

Diana of the Crossways — Volume 4 eBook

Diana of the Crossways — Volume 4 by George Meredith

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DIANA OF THE CROSSWAYS

By George Meredith

1897

BOOK 4.

XXVII. *Contains matter for subsequent explosion*

XXVIII. *Dialogue round the subject of A portrait, with some indications of the task for Diana*



- XXIX. *Shows the approaches of the political and the domestic crisis in company*
- XXX. *In which there is A taste of A little dinner and an aftertaste*
- XXXI. *A chapter containing great political news and therewith an intrusion of the love-god*
- XXXII. *Wherein we behold A giddy turn at the spectral crossways*
- XXXIII. *Exhibits the springing of A mine in A newspaper article*
- XXXIV. *In which it is darkly seen how the CRIMINAL'S judge may be love's criminal*
- XXXV. *Reveals how the true heroine of Romance comes finally to her time of triumph*



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CHAPTER XXVII

CONTAINS MATTER FOR SUBSEQUENT EXPLOSION

Among the various letters inundating Sir Lukin Dunstane upon the report of the triumph of surgical skill achieved by Sir William Macpherson and Mr. Lanyan Thomson, was one from Lady Wathin, dated Adlands, an estate of Mr. Quintin Manx's in Warwickshire, petitioning for the shortest line of reassurance as to the condition of her dear cousin, and an intimation of the period when it might be deemed possible for a relative to call and offer her sincere congratulations: a letter deserving a personal reply, one would suppose. She received the following, in a succinct female hand corresponding to its terseness; every 't' righteously crossed, every 'i' punctiliously dotted, as she remarked to Constance Asper, to whom the communication was transferred for perusal:

*'Dear lady Wathin,—*Lady Dunstane is gaining strength. The measure of her pulse indicates favourably. She shall be informed in good time of your solicitude for her recovery. The day cannot yet be named for visits of any kind. You will receive information as soon as the house is open.

'I have undertaken the task of correspondence, and beg you to believe me,

'Very truly yours,
'D. A. Warwick.'

Miss Asper speculated on the handwriting of her rival. She obtained permission to keep the letter, with the intention of transmitting it per post to an advertising interpreter of character in caligraphy.

Such was the character of the fair young heiress, exhibited by her performances much more patently than the run of a quill would reveal it.

She said, 'It is rather a pretty hand, I think.'

'Mrs. Warwick is a practised writer,' said Lady Wathin. 'Writing is her profession, if she has any. She goes to nurse my cousin. Her husband says she is an excellent nurse. He says what he can for her. But you must be in the last extremity, or she is ice. His appeal to her has been totally disregarded. Until he drops down in the street, as his doctor expects him to do some day, she will continue her course; and even then . . .' An adventuress desiring her freedom! Lady Wathin looked. She was too devout a woman to say what she thought. But she knew the world to be very wicked. Of Mrs. Warwick, her opinion was formed. She would not have charged the individual creature with a criminal design; all she did was to stuff the person her virtue abhorred with the wickedness of the world, and that is a common process in antipathy.



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She sympathized, moreover, with the beautiful devotedness of the wealthy heiress to her ideal of man. It had led her to make the acquaintance of old Lady Dacier, at the house in town, where Constance Asper had first met Percy; Mrs. Grafton Winstanley's house, representing neutral territory or debateable land for the occasional intercourse of the upper class and the climbing in the professions or in commerce; Mrs. Grafton Winstanley being on the edge of aristocracy by birth, her husband, like Mr. Quintin Manx, a lord of fleets. Old Lady Dacier's bluntness in speaking of her grandson would have shocked Lady Wathin as much as it astonished, had she been less of an ardent absorber of aristocratic manners. Percy was plainly called a donkey, for hanging off and on with a handsome girl of such expectations as Miss Asper. 'But what you can't do with a horse, you can't hope to do with a donkey.' She added that she had come for the purpose of seeing the heiress, of whose points of person she delivered a judgement critically appreciative as a horsefancier's on the racing turf. 'If a girl like that holds to it, she's pretty sure to get him at last. It 's no use to pull his neck down to the water.'

Lady Wathin delicately alluded to rumours of an entanglement, an admiration he had, ahem.

'A married woman,' the veteran nodded. 'I thought that was off? She must be a clever intriguer to keep him so long.'

'She is undoubtedly clever,' said Lady Wathin, and it was mumbled in her hearing: 'The woman seems to have a taste for our family.'

They agreed that they could see nothing to be done. The young lady must wither, Mrs. Warwick have her day. The veteran confided her experienced why to Lady Wathin: 'All the tales you tell of a woman of that sort are sharp sauce to the palates of men.'

They might be, to the men of the dreadful gilded idle class!

Mrs. Warwick's day appeared indefinitely prolonged, judging by Percy Dacier's behaviour to Miss Asper. Lady Wathin watched them narrowly when she had the chance, a little ashamed of her sex, or indignant rather at his display of courtliness in exchange for her open betrayal of her preference. It was almost to be wished that she would punish him by sacrificing herself to one of her many brilliant proposals of marriage. But such are women!—precisely because of his holding back he tightened the cord attaching him to her tenacious heart. This was the truth. For the rest, he was gracefully courteous; an observer could perceive the charm he exercised. He talked with a ready affability, latterly with greater social ease; evidently not acting the indifferent conqueror, or so consummately acting it as to mask the air. And yet he was ambitious, and he was not rich. Notoriously was he ambitious, and with wealth to back him, a great entertaining house, troops of adherents, he would gather influence, be propelled to leadership. The vexation of a constant itch to speak to him on the subject, and the

recognition, that he knew it all as well as she, tormented Lady Wathin. He gave her comforting news of her dear cousin in the Winter.



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'You have heard from Mrs. Warwick?' she said.

He replied, 'I had the latest from Mr. Redworth.'

'Mrs. Warwick has relinquished her post?'

'When she does, you may be sure that Lady Dunstane is, perfectly reestablished.'

'She is an excellent nurse.'

'The best, I believe.'

'It is a good quality in sickness.'

'Proof of good all through.'

'Her husband might have the advantage of it. His state is really pathetic. If she has feeling, and could only be made aware, she might perhaps be persuaded to pass from the friendly to the wifely duty.'

Mr. Dacier bent his head to listen, and he bowed.

He was fast in the toils; and though we have assurance that evil cannot triumph in perpetuity, the aspect of it throning provokes a kind of despair. How strange if ultimately the lawyers once busy about the uncle were to take up the case of the nephew, and this time reverse the issue, by proving it! For poor Mr. Warwick was emphatic on the question of his honour. It excited him dangerously. He was long-suffering, but with the slightest clue terrible. The unknotting of the entanglement might thus happen—and Constance Asper would welcome her hero still.

Meanwhile there was actually nothing to be done: a deplorable absence of motive villainy; apparently an absence of the beneficent Power directing events to their proper termination. Lady Wathin heard of her cousin's having been removed to Cowes in May, for light Solent and Channel voyages on board Lord Esquart's yacht. She heard also of heavy failures and convulsions in the City of London, quite unconscious that the Fates, or agents of the Providence she invoked to precipitate the catastrophe, were then beginning cavernously their performance of the part of villain in Diana's history.

Diana and Emma enjoyed happy quiet sailings under May breezes on the many-coloured South-western waters, heart in heart again; the physical weakness of the one, the moral weakness of the other, creating that mutual dependency which makes friendship a pulsating tie. Diana's confession had come of her letter to Emma. When the latter was able to examine her correspondence, Diana brought her the heap for perusal, her own sealed scribble, throbbing with all the fatal might-have-been, under her eyes. She could have concealed and destroyed it. She sat beside her friend, awaiting



her turn, hearing her say at the superscription: 'Your writing, Tony?' and she nodded. She was asked: 'Shall I read it?' She answered: 'Read.' They were soon locked in an embrace. Emma had no perception of coldness through those brief dry lines; her thought was of the matter.

'The danger is over now?' she said.

'Yes, that danger is over now.'

'You have weathered it?'

'I love him.'



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Emma dropped a heavy sigh in pity of her, remotely in compassion for Redworth, the loving and unbeloved. She was too humane and wise of our nature to chide her Tony for having her sex's heart. She had charity to bestow on women; in defence of them against men and the world, it was a charity armed with the weapons of battle. The wife madly stripped before the world by a jealous husband, and left chained to the rock, her youth wasting, her blood arrested, her sensibilities chilled and assailing her under their multitudinous disguises, and for whom the world is merciless, called forth Emma's tenderest commiseration; and that wife being Tony, and stricken with the curse of love, in other circumstances the blessing, Emma bled for her.

'But nothing desperate?' she said.

'No; you have saved me.'

'I would knock at death's doors again, and pass them, to be sure of that.'

'Kiss me; you may be sure. I would not put my lips to your cheek if there were danger of my faltering.'

'But you love him.'

'I do: and because I love him I will not let him be fettered to me.'

'You will see him.'

'Do not imagine that his persuasions undermined your Tony. I am subject to panics.'

'Was it your husband?'

'I had a visit from Lady Wathin. She knows him. She came as peacemaker. She managed to hint at his authority. Then came a letter from him—of supplication, interpenetrated with the hint: a suffused atmosphere. Upon that; unexpected by me, my—let me call him so once, forgive me!—lover came. Oh! he loves me, or did then. Percy! He had been told that I should be claimed. I felt myself the creature I am—a wreck of marriage. But I fancied I could serve him:—I saw golden. My vanity was the chief traitor. Cowardice of course played a part. In few things that we do, where self is concerned, will cowardice not be found. And the hallucination colours it to seem a lovely heroism. That was the second time Mr. Redworth arrived. I am always at crossways, and he rescues me; on this occasion unknowingly.'

'There's a divinity . . .' said Emma. 'When I think of it I perceive that Patience is our beneficent fairy godmother, who brings us our harvest in the long result.'

'My dear, does she bring us our labourers' rations, to sustain us for the day?' said Diana.'



'Poor fare, but enough.'

'I fear I was born godmotherless.'

'You have stores of patience, Tony; only now and then fits of desperation.'

'My nature's frailty, the gap in it: we will give it no fine names —they cover our pitfalls. I am open to be carried on a tide of unreasonableness when the coward cries out. But I can say, dear, that after one rescue, a similar temptation is unlikely to master me. I do not subscribe to the world's decrees for love of the monster, though I am beginning to understand the dues of allegiance. We have ceased to write letters. You may have faith in me.'



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'I have, with my whole soul,' said Emma.

So the confession closed; and in the present instance there were not any forgotten chambers to be unlocked and ransacked for addenda confessions.

The subjects discoursed of by the two endeared the hours to them. They were aware that the English of the period would have laughed a couple of women to scorn for venturing on them, and they were not a little hostile in consequence, and shot their epigrams profusely, applauding the keener that appeared to score the giant bulk of their intolerant enemy, who holds the day, but not the morrow. Us too he holds for the day, to punish us if we have temporal cravings. He scatters his gifts to the abject; tossing to us rebels bare dog-biscuit. But the life of the spirit is beyond his region; we have our morrow in his day when we crave nought of him. Diana and Emma delighted to discover that they were each the rebel of their earlier and less experienced years; each a member of the malcontent minor faction, the salt of earth, to whom their salt must serve for nourishment, as they admitted, relishing it determinedly, not without gratification.

Sir Lukin was busy upon his estate in Scotland. They summoned young Arthur Rhodes to the island, that he might have a taste of the new scenes. Diana was always wishing for his instruction and refreshment; and Redworth came to spend a Saturday and Sunday with them, and showed his disgust of the idle boy, as usual, at the same time consulting them on the topic of furniture for the Berkshire mansion he had recently bought, rather vaunting the Spanish pictures his commissioner in Madrid was transmitting. The pair of rebels, vexed by his treatment of the respectful junior, took him for an incarnation of their enemy, and pecked and worried the man astonishingly. He submitted to it like the placable giant. Yes, he was a Liberal, and furnishing and decorating the house in the stability of which he trusted. Why not? We must accept the world as it is, try to improve it by degrees.—Not so: humanity will not wait for you, the victims are shrieking beneath the bricks of your enormous edifice, behind the canvas of your pictures. 'But you may really say that luxurious yachting is an odd kind of insurgency,' avowed Diana. 'It's the tangle we are in.'

'It's the coat we have to wear; and why fret at it for being comfortable?'

'I don't half enough, when I think of my shivering neighbours.'

'Money is of course a rough test of virtue,' said Redworth. 'We have no other general test.'

Money! The ladies proclaimed it a mere material test; Diana, gazing on sunny sea, with an especial disdain. And name us your sort of virtue. There is more virtue in poverty, He denied that. Inflexibly British, he declared money, and also the art of getting money,

to be hereditary virtues, deserving of their reward. The reward a superior wealth and its fruits? Yes, the power to enjoy and

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spread enjoyment: and let idleness envy both! He abused idleness, and by implication the dilettante insurgency fostering it. However, he was compensatingly heterodox in his view of the Law's persecution of women; their pertinacious harpings on the theme had brought him to that; and in consideration of the fact, as they looked from yacht to shore, of their being rebels participating largely in the pleasures of the tyrant's court, they allowed him to silence them, and forgave him.

Thoughts upon money and idleness were in confusion with Diana. She had a household to support in London, and she was not working; she could not touch *the cantatrice* while Emma was near. Possibly, she again ejaculated, the Redworths of the world were right: the fruitful labours were with the mattock and hoe, or the mind directing them. It was a crushing invasion of materialism, so she proposed a sail to the coast of France, and thither they flew, touching Cherbourg, Alderney, Sark, Guernsey, and sighting the low Brittany rocks. Memorable days to Arthur Rhodes. He saw perpetually the one golden centre in new scenes. He heard her voice, he treasured her sayings; her gestures, her play of lip and eyelid, her lift of head, lightest movements, were imprinted on him, surely as the heavens are mirrored in the quiet seas, firmly and richly as earth answers to the sprinkled grain. For he was blissfully athirst, untroubled by a hope. She gave him more than she knew of: a present that kept its beating heart into the future; a height of sky, a belief in nobility, permanent through manhood down to age. She was his foam-born Goddess of those leaping waters; differently hued, crescented, a different influence. He had a happy week, and it charmed Diana to hear him tell her so. In spite of Redworth, she had faith in the fruit-bearing powers of a time of simple happiness, and shared the youth's in reflecting it. Only the happiness must be simple, that of the glass to the lovely face: no straining of arms to retain, no heaving of the bosom in vacancy.

His poverty and capacity for pure enjoyment led her to think of him almost clingingly when hard news reached her from the quaint old City of London, which despises poverty and authorcraft and all mean adventurers, and bows to the lordly merchant, the mighty financier, Redworth's incarnation of the virtues. Happy days on board the yacht *Clarissa*! Diana had to recall them with effort. They who sow their money for a promising high percentage have built their habitations on the sides of the most eruptive mountain in Europe. *AEtna* supplies more certain harvests, wrecks fewer vineyards and peaceful dwellings. The greed of gain is our volcano. Her wonder leapt up at the slight inducement she had received to embark her money in this Company: a South-American mine, collapsed almost within hearing of the trumpets of prospectus, after two punctual payments of the half-yearly interest. A Mrs. Ferdinand Cherson,

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an elder sister of the pretty Mrs. Fryar-Gunnett, had talked to her of the cost of things one afternoon at Lady Singleby's garden-party, and spoken of the City as the place to help to swell an income, if only you have an acquaintance with some of the chief City men. The great mine was named, and the rush for allotments. She knew a couple of the Directors. They vowed to her that ten per cent. was a trifle; the fortune to be expected out of the mine was already clearly estimable at forties and fifties. For their part they anticipated cent. per cent. Mrs. Cherson said she wanted money, and had therefore invested in the mine. It seemed so consequent, the cost of things being enormous! She and her sister Mrs. Fryar-Gunnett owned husbands who did their bidding, because of their having the brains, it might be understood. Thus five thousand pounds invested would speedily bring five thousand pounds per annum. Diana had often dreamed of the City of London as the seat of magic; and taking the City's contempt for authorcraft and the intangible as, from its point of view, justly founded, she had mixed her dream strangely with an ancient notion of the City's probity. Her broker's shaking head did not damp her ardour for shares to the full amount of her ability to purchase. She remembered her satisfaction at the allotment; the golden castle shot up from this fountain mine. She had a frenzy for mines and fished in some English with smaller sums. 'I am now a miner,' she had exclaimed, between dismay at her audacity and the pride of it. Why had she not consulted Redworth? He would peremptorily have stopped the frenzy in its first intoxicating effervescence. She, like Mrs. Cherson, like all women who have plunged upon the cost of things, wanted money. She naturally went to the mine. Address him for counsel in the person of dupe, she could not; shame was a barrier. Could she tell him that the prattle of a woman, spendthrift as Mrs. Cherson, had induced her to risk her money? Latterly the reports of Mrs. Fryar-Gunnett were not of the flavour to make association of their names agreeable to his hearing.

