

the gentlemen did look very tired—there was nothing for them to do. Even you, my boy! You made several big yawns! Did you know that?”

Philip laughed more than ever. “I didn’t know it, my pet!” he answered; “but I’m not surprised. Big yawns are the invariable result of an ‘at home.’ Do you like Beau Lovelace?”

“Very much,” she answered, readily. “But, Philip, I should not like to have so many friends as Lady Winsleigh. I thought friends were rare?”

“So they are! She doesn’t care for these people a bit. They are mere acquaintances.”

“Whom does she care for then?” asked Thelma suddenly. “Of course I mean after her husband. Naturally she loves him best.”

“Naturally,” and Philip paused, adding: “She has her son—Ernest—he’s a fine bright boy—he was not there to-night. You must see him some day. Then I think her favorite friend is Mrs. Rush-Marvelle.”

“I do like that lady too,” said Thelma. “She spoke very kindly to me and kissed me.”

“Did she really!” and Philip smiled. “I think she was more to be congratulated on taking the kiss than you in receiving it! But she’s not a bad old soul—only a little too fond of money. But, Thelma, whom do *you* care for most? You did tell me once, but I forget!”

She turned her lovely face and star-like eyes upon him, and, meeting his laughing look, she smiled.

“How often must I tell you!” she murmured, softly. “I do think you will never tire of hearing! You know that it is you for whom I care most, and that all the world would be empty to me without you! Oh, my husband—my darling! do not make me try to tell you how much I love you! I cannot—my heart is too full!”

The rest of their drive homeward was very quiet—there are times when silence is more eloquent than speech.

CHAPTER IV.

A small cloud—so slight as to be a mere speck on the fair blue sky, was all the warning we received.—PLINY.

AFTER that evening great changes came into Thelma’s before peaceful life. She had conquered her enemies, or so it seemed—society threw down all its barricades and rushed to meet her with open arms. Invitations crowded upon her—often she grew tired and bewildered in the multiplicity of them all. London life wearied her—she preferred the embowered seclusion of Errington

Manor, the dear old house in green-wooded Warwickshire. But the “season” claimed her—its frothy gayeties were deemed incomplete without her—no “at home” was considered quite “the” thing unless she was present. She became the center of a large and ever-widening social circle—painters, poets, novelists, wits, *savants*, and celebrities of high distinction crowded her rooms, striving to entertain her as well as themselves with that inane small talk and gossip too often practiced by the wisest among us—and thus surrounded, she began to learn many puzzling and painful things of which in her old Norwegian life she had been happily ignorant.

For instance, she had once imagined that all the men and women of culture who followed the higher professions must perforce be a sort of “Joyous Fraternity,” superior to other mortals not so gifted—and, under this erroneous impression she was at first eager to know some of the so-called “great” people who had distinguished themselves in literature or the fine arts. She had fancied that they must of necessity be all refined, sympathetic, large-hearted, and noble-minded—alas! how grievously was she disappointed! She found, to her sorrow, that the tree of modern Art bore but few wholesome roses and many cankered buds—that the “Joyous Fraternity” were not joyous at all—but on the contrary, inclined to dyspepsia and discontentment. She found that even poets, whom she had fondly deemed were the angel-guides among the children of this earth—were most of them painfully conceited, selfish in aim and limited in thought—moreover, that they were often so empty of all true inspiration, that they were actually able to hate and envy one another with a sort of womanish spite and temper—that novelists, professing to be in sympathy with the heart of humanity, were no sooner brought into contact one with another, than they plainly showed by look, voice, and manner the contempt they entertained for each other’s work—that men of science were never so happy as when trying to upset each other’s theories—that men of religious combativeness were always on the alert to destroy each other’s creeds—and that, in short, there was a very general tendency to mean jealousies, miserable heart-burnings and utter weariness all round.

On one occasion she, in the sweetest simplicity, invited two lady authoresses of note to meet at one of her “at homes.” She welcomed both the masculine-looking ladies with a radiant smile, and introduced them, saying gently: “You will be so pleased to know each other!” But the stony stare, stiff nod, portentous sniff, and scornful smile with which these two eminent females exchanged cold greetings were enough to daunt the most sympathetic hostess that ever lived—and when they at once retired to different corners of the room and sat apart with their backs turned to one another for the remainder of the evening, their attitude was so uncom-

promising that it was no wonder the gentle Thelma felt quite dismayed and wretched at the utter failure of the *rencontre*.

"They would *not* be sociable!" she afterward complained to Lady Winsleigh. "They *tried* to be as rude to each other as they could!"

