

Marion Arleigh's Penance eBook

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[Illustration]

Marion Arleigh's Penance

By Charlotte M. Braeme.

Author of "Dora Thorne," "Madolin's Lover," "Lord Ellesmere's Wife," "A Rose in Thorns," "The Belle of Lynn," Etc.

CHAPTER I.

Three o'clock on a warm June afternoon. The great heat has caused something like a purple haze to cloud over the deep blue of the sapphire sky. There is not one breath of wind to stir the leaves or cool the flushed faces of those whose duties call them out on this sultry June day. Away in the deep green heart of the broad land broad streams are flowing; in the very heart of the green woods there is cool, silent shade; by the borders of the sea, where the waves break with a low, musical murmur, there is a cooling breeze; but here in London on this bright June afternoon there is nothing to lessen the white, intense heat, and even the flowers exposed for sale in the streets are drooping, the crimson roses look thirsting for dew, the white lilies are fading, the bunches of mignonette give forth a fragrance sweet as the "song of the swan in dying," and the golden sun pours down its flood of rich, warm light over all.

Three o'clock, and the express leaves Euston Square for Scotland at a quarter past. The heat in the station is very great, the noise almost deafening; huge engines are pouring out volumes of steam, the shrill whistle sounds, porters are hurrying to and fro. The quarter-past three train is a great favorite—more people travel by that than by any other—and the platform is crowded by ladies, children, tourists, commercial gentlemen. There are very few of the humbler class. Ten minutes past three. The passengers are taking their places. The goddess of discord and noise reigns supreme, when from one of the smaller doors there glides, with soft, almost noiseless step, the figure of a woman.

She wore a long gray cloak that entirely shrouded her figure; a black veil hid her face so completely that not one feature could be seen. When she entered the station the change from the blinding glare outside to the shade within seemed to bewilder her. She stood for a few moments perfectly motionless; then she looked around her in a cautious, furtive manner, as though she would fain see if there was any one she recognized.

But in that busy crowd every one was intent on his or her business; no one had any attention to spare for her. She went with the same noiseless step to the booking office.



Most of the passengers had taken their tickets; she was one of the very last. She looked at the clerk in a vague, helpless way.

“Where to, ma’am?” he asked, for she had only said, “I want a ticket.”

“Where to?” she repeated. “Where does the train stop?”



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“It will stop at Chester and Crewe.”

“Then give me a ticket for Crewe,” she said, and, with a smile on his face, the clerk complied. She took the ticket and he gave her the change. She swept it into her purse with an absent, preoccupied manner, and he turned with a smile to one of his fellow-clerks, touching his forehead significantly.

“She is evidently on the road for Colney Hatch,” he observed. “If I had said the train would stop at Liliput, in my opinion she would have said, ‘Give me a ticket for there.’”

But the object of his remarks, all unconscious of them, had gone on to the platform. With the same appearance of not wishing to be seen, she looked into the carriages.

There was one almost empty; she entered it, took her seat in the corner, drew her veil still more closely over her face, and never raised her eyes.

A quarter past three; the bell rings loudly. There is a shrill whistle, and then, slowly at first, the train moves out of the station. A few minutes more, and the long walls, the numerous arches, are all left behind, and they are out in the blinding sunlight, hurrying through the clear, golden day as though life and death depended upon its speed. On, on, past the green meadows, where the hedgerows were filled with woodbines and wild roses, and the clover filled the air with fragrance; past gray old churches whose tapering spires pointed to heaven; past quiet homesteads sleeping in the sunshine; past silent, quaint villages and towns; past broad rivers and dark woods. Yet never once did the silent woman raise her eyes, never once did she look from the windows at the glowing landscape that lay on either side. Once, and once only, she caught a glimpse of the golden sunlight, and she turned away with a faint, sick, shuddering sigh.

Her fellow-passengers looked wonderingly at her. She never moved; her hands were tightly clasped, as one whose thoughts were all despairing: Once a lady addressed her, but she never heard the words. Silent, mute, and motionless, she might have been a marble statue, only that every now and then a quick, faint shiver came over her.

On through the fair, English counties, and the heat of the sun grew less. The birds came from their shelter in the leafy trees and began to sing; the flowers yielded their loveliest perfumes, and the sweet summer wind that blew in at the carriage windows was like the breath of Paradise.

Still she had neither spoken nor moved. Then the train stopped, and the sudden cessation from all sound made her start up suddenly, as though roused from painful dreams.

“Have we—have we passed Crewe?” she asked.



And then her fellow-passengers looked wonderingly at her, for the voice was like no other sound—no human sound; it was a faint gasp, as of one who had escaped a deadly peril, and was still faint with the remembrance of it.

“No,” replied a gentleman; “we have not reached Crewe yet. They are stopping for water, I should imagine. This is supposed to be one of the most out-of-the-way villages in England. It is called Redcliffe.”



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She gave one look through the open windows. There, behind the woods, a little village lay stretched and half hidden by the thick green foliage.

“I want to get out here,” she said, in the same faint voice.

Her fellow-travelers looked at each other, and their glances said plainly, “There is something strange about her; let her go.” A gentleman called the guard, and the woman, whose face was so carefully veiled, put something in his hand that shone like gold.

“Let me get out here,” she said, and without a word he unlocked the door, and she left the carriage. Those who remained behind breathed more freely after she had gone. That strange, mute presence had had a depressing effect on them all.

She looked neither to the right nor to the left, but made her way quickly to the green fields, where the golden silence of summer reigned. She walked there with hasty steps, looking behind her to see if she were pursued.

She opened the white gates and went into a field where the tall trees threw a deep shade. She sat down then, or, rather, flung herself on the ground with a vehement cry, like one who had suffered from a deadly pain without daring to murmur—one loud cry, and, from the sound of it, it was easy to tell that it came from a broken heart. She bowed her head against the rugged bark of a tree, and then fell into a deep slumber. The wearied limbs seemed to relax. To sleep as she did she must have been watching long.

When she opened her eyes again the afternoon had gone and the shadows of evening were falling. It was still bright and warm, but she shivered like one seized with mortal cold.

She rose and made her way to the quiet little village. It was almost out of the world, so completely was it hidden by the trees and hills. She reached the quiet little street at last. She looked at the windows of the houses, but the notice she wanted to see was not in any of them. At the end of the street she came to a narrow lane that led to the woods; half-way down the lane was a small cottage half buried in elder trees.

In the window hung a small placard—“Rooms to let.” She knocked at the door, which was opened by a kindly-looking elderly woman.

“You have rooms to let?” said the faint, low voice. “I want two.”

Then followed a few words as to terms, *etc.*, and the transaction was concluded.

“Shall my son fetch your luggage?” asked the landlady, Mrs. Hirste.



“I have no luggage,” she replied; then seeing something like a doubtful expression on the kindly face, she added; “I will pay you a month’s money in advance.”

That was quite satisfactory. Mrs. Hirste led the way to a pretty little parlor, which she showed with no little pride.

“This is the other room,” she said, throwing open the door of a pretty white chamber. “And now, is there anything I can get for you?”

“No,” replied the strange, weak voice. “I will ask when I want anything; for the present I only desire to be alone.”



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Mrs. Hirste withdrew, and her lodger immediately locked the door. Then she threw off the gray cloak and thick veil.

“I am alone,” she said—“alone and safe. Oh, if my wretched life be worth gratitude, thank God! thank God!”

She repeated the words with a burst of hysterical weeping. She knelt by the little white bed and buried her face in her hands. Deep, bitter sobs shook her whole frame; from her white lips came a low moan that betokened anguish too great for words. Then, when the passion of grief had subsided and she was exhausted, she rose and stood erect. Then one saw how superbly beautiful she was, although her face was stained with tears.

She was still young, not more than three-and-twenty; her figure was of rarest symmetry; when the great world knew her it had been accustomed to say that her figure resembled that of the celebrated Diana for the Louvre; there was the marvelous, free-spirited grace and matchless perfection.

She had the face and head of a young queen, a face of peerless beauty; a white, broad brow that might have worn a crown; eyes of the dark hue of the violets, with long fringes that rested on a cheek perfect in shape and color; brows straight, like those of a Greek goddess; lips sweet and proud—they were white now, and quivering, but the beauty of the mouth was unchanged.

So she stood in all the splendor of her grand loveliness. There is over her whole figure and face that indescribable something which tells that she is wife and mother both, that look of completed life.

The hands, so tightly clasped, are white and slender. There is no attribute of womanly loveliness that does not belong to her.

After a time she went to the window. Great crimson roses, wet with dew, and odorous woodbine peeped in as she opened it. The night-wind was heavy with the perfume of the sleeping flowers, the golden stars were shining in the sky, and she raised her pale, lovely face to the radiant heavens.

“My God!” she prayed, “take pity on me, and before I realize what has happened, let me die!”

“Let me die!” No other prayer went from her lips, although she sat there from sunset until the early dawn of the new day flushed in the glorious eastern skies.

While she sits there, with that despairing prayer rising from the depths of her despairing heart, we will tell the story of Marian Arleigh’s penance.



CHAPTER II.

“You cannot be cruel. You cannot think it is wrong to meet me. My whole life, with everything in it, belongs to you. If you told me to lie down here and die at your feet, I should do so and smile. Why do you say it is wrong, Marion?”

A lovely, child-like face was raised to the speaker.

“I do not know. I have a vague idea that anything requiring secrecy must be wrong. Is it not so?”

He laughed.



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“No, sweet. What would the great diplomatists of the world say to such a theory? Rather try to believe that what is stolen is sweet.”

She smiled, but the anxious expression still lingered on her lovely young face. He noticed it.

“As a rule, Marion, you are quite right. Concealments are odious. But there are exceptions—this is one—I love you; but I am only a poor artist, struggling to make a name. You, sweet, are rich and beautiful. From your high estate you smile upon me as a queen might smile on a subject. You are a true heroine. You are content 'to lose the world for love.'”

“I am content,” said the girl, with a little sigh of supreme happiness; “but I wish it were all open and straightforward. I wish you would go to my guardian and tell him you love me. Then tell Miss Carleton. Indeed, she would not be angry.”

“Do you know what would happen if I did as you advise, Marion?” he asked.

“Nothing would happen,” she replied; “and they would be pleased to see me happy.”

“You have to learn some of the world’s lessons yet,” he said. “If I were to go to Lord Ridsdale and say to him, ‘My Lord, I love your ward and she loves me,’ do you know what he would do?”

“No,” she replied, slowly.

“He would send for you at once, and take such measures as would prevent me from ever seeing you again. If I were to tell him, Marion, we should be parted forever. Could you bear that, darling?”

“No,” she replied, “I could not, Allan. If you think so, we—we will keep our secret a little longer.”

“Thank you,” he said, gratefully, kissing the little white hand clasped in his. “I knew you would not be cruel, Marion. You are so heroic and grand—so unlike other girls; you would not darken my solitary life for an absurd scruple—you would not refuse to see me, when the sight of you is the only sunbeam that cheers my life.”

The beautiful face brightened at his words.

“You will write to me, Marion—and, darling, my heart lives on your words—they are ever present with me. When I read one of your letters it seems to me your voice is whispering, and that whisper makes the only music that cheers my day. Tell me in your letters once, and once again, that you will be my wife, that you will love me, and never care for any one else.”



“I have told you so,” she said; “but if the words please you, I will tell you over and over again, as you say. You know I love you, Allan.”

“I know you are an angel!” cried the young man. “In all the wide world there is none like you.”

Then he clasped the little white hands more tightly in his own, and whispered sweet words to her that brought a bright flush to her face and a love light to her eyes. She drooped her head with the coy, pretty shyness of a bird, listening to words that seemed to her all poetry and music.

It was a pretty love scene. The lovers stood at the end of an old-fashioned orchard; the fruit hung ripe on the trees—golden-brown pears and purple plums, the grass under foot was thick and soft, the sun had set, the dew was falling, and the birds had gone to rest.



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The girl, standing under the trees, with downcast, blushing face and bright, clear eyes, was lovely as a poet's dream. She was not more than seventeen, and looked both young and childlike for that age. She had a face fair as a summer's morning, radiant with youth and happiness. Greuze might have painted her and immortalized her. She had a delicate color that was like the faint flush one sees inside a rose. She had eyes of the same beautiful blue as the purple heartsease, and great masses of golden-brown hair that fell in rich waves on her neck and shoulders.

She was patrician from the crown of her dainty head to the little feet; the slender, girlish figure was full of grace and symmetry, the white, rounded throat and beautiful shoulders were fit models for a sculptor. She had pretty white hands, with a soft, rose-leaf flush on the fingers. She was a lovely girl, fair, high-bred and elegant, and she gave promise of a most superb and magnificent womanhood. Such was Marion Arleigh on this June evening. The young man by her side was handsome after a certain style; the impression his face left upon every one was that he was not to be trusted; his dark eyes were not frank and clear, the thin lips were shrewd, with lines about them that betokened cruelty; it was a face from which children shrank instinctively, and women as a rule did not love. They stood side by side under the shade of an elder tree. Plainly as patrician was written on her beautiful face and figure, plebeian was imprinted on his. He was tall, but there was no high-bred grace, no ease of manner, no courteous dignity such as distinguishes the true English gentleman. His face expressed passion, but half a dozen meaner emotions were there as well. None were perceptible to the girl by his side. She thought him perfection and nothing else.

