons to little children and be their slave would be better, she thinks. To know nothing and see nothing, but live far away from the world and be independent, and take no trouble about my looks, or, if I please—that is Milady's way of thinking," Bice said.

The Contessa's face softened more and more as she looked at the girl. There even dropped a tear from her full eyes. She shook her head. "I am not sure," she said, "dear child, that I am not of Milady's opinion. There are ways in which it is better. Sometimes I think I was most happy when I was like that—without money, without experience, with no wishes."

"No wishes, Madama! Did you not wish to go out into the beautiful bright world, to see people, to hear music, to talk, to please? It is impossible. Money, that is different; and experience, that is different; but to wish, every one must do that."

"Bice, you have a great deal of experience

for so young a girl. You have seen so much. I ought to have brought you up otherwise, perhaps, but how could I? You have always shared with me, and what I had I gave you. And you know, besides, how little satisfaction there is in it—how sick one becomes of a crowd of faces that are nothing to you, and of music that goes on just the same whatever you are feeling—and this to please, as you call it! Whom do I please? Persons who do not care at all for me except that I amuse them sometimes—who like me to sing; who like to look at me; who find themselves less dull when I am there. That is all. And that will be all for you, unless you marry well, my Bice, which it is the object of my life to make you do."

"I hope I shall marry well," said the girl composedly. "It would be very pleasant to find one's self above all shifts, Madama. Still that is not everything; and I would much rather have led the life I have led, and enjoyed myself and seen so much, than to have been the little governess of the English family—the little girl who is always so quiet, who walks out with the children, and will not accept the eldest son even when he makes love to her. I should have laughed at the eldest son. I know what they

are like—they are so stupid; they have not a word to say; that would have amused me; but in the Tauchnitz books it is all honour and wretchedness. I am glad I know the world, and have seen all kinds of people, and wish for everything that is pleasant, instead of being so good and having no wishes as you say."

The Contessa laughed, having got rid of all her incipient tears. "There is more life in it," she said. "You see now what it is—this life in England; one day is like another, one does the same things. The newspaper comes in the morning, then luncheon, then to go out, then tea, dinner; there is no change. When we talk in the evening, and I remind Sir Tom of the past when I lived in Florence, and he was with me every day,"—the Contessa once more uttered that easy exclamation which would sound so profane in English. "*Quelle vie!*" she cried, "how much we got out of every day! There were no silences. They came in one after another with some new thing, something to see and to do. We separated to dress, to make ourselves beautiful for the evening, and then till the morning light came in through the curtains never a pause or a weariness. Yes! sometimes one had a terrible pang. There would be

a toilette, which was ravishing, which was far superior to mine—for I never had money to dress as I wished—or some one else would have a success, and attract all eyes. But what did that matter?" the Contessa cried, lighting up more and more. "One did not really grudge what lasted only for a time; for one knew next day one would have one's turn. Ah!" she said, with a sigh, "I knew what it was to be a queen, Bice, in those days."

"And so you do still, Madama," said the girl soothingly.

Madama di Forno-Populo shook her head. "It is no longer the same," she said. "You have known only the worst side, my *poverina*. It is no longer one's own palace, one's own people, and the best of the strangers, the finest company. You saw the Duchess at Milady's party the other day. To see me made her lose her breath. She could not refuse to speak to me—to salute me—but it was with a consternation! But, Bice, that lady was only too happy to be invited to the Palazzo Populino. To make one of our expeditions was her pride. I believe in my soul," cried the Contessa, "that when she looks back she remembers those days as the most bright of her life."

Bice's clear shining eyes rested upon her patroness with a light in them which was keen with indignation and wonder. She cried, "And why the change—and why the change, Madama?" with a high indignant tone, such as youth assumes in presence of ingratitude and meanness. Bice knew much that a young girl does not usually know; but the reason why her best friend should be thus slighted was not one of these things.

The Contessa shrank a little from her gaze. She rose up again and went to the window and looked out upon the wintry landscape, and standing there with her face averted, shrugged her shoulders a little and made answer in a tone of levity very different from the sincerer sound of her previous communications. "It is poverty, my child—poverty—always the easiest explanation! I was never rich, but then there had been no crash, no downfall. I was in my own palace. I had the means of entertaining. I was somebody. Ah! very different; it was not then at the baths, in the watering-places, that the Contessa di Forno-Populo was known. It is this, my Bice, that makes me say that sometimes I am of Milady's opinion; that to have no wishes, to know nothing, to desire nothing

that is best. When I knew the Duchess first I could be of service to her. Now that I meet her again it is she only that can be of service to me."

"But——" Bice began, and stopped short. She was, as has been said, a girl of many experiences. When a very young creature is thus prematurely introduced to a knowledge of human nature she approaches the subject with an impartiality scarcely possible at an older age. She had seen much. She had been acquainted with those vicissitudes that occur in the lives of the seekers of pleasure almost since ever she was born. She had been acquainted with persons of the most gay and cheerful appearance, who had enjoyed themselves highly, and called all their acquaintances round them to feast, and who had then suddenly collapsed, and after an interval of tears and wailings had disappeared from the scene of their downfall. But Bice had not learnt the commonplace lesson so deeply impressed upon the world from the Athenian Timon downwards, that a downfall of this kind instantly cuts all ties. She was aware, on the contrary, that a great deal of kindness, sympathy, and attempts to aid were always called forth on such occasions; that the women used to form a sort

of rampart around the ruined with tears and outcries, and that the men had anxious meetings and consultations and were constantly going to see some one or other upon the affairs of the downfallen. Bice had not seen in her experience that poverty was an argument for desertion. She was so worldly wise that she did not press her question as a simple girl might have done. She stopped short with an air of bewilderment and pain, which the Contessa, as her head was turned, did not see. She gave up the inquiry; but there arose in her mind a suspicion, a question, such as had not ever had admission there before.

"Ah!" cried the Contessa, suddenly turning round, clasping her hands, "it was different indeed when my house was open to all these English, and they came as they pleased. But now I do not know, if I am turned out of this house, this dull house in which I have taken refuge, where I shall go. I don't know where to go!"

"Madama!" Bice sprang to her feet too, and clasped her hands.

"It is true—it is quite true. We have spent everything. I have not the means to go even to a third rate place. As for Cannes it is impossible. I told you so before we came here.

Rome is impossible—the apartment is let, and without that I could not live at all. Everything is gone. Here one may manage to exist a little while, for the house is good, and Sir Tom is rather amusing. But how to get to London unless they will take us I know not, and London is the place to produce you, Bice. It is for that I have been working. But Milady does not like me; she is jealous of me, and if she can she will send us away. Is it wonderful, then, that I am glad you are her friend? I am very glad of it, and I should wish you to let her know that to no one could she give her money more fitly. You see," said the Contessa, with a smile, resuming her seat and her easy tone, "I have come back to the point we started from. It is seldom one does that so naturally. If it is true (which seems so impossible) that there is money to give away, no one has a better right to it than you."

Bice went away from this interview with a mind more disturbed than it had ever been in her life before. Naturally, the novel circumstances which surrounded her awakened deeper questions as her mind developed, and she began to find herself a distinct personage. They set her wondering. Madame di Forno-Populo had been of a tenderness unparalleled to this girl,

and had sheltered her existence ever since she could remember. It had not occurred to her mind as yet to ask what the relations were between them, or why she had been the object of so much affection and thought. She had accepted this with all the composure of a child ever since she was a child. And the prospect of achieving a marriage should she turn out beautiful, and thus being in a position to return some of the kindness shown her, seemed to Bice the most natural thing in the world. But the change of atmosphere had done something, and Lucy's company, and the growth, perhaps, of her own young spirit. She went away troubled. There seemed to be more in the world and its philosophy than Bice's simple rules could explain.

CHAPTER X.

THE SERPENT AND THE DOVE.

On the very next day after this conversation took place a marked change occurred in the manner of the Contessa. She had been always caressing to Lucy, calling her by pretty names, and using a hundred tender expressions as if to a child; but had never pretended to talk to her otherwise than in a condescending way. On this occasion, however, she exerted herself to a most unusual extent during their drive to captivate and charm Lady Randolph; and as Lucy was very simple and accessible to everything that seemed kindness, and the Contessa very clever and with full command of her powers, it is not wonderful that her success was easy. She led her to talk of Mr. Churchill, who had been kept to dinner on the previous night, and to whom Sir Tom had been very polite, and Lucy anxiously kind, doing all

that was possible to put the good man at his ease, though with but indifferent success. For the thought of such an obligation was too great to be easily borne, and the agitation of his mind was scarcely settled, even by the commonplaces of the dinner, and the devotion which young Lady Randolph showed him. Perhaps the grave politeness of Sir Tom, which was not very encouraging, and the curiosity of the great lady, whom he had mistaken for his benefactress, counterbalanced Mr. Churchill's satisfaction, for he did not regain his confidence, and it was evidently with great relief of mind that he got up from his seat when the carriage was announced to take him away. The Contessa had given her attention to all he said and did, with a most lively and even anxious interest, and it was from this that she had mastered so many details which Bice had reluctantly confirmed by her report of the information she had derived from Jock. It was not long before Madame di Forno-Populo managed to extract everything from Lucy. Lady Randolph was not used to defend herself against such inquiries, nor was there any reason why she should do so. She was glad indeed when she saw how sweetly her companion looked, and how kind were her tones, to talk over her own

difficult position with another woman, one who was interested, and who did not express her disapproval and horror as most people did. The Contessa, on the contrary, took a great deal of interest. She was astonished, indeed, but she did not represent to Lucy that what she had to do was impossible or even vicious, as most people seemed to suppose. She listened with the gravest attention; and she gave a soothing sense of sympathy to Lucy's troubled soul. She was so little prepared for sympathy from such a quarter that the unexpectedness of it made it more soothing still.

"This is a great charge to be laid upon you," the Contessa said, with the most kind look. "Upon you, so young and with so little experience. Your father must have been a man of very original mind, my Lucy. I have heard of a great many schemes of benevolence, but never one like this."

"No?" said Lucy, anxiously watching the Contessa's eye, for it was so strange to her to have sympathy on this point, that she felt a sort of longing for it, and that this new critic, who treated the whole matter with more moderation and reasonableness than usual, should approve.

"Generally one endows hospitals or builds

churches; in my country there is a way which is a little like yours; it is to give marriage portions —that is very good, I am told. It is done by finding out who is the most worthy. And it is said also that not the most worthy is always taken. Don't you remember there is a Rosiere in Barbe Bleue? Oh, I believe you have never heard of Barbe Bleue."

"I know the story," said Lucy, with a smile, "of the many wives, and the key, and sister Anne—sister Anne."

"Ah! that is not precisely what I mean; but it does not matter. So it is this which makes you so grave, my pretty Lucy. I do not wonder. What a charge for you! To encounter all the prejudices of the world which will think you mad. I know it. And now your husband—the excellent Tom—he," said the Contessa, laying a caressing and significant touch upon Lucy's arm, "does not approve?"

"Oh, Madame di Forno-Populo, that is the worst of it," cried Lucy, whose heart was opened, and who had taken no precaution against assault on this side; "but how do you know? for I thought that nobody knew."

The Contessa this time took Lucy's hand between hers, and pressed it tenderly, looking at

her all the time with a look full of meaning. "Dear child," she said, "I have been a great deal in the world. I see much that other people do not see. And I know his face, and yours my little angel. It is much for you to carry upon those young shoulders. And all for the sake of goodness and charity."

"I do not know," said Lucy, "that it is right to say that; for, had it been left to me, perhaps I should never have thought of it. I should have been content with doing just what I could for the poor. No one," said Lucy, with a sigh, "objects to that. When people are quite poor, it is natural to give them what they want; but the others——"

"Ah! the others," said the Contessa. "Dear child, the others are the most to be pitied. It is a greater thing, and far more difficult to give to this good clergyman enough to make his children happy, than it is to supply what is wanted in a cottage. Ah, yes, your father was wise; he was a person of character. The poor are always cared for. There are none of us, even when we are ourselves poor, who do not hold out a hand to them. There is a society in my Florence which is like you. It is for the *Poveri Vergognosi.* You don't understand Italian? That means

those who are ashamed to beg. These are they," said the Contessa impressively, "who are to be the most pitied. They must starve and never cry out; they must conceal their misery and smile; they must put always a fair front to the world, and seem to want nothing, while they want everything. Oh!" The Contessa ended with a sigh, which said more than words. She pressed Lucy's hand, and turned her face away. Her feelings were too much for her, and on the delicate cheek, which Lucy could see, there was the trace of a tear. After a moment she looked round again, and said, with a little quiver in her voice, "I respect your father, my Lucy. It was a noble thought, and it is original. No one I have ever heard of had such an intention before."

Lucy, at this unlooked-for applause, brightened with pleasure; but at the same time was so moved that she could only look up into her companion's face and return the pressure of her hand. When she recovered a little she said, "You have known people like that?"

"Known them? In my country," said the Contessa (who was not an Italian at all), "they are as plentiful as in England — blackberries. People with noble names, with noble old houses, with children who must never learn anything,

never be anything, because there is no money. Know them! dear child, who can know better? If I were to tell you my history! I have for my own part known—what I could not trouble your gentle spirit to hear."

"But, Madame di Forno-Populo, oh, if you think me worthy of your confidence, tell me!" cried Lucy. "Indeed, I am not so insensible as you may think. I have known more than you suppose. You look as if no harm could ever have touched you," Lucy cried, with a look of genuine admiration. The Contessa had found the right way into her heart.

The Contessa smiled with mournful meaning and shook her head. "A great deal of harm has touched me," she said; "I am the very person to meet with harm in the world. A solitary woman without any one to take care of me, and also a very silly one, with many foolish tastes and inclinations. Not prudent, not careful, my Lucy, and with very little money; what could be more forlorn? You see," she said, with a smile, "I do not put all this blame upon Providence, but a great deal on myself. But to put me out of the question——"

Lucy put a hand upon the Contessa's arm. She was much moved by this revelation.

"Oh! don't do that," she said; "it is you I want to hear of."

Madame di Forno-Populo had an object in every word she was saying, and knew exactly how much she meant to tell and how much to conceal. It was indeed a purely artificial appeal that she was making to her companion's feelings; and yet, when she looked upon the simple sympathy and generous interest in Lucy's face, her heart was touched.

"How good you are!" she said; "how generous! though I have come to you against your will, and am staying—when I am not wanted."

"Oh! do not say so," cried Lucy with eagerness; "do not think so—indeed, it was not against my will. I was glad, as glad as I could be, to receive my husband's friend."

"Few women are so," said the Contessa gravely. "I knew it when I came. Few, very few, care for their husband's friend, especially when she is a woman——"

Lucy fixed her eyes upon her with earnest attention. Her look was not suspicious, yet there was investigation in it.

"I do not think I am like that," she said simply.

"No, you are not like that," said the Contessa. "You are the soul of candour and sweetness; but I have vexed you. Ah, my Lucy, I have vexed you. I know it—innocently, my love—but still I have done it. That is one of the curses of poverty. Now look," she said, after a momentary pause, "how truth brings truth! I did not intend to say this when I began" (and this was perfectly true), "but now I must open my heart to you. I came without caring much what you would think, meaning no harm; oh, trust me, meaning no harm! But, since I have come, all the advantages of being here have appeared to me so strongly that I have set my heart upon remaining, though I knew it was disagreeable to you."