Lady Winsleigh laughed. "Of course!" she said. "What else *did* you expect! But if you want some fun, ask a young, pretty, and brilliant authoress (there are a few such) to meet an old, ugly and dowdy one (and there are many such), and watch the dowdy one's face! It will be a delicious study of expression, I assure you!"

But Thelma would not try this delicate experiment—in fact, she began rather to avoid literary people, with the exception of Beau Lovelace. His was a genial, sympathetic nature, and, moreover, he had a winning charm of manner which few could resist. He was not a bookworm—he was not, strictly speaking, a literary man—and he was entirely indifferent to public praise or blame. He was, as he himself expressed it, "a servant and worshiper of literature," and there is a wide gulf of difference between one who serves literature for its own sake and one who uses it basely as a tool to serve himself.

But in all her new and varied experiences, perhaps Thelma was most completely bewildered by the women she met. Her simple Norse beliefs in the purity and gentleness of womanhood were startled and outraged—she could not understand London ladies at all. Some of them seemed to have no idea beyond dress and show—others looked upon their husbands, the lawful protectors of their name and fame, with easy indifference, as though they were mere bits of household furniture—others, having nothing better to do, "went in" for spiritualism—the low spiritualism that manifests itself in the turning of tables and moving of sideboards—not the higher spiritualism of an improved, perfected, and saint-like way of life—and these argued wildly on the theory of matter passing through matter, to the extent of declaring themselves able to send a letter or box through the wall without making a hole in it—and this with such obstinate gravity as made Thelma fear for their reason. Then there were the women atheists—creatures who had voluntarily crushed all the sweetness of the sex within them—foolish human flowers without fragrance, that persistently turned away their faces from the sunlight and denied its existence, preferring to wither, profitless, on the dry stalk of their own theory—there were the "platform women," unnatural products of an unnatural age—there were the great ladies of the aristocracy who turned with scorn from a case of real necessity, and yet spent hundreds of pounds on private theatricals wherein they might have the chance of displaying themselves in extravagant costumes—and there were the "professional" beauties, who, if suddenly deprived

of elegant attire and face cosmetics, turned out to be no beauties at all, but very ordinary, unintelligent persons.

"What is the exact meaning of the term, 'professional beauty'?" Thelma had asked Beau Lovelace on one occasion. "I suppose it is some very poor beautiful woman who takes money for showing herself to the public, and having her portraits sold in the shops? And who is it that pays her?"

Lovelace broke into a laugh. "Upon my word, Lady Errington—you have put the matter in a most original but indubitably correct light! Who pays the 'professional beauty,' you ask? Well, in the case of Mrs. Smith-Gresham, whom you met the other day, it is a certain duke who pays her to the tune of several thousands a year. When he gets tired of her, or she of him, she'll find somebody else—or perhaps she'll go on the stage and swell the list of bad amateurs. She'll get on somehow, as long as she can find a fool ready to settle her dressmaker's bill."

"I do not understand!" said Thelma—and her fair brows drew together in that pained grave look that was becoming rather frequent with her now. And she began to ask fewer questions concerning the various strange phases of social life that puzzled her—why, for instance, religious theorists made so little practical use of their theories—why there were cloudy-eyed eccentrics who admired the faulty drawing of Watts, and the commonplace sentence-writing of Walt Whitman—why members of Parliament talked so much and did so little—why new poets, however nobly inspired, were never accepted unless they had influential friends on the press—why painters always married their models or their cooks, and got heartily ashamed of them afterward—and why people all round said so many things they did not mean. And confused by the general insincerity, she clung—poor child!—to Lady Winsleigh, who had the tact to seem what she was not—and the cleverness to probe into Thelma's nature and find out how translucently clear and pure it was—a perfect well of sweet water into which one drop of poison, or better still, several drops, gradually and insidiously instilled, might in time taint its flavor and darken its brightness. For if a woman have an innocent, unsuspecting soul, as delicate as the curled cup of a Nile-lily, the more easily will it droop and wither in the heated grasp of a careless, cruel hand. And to the flower-crushing task Lady Winsleigh set herself—partly for malice prepense against Errington, whose coldness to herself in past days had wounded her vanity, and partly for private jealousy of Thelma's beauty and attractiveness.

Within a short time she had completely won the girl's confidence and affection. Sir Philip, forgetting his former suspicions of her, was touched and disarmed by the attachment and admiration she openly displayed toward his young wife. She and Thelma were constantly seen together, and Mrs. Rush-Marvelle, far-

sighted as she generally was, often sighed doubtfully and rubbed her nose in perplexity as she confessed she "couldn't quite understand Clara." But Mrs. Rush-Marvelle had her hands full of other matters—she was aiding and abetting Marcia Van Clupp to set traps for that mild mouse Lord Masherville—and she was too much absorbed in this difficult and delicate business to attend to anything else just then. Otherwise, it is possible she might have scented danger for Thelma's peace of mind, and being good-natured, might have warded it off before it approached too closely—but, like policemen who are never within call when wanted, so friends are seldom at hand when their influence might be of real benefit.