How comes Marion Arleigh, the heiress of Hanton, ward of Lord Ridsdale, one of the proudest men in England, and pupil of Miss Carleton, to be alone in the sweet, soft eveningtide with Allan Lyster, whose name was not of the fairest repute among men?

If Lord Ridsdale had known it, his anger would have been without bounds; if Miss Carleton had guessed it, she would have been too shocked ever to have admitted Miss Arleigh in her doors again. How came she there? It was the old story of girlish imprudence, of girlish romance and folly, of a vivid imagination and bright, warm poetical fancy wrongly influenced and led astray. Much may be forgiven her, for lovely Marion Arleigh, one of the richest heiresses in England, was an orphan. No mother's love had taught her wisdom. She had no memory of a mother's gentle warning, or sweet and tender wisdom. Her mother died when she was born, and her father, John Arleigh, of Hanton, did not long survive his wife. He left his child to the care of Lady Ridsdale—his sister—but she died when Marion was four years old, and Lord Ridsdale, not knowing what better to do, sent his little ward to school. He thought first of having a governess at home for her; that would have necessitated a chaperon, and for that he was not inclined.



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“Send her to school,” was the advice given him by all his lady friends, and Lord Ridsdale followed it, as being the safest and wisest plan yet suggested to him. She was sent first to a lady’s school at Brighton, then to Paris, with Lady Livingstone’s daughters, then to Miss Carleton’s, and Miss Carleton was by universal consent considered the most efficient finishing governess in England.

Marion was very clever; she was romantic to a fault; she idealized everything and every one with whom she came into contact. She had a poet’s soul, loving most dearly all things bright and beautiful; she was very affectionate, very impressionable, able, generous with a queenly lavishness, truthful, noble. Had she been trained by a careful mother, Marion Arleigh would have been one of the noblest of women; but the best of school training cannot compensate for the wise and loving discipline of home. She grew up a most accomplished and lovely girl; the greatest fault that could be found with her was that she was terribly unreal. She knew nothing of the practical part of life. She idealized every one so completely that she never really understood any one.

Lord Ridsdale wondered often what he was to do with this beautiful and gifted girl when her school days were ended.

“She must be introduced to the world then,” he thought; “and I fervently hope she’ll soon be married.”

But as her coming to Ridsdale House would cause so great an alteration in his way of life, he deferred that event as long as it was possible to do so.

When Adelaide Lyster came as a governess-pupil to Miss Carleton’s school Marion Arleigh was just sixteen. Miss Lyster was not long before she knew the rank and social importance of her beautiful young pupil.

“When you have the world at your feet,” she would say to her sometimes, “I shall ask you a favor.”

“Ask me now!” said Marion, and then Miss Lyster told her how she had a brother—a genius—an artist—whose talent equaled that of Raphael, but that he was unknown to the world and had no one to take an interest in his fortunes.

“One word from you when you are a great lady will be of more value to my brother than even the praise of critics,” she would say; and Miss Arleigh, flattered by the speech, would promise that word should be spoken. Adelaide Lyster spent long hours in talking of her brother—of his genius, his struggles, his thirst for appreciation; the portrait she drew of him was so beautiful that Marion Arleigh longed to know him. Her wish was gratified at last. The drawing master who for many years had attended the school died, and Adelaide besought Miss Carleton to engage her brother. The astute lady was at first unwilling. Allan Lyster was young, and she did not think a young master at all

suitable. But Adelaide represented to her that, although young, he was highly gifted—he could teach well, and his terms were lower than most masters.

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“There could be no danger,” she said, “Miss Carleton’s pupils were all rich and well born—the young artist poor and unknown. They were all educated with one idea, namely, that the end and aim of their existence was to marry well, was to secure a title, if possible—diamonds, an opera box, a country house and town mansion. With that idea engraven so firmly on heart, soul and mind, it was not possible that there could be any danger in receiving a few drawing lessons from a penniless, unknown artist like Allan Lyster.”

So Miss Carleton, for once laying aside her usual caution, engaged him, and Adelaide Lyster told her favorite pupil as soon as the engagement was made. The governess-pupil had laid her plans well. On her first entrance into that high school where every girl had either riches, beauty or high birth, Adelaide Lyster had sworn to herself to make the best use of her opportunities, and to secure wealth at least for this her beloved brother. Allan should marry one of the girls, and then his fortune in life would be made. After passing them all in review she decided on Marion Arleigh. Not only was she the wealthiest heiress, but in her case there were no parents to interfere—no father with stern refusal, no mother with tearful pleadings. When she was of age she could please herself—marry Allan, if he would persuade her to do so, and then he would be master of all her wealth. She began her management of the somewhat difficult business with tact and diplomacy worthy of a gray-headed diplomatist. She spoke so incessantly of her brother—praising his genius, his great gifts—that Marion could not help thinking of him. She studied the character of this young heiress, and played so adroitly upon her weakness that Marion Arleigh, in her sweet girlish simplicity, had no chance against her.

When Allan Lyster came, to all outward appearances no one could have been more reserved; he rarely addressed his pupils, never except on matters connected with the lesson. He never looked at them. Miss Carleton flattered herself that she had found a treasure. Allan was not only the cheapest master she had ever had, but he was also a model of discretion. Yet none the less had he adopted his sister’s ideas and made up his mind to woo and win Marion Arleigh.

“It is well worth your while to try,” said his sister. “There are no parents to interfere; she will be her own mistress the very day she is of age.”

“But she is only about seventeen now,” said Allan; “there will be so long to wait.”

“The prize is well worth waiting for. Half the peers in England would be proud and thankful to win it. If you play your cards well, Allan, in one way or another you must succeed. Let me tell you the most important thing to do.”

“What is that?” he asked, looking admiringly into his sister’s face.

“Persuade her to write to you, and mind that her letters to you contain a promise of marriage. Do you see the importance of that?”



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“You are a clever woman, Adelaide; with you to help me I cannot fail.”

And he did not fail. Adelaide had arranged her plans too skillfully for that. She began by saying how much Allan admired Marion; then, seeing the idea was not displeasing to the young heiress, she gradually told her how he was certain to die of love for her.

If a wise mother had trained the girl, she would have been less susceptible; as it was, the notion of a handsome young artist dying for her was not at all unpleasant. She was seventeen, and had never had a lover. Other girls had talked about their flirtations; nothing of the kind had ever occurred to her. True, whenever she went out she could not help noticing how men’s eyes lingered on her face; but that one should love her—love her so dearly as to die for her, was to her romantic imagination strange as it was beautiful. Adelaide Lyster could play upon her feelings and emotions skilfully as she played upon the chords of a piano.

“I was saying to Allan yesterday how sorry I am that he ever came to Miss Carleton’s. What do you think he said?”

“I cannot tell,” replied Miss Arleigh, her beautiful young face flushing as she spoke.

“He said, ah! that he would rather love you unhappily than be blessed with the love of a queen; he would rather look upon your face once than gaze for years on the loveliest of all created women. How he worships you! Are all men of genius destined to love unhappily, I wonder?”

“Is he so very unhappy?” asked the young lady, sadly.

“Yes; I do not believe he knows what peace or rest is. He never sleeps or enjoys himself as other people do.”

“Why not?” asked the girl, to whom this flattery was most sweet and pleasant.

“His life is one long thought of you. If you were poor, he would not mind; there would be some hope of winning you; he would not let any other barrier than riches stand before him—that is one that honorable men cannot climb.”

“I do not see it,” said Miss Arleigh.

“Because you do not know the world. You are so noble in mind yourself, you do not even understand want of nobility in others. Do you not know that there are many people who would pretend to love you for the sake of your fortune?”

“I wish I had no fortune,” said the young girl, wistfully. “How shall I know, Adelaide, when any one loves me for myself?”

“When they are, like Allan, willing to die rather than to own their love; willing to suffer everything and anything rather than be suspected of fortune-hunting.”

“No one could suspect your brother Allan of that.”

“No one who knows him. But, Miss Arleigh, what would your guardian, Lord Ridsdale, say—what would Miss Carleton say—if Allan went to them, as I know he wants to do, and asked permission to work for you, to try and win you? Listen to me—I am telling you the truth. They would not be content with insult, with dismissing him ignominiously, but they would mar his future. You do not know the power vested in the hands of the rich and mighty. An artist must court public opinion, and if one in the position of Lord Ridsdale was his determined enemy and foe, he could expect nothing but ruin.”



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“That is not fair,” said the heiress, thoughtfully.

“Then again, if you were to tell Miss Carleton, she would dismiss my brother, she would complain of him, she would ruin him as completely as it was in human power to do so. The world is not generous; it is only noble souls that believe in noble souls. Such people as those would always persist in considering Allan a fortune-hunter and nothing more.”

All of which arguments Miss Lyster intended to impress upon her pupil’s mind, for this one great object of keeping Allan’s wooing a secret. If that could be until Miss Arleigh was twenty-one, and then she could be persuaded into marrying him, their fortunes were made.

That was her chief object. She knew Miss Arleigh was naturally frank, open and candid; that she had an instinctive dislike of all underhand behavior; that she could never be induced to look with favor on anything mean; but if the romance and generous truth of her character could be played upon, they were safe.

She had the gift of eloquence, this woman who so cruelly betrayed her trust. She talked well, and the most subtle and clever of arguments came to her naturally. Her words had with them a charm and force that the young could not resist. Let those who misuse such talents remember they must answer to the Most High God for them. Adelaide Lyster used hers to betray a trust, that ought to have been held most sacred. She cared little how she influenced Marion’s mind. She cared little what false notions, what false philosophy, what wrong ideas, she taught her, provided only she could win her interests, her liking and love for Allan.

CHAPTER IV.

Miss Carleton had been with her young ladies for a promenade—people less elegant would have said for a walk—Miss Carleton rejoiced in long words. “Young ladies, prepare for a promenade,” was her daily formula. They had just returned, and Miss Arleigh missed Adelaide Lyster.

“Why did not Miss Lyster go out with us today?” she asked of another governess.

“She complained of headache, and seemed quite out of spirits,” was the reply.

Marion hastened to her; she was of a most loving disposition, this motherless girl—tender and kind of heart, and there was no one for her to love—no father, mother, sister or brother; she was very rich, but quite alone in the world. She hastened to Miss Lyster’s room, and found that young lady completely prostrated by what she called a nervous headache.



“You have been crying, Adelaide,” said Marion. “It’s no use either denying it or turning your head so that I cannot see you. What is the matter?”

“I wish you had not come here, Marion. I did not want you to know my trouble.”

“But I must know it,” and the girl’s arms were clasped around her. She stooped down and kissed the treacherous face. “I must know it,” she continued, impetuously; “when I say must, Adelaide, I mean it.”



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"I dare not tell you—I cannot tell you, Miss Arleigh. It would have been well for my brother had he never seen your face."

"You have heard from him, then—it is about him?" and the fair face flushed.

"Yes, it is about him. I have had a letter from him this morning. He says that he must give up his appointment here and go abroad—that he cannot bear the torture of seeing you; and if he does go abroad, I shall never see him again."

The lips that had been caressing her quivered slightly.

"He is all I have in the world," continued the governess; "the only gleam of light or love in my troubled life. Oh, Marion! if he goes from me—goes to hide his sorrow and his love where I shall never see him again—what will become of me? I am in despair. The very thought of it breaks my heart."

And Miss Lyster sobbed as though she meant every word of it. The heiress bent over her.

"What can I do to help you? I am so sorry, Adelaide."

"There is only one thing you could do," replied the other, "and I dare not even mention it. My brother must die. Oh, fatal hour in which he ever saw the beauty of that face!"

"Tell me what the one thing is, Adelaide. If it is possible, I will do it."

"I dare not mention it. It is useless to name it. Men like my brother throw their genius, their life and love, under the feet of girls like you; but they meet with no return."

"Tell me what it is," repeated the other, her generous heart touched by the thought of receiving so much and giving so little.

"If you would but consent to see him—I know you will not, but it is the only means of saving him—if you expressed but the faintest shadow of a wish, he would stay; I know he would."

Marion hesitated.

"How can I interfere?" she said. "How can I express any such wish to him?"

"I knew you would not. That is why I did not care to tell you my trouble. Why should you—so rich, so happy, so beautiful—why should you interest yourself in the fate of people like us? My brother is a genius, not a lord."



“I wish,” cried the girl, impatiently, “that you would not be always talking to me about my riches. I cannot help them. You make me wretched. It is not because I am rich that I hesitate—how absurd you are, Adelaide!—but because your brother is a stranger to me, and I have no right to interfere in his life.”

“Is that all? I fancied you considered him so far beneath you. Genius is Godlike, but it is not money. Ah, Marion, if that be all, save him! Save him! He is all I have in the world! He is so young, so sensitive, so clever, so proud, you could influence him with half a word. If you said to him, ‘Stay,’ he would remain, though kings and emperors should summon him. Will you see him, and say that one word, Marion, for my sake?”



