

and manner. I am sorry I am not like other women—but I cannot help it. What I do wish you to understand is that I never suppose anything against my Philip—he is the noblest and best of men! And you must promise not to tell him that I was so foolish as to cry just now because you played that old song I sung to you both so often in Norway—it was because I felt a little sad—but it was only a fancy—and I would not have him troubled with such things. Will you promise?”

“But what has made you sad?” persisted Lorimer, still puzzled.

“Nothing—nothing indeed,” she answered, with almost feverish earnestness. “You yourself are sometimes sad, and can you tell why?”

Lorimer certainly could have told why—but he remained silent, and gently kissed the little hands he held.

“Then I mustn’t tell Philip of your sadness?” he asked softly, at last. “But will you tell him yourself, Thelma? Depend upon it, it’s much better to have no secrets from him. The least grief of yours would affect him more than the downfall of a kingdom. You know how dearly he loves you!”

“Yes, I know!” she answered, and her eyes brightened slowly. “And that is why I wish him always to see me happy!” She paused, and then added in a lower tone, “I would rather die, my friend, than vex him for one hour!”

George still held her hands and looked wistfully in her face. He was about to speak again, when a cold, courteous voice interrupted them.

“Lady Errington, may I have the honor of taking you in to supper?”

It was Sir Francis Lennox. He had entered quite noiselessly, his footsteps making no sound on the thick velvet-pile carpet, and he stood close to Lorimer, who dropped Thelma’s hands hastily and darted a suspicious glance at the intruder. But Sir Francis was the very picture of unconcerned and bland politeness, and offered Thelma his arm with the graceful ease of an accomplished courtier. She was perforce compelled to accept it, and she was slightly confused, though she could not have told why.

“Sir Philip has been looking everywhere for you,” continued Sir Francis, amicably. “And for you also,” he added, turning slightly to Lorimer. “I trust I’ve not abruptly broken off a peasant *tête-à-tête*?”

Lorimer colored hotly. “Not at all!” he said rather brusquely. “I’ve been strumming on the organ, and Lady Errington has been good enough to listen to me.”

“You do not *strum*,” said Thelma, with gentle reproach. “You play very beautifully.”

“Ah! a charming accomplishment!” observed Sir Francis, with his under-glance and covert smile, as they all three wended

their way out of the library. “I regret I have never had time to devote myself to acquiring some knowledge of the arts. In music I am a positive ignoramus! I can hold my own best in the field.”

“Yes, you’re a great adept at hunting, Lennox,” remarked Lorimer, suddenly, with something sarcastic in his tone. “I suppose the quarry never escapes you?”

“Seldom!” returned Sir Francis, coolly. “Indeed, I think I may say, never!”

And with that he passed into the supper-room, elbowing a way for Thelma, till he succeeded in placing her near the head of the table, where she was soon busily occupied in entertaining her guests and listening to their chatter; and Lorimer, looking at her once or twice, saw, to his great relief, that all traces of her former agitation had disappeared, leaving her face fair and radiant as a spring morning!

CHAPTER VII.

A generous fierceness dwells with innocence,
And conscious virtue is allowed some pride.

DRYDEN.

THE melancholy days of autumn came on apace, and by and by the manor was deserted. The Bruce-Errington establishment removed again to town, where business, connected with his intending membership for Parliament, occupied Sir Philip from morning till night. The old insidious feeling of depression returned and hovered over Thelma’s mind like a black bird of ill omen, and though she did her best to shake it off she could not succeed. People began to notice her deepening seriousness and the wistful melancholy of her blue eyes, and made their remarks thereon when they saw her at Marcia Van Clupp’s wedding, an event which came off brilliantly at the commencement of November, and which was almost entirely presided over by Mrs. Rush Marvelle. That far-seeing matron had indeed urged on the wedding by every delicate expedient possible.

“Long engagements are a great mistake,” she told Marcia—then, in a warning under-tone, she added: “Men are capricious nowadays—they’re all so much in demand. Better take Masher-ville while he’s in the humor.”

Marcia accepted this hint and took him, and Mrs. Rush-Marville heaved a sigh of relief when she saw the twain safely married and off to the Continent on their honeymoon trip—Marcia all sparkling and triumphant, Lord Algy tremulous and feebly ecstatic.

“Thank Heaven *that’s* over!” she said to her polite and servile

husband. "I never had such a troublesome business in my life! That girl's been nearly two seasons on my hands, and I think five hundred guineas not a bit too much for all I've done."