The Van Clupps were people Thelma could not get on with at all—she tried to do so because Mrs. Rush-Marvelle had assured her they were "charming"—and she liked Mrs. Marvelle sufficiently well to be willing to please her. But, in truth, these rich and vulgar Yankees seemed to her mind less to be esteemed than the peasants of the Alten Fjord, who in many instances possessed finer tact and breeding than old Van Clupp, the man of many dollars, whose father had been nothing but a low navy, but of whom he spoke now with smirking pride as a real descendant of the Pilgrim Fathers. An odd thing it is, by the way, how fond some Americans are of tracing back their ancestry to these virtuous old gentlemen! The Van Clupps were of course not the best types of their country—they were of that class who, because they have money, measure everything by the money standard, and hold even a noble poverty in utter contempt. Poor Van Clupp! It was sometimes pitiable to see him trying to be a gentleman—"going in" for "style"—to an excess that was ludicrous—cramming his house with expensive furniture like an upholsterer's show-room—drinking his tea out of pure Sèvres, with a lofty ignorance of its beauty and value—dressing his wife and daughter like shilling fashion-plates, and having his portrait taken in precisely the same attitude as that assumed by the Duke of Wrigglesbury when his grace sat to the same photographer! It was delicious to hear him bragging of his pilgrim ancestor—while in the same breath he would blandly sneer at certain "poor gentry" who could trace back their lineage to Cœur de Lion! But because the Erringtons were rich as well as titled persons, Van Clupp and his belongings bent the servile knee before them, flattering Thelma with that ill-judged eagerness and zealous persistency which distinguish inborn vulgarity, and which, far from pleasing her, annoyed and embarrassed her because she could not respond sincerely to such attentions.

There were many others too, not dollar-crusted Americans, whose excessive adulation and ceaseless compliment vexed the sincere, frank spirit of the girl—a spirit fresh and pure as the

wind blowing over her own Norse mountains. One of these was Sir Francis Lennox, that fashionable young man of leisure—and she had for him an instinctive, though quite unreasonable aversion. He was courtesy itself—he spared no pains to please her. Yet she felt as if his basilisk brown eyes were always upon her—he seemed to be ever at hand, ready to watch over her in trifles, such as the passing of a cup of tea, the offering of her wrap—the finding of a chair—the holding of a fan—he was always on the alert, like a remarkably well-trained upper servant. She could not, without rudeness, reject such unobtrusive, humble services, and yet they rendered her uncomfortable, though she did not quite know why. She ventured to mention her feeling concerning him to her friend, Lady Winsleigh, who heard her timid remarks with a look on her face that was not quite pleasant.

"Poor Sir Francis!" her ladyship said with a slight, mocking laugh. "He's never happy unless he plays puppy-dog! Don't mind him, Thelma! He won't bite, I assure you—he means no harm. It's only his little way of making himself agreeable!"

George Lorimer, during this particular "London season," fled the field of action, and went to Paris to stay with Pierre Duprez. He felt that it was dangerous to confront the fair enemy too often, for he knew in his own honest heart that his passion for Thelma increased each time he saw her—so, he avoided her. She missed him very much from her circle of intimates, and often went to see his mother, Mrs. Lorimer, one of the sweetest old ladies in the world—who had at once guessed her son's secret, but, like a prudent dame, kept it to herself. There were few young women as pretty and charming as old Mrs. Lorimer, with her snow-white parted hair and mild blue eyes, and voice as cheery as the note of a thrush in spring-time. After Lady Winsleigh, Thelma liked her best of all her new friends, and was fond of visiting her quiet little house in Kensington—for it was very quiet, and seemed like a sheltered haven of rest from the great rush of frivolity and folly in which the fashionable world delight.

And Thelma was often now in need of rest. As the season drew toward its close, she found herself strangely tired and dispirited. The life she was compelled to lead was all unsuited to her nature—it was artificial and constrained—and she was often unhappy. Why? Why, indeed! She did her best—but she made enemies everywhere. Again, why? Because she had a most pernicious—most unpleasant habit of telling the truth. Like Socrates, she seemed to say: "If any man should appear to me not to possess virtue, but to pretend that he does, I shall reproach him. This she expressed silently in face, voice, and manner—and, like Socrates, she might have added that she went about "perceiving, indeed, and grieving and alarmed that she was making herself odious." For she discovered, by degrees, that many people looked strangely

upon her—that others seemed afraid of her—and she continually heard that she was considered “eccentric.” So she became more reserved—even cold—she was content to let others argue about trifles and air their whims and follies without offering an opinion on any side.