She had to sit down in the buzz of her self-reproaches and amazement at the behaviour of that reputable City, shrug, and recommence the labour of her pen. Material misfortune had this one advantage; it kept her from speculative thoughts of her lover, and the meaning of his absence and, silence.

Diana's perusal of the incomplete *cantatrice* was done with the cold critical eye interpreting for the public. She was forced to write on nevertheless, and exactly in the ruts of the foregoing matter. It propelled her. No longer perversely, of necessity she wrote her best, convinced that the work was doomed to unpopularity, resolved that it should be at least a victory in style. A fit of angry cynicism now and then set her composing phrases as baits for the critics to quote, condemnatory of the attractiveness of the work. Her mood was bad.



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In addition, she found Whitmonby cool; he complained of the coolness of her letter of adieu; complained of her leaving London so long. How could she expect to be his Queen of the London Salon if she lost touch of the topics? He made no other allusion. They were soon on amicable terms, at the expense of flattering arts that she had not hitherto practised. But Westlake revealed unimagined marvels of the odd corners of the masculine bosom. He was the man of her circle the neatest in epigram, the widest of survey, an Oriental traveller, a distinguished writer, and if not personally bewitching, remarkably a gentleman of the world. He was wounded; he said as much. It came to this: admitting that he had no claims, he declared it to be unbearable for him to see another preferred. The happier was unmentioned, and Diana scraped his wound by rallying him. He repeated that he asked only to stand on equal terms with the others; her preference of one was past his tolerance. She told him that since leaving Lady Dunstane she had seen but Whitmonby, Wilmers, and him. He smiled sarcastically, saying he had never had a letter from her, except the formal one of invitation.

'Powers of blarney, have you forsaken a daughter of Erin?' cried Diana. 'Here is a friend who has a craving for you, and I talk sense to him. I have written to none of my set since I last left London.'

She pacified him by doses of cajolery new to her tongue. She liked him, abhorred the thought of losing any of her friends, so the cajoling sentences ran until Westlake betrayed an inflammable composition, and had to be put out, and smoked sullenly. Her resources were tried in restoring him to reason. The months of absence from London appeared to have transformed her world. Tonans was moderate. The great editor rebuked her for her prolonged absence from London, not so much because it discrowned her as Queen of the Salon, but candidly for its rendering her service less to him. Everything she knew of men and affairs was to him stale.

'How do you get to the secrets?' she asked.

'By sticking to the centre of them,' he said.

'But how do you manage to be in advance and act the prophet?'

'Because I will have them at any price, and that is known.'

She hinted at the peccant City Company.

'I think I have checked the mining mania, as I did the railway,' said he; 'and so far it was a public service. There's no checking of maniacs.'

She took her whipping within and without. 'On another occasion I shall apply to you, Mr. Tonans.'

'Ah, there was a time when you could have been a treasure to me,' he rejoined; alluding of course to the Dannisburgh days.

In dejection, as she mused on those days, and on her foolish ambition to have a London house where her light might burn, she advised herself, with Redworth's voice, to quit the house, arrest expenditure, and try for happiness by burning and shining in the spirit: devoting herself, as Arthur Rhodes did, purely to literature. It became almost a decision.



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Percy she had still neither written to nor heard from, and she dared not hope to meet him. She fancied a wish to have tidings of his marriage: it would be peace; if in desolation. Now that she had confessed and given her pledge to Emma, she had so far broken with him as to render the holding him chained a cruelty, and his reserve whispered of a rational acceptance of the end between them. She thanked him for it; an act whereby she was: instantly melted to such softness that a dread of him haunted her. Coward, take up your burden for armour! she called to her poor dungeoned self wailing to have common nourishment. She knew how prodigiously it waxed on crumbs; nay, on the imagination of small morsels. By way of chastizing it, she reviewed her life, her behaviour to her husband, until she sank backward to a depth deprived of air and light. That life with her husband was a dungeon to her nature deeper than any imposed by present conditions. She was then a revolutionary to reach to the breath of day. She had now to be, only not a coward, and she could breathe as others did. 'Women who sap the moral laws pull down the pillars of the temple on their sex,' Emma had said. Diana perceived something of her personal debt to civilization. Her struggles passed into the doomed *cantatrice* occupying days and nights under pressure for immediate payment; the silencing of friend Debit, ridiculously calling himself Credit, in contempt of sex and conduct, on the ground, that he was he solely by virtue of being she. He had got a trick of singing operatic solos in the form and style of the delightful tenor Tellio, and they were touching in absurdity, most real in unreality. Exquisitely trilled, after Tellio's manner,

'The tradesmen all beseech ye,
The landlord, cook and maid,
Complete *the cantatrice*,
That they may soon be paid.'

provoked her to laughter in pathos. He approached, posturing himself operatically, with perpetual new verses, rhymes to Danvers, rhymes to Madame Sybille, the cook. Seeing Tellio at one of Henry Wilmers' private concerts, Diana's lips twitched to dimples at the likeness her familiar had assumed. She had to compose her countenance to talk to him; but the moment of song was the trial. Lady Singleby sat beside her, and remarked:

'You have always fun going on in you!' She partook of the general impression that Diana Warwick was too humorous to nurse a downright passion.

Before leaving, she engaged Diana to her annual garden-party of the closing season, and there the meeting with Percy occurred, not unobserved. Had they been overheard, very little to implicate them would have been gathered. He walked in full view across the lawn to her, and they presented mask to mask.

'The beauty of the day tempts you at last, Mrs. Warwick.'

'I have been finishing a piece of work.'



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Lovely weather, beautiful dresses: agreed. Diana wore a yellow robe with a black bonnet, and he commented on the becoming hues; for the first time, he noticed her dress! Lovely women? Dacier hesitated. One he saw. But surely he must admire Mrs. Fryar-Gunnett? And who steps beside her, transparently fascinated, with visage at three-quarters to the rays within her bonnet? Can it be Sir Lukin Dunstane? and beholding none but his charmer!

Dacier withdrew his eyes thoughtfully from the spectacle, and moved to woo Diana to a stroll. She could not restrain her feet; she was out of the ring of her courtiers for the moment. He had seized his opportunity.

'It is nearly a year!' he said.

'I have been nursing nearly all the time, doing the work I do best.'

'Unaltered?'

'A year must leave its marks.'

'Tony!'

'You speak of a madwoman, a good eleven months dead. Let her rest. Those are the conditions.'

'Accepted, if I may see her.'

'Honestly accepted?'

'Imposed fatally, I have to own. I have felt with you: you are the wiser. But, admitting that, surely we can meet. I may see you?'

'My house has not been shut.'

'I respected the house. I distrusted myself.'

'What restores your confidence?'

'The strength I draw from you.'

One of the Beauties at a garden-party is lucky to get as many minutes as had passed in quietness. Diana was met and captured. But those last words of Percy's renewed her pride in him by suddenly building a firm faith in herself. Noblest of lovers! she thought, and brooded on the little that had been spoken, the much conveyed, for a proof of perfect truthfulness.



The world had watched them. It pronounced them discreet if culpable; probably cold to the passion both. Of Dacier's coldness it had no doubt, and Diana's was presumed from her comical flights of speech. She was given to him because of the known failure of her other adorers. He in the front rank of politicians attracted her with the lustre of his ambition; she him with her mingling of talent and beauty. An astute world; right in the main, owing to perceptions based upon brute nature; utterly astray in particulars, for the reason that it takes no count of the soul of man or woman. Hence its glee at a catastrophe; its poor stock of mercy. And when no catastrophe follows, the prophet, for the honour of the profession, must decry her as cunning beyond aught yet revealed of a serpent sex.



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Save for a word or two, the watchman might have overheard and trumpeted his report of their interview at Diana's house. After the first pained breathing, when they found themselves alone in that room where they had plighted their fortunes, they talked allusively to define the terms imposed on them by Reason. The thwarted step was unmentioned; it was a past madness. But Wisdom being recognized, they could meet. It would be hard if that were denied! They talked very little of their position; both understood the mutual acceptance of it; and now that he had seen her and was again under the spell, Dacier's rational mind, together with his delight in her presence, compelled him honourably to bow to the terms. Only, as these were severe upon lovers, the innocence of their meetings demanded indemnification in frequency.

'Come whenever you think I can be useful,' said Diana.

They pressed hands at parting, firmly and briefly, not for the ordinary dactylology of lovers, but in sign of the treaty of amity.

She soon learnt that she had tied herself to her costly household.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Dialogue round the subject of A portrait, with some indications of the task for Diana

An enamoured Egeria who is not a princess in her worldly state nor a goddess by origin has to play one of those parts which strain the woman's faculties past naturalness. She must never expose her feelings to her lover; she must make her counsel weighty—otherwise she is little his nymph of the pure wells, and what she soon may be, the world will say. She has also, most imperatively, to dazzle him without the betrayal of artifice, where simple spontaneousness is beyond conjuring. But feelings that are constrained becloud the judgement besides arresting the fine jet of delivery wherewith the mastered lover is taught through his ears to think himself prompted, and submit to be controlled, by a creature super-feminine. She must make her counsel so weighty in poignant praises as to repress impulses that would rouse her own; and her betraying impulsiveness was a subject of reflection to Diana after she had given Percy Dacier, metaphorically, the key of her house. Only as true Egeria could she receive him. She was therefore grateful, she thanked and venerated this noblest of lovers for his not pressing to the word of love, and so strengthening her to point his mind, freshen his moral energies and inspirit him. His chivalrous acceptance of the conditions of their renewed intimacy was a radiant knightliness to Diana, elevating her with a living image for worship:—he so near once to being the absolute lord of her destinies! How to reward him, was her sole dangerous thought. She prayed and strove that she might give him of her best, to practically help him; and she had reason to suppose



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she could do it, from the visible effect of her phrases. He glistened in repeating them; he had fallen into the habit; before witnesses too; in the presence of Miss Paynham, who had taken earnestly to the art of painting, and obtained her dear Mrs. Warwick's promise of a few sittings for the sketch of a portrait, near the close of the season. 'A very daring thing to attempt,' Miss Paynham said, when he was comparing her first outlines and the beautiful breathing features. 'Even if one gets the face, the lips will seem speechless, to those who know her.'

'If they have no recollection,' said Dacier.

'I mean, the endeavour should be to represent them at the moment of speaking.'

'Put it into the eyes.' He looked at the eyes.

She looked at the mouth. 'But it is the mouth, more than the eyes.'

He looked at the face. 'Where there is character, you have only to study it to be sure of a likeness.'

'That is the task, with one who utters jewels, Mr. Dacier.'

'Bright wit, I fear, is above the powers of your art.'

'Still I feel it could be done. See—now—that!'

Diana's lips had opened to say: 'Confess me a model model: I am dissected while I sit for portrayal. I must be for a moment like the frog of the two countrymen who were disputing as to the manner of his death, when he stretched to yawn, upon which they agreed that he had defeated the truth for both of them. I am not quite inanimate.'

'Irish countrymen,' said Dacier.

'The story adds, that blows were arrested; so confer the nationality as you please.'

Diana had often to divert him from a too intent perusal of her features with sparkles and stories current or invented to serve the immediate purpose.

Miss Paynham was Mrs. Warwick's guest for a fortnight, and observed them together. She sometimes charitably laid down her pencil and left them, having forgotten this or that. They were conversing of general matters with their usual crisp precision on her return, and she was rather like the two countrymen, in debating whether it was excess of coolness or discreetness; though she was convinced of their inclinations, and expected love some day to be leaping up. Diana noticed that she had no reminder for



leaving the room when it was Mr. Redworth present. These two had become very friendly, according to her hopes; and Miss Paynham was extremely solicitous to draw suggestions from Mr. Redworth and win his approval.

‘Do I appear likely to catch the mouth now, do you think, Mr. Redworth?’

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He remarked, smiling at Diana's expressive dimple, that the mouth was difficult to catch. He did not gaze intently. Mr. Redworth was the genius of friendship, 'the friend of women,' Mrs. Warwick had said of him. Miss Paynham discovered it, as regarded herself. The portrait was his commission to her, kindly proposed, secretly of course, to give her occupation and the chance of winning a vogue with the face of a famous Beauty. So many, however, were Mrs. Warwick's visitors, and so lively the chatter she directed, that accurate sketching was difficult to an amateurish hand. Whitmonby, Sullivan Smith, Westlake, Henry Wilmers, Arthur Rhodes, and other gentlemen, literary and military, were almost daily visitors when it became known that the tedium of the beautiful sitter required beguiling and there was a certainty of finding her at home. On Mrs. Warwick's Wednesday numerous ladies decorated the group. Then was heard such a rillet of dialogue without scandal or politics, as nowhere else in Britain; all vowed it subsequently; for to the remembrance it seemed magical. Not a breath of scandal, and yet the liveliest flow. Lady Pennon came attended by a Mr. Alexander Hepburn, a handsome Scot, at whom Dacier shot one of his instinctive keen glances, before seeing that the hostess had mounted a transient colour. Mr. Hepburn, in settling himself on his chair rather too briskly, contrived the next minute to break a precious bit of China standing by his elbow; and Lady Pennon cried out, with sympathetic anguish: 'Oh, my dear, what a trial for you!'

'Brittle is foredoomed,' said Diana, unruffled.

She deserved compliments, and would have had them if she had not wounded the most jealous and petulant of her courtiers.

'Then the Turk is a sapient custodian!' said Westlake, vexed with her flush at the entrance of the Scot.

Diana sedately took his challenge. 'We, Mr. Westlake, have the philosophy of ownership.'

Mr. Hepburn penitentially knelt to pick up the fragments, and Westlake murmured over his head: 'As long as it is we who are the cracked.'

'Did we not start from China?'

'We were consequently precipitated to Stamboul.'

'You try to elude the lesson.'

'I remember my first paedagogue telling me so when he rapped the book on my cranium.'

'The mark of the book is not a disfigurement.'



It was gently worded, and the shrewder for it. The mark of the book, if not a disfigurement, was a characteristic of Westlake's fashion of speech. Whitmonby nodded twice, for signification of a palpable hit in that bout; and he noted within him the foolishness of obtruding the remotest allusion to our personality when crossing the foils with a woman. She is down on it like the lightning, quick as she is in her contracted circle, politeness guarding her from a riposte.

Mr. Hepburn apologized very humbly, after regaining his chair. Diana smiled and said: 'Incidents in a drawing-room are prize-shots at Dulness.'

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'And in a dining-room too,' added Sullivan Smith. 'I was one day at a dinner-party, apparently of undertakers hired to mourn over the joints and the birds in the dishes, when the ceiling came down, and we all sprang up merry as crickets. It led to a pretty encounter and a real prize-shot.'