"Indeed!" cried Lucy, divided between sincerity and kindness; "if it was ever so for a moment, it was only because I did not understand."

"My sweetest child! this, I tell you, is one of the curses of poverty. I knew it was disagreeable to you; but because of the great advantage of being in your house, not only for me but for Bice, for whom I have sworn to do my best—Lucy, pardon me—I could not make up my mind to go away. Listen. I said to myself, I am

poor, I cannot give her all the advantages; and they are rich; it is nothing to them—I will stay, I will continue, though they do not want me, not for my sake, for the sake of Bice. They will not be sorry afterwards to have made the fortune of Bice. Listen, dear one; hear me out. I had the intention of forcing myself upon you—oh no! the words are not too strong—in London, always for Bice's sake, for she has no one but me; and if her career is stopped—— I am not a woman," said the Contessa with dignity, "who am used to find myself *de trop*. I have been in my life courted, I may say it, rather than disagreeable; yet this I was willing to bear, and impose myself upon you for Bice's sake——"

Lucy listened to this moving address with many differing emotions. It gave her a pang to think that her hopes of having her house to herself were thus permanently threatened. But at the same time her heart swelled, and all her generous feelings were stirred. Was she indeed so poor a creature as to grudge to two lonely women the shelter and advantage of her wealth and position? If she did this, what did it matter if she gave money away? This would indeed be keeping to the letter of her father's will, and

abjuring its meaning. She could not resist the pathos, the dignity, the sweetness of the Contessa's appeal, which was not for herself but for Bice, for the girl who was so good to baby, and whom that little oracle had bound her to with links of gratitude and tenderness. "Oh," Lucy said to herself, "if I should ever have to appeal to any one for kindness to him!" And Bice was the Contessa's child—the child of her heart, at least—the voluntary charge which she had taken upon her, and to which she was devoting herself. Was it possible that only because she wanted to have her husband to herself in the evenings, and objected to any interruption of their privacy, a woman should be made to suffer who was a good woman, and to whom Lucy could be of use? No, no, she cried within herself, the tears coming to her eyes; and yet there was a very real pang behind.

"But reassure yourself, dear child," said the Contessa, "for now that I see what you are doing for others, I cannot be so selfish. No; I cannot do it any longer. In England you do not love society; you love your home unbroken; you do not like strangers. No, my Lucy, I will learn a lesson from your goodness. I too will sacrifice. Oh, if it was only myself, and not Bice!"

"Contessa," said Lucy with an effort, looking

up with a smile through some tears, "I am not like that. It never was that you were—disagreeable. How could you be disagreeable? And Bice is—oh, so kind, so good to my boy. You must never think of it more. The town house is not so large as the Hall, but we shall find room in it. Oh, I am not so heartless, not so stupid as you think! Do you suppose I would let you go away after you have been so kind as to open your heart to me, and let me know that we are really of use? Oh no, no! And I am sure," she added, faltering slightly, "that Tom—will think the same."

"It is not Tom—excellent, *cher* Tom! that shall be consulted," cried the Contessa. "Lucy, my little angel! if it is really so that you will give my Bice the advantage of your protection for her *début*—— But that is to be an angel indeed, superior to all our little, petty, miserable—— Is it possible, then," cried the Contessa, "that there is some one so good, so noble in this low world?"

This gratitude confused Lucy more than all the rest. She did her best to deprecate and subdue; but in her heart she felt that it was a great sacrifice she was making. "Indeed, it is nothing," she said faintly. "I am fond of her,

and she has been so good to baby; and if we can be of any use—but oh, Madame di Forno-Populo," Lady Randolph cried, taking courage. "Her *début?* do you really mean what she says, that she must marry——"

"That I mean to marry her," said the Contessa, "that is how we express it," with a very concise ending to her transports of gratitude. "Sweet Lucy," she continued, "it is the usage of our country. The parents, or those who stand in their place, think it their duty. We marry our children as you clothe them in England. You do not wait till your little boy can choose. You find him what is necessary. Just so do we. We choose so much better than an inexperienced girl can choose. If she has an aversion, if she says, 'I cannot suffer him,' we do not press it upon her. Many guardians will pay no attention, but me," said the Contessa, putting forth a little foreign accent, which she displayed very rarely, "I have lived among the English, and I am influenced by their ways. Neither do I think it right," she added with an air of candour, "to offer an old person, or one who is hideous, or even very disagreeable. But, yes, she must marry well. What else is there that a girl of family can do?"

Lucy was about to answer with enthusiasm

that there were many things she could do; but stopped short, arrested by these last words. "A girl of family,"—that, no doubt, made a difference. She paused, and looked somewhat wistfully in her companion's face. "We think," she said, "in England that anything is better than a marriage without——"

The Contessa put up her hand to stay the words. "Without love—— I know what you are going to say; but, my angel, that is a word which Bice has never heard spoken. She knows it not. She has not the habit of thinking it necessary; she is a good girl, and she has no sentiment. Besides, why should we go so fast? If she produces the effect I hope—— Why should not some one present himself whom she could also love? Oh yes! fall in love with, as you say in English—such an innocent phrase! Let us hope that, when the proper person comes who satisfies my requirements, Bice—to whom not a word shall be said—will fall in love with him *comme il faut!*"

Lucy did not make any reply. She was troubled by the light laugh with which the Contessa concluded, and with the slight change of tone which was perceptible. But she was still too much moved by her own emotion to have

got beyond its spell, and she had committed herself beyond recall. While the Contessa talked on with—was it a little, little change?—a faint difference, a levity that had not been in her voice before, Lucy's thoughts went back upon what she had done with a little tremor. Not this time as to what Tom might say, but with a deeper wonder and pang as to what might come of it. Was she going voluntarily into new danger, such as she had no clue to, and could not understand? After a little while she asked almost timidly:

"But if Bice should not see any one——"

"You mean if no one suitable should present himself?" The Contessa suddenly grew very grave. She put her hands together with a gesture of entreaty. "My sweet one, let us not think of that. When she is dressed as I shall dress her, and brought out—as you will enable me to bring her out. My Lucy, we do not know what is in her. She will shine, she will charm. Even now, if she is excited, there are moments in which she is beautiful. If she fails altogether—— Ah, my love, as I tell you, there is where the curse of poverty comes in. Had she even a moderate fortune, poor child; but alas, orphan, with no one but me——"

"Is she an orphan?" said Lucy, feeling ashamed of the momentary failure of her interest, "and without relations—except——"

"Relations?" said the Contessa; there was something peculiar in her tone which attracted Lucy's attention, and came back to her mind in other days. "Ah, my Lucy, there are many things in this life which you have never thought of. She has relations who think nothing of her, who would be angry, be grieved, if they knew that she existed. Yes, it is terrible to think of, but it is true. She is, on one side, of English parentage. But pardon me, my sweetest, I did not mean to tell you all this; only, my Lucy, you will one time be glad to think that you have been kind to Bice. It will be a pleasure to you. Now let us think of it no more. Marry—yes, she must marry. She has not even so much as your poor clergyman; she has nothing, not a penny. So I must marry her; there is nothing more to be said."

CHAPTER XI.

THE CONTESSA'S TRIUMPH.

AND it was with very mingled sensations that Sir Tom heard from Lucy (for it was from her lips he heard it) the intimation that Madame di Forno-Populo was going to be so good as to remain at the Hall till they moved to London, and then to accompany them to Park Lane. Sir Tom was taken entirely by surprise. He was not a man who had much difficulty in commanding himself, or showing such an aspect as he pleased to the general world; but on this occasion he was so much surprised that his very jaw dropped with wonder and astonishment. It was at luncheon that the intimation was made, in the Contessa's presence, so that he did not venture to let loose any expression of his feelings. He gave a cry, only half uttered, of astonishment, restrained by politeness, turning

his eyes, which grew twice their size in the bewilderment of the moment, from Lucy to the Contessa and back again. Then he burst into a breathless laugh—a twinkle of humour lighted in those eyes which were big with wonder, and he turned a look of amused admiration towards the Contessa. How had she done it? There was no fathoming the cleverness of women, he said to himself, and for the rest of the day he kept bursting forth into little peals of laughter all by himself. How had she managed to do it? It was a task which he himself would not have ventured to undertake. He would not, he said to himself, have had the slightest idea how to bring forward such a proposition. On the contrary, had not his sense that Lucy had much to forgive in respect to this invasion of her home and privacy induced him to make a great sacrifice, to withdraw his opposition to those proceedings of hers of which he so much disapproved? And yet in an afternoon, in one interview, the Contessa had got the upper hand! Her cleverness was extraordinary. It tickled him so that he could not take time to think how very little satisfied he was with the result. He, too, had fallen under her enchantments in the country, in the stillness, if not dullness, of those

long evenings, and he had been very willing to be good to her for the sake of old times, to make her as comfortable as possible, to give her time to settle her plans for her London campaign. But that she should begin that campaign under his own roof, and that Lucy, his innocent and simple wife, should be visible to the world as the friend and ally of a lady whose name was too well known to society, was by no means satisfactory to Sir Tom. When his first astonishment and amazement was over he began to look grave; but what was he to do? He had so much respect for Lucy that when the idea occurred to him of warning her that the Contessa's antecedents were not of a comfortable kind, and that her generosity was mistaken, he rejected it again with a sort of panic, and did not dare, experienced and courageous as he was, to acknowledge to his little wife that he had ventured to bring to her house a woman of whom it could be said that she was not above suspicion. Sir Tom had dared a great many perils in his life, but he did not venture to face this. He recoiled from before it, as he would not have done from any lion in the way. He could not even suggest to her any reticence in her communications, any reserve in showing her-

self at the Contessa's side, or in inviting other people to meet her. If all his happiness depended upon it, he felt that he could not disturb Lucy's mind by any such warning. Confess to her that he had brought to her a woman with whom scandal had been busy, that he had introduced to her as his friend, and recommended to honour and kindness, one whose name had been in all men's mouths! Sir Tom ran away morally from this suggestion as if he had been the veriest coward; he could not breathe a word of it in Lucy's ear. How could he explain to her that mixture of amazement at the woman's boldness, and humorous sense of the incongruity of her appearance in the absolute quiet of an English home, without company, which, combined with ancient kindness and careless good humour, had made him sanction her first appearance? Still less, how could he explain the mingling of more subtle sensations, the recollections of a past which Sir Tom could not himself much approve of, yet which was full of interest still, and the formation of an intercourse which renewed that past, and brought a little tingling of agreeable excitement into life when it had fallen to too low an ebb to be agreeable in itself? He would not say a word of all this to Lucy. Her purity,

her simplicity, even her want of imagination and experience, her incapacity to understand that debatable land between vice and virtue in which so many men find little harm, and which so many women regard with interest and curiosity, closed his mouth. And then he comforted himself with the reflection that, as his aunt herself had admitted, the Contessa had never brought herself openly within the ban. Men might laugh when the name of La Forno-Populo was introduced, and women draw themselves up with indignation, or stare with astonishment not unmingled with consternation as the Duchess had done; but they could not refuse to recognise her, nor could any one assert that there was sufficient reason to exclude her from society. Not even when she was younger, and surrounded by worshippers, could this be said. And now when she was less—— But here Sir Tom paused to ask himself, was she less attractive than of old? When he came to consider the question he was obliged to allow that he did not think so; and if she really meant to bring out that girl—— Did she mean to bring out that girl? Could she make up her mind to exhibit beside her own waning (if they were waning) charms the first flush of this young

beauty? Sir Tom, who thought he knew women (at least of the kind of La Forno-Populo), shook his head and felt it very doubtful whether the Contessa was sincere, or if she could indeed make up her mind to take a secondary place. He thought with a rueful anticipation of the sort of people who would flock to Park Lane to renew their acquaintance with La Forno-Populo. "By Jove! but shall they though? Not if I know it," said Sir Tom firmly to himself.

Williams, the butler, was still more profoundly discomposed. He had opened his mind to Mrs. Freshwater on various occasions when his feelings were too many for him. Naturally, Williams gave the Contessa the benefit of no doubt as to her reputation. He was entirely convinced, as is the fashion of his class, that all that could have been said of her was true, and that she was as unfit for the society of the respectable as any wretched creature could be. "That foreign madam" was what he called her, in the privacy of the housekeeper's room, with many opprobrious epithets. Mrs. Freshwater, who was, perhaps, more good-natured than was advantageous to the housekeeper and manager of a large establishment, was melted whenever she saw her, by the Contessa's gracious looks and

ways, but Williams was immovable. "If you'd seen what I've seen," he said, shaking his head. The women, for Lucy's maid Fletcher sometimes shared these revelations, were deeply excited by this—longing yet fearing to ask what it was that Williams had seen. "And when I think of my lady, that is as innocent as the babe unborn," he said, "mixed up in all that—— You'll see such racketing as never was thought of," cried Williams. "I know just how things will go. Night turned into day, carriages driving up at all hours, suppers going on after the play all the night through, masks and dominoes arriving;—no—to be sure, this is England. There will be no *veglionis*, at least—which in England, ladies, would be masked balls — with Madam the Countess and her gentlemen—and even ladies too, a sort of ladies—in all sorts of dresses."

"O-oh!" the women cried.

They were partially shocked, as they were intended to be, but partially their curiosity was excited, and a feeling that they would like to see all these gaieties and fine dresses moved their minds. The primitive intelligence always feel certain that "racketing" and orgies that go on all night must be at least guiltily delightful, exciting, and amusing, if nothing else. They

were not of those who "held with" such dissipation; still for once in a way to see it, the responsibility not being theirs, would be something. They held their breath, but it was not altogether in horror; there was in it a mixture of anticipation too.

"And I know what will come of it," said Williams. "What has come afore: the money will have to come out o' some one's pocket; and master never knew how to keep his to himself—never, as long as I've known him. To be sure, he hadn't got a great deal in the old days. But I know what'll happen; he'll just have to pay up now—he's that soft," said Williams; "a man that can't say no to a woman. Not that I care for the money. I'd a deal sooner he gave her an allowance, or set her up in some other place, or just give her a good round sum—as he could afford to do—and get shut of her. That is what I should advise. Just a round sum and get shut of her."

"I've always heard," said Miss Fletcher, "as the money was my lady's, and not from the Randolph side at all."

"What's hers is his," said Williams; "what's my lady's is her husband's; and a good bargain too—on her side."

"I declare," cried Fletcher energetically, stung with that sense of wrong to her own side which gives heat to party feeling—"I declare if any man took my money to keep up his—his—his old sweetheart, I'd murder him. I'd take his life, that's what I should do."

"Poor dear," said Mrs. Freshwater, wiping her eyes with her apron. "Poor dear! She'll never murder no one, my lady. Bless her innocent face. I only hope as she'll never find it out."

"Sooner than she don't find it out I'll tell her myself," cried Williams. "Now I don't understand you women. You'd let my lady be deceived and made game of rather than tell her."

"Made game of!" cried Fletcher, with a shriek of indignation. "I should like to see who dared to do that."

