

Thelma gazed at him fixedly. "It is a mistake," she said, resolutely, "altogether a mistake. And as you are his friend, Sir Francis, you will please contradict this report—which is wrong, and may do Philip harm. It has no truth in it at all—"

"No truth!" exclaimed Lennox. "It's true as Gospel! Lady Errington, I'm sorry for it—but your husband is deceiving you most shamefully!"

"How dare you say such a thing!" she cried, springing upright and facing him—then she stopped and grew very pale—but she kept her eyes upon him. How bright they were! What a chilling pride glittered in their sea-blue depths!

"You are in error," she said, coldly. "If it is wrong to visit this theater you speak of, why are *you* so often seen there—and why is not some harm said of *you*? It is not your place to speak against my husband. It is shameful and treacherous! You do forget yourself most wickedly!"

And she moved to leave the room. But Sir Francis interposed. "Lady Errington," he said, very gently, "don't be hard upon me—pray forgive me! Of course I've no business to speak—but how can I help it? When I hear every one at the clubs discussing you, and pitying you, it's impossible to listen quite unmoved! I'm the least among your friends, I know; but I can't bear this sort of thing to go on; the whole affair will be dished up in the society papers next!"

And he paced the room impatiently—a very well-feigned expression of friendly concern and sympathy on his features. Thelma stood motionless, a little bewildered—her head throbbed achingly, and there was a sick sensation of numbness creeping about her.

"I tell you it is all wrong!" she repeated, with an effort. "I do not understand why these people at the clubs should talk of me or pity me. I do not need any pity! My husband is all goodness and truth"—she stopped and gathered courage as she went on. "Yes! he is better, braver, nobler than all other men in the world, it seems to me! He gives me all the joy of my life—each day and night I thank God for the blessing of his love!"

She paused again. Sir Francis turned and looked at her steadily. A sudden thought seemed to strike her, for she advanced eagerly, a sweet color flushing the pallor of her skin.

"You can do so much for me if you will!" she said, laying her hand on his arm. "You can tell all these people who talk so foolishly that they are wrong—tell them how happy I am! And that my Philip has never deceived me in any matter, great or small!"

"Never?" he asked with a slight sneer. "You are sure?"

"Sure!" she answered, bravely. "He would keep nothing from me that it was necessary or good for me to know. And I—"

oh! I might pass all my life in striving to please him, and yet I should never, never be worthy of all his tenderness and goodness? And that he goes many times to a theater without me—what is it? A mere nothing—a trifle to laugh at! It is not needful to tell me of such a small circumstance!"

As she spoke she smiled—her form seemed to dilate with a sort of inner confidence and rapture.

Sir Francis stared at her half-shamed—half-savage. The beautiful, appealing face, bright with simple trust, roused him to no sort of manly respect or forbearance—the very touch of the blossom-white hand she had laid so innocently on his arm stung his passion as with a lash. As he had said, he was fond of hunting—he had chased the unconscious deer all through the summer, and now that it had turned to bay with such pitiful mildness and sweet pleading, why not draw the knife across its slim throat without mercy?

"Really, Lady Errington!" he said at last sarcastically. "Your wifely enthusiasm and confidence are indeed charming! But, unfortunately, the proofs are all against you. Truth is truth, however much you may wish to blind your eyes to its manifestations. I sincerely wish Sir Philip were present to hear your eloquent praises of him, instead of being where he most undoubtedly is—in the arms of Violet Vere!"

As he said these words she started away from him and put her hands to her ears as though to shut out some discordant sound. Her eyes glowed feverishly, a cold shiver shook her from head to foot.

"That is false—false!" she muttered in a low, choked voice. "How can you—how dare you?"

She ceased, and with a swaying, bewildered movement, as though she were blind, she fell senseless at his feet.

