

"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

unexpected order, "To the Brilliant Theater, Strand," was sufficient to startle Briggs, and cause him to exchange surprise signals with "mamzelle," who merely smiled a prim, incomprehensible smile.

"Where did your la'ship say?" asked Briggs, dubiously.

"Are you getting deaf, Briggs?" responded his mistress, pleasantly. "To the Brilliant Theater!" She raised her voice, and spoke with distinct emphasis. There was no mistaking her. Briggs touched his hat—in the same instant he winked at Louise, and then the carriage rolled away.

At the very time when Lady Winsleigh's carriage was nearing the Strand, the grand morning rehearsal of a new burlesque was "on" at the Brilliant, and Violet's harsh tones, raised to a sort of rough masculine roar, were heard all over the theater, as she issued her commands or made complaints according to her changeful humors. She sat in an elevated position above the stage on a jutting beam of wood painted to resemble the gnarled branch of a tree, swinging her legs to and fro and clicking the heels of her shoes together in time to the mild scraping of a violin, the player whereof was "trying over" the first few bars of the new "jig" in which she was ere long to distinguish herself. She was a handsome woman, with a fine, fair skin, and large, full, dark eyes—she had a wide mouth, which, nearly always on the grin, displayed to the full her strong white teeth—her figure was inclined to excessive *embonpoint*, but this rather endeared her to her admirers than otherwise—many of these gentlemen being prone to describe her fleshly charms by the epithet "Prime!" as though she were a fatting pig or other animal getting ready for killing.

"Tommy! Tommy!" she screeched, presently, "are you going to sleep? Do you expect me to dance to a dirge, you lazy devil!"

Tommy, the player of the violin, paused in his efforts and looked up drearily. He was an old man, with a lean, long body and pinched features—his lips had a curious way, too, of trembling when he spoke, as if he were ready to cry.

"I can't help it," he said, slowly. "I don't know it yet. I must practice it a bit at home. My sight's not so good as it used to be—"

"Such a pair of optics, love, you've never, never seen—
One my mother blacked last night, the t'other it is green!"

sung Violet, to the infinite delight of all the unwashed-looking supernumeraries and ballet-girls who were scattered about the stage, talking and laughing.

"Shut up, Tommy!" she continued. "You're always talking about your eyesight. I warn you if you say too much about it, you'll lose your place. We don't want none natters in the brilliant. Put down your catgut screamer, and fetch me a pint. Ask for the Vere's own tipple—they'll twig!"

Tommy obeyed, and shuffled off on his errand. As he departed, a little man with a very red face, wearing a stove-pipe hat very much on one side, bounced on the stage as if some one had thrown him there like a ball.

"Now, ladies, ladies!" he shouted, warningly. "Attention! Once again, please! The last figure once again!"

The straggling groups scrambled hastily into something like order, and the little man continued: "One, two, three! Advance—retreat—left, right! Very well, indeed! Arms up a little more, Miss Jenkins—so! toes well pointed—courtesy—retire! One, two, three! swift slide to the left wing—forward! Round—take hands—all smile, please!" This general smile was apparently not quite satisfactory, for he repeated, persuasively: "All smile, please! So! Round again—more quickly—now break the circle in center—enter Miss Vere—" he paused, growing still redder in the face, and demanded: "Where is Miss Vere?"

He was standing just beneath the painted bough of the sham tree, and in a second his hat was dexterously kicked off, and two heels met with a click round his neck.

"Here I am, pickanniny!" retorted Miss Vere, holding him fast in this novel embrace amid the laughter of the supers. "You're getting as blind as Tommy! Steady, steady now, donkey!—steady—whoa!" And in a trice she stood upright, one foot planted firmly on each of his shoulders. "No weight, am I, darling?" she went on, jeeringly, and with an inimitably derisive air she put up an eyeglass and surveyed the top of his head. "You want a wig, my dear—do you, indeed! Come with me to-morrow, and I'll buy you one to suit your complexion. Your wife won't know you!"