"Not a bit—not a bit!" agreed Mr. Marvelle, warmly. "Have they—have they"—here he put on a most benevolent side look—"quite settled with you, my dear?"

"Every penny," replied Mrs. Marvelle, calmly. "Old Van Clupp paid me the last hundred this morning. And poor Mrs. Van Clupp is so *very* grateful!" She sighed placidly, and appeared to meditate. Then she smiled sweetly and, approaching Mr. Marvelle, patted his shoulder caressingly. "I think we'll do the Italian lakes, dear—what do you say?"

"Charming—charming!" declared, not her lord and master, but her slave and vassal. "Nothing could be more delightful!"

And to the Italian lakes accordingly they went. A great many people were out of town—all who had leisure and money enough to liberate themselves from the approaching evils of an English winter had departed or were departing. Beau Lovelace had gone to Como, George Lorimer had returned with Duprez to Paris, and Thelma had very few visitors except Lady Winsleigh, who was more often with her now than ever. In fact, her ladyship was more like one of the Errington household than anything else—she came so frequently and stayed so long. She seemed sincerely attached to Thelma, and Thelma herself, too single-hearted and simple to imagine that such affection could be feigned, gave her in return what Lady Winsleigh had never succeeded in winning from any woman—a pure, trusting, and utterly unsuspecting love, such as she would have lavished on a twin-born sister. But there was one person who was not deceived by Lady Winsleigh's charm of manner and grace of speech. This was Britta. Her keen eyes flashed a sort of unuttered defiance into her ladyship's beautiful, dark languishing ones—she distrusted her, and viewed the intimacy between her and the "Froken" with entire disfavor. Once she ventured to express something of her feeling on the matter to Thelma—but Thelma had looked so gently wondering and reproachful that Britta had not courage to go on.

"I am sorry, Britta," said her mistress, "that you do not like Lady Winsleigh, because I am very fond of her. You must try to like her for my sake."

But Britta pursed her lips and shook her head obstinately. However, she said no more at the time, and decided within herself to wait and watch the course of events. And in the meantime she became very intimate with Lady Winsleigh's maid, Louise Renaud, and Briggs, and learned from these two domestic authorities many things which greatly tormented and puzzled her little brain—things over which she pondered deeply without arriving at any satisfactory conclusion.

On her return to town, Thelma had been inexpressibly shocked at the changed appearance of her husband's secretary, Edward Neville. At first she scarcely knew him, he had altered so greatly. Always inclined to stoop, his shoulders were now bent as by the added weight of twenty years—his hair, once only grizzled, was now quite gray—his face was deeply sunken and pale, and his eyes by contrast looked large and wild, as though some haunting thought were driving him to madness. He shrunk so nervously from her gaze that she began to fancy he must have taken some dislike to her—and though she delicately refrained from pressing questions upon him personally, she spoke to her husband about him with real solicitude. "Is Mr. Neville working too hard?" she asked one day. "He looks very ill."

Her remark seemed to embarrass Philip—he colored and seemed confused.

"Does he? Oh, I suppose he sleeps badly. Yes, I remember, he told me so. You see, the loss of his wife has always preyed on his mind—he never loses hope of—of—that is—he is always trying to—you know!—to get her back again."

"But do you think he will ever find her?" asked Thelma. "I thought you said it was a hopeless case?"

"Well—I think so, certainly—but, you see, it's no good dashing his hopes—one never knows—she *might* turn up any day—it's a sort of chance!"

"I wish I could help him to search for her," she said, compassionately. "His eyes do look so full of sorrow." She paused and added, musingly: "Almost like Sigurd's eyes sometimes."

"Oh, he's not losing his wits," said Philip, hastily; "he's quite patient, and—and all that sort of thing. Don't bother about him, Thelma, he's all right!"

And he fumbled hastily with some papers, and began to talk of something else. His embarrassed manner caused her to wonder a little at the time as to the reason of it—but she had many other things to think about, and she soon forgot a conversation that might have proved a small guiding link in the chain of events that were soon about to follow quickly one upon another, shaking her life to its very foundation. Lady Winsleigh found it almost impossible to get her on the subject of the burlesque actress, Violet Vere, and Sir Philip's supposed admiration for that notorious stage-siren.

"I do not believe it," she said, firmly, "and you—you must not believe it either, Clara. For wherever you heard it, it is wrong. We should dishonor Philip by such a thought—you are his friend, and I am his wife—we are not the ones to believe anything against him, even if it could be proved—and there are no proofs."