And by and by the first shadow began to sweep over the fairness of her married life. It happened at a time when she and her husband were not quite so much together—society and its various claims had naturally separated them a little, but now a question of political ambition separated them still more. Some well-intentioned friends had persuaded Sir Philip to stand for Parliament—and this idea no sooner entered his head than he decided with impulsive ardor that he had been too long without a “career” and a “career” he must have in order to win distinction for his wife’s sake. Therefore, summoning his secretary, Neville, to his aid, he plunged headlong into the seething, turbid waters of English politics and shut himself up in his library day after day, studying blue-books, writing and answering letters, and drawing up addresses—and with the general proneness of the masculine mind to attend to one thing only at a time, he grew so absorbed in his work that his love for Thelma, though all unchanged and deep as ever, fell slightly into the background of his thoughts. Not that he neglected her, he simply concerned himself more with other things. So it happened that a certain indefinable sense of loss weighed upon her—a vague, uncomprehended solitude began to encompass her—a solitude even more keenly felt when she was surrounded by friends than when she was quite alone—and as the sweet English June drew to its end, she grew languid and listless, and her blue eyes often filled with sudden tears. Her little watch-dog, Britta, began to notice this, and to wonder concerning the reason of her mistress’s altered looks.

“It is this dreadful London,” thought Britta. “So hot and stifling—there’s no fresh air for her. And all this going about to balls and parties and shows—no wonder she is tired out!”

But it was something more than mere fatigue that made Thelma’s eyes look sometimes so anxious, so gravely meditative and earnest. One day she seemed so much abstracted and lost in painful musings that Britta’s loving heart ached, and she watched her for some moments without venturing to say a word. At last she spoke out bravely:

“Froken!”—she paused—Thelma seemed not to hear her—“Froken, has anything vexed or grieved you to-day?”

Thelma started nervously. “Vexed me—grieved me?” she repeated. “No, Britta—why do you ask?”

“You look very tired, dear Froken,” continued Britta, gently. “You are not as bright as you were when we first came to London.”

Thelma’s lips quivered. “I—I am not well, Britta,” she murmured, and suddenly her self-control gave way, and she broke into tears. In an instant Britta was kneeling by her, coaxing and caressing her, and calling her by every endearing name she could think of, while she wisely forbore from asking any more questions. Presently her sobs grew calmer—she rested her fair head against Britta’s shoulder and smiled faintly. At that moment a light tap was heard outside, and a voice called:

“Thelma! Are you there?”

Britta opened the door, and Sir Philip entered hurriedly and smiling—but stopped short to survey his wife in dismay.

“Why, my darling!” he exclaimed, distressfully. “Have you been crying?”

Here the discreet Britta retired.

Thelma sprang to her husband and nestled in his arms.

“Philip, do not mind it!” she murmured. “I felt a little sad—it is nothing! But tell me—you *do* love me? You will never tire of me? You have always loved me, I am sure?”

He raised her face gently with one hand, and looked at her in surprise.

“Thelma—what strange questions from *you*! Love you? Is not every beat of my heart for you? Are you not my life, my joy—my everything in this world?” And he pressed her passionately in his arms and kissed her.

“You have never loved any one else so much?” she whispered, half abashed.

“Never!” he answered, readily. “What makes you ask such a thing?”

She was silent. He looked down at her flushing cheeks and tear-wet lashes attentively.

“You are fanciful to-day, my pet,” he said at last. “You’ve been tiring yourself too much. You must rest. You’d better not go to the Brilliant Theater to-night—it’s only a burlesque, and is sure to be vulgar and noisy. We’ll stop at home and spend a quiet evening together—shall we?”

She raised her eyes half wistfully, and smiled. “I should like that very, very much, Philip!” She murmured; “but you know we did promise Clara to go with her to-night. And as we are so soon to leave London and return to Warwickshire, I should not like to disappoint her.”

“You are very fond of Clara?” he asked, suddenly.

“Very!” She paused and sighed slightly. “She is so kind and clever—much more clever than I can ever be—and she knows many things about the world which I do not. And she admires you so much, Philip!”

“Does she indeed?” Philip laughed and colored a little. “Very good of her, I’m sure! And so you’d really like to go to the Brilliant to-night?”

"I think so," she said, hesitatingly. "Clara says it will be very amusing. And you must remember how much I enjoyed 'Faust' and 'Hamlet.'"

Errington smiled. "You'll find the Brilliant performance very different to either," he said, amusedly. "You don't know what a burlesque is like!"