And with a vigorous jump she sprung down from her position, managing to give him a smart hit on the nose as she did so, and leaping to the center of the stage, she posed herself to commence her dance, when Tommy came creeping back in his slow and dismal fashion, bearing something in a pewter pot.

"That's the ticket!" she cried, as she perceived him. "I'm as dry as a whole desert! Give it here!" And she snatched the mug from the feeble hand of her messenger and began drinking eagerly.

The little red-faced man interposed. "Now, Miss Vi," he said, "is that brandy?"

"Rather so!" returned the Vere, with a knowing wink, "and a good many things besides. It's a mixture. The 'Vere's Own!' Ha, ha! Might be the name of a regiment!"

And she buried her mouth and nose again in the tankard.

"Look here," said the little man again. "Why not wait till after the dance? It's bad for you before."

"Oh, is it, indeed!" screamed Violet, raising her face, which

became suddenly and violently flushed. "Oh, good Lord! Are you a temperance preacher? Teach your granny! Bad for me? Say another word, and I'll box your ears for you! You braying jackass!—you sniveling idiot! Who makes the Brilliant draw? You or I? Tell me that, you staring old——"

Here Tommy, who had for some minutes been vainly endeavoring to attract her attention, raised his weak voice to a feeble shout.

"I say, Miss Vere! I've been trying to tell you, but you won't listen! There's a lady waiting to see you!"

"A what?" she asked.

"A lady!" continued Tommy, in loud tones. "A lady of title! Wants to see you in private. Won't detain you long."

Violet Vere raised her pewter mug once more, and drained off its contents.

"Lord, ain't I honored!" she said, smacking her lips with a grin. "A lady of title to see me! Let her wait! Now then!" and snapping her fingers, she began her dance, and went through it to the end, with her usual vigor and frankness. When she had finished, she turned to the red-faced man who had watched her evolutions with much delight in spite of the abuse she had heaped upon him, and said, with an affected, smirking drawl:

"Show the lady of title into my dressing-room. I shall be ready for her in ten minutes. Be sure to mention that I am very shy—and unaccustomed to company!"

When, in the stipulated ten minutes, she was ready to receive her unknown visitor, she was quite transformed. She had arrayed herself in a trailing gown of rich black velvet, fastened at the side with jet clasps—a cluster of natural, innocent, white violets nestled in the fall of Spanish lace at her throat—her face was pale with pearl-powder, and she had eaten a couple of scented bonbons to drown the smell of her recent brandy tippie. She reclined gracefully in an easy-chair, pretending to read, and she rose with an admirably acted air of startled surprise, as one of the errand boys belonging to the Brilliant tapped at her door, and in answer to her "Come in!" announced, "Lady Winsleigh!"

A faint, sweet, questioning smile played on the Vere's wide mouth.

"I am not aware that I have the honor of——" she began, modulating her voice to the requirements of fashionable society, and wondering within herself "what the d——!" this woman in the silk and sable-fur costume wanted.

"I must apologize for this intrusion, Miss Vere! I dare say you have never heard my name—I am not fortunate enough to be famous—as *you* are." This with a killing satire in her smile. "May I sit down? Thanks! I have called upon you in the hope that you may perhaps be able to give me a little information in a

private matter—a matter concerning the happiness of a very dear friend of mine." She paused—Violet Vere sat silent. After a minute or two, her ladyship continued in a somewhat embarrassed manner: "I believe you know a gentleman with whom I am also acquainted—Sir Philip Bruce-Errington."

Miss Vere raised her eyes with charming languor and a slow smile.

"Oh, yes!"

"He visits you, doesn't he?"

"Frequently!"

"I'm afraid you'll think me rude and inquisitive," continued Lady Winsleigh, with a coaxing air, "but—but may I ask——"

"Anything in the world," interrupted Violet, coolly. "Ask away! But I'm not bound to answer."

Lady Winsleigh reddened with indignation. "What an insulting creature!" she thought. But, after all, she had put herself in her present position, and she could not very well complain if she met with a rebuff. She made another effort.

"Sir Francis Lennox told me——" she began.

The Vere interrupted her with a cheerful laugh.