"My dear," responded her ladyship, easily, "you can get proofs for yourself if you like. For instance, ask Sir Philip how often he has seen Miss Vere lately—and hear what he says."

Thelma colored deeply "I would not question my husband on such a subject," she said, proudly.

"Oh, well, if you are so fastidious!" And Lady Winsleigh shrugged her shoulders.

"I am not fastidious," returned Thelma, "only I do wish to be worthy of his love—and I should not be so if I doubted him. No, Clara, I will trust him to the end."

Clara Winsleigh drew nearer to her, and took her hand.

"Even if he were unfaithful to you?" she asked in a low, impressive tone.

"Unfaithful!" Thelma uttered the word with a little cry. "Clara, dear Clara, you must not say such word! Unfaithful! That means that my husband would love some one more than me! Ah! that is impossible!"

"Suppose it were possible?" persisted Lady Winsleigh, with a cruel light in her dark eyes. "Such things have been!"

Thelma stood motionless, a deeply mournful expression on her fair, pale face. She seemed to think for a moment, then she spoke.

"I would never believe it!" she said, solemnly. "Never, unless I heard it from his own lips, or saw it in his own writing, that he was weary of me, and wanted me no more."

"And then?"

"Then"—she drew a quick breath—"I should know what to do. But, Clara, you must understand me well, even if this were so, I should never blame him—no—not once!"

"Not blame him?" cried Lady Winsleigh, impatiently. "Not blame him for infidelity?"

A deep blush swept over her face at the hated word "infidelity," but she answered, steadily:

"No. Because, you see, it would be my fault, not his. When you hold a flower in your hand for a long time, till all its fragrance has gone, and you drop it because it no longer smells sweetly, you are not blame; it is natural you should wish to have something fresh and fragrant—it is the flower's fault because it could not keep its scent long enough to please you. Now, if Philip were to love me no longer, I should be like that flower, and how would he be to blame? He would be as good as ever, but I—I should have ceased to seem pleasant to him—that is all!"

She put this strange view of the case quite calmly, as if it were the only solution to the question. Lady Winsleigh heard her, half in contemptuous amusement, half in dismay. "What can I do with such a woman as this?" she thought. "And fancy Lennie imagining for a moment that he could have any power over her!"

A loud, she said:

"Thelma, you're the oddest creature going—a regular heathen from Norway! You've set up your husband as an idol, and

you're always on your knees before him. It's awfully sweet of you, but it's quite absurd, all the same. Angelic wives always get the worst of it, and so you'll see! Haven't you heard that?"

"Yes, I have heard it," she answered, smiling a little. "But only since I came to London. In Norway, it is taught to woman that to be patient and obedient is best for every one. It is not so here. But I am not an angelic wife, Clara, and so the 'worst of it' will not apply to me. Indeed, I do not know of any 'worst' that I would not bear for Philip's sake."

Lady Winsleigh studied the lovely face, eloquent with love and truth, for some moments in silence. A kind of compunction pricked her conscience. Why destroy all that beautiful faith? Why wound that grandly trusting nature? The feeling was but momentary.

"Philip *does* run after the Vere," she said to herself—"it's true, there's no mistake about it, and she ought to know of it. But she won't believe without proofs. What proofs can I get, I wonder?" And her scheming brain set to work to solve this problem.

In justice to her, it must be admitted, she had a good deal of seeming truth on her side. Sir Philip's name *had* somehow got connected with that of the leading actress at the Brilliant, and more than Lady Winsleigh began to make jocular whispering comments on his stage "*amour*"—comments behind his back, which he was totally unaware of. Nobody knew quite how the rumor had first been started. Sir Francis Lennox seemed to know a good deal about it, and he was an "intimate" of the "Vere" magic circle of attraction. And though they talked, no one ventured to say anything to Sir Philip himself; the only two among his friends who would have spoken out honestly were Beau Lovelace and Lorimer, and these were absent.

One evening, contrary to his usual custom, Sir Philip went out after the late dinner. Before leaving, he kissed his wife tenderly, and told her on no account to sit up for him—he and Neville were going to attend a little matter of business which might detain them longer than they could calculate. After they had gone, Thelma resigned herself to a lonely evening, and, stirring the fire in the drawing-room to a cheerful blaze, she sat down beside it. First, she amused herself by reading over some letters recently received from her father—and then, yielding to a sudden fancy, she drew her spinning-wheel from the corner where it always stood, and set it in motion. She had little time for spinning now, but she never quite gave it up, and as the low, familiar whirring sound hummed pleasantly on her ears, she smiled, thinking how quaint and almost incongruous her simple instrument of industry looked among all the luxurious furniture and costly knick-knacks by which she was surrounded.