'Does that signify a duel?' asked Lady Pennon.

"'Twould be the vulgar title, to bring it into discredit with the populace, my lady.'

'Rank me one of the populace then! I hate duelling and rejoice that it is discountenanced.'

'The citizens, and not the populace, I think Mr. Sullivan Smith means,' Diana said. 'The citizen is generally right in morals. My father also was against the practice, when it raged at its "prettiest." I have heard him relate a story of a poor friend of his, who had to march out for a trifle, and said, as he accepted the invitation, "It's all nonsense!" and walking to the measured length, "It's all nonsense, you know!" and when lying on the ground, at his last gasp, "I told you it was all nonsense!"'

Sullivan Smith leaned over to Whitmonby and Dacier amid the ejaculations, and whispered: 'A lady's way of telling the story!—and excuseable to her:—she had to Jonah the adjective. What the poor fellow said was—' He murmured the sixty-pounder adjective, as in the belly of the whale, to rightly emphasize his noun.

Whitmonby nodded to the superior relish imparted by the vigour of masculine veracity in narration. 'A story for its native sauce piquante,' he said.

'Nothing without it!'

They had each a dissolving grain of contempt for women compelled by their delicacy to spoil that kind of story which demands the piquant accompaniment to flavour it racily and make it passable. For to see insipid mildness complacently swallowed as an excellent thing, knowing the rich smack of savour proper to the story, is your anecdotal gentleman's annoyance. But if the anecdote had supported him, Sullivan Smith would have let the expletive rest.

Major Carew Mahoney capped Mrs. Warwick's tale of the unfortunate duellist with another, that confessed the practice absurd, though he approved of it; and he cited Lord Larrian's opinion: 'It keeps men braced to civil conduct.'

'I would not differ with the dear old lord; but no! the pistol is the sceptre of the bully,' said Diana.

Mr. Hepburn, with the widest of eyes on her in perpetuity, warmly agreed; and the man was notorious among men for his contrary action.



'Most righteously our Princess Egeria distinguishes her reign by prohibiting it,' said Lady Singleby.

'And how,' Sullivan Smith sighed heavily, 'how, I'd ask, are ladies to be protected from the bully?'

He was beset: 'So it was all for us? all in consideration for our benefit?'

He mournfully exclaimed: 'Why, surely!'

'That is the funeral apology of the Rod, at the close of every barbarous chapter,' said Diana.



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'Too fine in mind, too fat in body; that is a consequence with men, dear madam. The conqueror stands to his weapons, or he loses his possessions.'

'Mr. Sullivan Smith jumps at his pleasure from the special to the general, and will be back, if we follow him, Lady Pennon. It is the trick men charge to women, showing that they can resemble us.'

Lady Pennon thumped her knee. 'Not a bit. There's no resemblance, and they know nothing of us.'

'Women are a blank to them, I believe,' said Whitmonby, treacherously bowing;—and Westlake said:

'Traces of a singular scrawl have been observed when they were held in close proximity to the fire.'

'Once, on the top of a coach,' Whitmonby resumed, 'I heard a comely dame of the period when summers are ceasing threatened by her husband with a divorce, for omitting to put sandwiches in their luncheon-basket. She made him the inscrutable answer: "Ah, poor man! you will go down ignorant to your grave!" We laughed, and to this day I cannot tell you why.'

'That laugh was from a basket lacking provision; and I think we could trace our separation to it,' Diana said to Lady Pennon, who replied: 'They expose themselves; they get no nearer to the riddle.'

Miss Courtney, a rising young actress, encouraged by a smile from Mrs. Warwick, remarked: 'On the stage, we have each our parts equally.'

'And speaking parts; not personae mutae.'

'The stage has advanced in verisimilitude,' Henry Wilmers added slyly; and Diana rejoined: 'You recognize a verisimilitude of the mirror when it is in advance of reality. Flatter the sketch, Miss Paynham, for a likeness to be seen. Probably there are still Old Conservatives who would prefer the personation of us by boys.'

'I don't know,' Westlake affected dubiousness. 'I have heard that a step to the riddle is gained by a serious contemplation of boys.'

'Serious?'

'That is the doubt.'

'The doubt throws its light on the step!'



'I advise them not to take any leap from their step,' said Lady Pennon.

'It would be a way of learning that we are no wiser than our sires; but perhaps too painful a way,' Whitmonby observed. 'Poor Mountford Wilts boasted of knowing women; and—he married. To jump into the mouth of the enigma, is not to read it.'

'You are figures of conceit when you speculate on us, Mr. Whitmonby.'

'An occupation of our leisure, my lady, for your amusement.'

'The leisure of the humming-top, a thousand to the minute, with the pretence that it sleeps!' Diana said.

'The sacrilegious hand to strip you of your mystery is withered as it stretches,' exclaimed Westlake. 'The sage and the devout are in accord for once.'

'And whichever of the two I may be, I'm one of them, happy to do my homage blindfold!' Sullivan Smith waved the sign of it.



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Diana sent her eyes over him and Mr. Hepburn, seeing Dacier. 'That rosy mediaevalism seems the utmost we can expect.' An instant she saddened, foreboding her words to be ominous, because of suddenly thirsting for a modern cry from him, the silent. She quitted her woman's fit of earnestness, and took to the humour that pleased him.

'Aslauga's knight, at his blind man's buff of devotion, catches the hem of the tapestry and is found by his lady kissing it in a trance of homage five hours long! Sir Hilary of Agincourt, returned from the wars to his castle at midnight, hears that the chitellaine is away dancing, and remains with all his men mounted in the courtyard till the grey morn brings her back! Adorable! We had a flag flying in those days. Since men began to fret the riddle, they have hauled it down half-mast. Soon we shall behold a bare pole and hats on around it. That is their solution.'

A smile circled at the hearing of Lady Singleby say: 'Well, I am all for our own times, however literal the men.'

'We are two different species!' thumped Lady Pennon, swimming on the theme. 'I am sure, I read what they write of women! And their heroines!'

Lady Esquart acquiesced: 'We are utter fools or horrid knaves.'

'Nature's original hieroglyphs—which have that appearance to the peruser,' Westlake assented.

'And when they would decipher us, and they hit on one of our "arts," the literary pirouette they perform is memorable.' Diana looked invitingly at Dacier. 'But I for one discern a possible relationship and a likeness.'

'I think it exists—behind a curtain,' Dacier replied.

'Before the era of the Nursery. Liberty to grow; independence is the key of the secret.'

'And what comes after the independence?' he inquired.

Whitmonby, musing that some distraction of an earnest incentive spoilt Mrs. Warwick's wit, informed him: 'The two different species then break their shallow armistice and join the shock of battle for possession of the earth, and we are outnumbered and exterminated, to a certainty. So I am against independence.'

'Socially a Mussulman, subject to explosions!' Diana said. 'So the eternal duel between us is maintained, and men will protest that they are for civilization. Dear me, I should like to write a sketch of the women of the future—don't be afraid!—the far future. What a different earth you will see!'

And very different creatures! the gentlemen unanimously surmised. Westlake described the fairer portion, no longer the weaker; frightful hosts.

Diana promised him a sweeter picture, if ever she brought her hand to paint it.



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'You would be offered up to the English national hangman, Jehoiachim Sneer,' interposed Arthur Rhodes, evidently firing a gun too big for him, of premeditated charging, as his patroness perceived; but she knew him to be smarting under recent applications of the swish of Mr. Sneer, and that he rushed to support her. She covered him by saying: 'If he has to be encountered, he kills none but the cripple,' wherewith the dead pause ensuing from a dose of outlandish speech in good company was bridged, though the youth heard Westlake mutter unpleasantly: 'Jehoiachim,' and had to endure a stare of Dacier's, who did not conceal his want of comprehension of the place he occupied in Mrs. Warwick's gatherings.

'They know nothing of us whatever!' Lady Pennon harped on her dictum.

'They put us in a case and profoundly study the captive creature,' said Diana: 'but would any man understand this . . . ?' She dropped her voice and drew in the heads of Lady Pennon, Lady Singleby, Lady Esquart and Miss Courtney: 'Real woman's nature speaks. A maid of mine had a "follower." She was a good girl; I was anxious about her and asked her if she could trust him. "Oh, yes, ma'am," she replied, "I can; he's quite like a female." I longed to see the young man, to tell him he had received the highest of eulogies.'

The ladies appreciatingly declared that such a tale was beyond the understandings of men. Miss Paynham primmed her mouth, admitting to herself her inability to repeat such a tale; an act that she deemed not 'quite like a lady.' She had previously come to the conclusion that Mrs. Warwick, with all her generous qualities, was deficient in delicate sentiment—owing perhaps to her coldness of temperament. Like Dacier also, she failed to comprehend the patronage of Mr. Rhodes: it led to suppositions; indefinite truly, and not calumnious at all; but a young poet, rather good-looking and well built, is not the same kind of wing-chick as a young actress, like Miss Courtney—Mrs. Warwick's latest shieldling: he is hardly enrolled for the reason that was assumed to sanction Mrs. Warwick's maid in the encouragement of her follower. Miss Paynham sketched on, with her thoughts in her bosom: a damsel castigatingly pursued by the idea of sex as the direct motive of every act of every person surrounding, her; deductively therefore that a certain form of the impelling passion, mild or terrible, or capricious, or it might be less pardonable, was unceasingly at work among the human couples up to decrepitude. And she too frequently hit the fact to doubt her gift of reading into them. Mr. Dacier was plain, and the state of young Mr. Rhodes; and the Scottish gentleman was at least a vehement admirer. But she penetrated the breast of Mr. Thomas Redworth as well, mentally tore his mask of friendship to shreds. He was kind indeed in commissioning her to do the portrait. His desire for it, and his urgency to have the features exactly



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given, besides the infrequency of his visits of late, when a favoured gentleman was present, were the betraying signs. Deductively, moreover, the lady who inspired the passion in numbers of gentlemen and set herself to win their admiration with her lively play of dialogue, must be coquettish; she could hold them only by coldness. Anecdotes, epigrams, drolleries, do not bubble to the lips of a woman who is under an emotional spell: rather they prove that she has the spell for casting. It suited Mr. Dacier, Miss Paynham thought: it was cruel to Mr. Redworth; at whom, of all her circle, the beautiful woman looked, when speaking to him, sometimes tenderly.

'Beware the silent one of an assembly!' Diana had written. She did not think of her words while Miss Paynham continued mutely sketching. The silent ones, with much conversation around them, have their heads at work, critically perforce; the faster if their hands are occupied; and the point they lean to do is the pivot of their thoughts. Miss Paynham felt for Mr. Redworth.

Diana was unaware of any other critic present than him she sought to enliven, not unsuccessfully, notwithstanding his English objection to the pitch of the converse she led, and a suspicion of effort to support it:— just a doubt, with all her easy voluble run, of the possibility of naturalness in a continuous cleverness. But he signified pleasure, and in pleasing him she was happy: in the knowledge that she dazzled, was her sense of safety. Percy hated scandal; he heard none. He wanted stirring, cheering; in her house he had it. He came daily, and as it was her wish that new themes, new flights of converse, should delight him and show her exhaustless, to preserve her ascendancy, she welcomed him without consulting the world. He was witness of Mr. Hepburn's presentation of a costly China vase, to repair the breach in her array of ornaments, and excuse a visit. Judging by the absence of any blow within, he saw not a sign of coquetry. Some such visit had been anticipated by the prescient woman, so there was no reddening. She brought about an exchange of sentences between him and her furious admirer, sparing either of them a glimpse of which was the sacrifice to the other, amusing them both. Dacier could allow Mr. Hepburn to outsit him; and he left them, proud of his absolute confidence in her.

She was mistaken in imagining that her social vivacity, mixed with comradeship of the active intellect, was the charm which kept Mr. Percy Dacier temperate when he well knew her to distinguish him above her courtiers. Her powers of dazzling kept him tame; they did not stamp her mark on him. He was one of the order of highly polished men, ignorant of women, who are impressed for long terms by temporary flashes, that hold them bound until a fresh impression comes, to confirm or obliterate the preceding. Affairs of the world he could treat competently; he had a head for high politics and the management of men; the



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feminine half of the world was a confusion and a vexation to his intelligence, characterless; and one woman at last appearing decipherable, he fancied it must be owing to her possession of character, a thing prized the more in women because of his latent doubt of its existence. Character, that was the mark he aimed at; that moved him to homage as neither sparkling wit nor incomparable beauty, nor the unusual combination, did. To be distinguished by a woman of character (beauty and wit for jewellery), was his minor ambition in life, and if Fortune now gratified it, he owned to the flattery. It really seemed by every test that she had the quality. Since the day when he beheld her by the bedside of his dead uncle, and that one on the French sea-sands, and again at Copsley, ghostly white out of her wrestle with death, bleeding holy sweat of brow for her friend, the print of her features had been on him as an index of depth of character, imposing respect and admiration—a sentiment imperilled by her consent to fly with him. Her subsequent reserve until they met—by an accident that the lady at any rate was not responsible for, proved the quality positively. And the nature of her character, at first suspected, vanquished him more, by comparison, than her vivid intellect, which he originally, and still lingeringly, appreciated in condescension, as a singular accomplishment, thrilling at times, now and then assailable feminine. But, after her consent to a proposal that caused him retrospective worldly shudders, and her composed recognition of the madness, a character capable of holding him in some awe was real majesty, and it rose to the clear heights, with her mental attributes for satellites. His tendency to despise women was wholesomely checked by the experience to justify him in saying, Here is a worthy one! She was health to him, as well as trusty counsel. Furthermore, where he respected, he was a governed man, free of the common masculine craze to scale fortresses for the sake of lowering flags. Whilst under his impression of her character, he submitted honourably to the ascendancy of a lady whose conduct suited him and whose preference flattered; whose presence was very refreshing; whose letters were a stimulant. Her letters were really running well-waters, not a lover's delusion of the luminous mind of his lady. They sparkled in review and preserved their integrity under critical analysis. The reading of them hurried him in pursuit of her from house to house during the autumn; and as she did not hint at the shadow his coming cast on her, his conscience was easy. Regarding their future, his political anxieties were a mountainous defile, curtaining the outlook. They met at Lockton, where he arrived after a recent consultation with his Chief, of whom, and the murmurs of the Cabinet, he spoke to Diana openly, in some dejection.

'They might see he has been breaking with his party for the last four years,' she said. 'The plunge to be taken is tremendous.'



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'But will he? He appears too despondent for a header.'

'We cannot dance on a quaking floor.'

'No; it's exactly that quake of the floor which gives "much qualms," to me as well,' said Dacier.

'A treble Neptune's power!' she rejoined, for his particular delectation. 'Enough if he hesitates. I forgive him his nausea. He awaits the impetus, and it will reach him, and soon. He will not wait for the mob at his heels, I am certain. A Minister who does that, is a post, and goes down with the first bursting of the dam. He has tried compromise and discovered that it does not appease the Fates; is not even a makeshift-mending at this hour. He is a man of nerves, very sensitively built; as quick—quicker than a woman, I could almost say, to feel the tremble of the air-forerunner of imperative changes.'

Dacier brightened fondly. 'You positively describe him; paint him to the life, without knowing him!'

'I have seen him; and if I paint, whose are the colours?'

'Sometimes I repeat you to him, and I get all the credit,' said Dacier.

'I glow with pride to think of speaking anything that you repeat,' said Diana, and her eyes were proudly lustreful.

Their love was nourished on these mutual flatteries. Thin food for passion! The innocence of it sanctioned the meetings and the appointments to meet. When separated they were interchanging letters, formally worded in the apostrophe and the termination, but throbbingly full: or Diana thought so of Percy's letters, with grateful justice; for his manner of opening his heart in amatory correspondence was to confide important, secret matters, up to which mark she sprang to reply in counsel. He proved his affection by trusting her; his respect by his tempered style: 'A Greenland style of writing,' she had said of an unhappy gentleman's epistolary compositions resembling it; and now the same official baldness was to her mind Italianly rich; it called forth such volumes.