"Oh, you come from him, do you? Now, why didn't you tell me that at first? It's all right! You're a great friend of Lennie's, aren't you?"

Lady Winsleigh sat erect and haughty, a deadly chill of disgust and fear at her heart. This creature called her quondam lover "Lennie"—even as she herself had done—and she, the proud, vain woman of society and fashion, shuddered at the idea that there should be even this similarity between herself and the "thing" called Violet Vere. She replied, stiffly:

"I have known him a long time."

"He's a nice fellow," went on Miss Vere, easily—"a *leetle* stingy sometimes, but never mind that! You want to know about Sir Philip Errington, and I'll tell you. He's chosen to mix himself up with some affairs of mine——"

"What affairs?" asked Lady Winsleigh, rather eagerly.

"They don't concern you," returned Miss Vere, calmly, "and we needn't talk about them! But they concern Sir Philip—or he thinks they do, and insists on seeing me about them, and holding long conversations, which bore me excessively!" She yawned slightly, smothering her yawn in a dainty lace handkerchief, and then went on: "He's a moral young man, don't you know—and I never could endure moral men! I can't get on with them at all!"

"Then you don't like him?" questioned Lady Winsleigh, in rather a disappointed tone.

"No, I don't!" said the Vere, candidly. "He's not my sort. But, Lord bless you! I know how he's getting talk—— about

because he comes here—and serve him right too! He shouldn't meddle with my business." She paused suddenly and drew a letter from her pocket—laughed and tossed it across the table.

"You can read that, if you like," she said, indifferently. "He wrote it and sent it round to me last night."

Lady Winsleigh's eyes glistened eagerly—she recognized Errington's bold, clear hand at once, and as she read, an expression of triumph played on her features. She looked up presently and said:

"Have you any further use for this letter, Miss Vere? Or—will you allow me to keep it?"

The Vere seemed slightly suspicious of this proposal, but looked amused too.

"Why, what do you want it for?" she inquired, bluntly. "To tease him about me?"

Lady Winsleigh forced a smile. "Well—perhaps!" she admitted; then with an air of gentleness and simplicity she continued: "I think, Miss Vere, with you, that it is very wrong of Sir Philip—very absurd of him, in fact—to interfere with your affairs, whatever they may be—and as it is very likely annoying to you—"

"It is," interposed Violet, decidedly.

"Then, with the help of this letter—which, really—really—excuse me for saying it!—quite compromises him," and her ladyship looked amiably concerned about it, "I might perhaps persuade him not to—to intrude upon you—you understand? But if you object to part with the letter, never mind! If I did not fear to offend you, I should ask you to exchange it for—something more—well! let us say, something more substantial—"

"Don't beat about the bush!" said Violet, with a sudden oblivion of her company manners. "You mean money?"

Lady Winsleigh smiled. "As you put it so frankly, Miss Vere—" she began.

"Of course! I'm always frank," returned the Vere, with a loud laugh. "Besides, what's the good of pretending? Money's the only thing worth having—it pays your butcher, baker, and dressmaker—and how are you to get along if you *can't* pay them, I'd like to know! Lord! if all the letters I've got from fools were paying stock instead of waste-paper, I'd shut up shop and leave the Brilliant to look out for itself!"

Lady Winsleigh felt she had gained her object, and she could now afford to be gracious.

"That would be a great loss to the world," she remarked, sweetly. "An immense loss! London could scarcely get on without Violet Vere!" Here she opened her purse and took out some bank-notes, which she folded and slipped inside an envelope.

"Then I may have the letter?" she continued.

"You may and welcome!" returned Violet.

Lady Winsleigh instantly held out the envelope, which she as instantly clutched. "Especially if you'll tell Sir Philip Errington to mind his own business!" She paused, and a dark flush mounted to her brow—one of those sudden flushes that purpled rather than crimsoned her face. "Yes," she repeated, "as he's a friend of yours, just tell him I said he was to mind his own business! Lord! what does he want to come here and preach at me for! I don't want his sermons! Moral!" here she laughed rather hoarsely, "I'm as moral as any one on the stage! Who says I'm not? Take 'em all round—there's not a soul behind the foot-lights more open and above-board than I am!"

