

"Gently, Clara! Draw it mild!" he said, languidly. "Don't irritate me, or I *may* turn crusty! You know, if I chose, I could open Bruce-Errington's eyes rather more widely than you'd like with respect to the *devoted affection* you entertain for his beautiful wife." She winced a little at this observation—he saw it and laughed—then resumed: "At present I'm really in the best of humors. The reason I wanted to speak to you alone for a minute or two was that I'd something to say which might possibly please you. But perhaps you'd rather not hear it?"

She was silent. So was he. He watched her closely for a little—noting with complacency the indignant heaving of her breast and the flush on her cheeks—signs of the strong repression she was putting upon her rising temper.

"Come, Clara, you may as well be amiable," he said. "I'm sure you'll be glad to know that the virtuous Philip is not immaculate after all. Won't it comfort you to think that he's nothing but a mortal man like the rest of us?—and that with a little patience your charms will most probably prevail with him as easily as they once did with me? Isn't that worth hearing?"

"I don't understand you," she replied, curtly.

"Then you are very dense, my dear girl," he remarked, smilingly. "Pardon me for saying so! But I'll put it plainly and in as few words as possible. The moral Bruce-Errington, like a great many other 'moral' men I know, has gone in for Violet Vere, and I dare say you understand what *that* means. In the simplest language, it means that he's tired of his domestic bliss and wants a change."

Lady Winsleigh stopped in her slow pacing along the gravel walk, and raised her eyes steadily to her companion's face.

"Are you sure of this?" she asked.

"Positive!" replied Sir Francis, flicking the light ash off his cigarette delicately with his little finger. "When you wrote me that note about the Vere, I confess I had my suspicions. Since then they've been confirmed. I know for a fact that Errington has had several private interviews with Vi, and has also written her a good many letters. Some of the fellows in the greenroom tease her about her new conquest, and she grins and admits it. Oh, the whole thing's plain enough! Only last week, when he went up to town to see his man Neville on business he called on Vi at her own apartments in Arundel Street, Strand. She told me so herself—we're rather intimate, you know—though of course she refused to mention the object of his visit. Honor among thieves!" and he smiled half mockingly.

Lady Winsleigh seemed absorbed, and walked on like one in a dream. Just then a bend in the avenue brought them in full view of the broad terrace in front of the manor, where Thelma's graceful figure, in a close-fitting robe of white silk crêpe, was outlined

clearly against the dazzling blue of the sky. Several people were grouped near her—she seemed to be in animated conversation with some of them, and her face was radiant with smiles. Lady Winsleigh looked at her—then said suddenly in a low voice:

"It will break her heart!"

Sir Francis assumed an air of polite surprise. "Pardon! Whose heart?"

She pointed slightly to the white figure on the terrace.

"Hers! Surely you must know that!"

He smiled. "Well, isn't that precisely what you desire, Clara? Though, for my part, I don't believe in the brittleness of hearts—they seem to me to be made of exceptionally tough material. However, if the fair Thelma's heart cracks ever so widely, I think I can undertake to mend it!"

Clara shrugged her shoulders. "You!" she exclaimed, contemptuously.

He stroked his mustache with feline care and nicety.

"Yes—I! If not, I've studied women all my life for nothing!"

She broke into a low peal of mocking laughter—turned, and was about to leave him, when he detained her by a slight touch on her arm.

"Stop a bit!" he said in an impressive *sotto voce*. "A bargain's a bargain all the world over. If I undertake to keep you cognizant of Bruce-Errington's little goings-on in London—information which, I dare say, you can turn to good account—you must do something for me. I ask very little. Speak of me to Lady Errington—make her think well of me—flatter me as much as you used to do when we fancied ourselves terrifically in love with each other—(a good joke, wasn't it?)—and, above all, make her *trust* me! Do you understand?"

"As Red Riding-Hood trusted the Wolf and was eaten up for her innocence," observed Lady Winsleigh. "Very well! I'll do my best. As I said before, you want a character. I'm sure I hope you'll obtain the situation you so much desire! I can state that you made yourself fairly useful in your last place, and that you left because your wages were not high enough!"