"I ought to have one of my old gowns on," she half murmured,

glancing down at the pale blue silk robe she wore—"I am too fine to spin!"

And she almost laughed as the wheel flew round swiftly under her graceful manipulations. Listening to its whir, whir, whir, she scarcely heard a sudden knock at the street door, and was quite startled when the servant, Morris, announced:

"Sir Francis Lennox!"

Surprised, she rose from her seat at the spinning-wheel with a slight air of hauteur. Sir Francis, who had never in his life seen a lady of title and fashion in London engaged in the primitive occupation of spinning, was entirely delighted with the picture before him—the tall, lovely woman with her gold hair and shimmering blue draperies, standing with such stateliness beside the simple wooden wheel, the antique emblem of household industry. Instinctively he thought of Marguerite; but Marguerite as a crowned queen, superior to all temptations of either man or fiend.

"Sir Philip is out," she said, as she suffered him to take her hand.

"So I was aware!" returned Lennox, easily. "I saw him a little while ago at the door of the Brilliant Theater."

She turned very pale—then controlling the rapid beating of her heart by a strong effort, she forced a careless smile, and said, bravely:

"Did you? I am very glad—for he will have some amusement there, perhaps, and that will do him good. He has been working so hard!"

She paused. He said nothing, and she went on more cheerfully still:

"Is it not a very dismal, wet evening? Yes!—and you must be cold. Will you have some tea?"

"Tha-anks!" drawled Sir Francis, staring at her admiringly. "If it's not too much trouble—"

"Oh, no!" said Thelma. "Why should it be?" And she rang the bell and gave the order. Sir Francis sunk lazily back in an easy-chair, and stroked his mustache slowly. He knew that his random hit about the theater had struck home—but she allowed the arrow to pierce and possibly wound her heart without showing any outward sign of discomposure. "A plucky woman!" he considered, and wondered how he should make his next move. She, meanwhile, smiled at him frankly, and gave a light twirl to her spinning-wheel.

"You see," she said, "I was amusing myself this evening by imagining that I was once more at home in Norway."

"Pray don't let me interrupt the amusement," he responded, with a sleepy look of satisfaction shooting from beneath his eyelids. "Go on spinning, Lady Errington. I've never seen any one spin before."

At that moment Morris appeared with the tea, and handed it to

Sir Francis. Thelma took none, and as the servant retired, she quietly resumed her occupation. There was a short silence, only broken by the hum of the wheel. Sir Francis sipped his tea with a meditative air, and studied the fair woman before him as critically as he would have studied a picture.

"I hope I'm not in your way?" he asked suddenly. She looked up surprised.

"Oh, no—only I am sorry Philip is not here to talk to you. It would be so much pleasanter."

"Would it?" he murmured, rather dubiously, and smiling. "Well, I shall be quite contented if *you* will talk to me, Lady Errington."

"Ah, but I am not at all clever in conversation," responded Thelma, quite seriously. "I am sure you, as well as many others, must have noticed that. I never do seem to say exactly the right thing to please everybody. Is it not very unfortunate?"

He laughed a little. "I have yet to learn in what way you do *not* please everybody," he said, dropping his voice to a low, caressing cadence. "Who, that sees you, does not admire—and—and love you?"

She met his languorous gaze without embarrassment, while the childlike openness of her regard confused and slightly shamed him.

"Admire me? Oh, yes!" she said somewhat plaintively. "It is that of which I am so weary! Because God has made one pleasant in form and face—to be stared at and whispered about, and have all one's dresses copied!—all that is so small and common and mean, and does vex me so much!"

"It is the penalty you pay for being beautiful," said Sir Francis slowly, wondering within himself at the extraordinary incongruity of a feminine creature who was actually tired of admiration.

She made no reply—the wheel went round faster than before. Presently Lennox set aside his emptied cup, and drawing his chair a little closer to hers, asked:

"When does Errington return?"

"I cannot tell you," she answered. "He said that he might be late. Mr. Neville was with him."

There was another silence. "Lady Errington," said Sir Francis, abruptly, "pray excuse me—I speak as a friend, and in your interests. How long is this to last?"

The wheel stopped. She raised her eyes—they were grave and steady.

"I do not understand you," she returned, quietly. "What is it that you mean?"

He hesitated—then went on, with lowered eyelids and a half smile.

"I mean—what all our set's talking about—Errington's queer fancy for that actress at the Brilliant."