Flatteries that were thin food for passion appeared the simplest exchanges of courtesy, and her meetings with her lover, judging by the nature of the discourse they held, so, consequent to their joint interest in the great crisis anticipated, as to rouse her indignant surprise and a turn for downright rebellion when the Argus world signified the fact of its having one eye, or more, wide open.

Debit and Credit, too, her buzzing familiars, insisted on an audience at each ear, and at the house-door, on her return to London.



CHAPTER XXIX

SHOWS THE APPROACHES OF THE POLITICAL AND THE DOMESTIC CRISIS IN COMPANY

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There was not much talk of Diana between Lady Dunstane and her customary visitor Tom Redworth now. She was shy in speaking of the love-stricken woman, and more was in his mind for thought than for speech. She some times wondered how much he might know, ending with the reflection that little passing around was unknown to him. He had to shut his mind against thought, against all meditation upon Mrs. Warwick; it was based scientifically when speculating and calculating, on the material element—a talisman. Men and women crossing the high seas of life he had found most readable under that illuminating inquiry, as to their means. An inspector of sea worthy ships proceeds in like manner. Whence would the money come? He could not help the bent of his mind; but he could avoid subjecting her to the talismanic touch. The girl at the Dublin Ball, the woman at the fire-grate of The Crossways, both in one were his Diana. Now and then, hearing an ugly whisper, his manful sympathy with the mere woman in her imprisoned liberty, defended her desperately from charges not distinctly formulated within him:—'She's not made of stone.' That was a height of self-abnegation to shake the poor fellow to his roots; but, then, he had no hopes of his own; and he stuck to it. Her choice of a man like Dacier, too, of whom Redworth judged highly, showed nobility. She irradiated the man; but no baseness could be in such an alliance. If allied, they were bound together for good. The tie-supposing a villain world not wrong—was only not the sacred tie because of impediments. The tie!—he deliberated, and said stoutly—No. Men of Redworth's nature go through sharp contests, though the duration of them is short, and the tussle of his worship of this woman with the materialistic turn of his mind was closed by the complete shutting up of the latter under lock and bar; so that a man, very little of an idealist, was able to sustain her in the pure imagination—where she did almost belong to him. She was his, in a sense, because she might have been his--but for an incredible extreme of folly. The dark ring of the eclipse cast by some amazing foolishness round the shining crescent perpetually in secret claimed the whole sphere of her, by what might have been, while admitting her lost to him in fact. To Thomas Redworth's mind the lack of perfect sanity in his conduct at any period of manhood, was so entirely past belief that he flew at the circumstances confirming the charge, and had wrestles with the angel of reality, who did but set him dreaming backward, after flinging him.

He heard at Lady Wathin's that Mrs. Warwick was in town for the winter. 'Mr. Dacier is also in town,' Lady Wathin said, with an acid indication of the needless mention of it. 'We have not seen him.' She invited Redworth to meet a few friends at dinner. 'I think you admire Miss Asper: in my idea a very saint among young women;—and you know what the young women of our day are. She will be present.



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She is, you are aware, England's greatest heiress. Only yesterday, hearing of that poor man Mr. Warwick's desperate attack of illness—heart!—and of his having no relative or friend to soothe his pillow,—he is lying in absolute loneliness,—she offered to go and nurse him! Of course it could not be done. It is not her place. The beauty of the character of a dear innocent young girl, with every gratification at command, who could make the offer, strikes me as unparalleled. She was perfectly sincere—she is sincerity. She asked at once, Where is he? She wished me to accompany her on a first visit. I saw a tear.'

Redworth had called at Lady Wathin's for information of the state of Mr. Warwick, concerning which a rumour was abroad. No stranger to the vagrant compassionateness of sentimentalists;—rich, idle, conscience-pricked or praise-catching;—he was unmoved by the tale that Miss Asper had proposed to go to Mr. Warwick's sick-bed in the uniform of a Sister of Charity.—'Speaking French!' Lady Wathin exclaimed; and his head rocked, as he said:

'An Englishman would not be likely to know better.'

'She speaks exquisite French—all European languages, Mr. Redworth. She does not pretend to wit. To my thinking, depth of sentiment is a far more feminine accomplishment. It assuredly will be found a greater treasure.'

The modest man (modest in such matters) was led by degrees to fancy himself sounded regarding Miss Asper: a piece of sculpture glacially decorative of the domestic mansion in person, to his thinking; and as to the nature of it—not a Diana, with all her faults!

If Diana had any faults, in a world and a position so heavily against her! He laughed to himself, when alone, at the neatly implied bitter reproach cast on the wife by the forsaken young lady, who proposed to nurse the abandoned husband of the woman bereaving her of the man she loved. Sentimentalists enjoy these tricks, the conceiving or the doing of them—the former mainly, which are cheaper, and equally effective. Miss Asper might be deficient in wit; this was a form of practical wit, occasionally exhibited by creatures acting on their instincts. Warwick he pitied, and he put compulsion on himself to go and see the poor fellow, the subject of so sublime a generosity. Mr. Warwick sat in an arm-chair, his legs out straight on the heels, his jaw dragging hollow cheeks, his hands loosely joined; improving in health, he said. A demure woman of middle age was in attendance. He did not speak of his wife. Three times he said disconnectedly, 'I hear reports,' and his eyelids worked. Redworth talked of general affairs, without those consolatory efforts, useless between men, which are neither medicine nor good honest water:—he judged by personal feelings. In consequence, he left an invalid the sourer for his visit.

Next day he received a briefly-worded summons from Mrs. Warwick.



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Crossing the park on the line to Diana's house, he met Miss Paynham, who grieved to say that Mrs. Warwick could not give her a sitting; and in a still mournfuller tone, imagined he would find her at home, and alone by this time. 'I left no one but Mr. Dacier there,' she observed.

'Mrs. Warwick will be disengaged to-morrow, no doubt,' he said consolingly.

Her head performed the negative. 'They talk politics, and she becomes animated, loses her pose. I will persevere, though I fear I have undertaken a task too much for me.'

'I am deeply indebted to you for the attempt.' Redworth bowed to her and set his face to the Abbey-towers, which wore a different aspect in the smoked grey light since his two minutes of colloquy. He had previously noticed that meetings with Miss Paynham produced a similar effect on him, a not so very impressionable man. And how was it done? She told him nothing he did not know or guess.

Diana was alone. Her manner, after the greeting, seemed feverish. She had not to excuse herself for abruptness when he heard the nature of the subject. Her counsellor and friend was informed, in feminine style, that she had, requested him to call, for the purpose of consulting him with regard to a matter she had decided upon; and it was, the sale of The Crossways. She said that it would have gone to her heart once; she supposed she had lost her affection for the place, or had got the better of her superstitions. She spoke lamely as well as bluntly. The place was hers, she said; her own property. Her husband could not interdict a sale.

Redworth addressed himself to her smothered antagonism. 'Even if he had rights, as they are termed . . . I think you might count on their not being pressed.'

'I have been told of illness.' She tapped her foot on the floor.

'His present state of health is unequal to his ordinary duties.'

'Emma Dunstane is fully supplied with the latest intelligence, Mr. Redworth. You know the source.'

'I mention it simply . . .'

'Yes, yes. What I have to protest is, that in this respect I am free. The Law has me fast, but leaves me its legal view of my small property. I have no authority over me. I can do as I please, in this, without a collision, or the dread of one. It is the married woman's perpetual dread when she ventures a step. Your Law originally presumed her a China-footed animal. And more, I have a claim for maintenance.'

She crimsoned angrily.



Redworth showed a look of pleasure, hard to understand. 'The application would be sufficient, I fancy,' he said.

'It should have been offered.'

'Did you not decline it?'

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'I declined to apply for it. I thought—But, Mr. Redworth, another thing, concerning us all: I want very much to hear your ideas of the prospects of the League; because I know you have ideas. The leaders are terrible men; they fascinate me. They appear to move with an army of facts. They are certainly carrying the country. I am obliged to think them sincere. Common agitators would not hold together, as they do. They gather strength each year. If their statistics are not illusory— an army of phantoms instead of one of facts; and they knock at my head without admission, I have to confess; they must win.'

'Ultimately, it is quite calculable that they will win,' said Redworth; and he was led to discourse of rates and duties and prohibitive tariffs to a woman surprisingly athirst, curious for every scrap of intelligence relating to the power, organization, and schemes of the League. 'Common sense is the secret of every successful civil agitation,' he said. 'Rap it unremittingly on crowds of the thickest of human heads, and the response comes at last to sweep all before it. You may reckon that the country will beat the landlords—for that is our question. Is it one of your political themes?'

'I am not presumptuous to such a degree:—a poor scholar,' Diana replied. 'Women striving to lift their heads among men deserve the sarcasm.'

He denied that any sarcasm was intended, and the lesson continued. When she had shaped in her mind some portion of his knowledge of the subject, she reverted casually to her practical business. Would he undertake to try to obtain a purchaser of *The Crossways*, at the price he might deem reasonable? She left the price entirely to his judgement. And now she had determined to part with the old place, the sooner the better! She said that smiling; and Redworth smiled, outwardly and inwardly. Her talk of her affairs was clearer to him than her curiosity for the mysteries of the League. He gained kind looks besides warm thanks by the promise to seek a purchaser; especially by his avoidance of prying queries. She wanted just this excellent automaton fac-totum; and she referred him to Mr. Braddock for the title-deeds, et caetera—the chirping phrase of ladies happily washing their hands of the mean details of business.

'How of your last work?' he asked her.

Serenest equanimity rejoined: 'As I anticipated, it is not popular. The critics are of one mind with the public. You may have noticed, they rarely flower above that rocky surface. *The cantatrice* sings them a false note. My next will probably please them less.'

Her mobile lips and brows shot the faint upper-wreath of a smile hovering. It was designed to display her philosophy.

'And what is the name of your next?' said he.

'I name it *the man of two minds*, if you can allow that to be in nature.'



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'Contra-distinguished from the woman?'

'Oh! you must first believe the woman to have one.'

'You are working on it?'

'By fits. And I forgot, Mr. Redworth: I have mislaid my receipts, and must ask you for the address of your wine-merchant;—or, will you? Several dozen of the same wines. I can trust him to be in awe of you, and the good repute of my table depends on his honesty.'

Redworth took the definite order for a large supply of wine.

She gave him her hand: a lost hand, dear to hold, needing to be guided, he feared. For him, it was merely a hand, cut off from the wrist; and he had performed that executive part! A wiser man would now have been the lord of it So he felt, with his burning wish to protect and cherish the beloved woman, while saying: 'If we find a speedy bidder for The Crossways, you will have to thank our railways.'

'You!' said Diana, confident in his ability to do every-thing of the practical kind.

Her ingenuousness tickled him. He missed her comic touches upon men and things, but the fever shown by her manner accounted for it.

As soon as he left her, she was writing to the lover who had an hour previously been hearing her voice; the note of her theme being Party; and how to serve it, when to sacrifice it to the Country. She wrote, carolling bars of the Puritani marches; and such will passion do, that her choice of music was quite in harmony with her theme. The martially-amorous melodies of Italian Opera in those days fostered a passion challenged to intrepidity from the heart of softness; gliding at the same time, and putting warm blood even into dull arithmetical figures which might be important to her lover, her hero fronting battle. She condensed Redworth's information skilfully, heartily giving it and whatever she had imbibed, as her own, down to the remark: 'Common sense in questions of justice, is a weapon that makes way into human heads and wins the certain majority, if we strike with it incessantly.' Whether anything she wrote was her own, mattered little: the savour of Percy's praise, which none could share with her, made it instantly all her own. Besides she wrote to strengthen him; she naturally laid her friends and the world under contribution; and no other sort of writing was possible. Percy had not a common interest in fiction; still less for high comedy. He liked the broad laugh when he deigned to open books of that sort; puns and strong flavours and harlequin surprises; and her work would not admit of them, however great her willingness to force her hand for his amusement: consequently her inventiveness deadened. She had to cease whipping it. 'My poor old London cabhorse of a pen shall

go to grass!' she sighed, looking to the sale of The Crossways for money; looking no farther.



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Those marshalled battalions of Debit and Credit were in hostile order, the weaker simply devoted to fighting for delay, when a winged messenger bearing the form of old Mr. Braddock descended to her with the reconciling news that a hermit bachelor, an acquaintance of Mr. Redworth's—both of whom wore a gloomy hue in her mind immediately—had offered a sum for the purchase of The Crossways. Considering the out-of-the-way district, Mr. Braddock thought it an excellent price to get. She thought the reverse, but confessed that double the sum would not have altered her opinion. Double the sum scarcely counted for the service she required of it for much more than a year. The money was paid shortly after into her Bank, and then she enjoyed the contemptuous felicity of tossing meat to her lions, tigers, wolves, and jackals, who, but for the fortunate intervention, would have been feeding on her. These menagerie beasts of prey were the lady's tradesmen, Debit's hungry-brood. She had a rapid glimpse of a false position in regarding that legitimate band so scornfully: another glimpse likewise of a day to come when they might not be stopped at the door. She was running a race with something; with what? It was unnamed; it ran in a shroud.

At times she surprised her heart violently beating when there had not been a thought to set it in motion. She traced it once to the words, 'next year,' incidentally mentioned. 'Free,' was a word that checked her throbs, as at a question of life or death. Her solitude, excepting the hours of sleep, if then, was a time of irregular breathing. The something unnamed, running beside her, became a dreadful familiar; the race between them past contemplation for ghastliness. 'But this is your Law!' she cried to the world, while blinding her eyes against a peep of the shrouded features.

Singularly, she had but to abandon hope, and the shadowy figure vanished, the tragic race was ended. How to live and think, and not to hope: the slave of passion had this problem before her.

Other tasks were supportable, though one seemed hard at moments and was not passive; it attacked her. The men and women of her circle derisively, unanimously, disbelieved in an innocence that forfeited reputation. Women were complimentarily assumed to be not such gaping idiots. And as the weeks advanced, a change came over Percy. The gentleman had grown restless at covert congratulations, hollow to his knowledge, however much caressing vanity, and therefore secretly a wound to it. One day, after sitting silent, he bluntly proposed to break 'this foolish trifling'; just in his old manner, though not so honourably; not very definitely either. Her hand was taken.

'I feared that dumbness!' Diana said, letting her hand go, but keeping her composure. 'My friend Percy, I am not a lion-tamer, and if you are of those animals, we break the chapter. Plainly you think that where there appears to be a choice of fools, the woman is distinctly designed for the person. Drop my hand, or I shall repeat the fable of the Goose with the Golden Eggs.'



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'Fables are applicable only in the school-room,' said he; and he ventured on 'Tony!'

'I vowed an oath to my dear Emma—as good as to the heavens! and that of itself would stay me from being insane again.' She released herself. 'Signor Percy, you teach me to suspect you of having an idle wish to pluck your plaything to pieces:—to boast of it? Ah! my friend, I fancied I was of more value to you. You must come less often; even to not at all, if you are one of those idols with feet of clay which leave the print of their steps in a room; or fall and crush the silly idolizer.'

'But surely you know . . .' said he. 'We can't have to wait long.' He looked full of hopeful meanings.

'A reason . . . !' She kept down her breath. A longdrawn sigh followed, through parted lips. She had a sensation of horror. 'And I cannot propose to nurse him—Emma will not hear of it,' she said. 'I dare not. Hypocrite to that extreme? Oh, no! But I must hear nothing. As it is, I am haunted. Now let this pass. Tony me no Tonies; I am stony to such whimpering business now we are in the van of the struggle. All round us it sounds like war. Last night I had Mr. Tonans dining here;—he wished to meet you; and you must have a private meeting with Mr. Whitmonby: he will be useful; others as well. You are wrong in affecting contempt of the Press. It perches you on a rock; but the swimmer in politics knows what draws the tides. Your own people, your set, your class, are a drag to you, like inherited superstitions to the wakening brain. The greater the glory! For you see the lead you take? You are saving your class. They should lead, and will, if they prove worthy in the crisis. Their curious error is to believe in the stability of a monumental position.'