In one second he was kneeling beside her. He raised her head on his arm—he gazed eagerly on her fair, still features. A dark contraction of his brows showed that his thoughts were not altogether righteous ones. Suddenly he laid her down again gently, and, springing to the door, locked it. Returning, he once more lifted her in a half-reclining position, and encircling her with his arms, drew her close to his breast and kissed her. He was in no hurry for her to recover. She looked very beautiful—she was helpless—she was in his power. The silvery ting-ting of the clock on the mantel-piece striking eleven startled him a little. He listened painfully—he thought he heard some one trying the handle of the door he had locked. Again—again he kissed those pale, unconscious lips! Presently, a slight shiver ran through her frame; she sighed, and a little moan escaped her. Gradually, as warmth and sensation returned to her, she felt the pressure of his embrace, and murmured:

"Philip! Darling—you have come back earlier—I thought—"

Here she opened her eyes and met those of Sir Francis, who was eagerly bending over her. She uttered an exclamation of alarm, and strove to rise. He held her still more closely.

"Thelma—dear, dearest Thelma! Let me comfort you—let me tell you how much I love you!"

And before she could divine his intent, he pressed his lips passionately on her pale cheek. With a cry she tore herself violently from his arms and sprang to her feet, trembling in every limb.

"What—what is this?" she exclaimed, wrathfully. "Are you mad?"

And still weak and confused from her recent attack of faintness, she pushed back her hair from her brows and regarded him with a sort of puzzled horror.

He flushed deeply, and set his lips hard.

"I dare say I am," he answered, with a bitter laugh; "in fact, I know I am!" You see, I've betrayed my miserable secret. Will you forgive me, Lady Errington—Thelma?" He drew nearer to her, and his eyes darkened with restrained passion. "Matchless beauty!—adorable woman, as you are!—will you not pardon my crime, if crime it be—the crime of loving you? For I do love you!—Heaven only knows how utterly and desperately!"

She stood mute, white, almost rigid, with that strange look of horror frozen, as it were, upon her features. Emboldened by her silence, he approached and caught her hand. She wrenched it from his grasp and motioned him from her with a gesture of such royal contempt that he quailed before her. All suddenly the flood-gates of her speech were loosened—the rising tide of burning indignation that in its very force had held her dumb and motionless, now broke forth unrestrainedly.

"Oh, God!" she cried, impetuously, a magnificent glory of disdain flashing in her jewel-like eyes, "what *thing* is this that calls itself a man?—this thief of honor—this pretended friend? What have I done, sir, that you should put such deep disgrace as your so-called *love* upon me?—what have I *seemed* that you thus dare to outrage me by the pollution of your touch? I—the wife of the noblest gentleman in the land! Ah!" and she drew a long breath—"and it is you who speak against my husband—*you!*" She smiled scornfully, then with more calmness continued: "You will leave my house, sir, at once, and never presume to enter it again!"

And she stepped toward the bell. He looked at her with an evil leer.

"Stop a moment!" he said, coolly. "Just one moment before you ring. Pray consider! The servant cannot possibly enter, as the door is locked."

"You *dared* to lock the door!" she exclaimed, a sudden fear

chilling her heart as she remembered similar maneuvers on the part of the Reverend Mr. Dyceworthy—then another thought crossed her mind, and she began to retreat toward a large painted panel of Venus disporting among Cupids and dolphins in the sea. Sir Francis sprang to her side, and caught her arm in an iron grip—his face was aflame with baffled spite and vindictiveness.

"Yes, I *dared!*" he muttered with triumphant malice. "And I dared do more than that! You lay unconscious in my arms—you beautiful, bewitching Thelma, and I kissed you—ay! fifty times! You can never undo those kisses! You can never forget that *my* lips, as well as your husband's, have rested on yours. I have had that much joy that shall never be taken away from me! And if I choose, even now"—and he gripped her more closely—"yes, even now I will kiss you, in spite of you!—who is to prevent me? I will force you to love me, Thelma—"

Driven to bay, she struck him with all her force in the face, across the eyes.