"Then I must be instructed," replied Thelma, smiling also. "I need to learn many things. I am very ignorant!"

"Ignorant!" and he swept aside with a caressing touch the clustering hair from her broad, noble brow. "My darling, you possess the greatest wisdom—the wisdom of innocence. I would not change it for all the learning of the sagest philosophers!"

"You really mean that?" she asked, half timidly.

"I really mean that," he answered, fondly. "Little skeptic! As if I would ever say anything to you that I did *not* mean! I shall be glad when we're out of London and back at the manor—then I shall have you all to myself again—for a time, at least."

She raised her eyes full of sudden joy—all the traces of her former depression had disappeared.

"And I shall have *you*!" she said, gladly. "And we shall not disappoint Lady Winsleigh to-night, Philip. I am not tired, and I shall be pleased to go to the theater."

"All right!" responded Philip, cheerfully. "So let it be! Only I don't believe you'll like the piece—though it certainly won't make you cry. Yet I doubt if it will make you laugh, either. However, it will be a new experience for you."

And a new experience it decidedly was—an experience, too, which brought some strange and perplexing results to Thelma of which she never dreamed.

She went to the Brilliant, accompanied by Lady Winsleigh and her husband—Neville, the secretary, making the fourth in their box; and during the first and second scene of the performance the stage effects were so pretty and the dancing so graceful that she nearly forgot the bewildered astonishment she had first felt at the extreme scantiness of apparel worn by the ladies of the ballet. They represented birds, bees, butterflies, and other winged denizens of the forest-world—and the *tout ensemble* was so fairy-like and brilliant with swift movement, light, and color that the eye was too dazzled and confused to note objectionable details. But in the third scene, when a plump, athletic young woman leaped on the stage in the guise of a humming-bird, with a feather tunic so short that it was a mere waist-belt of extra width—a flesh-colored bodice about three inches high, and a pair of blue wings attached to her fat shoulders, Thelma started and half rose from her seat in dismay, while a hot tide of color crimsoned her cheeks. She looked nervously at her husband.

"I do not think this is pleasant to see," she said, in a low tone.

"Would it not be best to go away? I—I think I would rather be at home."

Lady Winsleigh heard and smiled—a little mocking smile.

"Don't be silly, child!" she said. "If you leave the theater just now you'll have every one staring at you. That woman's an immense favorite—she is the success of the piece. She's got more diamonds than either you or I."

Thelma regarded her friend with a sort of grave wonder—but said nothing in reply. If Lady Winsleigh liked the performance and wished to remain, why—then politeness demanded that Thelma should not interfere with her pleasure by taking an abrupt leave. So she resumed her seat, but withdrew herself far behind the curtain of the box, in a corner where the stage was almost invisible to her eyes. Her husband bent over her and whispered:

"I'll take you home if you wish it, dear! Only say the word."

She shook her head.

"Clara enjoys it!" she answered, somewhat plaintively. "We must stay."

Philip was about to address Lady Winsleigh on the subject, when suddenly Neville touched him on the arm.

"Can I speak to you alone for a moment, Sir Philip?" he said in a strange, hoarse whisper. "Outside the box—away from the ladies—a matter of importance!"

He looked as if he were about to faint. He gasped rather than spoke these words; his face was white as death, and his eyes had a confused and bewildered stare.

"Certainly!" answered Philip, promptly, though not without an accent of surprise—and, excusing their absence briefly to his wife and Lady Winsleigh, they left the box together. Meanwhile the well-fed "Humming-Bird" was capering extravagantly before the foot-lights, pointing her toe in the delighted face of the stalls and singing in a loud, coarse voice the following refined ditty:

"Oh, my ducky, oh, my darling, oh, my duck, duck, duck!
If you love me you must have a little pluck, pluck, pluck!
Come and put your arms around me, kiss me once, twice, thrice,
For kissing may be naughty, but, by Jingo! it is nice!

Once, twice, thrice,

Nice, nice, nice!

Bliss, bliss, bliss!

Kiss, kiss, kiss!

Kissing may be naughty, but it's nice!

There were several verses in this graceful poem, and each one was hailed with enthusiastic applause. The Humming-Bird was triumphant, and when her song was concluded she executed a startling *pas-seul* full of quaint and astonishing surprises, reaching her superbest climax when she backed off the stage on one

portly leg—kicking the other in regular time to the orchestra. Lady Winsleigh laughed, and leaning toward Thelma, who still sat in her retired corner, said, with a show of kindness:

"You dear little goose! You must get accustomed to this kind of thing—it takes with the men immensely. Why, even your wonderful Philip has gone down behind the scenes with Neville—you may be sure of that!"