"Oh, they'll dare do it, soon enough, and take their fun out of her—it's just what them foreigners are fond of," said Williams, who knew them all and their tricks down to the ground, as he said. Still, however, notwithstanding his evil reports, good Mrs. Freshwater, who was as good-natured as she was fat, could scarcely make up her mind to believe all that of the Contessa.

"She do look so sweet, and talk so pretty, not as if she was foreign at all," the housekeeper said.

That evening, however, the Contessa herself took occasion to explain to Sir Tom what her intentions were. She had thought the subject all over while she dressed for dinner, with a certain elation in her success, yet keen clear-mindedness which never deserted her. And then, to be sure, her object had not been entirely the simple one of getting an invitation to Park Lane. She had intended something more than this. And she was not sure of success in that second and still more important point. She meant that Lady Randolph should endow Bice largely, liberally. She intended to bring every sort of motive to bear—even some that verged upon tragedy—to procure this. She had no compunction or faltering on the subject, for it was not for herself, she said within herself, that she was scheming, and she did not mean to be foiled. In considering the best means to attain this great and final object she decided that it would be well to go softly, not to insist too much upon the advantages she had secured, or to give Lucy too much cause to regret her yielding. The Contessa had the soul of a strategist, the imagination of a great general. She did not ignore

the feelings of the subject of her experiment. She even put herself in Lucy's place, and asked herself how she could bear this or that. She would not oppose or overwhelm the probable benefactress to whom she, or at least Bice, might afterwards owe so much. When Sir Tom approached her chair in the evening when he came in after dinner, as he always did, she made room for him on the sofa beside her. "I am going to make you my confidant," she said in her most charming way, with that air of smiling graciousness which made Sir Tom laugh, yet fascinated him in spite of himself. He knew that she put on the same air for whomsoever she chose to charm; but it had a power which he could not resist all the same. "But perhaps you don't care to be taken into my confidence," she added, smiling, too, as if willing to admit all he could allege as to her syren graces. She had a delightful air of being in the joke which entirely deceived Sir Tom.

"On the contrary," he said. "But as we have just heard your plans from my wife——"

The Contessa kissed her hand to Lucy, who occupied her usual place at the table.

"I wonder," she said, "if you understand, being only a man, what there is in that child;

for she is but a child. You and I, we are Methuselahs in comparison."

"Not quite so much as that," he said, with a laugh.

"Methuselahs," she said reflectively. "Older, if that is possible; knowing everything, while she knows nothing. She is our good angel. It is what you would not have dared to offer, you who know me—yes, I believe it—and like me. Oh no, I do not go beyond that English word, never! You like the Forno-Populo. I know how you men speak. You think that there is amusement to be got from her, and, you will do me the honour to say, no harm,—that is, no permanent harm. But you would not offer to befriend me; no, not the best of you. But she who by nature is against such women as I am—sweet Lucy! Yes it is you I am talking of," the Contessa said, who was skilful to break any lengthened speeches like this by all manner of interruptions, so that it should never tire the person to whom it was addressed. "She, who, is not amused by me, who does not like me, whose prejudices are all against me, she it is who offers me her little hand to help me. It is a lovely little hand, though she is not a beauty——"

"My wife is very well," said Sir Tom with a certain hauteur and abruptness such as in all their lengthened conversations he had never shown before.

The Contessa gave him a look in which there was much of that feminine contempt at which men laugh as one of the pretences of women. "I am going to be good to her, as she is to me," she said. "The Carnival will be short this year, and in England you have no Carnival. I will find myself a little house for the season. I will not too much impose upon that angel. There, now, is something good for you to relieve your mind. I can read you, *mon ami*, like a book. You are fond of me—oh yes!—but not too long; not too much. I can read you like a book."

"Too long, too much, are not in my vocabulary," said Sir Tom; "have they a meaning? not certainly that has any connection with a certain charming Contessina. If that lady has a fault, which I doubt, it is that she gives too little of her gracious countenance to her friends."

"She does not come down to breakfast," said the Contessa, with her soft laugh, which in itself was a work of art. "She is not so foolish as to

put herself in competition with the lilies and the roses, the English flowers. *Poverina!* she keeps herself for the afternoon which is charitable, and the light of the lamps which is flattering. But she remembers other days—alas! in which she was not afraid of the sun himself, not even of the mid-day, nor of the dawn when it comes in above the lamps. There was a certain *bal costumé* in Florence, a year when many English came to the Populino palace. But why do I talk of that? You will not remember——"

There was something apparently in the recollection that touched Sir Tom. His eye softened. An unaccustomed colour came to his middle-aged cheek. "I! not remember? I remember every hour, every moment," he said, and then their voices sank lower, and a murmur of reminiscences, one filling up another, ensued between the pair. Their tone softened, there were broken phrases, exclamations, a rapid interchange which was far too indistinct to be audible. Lucy sat by her table and worked, and was vaguely conscious of it all. She had said to herself that she would take no heed any more; that the poor Contessa was too open-hearted, too generous to harm her; that they were but two old friends talking of the past.

And so it was; but there was a something forlorn in sitting by at a distance, out of it all, and knowing that it was to go on and last, alas! by her own doing, who could tell how many evenings, how many long hours to come!

CHAPTER XII.

DIFFERENT VIEWS.

THE time after this seemed to fly in the great quiet, all the entertainments of the Christmas season being over, and the houses in the neighbourhood gradually emptying of guests. The only visitors at the Hall were the clergyman, the doctor, an odd man now and then whom Sir Tom would invite in the character of a "native," for the Contessa's amusement; and Mr. Rushton, who came from Farafield two or three times on business, at first with a very keen curiosity, to know how it was that Lucy had subdued her husband and got him to relinquish his objection to her alienation of her money. This had puzzled the lawyer very greatly. There had been no uncertainty about Sir Tom's opinion when the subject was mooted to him first. He had looked upon it with very proper sentiments. It had

seemed to him ridiculous, incredible, that Lucy should set up her will against his, or take her own way, when she knew how he regarded the matter. He had told the lawyer that he had little doubt of being able to bring her to hear reason. And then he had written to say that he withdrew his objection! Mr. Rushton felt that there must be some reason here more than met the eye. He made a pretence of business that he might discover what it was, and he had done so triumphantly, as he thought. Sir Tom, as everybody knew, had been "a rover" in his youth, and the world was charitable enough to conclude that in that youth there must be many things which he would not care to expose to the eye of day. When Mr. Rushton beheld at luncheon the Contessa, followed by the young and slim figure of Bice, it seemed to him that everything was solved. And Lady Randolph, he thought, did not look with very favourable eyes upon the younger lady. What doubt that Sir Tom had bought the assent of his wife to the presence of the guests by giving up on his side some of his reasonable rights?

"Did you ever hear of an Italian lady that Sir Tom was thick with before he married?" he asked his wife when he came home.

"How can you ask me such a question," said that virtuous woman, "when you know as well as I do that there were half a dozen?"

"Did you ever hear the name of Forno-Populo?" he asked.

Mrs. Rushton paused and did her best to look as if she was trying to recollect. As a matter of fact all Italian names sounded alike to her, as English names do to foreign ears. But after a moment she said boldly, "Of course I have heard it. That was the lady from Naples, or Venice, or some of those places, that ran away with him. You heard all about it at the time as well as I."

And upon this Mr. Rushton smote upon his thigh, and made a mighty exclamation. "By George!" he said, "he's got her there, under his wife's very nose; and that's why he has given in about the money." Nothing could have been more clearly reasoned out—there could be no doubt upon that subject. And the presence of Bice decided the question. Bice must be—they said, to be sure! Dates and everything answered to this view of the question. There could be no doubt as to who Bice was. They were very respectable good people themselves, and had never given any scandal to the world; but they never

hesitated for a moment or thought there was anything unnatural in attributing the most shameful scandal and domestic treachery to Sir Tom. In fact it would be difficult to say that they thought much less of him in consequence. It was Lucy, rather, upon whom their censure fell. She ought to have known better. She ought never to have allowed it. To pretend to such simplicity was sickening, Mrs. Rushton thought.

It was early in February when they all went to London—a time when society is in a sort of promissory state, full of hopes of dazzling delights to come, but for the present not dazzling, parliamentary, residential, a society made up of people who live in London, who are not merely gay birds of fashion, basking in the sunshine of the seasons. There was only a week or two of what the Contessa called Carnival, which indeed was not Carnival at all, but a sober time in which dinner-parties began, and the men began to gather at the clubs. The Contessa did not object to this period of quiet. She acquainted Lucy with all she meant to do in the meantime, to the great confusion of that ingenious spirit. "Bice must be dressed," the Contessa said, "which of itself requires no little time and thought. Un-

happily M. Worth is not in London. Even with M. Worth I exert my own faculties. He is excellent, but he has not the intuitions which come when one is very much interested in an object. Sweet Lucy, you have not thought upon that matter. Your dress is as your dressmaker sends it to you. Yes; but, my angel, Bice has her career before her. It is different."

"Oh, Madame di Forno-Populo," said Lucy, "do you still think in that way—must it still be exhibiting her, marrying her?"

"Marriage is honourable," said the Contessa. "It is what all girls are thinking of; but me, I think it better that their parents should take it in hand instead of the young ladies. There is something in Bice that is difficult—oh, very difficult. If one chooses well for her, one will be richly repaid; but if, on the contrary, one leaves it to the conventional, the ordinary—My sweetest! your pretty white dresses, your blues are delightful for you; but Bice is different, quite different. And then she has no fortune. She must be piquant. She must be striking. She must please. In England you take no trouble for that. It is not *comme il faut* here; but it is in our country. Each of us we like the ways of our country best."

"I have often wondered," said Lucy, "to hear you speak such perfect English, and Bice too. It is, I suppose, because you are so musical and have such good ears——"

"Darling!" said the Contessa sweetly. She said this or a similar word when nothing else occurred to her. She had her room full of lovely stuffs, brought by obsequious shopmen, to whom Lady Randolph's name was sufficient warrant for any extravagance the Contessa might think of. But she said to herself that she was not at all extravagant; for Bice's wardrobe was her stock-in-trade, and if she did not take the opportunity of securing it while in her power the Contessa thought she would be false to Bice's interests. The girl still wore nothing but her black frock. She went out in the park early in the morning when nobody was there, and sometimes had riding lessons at an unearthly hour, so that nobody should see her. The Contessa was very anxious on this point. When Lucy would have taken Bice out driving, when she would have taken her to the theatre, her patroness instantly interfered. "All that will come in its time," she said. "Not now. She must not appear now. I cannot have her seen. Recollect, my Lucy, she has no fortune. She must depend upon

herself for everything." This doctrine, at which Lucy stood aghast, was maintained in the most matter-of-fact way by the neophyte herself. "If I were seen," she said, "now, I should be quite stale when I appear. I must appear before I go anywhere. Oh yes, I love the theatre. I should like to go with you driving. But I should forestall myself. Some persons do, and they are never successful. First of all, before anything, I must appear."

"Oh, my child!" Lucy cried, "I cannot bear to hear of all this. You should not calculate so at your age. And when you appear, as you call it, what then, Bice? Nobody will take any particular notice, perhaps, and you will be so disappointed you will not know what to do. Hundreds of girls appear every season and nobody minds."

Bice took no notice of these subduing and moderating previsions. She smiled and repeated what the Contessa said. "I must do the best for myself, for I have no fortune."

No fortune! and to think that Lucy, with her mind directed to other matters, never once realised that this was a state of affairs which she could put an end to in a moment. It never occurred to her—perhaps, as she certainly was

matter of fact, the recollection that there was a sort of stipulation in the will against foreigners turned her thoughts into another channel.

It was, however, during this time of preparation and quiet that the household in Park Lane one day received a visit from Jock, accompanied by no less a person than MTutor, the leader of intellectual life and light of the world to the boy. They came to luncheon by appointment, and after visiting some museum on which Jock's mind was set, came to remain to dinner and go to the theatre. MTutor had a condescending appreciation of the stage. He thought it was an educational influence, not perhaps of any great utility to the youths under such care as his own, but of no small importance to the less fortunate members of society; and he liked to encourage the efforts of conscientious actors who looked upon their own calling in this light. It was rather for this purpose than with the idea of amusement that he patronised the play, and Jock, as in duty bound, though there was in him a certain boyish excitement as to the pleasure itself, did his best to regard the performance in the same exalted light. MTutor was a young man of about thirty, slim and tall. He was a man who had taken honours at college, though his admirers said not such

high honours as he might have taken. "For MTutor," said Jock, "never would go in for pot-hunting, you know. What he always wanted was to cultivate his own mind, not to get prizes." It was with heartfelt admiration that this feature in his character was dwelt upon by his disciples. Not a doubt that he could have got whatever he liked to go in for, had he not been so fastidious and high-minded. He was fellow of his college as it was, had got a poetry prize which perhaps was not the Newdigate, and smiled indulgently at those who were more warm in the arena of competition than himself. On other occasions when "men" came to luncheon, the Contessa, though quite ready to be amused by them in her own person, sternly forbade the appearance of Bice, the effect of whose future was not, she was determined, to be spoilt by any such preliminary peeps; but the Contessa's vigilance slackened when the visitors were of no greater importance than this. She was insensible to the greatness of MTutor. It did not seem to matter that he should be there sitting grave and dignified by Lucy's side, and talking somewhat over Lucy's head, any more than it mattered that Mr. Rushton should be there, or any other person of an inferior level. It was not upon such men that Bice's

appearance was to tell. She took no precautions against such persons. Jock himself at sixteen was not more utterly out of the question. And the Contessa herself, as it happened, was much amused by MTutor; his great ideas of everything, the exalted ideal that showed in all he did or said, gave great pleasure to this woman of the world. And when they came to the question of the educational influence of the stage, and the conscientious character of the actors' work, she could not conceal her satisfaction. "I will go with you, too," she said, "this evening." "We shall all go," said Sir Tom—"even Bice. There is a big box, and behind the curtain nobody will see her." To this the Contessa demurred, but after a little while, being in a yielding humour, gave way. "It is for the play alone," she said in an undertone, raising her finger in admonition, "you will remember, my child, for the play alone."

"We are all going for the play alone," said Sir Tom cheerfully. "Here is Lucy, who is a baby for a play. She likes melodrama best, disguises and trap-doors and long-lost sons, and all the rest of it."

"It is a taste that is very general," said MTutor indulgently; "but I am sure Lady Randolph appreciates the efforts of a conscientious

interpreter—one who calls all the resources of art to his aid——"

"I don't care for the play alone," said Bice to Jock in an undertone. "I want to see the people. They are always the most amusing. I have seen nobody yet in London. And though I must not be seen, I may look; that will do no harm. Then there will be the people who come into the box."

"The people who come into the box! but you know us all," said Jock, astonished, "before we go——"

"You all?" said Bice with some disdain. "It is easy to see *you;* that is not what I mean; this will be the first time I put my foot into the world. The actors, that is nothing. Is it the custom in England to look much at the play? No; you go to see your friends."

MTutor was on the other side of this strange girl in her black frock. He took it upon him to reply. He said, "That is the case in some countries, but not here. In England the play is actually thought of. English actors are not so good as the French, nor even the Italian. And the Germans are much better trained. Nevertheless, we do what perhaps no other nation does. We give them our attention. It is this which

makes the position of the actors more important, more interesting in England."