"Traitor!—liar!—coward!" she gasped, breathlessly. "Let me go!"

Smarting with the pain of the blow, he unconsciously loosened his grasp. She rushed to the Venus panel, and to his utter discomfiture and amazement he saw it open and close behind her. She disappeared suddenly and noiselessly as if by magic. With a fierce exclamation, he threw his whole weight against that secret sliding door—it resisted all his efforts. He searched for the spring by which it must have opened—the whole panel was perfectly smooth and apparently solid, and the painted Venus reclining on her dolphin's back seemed as though she smiled mockingly at his rage and disappointment.

While he was examining it, he heard the sudden, sharp, and continuous ringing of an electric bell somewhere in the house, and with a guilty flush on his face he sprang to the drawing-room door and unlocked it. He was just in time, for scarcely had he turned the key, when Morris made his appearance. That venerable servant looked round the room in evident surprise.

"Did her ladyship ring?" he inquired, his eyes roving everywhere in search of his mistress. Sir Francis collected his wits, and forced himself to seem composed.

"No," he said, coolly. "I rang." He adopted this falsehood as a means of exit. "Call a hansom, will you?"

And he sauntered easily into the hall, and got on his hat and great-coat. Morris was rather bewildered—but, obedient to the command, blew the summoning cab-whistle, which was promptly answered. Sir Francis tossed him half a crown, and entered the vehicle, which clattered away with him in the direction of Cromwell Road. Stopping at a particular house in a side street leading from thence, he bade the cabman wait, and, ascending the steps,

busted himself for some moments in scribbling something rapidly in pencil on a leaf of his note-book by the light of the hanging-lamp in the door-way. He then gave a loud knock, and inquired of the servant who answered it:

"Is Mr. Snawley-Grubbs in?"

"Yes, sir"—the reply came rather hesitatingly—"but he's having a party to-night."

And, in fact, the scraping of violins and the shuffle of dancing feet were distinctly audible overhead.

"Oh, well, just mention my name—Sir Francis Lennox. Say I will not detain him more than five minutes."

He entered, and was ushered into a small anteroom while the maid went to deliver her message. He caught sight of his own reflection in a round mirror over the mantel-piece, and his face darkened as he saw a dull red ridge across his forehead—the mark of Thelma's well-directed blow—the sign-manual of her scorn. A few minutes passed, and then there came in to him a large man in an expansive dress-suit—a man with a puffy red, Silenus-like countenance—no other than Mr. Snawley-Grubbs, who hailed him with effusive cordiality.

"My dear Sir Francis!" he said in a rich, thick, comfortable voice. "This is an unexpected pleasure! Won't you come upstairs? My girls are having a little informal dance—just among themselves and their own young friends—quite simple—in fact an unpretentious little affair!" And he rubbed his fat hands, on which twinkled two or three large diamond rings. "But we shall be charmed if you will join us!"

"Thanks, not this evening," returned Sir Francis. "It's rather too late. I should not have intruded upon you at this hour—but I thought you might possibly like this paragraph for the 'Snake.'"

And he held out with a careless air the paper on which he had scribbled but a few minutes previously. Mr. Snawley-Grubbs smiled, and fixed a pair of elegant gold-rimmed eye-glasses on his inflamed crimson nose.

"I must tell you, though," he observed, before reading, "that it is too late for this week, at any rate. We've gone to press already."

"Never mind!" returned Sir Francis, indifferently. "Next week will do as well."

And he furtively watched Mr. Snawley-Grubbs while he perused the pencil scrawl. That gentleman, however, as editor and proprietor of the "Snake"—a new, but highly successful weekly "society" journal—was far too dignified and self-important to allow his countenance to betray his feelings. He merely remarked, as he folded up the little slip very carefully:

"Very smart! very smart, indeed! Authentic, of course?" Sir Francis drew himself up haughtily. "You doubt my word?"