The startled, pitiful astonishment in the girl's face might have touched a less callous heart than Lady Winsleigh's—but her ladyship was prepared for it and only smiled.

"Gone behind the scenes! To see that dreadful woman!" exclaimed Thelma in a low, pained tone. "Oh, no, Clara! He would not do such a thing. Impossible!"

"Well, my dear, then where is he? He has been gone quite ten minutes. Look at the stalls—all the men are out of them! I tell you, Violet Vere draws everybody of the male sex after her! At the end of all her 'scenes' she has a regular reception—for men only—of course! Ladies not admitted!" And Clara Winsleigh laughed. "Don't look so shocked, for Heaven's sake, Thelma—you don't want your husband to be a regular nincompoop! He must have his amusements as well as other people. I believe you want him to be like a baby, tied to your apron-string! You'll find that an awful mistake—he'll get tired to death of you, sweet little Griselda though you are!"

Thelma's face grew very pale, and her hand closed more tightly on the fan she held.

"You have said that so very, very often lately, Clara!" she murmured. "You seem so sure that he will get tired—that all men get tired. I do not think you know Philip—he is not like any other person I have ever met. And why should he go behind the scenes to such a person as Violet Vere—"

At that moment the box-door opened with a sharp click, and Errington entered alone. He looked disturbed and anxious.

"Neville is not well," he said, abruptly, addressing his wife. "I've sent him home. He wouldn't have been able to sit this thing out." And he glanced half angrily toward the stage—the curtain had just gone up again and displayed the wondrous Violet Vere still in her "humming-bird" character, swinging on the branch of a tree and (after the example of all humming-birds) smoking a cigar with brazen-faced tranquillity.

"I am sorry he is ill," said Thelma, gently. "That is why you were so long away?"

"Was I long?" returned Philip, somewhat absently. "I didn't know it. I went to ask a question behind the scenes."

Lady Winsleigh coughed and glanced at Thelma, whose eyes dropped instantly.

"I suppose you saw Violet Vere?" asked Clara.

"Yes, I saw her," he replied, briefly. He seemed irritable and vexed—moreover, decidedly impatient. Presently he said: "Lady Winsleigh, would you mind very much if we left this place and went home? I'm rather anxious about Neville—he's had a shock. Thelma doesn't care a bit about this piece, I know, and if you are not very much absorbed—"

Lady Winsleigh rose instantly, with her usual ready grace.

"My dear Sir Philip!" she said, sweetly. "As if I would not do anything to oblige you! Let us go by all means! These burlesques *are* extremely fatiguing!"

He seemed relieved by her acquiescence—and smiled that rare sweet smile of his, which had once played such havoc with her ladyship's sensitive feelings. They left the theater, and were soon on their way home, though Thelma was rather silent during the drive. They dropped Lady Winsleigh at her own door, and after they had bidden her a cordial good-night, and were going on again toward home, Philip, turning toward his wife, and catching sight of her face by the light of a street-lamp, was struck by her extreme paleness and weary look.

"You are very tired, my darling, I fear?" he inquired, tenderly encircling her with one arm. "Lean your head on my shoulder—so!"

She obeyed, and her hand trembled a little as he took and held it in his own warm, strong clasp.

"We shall soon be home!" he added, cheerily. "And I think we must have no more theater-going this season. The heat and noise and glare are too much for you."

"Philip," said Thelma, suddenly. "Did you really go behind the scenes to-night?"

"Yes, I did," he answered, readily. "I was obliged to go on a matter of business—a very disagreeable and unpleasant matter too."

"And what was it?" she asked, timidly, yet hopefully.

"My pet, I can't tell you! I wish I could! It's a secret I'm bound not to betray—a secret which involves the name of another person who'd be wretched if I were to mention it to you. There—don't let us talk about it any more!"

"Very well, Philip," said Thelma, resignedly—but though she smiled, a sudden presentiment of evil depressed her. The figure of the vulgar, half-clothed, painted creature known as Violet Vere rose up mockingly before her eyes—and the half-scornful, half-jesting words of Lady Winsleigh rang persistently in her ears.

On reaching home Philip went straight to Neville's little study and remained in earnest converse with him for a long time, while Thelma went to bed, and lay restless among her pillows, puzzling her brain with strange forebodings and new and perplexing ideas, till fatigue overpowered her, and she fell asleep with a few tear-

drops wet on her lashes. And that night Philip wondered why his sweet wife talked so plaintively in her sleep—though he smiled as he listened to the drift of those dove-like murmurings.

"No one knows how my boy loves me," sighed the dreaming voice. "No one in all the world! How should he tire? Love can never tire!"