And with another sarcastic laugh, she moved forward toward the terrace where Thelma stood. Sir Francis followed at some little distance with no very pleasant expression on his features. A stealthy step approaching him from behind made him start nervously. It was Louise Renaud, who, carrying a silver tray on which soda-water bottles and glasses made an agreeable clinking, tripped demurely past him without raising her eyes. She came directly out of the rose-garden, and, as she overtook her mistress on the lawn, that lady seemed surprised, and asked:

"Where have you been, Louise?"

"Miladi was willing that I should assist in the attendance to-

day," replied Louise, discreetly. "I have waited upon Milord Winsleigh and other gentlemen in the summer-house at the end of the rose-garden."

And with one furtive glance of her black bead-like eyes at Lady Winsleigh's face, she made a respectful sort of half courtesy and went her way.

Later on in the afternoon, when it was nearing sunset, and all other amusements had given way to the delight of dancing on the springy green turf to the swinging music of the band—Briggs, released for a time from the duties of assisting the waiters at the splendid refreshment-table (duties which were pleasantly lightened by the drinking of a bottle of champagne which he was careful to reserve for his own consumption), sauntered leisurely through the winding alleys and fragrant shrubberies which led to the most unromantic portion of the manor grounds—namely, the vegetable-garden. Here none of the butterflies of fashion found their way—the suggestions offered by growing cabbages, turnips, beans, and plump, yellow-skinned marrows were too prosaic for society bantams who require refined surroundings in which to crow their assertive platitudes. Yet it was a peaceful nook—and there were household odors of mint and thyme and sweet marjoram which were pleasant to the soul of Briggs, and reminded him of roast goose on Christmas-day, with all its attendant succulent delicacies. He paced the path slowly, the light of the sinking sun blazing gloriously on his plush breeches, silver cordons and tassels, for he was in full-dress livery in honor of the fête, and looked exceedingly imposing. Now and then he glanced down at his calves with mild approval; his silk stockings fitted them well, and they had a very neat and shapely appearance.

"I've developed," he murmured to himself. "There ain't a doubt about it! One week of country air, and I'm a different man; the effects of overwork 'ave disappeared. Flopsie won't know these legs of mine when I get back—they've improved surprisingly." He stopped to survey a bed of carrots. "Plenty of Cressy there," he mused. "Cressy's a noble soup, and Flopsie makes it well—a man might do wuss than marry Flopsie. She's a widder, and a *leetle* old—just a *leetle* old for me—but—" Here he sniffed delicately at a sprig of thyme he had gathered, and smiled consciously. Presently he perceived a small, plump, pretty figure approaching him. No other than Britta, looking particularly charming in a very smart cap, adorned with pink-ribbon bows, and a very elaborately frilled muslin apron. Briggs at once assumed his most elegant and conquering air, straightened himself to his full height and kissed his hand to her with much condescension. She laughed as she came up to him, and the dimples in her round cheeks appeared in full force.

"Well, Mr. Briggs," she said, "are you enjoying yourself?"

Briggs smiled down upon her benevolently. "I am!" he responded, graciously. "I find the hair refreshing. And you, Miss Britta?"

"Oh, I'm very comfortable, thank you!" responded Britta, demurely, edging a little away from his arm, which showed an unmistakable tendency to encircle her waist—then glancing at a basket she held full of grapes, just cut from the hot-house, she continued: "These are for the supper-table. I must be quick, and take them to Mrs. Parton."

"Must you?" and Briggs asked this question with quite an unnecessary amount of tenderness, then resuming his dignity, he observed: "Mrs. Parton is a very worthy woman—an excellent 'ousekeeper. But she'll no doubt excuse you for lingering a little Miss Britta—especially in *my* company."

Britta laughed again, showing her pretty little white teeth to the best advantage. "Do you think she will?" she said, merrily. "Then I'll stop a minute, and if she scolds me I'll put the blame on you!"