"Oh, dear, no!" declared Mr. Snawley-Grubbs hastily, venturing to lay a soothing hand on Sir Francis's shoulder. "Your position, and all that sort of thing— Naturally you *must* be able to secure correct information. You can't help it! I assure you, the 'Snake' is infinitely obliged to you for a great many well-written and socially exciting paragraphs. Only, you see, I myself should never have thought that so extreme a follower of the exploded old doctrine of *noblesse oblige* as Sir Philip Bruce-Errington would have started on such a new line of action at all. But of course, we are all mortal!" And he shook his round, thick head with leering sagacity. "Well," he continued, after a pause, "this shall go in without fail next week, I promise you."

"You can send me a hundred copies of the issue," said Sir Francis, taking up his hat to go. "I suppose you're not afraid of an action for libel?"

Mr. Snawley-Grubbs laughed—nay, he roared—the idea seemed so exquisitely suited to his sense of humor.

"Afraid? My dear fellow, there's nothing I should like better! It would establish the 'Snake,' and make my fortune! I would even go to prison with pleasure. Prison, for a first-class misdemeanor, as I should most probably be termed, is perfectly endurable." He laughed again, and escorted Sir Francis to the street-door, where he shook hands heartily. "You are sure you won't come upstairs and join us? No? Ah, I see you have a cab waiting. Good-night, good-night!"

And the Snawley-Grubbs door being closed upon him, Sir Francis re-entered his cab, and was driven straight to his bachelor lodgings in Piccadilly. He was in a better humor with himself now—though he was still angrily conscious of a smart throbbing across the eyes, where Thelma's ringed hand had struck him. He found a brief note from Lady Winsleigh awaiting him. It ran as follows:

"You're playing a losing game this time—she will believe nothing without proofs—and even then it will be difficult. You had better drop the pursuit, I fancy—for once a woman's reputation will escape you!"

He smiled bitterly as he read these last words.

"Not while a society paper exists!" he said to himself. "As long as there are editors who are willing to accept the word of a responsible man of position for any report, the chastest Diana that ever lived shall not escape calumny! She wants proofs, does she? She shall have them—by Jove! she shall!"

And instead of going to bed, he went off to a *bijou* villa in Sir John's Wood—an elegantly appointed little place, which he rented and maintained—and where the popular personage known as Violet Vere basked in the very lap of luxury.

Meanwhile Thelma paced up and down her own boudoir, into

which she had escaped through the sliding panel which had baffled her admirer. Her whole frame trembled as she thought of the indignity to which she had been subjected during her brief unconsciousness—her face burned with bitter shame—she felt as if she were somehow poisonously infected by those hateful kisses of Lennox—all her womanly and wifely instincts were outraged. Her first impulse was to tell her husband everything the instant he returned. It was she who had rung the bell which had startled Sir Francis, and she was surprised that her summons was not answered. She rang again, and Britta appeared.

"I wanted Morris," said Thelma, quickly.

"He thought it was the drawing-room bell," responded Britta, meekly, for her "Froken" looked very angry. "I saw him in the hall just now, letting out Sir Francis Lennox."

"Has he gone?" demanded Thelma, eagerly.

Britta's wonder increased. "Yes, Froken!"

Thelma caught her arm, "Tell Morris never, never to let him inside the house again—*never!*" and her blue eyes flashed wrathfully. "He is a wicked man, Britta! You do not know how wicked he is!"

"Oh, yes, I do!" and Britta regarded her mistress steadfastly. "I know quite well! But, then, I must not speak! If I dared, I could tell you some strange things, dear Froken—but you will not hear me. You know you do not wish me to talk about your grand new friends, Froken, but—" she paused timidly.

"Oh, Britta, dear!" said Thelma, affectionately taking her hand. "You know they are not so much my friends as the friends of Sir Philip—and for this reason I must never listen to anything against them. Do you not see? Of course their ways seem strange to us—but, then, life in London is so different to life in Norway—and we cannot all at once understand—" she broke off, sighing a little. Then she resumed: "Now you will give Morris my message, Britta—and then come to me in my bedroom—I am tired, and Philip said I was not to wait up for him."