'Perfectly true!' cried Dacier; and the next minute, heated by approbation, was begging for her hand earnestly. She refused it.

'But you say things that catch me!' he pleaded. 'Remember, it was nearly mine. It soon will be mine. I heard yesterday from Lady Wathin . . . well, if it pains you!'

'Speak on,' said Diana, resigned to her thirsty ears.

'He is not expected to last through the autumn.'

'The calculation is hers?'

'Not exactly:—judging from the symptoms.'

Diana flashed a fiery eye into Dacier's, and rose. She was past danger of melting, with her imagination darkened by the funeral image; but she craved solitude, and had to act the callous, to dismiss him.



'Good. Enough for the day. Now leave me, if you please. When we meet again, stifle that raven's croak. I am not a "Sister of Charity," but neither am I a vulture hovering for the horse in the desert to die. A poor simile!—when it is my own and not another's breath that I want. Nothing in nature, only gruesome German stories will fetch comparisons for the yoke of this Law of yours. It seems the nightmare dream following an ogre's supper.'



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She was not acting the shiver of her frame.

To-morrow was open to him, and prospect of better fortune, so he departed, after squeezing the hand she ceremoniously extended.

But her woman's intuition warned her that she had not maintained the sovereign impression which was her security. And hope had become a flame in her bosom that would no longer take the common extinguisher. The race she ran was with a shrouded figure no more, but with the figure of the shroud; she had to summon paroxysms of a pity hard to feel, images of sickness, helplessness, the vaults, the last human silence for the stilling of her passionate heart. And when this was partly effected, the question, Am I going to live? renewed her tragical struggle. Who was it under the vaults, in the shroud, between the planks? and with human sensibility to swell the horror! Passion whispered of a vaster sorrow needed for herself; and the hope conjuring those frightful complexities was needed to soothe her. She pitied the man, but she was an enamoured woman. Often of late she had been sharply stung, relaxed as well, by the observations of Danvers assisting at her toilette. Had she beauty and charm, beauty and rich health in the young summer blooming of her days? —and all doomed to waste? No insurgency of words arose in denunciation of the wrong done to her nature. An undefined heavy feeling of wrong there was, just perceptive enough to let her know, without gravely shaming, that one or another must be slain for peace to come; for it is the case in which the world of the Laws overloading her is pitiless to women, deaf past ear-trumpets, past intercession; detesting and reviling them for a feeble human cry, and for one apparent step of revolt piling the pelted stones on them. It will not discriminate shades of hue, it massacres all the shadowed. They are honoured, after a fashion, at a certain elevation. Descending from it, and purely to breathe common air (thus in her mind), they are scourged and outcast. And alas! the very pleading for them excites a sort of ridicule in their advocate. How? She was utterly, even desperately, nay personally, earnest, and her humour closed her lips; though comical views of the scourged and outcast coming from the opposite party—the huge bully world—she would not have tolerated. Diana raged at a prevailing strength on the part of that huge bully world, which seemed really to embrace the atmosphere. Emma had said: 'The rules of Christian Society are a blessed Government for us women. We owe it so much that there is not a brick of the fabric we should not prop.' Emma's talk of obedience to the Laws, being Laws, was repeated by the rebel, with an involuntary unphrased comparison of the vessel in dock and the vessel at sea.

When Dacier next called to see Mrs. Warwick, he heard that she had gone to Copsley for a couple of weeks. The lesson was emphasized by her not writing:—and was it the tricky sex, or the splendid character of the woman, which dealt him this punishment? Knowing how much Diana forfeited for him, he was moved to some enthusiasm, despite his inclination to be hurt.



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She, on her return to London, gained a considerable increase of knowledge as to her position in the eye of the world; and unlike the result of her meditations derived from the clamouring tradesmen, whom she could excuse, she was neither illuminated nor cautioned by that dubious look; she conscientiously revolted. Lady Pennon hinted a word for her Government. 'A good deal of what you so capitally call "Green tea talk" is going on, my dear.' Diana replied, without pretending to misunderstand.

'Gossip is a beast of prey that does not wait for the death of the creature it devours. They are welcome to my shadow, if the liberty I claim casts one, and it feeds them.' To which the old lady rejoined: 'Oh! I am with you through thick and thin. I presented you at Court, and I stand by you. Only, walk carefully. Women have to walk with a train. You are too famous not to have your troops of watchers.'

'But I mean to prove,' said Diana, 'that a woman can walk with her train independent of the common reserves and artifices.'

'Not on highways, my dear!'

Diana, praising the speaker, referred the whole truth in that to the material element of her metaphor.

She was more astonished by Whitmonby's candid chiding; but with him she could fence, and men are easily diverted. She had sent for him, to bring him and Percy Dacier together to a conference. Unaware of the project, he took the opportunity of their privacy to speak of the great station open to her in London being imperilled; and he spoke of 'tongues,' and ahem! A very little would have induced him to fill that empty vocable with a name.

She had to pardon the critic in him for an unpleasant review of her hapless *cantatrice*; and as a means of evasion, she mentioned the poor book and her slaughter of the heroine, that he had complained of.

'I killed her; I could not let her live. You were unjust in accusing the authoress of heartlessness.'

'If I did, I retract,' said he. 'She steers too evidently from the centre of the vessel. She has the organ in excess.'

'Proof that it is not squandered.'

'The point concerns direction.'

'Have I made so bad a choice of my friends?'



'It is the common error of the sprightly to suppose that in parrying a thrust they blind our eyes.'

'The world sees always what it desires to see, Mr. Whitmonby.'

'The world, my dear Mrs. Warwick, is a blundering machine upon its own affairs, but a cruel sleuth-hound to rouse in pursuit.'

'So now you have me chased by sight and scent. And if I take wing?'

'Shots! volleys!—You are lawful game. The choice you have made of your friends, should oblige you to think of them.'

'I imagine I do. Have I offended any, or one?'

'I will not say that. You know the commotion in a French kitchen when the guests of the house declined a particular dish furnished them by command. The cook and his crew were loyal to their master, but, for the love of their Art, they sent him notice. It is ill serving a mad sovereign.'



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Diana bowed to the compact little apologue.

'I will tell you another story, traditional in our family from my great-grandmother, a Spanish woman,' she said. 'A cavalier serenaded his mistress, and rascal mercenaries fell upon him before he could draw sword. He battered his guitar on their pates till the lattice opened with a cry, and startled them to flight. "Thrice blessed and beloved!" he called to her above, in reference to the noise, "it was merely a diversion of the accompaniment." Now there was loyal service to a sovereign!'

'You are certainly an angel!' exclaimed Whitmonby. 'I swallow the story, and leave it to digestion to discover the appositeness. Whatever tuneful instrument one of your friends possesses shall solace your slumbers or batter the pate of your enemy. But discourage the habitual serenader.'

'The musician you must mean is due here now, by appointment to meet you,' said Diana, and set him momentarily agape with the name of Mr. Percy Dacier.

That was the origin of the alliance between the young statesman and a newspaper editor. Whitmonby, accepting proposals which suited him, quitted the house, after an hour of political talk, no longer inclined to hint at the 'habitual serenader,' but very ready to fall foul of those who did, as he proved when the numbers buzzed openly. Times were masculine; the excitement on the eve of so great a crisis, and Diana's comprehension of it and fine heading cry, put that weak matter aside. Moreover, he was taught to suppose himself as welcome a guest as Dacier; and the cook could stand criticism; the wines—wonderful to say of a lady's table—were trusty; the talk, on the political evenings and the social and anecdotal supper-nights, ran always in perfect accord with his ideal of the conversational orchestra: an improvised harmony, unmatched elsewhere. She did not, he considered, so perfectly assort her dinner-guests; that was her one fault. She had therefore to strain her adroitness to cover their deficiencies and fuse them. But what other woman could have done it! She led superbly. If an Irishman was present, she kept him from overflowing, managed to extract just the flavour of him, the smack of salt. She did even, at Whitmonby's table, on a red-letter Sunday evening, in concert with him and the Dean, bring down that cataract, the Bodleian, to the levels of interchanging dialogue by seasonable touches, inimitably done, and never done before. Sullivan Smith, unbridled in the middle of dinner, was docile to her. 'Irishmen;' she said, pleading on their behalf to Whitmonby, who pronounced the race too raw for an Olympian feast, 'are invaluable if you hang them up to smoke and cure'; and the master of social converse could not deny that they were responsive to her magic. The supper-nights were mainly devoted to Percy's friends. He brought as many as he pleased, and as often as it pleased him; and it was her pride to provide Cleopatra banquets for the lover whose anxieties were soothed by them, and to whom she sacrificed her name willingly in return for a generosity that certain chance whispers of her heart elevated to the pitch of measureless.



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So they wore through the Session and the Autumn, clouds heavier, the League drumming, the cry of Ireland 'ominously Banshee,' as she wrote to Emma.

CHAPTER XXX

IN WHICH THERE IS A TASTE OF A LITTLE DINNER AND AN AFTERTASTE

'But Tony lives!' Emma Dunstane cried, on her solitary height, with the full accent of envy marking the verb; and when she wrote enviously to her friend of the life among bright intelligences, and of talk worth hearing, it was a happy signification that health, frail though it might be, had grown importunate for some of the play of life. Diana sent her word to name her day, and she would have her choicest to meet her dearest. They were in the early days of December, not the best of times for improvised gatherings. Emma wanted, however, to taste them as they cropped; she was also, owing to her long isolation, timid at a notion of encountering the pick of the London world, prepared by Tony to behold 'a wonder more than worthy of them,' as her friend unadvisedly wrote. That was why she came unexpectedly, and for a mixture of reasons, went to an hotel. Fatality designed it so. She was reproached, but she said: 'You have to write or you entertain at night; I should be a clog and fret you. My hotel is Maitland's; excellent; I believe I am to lie on the pillow where a crowned head reposed! You will perceive that I am proud as well as comfortable. And I would rather meet your usual set of guests.'

'The reason why I have been entertaining at night is, that Percy is harassed and requires enlivening,' said Diana. 'He brings his friends. My house is open to them, if it amuses him. What the world says, is past a thought. I owe him too much.'

Emma murmured that the world would soon be pacified.

Diana shook her head. 'The poor man is better; able to go about his affairs; and I am honestly relieved. It lays a spectre. As for me, I do not look ahead. I serve as a kind of secretary to Percy. I labour at making abstracts by day, and at night preside at my suppertable. You would think it monotonous; no incident varies the course we run. I have no time to ask whether it is happiness. It seems to bear a resemblance.'

Emma replied: 'He may be everything you tell me. He should not have chosen the last night of the Opera to go to your box and sit beside you till the fall of the curtain. The presence at the Opera of a man notoriously indifferent to music was enough in itself.'

Diana smiled with languor. 'You heard of that? But the Opera was *The Puritani*, my favourite. And he saw me sitting in Lady Pennon's box alone. We were compromised neck-deep already. I can kiss you, my own Emmy, till I die; 'but what the world says, is what the wind says. Besides he has his hopes.... If I am blackened ever so thickly, he



can make me white. Dear me! if the world knew that he comes here almost nightly! It will; and does it matter? I am his in soul; the rest is waste-paper—a half-printed sheet.'



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'Provided he is worthy of such devotion!'

'He is absolute worthiness. He is the prince of men: I dread to say, mine! for fear. But Emmy will not judge him to-morrow by contrast with more voluble talkers.—I can do anything but read poetry now. That kills me!—See him through me. In nature, character, intellect, he has no rival. Whenever I despond—and it comes now and then—I rebuke myself with this one admonition.

Simply to have known him! Admit that for a woman to find one who is worthy among the opposite creatures, is a happy termination of her quest, and in some sort dismisses her to the Shades, an uncomplaining ferry-bird. If my end were at hand I should have no cause to lament it. We women miss life only when we have to confess we have never met the man to reverence.'

Emma had to hear a very great deal of Mr. Percy. Diana's comparison of herself to 'the busy bee at a window-pane,' was more in her old manner; and her friend would have hearkened to the marvels of the gentle man less unrefreshed, had it not appeared to her that her Tony gave in excess for what was given in return. She hinted her view. . .

'It is expected of our sex,' Diana said.

The work of busy bee at a window-pane had at any rate not spoiled her beauty, though she had voluntarily, profitlessly, become this man's drudge, and her sprightly fancy, her ready humour and darting look all round in discussion, were rather deadened.

But the loss was not perceptible in the circle of her guests. Present at a dinner little indicating the last, were Whitmonby, in lively trim for shuffling, dealing, cutting, trumping or drawing trumps; Westlake, polishing epigrams under his eyelids; Henry Wilmers, who timed an anecdote to strike as the passing hour without freezing the current; Sullivan Smith, smoked, cured and ready to flavour; Percy Dacier, pleasant listener, measured speaker; and young Arthur Rhodes, the neophyte of the hostess's training; of whom she had said to Emma, 'The dear boy very kindly serves to frank an unlicensed widow'; and whom she prompted and made her utmost of, with her natural tact. These she mixed and leavened. The talk was on high levels and low; an enchantment to Emma Dunstane: now a story; a question opening new routes, sharp sketches of known personages; a paradox shot by laughter as soon as uttered; and all so smoothly; not a shadow of the dominant holder-forth or a momentary prospect of dead flats; the mellow ring of appositeness being the concordant note of deliveries running linked as they flashed, and a tolerant philosophy of the sage in the world recurrently the keynote.



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Once only had Diana to protect her nurseling. He cited a funny line from a recent popular volume of verse, in perfect A propos, looking at Sullivan Smith; who replied, that the poets had become too many for him, and he read none now. Diana said: 'There are many Alexanders, but Alexander of Macedon is not dwarfed by the number.' She gave him an opening for a smarter reply, but he lost it in a comment—against Whitmonby's cardinal rule: 'The neatest turn of the wrist that ever swung a hero to crack a crown!' and he bowed to young Rhodes: 'I'll read your versicler to-morrow morning early.' The latter expressed a fear that the hour was too critical for poetry.

'I have taken the dose at a very early hour,' said Whitmonby, to bring conversation to the flow again, 'and it effaced the critical mind completely.'

'But did not silence the critical nose,' observed Westlake.

Wilmers named the owner of the longest nose in Europe.

'Potentially, indeed a critic!' said Diana.

'Nights beside it must be fearful, and good matter for a divorce, if the poor dear lady could hale it to the doors of the Vatican!' Sullivan Smith exclaimed. 'But there's character in noses.'

'Calculable by inches?' Dacier asked.

'More than in any other feature,' said Lady Dunstane. 'The Riffords are all prodigiously gifted and amusing: suspendens omnia naso. It should be prayed for in families.'

'Totum ut to faciant, Fabulle, nasum,' rejoined Whitmonby. 'Lady Isabella was reading the tale of the German princess, who had a sentinel stationed some hundred yards away to whisk off the flies, and she owned to me that her hand instinctively travelled upward.'

'Candour is the best concealment, when one has to carry a saddle of absurdity,' said Diana. 'Touchstone's "poor thing, but mine own," is godlike in its enveloping fold.'

'The most comforting sermon ever delivered on property in poverty,' said Arthur Rhodes.

Westlake assented. 'His choice of Audrey strikes me as an exhibition of the sure instinct for pasture of the philosophical jester in a forest.'

'With nature's woman, if he can find her, the urban seems equally at home,' said Lady Dunstane.