"Stop a little, stop a little!" cried Sir Tom; "don't let me interrupt you, Derwentwater, if you are instructing the young ones; but don't forget the *Comédie Française* and the aristocracy of art."

"I do not forget it," said Mr. Derwentwater; "in that point of view we are far behind France; still I uphold that nowhere else do people go to the theatre for the sake of the play as we do; and it is this," he said, turning to Bice, "that makes it possible that the theatre may be an influence and a power."

Bice lifted her eyes upon this man with a wondering gaze of contempt. She gave him a full look which abashed him, though he was so much more important, so much more intellectual, than she. Then, without deigning to take any notice, she turned to Jock at her other side. "If that is all I do not care for going," she said. "I have seen many plays—oh, many! I like quite as well to read at home. It is not for that I wish to go; but to see the world. The world, that is far more interesting. It is like a novel, but living. You look at the people and you read what they are thinking. You see their

stories going on. That is what amuses me; but a play on the stage, what is it? People dressed in clothes that do not belong to them, trying to make themselves look like somebody else—but they never do. One says—that is not I, but the people that know—Bravo, Got! Bravo, Regnier! It does not matter what parts they are acting. You do not care for the part. Then why go and look at it?" said Bice with straightforward philosophy.

All this she poured forth upon Jock in a low clear voice, as if there was no one else near. Jock, for his part, was carried away by the flood.

"I don't know about Got and Regnier. But what we are going to see is Shakespeare," he said, with a little awe; "that is not just like a common play."

Mr. Derwentwater had been astonished by Bice's indifference to his own instructive remarks. It was this perhaps more than her beauty which had called his attention to her, and he had listened as well as he could to the low rapid stream of her conversation, not without wonder that she should have chosen Jock as the recipient of her confidence. What she said, though he heard it but imperfectly, interested him still more. He wanted to make her out—it was a

new kind of study. While Lucy, by his side, went on tranquilly with some soft talk about the theatre, of which she knew very little, he thought, he made her a civil response, but gave all his attention to what was going on at the other side; and there was suddenly a lull of the general commotion, in which he heard distinctly Bice's next words.

"*What* is Shakespeare?" she said; then went on with her own reflections. "What I want to see is the world. I have never yet gone into the world; but I must know it, for it is there I have to live. If one could live in Shakespeare," cried the girl, "it would be easy; but I have not been brought up for that; and I want to see the world—just a little corner—because that is what concerns me, not a play. If it is only for the play, I think I shall not go."

"You had much better come," said Jock; "after all it is fun, and some of the fellows will be good. The world is not to be seen at the theatre that I know of," continued the boy. "Rows of people sitting one behind another, most of them as stupid as possible—you don't call that the world? But come—I wish you would come. It is a change—it stirs you up."

"I don't want to be stirred up. I am all

living," cried Bice. There seemed to breathe out from her a sort of visible atmosphere of energy and impatient life. Looking across this thrill in the air, which somehow was like the vibration of heat in the atmosphere, Jock's eyes encountered those of his tutor, turned very curiously, and not without bewilderment, to the same point as his own. It gave the boy a curious sensation which he could not define. He had wished to exhibit to Mr. Derwentwater this strange phenomenon in the shape of a girl, with a sense that there was something very unusual in her, something in which he himself had a certain proprietorship. But when MTutor's eyes encountered Jock's with an astonished glance of discovery in them, which seemed to say that he had found out Bice for himself without the interposition of the original discoverer, Jock felt a thrill of displeasure, and almost pain, which he could not explain to himself. What did it mean? It seemed to bring with it a certain defiance of, and opposition to, this king of men.

CHAPTER XIII.

TWO FRIENDS.

"WHO was that young lady?" Mr. Derwentwater said. "I did not catch the name."

"What young lady?" To suppose for a moment that Jock did not know who was meant would be ridiculous, of course; but, for some reason which he did not explain even to himself, this was the reply he made.

"My dear Jock, there was but one," said MTutor with much friendliness. "At your age you do not take much notice of the other sex, and that is very well and right; but still it would be wrong to imagine that there is not something interesting in girls occasionally. I did not make her out. She was quite a study to me at the theatre. I am afraid the greater part of the performance, and all the most meritorious portion of it, was thrown away upon

her; but still there were gleams of interest. She is not without intelligence, that is clear."

"You mean Bice," said Jock, with a certain dogged air which Mr. Derwentwater had seldom seen in him before, and did not understand. He spoke as if he intended to say as little as was practicable, and as if he resented being made to speak at all.

"Bice—ah! like Dante's Bice," said MTutor. "That makes her more interesting still. Though it is not perhaps under that aspect that one represents to one's self the Bice of Dante—*ben son, ben son, Beatrice.* No, not exactly under that aspect. Dante's Bice must have been more grand, more imposing, in her dress of crimson or dazzling white."

Jock made no response. It was usual for him to regard MTutor devoutly when he talked in this way, and to feel that no man on earth talked so well. Jock in his omnivorous reading knew perhaps Dante better than his instructor, but he had come to the age when the mind, confused in all its first awakening of emotions, cannot talk of what affects it most. The time had been at which he had discussed everything he read with whosoever would listen, and instructed the world in a child's straightforward

way. At that period he had often improved Lucy's mind on the subject of Dante, telling her all the details of that wonderful pilgrimage through earth and heaven, to her great interest and wonder, as something that had happened the other day. Lucy had not in those days been quite able to understand how it was that the gentleman of Florence should have met everybody he knew in the unseen, but she had taken it all in respectfully, as was her wont. Jock, however, had passed beyond this stage, and no longer told Lucy, or any one, stories from his reading; and other sensations had begun to stir in him which he could not put into words. In this way it was a constant admiration to him to hear MTutor, who could always, he thought, say the right thing and never was at a loss. But this evening he was dissatisfied. They were returning from the theatre by a late train, and nothing but Jock's reputation and high character as a boy of boys, high up in everything intellectual, and without reproach in any way, besides the devoted friendship which subsisted between himself and his tutor, could have justified Mr. Derwentwater in permitting him in the middle of the half to go to London to the theatre and return by the

twelve o'clock train. This privilege came to him from the favour of his tutor, and yet for the first time his tutor did not seem the superhuman being he had always previously appeared to Jock. But Mr. Derwentwater was quite unsuspicious of this.

"There is something very much out of the way in the young lady altogether," he said. "That little black dress, fitting her like a glove, and no ornament or finery of any description. It is not so with girls in general. It was very striking—tell me——"

"I didn't think," cried Jock, "that you paid any attention to what women wore."

Mr. Derwentwater yielded to a gentle smile. "Tell me," he said, as if he had not been interrupted, "who this young lady may be. Is she a daughter of the Italian lady, a handsome woman too in her way, who was with your people?" The railway carriage in which they were coursing through the blackness of the night was but dimly lighted, and it was not easy to see from one corner to another the expression of Jock's face.

"I don't know," said Jock in a voice that sounded gruff, "I can't tell who she is—I never asked. It did not seem any business of mine."

"Old fellow," said MTutor, "don't cultivate those bearish ways. Some men do, but it's not good form. I don't like to see it in you."

This silenced Jock, and made his face flame in the darkness. He did not know what excuse to make. He added reluctantly, "Of course I know that she came with the Contessa; but who she is I don't know, and I don't think Lucy knows. She is just—there."

"Well, my boy," said Mr. Derwentwater, "if there is any mystery, all right; I don't want to be prying;" but, as was natural, this only increased his curiosity. After an interval he broke forth again. "A little mystery," he said, "suits them; a woman ought to be mysterious, with her long robes falling round her, and her mystery of long hair, and all the natural veils and mists that are about her. It is more poetic and in keeping that they should only have a lovely suggestive name, what we call a Christian name, instead of a commonplace patronymic, Miss So-and-so! Yes; I recognise your Bice as by far the most suitable symbol."

It is impossible to say what an amount of unexpected and inexpressible irritation arose in the mind of Jock with every word. "Your Bice!" The words excited him almost beyond

his power of control. The mere fact of having somehow got into opposition to MTutor was in itself an irritation almost more than he could bear. How it was he could not explain to himself; but only felt that from the moment when they had got into their carriage together, Mr. Derwentwater, hitherto his god, had become almost odious to him. The evening altogether had been exciting, but uncomfortable. They had all gone to the theatre, where Jock had been prepared to look on not so much at a fine piece of acting as at a conscientious study, the laboriousness of which was one of its chief qualities. Neither the Contessa nor Bice had been much impressed by that fine view of the performance. Madame di Forno-Populo, indeed, had swept the audience with her opera-glass, and paid very little attention to the stage. She had yawned at the most important moments. When the curtain fell she had woke up, looking with interest for visitors, as it appeared, though very few visitors had come. Bice was put into the corner under shelter of the Contessa, and thence had taken furtive peeps, though without any opera-glass, with her own keen intelligent young eyes, at the people sitting near, whom Jock had declared not to be in any sense of the word the

world. Bice too looked up, when the box-door opened, with great interest. She kept well in the shade, but it was evident that she was anxious to see whosoever might come. And very few people came; one or two men who came to pay their respects to Lucy, one or two who appeared with faces of excitement and surprise to ask if it was indeed Madame di Forno-Populo whom they had seen. At these Bice from out her corner gazed with large eyes; they were not persons of an interesting kind. One of them was a Lord Somebody, who was red-faced and had an air which somehow did not suit the place in which Lucy was, and towards whom Sir Tom, though he knew him, maintained an aspect of seriousness not at all usual to his cordial countenance. Bice, it was evident, was struck with a contemptuous amaze at the appearance of these visitors. There was a quick interchange of glances between her and the Contessa, with shrugs of the shoulders and much play of fans. Bice's raised eyebrows and curled lips perhaps meant—"Are those your famous friends? Is this all?" Whereas the Contessa answered deprecatingly, with a sort of "wait a little" look. Jock, who generally was pleased to stroll about the lobbies in a sort of mannish

way in the intervals between the acts, sat still in his place to watch all this with a wondering sense that here was something going on in which there was a still closer interest, and to notice everything almost without knowing that he noted it, following in this respect, as in most others, the lead of his tutor, who likewise addressed himself to the supervision of everything that went on, discoursing in the meantime to Lucy about the actors' "interpretation" of the part, and how far he, Mr. Derwentwater, agreed with their view. To Lucy, indeed, the action of the play was everything, and the intervals between tedious. She laughed and cried, and followed every movement, and looked round, hushing the others when they whispered, almost with indignation. Lucy was far younger, Jock decided, than Bice or even himself. He, too, had learned already—how had he learned it?—that the play going on upon the stage was less interesting than that which was being performed outside. Even Jock had found this out, though he could not have told how. Shakespeare, indeed, was far greater, nobler; but the excitement of a living story, the progress of events of which nobody could tell what would come next, had an interest transcending even

the poetry. That was what people said, Jock was aware, in novels and other productions; but until to-night he never believed it was true.

And then there was the journey from town, with all the curious sensation of parting at the theatre-doors, and returning from that shining world of gaslight and ladies' dresses into the dimness of the railway, the tedious though not very long journey, the plunging of the carriage through the blackness of the night; and along with these the questions of Mr. Derwentwater, so unlike him, so uncalled-for, as Jock could not help thinking. What had he to do with Bice? What had any one to do with her? So far as she belonged to any one, it was to himself, Jock; her first friend, her companion in her walks, he to whom she had spoken so freely, and who had told her his opinion with such simplicity. When Jock remembered that he had told her she was not pretty his cheeks burned. There had stolen into his mind, he could not tell how, a very different feeling now—not perhaps a different opinion. When he reflected it did not seem to him even now that pretty was the word to use —but the impression of Bice which was in his mind was something that made the boy thrill. He did not understand it, nor could he tell what

it was. But it made him quiver with resentment when there was any question about her—anything like this cold-blooded investigation which Mr. Derwentwater had attempted to make. It troubled Jock all the more that it should be MTutor who made it. When our god, our model of excellence, comes down from his high state to anything that is petty, or less than perfect, how sore is the pang with which we acknowledge it! "To be wroth with those we love doth work like madness in the brain." Jock had both these pangs together. He was angry because MTutor had been interfering with matters in which he had no concern, and he was pained because MTutor had condescended to ask questions and invite gossip, like the smaller beings well enough known in the boy-world as in every other, who made gossip the chief object of their existence. Could there be anything in the idol of his youth akin to these? He felt sore and disappointed, without knowing why, with a dim consciousness that there were many other people whom Mr. Derwentwater might have inquired about without awakening any such feelings in him. When the train stopped, and they got out, it was strange to walk down the silent midnight streets by MTutor's side, without the old sensa-

tion of pleasure with which the boy felt himself made into the man's companion. He was awakened out of his maze of dark and painful feelings by the voice of Derwentwater calling upon him to admire the effect of the moonlight upon the river as they crossed the bridge. For long after that scene remained in Jock's mind against a background of mysterious shadows and perplexity. The moon rode in the midst of a wide clearing of blue between two broken banks of clouds. She was almost full, and approaching her setting. She shone full upon the river, sweeping from side to side in one flood of silver, broken only by a few strange little blacknesses, the few boats, like houseless stragglers out by night and without shelter, which lay here and there by a wharf or at the water's edge. The scene was wonderfully still and solemn, not a motion to be seen either on street or stream. "How is it, do you think," said Mr. Derwentwater, "that we think so little of the sun when it is he that lights up a scene like this, and so much of the moon?"

Jock was taken by surprise by this question, which was of a kind which his tutor was fond of putting, and which brought back their old relations instantaneously. Jock seemed to himself

to wake up out of a strange inarticulate dream of displeasure and embarrassment, and to feel himself with sudden remorse a traitor to his friend. He said, faltering, "I don't know; it is always you that finds out the analogies. I don't think that my mind is poetical at all."

"You do yourself injustice, Jock," said Derwenter, his arm within that of his pupil in their old familiar way. And then he said, "The moon is the feminine influence which charms us by showing herself clearly as the source of the light she sheds. The sun we rarely think of at all, but only of what he gives us—the light and the heat that are our life. Her," he pointed to the sky, "we could dispense with, save for the beauty of her."

"I wish," said Jock, "I could think of anything so fine. But do you think we could do without women like that?" said the inquiring young spirit, ready to follow with his bosom bare whithersoever this refined philosophy might lead.

"You and I will," said the instructor. "There are grosser and there are tamer spirits to whom it might be different. I would not wrong you by supposing that you, my boy, could ever be tempted in the gross way; and

I don't think you are of the butterfly dancing kind."

"I should rather think not!" said Jock, with a short laugh.

"Then, except as a beautiful object, setting herself forth in conscious brightness, like that emblem of woman yonder," said MTutor, with a wave of his hand, admiring, familiar, but somewhat contemptuous, towards the moon, "what do we want with that feminine influence? Our lives are set to higher uses, and occupied with other aims."

Jock was perfectly satisfied with this profession of faith. He went along the street with his tutor's arm in his, and a vague elation as of something settled and concluded upon in his mind. Their footsteps rang upon the pavement with a manly tramp as they paced away from the light on the bridge into the shadow of the old houses with their red roofs. They had gone some way before, being above all things loyal, Jock thought it right to put in a proviso. "Not intellectually, perhaps," he said, "but I can't forget how much I owe to my sister. I should have been a most forlorn little wretch when I was a child, and I shouldn't be much now but for Lucy standing by me. It's not well to forget

that, is it, sir? though Lucy is not at all clever," he added in an undertone.