And her eyes flashed defiantly.

"She's been drinking!" thought Lady Winsleigh, disgustedly. In fact, the "Vere's own" tippie had begun to take its usual effect, which was to make the Vere herself both blatant and boisterous.

"I'm sure," said her ladyship with frigid politeness, "that you are everything that is quite charming, Miss Vere! I have a great respect for the—the ornaments of the English stage. Society has quite thrown down its former barriers, you know—the members of your profession are received in the very best circles—"

"I ain't!" said Violet, with ungrammatical candor. "Your Irvings and your Terrys, your Mary Andersons and your Langtrys—they're good enough for your fine drawing-rooms, and get more invitations out than they can accept. And none of them have got half my talent, I tell you! Lord bless my soul! if they're respectable enough for you—so am I!"

And she struck her hand emphatically on the table. Lady Winsleigh looked at her with a slight smile.

"I must really say good-bye!" she said, rising and gathering her furs about her. "I could talk with you all the morning, Miss Vere, but I have so many engagements! Besides, I mustn't detain you! I'm so much obliged to you for your kind reception of me!"

"Don't mention it!" and Violet glanced her over with a kind of sullen sarcasm. "I'm bound to please Lennie when I can, you know!"

Again Lady Winsleigh shivered a little, but forced herself to shake hands with the notorious stage Jezebel.

"I shall come and see you in the new piece," she said, graciously. "I always take a box on first nights! And your dancing is so exquisite! The very poetry of motion! So pleased to have met you! Good-bye!"

And with a few more vague compliments and remarks about the weather, Lady Winsleigh took her departure. Left alone, the actress threw herself back in her chair and laughed.

"That woman's up to some mischief," she exclaimed *sotto voce*.

"and so is Lennie! I wonder what's their little game? I don't care, as long as they'll keep the high and mighty Errington in his place. I'm tired of him! Why does he meddle with *my* affairs?" Her brows knitted into a frown. "As if he or anybody else could persuade me to go back to—" she paused, and bit her lips angrily. Then she opened the envelope Lady Winsleigh had left with her, and pulled out the bank-notes inside. "Let me see—five, ten, fifteen, twenty! Not bad pay, on the whole! It'll just cover the bill for my plush mantle."

Lady Winsleigh, on her way home, was tormented by sundry uncomfortable thoughts and sharp pricks of conscience. Her interview with Violet Vere had instinctively convinced her that Sir Philip was innocent of the intrigue imputed to him, and yet—the letter she had now in her possession seemed to prove him guilty. And though she felt herself to be playing a vile part, she could not resist the temptation of trying what the effect would be of this compromising document on Thelma's trusting mind. It was undoubtedly a very incriminating epistle—any lawyer would have said as much while blandly pocketing his fee for saying it. It was written off in evident haste, and ran as follows:

"Let me see you once more on the subject you know of. Why will you not accept the honorable position offered to you? There shall be no stint of money—all the promises I have made I am quite ready to fulfill—you shall lose nothing by being gentle. Surely you cannot continue to seem so destitute of all womanly feeling and pity? I will not believe that you would so deliberately condemn to death a man who has loved, and who loves you still so faithfully, and who, without you, is utterly weary of life and broken-hearted! Think once more—and let my words carry more weight with you!

"BRUCE-ERRINGTON."

This was all, but more than enough!

"I wonder what he means," thought Lady Winsleigh. "It looks as if he were in love with the Vere and she refused to reciprocate. It *must* be that. And yet that doesn't accord with what the creature herself said about his 'preaching at her.' He wouldn't do that if he were in love."

She studied every word of the letter again and again, and finally folded it up carefully and placed it in her pocket-book.

"Innocent or guilty, Thelma must see it," she decided. "I wonder how she'll take it! If she wants a proof—it's one she'll scarcely deny. Some women would fret themselves to death over it—but I shouldn't wonder if she sat down under it quite calmly without a word of complaint." She frowned a little. "Why must *she* always be superior to others of her sex! How I detest that still, solemn smile of hers and those big baby-blue eyes! I think if Philip had married any other woman than *she*—a woman more like

the rest of us who'd have gone with her time—I could have forgiven him more easily. But to pick up a Norwegian peasant and set her up as a sort of moral finger-post to society—and then to go and compromise himself with Violet Vere—that's a kind of thing I *can't* stand! I'd rather be anything in the world than a humbug!"