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It was very pleasant to know that one word from her could influence the life of this great unknown genius; very pleasant to believe that she was loved so dearly, so entirely, that even an emperor could not take the man who worshiped her from her side. It seems weak that she should so easily believe. Insight gives one a false estimate of her character; but there are many things to be considered before judging her. She was romantic in the highest degree; she was all ideality and poetry. She had no idea of the realities of life; she had the vaguest possible idea that there was wickedness in the world, but that ever deceit or treachery should come near her was an idea that never entered her romantic mind. She was too old to be at school; had her mother been living, she would have been removed from there. She would have had friends and admirers, her love and affection would have found proper objects, and the great calamity of her life would have been averted. Heaven help and guide any foolish, romantic girl left without the guidance of mother or friend!

She thought nothing of the impropriety of meeting the young artist unknown to any one. She remembered only the romance of it—a genius, a handsome young genius was dying for love of her, for her sake; he was going away, to leave home, friends and country, going to die in exile, simply for love of her; to lay down all the brilliant hopes of his life, to give up all his dreams, all his plans, because he found her so fair he could no longer live in her presence. Before she made any further remark she began to think whether any of her favorite heroines had ever been in this delightful situation, and how it was best to behave with a genius dying for her. She could not remember, but she knew there were innumerable instances of queens having loved their subjects—to wit, the stately Elizabeth and Essex. She, in the eyes of this poor artist and his sister, was a queen—it would not hurt her to stoop from her high estate. She turned her fair, troubled face to the astute woman by her side.

“Even if I could do him any good by seeing him,” she said, “how could it be managed?”

Miss Lyster’s stare of admiration was something wonderful to see. “Would you be so noble, so generous? Oh, Miss Arleigh, you will save my life and his! Would you really see him, and tell him he had better stay? How good you are! Do you know, I could kneel here at your feet to thank you. If you are willing, I can make all arrangements—I only needed your consent.”

The excitement was a pleasant break in the monotony of school life. How little did Marion understand those with whom she had to deal! She had promised to grant this interview as something of a condescension. Miss Lyster managed her so skilfully that before it took place she had learned to long for it.

The farce of Allan’s illness was kept up. For two days the pupils were deprived of their lessons through the indisposition of their master.



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“I do not know that your kindness will be needed after all,” said Adelaide, sadly. “My brother is very ill; he may not recover. Oh, what a fatal day it was when he first saw you, Miss Arleigh!”

Now, Marion had often rehearsed this interview. She had pictured herself as taking the part of a very dignified queen; of saying to this interesting subject who was dying for love of her, “Stay.” She imagined his delight at her condescension, his sister’s gratitude for her kindness; and now, behold, nothing of the kind was wanting—the pretty role she had sketched out for herself required no playing.

“I do not think I need make any arrangement for the little interview you promised my brother,” said Miss Lyster to the simple girl. “I have had a note from him this morning. He is in better health, but he is in despair, and he cannot hide it. He absolutely refuses to believe that you have consented to see him. Unless you tell him so yourself, he will never believe it.”

“But how can I tell him?” asked the girl.

“Write on a piece of paper, ‘Come at the hour and place your sister appoints. I wish to see you.’ Then he will come. I am writing tonight, and will enclose the note.”

It would rather take from her queenlike attitude, she thought; but as she had promised the kindness, it would not be graceful to dispute as to how it should be granted; so, under the guidance of the woman to whom her innocent youth was entrusted, she sealed her fate with her own hands.

CHAPTER V.

“How am I to thank you?” said Adelaide Lyster to the girl she had betrayed. “I have a letter from Allan, and he says the very thought of seeing you has given him a fresh life—fresh energy. I have never read anything so rapturous in my life. Do you wish to see the letter?”

As Marion Arleigh read the passionate, poetical words that had been written expressly for her, her face flushed. How wonderful it was to hold a man’s life in her hands—to sway a genius so that her nod meant stay or go, her least words meant happiness or misery! She looked around with something of pity for other girls who had not this new and wonderful sensation.

“A life in her hands!” There came to her, young as she was, a vague idea of woman’s power for good or for evil. A cruel or cold word from her, and the artist would go in his misery only to seek death in some far-off land. A kind word, and he would remain—his genius would have its sway, and he would paint pictures that the world should glory in.

“I have arranged it all,” said Miss Lyster. “Miss Carleton is going to-day to that grand dinner-party at Macdonald’s. She has given orders that the young ladies shall go over to Herrington, and take some refreshments with them—it will be a picnic on a small scale. You can excuse yourself from going. I will volunteer to remain with you, and toward sunset, we will walk through the old orchard. Allan will await us there.”



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The girl's heart beat; it was a romantic dream after all—that strange, wonderful reality; the interview she had so often imagined was to take place at last.

“I cannot tell an untruth,” she said to Miss Lyster; “I could not if I tried. How could I excuse myself from going?”

Adelaide looked slightly shocked.

“I would not ask you to speak untruthfully, not even to save Allan's life, dearly as I love him,” she said. “There is no need. Say you are not inclined to go. Miss Carleton will not interfere with the whims of an heiress.”

So it was arranged, and everything fell out just as Adelaide Lyster had foreseen. Miss Carleton did not care to interfere with the whims of a great heiress like Marion Arleigh.

“By all means, stay at home, my love, if you wish, and Miss Lyster, too. She is an admirable young person; so prudent, so discreet. I could not leave you in better hands.”

Marion Arleigh lived afterward to be presented at Court, but she never again felt the same diffidence, the same trepidation, as when, with her false friend by her side, she went down the steps that led to the orchard. The hedge was high and thick, tall trees formed a complete barrier between the grounds and the high road, no strangers or passersby could be seen. Miss Lyster had chosen her time well. She knew that in the lady superintendent's absence the servants would hold high revels; there was no fear of interruption.

In after life Marion Arleigh remembered every detail of that evening. It was May then, and the hedge was white with hawthorn; there was a gleam of gold from the laburnums, and the scent of the lilacs filled the air; the apple trees were all in blossom, the birds were singing, the sun shining, warmth and fragrance and beauty lay all around her.

Far down the orchard, standing sketching a picturesque old tree, was the artist, Allan Lyster. He looked up as the sound of light footsteps rustled in the grass. When he saw who was coming he flung down his pencils and advanced, hat in hand.

There was something graceful and poetical, after all, in the way in which he went up to Miss Arleigh and knelt lightly on one knee.

“I would kiss the hem of your robe if I dared,” he said. “How am I to thank you?”

Then he sprang up and took his sister's hand in his. He allowed no time for confusion and embarrassment—he was too clever for that.



“How am I to thank you, Miss Arleigh?” he said. “If the sun had fallen from the heavens, I could not have felt, more surprise than your kindness has caused me. My sister tells me you are good enough not to be angry at my presumption.”

Miss Lyster laughed.

“I think, Allan,” she said, “that I shall leave you to listen to Miss Arleigh’s lecture alone. She will be able to say harder words to you if I am not by to listen. I will see if I can finish your picture.”



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She walked over to the tree where paper and pencils lay, leaving them alone, and though she was a woman, and young—though she knew that she was most foully betraying a girl whose youth and innocence might have pleaded for her, she had not even a passing thought of pity. “Let Allan win the fortune if he can. He will make better use of it than she could.”

“You are so good to me,” murmured the young artist, his dark eyes flashing keenly for one-half a minute over that beautiful face. “I am at a loss for words.”

Allan Lyster was gifted with a most musical voice, and he understood perfectly well how to make the most use of it. The pathos with which he said those words was wonderful to hear.

“I am glad to see you,” she said. “Your sister tells me you think of going abroad.”

“Has she told you why?” he asked eagerly.

Marion’s face grew crimson. The beautiful eyes dropped from his. She drew back ever so little, but another keen, sharp glance told him she was not angry; only shy and timid.

“You are so good to me,” he continued, with passionate eagerness, “that I am not afraid to tell you. I must go; life here is torture to me; it is torture to see you, to hear you speak, to worship you with a heart full of fire, and yet to know that the sun is not farther from me than you, to know that if I laid my life at your feet you would only laugh at me and think me mad. It is torture so great that exile and death seem preferable.”

He saw her lips quiver, and her eyes, half raised, had in them no angry light.

“You are a great lady,” he said, “rich, noble, powerful. I am a poor artist. I have but one gift—that is genius. And I have dared, fired by such a beauty as woman never had before, to raise my eyes to you. They are dazzled, blinded, and I must suffer for my rashness; and yet—”

He paused, gave another keen glance, felt perfectly satisfied that what he was saying was well received, then went on:

“Artists before now have loved great ladies, and by their genius have immortalized them. But I am mad to say such things. This is the age of money-worship, and art is no longer valued as in those times.”

“I do not value money,” she said, in a clear, sweet voice. “I value many things a thousand times more highly.”

“You are an angel!” he cried. “Even though my love tortures me, I would not change it for the highest pleasures other men enjoy. The poets learn by suffering what they teach



in song; so it will be with me. Sorrow will make me a great artist; whereas, if I had been a happy man, I might never, perhaps, have risen much above the common level. I am resigned to suffer all my life.”

“I do not like to hear you speak so,” she said. “Life will not be all suffering.”

“I have raised my eyes, looked at the sun, and it has dazzled me,” he said. “Ah, lady, I have had such dreams, of love that overleaped all barriers, as Art has rendered loveliness immortal for all time. I have dreamed of loves such as Petrarch had for Laura, Dante for Beatrice, and I wake to call myself mad for indulging in such dreams.”



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She was deeply interested. This was exactly as heroes spoke in novels; they always had a lofty contempt for money, and talked as though love was the only and universal good. She looked half shyly at him; he was very handsome, this young artist who loved her so, and very sad. How dearly he loved her, and how strange it was! In all this wide world there was not one who cared for her as he did; the thought seemed to bring her nearer to him. No one had ever talked of loving her before. Perhaps the beauty of the May evening softened her and inclined her heart to him; for after a few minutes' silence she said to him:

"We are forgetting the very object for which I consented to see you."

CHAPTER VI.

"It is no wonder," replied Allan Lyster. "I forget everything in speaking to you. You do well, lady, in making me remember myself."

"Do not mistake me," she said gently. "I only thought time is flying, and I have not said yet what I promised your sister I would say."

They had walked down the orchard, and they stood now under the spreading boughs of a large apple tree—the pink and white blossoms made the loveliest frame for that most fair face. She was lovely as the blossoms themselves.

"I feel like a criminal," said Allan Lyster; "and as though you were my judge. I tremble to know what you have to say."

"Yet it is not very terrible, Mr. Lyster. Your sister is my dearest friend, and she tells me that you are thinking of going abroad. She is very miserable over it. She fancies she should never see you again. I promised her that I would persuade you to stay."

His face flushed—his eyes flashed—he bent over her.

"See what little white hands yours are," he said; "yet they hold a life—a strong man's life. If you bade me stay, I would remain though death were the penalty. If you bade me go, I would go and never look upon a familiar face again."

"I do not like to say go, or stay," she replied, hesitatingly. "It is a serious thing to interfere with a man's life."

"I have dared already more than I ever dreamed of daring. I have told how rashly I have ventured to raise my eyes to the sun—you know my presumption. I have dared to kneel at your feet, and tell you that you are the star of my idolatry, the source of all my inspiration. You know that, yet you will not punish my presumption by telling me to go?"



“I will not,” she replied, gently.

“Then you are not angry with me? I did not know life held such happiness as that. You know I love you? You are not angry?”

A sudden breeze stirred the apple blossoms, and they fell like a shower on her fair head.

“You must pardon me if I am beside myself with joy. Looking on your face, I grow intoxicated with your beauty, as men do with rare wines. Ah, lady! in the years to come and in the great world people may love you; but you shall look, and look in vain, for a love so true, so deep, so devoted as mine.”



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"I believe it," she replied.

"You believe it, yet you are not angry with me? You hold my life in your hands yet will not bid me go?"

He bent over her, his handsome face was glowing, his dark eyes flashing fire.

"I could fancy myself in a dream," he said; "it is too strange, too sweet to be true. There must be some intoxication in these apple blossoms. Dare I ask you one more grace?"

"I have not been very unkind," she said.

"Will you let me sometimes see you? I will not presume upon your kindness. Your face is to me what sunshine is to flowers. Do not turn its light from me."

"You see me at the lessons," she said.

"Pardon me, I do not. I never dare to look at you; if I did, Miss Carleton would soon know my secret. I am an artist, practiced to admire. I may say what in others would be simple impertinence. You look so beautiful, Miss Arleigh, with the sunlight falling on you through the apple blossoms. Will you let me make a picture of you, just as you are now? I could paint it well, for my whole heart would be in the work."

"I am willing," she said.

"And you will let me keep the picture when it is finished, and once or twice before the lovely summer fades you will come out here and see me again?"

"Yes," she said, "I will come again."

"I shall keep those few penciled words you sent me until I die," he said, "and then they shall be buried with me."

Allan Lyster was a wise general; he knew exactly when it was time to retreat. He would fain have lingered by her side talking to her, looking in her lovely face, but prudence told him that he had said enough. He looked across at the trees and signed to his sister, unseen and unknown to Miss Arleigh. Adelaide, quick to take the hint, joined them at once.

"I shall not show you my sketch, Allan," she said laughingly; "it will not show well by the side of yours. Marion, we must go. Have you accomplished my heart's desire—persuaded my brother to stay?"