"You are a loyal soul," said MTutor, with a pressure of his arm, "but Woman does not mean our mothers and sisters." Here he permitted himself a little laugh. "It shows me how much inferior is my position to that of your youth, my dear boy," he said, "when you give me such an answer. Believe me, it is far finer than anything you suppose me to be able to say."

Jock did not know how to respond to this speech. It half angered, half pleased him, but on the whole he was more ashamed of the supposed youthfulness than satisfied with the approbation. No one, however young, likes the imputation of innocence; and Jock had feelings rising within him of which he scarcely knew the meaning, but which made him still more sensible of the injustice of this view. He was too proud, however, to explain himself even if he had been able to do so, and the little way that remained was trodden in silence. The boy, however, could not help a curious sensation of superiority as he went to his room through the sleeping-house, feeling the stillness of the slumber into which he stole, treading very quietly that he might not disturb any one. He stopped for a

moment with a candle in his hand and looked down the long passage with its line of closed doors on each side, holding his breath with a half smile of sympathy, respect for the hush of sleep, yet keen superiority of life and emotion over all the unconscious household. His own brain and heart seemed tingling with the activity and tumult of life in them. It seemed to him impossible to sleep, to still the commotion in his mind, and bring himself into harmony with that hushed atmosphere and childish calm.

CHAPTER XIV.

YOUTHFUL UNREST.

EASTER was very early that year, about as early as Easter can be, and there was in Jock's mind a disturbing consciousness of the holidays, and the manner in which he was likely to spend them, which no doubt interfered to a certain extent with his work. He ought to have been first in the competition for a certain school prize, and he was not. It was carried off, to the disappointment of Jock's house, and indeed of the greater part of the school, by a King's scholar, which was the fate of most of the prizes. Mr. Derwentwater was deeply cast down by this disappointment. He expressed himself on the subject indeed with all the fine feeling for which he was distinguished. "The loss of a distinction," he said, "is not in itself a matter to disturb us; but I own I should be sorry to

think that you were failing at all in that intellectual energy which has already placed you so often at the head of the lists—that, my dear fellow, I should unfeignedly regret; but not a mere prize, which is nothing." This was a very handsome way of speaking of it; but that MTutor was disappointed there could be no doubt. To Jock himself it gave a keen momentary pang to see his own name only third in that bead-roll of honour; but so it was. The holidays had all that to answer for—the holidays, or rather what they were to bring. When he thought of the Hall and the company there Jock felt a certain high tide in his veins, an awakening of interest and anticipation which he did not understand. He did not say to himself that he was going to be happy. He only looked forward with an eager heart, with a sense of something to come, which was different from the routine of ordinary life. MTutor, after many hindrances and hesitations, was at last going to accept the invitation of Sir Tom, and accompany his pupil. This Jock had looked forward to as the greatest of pleasures. But somehow he did not feel so happy about it now. He did not seem to himself to want Mr. Derwentwater. In some ways, indeed, he had become impatient of

Mr. Derwentwater. Since that visit to the theatre, involuntarily, without any cause for it, there had commenced to be moments in which MTutor was tedious. This sacrilege was unconscious, and never yet had been put into words; but still the feeling was there; and the beginning of any such revolution in the soul must be accompanied with many uneasinesses. Jock was on the stroke, so to speak, of seventeen. He was old for his age, yet he had been almost childish too in his devotion to his books and the subjects of his school life. The last year had introduced many new thoughts to his mind by restoring him to the partial society of his sister and her house; but into these new subjects he had carried the devotion of his studious habits and the enthusiasm of his discipleship, transferring himself bodily with all his traditions into the new atmosphere. But a change somehow had begun in him, he could not tell how. He was stirred beyond the lines of his former being —sentiments, confusions of spirit quite new to him, were vaguely fermenting, he could not tell how; and school work, and prizes, and all the emulations of sixth form had somehow tamed and paled. The colour seemed to have gone out of them. And the library of MTutor, that

paradise of thought, that home of conversation, where so many fine things used to be said—that too had palled upon the boy's uneasy soul. He felt as if he should prefer to leave everything behind him—books and compositions and talk, and even MTutor himself. Such a state of mind is sure to occur some time or other in a boy's experiences; but in this case it was too early, and Mr. Derwentwater, who was very deeply devoted to his pupils, was much exercised on the subject. He had lost Jock's confidence, he thought. How had he lost his confidence? was it that some other less wholesome influence was coming in? Thus there were feelings of discomfort between them, hesitations as to what to say, instinctive avoidance of some subjects, concealed allusions to others. It might even be said that in a very refined and superior way, such as was alone possible to such a man, Mr. Derwentwater occasionally talked at Jock. He talked of the pain and grief of seeing a young heart closed to you which once had been open, and of the poignant disappointment which arises in an elder spirit when its spiritual child—its disciple—gets beyond its leading. Jock, occupied with his own thoughts, only partially understood.

It was in this state of mind that they set out together, amid all the bustle of breaking up, to pay their promised visit. Jock, who up to this moment had hated London, and looked with alarm upon society, had eagerly accepted his tutor's proposal that after the ten days which they were to spend at the Hall they should go to Normandy together for the rest of the holidays, which was an arrangement very pleasant in anticipation. But by this time neither of the two was at all anxious to carry it out. Mr. Derwentwater had begun to talk of the expediency of giving a little attention to one's own country. "We are just as foolish as the ignorant masses," he said, "though we think ourselves so wise. Why not Devonshire instead of Normandy? it is finer in natural scenery. Why not London instead of Paris? there is no spell in mere going, as the ignorant say, 'abroad.'" When you come to think of it, in just the same proportion as one is superior to the common round of gaping British tourists by going on a walking tour in Normandy, one is superior to the walkers in Normandy by choosing Devonshire.

These remarks were preliminary to the intention of giving up the plan altogether, and by the time they set out it was tacitly understood that

this was to be the case. It was to be given up —not for Devonshire. The pair of friends had become two—they were to do each what was good in his own eyes. Jock would remain "at home," whether that home meant the Hall or Park Lane, and Mr. Derwentwater, after his week's visit, should go on—where seemed to him good.

There was a considerable party gathered in the inner drawing-room when Jock and his companion presented themselves there. The scene was very different from that to which Jock had been accustomed, when the tea-table was a sort of fireside adjunct to the warmth and brightness centred there. Now the windows were full of a clear yellow sky, shining a little shrilly after rain, and promising in its too clear and watery brightness more rain to come; and many people were about, some standing up against the light, some lounging in the comfortable chairs, some talking together in groups, some hanging about Lucy and her tea-service. Lucy said, "Oh, is it you, Jock?" and kissed him, with a look of pleasure; but she had not run out to meet him as of old. Lucy, indeed, was changed, perhaps more evidently changed than any member of the family. She was far more self-possessed than

she had ever been before. She did not now turn to her husband with that pretty look, half smiling, half wistful, to know how she had got through her domestic duties. There was a slight air of hurry and embarrassment about her eyes. The season had not begun, and she could not have been overdone by her social duties; but something had aged and changed her. Some old acquaintances came forward and shook hands with Jock; and Sir Tom, when he saw who it was, detached himself from the person he was talking to, and came forward and gave him a sufficiently cordial welcome. The person with whom he was talking was the Contessa. She was in her old place in the room, the comfortable sofa which she had taken from Lady Randolph, and where Sir Tom, leaning upon the mantelpiece, as an Englishman loves to do, could talk to her in the easiest of attitudes. Jock, though he was not discerning, thought that Sir Tom looked aged and changed too. The people in general had a tired afternoon sort of look about them. They were not like people exulting to get out of town, and out of darkness and winter weather to the fresh air and April skies. Perhaps, however, this effect was produced by the fact that looking for one special person in the

assembly, Jock had not found her. He had never cared who was there before. Except Lucy, the whole world was much the same to him. To talk to her now and then, but, by preference, alone, when he could have her to himself and nobody else was by, and then to escape to the library, had been the height of his desire. Now he no longer thought of the library, or even, save in a secondary way, of Lucy. He looked about for some one else. There was the Contessa, sure enough, with one man on the sofa by her side and another seated in front of her, and Sir Tom against the mantelpiece lounging and talking. She was enchanting them all with her rapid talk, with the pretty swift movements of her hands, her expressive looks and ways. But there was no shadow of Bice about the room. Jock looked at once behind the table, where she had been always visible when the Contessa was present. But Bice was not there. There was not a trace of her among the people whom Jock neither knew nor cared to know. But everything went on cheerfully, notwithstanding this omission, which nobody but Jock seemed to remark. Ladies chattered softly as they sipped their tea, men standing over them telling anecdotes of this

person and that, with runs of soft laughter here and there. Lucy at the tea-table was the only one who was at all isolated. She was bending over her cups and saucers, supplying now one and now another, listening to a chance remark here and there, giving an abstracted smile to the person who might chance to be next to her. What was she thinking of? Not of Jock, who had only got a smile a little more animated than the others. Mr. Derwentwater did not know anybody in this company. He stood on the outskirts of it, with that look of mingled conciliation and defiance which is natural to a man who feels himself overlooked. He was more disappointed even than Jock, for he had anticipated a great deal of attention, and not to find himself nobody in a fashionable crowd.

Things did not mend even at dinner. Then the people were more easily identified in their evening clothes, exposing themselves steadily to all observers on either side of the table; but they did not seem more interesting. There were two or three political men, friends of Sir Tom, and some of a very different type who were attached to the Contessa—indeed, the party consisted chiefly of men, with a few ladies thrown in. The ladies were not much more attractive. One of

them, a Lady Anastasia something, was one of the most inveterate of gossip collectors, a lady who not only provided piquant tales for home consumption, but served them up to the general public afterwards in a newspaper—the only representatives of ordinary womankind being a mother and two daughters, who had no particular qualities, and who duly occupied a certain amount of space without giving anything in return. But Bice was not visible. She who had been so little noticed, yet so far from insignificant, where was she? Could it be that the Contessa had left her behind, or that Lucy had objected to her, or that she was ill, or that—Jock did not know what to think. The company was a strange one. Those sedate political friends of Sir Tom found themselves with a little dismay in the society of the lady who wrote for what she called the Press, and the gentlemen from the clubs. One of the guests was the young Marquis Montjoie, who had quite lately come into his title and the world. He had been at school with Jock a few years before, and he recognised Mr. Derwentwater with a curious mixture of awe and contempt. "Hallo!" he had cried when he perceived him first, and he had whispered something to the Contessa which made her laugh also. All

this Jock remarked vaguely in his uneasiness and disappointment. What was the good of coming home, he said to himself, if—— What was the use of having so looked forward to the holidays and lost that prize, and disappointed everybody, if—— There rose such a ferment in Jock's veins as had never been there before. When the ladies left the room after dinner it was he that opened the door for them, and as Lucy looked up with a smile into her brother's face she met from him a scowl which took away her breath. Why did he scowl at Lucy? and why think that in all his life he had never seen so dull a company before? Their good things after dinner were odious to his ears; and to think that even MTutor should be able to laugh at such miserable jokes and take an interest in such small talk! That fellow Montjoie, above all, was intolerable to Jock. He had been quite low down in the school when he left, a being of no account, a creature called by opprobrious names, and not worthy to tie the shoes of a member of sixth form. But when he rattled loudly on about nothing at all, even Sir Tom did not refuse to listen. What was Montjoie doing here? When the gentlemen streamed into the drawing-room, a procession of black coats, Jock, who came last, could not help being aware that

he was scowling at everybody. He met the eyes of one of those inoffensive little girls in blue, and made her jump, looking at her as if he would eat her. And all the evening through he kept prowling about with his hands in his pockets, now looking at the books in the shelves, now frowning at Lucy, who could not think what was the matter with her brother. Was Jock ill? What had happened to him? The young ladies in blue sang an innocent little duet, and Jock stared at the Contessa, wondering if she was going to sing, and if the door would open and the slim figure in the black frock come in as by a signal and place herself at the piano. But the Contessa only laughed behind her fan, and made a little pretence at applause when the music ceased, having talked all through it, she and the gentlemen about her, of whom Montjoie was one and the loudest. No, she was not going to sing. When the door opened it was only to admit the servants with their trays and the tea which nobody wanted. What was the use of looking forward to the holidays if—— Mr. Derwentwater, perhaps, had similar thoughts. He came up to Jock behind the backs of the other people and put an uneasy question to him.

"I thought you said that Madame di Forno-Populo sang?"

"She used to," said Jack laconically.

"The music here does not seem of a high class," said MTutor. "I hope she will sing. Italians, though their music is sensuous, generally know something about the art."

To this Jock made no reply, but hunched his shoulders a little higher, and dug his hands down deeper into his pockets.

"By the way, is the—young lady who was with Madame di Forno-Populo here no longer?" said MTutor in a sort of accidental manner, as if that had for the first time occurred to him. He raised his eyes to Jock's face, which was foolish, and they both reddened in spite of themselves—Mr. Derwentwater with sudden confusion, and Jock with angry dismay.

"Not that I know of," said the boy. "I haven't heard anything." Then he went on hurriedly, "No more than I know what Montjoie's doing here. What's he been asked here for, I wonder? He can't amuse anybody much." These words, however, were contradicted practically as soon as they were said by a peal of laughter which rose from the Contessa's little corner—all caused, as

it was evident, by some pleasantry of Montjoie's.

"It seems that he does, though," said Mr. Derwentwater; and then he added with a smile, "We are novices in society, you and I. We do best in our own class; not to know that Montjoie will be in the very front of society, the admired of all admirers at least for a season or two! Isn't he a favourite of fortune, the best *parti*, a golden youth in every sense of the word——"

"Why, he was a scug!" cried Jock with illimitable disdain. This mysterious and terrible monosyllable was applied at school to a youth hopelessly low down and destitute of any personal advantages to counterbalance his inferiority. Jock launched it at the Marquis, evidently now in a very different situation, as if it had been a stone.

"Hush!" said MTutor blandly. "You will meet a great many such in society, and they will think themselves quite as good as you."

Then the mother of the young ladies in blue approached and disturbed this *tête-à-tête*.

"I think you were talking of Lord Montjoie," she said. "I hear he is so clever; there are some comic songs he sings which, I am told, are

quite irresistible. Mr. Trevor, don't you think you could induce him to sing one—as you were at school with him, and are a sort of son of the house?"

At this Jock glowered with eyes that were alarming to see under the deep cover of his eyebrows, and MTutor laughed out. "We had not so exalted an opinion of Montjoie," he said; and then, with a politic diversion of which he was proud, "Would not your daughters favour us again? A comic song in the present state of our feelings would be more than we could bear."

"What a clever fellow he is, after all!" said Jock to himself admiringly, "how he can manage people and say the right thing at the right moment! I daresay Lucy will tell me if I ask her," he said quite irrelevantly, as the lady, well pleased to hear her daughters appreciated, sailed away. There was something in the complete sympathy of Mr. Derwentwater's mind, even though it irritated, which touched him. He put the question point blank to Lucy when he found an opportunity of speaking to her. "I say, Lucy, where is Bice? You have got all the old fogeys about the place, and she is not here," the boy said.