Britta departed, and Thelma went rather slowly upstairs. It was now nearly midnight, and she felt languid and weary. Her reflections began to take a new turn. Suppose she told her husband all that had occurred, he would most certainly go to Sir Francis and punish him in some way—there might then be a quarrel in which Philip himself might suffer—and all sorts of evil consequences would perhaps result from her want of reticence. If, on the other hand, she said nothing, and simply refused to receive Lennox, would not her husband think such conduct on her part strange? She puzzled over these questions till her head ached, and finally resolved to keep her own counsel for the present. After what had happened, Sir Francis would most probably not intrude himself again into her presence. "I will ask Mrs. Lori

mer what is best to do," she thought. "She is old and wise, and she will know."

That night, as she laid her head on her pillow, and Britta threw the warm *eidredon* over her, she shivered a little and asked:

"Is it not very cold, Britta?"

"Very!" responded her little maid. "And it is beginning to snow."

Thelma looked wistful. "It is all snow and darkness now at the Alten Fjord," she said.

Britta smiled. "Yes, indeed, Froken! We are better off here than there."

"Perhaps!" replied Thelma, a little musingly, and then she settled herself as though to sleep.

Britta kissed her hand, and retired noiselessly. When she had gone, Thelma opened her eyes and lay broad awake looking at the flicker of rosy light flung on the ceiling from the little suspended lamp in her oratory. All snow and darkness at the Alten Fjord! How strange the picture seemed! She thought of her mother's sepulcher—how cold and dreary it must be. She could see in fancy the long pendent icicles fringing the entrance to the seaking's tomb—the spot where she and Philip had first met. She could almost hear the slow, sullen plash of the black fjord against the shore. Her maiden life in Norway—her school-days at Arles—these were now like dreams—dreams that had passed away long, long ago. The whole tenor of her existence had changed—she was a wife—she was soon to be a mother—and with this near future of new and sacred joy before her, why did she to-night so persistently look backward to the past?

As she lay quiet, watching the glimmering light upon the wall, it seemed as though her room were suddenly filled with shadowy forms—she saw her mother's sweet, sad, suffering face—then her father's sturdy figure and fine, frank features—then came the flitting shape of the hapless Sigurd, whose plaintive voice she almost imagined she could hear—and feeling that she was growing foolishly nervous, she closed her eyes, and tried to sleep. In vain—her mind began to work on a far more unpleasing train of thought. Why did not Philip return? Where was he? As though some mocking devil had answered her, the words, "In the arms of Violet Vere!" as uttered by Sir Francis Lennox, recurred to her. Overcome by her restlessness, she started up. She determined to get out of bed, and put on her dressing-gown and read—when her quick ears caught the sound of steps coming up the staircase. She recognized her husband's firm tread, and understood that he was followed by Neville, whose sleeping apartment was on the floor above. She listened attentively—they were talking together in low tones on the landing outside her door.

"Think it would be much better to make a clean breast of it," said Sir Philip. "She will have to know some day."

"Your wife? For God's sake, don't tell her!" Neville's voice replied. "Such a disgraceful——" Here his words sunk to a whisper, and Thelma could not distinguish them. Another minute, and her husband entered with soft precaution, fearing to awake her. She stretched out her arms to welcome him, and he hastened to her with an exclamation of tenderness and pleasure.

"My darling! Not asleep yet?"

She smiled—but there was something very piteous in her smile had the dim light enabled him to perceive it.

"No, not yet, Philip! And yet I think I have been dreaming of—the Alten Fjord."

"Ah! it must be cold there now," he answered, lightly. "It's cold enough here, in all conscience. To-night there is a bitter east wind, and snow is falling."