Briggs played with his silver tassels, and leaning gracefully against a plum-tree, surveyed her with a critical eye.

"I was not able," he observed, "to see much of you in town. Our people were always a visitin' each other, and yet our meetings were, as the poet says, 'few and far between.'"

Britta nodded indifferently, and perceiving a particularly ripe gooseberry on one of the bushes close to her, gathered it quickly and popped it between her rosy lips. Seeing another equally ripe, she offered it to Briggs, who accepted it and eat it slowly, though he had a misgiving that by so doing he was seriously compromising his dignity. He resumed his conversation.

"Since I've been down 'ere, I've 'ad more oppotunity to observe you. I 'ope you will allow me to say I think very 'ighly of you." He waved his hand with the elegance of a Sir Charles Grandison. "Very 'ighly indeed! Your youth is most becoming to you! If you only 'ad a little more *chick*, there'd be nothing left to desire!"

"A little more—*what?*" asked Britta, opening her blue eyes very wide in puzzled amusement.

"*Chick!*" replied Briggs, with persistent persuasiveness. "*Chick*, Miss Britta, is a French word much used by the aristocracy. Coming from Norway, and 'avin' perhaps a very limited experience, you mayn't 'ave 'erd it—but eddicated people 'ere find it very convenient and expressive. *Chick* means style—the thing—the go, the fashion. For example, everythink your lady wears is *chick!*"

"Really!" said Britta, with a wondering and innocent air. "How funny! It doesn't sound like French at all, Mr. Briggs—it's more like English."

"Perhaps the Paris accent isn't familiar to you yet," remarked

Briggs, majestically. "Your stay in the gay metropolis was probably short. Now, I've been there many times—ah, Paris, Paris!" he paused in a sort of ecstasy, then, with a side leer, continued: "You'd 'ardly believe 'ow wicked I am in Paris, Miss Britta! I am, indeed! It is something in the hair of the bollyvards, I suppose! And the caffy life excites my nerves."

"Then you shouldn't go there," said Britta, gravely, though her eyes twinkled with repressed fun. "It can't be good for you. And, oh! I'm so sorry, Mr. Briggs, to think that *you* are ever wicked!" And she laughed.

"It's not for long," explained Briggs, with a comically satisfied, yet penitent look. "It is only a sort of breaking out—a fit of 'igh spirits. Hall men are so at times! It's *chick* to run a little wild in Paris. But, Miss Britta, if *you* were with me I should never run wild!" Here his arm made another attempt to get round her waist—and again she skillfully, and with some show of anger, avoided it.

"Ah, you're very 'ard upon me," he then observed. "Very, very 'ard! But I won't complain, my—my dear gal—one day you'll know me better!" He stopped and looked at her very intently. "Miss Britta," he said, abruptly, "you've a great affection for your lady, 'aven't you?"

Instantly Britta's face flushed, and she was all attention.

"Yes, indeed!" she answered, quickly. "Why do you ask Mr. Briggs?"

Briggs rubbed his nose perplexedly. "It is not easy to explain," he said. "To run down my own employers wouldn't be in my line. But I've an idea that Clara—by which name I allude to my Lord Winsleigh's lady—is up to mischief. She 'ates *your* lady, Miss Britta—'ates 'er like poison!"

"Hates her!" cried Britta, in astonishment. "Oh, you must be mistaken, Mr. Briggs! She is as fond of her as she can be—almost like a sister to her!"

"Clara's a fine actress," murmured Briggs, more to himself than his companion. "She'd beat Violet Vere on 'er own ground." Raising his voice a little, he turned gallantly to Britta and relieved her of the basket she held.

"Hallow me!" he said. "We'll walk to the 'ouse together. On the way I'll explain—and you'll judge for yourself. The words of the immortal bard, whose county we are in, occur to me as *apropo*: 'There are more things in 'evin and 'erth, 'Oratio—than even the most devoted domestic can sometimes be aweer of.'"