"Is that why you are glooming upon everybody so?" said the unfeeling Lucy. "You

cannot call your friend Lord Montjoie an old fogey, Jock. He says you were such friends at school."

"I—friends!" cried Jock with disdain. "Why, he was nothing but a scug."

Thus Lucy, too, avoided the question; but it was not because she had any real reluctance to speak of Bice, though this was what Jock could not know.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CONTESSA PREPARES THE WAY.

"I NEVER sing," said the Contessa, with that serene smile with which she was in the habit of accompanying a statement which her hearers knew to be quite untrue. "Oh never! It is one of my possibilities which are over—one of the things which you remember of me in—other days——"

"So far back as March," said Sir Tom; "but we all recognise that in a lady's calendar that may mean a century."

"Put it in the plural, *mon ami*—centuries, that is more correct," said the Contessa, with her dazzling smile.

"And might one ask why this sudden acceleration of time?" asked one of the gentlemen who were always in attendance, belonging, so to speak, to the Contessa's side of the party. She

opened out her lovely hands and gave a little shrug to her shoulders, and elevation of her eyebrows.

"It is easy to tell; but whether I shall tell you is another question——"

"Oh do, do, Countess," cried young Montjoie, who was somewhat rough in his attentions, and treated the lady with less ceremony than a less noble youth would have ventured upon. "Come, don't keep us all in suspense. I must hear you, don't you know; all the other fellows have heard you. So, please, get over the preliminaries, and let's come to the music. I am awfully fond of music, especially singing. I'm a dab at that myself——"

The Contessa let her eyes dwell upon this illustrious young man. "Why," she said, "have I been prevented from making acquaintance with the art in which my Lord Montjoie is—a dab——"

At this there was a laugh, in which the good-natured young nobleman did not refuse to join. "I say, you know! it's too bad to make fun of me like this," he cried; "but I'll tell you what, Countess, I'll make a bargain with you. I'll sing you three of mine if you'll sing me one of yours."

The Contessa smiled with that gracious response which so often answered instead of words.

The other ladies had withdrawn, except Lucy, who waited somewhat uneasily till her guest was ready. Though Madame di Forno-Populo had never lost the ascendency which she had acquired over Lady Randolph by throwing herself upon her understanding and sympathy, there were still many things which Lucy could not acquiesce in without uneasiness, in the Contessa's ways. The group of men about her chair, when all the other ladies took their candles and made their way upstairs, wounded Lucy's instinctive sense of what was befitting. She waited, punctilious in her feeling of duty, though the Contessa had not hesitated to make her understand that the precaution was quite unnecessary—and though even Sir Tom had said something of a similar signification. "She is old enough to take care of herself. She doesn't want a chaperon," Sir Tom had said; but nevertheless Lucy would take up a book and sit down at the table and wait, which was the more troublesome that it was precisely at this moment that the Contessa was most amusing and enjoyed herself most. Sir Tom's parliamentary friends had disappeared to the smoking-room when the ladies left the room. It was the other kind of visitors, the gentlemen who had known the Contessa in former days, and were

old friends likewise of Sir Tom, who gathered round her now—they and young Lord Montjoie, who was rather out of place in the party, but who admired the Contessa greatly, and thought her better fun than any one he knew.

The Contessa gave the young man one of those speaking smiles which were more eloquent than words. And then she said, "If I were to tell you why, you would not believe me. I am going to retire from the world."

At this there was a little tumult of outcry and laughter. "The world cannot spare you, Contessa." "We can't permit any such sacrifice." And, "Retire! Till to-morrow?" her courtiers said.

"Not till to-morrow. I do more than retire. I abdicate," said the Contessa, waving her beautiful hands as if in farewell.

"This sounds very mysterious; for an abdication is different from a withdrawal, it suggests a successor."

"Which is an impossibility," another said.

The Contessa distributed her smiles with gracious impartiality to all, but she kept a little watch upon young Montjoie, who was eager amid the ring of her worshippers. "Nevertheless, it is more than a successor," she said, playing with

them, with a strange pleasure. To be thus surrounded, flattered more openly than men ever venture to flatter a woman whom they respect, addressed with exaggerated admiration, contemplated with bold and unwavering eyes, had come by many descents to be delightful to the Contessa. It reminded her of her old triumphs—of the days when men of a different sort brought homage perhaps not much more real but far more delicate to her feet. A long career of baths and watering-places, of Baden and Homburg, and every other conceivable resort of temporary gaiety and fashion, had brought her to this. Sir Tom, who was not taking much share in the conversation, stood with his arm on the mantelpiece, and watched her and her little court with compassionate eyes. He had laughed often before; but he did not laugh now. Perhaps the fact that he was himself no longer her first object helped to change the aspect of affairs. He had consented to invite these men as old acquaintances; but it was intolerable to him to see this scene going on in the room in which his wife was; and the Contessa's radiant satisfaction seemed almost horrible to him in Lucy's presence. Lucy was seated at some distance from the group, her face turned away, her head bent, to all

appearance very intent upon the book she was reading. He looked at her with a sort of reverential impatience. She was not capable of understanding the degradation which her own pure and simple presence made apparent. He could not endure her to be there sanctioning the indecorum ;—and yet the tenacity with which she held her place, and did what she thought her duty to her guest, filled him with a wondering pride. No other scene perhaps, he thought, in all England could have presented a contrast so curious.

"The Contessa speaks in riddles," said one of the circle. "We want an Œdipus."

"Oh, come, Countess," said young Montjoie, "don't hang us up like this. We are all of us on pins and needles, don't you know. It all began about you singing. Why don't you sing? All the fellows say it's as good as Grisi. I never heard Grisi, but I know every note Patti's got in her voice; and I want to compare, don't you know."

The Contessa contemplated the young man with a sort of indulgent smile, like a mother who withholds a toy.

"When are you going away?" she said. "You will soon go back to your dear London, to your clubs and all your delights."

"Oh, come, Countess," repeated Montjoie, "that isn't kind. You talk as if you wanted to get rid of a fellow. I'm due at the Duke's on Friday, don't you know."

"Then it shall be on Thursday," said the Contessa, with a laugh.

"What shall be on Thursday?"

The others all came round her with eager questions.

"I am going on Wednesday," said one. "What is this that is going to happen?"

"And why am I to be excluded?"

"And I? If there is to be anything new, tell us what it is."

"Inquisitors! and they say that curiosity belongs to women," said the Contessa. "Messieurs, if I were to tell you what it was, it would be no longer new."

"Well, but hang it all," cried young Montjoie, who was excited and had forgotten his manners, "do tell us what it is. Don't you see we don't even know what kind of thing you mean? If it's music——"

Madame di Forno-Populo laughed once more. She loved to mystify and raise expectations. "It is not music," she said. "It is my reason for withdrawing. When you see that you will

understand. You will all say the Contessa is wise. She has foreseen exactly the right moment to retire."

And with this she rose from the sofa with a sudden movement which took her attendants by surprise. She was not given to shaking hands. She withdrew quickly from Montjoie's effort to seize her delicate fingers, which she waved to the company in general. "My Lucy," she said, "I have kept you waiting! to this extent does one forget one's self in your delightful house. But, my angel, you should not permit me to do it. You should hold up your finger, and I would obey."

"Bravo," said Montjoie's voice behind their backs in a murmur of delight. "Oh, by Jove, isn't that good? Fancy, a woman like her, and that simple——"

One of the elder men gave Montjoie something like a kick, inappropriate as the scene was for such a demonstration. "You little —— think what you are saying," he cried.

But Sir Tom was opening the door for the ladies and did not hear. Lucy was tired and pale. She looked like a child beside the stately Contessa. She had taken no notice of Madame di Forno-Populo's profession of submission. In

her heart she was longing to run to the nursery to see her boy asleep, and make sure that all was well; and she was not only tired with her vigil, but uneasy, disapproving. She divined what the Contessa meant, though not even Sir Tom had made it out. Perhaps it was feminine instinct that instructed her on this point. Perhaps the strong repugnance she had, and sense of opposition to what was about to be done, quickened her powers of divination. She who had never suspected anybody in all her life fathomed the Contessa's intentions at a glance. "That boy!" she said to herself as she followed up the great staircase. Lucy divined the Contessa, and the Contessa divined that she had divined her. She turned round when they reached the top of the stairs and paused for a moment looking at Lady Randolph's face, lit up with the light of her candle. "My sweetest," said the Contessa, "you do not approve. It breaks my heart to see it. But what can I do? This is my way, it is not yours; but to me it is the only way."

Lucy could do nothing but shake her head as she turned the way of the nursery where her boy was sleeping. The contrast gave her a pang. Bice, too, was no doubt sleeping the deep and dreamless sleep of youth behind one of

those closed doors; poor Bice! secluded there to increase the effect of her eventual appearance, and about whom her protectress was draping all those veils of mystery in order to tempt the fancy of a commonplace youth not much more than a schoolboy! And yet the Contessa loved her charge, and persuaded herself that she was acting for Bice's good. Poor Bice, who was so good to little Tom! Was there nothing to be done to save her?

"What's going to happen on Thursday?" the men of the Contessa's train asked of Sir Tom as they followed him to the smoking-room, where Mr. Derwentwater, in a velvet coat, was already seated smoking a mild cigarette, and conversing with one of the parliamentary gentlemen. Jock hung about in the background, turning over the books (for there were books everywhere in this well-provided house) rather with the intention of making it quite evident that he went to bed when he liked, and could stay up as late as any one, than from any hankering after that cigar which a sixth form fellow, so conscientious as Jock was, might not trifle with. "Oh, here are those two duffers—those saps, don't you know," Montjoie said, with a grimace, as he perceived them on entering the room; in which remark he

was perhaps justified by the epithets which these two superior persons applied to him. The two parties did not amalgamate in the smoking-room any more than in other places. The new-comers surrounded Sir Tom in a noisy little crowd, demanding of him an explanation of the Contessa's meaning. This, however, was subdued presently by a somewhat startling little incident. The gentlemen were discussing the Contessa with the greatest freedom. "It's rather astounding to meet her in a good house, just like any one else," one man forgot himself sufficiently to say, but he came to his recollection very quickly on meeting Sir Tom's eyes. "I beg your pardon, Randolph; of course that's not what I mean. I mean after all those years." "Then I hope you will remember to say exactly what you mean," said Sir Tom, "on other occasions. It will simplify matters."

This momentary incident, though it was quiet enough, and expressed in tones rather less than more loud than the ordinary conversation, made a sensation in the room, and produced first an involuntary stillness, and then an eager access of talk. It had the effect, however, of making everybody aware that the Contessa intended to make on Thursday some revelation or other, an

intimation which moved Jock and his tutor as much or even more than it moved the others. Mr. Derwentwater even made advances to Montjoie, whom he had steadily ignored, in order to ascertain what it was. "Something's coming off, that's all we can tell," that young patrician said. "She is going to retire, so she says, from the world, don't you know. That's like a tradesman shutting up shop when he's made his fortune, or a *prima donna* going off the stage. It ain't so easy to make out, is it, how the Forno-Populo can retire from the world? She can't be going to take poison, like the great Sarah, and give us a grand dying seance in Lady Randolph's drawing-room. That would be going a bit too far, don't you know."

"It is going a bit too far to imagine such a thing," Derwentwater said.

"Oh, come, you know it isn't school-time," cried Montjoie, with a laugh. And though Mr. Derwentwater was as much superior to the little lordling as could be conceived, he retired disconcerted from this passage of arms. To be reminded that you are a pedagogue is difficult to bear, especially an unsuccessful pedagogue, attempting to exert authority which exists no longer. MTutor prided himself on being a man of the

world, but he retired a little with an involuntary sense of offence from this easy setting down. He rose shortly after and took Jock by the arm and led him away. "You are not smoking, which I am glad to see—and shows your sense," he said. "Come out and have a breath of air before we go upstairs. Can you imagine anything more detestable than that little precocious *roué*, that washed-out little man-about-town?" he added with some energy, as they stepped out of the open windows of the library, left open in case the fine night should have seduced the gentlemen on to the terrace to smoke their cigars. It was a lovely spring night, soft and balmy, with a sensation of growth in the air, the sky very clear, with airy white clouds all lit up by the moon. The quiet and freshness gave to those who stepped into it a curious sensation of superiority to the men whom they left in the warm brightly-lit room, with its heavy atmosphere and artificial delights. It felt like a moral atmosphere in contrast with the air all laden with human emanations, smoke, and the careless talk of men. These two were perhaps somewhat inclined to feel a superiority in any circumstances. They did so doubly in these.

"He was always a little cad," said Jock.

"To hear a lady's name from his mouth is revolting," said Derwentwater. "We are all too careless in that respect. I admire Madame di Forno-Populo for keeping her—is it her daughter or niece?—out of the way while that little animal is here."

"Oh, Bice would soon make him know his place," said Jock; "she is not just like one of the girls that are civil, you know. She is not afraid of telling you what she thinks of you. I know exactly how she'd look at Montjoie." Jock permitted himself an abrupt laugh in the pleasure of feeling that he knew her ways far better than any one. "She would soon set him down—the little beast!—in his right place."

As they walked up and down the terrace their steps and voices were very audible in the stillness of the night; and the windows were lighted in the east wing, showing that the inhabitants were still up there and about. While Jock spoke, one of these windows opened quite suddenly, and for a single moment a figure like a shadow appeared in it. The light movement, sudden as a bird's on the wing, would have betrayed her (she felt) to Jock even if she had not spoken. But she waved her hand and called out "Good-night" in a voice full of laughter.

"Don't talk secrets, for we can hear you," she said. "Good-night!" And so vanished again, with a little echo of laughter from within. The young men were both excited and disconcerted by this interruption. It gave them a sensation of shame for the moment as if they had been caught in a discussion of a forbidden subject; and then a tingling ran through their veins. Even MTutor for the moment found no fine speech in which to express his sense of this sudden momentary tantalising appearance of the mystic woman standing half visible out of the background of the unknown. He did think some very fine things on the subject after a time, with a side glance of philosophical reflection that her light laugh of mockery, as she momentarily revealed herself, was an outcome of this sceptical century, and that in a previous age her utterance would have been a song or a sigh. But at the moment even Mr. Derwentwater was subjugated by the thrill of sensation and feeling, and found nothing to say.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN SUSPENSE.