She heard this account of the weather with almost morbid interest. Her thoughts instantly betook themselves again to Norway, and dwelt there. To the last—before her aching eyes closed in the slumber she so sorely needed—she seemed to be carried away in fancy to a weird stretch of gloom-enveloped landscape where she stood entirely alone, vaguely wondering at the dreary scene. "How strange it seems!" she murmured almost aloud. "All snow and darkness at the Alten Fjord!"

#### CHAPTER VIII.

Le temps où nous nous sommes aimés n'a guère duré, jeune fille; il a passé comme un coup de vent.—*Old Breton Ballad.*

THE next morning dawned cold and dismal. A dense yellow fog hung over the metropolis like a pall—the street-lamps were lighted, but their flare scarcely illumined the thoroughfares, and the chill of the snow-burdened air penetrated into the warmest rooms, and made itself felt even by the side of the brightest fire. Sir Philip woke with an uncomfortable sense of headache and depression, and grumbled—as surely every Englishman has a right to grumble, at the uncompromising wretchedness of his country's winter climate. His humor was not improved when a telegram arrived before breakfast summoning him in haste to a dull town in one of the Midland counties on pressing business connected with his candidature for Parliament.

"What a bore!" he exclaimed, showing the missive to his wife. "I must go—and I sha'n't be able to get back to-night. You'll be all alone, Thelma. I wish you'd go to the Winsleighs!"

"Why?" said Thelma, quietly. "I shall much prefer to be here. I do not mind, Philip. I am accustomed to be alone." Something in her tone struck him as particularly sad, and he looked at her intently.

"Now, my darling," he said suddenly, "if this parliamentary

bother is making you feel worried or vexed in any way, I'll throw it all up—by Jove, I will!" And he drew her into his warm embrace. "After all," he added, with a laugh, "what does it matter! The country can get on without me!"

Thelma smiled a little.

"You must not talk so foolishly, Philip," she said, tenderly. "It is wrong to begin a thing of importance and not go through with it. And I am not worried or vexed at all. What would people say of me if I, your wife, were, for my own selfish comfort and pleasure of having you always with me, to prevent you from taking a good place among the men of your nation? Indeed, I should deserve much blame! And so, though it is a gloomy day for you, poor boy, you must go to this place where you are wanted, and I shall think of you all the time you are gone, and shall be so happy to welcome you home to-morrow!"

And she kissed and clung to him for a moment in silence. All that day Philip was haunted by the remembrance of the lingering tenderness of her farewell embrace. By ten o'clock he was gone taking Neville with him; and after her household duties were over, Thelma prepared herself to go and lunch with old Mrs. Lorimer, and see what she would advise concerning the affair of Sir Francis Lennox. But, at the same time, she resolved that nothing should make her speak of the reports that were afloat about her husband and Violet Vere.

"I know it is all false," she said to herself over and over again. "And the people here are as silly as the peasants in Bosekop, ready to believe any untruth so long as it gives them something to talk about. But they may chatter as they please—I shall not say one word, not even to Philip—for it would seem as if I mistrusted him."

Thus she put away all the morbid fancies that threatened to oppress her, and became almost cheerful.

And while she made her simple plans for pleasantly passing the long, dull day of her husband's enforced absence, her friend, Lady Winsleigh, was making arrangements of a very different nature. Her ladyship had received a telegram from Sir Francis Lennox that morning. The pink missive had apparently put her in an excellent humor, though, after reading it, she crumpled it up and threw it in the waste-paper basket, from which receptacle, Louise Renaud, her astute attendant, half an hour later extracted it, secreting it in her own pocket for private perusal at leisure. She ordered her brougham, saying she was going out on business—and before departing, she took from her dressing-case certain bank-notes and crammed them hastily into her purse—a purse which, in all good faith, she handed to her maid to put in her sealskin muff-bag. Of course, Louise managed to make herself aware of its contents—but when her ladyship at last entered her carriage her