"He did not want much persuasion," she replied, suddenly remembering with surprise how little had been said about the matter.



“I hope Allan has made no blunder,” thought the sister; aloud she said, “I know it. I knew that one look from you would do all that my prayers failed to accomplish. We must go, Marion; it is time to re-enter the house.”

“Miss Arleigh,” said Allan Lyster, “when I wake to-morrow, I shall fancy all this but a dream. Will you give me something to make me remember that it is indeed a happy reality?”

“What shall I give you?” asked the girl.

“You have held that spray of apple blossoms in your hand all the evening,” he said, “give me that.”

She laughed and held it out to him.

“Thank you,” he said; “now that you have touched it it ought not to die.”

“Do all artists talk like you, Mr. Lyster?”



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“When the same subject inspires them,” he replied, and then Adelaide reminded them again that time was flying, and they must be gone.

A few more minutes and the handsome young artist was walking quickly down the high road. He had succeeded beyond his wildest expectations. He felt as sure of winning the beautiful young heiress as though he had placed already a wedding ring upon her finger. He laughed to himself to think how easy the task was; so easy, in fact, that he felt a touch of contempt for that which was so easily won.

“It will be a good thing for me,” he said to himself. “If I succeed, painting may go. I shall not trouble myself about anything but spending money. If I succeed, Adelaide shall have her reward.” And he pleased himself by thinking how, out of his forty thousands, he would give her a fortune.

“She deserves it. She has worked hard for me, and she shall not be forgotten.”

It did not occur to him that there would arise any serious difficulty. Of course, no steps could be taken until she was twenty-one. He could not marry her without the consent of her guardian, and to ask for it was, of course, nonsense. He would bind her to himself with the most solemn of promises, and the very day she was of age they would be married. As he walked toward his humble lodgings he amused himself by thinking what he should do when he became master of Hanton Hall. No sentiment troubled Allan Lyster; he could make love in any style he liked to anyone who suited him. As to any remorse over the girl his sister had betrayed and they had both deceived, he felt none.

“How do you like him, Marion?” asked Adelaide Lyster, as the two walked home.

“He is very handsome and very clever,” was the grave reply.

“Add to that—he is more deeply in love than any man ever was yet,” said Miss Lyster, laughingly. “Marion, he worships you—his love is something that frightens me.”

Miss Arleigh avowed that it was true.

“He will go home,” continued Adelaide, “and instead of going to sleep like a sensible man, he will walk about all night, composing grand poems about you.”

“Does he write poetry?” asked Marion, with increased admiration.

“He is a poet and artist both,” said his sister, with a little touch of pride that amused the heiress.

That was Miss Arleigh’s first interview with her admirer, the second was, he assured her, for the sake of the picture—the third, that he might see how the picture was going on—the fourth, that she might see it completed—the fifth, because she found the flattery of



his love so irresistible she could no longer do without it—the sixth, because she began to fall in love with him herself—and then she lost all count, she lived for those interviews, and nothing else.

“I want to impress one thing upon you,” said Adelaide to her brother; “bear it always in mind. When you think you have made sufficient advances in her favor to ask her to marry you, do not rest satisfied with her spoken word, make her write it. It will be of no use to you unless you do that.”



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“Explain a little further, my wisest of sisters,” said Allan.

“A written promise of marriage is the only security a man has. Women change like the wind, without rhyme or reason. But if you have her own word pledged to you, her promise of marriage written so that there shall be no mistake, then it will be worth a fortune to you.”

“Even if she should refuse to fulfil”—

“You are not very worldly wise, Allan,” said his sister with the slightest tinge of contempt in her voice. “If she fulfils it, all well and good. The very fact of having written it keeps a girl true when she should otherwise be false. But if she refuses to keep it, the remedy then is in your own hands.”

“And that remedy is”—he began, but she interrupted him quickly.

“The remedy is, of course, an action at law; or what would be far more efficacious in her case, holding her letters as a means of getting money from her. A proud woman will sacrifice any amount of wealth rather than have such a thing known.”

Marion Arleigh fell easily into the plot laid by those she considered her best friends.

CHAPTER VII.

It is not pleasant to trace the steps by which the simple credulous girl fell into the snare laid for her. She had sense and reason, but they were both overbalanced by romance—she saw only the ideal side of everything. The romance of this hidden love was delightful to her; she compared herself to every heroine in fiction, and found none of them in a more charming position than herself.

Allan’s profession had something to do with romance; had he been a mere commonplace doctor or lawyer it would have been a different matter, but an artist—the halo of his art transfigured him in her eyes—thus to be capable of a deep and passionate love such as he felt for her!

It was altogether like one of those romances that charmed her; and after a time she gave herself up entirely to her love.

By the skilful management of Adelaide Lyster their meetings became very frequent, and before long he had won from her a promise that she would love him all her life, and would consent to marry him. Even at that time, when she was most ecstatic, most carried away by the novelty and the romance, even then, if any sensible person had spoken to her, she would have understood more her position than she did now.



If anyone had said to her: “That man is not a hero, he is only a fortune hunter; he is not even an honorable man, or he would not seek to decoy you from your duty to bind you to an underhand agreement; instead of being honorable and a hero he is dishonorable and a rogue”—she had sense enough to have seen that. She understood enough of the laws of honor to know when they were broken. But this side of the question never occurred to her. He was young, handsome, and an artist; he loved her so dearly that for love of her he was almost dying.



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She was rich and powerful; he had nothing but genius; he loved her so that her smile gave him life, her frown was death. It was pleasant, too, and most romantic, to escape from the thralldom of school to wander with him in the gray twilight through the old orchard and the green lanes; it was pleasant to feel in the depth of her heart a love that no one knew anything of—no one even understood. The scenery, viewed from its romantic side, charmed her.

They told her continually how great and noble, how generous she was, and she delighted in hearing it.

“You value genius more than money,” Allan would say to her, “and you are right. God gives genius, men make money. You have the power of discriminating between them.”

She began to look upon herself as something very superior indeed—something far excelling the ordinary run of girls. They flattered her until she hardly knew what was false and what was true.

She delighted in making pictures of the future; how she was to stoop from the height of her grandeur to raise him; how her wealth was, as it were, to crown his genius. They told her that the whole world would praise her for her noble generosity. That the rich heiress who forgot her wealth and became the artist's wife, would be honored wherever her name was known. They intoxicated her with romance, they bewildered her with flattery. And she was only seventeen, with no mother to speak one warning word to her.

She pledged herself to be Allan Lyster's wife when she came of age. He told her he would rather forego all claim to her wealth, marry her at once, and leave her guardian to act as he thought best; but she, though delighted to find him free from the least taint of anything mercenary, refused to run the risk of losing her fortune.

“Would you really,” she said to him one day, “love me as much if I were quite poor, as you do now?”

“Would I! Oh, Marion, what a question to ask me! The only drawback to my love is that hateful fortune; if it were not for that I would marry you at once. Ah, you should find out what I loved you for, sweet. I would work for you night and day. I would move the whole world to find for my darling that which she would require.”

And the girl in her simplicity believed him, and thought herself the most fortunate among woman to have won a love for herself that had in it no taint of this world.

So they flung the glamor of love and flattery around her, until she lost the keen perception of right and wrong that would have saved her.



She promised to be Allan Lyster's wife. When he had won that promise from her, he pretended to think better of it.

"I am wrong to ask you, Marion; I am selfish, I ought not even wish you to share my lot."

She asked him why, raising her sweet eyes to his face.

"Why, because when you go out into the great world peers and princes will woo you, my darling; the noblest in the land will sue for your favor, and you, who might have been a duchess, will repent loving and caring for one so poor and obscure as I am. I can give you no title."



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“You can give me what I value more,” she said. “You can give me true and disinterested love.”

He did not forget his sister’s advice, that he should have that promise in writing. One evening—it was August then, when the fruit hung ripe on the trees—he told her, with many sighs, that he should not see her again for some days.

“How am I to live through them, Marion, I do not know; now when I wake, my first thought is that I shall see you; all the world seems so fair and life so bright, because I shall see you. What will happen to me when the morning sun brings no such delight?”

She was young and simple enough to feel very much touched with his words; the old idea of having his life in her hands never left her.

“Grant me a favor,” he said. “I shall have no energy for work unless you promise it: Write to me every night and in your letters tell me, sweet, that which I love best to hear, that you will marry me.”

So to make him happy, to give him life and energy for his work, she wrote to him every evening, and, remembering his request, in each one of those letters she repeated her promise to marry him.

This is no overstrained story, it is no exaggeration; hundreds of men have acted as Allan Lyster did, and hundreds will act so in the future. When girls have once mastered the grand lesson that all secrecy—all concealment is wrong, they will have taken the only precaution possible to save themselves.

So matters went on until the continued secrecy began to prey upon Marion’s mind; then she made an appeal to Allan with which our story opens. He did his best to argue with her, and he sent a note to his sister, telling her the bright, bonnie bird they had ensnared was growing restive under constraint.

No doubts ever came to her. Youth is the age of romance; youth imperatively demands love and poetry. She had found both and was perfectly satisfied. She believed honestly that she loved him very dearly; it never occurred to her that the greatest charm really was the excitement of having to plan interviews and arrange her letters so as to escape detection; it never occurred to her that if she had been like other girls of her age in society, and so enabled to judge of people, so far from loving him and making a hero of him, he would have been distasteful to her. She had had no opportunities of being able to judge. Lord Ridsdale’s only idea was to keep her at school as long as possible, in order to escape further trouble. She had never been in the society of gentlemen, and her head was full of romance and poetry.



Therefore she fell an easy victim to the artist and his sister. She was ready to believe he was a great hero, because he was handsome; that he was all that could be noble and generous, because he talked poetry. True, she began to dislike the concealment, but it never struck her that she disliked it because the whole affair was growing tiresome to her.



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She had talked it over and over again with him—how they must wait until she was twenty-one, then they would be married and go to live at Hanton.

“You will like Hanton,” she said. “It is old, gray and picturesque; the woods are beautiful, there is a river running through them.”

“I shall like any place that I could share with you,” he replied. “When shall you leave this place, Marion?”

“At Christmas, I expect. But, Allan, shall we never see each other until I am twenty-one?”

“I hope so,” he replied. “You do not know where you will live?”

“No, that is not decided. Lord Ridsdale says I cannot go to Hanton alone, and I know that I cannot live at his house.”

“But go where you will, Marion, you will write to me and see me sometimes?”

“Of course I shall. If I remain in London it will be comparatively easy, and if I go into the country you will be obliged to follow me.”

“I wish I could disguise myself as a page and go with you,” he said. “I do not see how I am to live without you.”

He did another thing which touched her generous heart—he painted a picture, and with the proceeds of the sale of it he purchased a ring for her. It was his sister who told her how the ring was procured.

“It is my belief,” said Miss Lyster, “that if he could change his whole heart into one great ruby, he would do so, and offer it to you.”

She placed the ring on her finger, and he made her promise never to take it off. It was made of rubies and opals set in pure gold.

“Do not remove that, Marion,” he said, “until I can find a plain gold ring and that shall bind you to me for as long as we both shall live.”

CHAPTER VIII.

A change came at last—one for which none of the three had been prepared: Lord Ridsdale married.



The first thing the new Lady Ridsdale did was to insist on the removal of Miss Arleigh from school.

“Nearly eighteen,” she said, “and still at school! My dear William, the only wonder is that the poor girl has not fallen into some dreadful mischief. She ought to have been presented last year. We must have her home at once.”

Lady Ridsdale was a woman of the world; she knew exactly how much eclat and importance would accrue to her from the fact of being chaperone to a wealthy heiress like Miss Arleigh.

“Is the girl pretty?” she asked her husband; and to do him justice, he looked much confused.

“I hardly know what to answer you, Laura. I must confess the truth; I have not seen her for two years and more. When my wife died I was quite at a loss what to do with her, so I sent her to school. Miss Carleton promised to take complete charge of her, and I have not seen her, as I say, for more than two years.”

“Was she a pretty girl then?” persisted Lady Ridsdale.

“I think so. Miss Carleton said she was beautiful. She had been crying when I saw her, so that I could hardly judge.”



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“A beauty, and a wealthy heiress! We must have her at home at once, William. We will fetch her without any delay.”

Lord Ridsdale thought some of the servants might go, that it was hardly necessary for him to make the journey. His wife laughed at him.

“You do not know the social importance of your ward,” she said. “Before long Miss Arleigh will be one of the queens of society, heiress of Hanton, and of the large fortune left by her father; we shall have some of the first men in England wooing her. She may be a duchess if she likes.” At which intelligence Lord Ridsdale opened his eyes.

He had thought of his ward as of a tiresome responsibility, a child of whom the charge would be very troublesome. He had taken good care of her money, because he was an honorable man, but he had not thought much of what his wife called her social position. As a probable duchess he felt a great amount of respect for her.

So Lord and Lady Ridsdale went together to bring their beautiful young ward home. Miss Carleton was grieved to lose her.

“She has been a docile pupil, and she is a beautiful, lovable girl. Though I am sorry indeed to part with her, for her own sake I am glad she is going; it is high time she saw something of the world.”

“You have had no trouble with her, I hope?” said Lord Ridsdale. “At seventeen most young girls have begun to think of love and lovers.”