Many people desire to be something they are not, and her ladyship quite unconsciously echoed this rather general sentiment. She was, without knowing it, such an adept in society humbug that she even humbugged herself. She betrayed herself as she betrayed others, and told little soothing lies to her own conscience as she told them to her friends. There are plenty of women like her—women of pleasant courtesy and fashion to whom truth is mere coarseness—and with whom polite lying passes for perfect breeding. She was not aware, as she was driven along Park Lane to her own residence, that she carried with her on the box of her brougham a private detective in the person of Briggs. Perched stiffly on his seat, with arms tightly folded, this respectable retainer was quite absorbed in meditation, so much so that he exchanged not a word with his friend, the coachman beside him. He had his own notions of propriety—he considered that his mistress had no business whatever to call on an actress of Violet Vere's repute—and he resolved that whether he were reproved for over-officiousness or not, nothing should prevent him from casually mentioning to Lord Winsleigh the object of her ladyship's drive that morning.

"For," mused Briggs, gravely, "a lady's responsibilities, and, 'owever she forgets 'erself, appearances 'as to be kep' up."

With the afternoon, the fog which had hung over the city all day deepened and darkened. Thelma had lunched with Mrs. Lorimer, and had enjoyed much pleasant chat with that kindly, cheerful old lady. She had confided to her part of the story of Sir Francis Lennox's conduct, carefully avoiding every mention of the circumstance which had given rise to it—namely, the discussion about Violet Vere. She merely explained that she had suddenly fainted, in which condition Sir Francis had taken advantage of her helplessness to insult her.

Mrs. Lorimer was highly indignant. "Tell your husband all about it, my dear!" she advised. "He's big enough and strong enough to give that little snob a good trouncing! My patience! I wish George were in London—he'd lend a hand and welcome!"

And the old lady nodded her head violently over the sock she was knitting—the making of socks for her beloved son was her principal occupation and amusement.

"But I hear," said Thelma, "that it is against the law to strike any one, no matter how you have been insulted. If so—then Philip would be punished for attacking Sir Francis, and that would not be fair."

"You didn't think of that, child, when you struck Lennox your-

self," returned Mrs. Lorimer, laughing. "And I guarantee you gave him a good hard blow—and serve him right! Never mind what comes of it, my dearie—just tell your husband as soon as ever he comes home, and let him take the matter into his own hands. He's a fine man—he'll know how to defend the pretty wife he loves so well!" And she smiled, while her shining knitting-needles clicked faster than ever.

Thelma's face saddened a little. "I think I am not worthy of his love," she said, sorrowfully.

Mrs. Lorimer looked at her with some inquisitiveness.

"What makes you say that, my dear?"

"Because I feel it so much," she replied. "Dear Mrs. Lorimer, you cannot, perhaps, understand, but when he married me, it seemed as if the old story of the king and the beggar-maid were being repeated over again. I sought nothing but his love—his love was, and is my life! These riches—these jewels and beautiful things he surrounds me with—I do not care for them at all, except for the reason that he wishes me to have them. I scarcely understand their value, for I have been poor all my life, and yet I have wanted nothing. I do not think wealth is needful to make one happy. But love—ah! I could not live without it—and now—now—" She paused, and her eyes filled with sudden tears.

"Now what?" asked Mrs. Lorimer, gently.

"Now," continued the girl in a low voice, "my heart is always afraid! Yes, I am afraid of losing my husband's love. Ah, do not laugh at me, dear Mrs. Lorimer! You know people who are much together sometimes get tired—tired of seeing the same face always—the same form—"

"Are *you* tired, dearie?" asked the old lady, meaningly.

"I! Tired of Philip? I am only happy when he is with me!" And her eyes deepened with passionate tenderness. "I would wish to live and die beside him, and I should not care if I never saw another human face than his!"