And gently sauntering by Britta's side, Briggs began to conversate in low and confidential tones. She listened with strained and eager attention, and she was soon receiving information that startled her and set her on the alert.

Talk of private detectives and secret service! Do private detec-

tives ever discover so much as the servants of a man's own household?—servants who are aware of the smallest trifles—who know the name and position of every visitor that comes and goes—who easily learn to recognize the handwriting on every letter that arrives—who laugh and talk in their kitchens over things that their credulous masters and mistresses imagine are unknown to all the world save themselves—who will judge the morals of a duke, and tear the reputation of a duchess to shreds for the least, the most trifling error of conduct! If you can stand well with your servants, you can stand well with the whole world—if not—carry yourself as haughtily as you may—your pride will not last long, depend upon it!

Meanwhile, as Briggs and Britta strolled in the side paths of the shrubbery, the gay guests of the manor were dancing on the lawn. Thelma did not dance—she reclined in a low basket-chair, fanning herself. George Lorimer lay stretched in lazy length at her feet, and near her stood her husband together with Beau Lovelace and Lord Winsleigh. At a little distance, under the shadow of a noble beech, sat Mrs. Rush-Marvelle and Mrs. Van Clupp in earnest conversation. It was to Mrs. Marvelle that the Van Clupps owed their invitation for this one day down to Errington Manor—for Thelma herself was not partial to them. But she did not like to refuse Mrs. Marvelle's earnest entreaty that they should be asked—and that good-natured, scheming lady having gained her point, straightway said to Marcia Van Clupp somewhat severely:

"Now, Marcia, this is your last chance. If you don't hook Masherville at the Errington fête, you'll lose him! You mark my words!"

Marcia had dutifully promised to do her best, and she was now having what she herself called "a good hard time of it." Lord Algy was in one of his most provokingly vacillating moods—moreover, he had a headache, and felt bilious. Therefore he would not dance—he would not play tennis—he did not understand archery—he was disinclined to sit in romantic shrubberies or summer-houses, as he had a nervous dread of spiders—so he rambled aimlessly about the grounds with his hands in his pockets, and perforce Marcia was compelled to ramble too. Once she tried what effect an opposite flirtation would have on his mind, so she coquetted desperately with a young country squire, whose breed of pigs was considered the finest in England—but Masherville did not seem to mind it in the least. Nay, he looked rather relieved than otherwise, and Marcia, seeing this, grew more resolute than ever.

"I guess I'll pay him out for this!" she thought, as she watched him feebly drinking soda-water for his headache. "He's a man that wants ruling, and ruled he shall be!"

And Mrs. Rush-Marvelle and Mrs. Van Clupp observed her ma-

eavers with maternal interest, while the cunning-faced, white-headed Van Clupp conversed condescendingly with Mr. Rush-Marvelle as being a nonentity of a man whom he could safely patronize.

As the glory of the sunset paled, and the delicate, warm hues of the summer twilight softened the landscape, the merriment of the brilliant assembly seemed to increase. As soon as it was dark, the grounds were to be illuminated by electricity, and dancing was to be continued indoors—the fine old picture-gallery being the place chosen for the purpose. Nothing that could add to the utmost entertainment of the guests had been forgotten, and Thelma, the fair mistress of these pleasant revels, noting with quiet eyes the evident enjoyment of all present, felt very happy and tranquil. She had exerted herself a good deal, and was now a little tired. Her eyes had a dreamy, far-off look, and she found her thoughts wandering now and then away to the Alten Fjord—she almost fancied she could hear the sigh of the pines and the dash of the waves mingling in unison as they used to do when she sat at the old farm-house window and spun, little dreaming then how her life would change—how all those familiar things would be swept away as though they had never been. She roused herself from this momentary reverie, and glancing down at the recumbent gentleman at her feet, touched his shoulder lightly with the edge of her fan.

“Why do you not dance, you very lazy Mr. Lorimer?” she asked, with a smile.

He turned up his fair, half-boyish face to hers and laughed.