Miss Carleton prided herself on the fact that in her establishment such matters were entirely avoided.

“There is nothing of the kind,” she replied, earnestly. “I do not believe that Miss Arleigh has even begun to think of such things.”

“So much the worse when she does begin,” thought Lady Ridsdale.

When the preliminaries had all been discussed, and Miss Arleigh was requested to meet her guardian, Lady Ridsdale could not control her surprise at the sight of the girl’s beauty.

“You could not tell whether she was pretty or not?” she said afterwards to her husband. “William you must be blind.”

She welcomed the young girl warmly. She kissed the fresh blooming face that had all a woman’s beauty with the innocence of a child. She clasped her arms round the slender, girlish figure.



“You must learn to love me,” she said, “to look on me in the place of the mother you have lost.”

And Marion Arleigh for the first time in her life imagined to herself what a mother’s love would be like.

“What a strange idea to keep you so long at school!” said Lady Ridsdale. “We must do our best to atone for it.”

“I should imagine that my guardian did not know what to do with me,” she replied, with a smile so bright and sweet that Lord Ridsdale at once fell in love with her, as his wife had done before him.

“Where am I going to live?” asked Marion, after they had been talking for some time.

“We are going to Thorpe Castle,” replied Lady Ridsdale, “and I thought you would enjoy being there with us.”



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“I shall enjoy anything and everything” said Marion. “I have all my life before me, and it will be full of glorious possibilities.”

Suddenly she paused, remembering that her life was settled and arranged; it held no more possibilities; they were all at an end. For the first time she felt the weight of the chain that bound her. Lady Ridsdale wondered why the beautiful face suddenly grew pale and grave.

Half an hour afterwards Marion came timidly to her side.

“Lady Ridsdale,” she began, in a half-hesitating manner, “of course I never thought such happiness as the marriage of my guardian was in store for me.”

“I suppose not,” was the smiling reply.

“I used to think that I should go away from here and be so lonely, so sad. I have made a promise and I do not see how I can keep it.”

Lady Ridsdale was touched and flattered by the girl’s confidence.

“Tell me all about it, Marion; you shall keep the promise, if it be possible.”

“There is a governess here, one of the assistants; her name is Lyster—Adelaide Lyster. She has always been very kind to me; indeed I should have been most lonely but for her, and I—I am very much attached to her.”

“Quite natural and quite right,” said Lady Ridsdale. “You wish, of course, to make her a very handsome present?”

“No, not quite that,” said Marion, looking very uncomfortable; “it is much worse than that. I thought I should be all alone, and I promised that when I left Miss Carleton’s she should go with me as my companion, and should live with me.”

Lady Ridsdale looked very grave.

“I do not think it possible, my dear,” she replied. “Lord Ridsdale has the greatest objection to that kind of thing. Will you not try if you shall like me as a companion?”

“I am quite sure to do that,” she said; “but I made the promise. What shall I do?”

“You made it under a certain set of circumstances,” said Lady Ridsdale “and they no longer exist. You may, I think, in all honor, defer the keeping of it, until you have a house of your own.”



But Marion still looked as she felt—uncomfortable. Lord Ridsdale had gone to superintend some arrangements for their departure, leaving the two ladies alone.

“You think the young person will be disappointed?” said Lady Ridsdale, kindly.

“I am sure she will,” replied Marion wincing at the words “young person.”

“Let me see her; ask her to come here, and I will speak to her. After all, my dear, you are not in the least to blame if you cannot keep your promise—you must remember that.”

A few more minutes and Miss Lyster, dressed in her most becoming costume, stood before Lady Ridsdale.

A few words passed, and then Lady Ridsdale began;

“My ward is in some distress, Miss Lyster. I find that she has promised you that you shall live with her as companion.”



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“She certainly did so, and I have made all arrangements for that purpose.”

“We will hope you have not made many arrangements,” said Lady Ridsdale, suavely, “as Miss Arleigh’s movements have been so very uncertain. Of course, when Miss Arleigh is of age, and makes her own arrangements—forms her own household—she will do as she likes. It will be utterly impossible for her to carry out her promise in Lord Ridsdale’s house, as I am sure you will have the good sense to perceive.”

Now, Miss Lyster was not wanting in good sense. She was taken by surprise, as was every one else, by this sudden movement. She had had no time to think what was best under the circumstances; the only idea that occurred to her was how more than useless it would be to offend Lady Ridsdale. Unless she managed to secure her good opinions there would be no invitations to Ridsdale house. These ideas flashed through her mind with the rapidity of lightning; then Miss Lyster, with an expression on her face that was a most perfect mixture of reverence and humility, said:

“I hope Miss Arleigh will study herself and your ladyship, not me.”

“You must not look at it in that light. Miss Arleigh studies every one most kindly, I am sure. It is simply this: that there would never be the least objection to Miss Arleigh following out any wish or any idea that should occur to her, but that in this case it would be impossible to carry out her wish. Miss Arleigh will soon be surrounded by friends and companions of her own age, and then she will not feel lonely.”

Miss Lyster’s reply was a deep, silent bow. To herself she said:

“If she thinks to take Marion from me, she is mistaken. I will never lose my hold on her.”

Lady Ridsdale was touched by the companion’s resignation to circumstances.

“We shall be very pleased to see you at Thorpe Castle during the vacation, Miss Lyster,” said Lady Ridsdale, “and we owe you a deep debt of gratitude for your unflinching kindness to Miss Arleigh.”

Then the interview ended.

Miss Lyster, after a few more words, quitted the room.

“My dear Marion,” said Lady Ridsdale, “I am almost glad that circumstances do prevent you from carrying out this arrangement.”

“Why?” she asked simply.

“Because I have lived in the world long enough to be a judge of character, and your friend’s face does not please me. Do not trust her too far.”



CHAPTER IX.

Life at Miss Carleton's and life at Thorpe Castle were very different. Marion had not been there very long before she began to feel most perfectly happy, and to wonder how she endured the monotonous routine of school.

The parting from Allan had really been terrible to her, his love had for so long been her chief comfort and her only pleasure. She said to herself that she should miss him most terribly; yet, if she had looked into her own heart, she would have seen it was not so much him she should miss as it was the novelty of his letters, his plotting, his poetry, the stolen interviews, the hidden romance that she thought so beautiful.



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“You will not forget me, darling?” he said, pleadingly. “You will write to me, and you will let me sometimes see you?” She promised faithfully. She wept over leaving him, yet in some unaccountable way her spirits rose when she came away; she felt more free, more at ease than she had done for a long time.

“You must make the best use of the sunny days,” said Lady Ridsdale. “There is one advantage in having been so long at school—you will be perfectly fresh to the world, and that is always a charm in itself. You must give yourself up entirely to my guidance for a time.”

Marion did so most willingly. Lady Ridsdale engaged a pretty, quick Parisian as lady’s maid; she invited young ladies of her own rank and position to stay at the castle; she obtained every possible enjoyment and pleasure for the girl.

This was something like. The hours seemed to fly like golden moments, the very atmosphere was different. Here all was refinement, grace, courtesy and kindness. Lady Ridsdale knew some delightful people, and nothing pleased her so much as filling Thorpe Castle with visitors.

One and all were delighted with the young heiress. Her beauty, her brilliant accomplishments, her simplicity, her frankness of character and sweetness of temper made her a general favorite. She soon made up for lost time. She learned to drive, to ride, to row, to do all the hundred and one pretty things that mark the young lady of the world.

The gentlemen admired her exceedingly, she was so lovely, so candid. She was never left alone. If she entered the drawing-room she was instantly surrounded with a little court of admirers. When she wished to ride or walk there was always some little contention as to who should accompany her. It was very pleasant. Before she had been at Thorpe Castle long Marion Arleigh was queen of the new world. In the midst of all her happiness the first letter from Allan Lyster came like a thunderbolt. She was naturally so frank, so candid, that the keeping of a secret was most difficult to her. Her first impulse was to go to Lady Ridsdale and tell her everything. Then she remembered that she had given a solemn pledge of secrecy, and that she must not say one word.

It made her very unhappy. She did not like the sense of concealment. She did not like having a secret of so much importance that she could share with no one. Then it struck her, too, that the tone of the letter was not quite what she liked; it was in some vague way different from the tone of the people she was living with. She did not like that reiterated petition, for secrecy was weighing heavily on her heart and soul. She waited two days before answering that letter. She said to herself that she ought to be very pleased to receive it, and that she was pleased; yet something weighed on her mind and shadowed the perfect happiness she had expected to feel.



Then she answered him, and again, for the first time in her life, she sat with her pen in her hand, hardly knowing what to say. She had been accustomed to writing page after page and never pausing. Since then something seemed to have arisen in her life and to stand between them. She did not care to tell him of the luxury of Thorpe Castle, the number of visitors, the splendor of the entertainments.



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“That will not interest him,” she said; “his life is so different.” A strange sensation of uneasiness came over her as she remembered how different it was. So she wrote a letter full of commonplaces, and when Allan Lyster read it he bit his lips in fierce, hot anger.

“She is learning not to care for me already,” he said. “She has never written so coldly to me before.”

Adelaide bade him to be of good cheer.

“I shall go to the castle at Christmas,” she said, “and, rely upon it, Allan, I will find an opportunity of sending for you. You need not be anxious; there is no possible plea on which she can escape you now. If you will take my advice you will not draw the chain too tightly; let her feel that she is free.”

Allan took her advice. He did not persecute her with letters; he wrote, and filled his pages with love and flattery so sweet it could not tease her.

And then when Christmas came around Adelaide filled the grand purpose of her life—she went to Thorpe Castle. Her behavior there might have been taken as a model. She was quite sure of Marion’s affection, so she devoted herself entirely to Lady Ridsdale; she waited upon her, she solicited her advice, she administered to her the most delicate doses of flattery. In short, she set herself to work to win Lady Ridsdale’s heart; but she did not succeed.

The mistress of Thorpe Castle did not like Miss Lyster; she merely tolerated her, and that was for Marion’s sake. With Lord Ridsdale she succeeded better. Her subtle flattery and constant attentions made some impression on him. He told his wife that Miss Lyster was a very amiable girl, and he hoped she would often pass her vacation at Thorpe Castle. My lady smiled suavely, and made no reply.

Adelaide wrote to her brother that he had no cause for fear.

“The first morning of my arrival,” she said, “Marion took me to her room, and we had a long talk about you. Have no fear; she is quite true to you, and I have a scheme in my mind for getting you invited to the castle.”

One morning when Lady Ridsdale and Miss Arleigh were engaged with visitors Adelaide asked if she might go through the picture-gallery. Lord Ridsdale, flattered by the request, offered to go with her and show her some of his especial favorites.

Miss Lyster was all enthusiasm, and she was tolerably well acquainted with the first principles of art. She made some remarks that pleased and interested his lordship. Then she was quite silent for some minutes, and afterward sighed deeply. Lord



Ridsdale looked at her. The sigh had been such a profound one that he could not help taking some notice of it.

“Are you tired?” he asked.

“No,” she replied. “You are so kind, Lord Ridsdale, that I may tell you of what I was thinking. I was wishing that this great privilege I now enjoy could be given to my brother instead of me.”

Lord Ridsdale looked benevolently interested, and she continued:



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“I have but one relative in the world, an only brother, and he is an artist. He lives on his art, and I was thinking what a privilege he would consider it of what benefit it would be to him, if he could see those pictures.”

“Your brother is an artist! I see no reason why he should not profit by this really beautiful collection of pictures. Would he like to visit Thorpe Castle, do you think?”

“You are too kind, Lord Ridsdale. I should say it would be a glimpse of paradise to him.”

“Then by all means. Miss Lyster, write and ask him. I cannot extend the invitation for any lengthened period, as we have so many visitors, but if he will come for a week I shall be delighted to see him.”

She thanked him until his lordship was in a perfect glow of benevolence to think what a kind and generous action he had performed. His wife did not look quite so pleased when he told her; but then, my Lord Ridsdale was not a man of great observation.

CHAPTER X.

As a result of the conversation in the picture-gallery the young artist, in compliance with an invitation of Lord Ridsdale, came over to Thorpe Castle. Long before he came Marion had grown sick of the deception and weary of the chains that bound her.

She was naturally so frank, so open, that the need for concealment troubled her greatly. She had the warmest affection for Lady Ridsdale. She would have liked above all things to have trusted and confided in her. It was torture to the girl to think that she was helping others to keep secret from her that which she ought to know. She shrank from Miss Lyster. She no longer cared to be beguiled by long walks in the shrubbery, to hear nothing but praises of “my brother,” and the oft-told tale of his love for her. Association with refined, honorable, high-minded people was doing its work with her; anything approaching deceit, falsehood or meanness revolted her.

Those were not the best possible dispositions in which Allan could find her. He had not reckoned upon these better influences; he had not thought that when she came to contrast his behavior with that of others she would see how deficient in all honor and manliness it had been; he trusted to the glamor of love, and behold! there had been no love on her part; nothing but gratified vanity.

He was very pleased to go to Thorpe Castle—he thought nothing would advance his cause more than for her to meet him among her own class, meet him as her equal in some respects, if not in all.