"Well, and don't you think he has the same feelings for you?"

"Men are different, I think," returned Thelma, musingly. "Now, love is everything to me—but it may not be everything to Philip. I do believe that love is only part of a man's life, while it is *all* a woman's. Clara told me once that most husbands wearied of their wives, though they would not always confess it—"

"Clara Winsleigh's modern social doctrines are false, my dear!" interrupted Mrs. Lorimer, quickly. "She isn't satisfied with her own marriage, and she thinks everybody must be as discontented as herself. Now, my husband and I lived always together for five-and-twenty years, and we were lovers to the last day, when my darling died with his hands in mine—and—and—if it hadn't been for my boy—I should have died too!"

And two bright tears fell glittering on the old lady's knitting.

Thelma took her hand and kissed it fondly. "I can understand that," she said, softly; "but still—still I do believe it is difficult to keep love when you have won it! It is, perhaps, easy to win—but I am sure it is hard to keep!"

Mrs. Lorimer looked at her earnestly.

"My dear child, don't let that frivolous Winsleigh woman put nonsense into your pretty head. You are too sensible to take such a morbid view of things—and you mustn't allow your wholesome fresh nature to be contaminated by the petulant, wrong-headed notions that cloud the brains of idle, fashionable, useless women. Believe me, good men don't tire of their wives—and Sir Philip is a good man. Good wives never weary their husbands—and you are a good wife—and you will be a good, sweet mother. Think of that new delight so soon coming for you, and leave all the modern, crazy, one-sided notions of human life to the French and Russian novelists. Tut tut!" continued the old lady, tenderly. "A nice little ladyship you are—worrying yourself about nothing! Send Philip to me when he comes home. I'll scold him for leaving his bird to mope in her London cage!"

"I do not mope," declared Thelma. "And you must not scold him, please! Poor boy! He is working so very hard, and has so much to attend to. He wants to distinguish himself for—for my sake!"

"That looks very much as if he were tired of you!" laughed Mrs. Lorimer. "Though I dare say you'd like him to stay at home and make love to you all day! Silly girl! You want the world to be a sort of Arcadia, with you as Phyllis, and Sir Philip as Corydon! My dear, we're living in the nineteenth century, and the days of fond shepherds and languishing shepherdesses are past!"

Thelma laughed, too, and felt soon ashamed of her depression. The figure of Violet Vere now and then danced before her like a mocking will-o'-the-wisp; but her pride forbade her to mention this—the actual source of all her vague troubles.

She left Mrs. Lorimer's house, which was near Holland Park, about four o'clock, and as she was passing Church Street, Kensington, she bade her coachman drive up to the Carmelite Church there, familiarly known as the "Carms." She entered the sacred edifice, where the service of benediction was in progress; and, kneeling down, she listened to the exquisite strains of the solemn music that pealed through those dim and shadowy aisles, and a sense of the most perfect peace settled soothingly on her soul. Claspings her gentle hands, she prayed with innocent and heartfelt earnestness—not for herself—never for herself—but always for that dear, most dear one, for whom every beat of her true heart was a fresh vow of undying and devoted affection.

"Dear God!" she whispered, "if I love him too much, forgive me! Thou, who art all Love, wilt pardon me this excess of love!"

Bless my darling always, and teach me how to be more worthy of Thy goodness and his tenderness!"

And when she left the church, she was happier and more light-hearted than she had been for many a long day. She drove home, heedless of the fog and cold, dismal aspect of the weather, and resolved to go and visit Lady Winsleigh in the evening, so that when Philip came back on the morrow, she might be able to tell him that she had amused herself and had not been lonely.

But when she arrived at her own door, Morris, who opened it, informed her that Lady Winsleigh was waiting in the drawing-room to see her, and had been waiting some time. Thelma hastened thither immediately, and held out her hands joyously to her friend.

"I am so sorry you have had to wait, Clara," she began. "Why did you not send word and say you were coming? Philip is away and will not be back to-night, and I have been lunching with Mrs. Lorimer, and— Why, what makes you look so grave?"