Meanwhile, Lady Winsleigh, in the seclusion of her own boudoir, penned a brief note to Sir Francis Lennox as follows:

"DEAR OLD LENNIE,—I saw you in the stalls at the theater this evening, though you pretended not to see me. What a fickle creature you are! not that I mind in the very least. The virtuous Bruce-Errington left his saintly wife and me to talk little platitudes together, while he, decorously accompanied by his secretary, went down to pay court to Violet Vere. How stout she is getting! Why don't you men advise her to diet herself? I know you also went behind the scenes—of course, *you* are an *ami intime*—promising boy you are, to be sure! Come and lunch with me to-morrow if you're not too lazy.

"Yours ever,

"CLARA."

She gave this missive to her maid, Louise Renaud, to post. That faithful attendant took it first to her own apartment where she ungummed the envelope neatly by the aid of hot water, and read every word of it. This was not an exceptional action of hers—all the letters received and sent by her mistress were subjected to the same process—even those that were sealed with wax she had a means of opening in such a manner that it was impossible to detect that they had been tampered with.

She was a very clever French maid was Louise—one of the cleverest of her class. Fond of mischief, ever suspicious, always on the alert for evil, utterly unscrupulous and malicious, she was an altogether admirable attendant for a lady of rank and fashion, her skill as a *coiffeur* and needlewoman always obtaining for her the wages she so justly deserved. When will wealthy women reared in idleness and luxury learn the folly of keeping a trained spy attached to their persons?—a spy whose pretended calling is merely to arrange dresses and fripperies (half of which she invariably steals), but whose real delight is to take note of all her mistress's incomings and outgoings, tempers and tears—to watch her looks, her smiles and frowns—and to start scandalous gossip concerning her in the servants' hall, from whence it gradually spreads to the society newspapers—for do you think these estimable and popular journals are never indebted for their "reliable" information to the "honest" statements of a discharged footman or valet? Briggs, for instance, had tried his hand at a paragraph

or two concerning the "Upper Ten," and with the aid of a dictionary, had succeeded in expressing himself quite smartly, though in ordinary conversation his h's were often lacking or superfluous, and his grammar doubtful. Whether he persuaded any editor to accept his literary efforts is quite another matter—a question to which the answer must remain forever enveloped in mystery—but if he *did* appear in print (it is only an if!) he must have been immensely gratified to consider that his statements were received with gusto by at least half aristocratic London, and implicitly believed as having emanated from the "best authorities." And Louise Renaud having posted her mistress's letter at last, went down to visit Briggs in his private pantry, and to ask him a question.

"Tell me," she said, rapidly with her tight, prim smile. "You read the papers—you will know. What lady is that of the theater—Violet Vere?"

Briggs laid down the paper he was perusing and surveyed her with a superior air.

"What, Vi?" he exclaimed with a lazy wink. "Vi, of the Hopperer-Buff: You've 'erd of 'er, surely, mamzelle? No? There's not a man (as is worth calling a man) about town, as don't know 'er! Dukes, lords, an' royal 'ighnesses—she's the style for 'em! Mag-ni-ficent creetur! all legs and arms! I won't deny but wot I 'ave an admiration for 'er myself—I bought a 'arf-crown portrait of 'er quite recently." And Briggs rose slowly and searched in a mysterious drawer which he invariably kept locked.

"'Ere she is, as large as life, mamzelle," he continued, exhibiting a "promenade" photograph of the actress in question. "There's a neck for you! There's form! Vi, my dear, I saloot you!" and he pressed a sounding kiss on the picture. "You're one in a million! Smokes and drinks like a trooper, mamzelle!" he added, admiringly, as Louise Renaud studied the portrait attentively. "But with all 'er advantages, you would not call 'er a lady. No—that term would be out of the question. She is wot we men would call an enchantin' female!" And Briggs kissed the tips of his fingers and waved them in the air as he had seen certain foreign gentlemen do when enthusiastic.

"I comprehend," said the French maid, nodding emphatically. "Then, if she is so, what makes that proud Seigneur Bruce-Errington visit her?" Here she shook her fingers at Briggs. "And leave his beautiful lady wife to go and see her?" Another shake. "And that *misérable* Sieur Lennox to go also? Tell me that!" She folded her arms, like Napoleon at St. Helena, and smiled again that smile which was nothing but a sneer. Briggs rubbed his nose contemplatively.

"Little Francis can go ennywheres," he said at last. "He's laid out a good deal of tin on Vi and others of 'er purfession. You can not make ennythink of that young feller but a cad. I would not

accept 'im for my pussional attendant. No! But Sir Philip Bruce-Errington—" He paused, then continued, " Air you sure of your facts, mamzelle?"

Mamzelle was so sure that the bow on her cap threatened to come off with the determined wagging of her head.