“I am so happy,” said Adelaide Lyster to her on the morning of the day on which he was expected. “I am so very happy, Marion, and you”—



But no answering enthusiasm shone in Miss Arleigh's face, and Adelaide noticed it.

"Allan will enjoy himself so much here," she continued. "Ah! Marion, the sight of you will be like sunshine to flowers to him."



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But Miss Arleigh did not look delighted; she was thinking more of how she could keep such a secret from her good, kind guardians than of any pleasure in meeting her lover.

He came; she lingered by Lady Ridsdale's side during his reception. The thought did certainly pass through Lord Ridsdale's mind that Allan Lyster was very young and very handsome to be drawing-master of a young ladies' school; but not for the world would he have breathed such a thought to any one living, lest it should injure him. Lord Ridsdale was courtesy itself to his young guest. He pointed out to him the finest pictures; he took him over the woods to show him where the most picturesque scenery lay; he took him to the library and introduced to his notice some of the finest works of art.

When they came to compare notes Lord and Lady Ridsdale quite disagreed over Allan. The gentleman liked him, he thought him clever, gifted and intellectual; Lady Ridsdale, with the keener sense belonging to women, read his character more clearly.

"He is not true," she said. "His eyes have never once met mine with a frank, clear look; either he has something to conceal, or his natural disposition is anything but candid."

Lady Ridsdale did not like him, but with some of the visitors at Thorpe Castle he was very popular. His talents were appreciated and admired. One gentleman, Sir Thomas Ashburnham, ordered a picture from him; another purchased a series of sketches; and a third invited him to a grand old castle in the North where he could make himself familiar with some of the finest rugged scenery in Scotland.

So that in one sense his visit was a complete success. He increased his social importance; he made friends who would be of great value to him; but, so far as Marion was concerned, it was a complete, dead failure. He had expected long interviews with her; he had thought of long and pleasant hours in the grounds; he had pictured to himself how she would renew her vows of fidelity to him; how she would listen, as she had done before, to his love-making, and perhaps even seem fonder to him than she had ever done before.

Instead of which she certainly shrank from him. Never once during the whole of his stay at Thorpe Castle did he contrive to get one *tete-a-tete* with her. If he wrote a little note asking her to meet him in the shrubbery or the grounds, or to give him five minutes in the conservatory, her answer was always that she was engaged. If he rose earlier than usual, hoping to meet her in the breakfast-room, she invariably remained later than usual upstairs. He could not, contrive as he would, obtain five minutes with her. In vain he asked his sister to manage an interview for him; Marion seemed instinctively aware of what she wanted. When Miss Lyster suggested a walk in the garden, Marion, knowing that her brother would be sure to appear, declined it. Her only safeguard lay in continually seeking Lady Ridsdale's society.



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“The dear child is so warmly attached to me!” said the mistress of Thorpe Castle to her husband. “It is really wonderful.”

While Allan and his sister began to feel, with something of baffled rage, that their power over her was growing less.

“Why do you never consent to see my brother?” asked Adelaide one day, when Allan had complained most bitterly to her.

“Because I have such great respect for my guardians,” she answered. “I cannot bear anything clandestine or underhand beneath their roof.”

A reply that, strange to say, silenced Miss Lyster. Brother and sister held a council of war, and it was decided that all deference must be paid to her humor.

“Content yourself, brother, with reminding her of her promise to marry you when she comes of age, but do no more. Do not seek an interview with her; let her imagine herself quite free.”

But the finishing stroke was given one day during lunch, when the conversation turned upon the elopement of a young lady in the neighborhood. Lady Ridsdale expressed great fears for her future.

“He is not a gentleman,” she said. “No true gentleman would ever try to persuade any girl to a clandestine engagement.”

She saw Marion open her eyes and look at her in amazement.

“I am quite right, my dear,” she said. “You may depend upon it, a man who would persuade any girl to engage herself to him unknown to her friends is not only no gentleman, but he is not even an honest man.”

Marion Arleigh’s beautiful face flushed, then grew deadly pale; almost involuntarily she looked at Allan, but he did not raise his eyes to meet hers.

Those words were the death-blow to her love, or what she called her love—“Not even an honest man.” This hero of her romance, this artist whom she was to ennoble by her love, was not even an honest man. She shuddered and grew faint at the thought.

Again she was present when Lady Ridsdale was talking of the Lysters to her husband. She praised Allan’s artistic qualities, she admired his talents, but she owned frankly that she did not like him, that she did not think him true.

Marion Arleigh was very much struck with this remark. Then she began to think over all she knew of the Lysters. She saw all in the clear light of reason, not in the glamor of



love, and her judgment condemned them both. The sister had been false to her trust; she had betrayed the youth and innocence of the pupil entrusted to her, and he—she summed up the evil he had done her in these few words—he was not true.

She decided upon what to do. She would never be false to them; all her life long she would do her best to advance Allan's interest; but she must release herself from the tie that became unbearable to her.

He, at this difficult juncture of affairs, behaved with great tact. He took his sister's advice, and would not intrude upon her. He sought no more interviews; he wrote no more notes.



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“He sees,” thought Marion, “that my eyes are open, and he wisely intends to let me go free. He sees that I understand he has acted dishonorably in taking advantage of my youth, and he is, perhaps, sorry for it.”

So, in proportion as he ceased to importune her, she grew kinder to him. She talked to him about his pictures, and the progress he was making. He showed her sketches of pictures that he intended to paint, but the word love was never mentioned.

The time came now for Miss Lyster to return to her school duties. She was not affected, but she felt the deepest sorrow. It was not pleasant to leave such a home as Thorpe Castle for the drudgery of a school. But she could see plainly if that visit was to be renewed she must go, and make no sign.

Brother and sister were profuse in their thanks; they expressed the deepest gratitude to Lord and Lady Ridsdale; they professed themselves overcome with benefits. Lord Ridsdale received all these thanks with great complacency, feeling that he deserved them. Lady Ridsdale’s impression was:

“I am glad they are gone, though I do not like to interfere in Marion’s affairs. I shall certainly advise her to drop that acquaintance as soon as she can.”

Allan bade Marion “good-bye.” His last words to her were:

“I shall not seek to correspond with you clandestinely—nothing but the fervor of my love can possibly excuse my having met you as I did. I loved you, so I forgot prudence, ceremony, etiquette, and all. But, Marion, you will remember that you are my promised wife.”

She shrank back at the words. It was the greatest relief to her when they went; it was as though some dark, brooding presence was removed from the castle.

CHAPTER XI.

More than once was Marion Arleigh tempted to break that solemn promise, and tell all to Lady Ridsdale. She longed to do so—the fact of being blamed would not prevent her, she felt that she deserved it—but she was one of those who are most scrupulous in keeping a promise once given. Of one thing she was quite resolved—she would write to Allan and tell him this clandestine engagement must come to an end. She could not bear the burden of the secret any longer, neither could she possibly fulfil the contract. She found on examining her own heart that she did not love him, and a marriage without love was absurd.

She told him she would always be his friend, that she should look upon his advancement in life as her especial care; she should always remember him, with the



most grateful affection; but as for love, all notion of it must be considered at an end. And, she wrote still further, she could not blame herself for this, because she felt that her youth and inexperience excused her. She should always remember the claim that Adelaide and himself had upon her, and she was always his sincerely affectionate friend, Marion Arleigh.



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Allan Lyster was not altogether surprised at the receipt of this letter; he had anticipated some such blow. He went with it at once to his friend and counsellor, his sister.

"It seems to me," he said, "that there is an end of the whole business—a dead failure."

"Nothing of the kind," she replied. "Now you see the value of my advice over documentary evidence; these letters of yours are a fortune in themselves."

"I do not see it," he replied, gloomily.

"Men are not gifted with much foresight," said Adelaide Lyster. "Let us consider. She has pledged her word, over and over again in those letters, to marry you."

"She has done so," he replied.

"Then you hold a position from which nothing can dislodge you. If you were to go over and insist on her promise being carried out, it would be useless; not only would she refuse, but Lord and Lady Ridsdale would take her part against you, and all would be lost. Evidently that plan would be quite useless."

"Yes, there could result nothing save evil from such an attempt," he replied.

"Take my advice, Allan. Now answer me honestly, what is it that you hope to make out of this? Do you care very much for the girl herself?"

"I like her," was the hesitating answer; "but I must confess I care more for money than anything else."

"Then I will teach you how to make money of this affair. Write tomorrow, tell her you have received her letter, but that you must always love her, and that you shall hold her to her promise of being your wife. The chances are that she will not answer that letter, and that for a time there will be silence between you. Then," she continued, "my advice to you is this: wait until she marries. You cannot marry her now, she will never be willing, but you can make a very decent fortune out of her when she is married."

"In what way?" he asked.

"Hold those letters as a rod over her, threaten to bring an action against her—she will never know that such an action cannot stand; or if that does not do, threaten to show them to her husband. Rather than let him know, rather than let Lord and Lady Ridsdale know, she will give you thousands of pounds."

Allan Lyster for one-half moment shrank from his sister.

"It seems so very bad," he said.



“Not at all. She will have more money than she can count; you have a right to some of it. Of course, you will never really tell, but why not make what you can out of it? She would not even miss a thousand a year and see what one thousand alone would do for you.”

So it was settled—the fiendish plan that was to torture an innocent woman until she was driven to shame and almost death. He wrote the letter. Marion received it with silent disdain; she had told him that it must all be at an end, and it should be so.

Then, as Adelaide had wisely foreseen, there fell silence between them. Adelaide wrote at intervals; in one letter she said:



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“Allan has told me what passed between you.” She made no further comment; after a time she ceased even to mention his name in her letters, and then Marion believed herself, in all honesty, free. She did not forget her promise; she interested herself greatly in procuring commissions for Allan Lyster; she persuaded Lord Ridsdale to order several pictures from him; she sent very handsome presents to Adelaide, and thanked Heaven that never again while she lived would she have a secret.

How relieved, how happy she felt! Life was not the same to her, now that this terrible burden was removed. She asked herself how she ever could have been so blind and mad as to believe the feeling she entertained for Allan Lyster was love.

A year passed, and, except for the favors she conferred upon him, the orders that she had obtained for him, no news came to Marion of the man who had been her lover. How was she to know that the web was weaving slowly around her? It was silence like that of a tiger falling back for a spring.

Then the great event of her life came to Marion Arleigh. She fell in love, and this time it was real, genuine and true. Lady Ridsdale insisted on her going to London for the season.

It was high time, she said, that Miss Arleigh, the heiress of Hanton, was presented at court, and made her debut in the great world.

So they went to London, and Marion, by her wonderful beauty and grace, created a great sensation there; Heiress of Hanton, one of the prettiest estates in England, she had plenty of lovers; her appearance was the most decided success, just as Lady Ridsdale had foreseen that it would be.

Then came my Lord Atherton, one of the proudest and handsomest men in England, the owner of an immense property and most noble name. He had been abroad for some years, but returned to London, and was considered one of the most eligible and accomplished men of the day. Many were the speculations as to whom he would marry—as to who would win the great matrimonial prize.

The wonder and speculations were soon at an end. Lord Atherton saw Miss Arleigh and fell in love with her at once. Not for her money—he was rich enough to dispense with wealth in a wife; not for money, but for her wonderful beauty and simple, unaffected grace.

He was charmed with her; the candor, the purity, the brightness of her disposition enchanted him.

“Her lips seemed to be doubly lovely,” he said one day to Lady Ridsdale, “because they have not, in my opinion, ever uttered one false word.”



Marion was equally enchanted; there was no one so great or so good as Lord Atherton. The heroes she had read of faded into insignificance before him. He was so generous, so noble, so loyal, so truthful in every way, such a perfect gentleman, and no mean scholar. It was something to win the love of such a man, it was something to love him.

Now she understood this was true love, the very remembrance of her infatuation over Allan Lyster dyed her beautiful face crimson. Ah, how she thanked Heaven that she was free, how utterly wretched she would have been for her whole life long had she been beguiled into marrying him!



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She loved Lord Atherton with her whole heart, her womanly nature did him full homage. She appreciated his noble qualities, she was happy in his love as it was possible for a woman to be.

Yet, after he had asked her to be his wife, there came over her a great longing to tell him the story of her engagement to Allan Lyster.

“He ought to know it,” she said, “though all is at end now; he ought to know it, there should be no secrets between us.”

But she dare not tell him. One thing that restrained her was the promise she had given never to mention it, but the reason above all others was she knew his fastidious sense of honor so well that she was afraid he would not love her when he knew how lightly she had once before given her love.

So she committed that greatest of all errors, she engaged herself to marry Lord Atherton without telling him of her acquaintance with the young artist. Then she was so happy for a time that she forgot the whole matter; she was so happy that she ceased to remember there had ever been anything deserving blame in her life.

The season over, they returned to Thorpe Castle, and Lord Atherton soon followed to pay them a long visit. He told them quite frankly that it was perfectly useless to delay the wedding, that he could not live out of Marion’s presence, therefore the sooner the arrangements were made the better.

That was perhaps the happiest time in Marion’s life. Lady Ridsdale, delighted at the excellent match she was about to make, was in the highest spirits. Preparations were begun for the trousseau. Lord Atherton ordered that his mansion, Leigh Hall, should be entirely refurnished. Every luxury, every splendor, every magnificence, was prepared for the bride; presents were lavished upon her from all sides; congratulations and good wishes were showered on her.