“Dance! I! Good gracious! Such an exertion would kill me, Lady Errington—don’t you know that? I am of a sultan-like disposition—I shouldn’t mind having slaves to dance for me if they did it well—but I should look on from the throne whereon I sat cross-legged, and smoke my pipe in peace.”

“Always the same!” she said, lightly. “Are you never serious?”

His eyes darkened suddenly. “Sometimes. Awfully so! And in that condition I become a burden to myself and my friends.”

“Never be serious!” interposed Beau Lovelace, “it really isn’t worth while! Cultivate the humor of a Socrates, and reduce everything by means of close argument to its smallest standpoint, and the world, life, and time are no more than a pinch of snuff for some great Titanic god to please his giant nose withal!”

“Your fame isn’t worth much then, Beau, if we’re to go by that line of argument,” remarked Errington, with a laugh.

“Fame! By Jove! You don’t suppose I’m such an arrant donkey as to set any store by fame!” cried Lovelace, a broad smile lightening up his face and eyes. “Why, because a few people read my books and are amused thereby—and because the

press pats me graciously on the back, and says metaphorically, ‘Well done, little ‘un!’ or words to that effect, am I to go crowing about the world as if I were the only literary chanticleer? My dear friend, have you read ‘Esdras’? You will find there that a certain King of Persia wrote to one Rathumus, a story writer. No doubt he was famous in his day, but—to travestie ‘Hamlet,’ ‘where be his stories now?’ Learn, from the deep oblivion into which poor Rathumus’s literary efforts have fallen, the utter mockery and uselessness of so-called fame!”

“But there must be a certain pleasure in it while you’re alive to enjoy it,” said Lord Winsleigh. “Surely you derive some little satisfaction from your celebrity, Mr. Lovelace?”

Beau broke into a laugh, mellow, musical, and hearty.

“A satisfaction shared with murderers, thieves, divorced women, dynamiters, and other notorious people in general,” he said. “They’re all talked about—so am I. They all get written about—so do I. My biography is always being carefully compiled by newspaper authorities, to the delight of the reading public. Only the other day I learned for the first time that my father was a green-grocer, who went in for selling coals by the half hundred and thereby made his fortune—my mother was an unsuccessful oyster-woman who failed ignominiously at Margate—moreover, I’ve a great many brothers and sisters of tender age whom I absolutely refuse to assist. I’ve got a wife somewhere, whom my literary success causes me to despise—and I have deserted children. I’m charmed with the accuracy of the newspapers—and I wouldn’t contradict them for the world—I find my biographies so original! They are the result of that celebrity which Winsleigh thinks enjoyable.”

“But assertions of that kind are libels,” said Errington. “You could prosecute.”

“Too much trouble!” declared Beau. “Besides, five journals have disclosed the name of the town where I was born, and as they all contradict each other, and none of them are right, any contradiction on *my* part would be superfluous!”

They laughed, and at that moment Lady Winsleigh joined them.

“Are you not catching cold, Thelma?” she inquired, sweetly. “Sir Philip, you ought to make her put on something warm; I find the air growing chilly.”

At that moment the ever-ready Sir Francis Lennox approached with a light woolen wrap he had found in the hall.

“Permit me!” he said, gently, at the same time adroitly throwing it over Thelma’s shoulders.

She colored a little—she did not care for his attention, but she could not very well ignore it without seeming to be discourteous. So she murmured, “Thank you!” and, rising from her chair, addressed Lady Winsleigh.

"If you feel cold, Clara, you will like some tea," she said. "Shall we go in-doors, where it is ready?"

Lady Winsleigh assented with some eagerness—and the two beautiful women—the one dark, the other fair—walked side by side across the lawn into the house, their arms round each other's waists as they went.

"Two queens—and yet not rivals?" half queried Lovelace, as he watched them disappearing.

"Their thrones are secure!" returned Sir Philip, gayly.