'Baron Pawle is an example,' added Whitmonby. 'His cook is a pattern wife to him. I heard him say at table that she was responsible for all except the wines. "I wouldn't have them on my conscience, with a Judge!" my lady retorted.'

'When poor Madame de Jacquieres was dying,' said Wilmers, 'her confessor sat by her bedside, prepared for his ministrations. "Pour commencer, mon ami, jamais je n'ai fait rien hors nature."'

Lord Wadaster had uttered something tolerably similar: 'I am a sinner, and in good society.' Sir Abraham Hartiston, a minor satellite of the Regent, diversified this: 'I am a sinner, and go to good society.' Madame la Comtesse de la Roche-Aigle, the cause of many deaths, declared it unwomanly to fear anything save 'les revenants.' Yet the countess could say the pretty thing: 'Foot on a flower, then think of me!'



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'Sentimentality puts up infant hands for absolution,' said Diana.

'But tell me,' Lady Dunstane inquired generally, 'why men are so much happier than women in laughing at their spouses?'

They are humaner, was one dictum; they are more frivolous, ironically another.

'It warrants them for blowing the bugle-horn of masculine superiority night and morning from the castle-walls,' Diana said.

'I should imagine it is for joy of heart that they still have cause to laugh!' said Westlake.

On the other hand, are women really pained by having to laugh at their lords? Curious little speeches flying about the great world, affirmed the contrary. But the fair speakers were chartered libertines, and their laugh admittedly had a biting acid. The parasite is concerned in the majesty of the tree.

'We have entered Botany Bay,' Diana said to Emma; who answered: 'A metaphor is the Deus ex machine, of an argument'; and Whitmonby, to lighten a shadow of heaviness, related allusively an anecdote of the Law Courts. Sullivan Smith begged permission to 'black cap' it with Judge FitzGerald's sentence upon a convicted criminal: 'Your plot was perfect but for One above.' Dacier cited an execrable impromptu line of the Chief of the Opposition in Parliament. The Premier, it was remarked, played him like an angler his fish on the hook; or say, Mr. Serjeant Rufus his witness in the box.

'Or a French journalist an English missionary,' said Westlake; and as the instance was recent it was relished.

The talk of Premiers offered Whitmonby occasion for a flight to the Court of Vienna and Kaunitz. Wilmers told a droll story of Lord Busby's missing the Embassy there. Westlake furnished a sample of the tranquil sententiousness of Busby's brother Robert during a stormy debate in the House of Commons.

'I remember,' Dacier was reminded, 'hearing him say, when the House resembled a Chartist riot, "Let us stand aside and meditate on Life. If Youth could know, in the season of its reaping of the Pleasures, that it is but sowing Doctor's bills!"'

Latterly a malady had supervened, and Bob Busby had retired from the universal to the special;—his mysterious case.

'Assure him, that is endemic. He may be cured of his desire for the exposition of it,' said Lady Dunstane.

Westlake chimed with her: 'Yes, the charm in discoursing of one's case is over when the individual appears no longer at odds with Providence.'



'But then we lose our Tragedy,' said Whitmonby.

'Our Comedy too,' added Diana. 'We must consent to be Busbied for the sake of the instructive recreations.'

'A curious idea, though,' said Sullivan Smith, 'that some of the grand instructive figures were in their day colossal bores!'

'So you see the marvel of the poet's craft at last?' Diana smiled on him, and he vowed: 'I'll read nothing else for a month!' Young Rhodes bade him beware of a deluge in proclaiming it.



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They rose from table at ten, with the satisfaction of knowing that they had not argued, had not wrangled, had never stagnated, and were digestingly refreshed; as it should be among grown members of the civilized world, who mean to practise philosophy, making the hour of the feast a balanced recreation and a regeneration of body and mind.

'Evenings like these are worth a pilgrimage,' Emma said, embracing Tony outside the drawing-room door. 'I am so glad I came: and if I am strong enough, invite me again in the Spring. To-morrow early I start for Copsley, to escape this London air. I shall hope to have you there soon.'

She was pleased by hearing Tony ask her whether she did not think that Arthur Rhodes had borne himself well; for it breathed of her simply friendly soul.

The gentlemen followed Lady Dunstane in a troop, Dacier yielding perforce the last adieu to young Rhodes.

Five minutes later Diana was in her dressing-room, where she wrote at night, on the rare occasions now when she was left free for composition. Beginning to dwell on *the man of two minds*, she glanced at the woman likewise divided, if not similarly; and she sat brooding. She did not accuse her marriage of being the first fatal step: her error was the step into Society without the wherewithal to support her position there. Girls of her kind, airing their wings above the sphere of their birth, are cryingly adventuresses. As adventuresses they are treated.

Vain to be shrewish with the world! Rather let us turn and scold our nature for irreflectively rushing to the cream and honey! Had she subsisted on her small income in a country cottage, this task of writing would have been holiday. Or better, if, as she preached to Mary Paynham, she had apprenticed herself to some productive craft. The simplicity of the life of labour looked beautiful. What will not look beautiful contrasted with the fly in the web? She had chosen to be one of the flies of life.

Instead of running to composition, her mind was eloquent with a sermon to Arthur Rhodes, in Redworth's vein; more sympathetically, of course. 'For I am not one of the lecturing Mammonites!' she could say.

She was far from that. Penitentially, in the thick of her disdain of the arrogant money-Bettors, she pulled out a drawer where her bank-book lay, and observed it contemplatively; jotting down a reflection before the dread book of facts was opened: 'Gaze on the moral path you should have taken, you are asked for courage to commit a sanctioned suicide, by walking back to it stripped—a skeleton self.' She sighed forth: 'But I have no courage: I never had!' The book revealed its tale in a small pencilled computation of the bank-clerk's; on the peccant side. Credit presented many pages blanks. She seemed to have withdrawn from the struggle with such a partner.



It signified an immediate appeal to the usurers, unless the publisher could be persuaded, with three parts of the book in his hands, to come to the rescue. Work! roared old Debit, the sinner turned slavedriver.



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Diana smoothed her wrists, compressing her lips not to laugh at the simulation of an attitude of combat. She took up her pen.

And strange to think, she could have flowed away at once on the stuff that Danvers delighted to read!—wicked princes, rogue noblemen, titled wantons, daisy and lily innocents, traitorous marriages, murders, a gallows dangling a corpse dotted by a moon, and a woman bowed beneath. She could have written, with the certainty that in the upper and the middle as well as in the lower classes of the country, there would be a multitude to read that stuff, so cordially, despite the gaps between them, are they one in their literary tastes. And why should they not read it? Her present mood was a craving for excitement; for incident, wild action, the primitive machinery of our species; any amount of theatrical heroics, pathos, and clown-gabble. A panorama of scenes came sweeping round her.

She was, however, harnessed to a different kind of vehicle, and had to drag it. The sound of the house-door shutting, imagined perhaps, was a fugitive distraction. Now to animate *The Man of Two Minds!*

He is courting, but he is burdened with the task of tasks. He has an ideal of womanhood and of the union of couples: a delicacy extreme as his attachment: and he must induce the lady to school herself to his ideal, not allowing her to suspect him less devoted to her person; while she, an exacting idol, will drink any quantity of idealization as long as he starts it from a full acceptance of her acknowledged qualities. Diana could once have tripped the scene along airily. She stared at the opening sentence, a heavy bit of moralized manufacture, fit to yoke beside that on her view of her bank-book.

'It has come to this—I have no head,' she cried.

And is our public likely to muster the slightest taste for comic analysis that does not tumble to farce? The doubt reduced her whole *Ms.* to a leaden weight, composed for sinking. Percy's addiction to burlesque was a further hindrance, for she did not perceive how her comedy could be strained to gratify it.

There was a knock, and Danvers entered. 'You have apparently a liking for late hours,' observed her mistress. 'I told you to go to bed.' 'It is Mr. Dacier,' said Danvers. 'He wishes to see me?' 'Yes, ma'am. He apologized for disturbing you.' 'He must have some good reason.' What could it be! Diana's glass approved her appearance. She pressed the black swell of hair above her temples, rather amazed, curious, inclined to a beating of the heart.



CHAPTER XXXI

A chapter containing great political news and therewith an intrusion of the love-god

Dacier was pacing about the drawing-room, as in a place too narrow for him.



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Diana stood at the door. 'Have you forgotten to tell me anything I ought to know?'

He came up to her and shut the door softly behind her, holding her hand. 'You are near it. I returned . . . But tell me first:—You were slightly under a shadow this evening, dejected.'

'Did I show it?'

She was growing a little suspicious, but this cunning touch of lover-like interest dispersed the shade.

'To me you did.'

'It was unpardonable to let it be seen.'

'No one else could have observed it.'

Her woman's heart was thrilled; for she had concealed the dejection from Emma.

'It was nothing,' she said; 'a knot in the book I am writing. We poor authors are worried now and then. But you?'

His face rippled by degrees brightly, to excite a reflection in hers.

'Shall I tune you with good news? I think it will excuse me for coming back.'

'Very good news?'

'Brave news, as far as it goes.'

'Then it concerns you!'

'Me, you, the country.'

'Oh! do I guess?' cried Diana. 'But speak, pray; I burn.'

'What am I to have for telling it?'

'Put no price. You know my heart. I guess—or fancy. It relates to your Chief?'

Dacier smiled in a way to show the lock without the key; and she was insensibly drawn nearer to him, speculating on the smile.

'Try again,' said he, keenly appreciating the blindness to his motive of her studious dark eyes, and her open-lipped breathing.



'Percy! I must be right.'

'Well, you are. He has decided!'

'Oh! that is the bravest possible. When did you hear?'

'He informed me of his final decision this afternoon.'

'And you were charged with the secret all the evening, and betrayed not a sign! I compliment the diplomatic statesman. But when will it be public?'

'He calls Parliament together the first week of next month.'

'The proposal is—? No more compromises!'

'Total!'

Diana clapped hands; and her aspect of enthusiasm was intoxicating. 'He is a wise man and a gallant Minister! And while you were reading me through, I was blind to you,' she added meltingly.

'I have not made too much of it?' said he.

'Indeed you have not.'

She was radiant with her dark lightnings, yet visibly subject to him under the spell of the news he had artfully lengthened out to excite and overbalance her:—and her enthusiasm was all pointed to his share in the altered situation, as he well knew and was flattered in knowing.

'So Tony is no longer dejected? I thought I could freshen you and get my excuse.'

'Oh! a high wind will make a dead leaf fly like a bird. I soar. Now I do feel proud. I have longed for it—to have you leading the country: not tugged at like a waggon with a treble team uphill. We two are a month in advance of all England. You stand by him?—only to hear it, for I am sure of it!'



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'We stand or fall together.'

Her glowing look doated on the faithful lieutenant.

'And if the henchman is my hero, I am but a waiting-woman. But I must admire his leader.'

'Tony!'

'Ah! no,' she joined her hands, wondering whither her armed majesty had fled; 'no softness! no payments! Flatter me by letting me think you came to a head not a silly woman's heart, with one name on it, as it has not to betray. I have been frank; you need no proofs . . .' The supplicating hands left her figure an easy prey to the storm, and were crushed in a knot on her bosom. She could only shrink. 'Ah! Percy . . you undo my praise of you—my pride in receiving you.'

They were speechless perforce.

'You see, Tony, my dearest, I am flesh and blood after all.'

'You drive me to be ice and door-bolts!'

Her eyes broke over him reproachfully.

'It is not so much to grant,' he murmured.

'It changes everything between us.'

'Not me. It binds me the faster.'

'It makes me a loathsome hypocrite.'

'But, Tony! is it so much?'

'Not if you value it low.'

'But how long do you keep me in this rag-puppet's state of suspension?'

'Patience.'

'Dangling and swinging day and night!'

'The rag-puppet shall be animated and repaid if I have life. I wish to respect my hero. Have a little mercy. Our day will come: perhaps as wonderfully as this wonderful news. My friend, drop your hands. Have you forgotten who I am? I want to think, Percy!'



'But you are mine.'

'You are abasing your own.'

'No, by heaven!'

'Worse, dear friend; you are lowering yourself to the woman who loves you.'

'You must imagine me superhuman.'

'I worship you—or did.'

'Be reasonable, Tony. What harm! Surely a trifle of recompense? Just to let me feel I live! You own you love me. Then I am your lover.'

'My dear friend Percy, when I have consented to be your paramour, this kind of treatment of me will not want apologies.'

The plain speaking from the wound he dealt her was effective with a gentleman who would never have enjoyed his privileges had he been of a nature unsusceptible to her distinct wish and meaning.

He sighed. 'You know how my family bother me. The woman I want, the only woman I could marry, I can't have.'

'You have her in soul.'

'Body and soul, it must be! I believe you were made without fire.'

'Perhaps. The element is omitted with some of us happily, some think. Now we can converse. There seems to be a measurement of distances required before men and women have a chance with their brains:—or before a man will understand that he can be advised and seconded. When will the Cabinet be consulted?'



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'Oh, a few days. Promise me . . .'

'Any honourable promise!'

'You will not keep me waiting longer than the end of the Session?'

'Probably there will be an appeal to the country.'

'In any case, promise me: have some compassion.'

'Ah, the compassion! You do not choose your words, Percy, or forget who is the speaker.'

'It is Tony who forgets the time she has kept her lover dangling. Promise, and I will wait.'

'You hurt my hand, sir.'

'I could crack the knuckles. Promise!'

'Come to me to-morrow.'

'To-morrow you are in your armour-triple brass! All creation cries out for now. We are mounted on barbs and you talk of ambling.'

'Arthur Rhodes might have spoken that.'

'Rhodes!' he shook off the name in disgust. 'Pet him as much as you like; don't . . .' he was unable to phrase his objection.

She cooled him further with eulogies of the chevaleresque manner of speaking which young Mr. Rhodes could assume; till for very wrath of blood—not jealousy: he had none of any man, with her; and not passion; the little he had was a fitful gust—he punished her coldness by taking what hastily could be gathered.

Her shape was a pained submission; and she thought: Where is the woman who ever knows a man!—as women do think when one of their artifices of evasion with a lover, or the trick of imposingness, has apparently been subduing him. But the pain was less than previously, for she was now mistress of herself, fearing no abysses.

Dacier released her quickly, saying: 'If I come tomorrow, shall I have the promise?'

She answered: 'Be sure I shall not lie.'

'Why not let me have it before I go?'



'My friend, to tell you the truth, you have utterly distracted me.'

'Forgive me if I did hurt your hand.'

'The hand? You might strike it off.'

'I can't be other than a mortal lover, Tony. There's the fact.'

'No; the fault is mine when I am degraded. I trust you: there's the error.'

The trial for Dacier was the sight of her quick-lifting; bosom under the mask of cold language: an attraction and repulsion in union; a delirium to any lover impelled to trample on weak defences. But the evident pain he inflicted moved his pity, which helped to restore his conception of the beauty of her character. She stood so nobly meek. And she was never prudish, only self-respecting. Although the great news he imparted had roused an ardent thirst for holiday and a dash out of harness, and he could hardly check it, he yielded her the lead.

'Trust me you may,' he said. 'But you know—we are one. The world has given you to me, me to you. Why should we be asunder? There's no reason in it.'

She replied: 'But still I wish to burn a little incense in honour of myself, or else I cannot live. It is the truth. You make Death my truer friend, and at this moment I would willingly go out. You would respect me more dead than alive. I could better pardon you too.'



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He pleaded for the red mouth's pardon, remotely irritated by the suspicion that she swayed him overmuch: and he had deserved the small benevolences and donations of love, crumbs and heavenly dews!

'Not a word of pardon,' said Diana. 'I shall never count an iota against you "in the dark backward and abysm of Time." This news is great, and I have sunk beneath it. Come tomorrow. Then we will speak upon whatever you can prove rational. The hour is getting late.'