It was thus that Bice was engaged while Lucy imagined her asleep in her innocence, unaware of the net that was being spread for her unsuspecting feet. Bice was neither asleep nor unsuspecting. She was innocent in a way inconceivable to the ordinary home-keeping imagination, knowing no evil in the devices to which she was a party; but she was not innocent in the conventional sense. That any high feminine ideal should be affected by the design of the Contessa or by her own participation in it had not occurred to the girl. She had been accustomed to smile at the high virtue of those ladies in the novels who would not receive the addresses of the eldest son of their patroness, and who preferred a humble village and the delights of self-sacrifice to all the grandeurs of

an ambitious marriage. That might be well enough in a novel, Bice thought, but it was not so in life. In her own case there was no question about it. The other way it was which seemed to her the virtuous way. Had it been proposed to her to throw herself away upon a poor man whom she might be supposed to love, and so prove herself incapable of being of any use to the Contessa, and make all her previous training and teaching of no effect, Bice's moral indignation would have been as elevated as that of any English heroine at the idea of marrying for interest instead of love. The possibility did not occur to her at all; but it would have been rejected with disdain had it attempted to force its way across the threshold of her mind. She loved nobody—except the Contessa; which was a great defence and preservation to her thoughts. She accepted the suggestion that Montjoie should be the means of raising her to that position she was made for, with composure and without an objection. It was not arranged upon secretly, without her knowledge, but with her full concurrence. "He is not very much to look at. I wish he had been more handsome," the Contessa said; but Bice's indifference on this point was sublime. "What can it matter?" she said

loftily. She was not even very deeply interested in his disposition or mental qualities. Everything else being so suitable, it would have been cowardly to shrink from any minor disadvantage. She silenced the Contessa in the attempt to make the best of him. "All these things are so secondary," the girl said. Her devotion to the career chosen for her was above all weakly arguments of this kind. She looked upon them even with a certain scorn. And though there was in her mind some excitement as to her appearance "in the world," as she phrased it, and her skill "to please," which was as yet untried, it was notwithstanding with the composure of a nature quite unaware of any higher questions involved that she took her part in all the preparations. Her knowledge of the very doubtful world in which she had lived had been of a philosophical character. She was quite impartial. She had no prejudices. Those of whom she approved were those who had carried out their intentions, whatever they might be, as she should do, by marrying an English Milord with a good title and much money. She meant, indeed, to spend his money, but legitimately. She meant to become a great lady by his means, but not to do

him any harm. Bice had an almost savage purity of heart, and the thought that any of the stains she knew of should touch her was incredible, impossible; neither was it in her to be unkind, or unjust, or envious, or ungenerous. Nothing of all this was involved in the purely business operation in which she was engaged. According to her code no professions of attachment or pretence of feeling were necessary. She had indeed no theories in her mind about being a good wife; but she would not be a bad one. She would keep her part of the compact; there should be nothing to complain of—nothing to object to. She would do her best to amuse the man she had to live with and make his life agreeable to him, which is a thing not always taken into consideration in marriage-contracts much more ideal in character. He should not be allowed to be dull, that was one thing certain. Regarding the matter in this reasonable point of view, Bice prepared for the great event of Thursday with just excitement enough to make it amusing. It might be that she should fail. Few succeed at the very first effort without difficulty, she said to herself; but if she failed there would be nothing tragical in the failure, and the season was all before

her. It could scarcely be hoped that she would bring down her antagonist the first time she set lance in rest.

She was carefully kept out of sight during the intervening days; no one saw her; no one had any acquaintance with the fact of her existence. The precautions taken were such that Bice was never even encountered on the staircase, never seen to flit in or out of a room, and indeed did not exist at all for the party in the house. Notwithstanding these precautions she had the needful exercise to keep her in health and good looks, and still romped with the baby and held conversations with the sympathetic Lucy, who did not know what to say to express her feeling of anxious disapproval and desire to succour without at the same time injuring in Bice's mind her nearest friend and protectress. She might, indeed, have spared herself the trouble of any such anxiety, for Bice neither felt injured by the Contessa's scheme nor degraded by her precautions. It amused the girl highly to be made a secret of, to run all the risks of discovery and baffle the curious. The fun of it was delightful to her. Sometimes she would amuse herself by hanging till the last practicable moment in the gallery at

the top of the staircase, on the balcony at the window, or at the door of the Contessa's room which was commanded by various other doors; but always vanished within in time to avoid all inquisitive eyes, with the laughter and delight of a child at the danger escaped and the fun of the situation. In these cases the Contessa would sometimes take fright, but never—so light was the temper of this scheming woman, this deep plotter and conspirator—refused to join in the laughter when the flight was made and safety secured. They were like a couple of children with a mystification in hand, notwithstanding that they were planning an invasion so serious of all the proprieties, and meant to make so disreputable and revolting a bargain. But this was not in their ideas. Bice went out very early in the morning before any one was astir, to take needful exercise in the park, and gather early primroses and the catkins that hung upon the trees. On one of these occasions she met Mr. Derwentwater, of whom she was not afraid; and at another time, when skirting the shrubberies at a somewhat later hour to keep clear of any stragglers, Jock. Mr. Derwentwater talked to her in a tone which amused the girl. He spoke of Proserpina gathering flowers, herself a——

and then altered and grew confused under her eye.

"Herself a—— What?" said Bice. "Have you forgotten what you were going to say?"

"I have not forgotten—herself a fairer flower. One does not forget such lovely words as these," he said, injured by the question. "But when one comes face to face with the impersonation of the poet's idea——"

"It was poetry, then?" said Bice. "I know very little of that. It is not in Tauchnitz, perhaps? All I know of English is from the Tauchnitz. I read chiefly novels. You do not approve of that? But, yes, I like them; because it is life."

"Is it life?" said Derwentwater, who was somewhat contemptuous of fiction.

"At least it is England," said Bice. "The girls who will not make a good marriage because of some one else, or because it is their parents who arrange it. That is how Lady Randolph speaks. She says that nothing is right but to fall—how do you call it?—in love; it is not *comme il faut* even to talk of that."

Derwentwater blushed like a girl. He was more inexperienced in many ways than Bice.

"And do you regard it in another point of view?" he said.

Bice laughed out with frank disdain. "Certainly, I regard it different—oh, quite different. That is not what happens in life."

"And do you consider life is chiefly occupied with getting married?" he continued, feeling, along with a good deal of quite unnecessary excitement, a great desire to know what was her way of looking at this great subject. Visions had been flashing recently through his mind which pointed a little this way too.

"Altogether," said Bice, with great gravity, "how can you begin to live till you have settled that? Till then you do not know what is going to happen to you. When you get up in the morning you know not what may come before the night; when you walk out you know not who may be the next person you meet; perhaps your husband. But then you marry, and that is all settled; henceforward nothing can happen!" said Bice, throwing out her hands. "Then, after all is settled, you can begin to live."

"This is very interesting," said Derwentwater; "I am so glad to get at a real and individual view. But this perhaps only applies

to—ladies? It is perhaps not the same with men?"

Bice gave him a careless half-contemptuous glance. "I have never known anything," she said, "about men."

There are many girls, much more innocent in outward matters than Bice, who would have said these words with an intention *agaçante*—the intention of leading to a great deal more badinage. But Bice spoke with a calm, almost scornful, composure. She had no desire to *agacer*. She looked him in the face as tranquilly as if he had been an old woman. And, so far as she was concerned, he might have been an old woman; for he had virtually no existence in his capacity of young man. Had she possessed any clue to the thoughts that had taken rise in his mind, the new revelation which she had conveyed to him, Bice's amazement would have been without bounds. But instinct indicated to her that the interview should proceed no further. She waved her hand to him as she came to a cross road which led into the woods. "I am going this way," she cried, darting off round the corner of a great tree. He stood and looked after her bewildered, as her light figure skimmed along into the depths of the shadows. "Then, after all

is settled, you can begin to live," he repeated to himself. Was it true? He had got up the morning on which he saw her first without any thought that everything might be changed for him that day. And now it was quite true that there lay before him an interval which must be somehow filled up before he could begin to live. How was it to be filled up? Would *she* have anything to do with the settling which must precede his recommencement of existence? He went on with his mind altogether absorbed in these thoughts, and with a thrill and tingling through all his veins. And that was the only time he encountered Bice—for whom, in fact, though he had not hitherto allowed it even to himself, he had come to the Hall—till the great night.

Jock encountered her the next day not so early, at the hour indeed when the great people were at breakfast. He had been one of the first to come downstairs, and he had not lingered at table as persons do who have letters to read, and the newspapers, and all that is going on to talk about. He met her coming from the park. She put out her hand when she saw him as if to keep him off.

"If you wish to speak to me," she said,

"you must turn back and walk with me. I do not want any one to see me, and they will soon be coming out from breakfast."

"Why don't you want any one to see you?" Jock said.

Bice had learnt the secret of the Contessa's smile; but this which she cast upon Jock had something mocking in it, and ended in a laugh. "Oh, don't you know?" she said, "it is so silly to be a boy!"

"You are no older than I am," cried Jock, aggrieved; "and why don't you come down to dinner as you used to do? I always liked you to come. It is quite different when you are not there. If I had known I should not have come home at all this Easter," Jock cried.

"Oh!" cried Bice, "that means that you like me, then?—and so does Milady. If I should go away altogether——"

"You are not going away altogether? Why should you? There is no other place you could be so well as here. The Contessa never says a word, but laughs at a fellow, which is scarcely civil; and she has those men about her that are —not——; but you—— why should you go away?" cried Jock with angry vehemence. He looked at her with eyes lowering fiercely under

his eyebrows; yet in his heart he was not angry but wretched, as if something were rending him. Jock did not understand how he felt.

"Oh, now, you look at me as if you would eat me," said Bice, "as if I were the little girl in the red hood and you the wolf—— But it is silly, for how should I stay here when Milady is going away? We are all going to London—and then! it will soon be decided, I suppose," said Bice, herself feeling a little sad for the first time at the idea, "what is going to be done with me."

"What is going to be done with you?" cried Jock hoarsely, for he was angry and grieved, and full of impatient indignation, though he scarcely knew why.

Bice turned upon him with that lingering smile which was like the Contessa's. But, unlike the Contessa's, it ended as usual in a laugh. She kissed her hand to him, and darted round the corner of the shrubbery just as some one appeared from breakfast. "Good-bye," she said, "do not be angry," and so vanished like lightning. This was one of the cases which made her heart beat with fun and exhilaration, when she was, as she told the Contessa, nearly caught. She got into the shelter of the east rooms,

panting with the run she had made, her complexion brilliant, her eyes shining. "I thought I should certainly be seen this time," she said.

The Contessa looked at the girl with admiring eyes. "I could almost have wished you had," she said. "You are superb like that." They talked without a shade of embarrassment on this subject, upon which English mothers and children would blush and hesitate.

This was the day, the great day of the revelation which the Contessa had promised. There had been a great deal of discussion and speculation about it in the company. No one, even Sir Tom, knew what it was. Lucy, though she was not clever, had her wits sharpened in this respect, and she had divined; but no one else had any conception of what was coming. Two of the elder men had gone, very sorry to miss the great event, whatever it was. And young Montjoie had talked of nothing else since the promise had been made. The conversation in the drawing-room late in the afternoon chiefly turned on this subject, and the lady visitors too heard of it, and were not less curious. She who had the two daughters addressed herself to Lucy for information. She said, "I hear some novelty is expected to-night, Lady Randolph, something

the Contessa has arranged. She is very clever, is she not? and sings delightfully, I know. There is so much more talent of that kind among foreigners than there is among us. Is it tableaux? The girls are so longing to know."

"Oh yes, we want so much to know," said the young ladies in blue.

"I don't think it is tableaux," said Lucy; "but I have not been told what it is."

This the ladies did not believe, but they asked no further questions. "It is clear that she does not wish us to know; so, girls, you must say nothing," was the conclusion of the mother.

They said a great deal, notwithstanding this warning. The house altogether was excited on the subject, and even Mr. Derwentwater took part in the speculations. He looked upon the Contessa as one of those inscrutable women of the stage, the Sirens who beguile everybody. She had some design upon Montjoie, he felt, and it was only the youth's impertinence which prevented Mr. Derwentwater from interfering. He watched with the natural instinct of his profession and a strong impulse to write to the lad's parents and have him taken away. But Montjoie had no parents. He had attained his

majority, and was supposed by the law capable of taking care of himself. What did that woman mean to do with the boy? She had some designs upon him. But there was nobody to whom Mr. Derwentwater could confide his suspicions, or whom he could ask what the Contessa meant. MTutor had not on the whole a pleasant visit. He was disappointed in that which had been his chief object—his favourite pupil was detached from him, he knew not how —and this other boy, whom, though he did not love him, he could not help feeling a sort of responsibility for, was in danger from a designing woman, a woman out of a French play, *L'Aventurière*, something of that sort. Mr. Derwentwater felt that he could not drag himself away, the attractions were so strong. He wanted to see the *dénoûement;* still more he wanted to see Bice. No drama in the world had so powerful an interest. But though it was so impossible to go away, it was not pleasant to stay. Jock did not want him. Lucy, though she was always sweet and friendly, had a look of haste and over-occupation; her eyes wandered when she talked to him; her mind was occupied with other things. Most of the men of the party were more than indifferent, were disagreeable to him. He

thought they were a danger for Jock. And Bice never was visible; that moment on the balcony—those few minutes in the park—the half dozen words which had been so "suggestive," he thought, which had woke so many echoes in his mind—these were all he had had of her. Had she intended them to awaken echoes? He asked himself this question a thousand times. Had she willingly cast this seed of thought into his mind to germinate—to produce—what result? If it was so, then, indeed, all the little annoyances of his stay would be a cheap price to pay. It did not occur to this judicious person, whose influence over his pupils was so great, and who had studied so deeply the mind of youth, that a girl of sixteen was but little likely to be consciously suggestive—to sow, with any intention in her mind, seeds of meaning to develop in his. To do him justice, he was as unconscious of the limits of sixteen in Bice's case as we all are in the case of Juliet. She was of no age. She was the ideal woman capable of comprehensions and intentions as far above anything possible to the genus boy as heaven was above earth. It would have been a profanation, a sacrilege too dreadful to be thought of, to compare that ethereal creature with the other things of her age with

which he was so familiar. Of her age! Her age was the age of romance, of love, of poetry, of all ineffable things.

"I say, Countess," said Montjoie, "I hope you're not forgetting. This is the night, don't you know. And here we are all ready for dinner and nothing has happened. When is it coming? You are so awfully mysterious; it ain't fair upon a fellow."

"Is every one in the room?" said the Contessa, with an indulgent smile at the young man's eagerness. They all looked round, for everybody was curious. And all were there—the lady who wrote for the Press, and the lady with the two daughters, the girls in blue; and Sir Tom's parliamentary friends standing up against the mantelpiece; and Mr. Derwentwater by himself, more curious than any one, keeping one eye on Montjoie, as if he would have liked to send him to the pupil-room to do a *pœna;* and Jock indifferent, with his back to the door. All the rest were expectant except Jock, who took no notice. The Contessa's special friends were about her chair, rubbing their hands, and ready to back the Forno-Populo for a new sensation. The Contessa looked round, her eye dwelling for a moment upon Lucy, who looked a

little fluttered and uncomfortable, and upon Sir Tom, who evidently knew nothing, and was looking on with a smile.

"Now you shall see," she said, "why I abdicate," and made a sign, clapping softly her beautiful hands.

There was a momentary pause. Montjoie, who was standing out in the clear space in the centre of the room, turned round at the Contessa's call. He turned towards the open door, which was less lighted than the inner room. It was he who saw first what was coming. "Oh, by Jove!" the young Marquis said.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DÉBUT.