The others were silent. Lord Winsleigh's thoughts, whatever they were, deepened the lines of gravity on his face; and George Lorimer, as he got up from his couch on the grass, caught a fleeting expression in the brown eyes of Sir Francis Lennox that struck him with a sense of unpleasantness. But he quickly dismissed the impression from his mind, and went to have a quiet smoke in the shrubbery.

CHAPTER VI.

La rose du jardin, comme tu sais, dure peu, et la saison des roses est bien vite écoulée!—SAADI.

THELMA took her friend Lady Winsleigh to her own boudoir, a room which had been the particular pride of Sir Philip's mother. The walls were decorated with panels of blue silk in which were woven flowers of gold and silver thread—and the furniture, bought from an old palace in Milan, was of elaborately carved wood inlaid with ivory and silver. Here a *tête-à-tête* tea was served for the two ladies, both of whom were somewhat fatigued by the pleasures of the day. Lady Winsleigh declared she must have some rest, or she would be quite unequal to the gayeties of the approaching evening, and Thelma herself was not sorry to escape for a little from her duties as hostess—so the two remained together for some time in earnest conversation, and Lady Winsleigh then and there confided to Thelma what she had heard reported concerning Sir Philip's intimate acquaintance with the burlesque actress, Violet Vere. And they were both so long absent that, after awhile, Errington began to miss his wife, and, growing impatient, went in search of her. He entered the boudoir, and, to his surprise, found Lady Winsleigh there quite alone.

"Where is Thelma?" he demanded.

"She seems not very well—a slight headache or something of that sort—and has gone to lie down," replied Lady Winsleigh, with a faint trace of embarrassment in her manner. "I think the heat has been too much for her."

"I'll go and see after her,"—and he turned promptly to leave the room.

"Sir Philip!" called Lady Winsleigh. He paused and looked back.

"Stay one moment," continued her ladyship, softly. "I have been for a long time so very anxious to say something to you in private. Please let me speak now. You—you know"—here she cast down her lustrous eyes—"before you went to Norway I—I was very foolish—"

"Pray do not recall it," he said with kindly gravity. "I have forgotten it."

"That is so good of you!" and a flush of color warmed her delicate cheeks. "For if you have forgotten, you have also forgiven?"

"Entirely!" answered Errington, and touched by her plaintive, self-reproachful manner and trembling voice, he went up to her and took her hands in his own. "Don't think of the past, Clara! Perhaps I also was to blame a little—I'm quite willing to think I was. Flirtation's a dangerous amusement at best." He paused as he saw two bright tears on her long, silky lashes, and in his heart felt a sort of remorse that he had ever permitted himself to think badly of her. "We are the best of friends now, Clara," he continued, cheerfully, "and I hope we may always remain so. You can't imagine how glad I am that you love my Thelma!"

"Who would not love her!" sighed Lady Winsleigh, gently, as Sir Philip released her hands from his warm clasp—then raising her tearful eyes to his she added wistfully: "you must take great care of her, Philip—she is so sensitive—I always fancy an unkind word would kill her."

"She'll never hear one from me!" he returned, with so tender and earnest a look on his face that Lady Winsleigh's heart ached for jealousy. "I must really go and see how she is. She's been exerting herself too much to-day. Excuse me!" and with a courteous smile and bow he left the room with a hurried and eager step.

Alone, Lady Winsleigh smiled bitterly. "Men are all alike!" she said half aloud. "Who would think he was such a hypocrite? Fancy his dividing his affection between two such contrasts as Thelma and Violet Vere! However, there's no accounting for tastes. As for men's fidelity, I wouldn't give a straw for it—and for his morality—!" She finished the sentence with a scornful laugh, and left the boudoir to return to the rest of the company.

Errington, meanwhile, knocked softly at the door of his wife's bedroom, and receiving no answer, turned the handle noiselessly and went in. Thelma lay on the bed, dressed as she was, her cheek resting on her hand, and her face partly hidden. Her husband approached on tiptoe, and lightly kissed her forehead. She did not stir—she appeared to sleep profoundly.

"Poor girl!" he thought, "she's tired out, and no wonder, with