Dacier took a draught of her dark beauty with the crimson he had kindled over the cheeks. Her lips were firmly closed, her eyes grave; dry, but seeming to waver tearfully in their heavy fulness. He could not doubt her love of him; and although chafing at the idea that she swayed him absurdly—beyond the credible in his world of wag-tongues—he resumed his natural soberness, as a garment, not very uneasily fitting: whence it ensued—for so are we influenced by the garb we put on us—that his manly sentiment of revolt in being condemned to play second, was repressed by the refreshment breathed on him from her lofty character, the pure jewel proffered to his, inward ownership.

'Adieu for the night,' he said, and she smiled. He pressed for a pressure of her hand. She brightened her smile instead, and said only: 'Good night, Percy.'

CHAPTER XXXII

WHEREIN WE BEHOLD A GIDDY TURN AT THE SPECTRAL CROSSWAYS

Danvers accompanied Mr. Dacier to the house-door. Climbing the stairs, she found her mistress in the drawing-room still.

'You must be cold, ma'am,' she said, glancing at the fire-grate.

'Is it a frost?' said Diana.

'It's midnight and midwinter, ma'am.'

'Has it struck midnight?'

The mantel-piece clock said five minutes past.

'You had better go to bed, Danvers, or you will lose your bloom. Stop; you are a faithful soul. Great things are happening and I am agitated. Mr. Dacier has told me news. He came back purposely.'

'Yes, ma'am,' said Danvers. 'He had a great deal to tell?'



'Well, he had.' Diana coloured at the first tentative impertinence she had heard from her maid. 'What is the secret of you, Danvers? What attaches you to me?'

'I'm sure I don't know, ma'am. I'm romantic.'

'And you think me a romantic object?'

'I'm sure I can't say, ma'am. I'd rather serve you than any other lady; and I wish you was happy.'

'Do you suppose I am unhappy?'

'I'm sure—but if I may speak, ma'am: so handsome and clever a lady! and young! I can't bear to see it.'

'Tush, you silly woman. You read your melting tales, and imagine. I must go and write for money: it is my profession. And I haven't an idea in my head. This news disturbs me. Ruin if I don't write; so I must.—I can't!'



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Diana beheld the ruin. She clasped the great news for succour. Great indeed: and known but to her of all the outer world. She was ahead of all—ahead of Mr. Tonans!

The visionary figure of Mr. Tonans petrified by the great news, drinking it, and confessing her ahead of him in the race for secrets, arose toweringly. She had not ever seen the Editor in his den at midnight. With the rumble of his machinery about him, and fresh matter arriving and flying into the printing-press, it must be like being in the very furnace-hissing of Events: an Olympian Council held in Vulcan's smithy. Consider the bringing to the Jove there news of such magnitude as to stupefy him! He, too, who had admonished her rather sneeringly for staleness in her information. But this news, great though it was, and throbbing like a heart plucked out of a breathing body, throbbed but for a brief term, a day or two; after which, great though it was, immense, it relapsed into a common organ, a possession of the multitude, merely historically curious.

'You are not afraid of the streets at night?' Diana said to her maid, as they were going upstairs.

'Not when we're driving, ma'am,' was the answer.

The man of two minds faced his creatrix in the dressing-room, still delivering that most ponderous of sentences—a smothering pillow!

I have mistaken my vocation, thought Diana: I am certainly the flattest proser who ever penned a line.

She sent Dangers into the bedroom on a trifling errand, unable to bear the woman's proximity, and oddly unwilling to dismiss her.

She pressed her hands on her eyelids. Would Percy have humiliated her so if he had respected her? He took advantage of the sudden loss of her habitual queenly initiative at the wonderful news to debase and stain their intimacy. The lover's behaviour was judged by her sensations: she felt humiliated, plucked violently from the throne where she had long been sitting securely, very proudly. That was at an end. If she was to be better than the loathsome of hypocrites, she must deny him his admission to the house. And then what was her life!

Something that was pressing her low, she knew not how, and left it unquestioned, incited her to exaggerate the indignity her pride had suffered. She was a dethroned woman. Deeper within, an unmasked actress, she said. Oh, she forgave him! But clearly he took her for the same as other women consenting to receive a privileged visitor. And sounding herself to the soul, was she so magnificently better? Her face flamed. She hugged her arms at her breast to quiet the beating, and dropped them when she surprised herself embracing the memory. He had brought political news, and treated her as—name the thing! Not designedly, it might be: her position invited it.

'The world had given her to him.' The world is always a prophet of the mire; but the world is no longer an utterly mistaken world. She shook before it.



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She asked herself why Percy or the world should think highly of an adventuress, who was a denounced wife, a wretched author, and on the verge of bankruptcy. She was an adventuress. When she held *The Crossways* she had at least a bit of solid footing: now gone. An adventuress without an idea in her head: witness her dullard, *The Man of Two Minds*, at his work of sermonizing his mistress.

The tremendous pressure upon our consciousness of the material cause, when we find ourselves cast among the breakers of moral difficulties and endeavour to elude that mudvisaged monster, chiefly by feigning unconsciousness, was an experience of Diana's, in the crisis to which she was wrought. Her wits were too acute, her nature too direct, to permit of a lengthened confusion. She laid the scourge on her flesh smartly. —I gave him these privileges because I am weak as the weakest, base as my enemies proclaim me. I covered my woman's vile weakness with an air of intellectual serenity that he, choosing his moment, tore away, exposing me to myself, as well as to him, the most ordinary of reptiles. I kept up a costly household for the sole purpose of seeing him and having him near me. Hence this bitter need of money!—Either it must be money or disgrace. Money would assist her quietly to amend and complete her work. Yes, and this want of money, in a review of the last two years, was the material cause of her recklessness. It was, her revived and uprising pudency declared, the principal; the only cause. Mere want of money.

And she had a secret worth thousands! The secret of a day, no more: anybody's secret after some four and twenty hours.

She smiled at the fancied elongation and stare of the features of Mr. Tonans in his editorial midnight den.

What if he knew it and could cap it with something novel and stranger? Hardly. But it was an inciting suggestion.

She began to tremble as a lightning-flash made visible her fortunes recovered, disgrace averted, hours of peace for composition stretching before her: a summer afternoon's vista.

It seemed a duel between herself and Mr. Tonans, and she sure of her triumph—Diana victrix!

'Danvers!' she called.

'Is it to undress, ma'am?' said the maid, entering to her.

'You are not afraid of the streets, you tell me. I have to go down to the City, I think. It is urgent. Yes, I must go. If I were to impart the news to you, your head would be a tolling bell for a month.'



'You will take a cab, ma'am.'

'We must walk out to find one. I must go, though I should have to go on foot. Quick with bonnet and shawl; muffle up warmly. We have never been out so late: but does it matter? You're a brave soul, I'm sure, and you shall have your fee.'

'I don't care for money, ma'am.'

'When we get home you shall kiss me.'



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Danvers clothed her mistress in furs and rich wrappings: Not paid for! was Diana's desperate thought, and a wrong one; but she had to seem the precipitated bankrupt and succeeded. She was near being it. The boiling of her secret carried her through the streets rapidly and unobservantly except of such small things as the glow of the lights on the pavements and the hushed cognizance of the houses, in silence to a thoroughfare where a willing cabman was met. The destination named, he nodded alertly he had driven gentlemen there at night from the House of Commons, he said.

'Our Parliament is now sitting, and you drive ladies,' Diana replied.

'I hope I know one, never mind the hour,' said he of the capes.

He was bidden to drive rapidly.

'Complexion a tulip: you do not often see a pale cabman,' she remarked to Danvers, who began laughing, as she always expected to do on an excursion with her mistress.

'Do you remember, ma'am, the cabman taking us to the coach, when you thought of going to the continent?'

'And I went to The Crossways? I have forgotten him.'

'He declared you was so beautiful a lady he would drive you to the end of England for nothing.'

'It must have been when I was paying him. Put it out of your mind, Danvers, that there are individual cabmen. They are the painted flowers of our metropolitan thoroughfares, and we gather them in rows.'

'They have their feelings, ma'am.'

'Brandied feelings are not pathetic to me.'

'I like to think kindly of them,' Danvers remarked, in reproof of her inhumanity; adding: 'They may overturn us!' at which Diana laughed. Her eyes were drawn to a brawl of women and men in the street. 'Ah! that miserable sight!' she cried. 'It is the everlasting nightmare of London.'

Danvers humped, femininely injured by the notice of it. She wondered her mistress should deign to.

Rolling on between the blind and darkened houses, Diana transferred her sensations to them, and in a fit of the nerves imagined them beholding a funeral convoy without followers.



They came in view of the domed cathedral, hearing, in a pause of the wheels, the bell of the hour. 'Faster—faster! my dear man,' Diana murmured, and they entered a small still square of many lighted windows.

'This must be where the morrow is manufactured,' she said. 'Tell the man to wait.—Or rather it's the mirror of yesterday: we have to look backward to see forward in life.'

She talked her cool philosophy to mask her excitement from herself. Her card, marked: 'Imperative-two minutes,' was taken up to Mr. Tonans. They ascended to the editorial ante-room. Doors opened and shut, hasty feet traversed the corridors, a dull hum in dumbness told of mighty business at work. Diana received the summons to the mighty head of the establishment. Danvers was left to speculate.



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She heard the voice of Mr. Tonans: 'Not more than two!' This was not a place for compliments. Men passed her, hither and yonder, cursorily noticing the presence of a woman. She lost, very strangely to her, the sense of her sex and became an object—a disregarded object. Things of more importance were about. Her feminine self-esteem was troubled; all idea of attractiveness expired. Here was manifestly a spot where women had dropped from the secondary to the cancelled stage of their extraordinary career in a world either blowing them aloft like soap-bubbles or quietly shelving them as supernumeraries. A gentleman—sweet vision!—shot by to the editor's door, without even looking cursorily. He knocked. Mr. Tonans appeared and took him by the arm, dictating at a great rate; perceived Danvers, frowned at the female, and requested him to wait in the room, which the gentleman did, not once casting eye upon a woman. At last her mistress returned to her, escorted so far by Mr. Tonans, and he refreshingly bent his back to bow over her hand: so we have the satisfaction of knowing that we are not such poor creatures after all! Suffering in person, Danvers was revived by the little show of homage to her sex.

They descended the stairs.

'You are not an Editor of a paper, but you may boast that you have been near the nest of one,' Diana said, when they resumed their seats in the cab. She breathed deeply from time to time, as if under a weight, or relieved of it, but she seemed animated, and she dropped now and again a funny observation of the kind that tickled Danvers and caused the maid to boast of her everywhere as better than a Play.

At home, Danvers busied her hands to supply her mistress a cup of refreshing tea and a plate of biscuits.

Diana had stunned herself with the strange weight of the expedition, and had not a thought. In spite of tea at that hour, she slept soundly through the remainder of the night, dreamlessly till late into the morning.

CHAPTER XXXIII

EXHIBITS THE SPRINGING OF A MINE IN A NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

The powers of harmony would seem to be tried to their shrewdest pitch when Politics and Love are planted together in a human breast. This apparently opposite couple can nevertheless chant a very sweet accord, as was shown by Dacier on his homeward walk from Diana's house. Let Love lead, the God will make music of any chamber-comrade. He was able to think of affairs of State while feeling the satisfied thirst of the lover whose pride, irritated by confidential wild eulogies of the beautiful woman, had



recently clamoured for proofs of his commandership. The impression she stamped on him at Copsley remained, but it could not occupy the foreground for ever. He did not object to play second to her sprightly wits in converse, if he had some warm testimony to his mastery over her blood. For the world had given her to him, enthusiastic friends had congratulated him: she had exalted him for true knightliness; and he considered the proofs well earned, though he did not value them low. They were little by comparison. They lighted, instead of staining, her unparalleled high character.



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She loved him. Full surely did she love him, or such a woman would never have consented to brave the world; once in their project of flight, and next, even more endearingly when contemplated, in the sacrifice of her good name; not omitting that fervent memory of her pained submission, but a palpitating submission, to his caress. She was in his arms again at the thought of it. He had melted her, and won the confession of her senses by a surprise, and he owned that never had woman been so vigilantly self-guarded or so watchful to keep her lover amused and aloof. Such a woman deserved long service. But then the long service deserved its time of harvest. Her surging look of reproach in submission pointed to the golden time, and as he was a man of honour, pledged to her for life, he had no remorse, and no scruple in determining to exact her dated promise, on this occasion deliberately. She was the woman to be his wife; she was his mind's mate: they had hung apart in deference to mere scruples too long. During the fierce battle of the Session she would be his help, his fountain of counsel; and she would be the rosy gauze-veiled more than cold helper and adviser, the being which would spur her womanly intelligence to acknowledge, on this occasion deliberately, the wisdom of the step. They had been so close to it! She might call it madness then: now it was wisdom. Each had complete experience of the other, and each vowed the step must be taken. As to the secret communicated, he exulted in the pardonable cunning of the impulse turning him back to her house after the guests had gone, and the dexterous play of his bait on the line, tempting her to guess and quit her queenly guard. Though it had not been distinctly schemed, the review of it in that light added to the enjoyment. It had been dimly and richly conjectured as a hoped result. Small favours from her were really worth, thrice worth, the utmost from other women. They tasted the sweeter for the winning of them artfully—an honourable thing in love. Nature, rewarding the lover's ingenuity and enterprise, inspires him with old Greek notions of right and wrong: and love is indeed a fluid mercurial realm, continually shifting the principles of rectitude and larceny. As long as he means nobly, what is there to condemn him? Not she in her heart. She was the presiding divinity.

And she, his Tony, that splendid Diana, was the woman the world abused! Whom will it not abuse?

The slough she would have to plunge in before he could make her his own with the world's consent, was already up to her throat. She must, and without further hesitation, be steeped, that he might drag her out, washed of the imputed defilement, and radiant, as she was in character. Reflection now said this; not impulse. Her words rang through him. At every meeting she said things to confound his estimate of the wits of women, or be remembered for some spirited ring they had: A high wind will make a dead leaf fly like a bird. He murmured it and flew with her. She quickened a vein of imagination that gave him entrance to a strangely brilliant sphere, above his own, where, she sustaining, he too could soar; and he did, scarce conscious of walking home, undressing, falling asleep.



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The act of waking was an instantaneous recovery of his emotional rapture of the overnight; nor was it a bar to graver considerations. His Chief had gone down to a house in the country; his personal business was to see and sound the followers of their party—after another sight of his Tony. She would be sure to counsel sagaciously; she always did. She had a marvellous intuition of the natures of the men he worked with, solely from his chance descriptions of them; it was as though he started the bird and she transfixed it. And she should not have matter to rule her smooth brows: that he swore to. She should sway him as she pleased, be respected after her prescribed manner. The promise must be exacted; nothing besides, promise.—You see, Tony, you cannot be less than Tony to me now, he addressed the gentle phantom of her. Let me have your word, and I am your servant till the Session ends.—Tony blushes her swarthy crimson: Diana, fluttering, rebukes her; but Diana is the appeasable Goddess; Tony is the woman, and she loves him. The glorious Goddess need not cut them adrift; they can show her a book of honest pages.

Dacier could truthfully say he had worshipped, done knightly service to the beloved woman, homage to the aureole encircling her. Those friends of his, covertly congratulating him on her preference, doubtless thought him more privileged than he was; but they did not know Diana; and they were welcome, if they would only believe, to the knowledge that he was at the feet of this most sovereign woman. He despised the particular Satyr-world which, whatever the nature or station of the woman, crowns the desecrator, and bestows the title of Fool on the worshipper. He could have answered veraciously that she had kept him from folly.

Nevertheless the term to service must come. In the assurance of the approaching term he stood braced against a blowing world; happy as men are when their muscles are strung for a prize they pluck with the energy and aim of their whole force.