THE door was open. The long drawing-room afforded a sort of processional path for the new-comer. Her dress was not white like that of the ordinary *débutante*. It had a yellow golden glow of colour, warm yet soft. She walked not with the confused air of a novice perceiving herself observed, but with a slow and serene gait like a young queen. She was not alarmed by the consciousness that everybody was looking at her. Not to have been looked at would have been more likely to embarrass Bice. Her beautiful throat and shoulders were uncovered, her hair dressed more elaborately than that of English girls in general. English girls—the two innocents in blue, who were nice girls enough, and stood with their mouths and eyes open in speechless wonder and admiration—seemed of

an entirely different species from this dazzling creature. She made a momentary pause on the threshold, while all the beholders held their breath. Montjoie, for one, was struck dumb. His commonplace countenance changed altogether. He looked at her with his face growing longer, his jaw dropping. It was more than a sensation: it was such a climax of excitement and surprise as does not happen above once or twice in a lifetime. The whole company were moved by similar feelings, all except the Contessa, lying back in her chair, and Lucy, who stood rather troubled, moving from one foot to another, clasping and unclasping her hands. Jock, roused by the murmur, turned round with a start, and eyed her too with looks of wild astonishment. She stood for a moment looking at them all—with a smile which was half mischievous, half appealing—on the threshold, as Bice felt it, not only of Lady Randolph's drawing-room but of the world.

Sir Tom had started at the sight of her as much as any one. He had not been in the secret. He cried out, "By Jove!" like Montjoie. But he had those instincts which are perhaps rather old-fashioned, of protection and service to women. He belonged to the school which

thinks a girl should not walk across a room without some man's arm to sustain her, or open a door for herself. He started forward with a little sense of being to blame, and offered her his arm. "Why didn't you send for me to bring you in if you were late?" he cried, with a tone in which there was some tremor and vexation. The effectiveness of her appearance was terrible to Sir Tom. She looked up at him with a look of pleasure and kindness, and said, "I was not late," with a smile. She looked taller, more developed in a single day. But for that little pucker of vexation on Sir Tom's forehead they would have looked like a father and daughter, the father proudly bringing his young princess into the circle of her adorers. Bice swept him towards Lucy, and made a low obeisance to Lady Randolph, and took her hand and kissed it. "I must come to you first," she said.

"Well?" said the Contessa, turning round to her retainers with a quick movement. They were all gazing at the *débutante* so intently that they had no eyes for her. One of them at length replied, with something like solemnity, "Oh, I understand what you mean, Contessa; anybody but you would have to abdicate." "But not you," said another, who had some kindness in

his heart. The Contessa rose up with an air of triumph. "I do not want to be compelled," she said; "I told you. I give up. I will take your arm Mr. St. John, as a private person, having relinquished my claims, and leave Milord to the new *régime*."

This was how it came about, in the slight scuffle caused by the sudden change of programme, that Bice, in all her splendour, found herself going in to the dining-room on Lord Montjoie's arm. Notwithstanding that he had been struck dumb by her beauty, little Montjoie was by no means happy when this wonderful good fortune fell upon him. He would have preferred to gaze at her from the other side of the table: on the whole, he would have been a great deal more at his ease with the Contessa. He would have asked her a hundred questions about this wonderful beauty; but the beauty herself rather frightened the young man. Presently, however, he regained his courage, and as lack of boldness was not his weak point, soon began to lose the sense of awe which had been so strong upon him. She smiled; she was as ready to talk as he was, as the overwhelming impression she had made upon him began to be modified by familiarity. "I suppose," he said, when he had

reached this point, "that you arrived to-day?" And then, after a pause, "You speak English?" he added in a hesitating tone. She received this question with so merry a laugh that he was quite encouraged.

"Always," she said, "since I was a child. Was that why you were afraid of me?"

"Afraid?" he said; and then he looked at her almost with a recurrence of his first fright, till her laugh reassured him. "Yes, I was frightened," Lord Montjoie said; "you looked so—so—don't you know. I was struck all of a heap. I suppose you came to-day? We were all on the outlook from something the Contessa said. You must be clever to get in without anybody seeing you."

"I was far more clever than that," said Bice; "you don't know how clever I am."

"I daresay," said Lord Montjoie admiringly, "because you don't want it. That's always the way."

"I am so clever that I have been here all the time," said Bice, with another laugh so joyous,—"so jolly," Montjoie said, that his terrors died away. But his surprise took another development at this extraordinary information.

"By Jove!" he cried, "you don't mean that,

Miss—Mademoiselle—I am so awfully stupid I never heard—that is to say, I ain't at all clever at foreign names."

"Oh, never mind," cried Bice; "neither am I. But yours is delightful; it is so easy, Milord. Ought I to say Milord?"

"Oh," cried Montjoie, a little confused. "No; I don't think so—people don't as a rule."

"Lord Montjoie—that is right? I like always to know——"

"So do I," said Montjoie; "it's always best to ask, ain't it, and then there can be no mistakes? But you don't mean to say *that?* You here yesterday and all the time? I shouldn't think you could have been hid. Not the kind of person, don't you know."

"I can't tell about being the kind of person. It has been fun," said Bice; "sometimes I have seen you all coming, and waited till there was just time to fly. I like leaving it till the last moment, and then there is the excitement, don't you know."

"By Jove, what fun!" said Montjoie. He was not clever enough—few people are—to perceive that she had mimicked himself in tone and expression. "And I might have caught you any day," he cried. "What a muff I have been!"

"If I had allowed myself to be caught I should have been a greater—what do you call it? You wear beautiful things to do your smoking in, Lord Montjoie; what is it? Velvet? And why don't you wear them to dinner?—you would look so much more handsome. I am very fond myself of beautiful clothes."

"Oh, by Jove!" cried Montjoie again, with something like a blush. "You've seen me in those things! I only wear them when I think nobody sees. They're something from the East," he added with a tone of careless complacency; for, as a matter of fact, he piqued himself very much upon this smoking-suit, which had not, at the Hall, received the applause it deserved.

"You go and smoke like that among other men? Yes, I perceive," said Bice, "you are just like women; there is no difference. We put on our pretty things for other ladies, because you cannot understand them; and you do the same."

"Oh, come now, Miss——Forno-Populo! you don't mean to tell me that you got yourself up like that for the sake of the ladies?" cried the young man.

"For whom, then?" said Bice, throwing up her head; but afterwards, with the instinct of a

young actress, she remembered her *rôle*, which it was fun to carry out thoroughly. She laughed. "You are the most clever," she said. "I see you are one that women cannot deceive."

Montjoie laughed, too, with gratified vanity and superior knowledge. "You are about right there," he said. "I am not to be taken in, don't you know. It's no good trying it on with me. I see through ladies' little pretences. If there were no men you would not care what guys you were; and no more do we."

Bice made no reply. She turned upon him that dazzling smile of which she had learned the secret from the Contessa, which was unfathomable to the observer but quite simple to the simple-minded; and then she said, "Do you amuse yourself very much in the evening? I used to hear the voices and think how pleasant it would have been to be there."

"Not so pleasant as you think," said the young man. "The only fun was the Contessa's, don't you know. She's a fine woman for her age, but she's—— Goodness! I forgot. She's your——"

"She is *passée*," said the girl calmly. "You make me afraid, Lord Montjoie. How much of a critic you are, and see through women, through

and through." At this the noble Marquis laughed with true enjoyment of his own gifts.

"But you ain't offended?" he said. "There was no harm meant. Even a lady can't, don't you know, be always the same age."

"Don't you think so?" said Bice. "Oh, I think you are wrong. The Contessa is of no age. She is the age she pleases—she has all the secrets. I see nobody more beautiful."

"That may be," said Montjoie; "but you can't see everybody, don't you know. She's very handsome and all that—and when the real thing isn't there—but when it is, don't you know——"

"English is very perplexing," said Bice, shaking her head, but with a smile in her eyes which somewhat belied her air of simplicity. "What may that be—the real thing? Shall I find it in the dictionary?" she asked; and then their eyes met and there was another burst of laughter, somewhat boisterous on his part, but on hers with a ring of lightheartedness which quenched the malice. She was so young that she had a pleasure in playing her *rôle*, and did not feel any immorality involved.

While this conversation was going on, which was much observed and commented on by all the

company, Jock from one end of the table and Mr. Derwentwater from the other looked on with an eager observation and breathless desire to make out what was being said which gave an expression of anxiety to the features of MTutor, and one of almost ferocity to the lowering countenance of Jock. Both of these gentlemen were eagerly questioned by the ladies next them as to who this young lady might be.

"Terribly theatrical, don't you think, to come into a room like that?" said the mother of the girls in blue. "If my Minnie or Edith had been asked to do it they would have died of shame."

"I do not deny," said Mr. Derwentwater, "the advantage of conventional restraints. I like the little airs of seclusion, of retirement, that surround young ladies. But the——" he paused a little for a name, and then, with that acquaintance with foreign ways on which Mr. Derwentwater prided himself, added, "the Signorina was at home."

"The Signorina! Is that what you call her—just like a person that is going on the stage? She will be the—niece, I suppose?"

Jock's next neighbour was the lady who was engaged in literature. She said to Jock, "I must get you to tell me her name. She is lovely.

She will make a great sensation. I must make a few notes of her dress after dinner—would you call that yellow or white? Whoever dressed her knew what they were about. Mademoiselle, I imagine, one ought to call her. I know that's French, and she's Italian, but still—— The new beauty! that's what she will be called. I am so glad to be the first to see her; but I must get you to tell me her name."

Among the gentlemen there was no other subject of conversation, and but one opinion. A little hum of curiosity ran round the table. It was far more exciting than tableaux, which was what some of the guests had expected to be arranged by the Contessa. Tableaux! nothing could have been equal to the effect of that dramatic entry and sudden revelation. "As for Montjoie, all was up with him, but the Contessa knew what she was about. She was not going to throw away her effects," they said. "There could be no doubt for whose benefit it all was." The Contessa graciously baffled with her charming smile all the questions that were poured upon her. She received the compliments addressed to her with gracious bows, but she gave no reply to any one. As she swept out of the room after dinner she tapped Montjoie lightly on the arm

with her fan. "I will sing for you to-night," she said.

In the drawing-room the elements were a little heterogeneous without the gentlemen. The two girls in blue gazed at this wonderful new competitor with a curiosity which was almost alarm. They would have liked to make acquaintance, to draw her into their little party of youth outside the phalanx of the elders. But Bice took no more note of them than if they had been cabbages. She was in great excitement, all smiles and glory. "Do I please you like this?" she said, going up to Lucy, spreading out all her finery with the delight of a child. Lucy shrank a little. She had a troubled anxious look, which did not look like pleasure; but Lady Anastasia, who wrote for the newspapers, walked round and round the *débutante* and took notes frankly. "Of course I shall describe her dress. I never saw anything so lovely," the lady said. Bice, in the glow of her golden yellow, and of her smiles and delight, with the noble correspondent of the newspapers examining her, found the acutest interest in the position. The Contessa from her sofa smiled upon the scene, looking on with the air of a gratified exhibitor whose show had succeeded

beyond her hopes. Lady Randolph, with an air of anxiety in her fair and simple countenance, stood behind, looking at Bice with protecting yet disturbed and troubled looks. The mother and daughters at the other side looked on, she all solid and speechless with disapproval, they in a flutter of interest and wonder and gentle envy and offence. More than a tableau; it was like an act out of a play. And when the gentlemen came in what a sudden quickening of the interest! Bice rose to the action like a heroine when the great scene has come, and the others all gathered round with a spectatorship that was almost breathless. The worst feature of the whole to those who were interested in Bice was her own evident enjoyment. She talked, she distributed her smiles right and left, she mimicked yet flattered Montjoie with a dazzling youthful assurance which confounded Mr. Derwentwater, and made Jock furious, and brought looks of pain not only to the face of Lucy but also to that of Sir Tom, who was less easily shocked. She was like a young actress in her first triumph, filling her *rôle* with a sort of enthusiasm, enjoying it with all her heart. And when the Contessa rose to sing, Bice followed her to the piano with an air as different as possible from the swift

noiseless self-effacement of her performance on previous occasions. She looked round upon the company with a sort of malicious triumph, a laugh on her lips as of some delightful mystification, some surprise of which she was in the secret. "Come and listen," she said to Jock, lightly touching him on the shoulder as she passed him. The Contessa's singing was already known. It was considered by some with a certain contempt, by others with admiration, as almost as good as professional. But when, instead of one of her usual performances, there arose in splendid fulness the harmony of two voices, that of Bice suddenly breaking forth in all the freshness of youth, unexpected, unprepared for, the climax of wonder and enthusiasm was reached. Lady Anastasia, after the first start and thrill of wonder, rushed to the usual writing-table and dashed off a hurried note, which she fastened to her fan in her excitement. "Everybody must know of this!" she cried. One of the young ladies in the background wept with admiration, crying, "Mamma, she is heavenly," while even the virtuous mother was moved. "They must intend her for the stage," that lady said, wondering, withdrawing from her *rôle* of disapproval. As for the gentlemen, those of them who were

not speechless with enthusiasm were almost noisy in their excitement. Montjoie pressed into the first rank, almost touching Bice's dress, which she drew away between two bars, turning half round with a slight shake of her head and a smile in her eyes, even while the loveliest notes were flowing forth from her melodious throat. The listeners could hear the noble lord's "By Jove!" in the midst of the music, and even detect the slight quaver of laughter which followed in Bice's wonderful voice.

The commotion of applause, enthusiasm, and wonder afterwards was indescribable. The gentlemen crowded round the singers—even the parliamentary gentlemen had lost their self-control, while the young lady who had wept forgot her timidity to make an eager approach to the *débutante*.

"It was heavenly: it was a rapture: oh, sing again!" cried Miss Edith, which was much prettier than Lord Montjoie's broken exclamations, "Oh, by Jove! don't you know," to which Bice was listening with delighted mockery.

Bice had been trained to pay very little attention to the opinions of other girls, but she gave the young lady in blue a friendly look, and launched over her shoulder an appeal to Jock.

"Didn't you like it, you?" she cried, with a slight clap together of her hands to call his attention.

Jock glared at her over Miss Edith's shoulder. "I don't understand music," he said in his most surly voice. These were the distinct utterances which enchanted Bice amid the murmurs of more ordinary applause. She was delighted with them. She clapped her hands once more with a delight which was contagious. "Ah, I know now, this is what it is to have *succès*," she cried.

"Now," said the Contessa, "it is the turn of Lord Montjoie, who is a dab—that is the word —at singing, and who promised me three for one."

At this there rose a hubbub of laughter, in the midst of which, though with many protestations and remonstrances, "don't you know," that young nobleman was driven to the fulfilment of his promise. In the midst of this commotion, a sign as swift as lightning, but, unlike lightning, imperceptible, a lifting of the eyebrows, a movement of a finger, was given and noted. In such a musical assembly the performance of a young marquis, with nobody knows how many thousands a year and entirely his own master, is rarely without interest. Mr. Derwentwater

turned his back with marked indifference, and Jock with a sort of snort went away altogether. But of the others, the majority, though some with laughter and some with sneers, were civil, and listened to the performance. Jock marched off with a disdain beyond expression; but he had scarcely issued forth into the hall before he heard a rustle behind him, and, looking back, to his amazement saw Bice in all the glory of her golden robes.

"Hush!" she cried, smothering a laugh, and with a quick gesture of repression, "don't say anything. It must not be discovered that I have run away!"

"Why have you run away? I thought you thought no end of that little scug," cried savage Jock.

Bice turned upon him that smile that said everything and nothing, and then flew like a bird upstairs.

END OF VOL. II.

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