"Do I look grave, Thelma?" she said with a slight smile. "Well, perhaps I've a reason for my gravity. And so your husband is away?"

"Yes. He went quite early this morning—a telegram summoned him and he was obliged to go." Here she drew up a chair to the fire and began to loosen her wraps. "Sit down, Clara! I will ring for tea."

"No, don't ring," said Lady Winsleigh. "Not yet! I want to talk to you privately." She sank languidly on a velvet lounge and looked Thelma straight in the eyes.

"Dear Thelma," she continued, in a sweetly tremulous, compassionate voice. "Can you bear to hear something very painful and shocking, something that I'm afraid will grieve you very much?"

The color fled from the girl's fair face—her eyes grew startled.

"What do you mean, Clara? Is it anything about—about Philip?"

Lady Winsleigh bent her head in assent, but remained silent.

"If," continued Thelma, with a little return of the rosy hue to her cheeks, "if it is something else about that—that person at the theater, indeed, Clara, I would rather not hear it! I think I have been wrong in listening to any such stories—it is so seldom that gossip of any kind is true. It is not a wife's duty to receive scandals about her husband. And suppose he does see Miss Vere, how do I know that it may not be on business for some friend of his?—because I do know that on that night when he went behind the scenes at the Brilliant, he said it was on business. Mr. Lovelace used often to go and see Miss Mary Anderson, all to persuade her to take a play written by a friend of his—and Philip, who is always kind-hearted, may perhaps be doing something of the same sort. I feel I have been wicked to have even a small doubt

of my husband's love—so, Clara, do not let us talk any more on a subject which only displeases me."

"You must choose your own way of life, of course," said Lady Winsleigh, coldly. "But you draw rather foolish comparisons, Thelma. There is a wide difference between Mary Anderson and Violet Vere. Besides, Mr. Lovelace is a bachelor—he can do as he likes and go where he likes without exciting comment. However, whether you are angry with me or not, I feel I should not be your true friend if I did not show you—*this*. You know your husband's writing!"

And she drew out the fatal letter, and continued, watching her victim as she spoke. "This was sent by Sir Philip to Violet Vere last night—she gave it to me herself this morning."

Thelma's hand trembled as she took the paper.

"Why should I read it?" she faltered, mechanically.

Lady Winsleigh raised her eyebrows and frowned impatiently.

"Why—why? Because it is your duty to do so! Have you no pride? Will you allow your husband to write such a letter as that to another woman—and *such* a woman too!—without one word of remonstrance? You owe it to yourself—to your own sense of honor—to resent and resist such treatment on his part! Surely the deepest love cannot pardon deliberate injury and insult."

"My love can pardon anything," answered the girl in a low voice, and then slowly, very slowly she opened the folded sheet—slowly she read every word it contained—words that stamped themselves one by one on her bewildered brain and sent it reeling into darkness and vacancy. She felt sick and cold—she stared fixedly at her husband's familiar handwriting. "A man who has loved and who loves you still, and who without you is utterly weary and broken-hearted!"

Thus he wrote of himself to—to Violet Vere! It seemed incredible—yet it was true! She heard a rushing sound in her ears—that room swung round dizzily before her eyes—yet she sat, still, calm, and cold, holding the letter and speaking no word.

Lady Winsleigh watched her, irritated at her passionless demeanor.

"Well!" she exclaimed at last. "Have you nothing to say?"

Thelma looked up, her eyes burning with an intense feverish light.

"Nothing!" she replied.

"*Nothing?*" repeated her ladyship with emphatic astonishment.

"Nothing against Philip," continued the girl, steadily. "For the blame is not his, but mine! That he is weary and heart-broken must be my fault—though I cannot yet understand what I have done. But it must be something, because if I were all that he wished he would not have grown so tired." She paused and

her pale lips quivered. "I am sorry," she went on with dreamy pathos, "sorrow for him than for myself, because now I see I am in the way of his happiness." A quiver of agony passed over her face—she fixed her large bright eyes on Lady Winsleigh, who instinctively shrank from the solemn speechless despair of that penetrating gaze.