She was perhaps at that time the happiest girl in the world. She had almost forgotten that buried romance of her school days. When she remembered Allan, it was only with an earnest desire to help him. To Adelaide Lyster she sent some very superb presents, telling her frankly of her approaching marriage, and telling her she would always be most welcome at Leigh Hall.

If she had been more worldly-wise, poor child, she would have known that Adelaide’s silence meant mischief; but she was not married with any presentiment of the sorrow that was to fall so heavily upon her and when she was married she declared herself to be happier than any one had ever been in this world yet.



CHAPTER XII.

An agreement had been made between them that some little time should elapse before Allan put his long-cherished scheme into execution. Nothing, Adelaide assured him, could have answered his purpose better than Marion's marriage with the wealthy Lord Atherton.

"You will be able to get what you like from her, Allan. I am told she worships her husband. Those letters will be worth a fortune, after all. Now see what it is to have a clever sister."



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They allowed her, poor child, some short dream of happiness; she was lulled into perfect security when the blow fell. As Lady Atherton of Leigh her position was second to none. Her husband owned half the county; she was queen of the whole of it. She was beloved, popular and admired; her husband worshiped her; her friends held her in highest honor and esteem. To Lord and Lady Ridsdale she had grown dear as a child of their own. She was at the height of human felicity; there was nothing on earth left for her to desire. Sometimes, when she heard of the misery resulting from very unequal or loveless marriages, she would raise her beautiful face to heaven and thank God that she had been preserved from the snares of her youth. She heard quite accidentally from some one, who had been purchasing a picture, that Allan Lyster was abroad, and she decided, in her own most generous mind, that when he returned he should have an order that would please him. But he did not return, and from her old friend, Adelaide, she had heard no single word since her marriage.

There were great rejoicings when her little son and heir was born; the only fear was lest the child should be absolutely killed by the great amount of affection and caresses heaped upon it. Lord Atherton's happiness was complete, Lord and Lady Ridsdale were delighted with the beautiful princely boy, and his mother absolutely worshiped him.

It was when the little heir of Leigh was about a year old that the blow fell on his beautiful mother. She was seated one morning in her luxurious dressing-room, a scene of splendid confusion and brilliant coloring that would have enchanted an artist, herself more lovely than ever, for the promise of her girlhood had developed into magnificent womanhood. Jewels of great value lay on the toilet-table, costly dresses were lying about. The nurse had just been in with baby, and nothing would please baby but playing with his mamma's beautiful golden-brown hair. Of course his wish must be gratified. The diamond arrow that fastened the heavy coils was withdrawn, and the glorious wealth of hair, in all its shining abundance, fell in picturesque disorder. Then Lord Atherton entered to ask his wife some question about the day's proceedings, and he told her she looked so lovely he would not let the beautiful hair be touched. My lord withdrew, leaving his wife's face flushed with pleasure at his praises. Then came the maid, and she brought in her hands some letters that had just arrived. Lady Atherton laid them down carelessly; there was nothing, she thought, that could possibly interest her.

Presently she took up the letters, and then all her indifference vanished, the love light died from her eyes, the smile from her lips. She knew the handwriting. One of those notes was from Allan Lyster.

She hastily opened it, and, as she read, all the color faded from her sweet face. The folly and sin of her ignorant girlhood were finding her out.



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“I have but just returned from abroad,” he wrote, “where I have been for more than two years, and I am completely overwhelmed by the intelligence that awaited me. You are married, Marion! You, who promised so faithfully to be my wife. You, whose letters to me contain that promise given over and over again. It is too late to ask what this treachery means. I have by me the letter you wrote, asking for your freedom, and I have the copy of mine absolutely refusing it. I told you then that I should hold you to your promise, and you have disregarded my words.

“Marion, I must have compensation. It is useless talking to one like you of love. You throw aside the poor artist for the rich lord. You must pay me in your own coin, in what you value most—money. You have wronged me as your promised husband. I had some right to your fortune, as your duped and deserted lover. That right still remains. I claim some portion of what ought to have been all mine.

“I am in immediate and urgent want of a thousand pounds. That is very little for one who ought, as your husband, to be at this moment the master of Hanton Hall and its rich domain. However, for a time, that will content me; when I want another I will come to you for it. I will not call at your house; you can send me a check, bank note, or what you will.

“I do not wish to seem harsh, but it is better to tell you at once that if you refuse any money request of mine at any time I shall immediately commence proceedings against you. I shall bring an action for breach of promise of marriage, and all England will cry shame on the false, mercenary woman who abandoned a poor lover, to whom her troth was plighted, in order to marry a rich lord. All England shall despise you. For your child’s sake, I counsel you to avoid an exposure.”

She read those terrible words over and over again. Suddenly the whole plot grew clear to her. It was for this they had schemed and plotted. Not for love of her, but to make money out of her, to trade upon her weakness and folly, stain her character, her fair name, her happiness, the love of her husband and child, the esteem of her friends. All lay in their hands. They could, if they would, make her name, that noble name which her husband bore so proudly, a subject of jest all over the world.

She could fancy the papers, their paragraphs, their remarks, their comments. She could almost see the heading:

“Action for Breach of Promise against Lady Atherton.” How the Radicals, who hated her husband for his politics, would rejoice! Even in the years to come, when her child grew to man’s estate, it would be as a black mark against him that his mother had been the subject of such vulgar jest. Her husband would never bear it. He would leave her, she was sure. Ah! better pay a thousand pounds over and over again than go through all this.



Yet it seemed a large sum; not that she cared for it, but how could she get it without her husband's knowledge? By her own wish, all money affairs had been left in his hands; he would wonder when he looked at her check book why she had drawn so large a sum; better write out checks of a hundred pounds each.



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She did so, and sent them. Just as she was folding the paper that enclosed them a grand inspiration came to her—an impulse to go to her husband and tell him all.

He would find some means of saving her, she was quite sure of that. Then the more cowardly, the weaker part of her nature, rose in rebellion. She dared not, for, if she did, he would never love her again. So she sent the thousand pounds, and then there was an interval of peace. Yet not peace for her; the sword was suspended over her head, and any moment it might fall. She grew thin, restless and nervous; her husband and all her friends wondered what ailed her; her manner changed, even her beautiful face seemed to grow restless and pale.

Then came the demand for a second thousand. Having tasted the luxury of spending what he liked and living without work, Allan Lyster was entranced with his triumph. He had taken rooms in a very expensive and fashionable locality, he bought a horse, and set up a private cab, with a smart little tiger. He entered one of the fashionable clubs, and people began to say that he had had money left him. If any one of the gentlemen who met him and touched his hand, had but known that he was trading on a woman's secret, they would have thrashed him with less remorse of conscience than if they were punishing a mad dog.

Then the third thousand was asked for, and Lady Atherton was at a loss where or how to get it; her husband had already rallied her about the large sums of money she spent, and she was obliged to have recourse to means she disliked for procuring it.

CHAPTER XIII.

There came a day when Lady Atherton could no longer meet the demands made upon her; the estate near Hanton was to be sold, and her husband wished to purchase it.

“A little economy for one year,” he said to his wife, “and we shall do it easily. You will not mind being careful for one year, Marion?”

She told him, what was perfectly true, that she would deprive herself of anything on earth for his sake. He laughed.

“There will not be much privation needed, for one who has spent three thousand pounds in six months. I shall have to give my little wife some lessons in economy.”

It was hard, for on her own self she had not spent one shilling. Another time she was greatly distressed what to say—her husband complained of her dress.

“Marion,” he said, “it seems absurd to say, but, my darling, you are positively shabby—that is, for one in your position. How is it?”



She did not tell him that she could not purchase more dresses, or, rather, would not until Madame Elise was paid. Her face flushed, and Lord Atherton smiled.

“You need not carry economy too far,” he said; “it is very good of you to take so great an interest in me, Marion, but you must not go to these extremes. You had five hundred pounds yesterday; go and get some pretty, elegant dresses suitable for Lady Atherton.”



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She could not tell him that she had sent that all away, and had not a shilling left. There were times when Marion, Lady Atherton, heiress of Hanton, mistress of one of the finest fortunes in England, wife of one of the richest men—when she hardly knew where to turn for money; the poorest beggar in the street was more at ease.

In the meantime, Allan Lyster, by his successful trading on a woman's secret, was leading a life of complete and perfect luxury. He spared no expense; he gambled, betted, played at every game of chance; he was well known at Tattersall's in all the green rooms; he played to perfection the part of a fast man about town, while the woman he had pretended to love was wearing her life away in mortification and suspense.

At last, what she had long foreseen came to pass. Allan wrote to her for money when she was utterly unable to get it. She was compelled to borrow it from Lord Ridsdale. He lent it to her with a smile, telling her at the same time, with real gravity in his voice, that he hoped she was keeping no secret from her husband.

So the time came when she could no longer keep pace with his extravagance, when she was compelled to refuse his request. He had lost some money in a bet over some horses. He told her that he must have it, and she assured him that it was impossible. Then the blow fell. He wrote to say that if the money were not sent him by Thursday he should at once commence an action against her.

"The damages that I shall win," he wrote, "will be so large that I shall not want to ask you for more."

She was terrified almost out of her senses. To many women it would have occurred to sell or pledge their jewels, to change diamonds for paste. She thought of none of these things. Lord Ridsdale had gone to Paris, she could not ask him, and Lady Atherton was at her wits' end.

She learned, however, that she was too fearful, that he was trading on her alarm, that he could not bring an action against her, because at the time that promise had been given she was a ward and not of age. She wrote and told him that his threat was in vain.

It was the answer to that question that drove her from home a fugitive, that exiled her from all she loved, that drove her mad with terror.

He wrote to her and admitted that her argument was perfectly just, that perhaps in strict legal bounds he could not maintain such an action; but the shame and exposure for her, he told her, would be none the less.



“If you persist in your refusal,” he wrote, “I shall go at once to Lord Atherton. I will show him those letters, and ask him in justice to give me some share of the fortune he has deprived me of. I shall read every word to him, and tell him all that took place; he may judge between us.”



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The letter fell from her nerveless hands, and Marion, Lady Atherton, fell on her knees with a cry of despair. She was powerless to help herself, she could do nothing, she could get no more money; and even if she could of what avail? If she sent this, in a few weeks or months at the farthest, he would renew his demand, and she could not do more. The sword must fall, as well now as in a year's time; besides, the suspense was killing her. The long strain upon her nerves began to tell at last. She was fast, losing her health and strength; she could not eat nor sleep; she was as one beside herself; frightful dreams, dread that knew no words, fear that could not be destroyed, pursued her. She grew so pale, so thin, so nervous, that Lord Atherton was alarmed about her.

If she had loved her husband less her despair would not have been so great. Sooner than he should read those ill-considered words—those protestations of love that made her face flush with flame—sooner than he should read those she would die any death. For it had come to that; she looked for death to save her. She felt powerless in the hands of a villain who would never cease to persecute her.

She sent no answer to the letter. What could she say? She made one or two despairing efforts to get the money, found it impossible, then gave herself up for lost.

She did not write, but there came another note from him saying that unless he heard from her that the money was coming he would wait upon her husband on Friday morning and tell him all.

There was no further respite for her—the sword had fallen—she could not live and face it; she could not live knowing that her husband was to read those words of her folly, that he was to know all the deceit, the clandestine correspondence that weighed now so bear it.

“I shall never look in his face again,” she said to herself. “I could never bear that he should see me after he knows that.”

She weighed it well in her mind. She looked at it in every way, but the more she thought of it the more impossible it seemed. She could not bring disgrace on her husband and live. She could not doom her only child to sorrow and shame, yet live. She could not bear the ignominy of the exposure. She, who had been so proud of her fair fame, of her spotless name, her high reputation. It was not possible. She could not bear it. Her hands trembled. All the strength seemed to leave her. She fell half-fainting—moaning with white lips that she could not bear it and live.

Must she die? Must she part with the sweet, warm life that filled her veins? Must she seek death because she could no longer live?

No, she dare not.



“I cannot live and I dare not die,” she moaned. “I am utterly wretched, utterly hopeless and miserable. Life and death alike are full of terrors for me.”

What should she do? Through the long, burning hours, through the long, dreary nights, she asked herself that question—What should she do?



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Her husband, alarmed at her white face and altered manner, talked of summoning a physician to her. Her friends advised change of air, but there was no human help for her.

Then, when mind and brain alike were overdone, when the strained nerves gave way, when the fever of fear and suspense rose to its height, she thought of flight. That was the only recourse left to her—flight! Then she would escape the terrors of death and the horror of life. Flight was the only resource left to her. The poor, bewildered mind, groping so darkly, fixed on this one idea. She would not kill herself. That would deprive her of all hope in another world. She dare not live her present life, but flight would save her.

People would only think she was mad for running away, and surely when Allan Lyster saw what he had done he would relent and persecute her no more.

She was not herself when she stole so quietly from home and went disguised to the station. She was half delirious with fear and dread; her brain whirled, her heart beat, every moment she dreaded to see Allan Lyster pursuing her. Her only idea was to get away from him, safe in some refuge where he could not find her.