" Well," resumed Briggs, " Sir Philip may, like hothers, consider it ' the thing ' you know, to 'ang on as it were to Vi. But I 'ad thought 'im superior to it. Ah! poor 'uman natur', as Uxley says!" and Briggs sighed. " Lady Errington is a sweet creetur, mamzelle—a *very* sweet creetur! *Has* a rule I find the merest nod of my 'ed a sufficient saloot to a woman of the aristocracy—but for 'er, mamzelle, I never fail to show 'er up with a court bow!" And involuntarily Briggs bowed then and there in his most elegant manner. Mamzelle tightened her thin lips a little and waved her hand expressively.

" She is an angel of beauty!" she said, " and Miladi Winsleigh is jealous—ah, *Dieu!* jealous to death of her! She is innocent too—like a baby—and she worships her husband. That is an error! To worship a man is a great mistake—she will find it so. Men are not to be too much loved—no, no!"

Briggs smiled in superb self-consciousness. " Well, well! I will not deny, mamzelle, that it spoils us," he said, complacently. " It certainly spoils us!—' When lovely woman stoops to folly'—the hold, hold story!"

" You will r-r-remember," said mamzelle suddenly stepping up very close to him and speaking with a strong accent, " what I have said to-night! Monsieur Briggs, you will r-remember! There will be mees-cheef! Yes—there will be mees-cheef to Sieur Bruce-Errington, and when there is—I—I, Louise Renaud—I know who ees at the bottom of eet!"

So saying, with a whirl of her black silk dress and a flash of her white muslin apron she disappeared. Briggs, left alone, sauntered to a looking-glass hanging on the wall and studied with some solitudine a pimple that had recently appeared on his clean-shaven face.

" Mischief!" he soliloquized. " I dessay! Whenever a lot of women gets together, there's sure to be mischief. Dear creeturs! They love it like the best Cliquot! Sprightly young pusson is mamzelle. Knows who's at the bottom of ' eet,' does she? Well—she's not the only one as knows the same thing! As long as doors 'as cracks and key'oles, it ain't in the least difficult to find out wot goes on inside boo-dwars and drorin'-rooms. And 'ighly interestin' things one 'ears now and then—'ighly interestin'!"

And Briggs leered suavely at his own reflection, and then resumed the perusal of his paper. He was absorbed in the piquant, highly-flavored details of a particularly disgraceful divorce case, and he was by no means likely to disturb himself from his refined enjoyment for any less important reason than the summons of

Lord Winsleigh's bell, which rang so seldom that, when it did, he made it a point of honor to answer immediately, for, as he said:

" His lordship knows wot is due to me, and I knows wot is due to 'im—therefore it 'appens we are able to ekally respect each other!"

CHAPTER V.

If thou wert honorable,
Thou wouldst have told this tale for virtue, not
For such an end thou seek'st; as base, as strange.
Thou wrong'st a gentleman 'who is as far
From thy report, as thou from honor.

Cymbeline.

SUMMER in Shakespeare Land! Summer in the heart of England—summer in wooded Warwickshire—a summer brilliant, warm, radiant with flowers, melodious with the songs of the heaven-aspiring larks, and the sweet, low trill of the forest-hidden nightingales. Wonderful and divine it is to hear the wild chorus of nightingales that sing beside Como in the hot languorous nights of an Italian July—wonderful to hear them maddening themselves with love and music, and almost splitting their slender throats with the bursting bubbles of burning song—but there is something, perhaps, more dreamily enchanting still—to hear them warbling less passionately but more plaintively, beneath the drooping leafage of those grand old trees, some of which may have stretched their branches in shadowy benediction over the sacred head of the grandest poet in the world. Why travel to Athens—why wander among the Ionian Isles for love of the classic ground? Surely, though the clear-brained old Greeks were the founders of all noble literature, they have reached their culminating point in the English Shakespeare—and the Warwickshire lanes, decked simply with hawthorn and sweet-brier roses, through which Mary Arden walked leading her boy-angel by the hand, are sacred as any portion of that earth once trodden by the feet of Homer and Plato.

So, at least, Thelma thought, when, released from the bondage of London social life, she found herself once more at Errington Manor, then looking its loveliest, surrounded with a green girdle of oak and beech, and set off by the beauty of velvety lawns and terraces, and rose-gardens in full bloom. The depression from which she had suffered fell away from her completely—she grew light-hearted as a child, and flitted from room to room, singing to herself for pure gladness. Philip was with her all day now, save for a couple of hours in the forenoon which he devoted to letter-writing in connection with his Parliamentary aspirations—and Philip was tender, adoring, and passionate as lovers may be, but