"Who gave you this letter, Clara?" she asked, calmly.

"I told you before—Miss Vere herself."

"Why did she give it to you?" continued Thelma in a dull, sad voice.

Lady Winsleigh hesitated and stammered a little. "Well, because—because I asked her if the stories about Sir Philip were true. And she begged me to ask him not to visit her so often." Then, with an additional thought of malice, she said softly: "She doesn't wish to wrong you, Thelma—of course, she's not a very good woman, but I think she feels sorry for you."

The girl uttered a smothered cry of anguish, as though she had been stabbed to the heart. She!—to be actually *pitied* by Violet Vere, because she had been unable to keep her husband's love! This idea tortured her very soul—but she was silent.

"I thought you were my friend, Clara?" she said suddenly with a strange wistfulness.

"So I am, Thelma," murmured Lady Winsleigh, a guilty flush coloring her cheeks.

"You have made me very miserable," went on Thelma gravely, and with pathetic simplicity, "and I am sorry indeed that we ever met. I was so happy till I knew you!—and yet I was very fond of you! I am sure you mean everything for the best, but I cannot think it is so. And it is all so dark and desolate now. Why have you taken such pains to make me sad? Why have you so often tried to make me doubt my husband's love? Why have you come to-day so quickly to tell me I have lost it? But for you I might never have known this sorrow—I might have died soon, in happy ignorance, believing in my darling's truth as I believe in God!"

Her voice broke, and a hard sob choked her utterance. For once Lady Winsleigh's conscience smote her—for once she felt ashamed, and dared not offer consolation to the innocent soul she had so wantonly stricken. For a minute or two there was silence, broken only by the monotonous ticking of the clock and the crackling of the fire.

Presently Thelma spoke again. "I will ask you to go away now and leave me, Clara," she said, simply. "When the heart is sorrowful, it is best to be alone. Good-bye!" And she gently held out her hand.

"Poor Thelma!" said Lady Winsleigh, taking it with an affection of tenderness. "What will you do?"

Thelma did not answer; she sat mute and rigid.

"You are thinking unkindly of me just now," continued Clara, softly; "but I felt it was my duty to tell you the worst at once. It's no good living in a delusion! I'm very, very sorry for you, Thelma!"

Thelma remained perfectly silent. Lady Winsleigh moved toward the door, and, as she opened it, looked back at her. The girl might have been a lifeless figure for any movement that could be perceived about her. Her face was white as marble—her eyes were fixed on the sparkling fire—her very hands looked stiff and pallid as wax, as they lay clasped in her lap—the letter—the cruel letter—had fallen at her feet. She seemed as one in a trance of misery, and so Lady Winsleigh left her.

CHAPTER IX.

O my lord, O Love,
I have laid my life at thy feet;
Have thy will thereof
For what shall please thee is sweet!

SWINBURNE.

SHE roused herself at last. Unclasping her hands, she pushed back her hair from her brows and sighed heavily. Shivering as with intense cold, she rose from the chair she had so long occupied, and stood upright, mechanically gathering around her her long fur mantle that she had not as yet taken off. Catching sight of the letter where it lay, a gleaming speck of white on the rich dark hues of the carpet, she picked it up and read it through again calmly and comprehensively—then folded it up carefully as though it were something of inestimable value. Her thoughts were a little confused—she could only realize clearly two distinct things—first, that Philip was unhappy—secondly, that she was in the way of his happiness. She did not pause to consider how this change in him had been effected—moreover, she never imagined that the letter he had written could refer to any one but himself. Hers was a nature that accepted facts as they appeared—she never sought for ulterior motives or disguised meanings. True, she could not understand her husband's admiration for Violet Vere, "But then," she thought, "many other men admire her too. And so it is certain there must be something about her that wins love—something I cannot see!"

And presently she put aside all other considerations, and only pondered on one thing—how should she remove herself from the path of her husband's pleasure? For she had no doubt but that she was an obstacle to his enjoyment. He had made promises to Violet Vere which he was "ready to fulfill"—he offered her "an honorable position"—he desired her "not to condemn him to death"—he besought her to let his words "carry more weight with her."