She little dreamed that in the hurry of her flight she had dropped Allan Lyster's letter—the letter in which he threatened to tell her husband—the letter which drove her mad, and sent her from home. She had intended to destroy it; she believed she had done so; but the fact was, it had fallen from her hands on the floor, and she never thought of it again. Her maid, thinking it might be of consequence, picked it up and laid it on the mantelshelf. Only God knows what would have become of Lady Atherton but for this oversight.

Her absence was not discovered until evening, when it was time to dress for dinner; then the maid could not find her. No notice was taken of her absence at first; they thought she had gone out and had been detained; but when midnight arrived, and there was still no news of her, Lord Atherton became alarmed. He went into her dressing-room, and there his eyes fell upon the letter. He opened and read it, bewildered by its contents. At first he did not understand it, then he began to see what it meant.

Gradually the meaning grew clear to him. This villain was trading upon some secret of poor Marion, and she in fear and trembling had fled. He felt sure of it, and from that conviction he took his precautions.

He said nothing to the servants, except that Lady Atherton had gone away for a few days and would not return just yet. "I shall find her," he thought, "before the scandal gets known." Seeing their lord perfectly cool and unconcerned, the servants made sure all was right. No one in the wide world knew the true story of Lady Atherton's flight except her husband.



“I will find her,” he said to himself; “but before I even begin to look for her I will settle my account with the sneaking villain known as Allan Lyster.”



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CHAPTER XIV.

In his luxurious drawing-room Allan Lyster sat alone. He was engaged to dine with a party of guardsmen at Richmond, but he hardly felt in spirits to go. This was Thursday; never dreaming that Lady Atherton would fail him, he had faithfully promised to pay his bet on Friday. It was now Thursday evening, and he had heard nothing from her. He had not the least intention of really betraying her to her husband—he knew the character of an English gentleman too well for that. He knew that if Lord Atherton had but the least suspicion of the vilely treacherous way in which he had preyed upon his innocent wife, he would, in all probability, thrash him within an inch of his life.

He was far from being comfortable, and wished that he had taken Adelaide's advice and had gone less rashly to work—had been content with less. After all, he felt compelled to own that he had been rather hard upon her.

"Let her send this time," he said to himself, "and I will not trouble her again just yet."

He was seated in a luxurious lounging chair, on the table by his side was a bottle of finest Cognac, and he was enjoying the flavor of a very fine cigar. Notwithstanding all these comforts, Allan Lyster was not happy.

"I cannot think," he said to himself, "why she does not send."

At that moment he heard a sharp ring at the door bell.

"That is the messenger," he said to himself, triumphantly, "and it is quite time, too."

But it was a man's heavy footstep that mounted the stairs, and when Allan Lyster looked anxiously at the door, he was astonished to see Lord Atherton enter, carrying a thick riding whip in his hand.

He sprang obsequiously from his chair.

"I am delighted to see you, my lord," he began, but one look at that white, stern face froze the words on his lips. Lord Atherton waved his hand.

"I want those letters, sir!" he cried, in a voice of thunder—"those letters that you have, holding as a sword over the head of my wife!"

"What if I refuse to give them?" replied Allan.

"Then I shall take them from you. I have read this precious epistle, in which you threaten to show them to me. Now bring them here."



“I am not accustomed, my lord, to this treatment.”

Lord Atherton’s face flushed, his eyes seemed to flame fire.

“Not a word; bring them to me! You have traded for the last time upon a woman’s weakness and fears. I will read the letters, then I will tell you what I think of you.”

“Better tell your wife,” sneered the other, “what you think of her.”

“My wife is a lady,” was the quiet reply—“a lady for whom I have the greatest honor, respect and esteem. Your lips simply sully her name, and I refuse to hear it from you.”

“She did not always think so,” was the sullen reply. “If you had not stepped in and robbed me, she would have been my wife now.”

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The white anger of that face, and the convulsive movement of the hand that held the heavy whip, might have warned him.

“I want those letters,” repeated Lord Atherton; “bring them to me at once. Remember, they are useless to you; you will never force one mere farthing from Lady Atherton—your keeping them will be useless.”

“It will be more to my interest to keep them,” sneered Allan Lyster; “they are interesting documents, and I can show them to those who will not judge the matter in so one-sided a manner as your lordship.”

“You may publish them, if you please,” said Lord Atherton, “but I will take care that every line in them brands you with red hot shame. You shall publish them, and I will make all England ring with the story of your infamy. I will make every honest man loathe you.”

“You cannot,” said Allan Lyster.

“I can. Englishmen like fair play. I will tell all England how you took advantage of a girl’s youth and inexperience, above all, of the fact of her being an orphan, to beguile her into making you a promise of marriage, and how since you have traded, you coward, on her weakness, on her love for her husband, on the best part of her nature; and I will tell my story so honestly, so well, that every honest man shall hate you. You may have frightened my poor wife with shadows, you cannot so frighten me. I tell you, and I am speaking truthfully, that I do not care if you print her letters and every man, woman and child read them; they shall read my vindication of her and my denunciation of you.”

“You see, Lord Atherton, she did promise to marry me, and I did reckon upon her fortune. What will you give me for the letters?”

“Nothing. If, after reading them, I find you really received, from the pure and noble lady who is now my wife, a promise of marriage, I will give you some compensation. I will give you two thousand pounds, although I know that promise to have been drawn from her by fraud, treachery and cunning.”

Allan Lyster began to see, in his own phrase, that the game was up. He unlocked the door of a little cabinet, and took from it a bundle of papers. He gave them to Lord Atherton, who, still standing, read them word for word.

“It is as I thought,” he said, when he came to the last. “It is the worst case of fraud, deception and cowardice I have ever met. Nothing could be more mean, more dishonorable, more revolting. Still, as the promise is true, I will give you a check for two thousand pounds when you have destroyed them.”



Very slowly and deliberately Allan Lyster tore the letters into the smallest shreds, until they all were destroyed, then Lord Atherton, taking a check book from his pocket, wrote him out a check for two thousand pounds.

Allan took it sullenly enough.

“If I had my rights,” he said, “I should have more than that every quarter.”



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“That is as it may be,” said Lord Atherton, quietly. “You may have deceived a very young and inexperienced girl; but you would not, perhaps, have been so successful when that same girl was able to compare you with others. Now I have paid you; remember, I do not seek to purchase your silence. I leave it entirely to your own option whether you tell your story or not. I know that you cannot brand yourself with deeper disgrace and shame than by making public your share in this transaction.”

Allan Lyster murmured some insolent words which his lordship did not choose to hear. He straightened the lash of his whip.

“Now,” he continued, blandly, “I am going to give you a lesson. I am going to teach you several things. The first is to respect the trusts that parents and governesses place in you when they confide young girls to you for lessons; the second, is to respect women, and not, like a vile, mean coward, to trade upon their secrets; and the third lesson I wish to give you is to make you an honest man, to teach you to live on your own earnings, and not on the price of a woman’s tears. This is how I would enforce my lesson.”

He raised that strong right arm of his and rained down heavy blows on the cowardly traitor who had taken a woman’s money as the price of his honor and manhood. His face never for one moment lost its calm; but the strong arm did its work, until the coward whined for pity. Then Lord Atherton broke his whip in two and flung it on the floor.

“I should not like to touch even a dog with it,” he said, “after it has touched you.”

He stood still for some moments to see if the coward would make any effort to rise and revenge himself; but the man who had been content to live on a woman’s misery thought the safest plan was to lie still on the floor.

“I shall be happy to repeat my lesson,” said his lordship, calmly, “if you require it again.”

Allan Lyster made no reply, and Lord Atherton walked away. When he was quite gone, and the last sound of his footsteps died away, he rose—he shook his fist in impotent wrath:

“Curse him!” he cried. “It shall go hard with me but I will be equal with him yet!”

He had played his last card and lost; henceforward there was nothing for him but hard work and dishonor. He knew that what Lord Atherton had said was true; if any one knew what he had done, nothing but hatred and disgust would be his portion.

Lord Atherton went at once to Scotland Yard and asked for a detective. He showed him the portrait of his wife, told him she had left home under a false impression, and that he would give him fifty pounds if he could trace her.



For a week all effort was in vain, they could hear nothing of her; then one morning Lord Atherton saw an advertisement in the "Times," and he said to himself that the lost was found.

CHAPTER XV.



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Advertisement.—On Thursday evening last a lady arrived at the little village of Redcliffe, and took lodgings there. The same evening she fell ill of brain fever, and now is in danger of death. She is a stranger to all in the village, and no clue as to her name or friends can be found. Any one who has a missing relative or friend is requested to attend to this advertisement.

Then followed a description of the lady and of the dress she wore. Lord Atherton felt sure that it was his lost wife.

Without saying one word, he went at once to Redcliffe; he went to the address given and was referred to Mrs. Hirste's.

He went there, and said he had every reason to believe the lady mentioned in the advertisement was his wife. "She left home," he said, "unknown to us, delirious, without doubt, at the time, and quite unable to account for her own action."

They took him into the room where she lay; he looked at the flushed face and shining eyes.

"It is my wife," he said, quietly. "Thank God, I have found her."

But Marion did not know him; her hot lips murmured continually of Allan, who was persecuting her, and of her husband whom she loved so dearly, but who would never be willing to see her again.

"How she must have suffered!" he said to himself. Then he telegraphed to London for a physician and a nurse. They were not long in coming; by that time the whole village was in a state of excitement and consternation.

"She will recover, I have every reason to believe," said the doctor, "but she has evidently suffered long and terribly. Some domestic trouble, my lord, I suppose, that has preyed upon her?"

"Yes," replied Lord Atherton, "a domestic trouble that she has been foolish enough to keep to herself and which had preyed on her mind."

She had the best of care, the kindest and most constant attention, yet it was some time before she opened her eyes to the ordinary affairs of this life.

Lord Atherton never forgot the hour—he was sitting by her bedside. He had barely left her since her illness began, and suddenly he heard the sound of a low, faint sigh.

He looked eagerly into the worn, sweet face—once more the light of reason shone in those lovely eyes.



“Marion,” he said, gently.

She gave one half-frightened glance at him, then buried her face in her hands with a moan.

“My sweet wife,” he said, “do not be afraid. I know all about it, darling. I have made that villain destroy those letters. You need fear no more.”

“And you are not cross?” she whispered.

“Not with you, my poor child; always trust me, Marion. I love you better than any one else in the world could love you. I am afraid even that I love your faults.”

“Do you know that I promised to marry him?” she asked.

“Yes, I know all about it. Thank God you were not deluded into carrying out the promise. It was all a plot, my darling, between that wretched man and his sister. They knew you had money and they wanted it. I must not reproach you, but I wish you had told me before we were married—you should not have suffered so terribly.”



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“Shall you love me just as much as you did before?” she asked, after a short pause.

“I may safely say that I shall love you a thousand times better, Marion. You see, I have found out in this short space of time that I could not live without you.”

She was not long in recovering after that. As soon as it was possible to move her, Lord Atherton took her to Hanton, and there she speedily regained health and strength.

When she was quite well, Lord Atherton had one more conversation with her on this matter.

“You were so very young,” he said, “and the brother and sister seem both to have been specious, cunning and clever; they evidently played upon your weakness and childish love of romance. Therefore, my darling, I look very indulgently upon that girlish error, if I may call it by so grave a name. Shall I tell you frankly, Marion, where you did wrong?”

“Yes,” she replied, looking up at him with eyes that shone brightly through her tears.

“You did wrong in concealing anything from me,” he continued. “Rely upon it, my darling, the surest foundation for happiness in marriage is perfect trust. A secret between husband and wife is like a worm in a bud, or a canker in fairest fruit; no matter if the telling of a secret should even provoke anger, it should always be told. That shall be the last between us, Marion.”

She clung to him with caressing hands, thanking him, blessing him, and promising him that while she lived there should never more be any secrets between them.

Lord Atherton was quite right. Allan Lyster was only too glad to keep his secret, but he never did any more good. Years passed on; fair, blooming children made the old walls of Hanton re-echo with music; Lady Atherton had almost forgotten this, the peril of her youth, when once more there came a letter from Allan Lyster. He was dying, in the greatest poverty and distress, and implored their help. Lord Atherton generously went to his aid. He provided him with all needful comforts, and, after his death, buried him.

Of Adelaide Lyster, after the failure of her brother’s schemes, they never heard again. Lady Atherton is very careful in the training of her daughters, teaching them to distinguish between true and false romance—teaching them that the most beautiful poetry of life is truth.

(THE END.)

[Transcriber’s Note: The following typographical errors have been corrected from the original edition.



A missing quotation mark has been added to the sentence *"In all the wide world there is none like you.*

the very though of seeing you has been changed to *the very thought of seeing you.*

then they would be maried has been changed to *then they would be married.*

skilful mamnagement has been changed to *skilful management.*

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Then the interview ended has been changed to *Then the interview ended.*

The gentleman like him, he thought him clever, gifted and intellectual has been changed to *The gentleman liked him, he thought him clever, gifted and intellectual.*

A missing quotation mark has been added after *or his natural disposition is anything but candid.*

A quotation mark at the end of *"Take my advice, Allan."* has been removed.

Her lips seeemd has been changed to *Her lips seemed.*

The original numbering of the chapters, omitting Chapter III, has been retained.]