Letters and morning papers were laid for him to peruse in his dressing-room. He read his letters before the bath. Not much public news was expected at the present season. While dressing, he turned over the sheets of Whitmonby's journal. Dull comments on stale things. Foreign news. Home news, with the leaders on them, identically dull. Behold the effect of Journalism: a witty man, sparkling overnight, gets into his pulpit and prosed; because he must say something, and he really knows nothing.

Journalists have an excessive overestimate of their influence. They cannot, as Diana said, comparing them with men on the Parliamentary platform, cannot feel they are aboard the big vessel; they can only strive to raise a breeze, or find one to swell; and they cannot measure the stoutness or the greatness of the good ship England. Dacier's personal ambition was inferior to his desire to extend and strengthen

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his England. Parliament was the field, Government the office. How many conversations had passed between him and Diana on that patriotic dream! She had often filled his drooping sails; he owned it proudly:—and while the world, both the hoofed and the rectilinear portions, were biting at her character! Had he fretted her self-respect? He blamed himself, but a devoted service must have its term.

The paper of Mr. Tonans was reserved for perusal at breakfast. He reserved it because Tonans was an opponent, tricky and surprising now and then, amusing too; unlikely to afford him serious reflections. The recent endeavours of his journal to whip the Government-team to a right-about-face were annoying, preposterous. Dacier had admitted to Diana that Tonans merited the thanks of the country during 'the discreditable Railway mania, when his articles had a fine exhortative and prophetic twang, and had done marked good. Otherwise, as regarded the Ministry, the veering gusts of Tonans were objectionable: he 'raised the breeze' wantonly as well as disagreeably. Any one can whip up the populace if he has the instruments; and Tonans frequently intruded on the Ministry's prerogative to govern. The journalist was bidding against the statesman. But such is the condition of a rapidly Radicalizing country! We must take it as it is.

With a complacent, What now, Dacier fixed his indifferent eyes on the first column of the leaders. He read, and his eyes grew horny. He jerked back at each sentence, electrified, staring. The article was shorter than usual. Total Repeal was named; the precise date when the Minister intended calling Parliament together to propose it. The 'Total Repeal' might be guess-work—an Editor's bold stroke; but the details, the date, were significant of positive information. The Minister's definite and immediate instructions were exactly stated.

Where could the fellow have got hold of that? Dacier asked the blank ceiling.

He frowned at vacant corners of the room in an effort to conjure some speculation indicative of the source.

Had his Chief confided the secret to another and a traitor? Had they been overheard in his library when the project determined on was put in plain speech?

The answer was no, impossible, to each question.

He glanced at Diana. She? But it was past midnight when he left her. And she would never have betrayed him, never, never. To imagine it a moment was an injury to her.

Where else could he look? It had been specially mentioned in the communication as a secret by his Chief, who trusted him and no others. Up to the consultation with the



Cabinet, it was a thing to be guarded like life itself. Not to a soul except Diana would Dacier have breathed syllable of any secret—and one of this weight!

He ran down the article again. There were the facts; undeniable facts; and they detonated with audible roaring and rounding echoes of them over England. How did they come there? As well inquire how man came on the, face of the earth.



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He had to wipe his forehead perpetually. Think as he would in exaltation of Diana to shelter himself, he was the accused. He might not be the guilty, but he had opened his mouth; and though it was to her only, and she, as Dunstane had sworn, true as steel, he could not escape condemnation. He had virtually betrayed his master. Diana would never betray her lover, but the thing was in the air as soon as uttered: and off to the printing-press! Dacier's grotesque fancy under annoyance pictured a stream of small printer's devils in flight from his babbling lips.

He consumed bits of breakfast, with a sour confession that a newspaper-article had hit him at last, and stunningly.

Hat and coat were called for. The state of aimlessness in hot perplexity demands a show of action. Whither to go first was as obscure as what to do. Diana said of the Englishman's hat and coat, that she supposed they were to make him a walking presentment of the house he had shut up behind him. A shot of the eye at the glass confirmed the likeness, but with a ruefully wry-faced repudiation of it internally:—Not so shut up! the reverse of that—a common babbler.

However, there was no doubt of Diana. First he would call on her. The pleasantest dose in perturbations of the kind is instinctively taken first. She would console, perhaps direct him to guess how the secret had leaked. But so suddenly, immediately! It was inexplicable.

Sudden and immediate consequences were experienced. On the steps of his house his way was blocked by the arrival of Mr. Quintin Manx, who jumped out of a cab, bellowing interjections and interrogations in a breath. Was there anything in that article? He had read it at breakfast, and it had choked him. Dacier was due at a house and could not wait: he said, rather sharply, he was not responsible for newspaper articles. Quintin Manx, a senior gentleman and junior landowner, vowed that no Minister intending to sell the country should treat him as a sheep. The shepherd might go; he would not carry his flock with him. But was there a twinkle of probability in the story? . . . that article! Dacier was unable to inform him; he was very hurried, had to keep an appointment.

'If I let you go, will you come and lunch with me at two?' said Quintin.

To get rid of him, Dacier nodded and agreed.

'Two o'clock, mind!' was bawled at his heels as he walked off with his long stride, unceremoniously leaving the puffy gentleman of sixty to settle with his cabman far to the rear.

CHAPTER XXXIV

In which it is darkly seen how the CRIMINAL'S judge may be love's criminal



When we are losing balance on a precipice we do not think much of the thing we have clutched for support. Our balance is restored and we have not fallen; that is the comfortable reflection: we stand as others do, and we will for the future be warned to avoid the dizzy stations which cry for resources beyond a common equilibrium, and where a slip precipitates us to ruin.



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When, further, it is a woman planted in a burning blush, having to idealize her feminine weakness, that she may not rebuke herself for grovelling, the mean material acts by which she sustains a tottering position are speedily swallowed in the one pervading flame. She sees but an ashen curl of the path she has traversed to safety, if anything.

Knowing her lover was to come in the morning, Diana's thoughts dwelt wholly upon the way to tell him, as tenderly as possible without danger to herself, that her time for entertaining was over until she had finished her book; indefinitely, therefore. The apprehension of his complaining pricked the memory that she had something to forgive. He had sunk her in her own esteem by compelling her to see her woman's softness. But how high above all other men her experience of him could place him notwithstanding! He had bowed to the figure of herself, dearer than herself, that she set before him: and it was a true figure to the world; a too fictitious to any but the most knightly of lovers. She forgave; and a shudder seized her.—Snake! she rebuked the delicious run of fire through her veins; for she was not like the idol women of imperishable type, who are never for a twinkle the prey of the blood: statues created by man's common desire to impress upon the sex his possessing pattern of them as domestic decorations.

When she entered the room to Dacier and they touched hands, she rejoiced in her coolness, without any other feeling or perception active. Not to be unkind, not too kind: this was her task. She waited for the passage of commonplaces.

'You slept well, Percy?'

'Yes; and you?'

'I don't think I even dreamed.'

They sat. She noticed the cloud on him and waited for his allusion to it, anxious concerning him simply.

Dacier flung the hair off his temples. Words of Titanic formation were hurling in his head at journals and journalists. He muttered his disgust of them.

'Is there anything to annoy you in the papers to-day?' she asked, and thought how handsome his face was in anger.

The paper of Mr. Tonans was named by him. 'You have not seen it?'

'I have not opened it yet.'

He sprang up. 'The truth is, those fellows can now afford to buy right and left, corrupt every soul alive! There must have been a spy at the keyhole. I'm pretty certain—I



could swear it was not breathed to any ear but mine; and there it is this morning in black and white.'

'What is?' cried Diana, turning to him on her chair.

'The thing I told you last night.'

Her lips worked, as if to spell the thing. 'Printed, do you say?' she rose.

'Printed. In a leading article, loud as a trumpet; a hue and cry running from end to end of the country. And my Chief has already had the satisfaction of seeing the secret he confided to me yesterday roared in all the thoroughfares this morning. They've got the facts: his decision to propose it, and the date—the whole of it! But who could have betrayed it?'

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For the first time since her midnight expedition she felt a sensation of the full weight of the deed. She heard thunder.

She tried to disperse the growing burden by an inward summons to contempt of the journalistic profession, but nothing would come. She tried to minimize it, and her brain succumbed. Her views of the deed last night and now throttled reason in two contending clutches. The enormity swelled its dimensions, taking shape, and pointing magnetically at her. She stood absolutely, amazedly, bare before it.

'Is it of such very great importance?' she said, like one supplicating him to lessen it.

'A secret of State? If you ask whether it is of great importance to me, relatively it is of course. Nothing greater. Personally my conscience is clear. I never mentioned it—couldn't have mentioned it—to any one but you. I'm not the man to blab secrets. He spoke to me because he knew he could trust me. To tell you the truth, I'm brought to a dead stop. I can't make a guess.

I'm certain, from what he said, that he trusted me only with it: perfectly certain. I know him well. He was in his library, speaking in his usual conversational tone, deliberately, nor overloud. He stated that it was a secret between us.'

'Will it affect him?'

'This article? Why, naturally it will. You ask strange questions. A Minister coming to a determination like that! It affects him vitally. The members of the Cabinet are not so devoted It affects us all—the whole Party; may split it to pieces! There's no reckoning the upset right and left. If it were false, it could be refuted; we could despise it as a trick of journalism. It's true. There's the mischief. Tonans did not happen to call here last night?—absurd! I left later than twelve.'

'No, but let me hear,' Diana said hurriedly, for the sake of uttering the veracious negative and to slur it over. 'Let me hear . . .' She could not muster an idea.

Her delicious thrilling voice was a comfort to him. He lifted his breast high and thumped it, trying to smile. 'After all, it's pleasant being with you, Tony. Give me your hand—you may: I'm bothered—confounded by this morning surprise. It was like walking against the muzzle of a loaded cannon suddenly unmasked. One can't fathom the mischief it will do. And I shall be suspected, and can't quite protest myself the spotless innocent. Not even to my heart's mistress! to the wife of the bosom! I suppose I'm no Roman. You won't give me your hand? Tony, you might, seeing I am rather . . .'

A rush of scalding tears flooded her eyes.

'Don't touch me,' she said, and forced her sight to look straight at him through the fiery shower. 'I have done positive mischief?'



'You, my dear Tony?' He doated on her face. 'I don't blame you, I blame myself. These things should never be breathed. Once in the air, the devil has hold of them. Don't take it so much to heart. The thing's bad enough to bear as it is. Tears! Let me have the hand. I came, on my honour, with the most honest intention to submit to your orders: but if I see you weeping in sympathy!'



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'Oh! for heaven's sake,' she caught her hands away from him, 'don't be generous. Whip me with scorpions. And don't touch me,' cried Diana. 'Do you understand? You did not name it as a secret. I did not imagine it to be a secret of immense, immediate importance.'

'But—what?' shouted Dacier, stiffening.

He wanted her positive meaning, as she perceived, having hoped that it was generally taken and current, and the shock to him over.

'I had . . . I had not a suspicion of doing harm, Percy.'

'But what harm have you done? No riddles!'

His features gave sign of the break in their common ground, the widening gulf.

'I went . . . it was a curious giddiness: I can't account for it. I thought . . .'

'Went? You went where?'

'Last night. I would speak intelligibly: my mind has gone. Ah! you look. It is not so bad as my feeling.'

'But where did you go last night? What!—to Tonans?'

She drooped her head: she saw the track of her route cleaving the darkness in a demoniacal zig-zag and herself in demon's grip.

'Yes,' she confronted him. 'I went to Mr. Tonans.'

'Why?'

'I went to him—'

'You went alone?'

'I took my maid.'

'Well?'

'It was late when you left me . . .'

'Speak plainly!'

'I am trying: I will tell you all.'



'At once, if you please.'

'I went to him—why? There is no accounting for it. He sneered constantly at my stale information.'

'You gave him constant information?'

'No: in our ordinary talk. He railed at me for being "out of it." I must be childish: I went to show him—oh! my vanity! I think I must have been possessed.'

She watched the hardening of her lover's eyes. They penetrated, and through them she read herself insufferably.

But it was with hesitation still that he said: 'Then you betrayed me?'

'Percy! I had not a suspicion of mischief.'

'You went straight to this man?'

'Not thinking . . .'

'You sold me to a journalist!'

'I thought it was a secret of a day. I don't think you—no, you did not tell me to keep it secret. A word from you would have been enough. I was in extremity.'

Dacier threw his hands up and broke away. He had an impulse to dash from the room, to get a breath of different air. He stood at the window, observing tradesmen's carts, housemaids, blank doors, dogs, a beggar fifer. Her last words recurred to him. He turned: 'You were in extremity, you said. What is the meaning of that? What extremity?'

Her large dark eyes flashed powerlessly; her shape appeared to have narrowed; her tongue, too, was a feeble penitent.

'You ask a creature to recall her acts of insanity.'



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'There must be some signification in your words, I suppose.'

'I will tell you as clearly as I can. You have the right to be my judge. I was in extremity—that is, I saw no means . . . I could not write: it was ruin coming.'

'Ah?—you took payment for playing spy?'

'I fancied I could retrieve . . . Now I see the folly, the baseness. I was blind.'

'Then you sold me to a journalist for money?'

The intolerable scourge fetched a stifled scream from her and drove her pacing, but there was no escape; she returned to meet it.

The room was a cage to both of them, and every word of either was a sting.

'Percy, I did not imagine he would use it—make use of it as he has done.'

'Not? And when he paid for it?'

'I fancied it would be merely of general service—if any.'

'Distributed; I see: not leading to the exposure of the communicant!'

'You are harsh; but I would not have you milder.'

The meekness of such a mischief-doer was revolting and called for the lash.

'Do me the favour to name the sum. I am curious to learn what my imbecility was counted worth.'

'No sum was named.'

'Have I been bought for a song?'

'It was a suggestion—no definite . . . nothing stipulated.'

'You were to receive money!'

'Leave me a bit of veiling! No, you shall behold me the thing I am. Listen . . . I was poor . . .'

'You might have applied to me.'

'For money! That I could not do:



'Better than betraying me, believe me.'

'I had no thought of betraying. I hope I could have died rather than consciously betray.'

'Money! My whole fortune was at your, disposal.'

'I was beset with debts, unable to write, and, last night when you left me, abject. It seemed to me that you disrespected me . . .'

'Last night!' Dacier cried with lashing emphasis.

'It is evident to me that I have the reptile in me, Percy. Or else I am subject to lose my reason. I went . . . I went like a bullet: I cannot describe it; I was mad. I need a strong arm, I want help. I am given to think that I do my best and can be independent; I break down. I went blindly—now I see it—for the chance of recovering my position, as the gambler casts; and he wins or loses. With me it is the soul that is lost. No exact sum was named; thousands were hinted.'

'You are hardly practical on points of business.'

'I was insane.'

'I think you said you slept well after it,' Dacier remarked.

'I had so little the idea of having done evilly, that I slept without a dream.'

He shrugged:—the consciences of women are such smooth deeps, or running shallows.



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'I have often wondered how your newspaper men got their information,' he said, and muttered: 'Money-women!' adding: 'Idiots to prime them! And I one of the leaky vessels! Well, we learn. I have been rather astonished at times of late at the scraps of secret knowledge displayed by Tonans. If he flourishes his thousands! The wonder is, he doesn't corrupt the Ministers' wives. Perhaps he does. Marriage will become a danger-sign to Parliamentary members. Foreign women do these tricks . . . women of a well-known stamp. It is now a full year, I think, since I began to speak to you of secret matters—and congratulated myself, I recollect, on your thirst for them.'

'Percy, if you suspect that I have uttered one word before last night, you are wrong. I cannot paint my temptation or my loss of sense last night. Previously I was blameless. I thirsted, yes; but in the hope of helping you.'

He looked at her. She perceived how glitteringly loveless his eyes had grown. It was her punishment; and though the enamoured woman's heart protested it excessive, she accepted it.

'I can never trust you again,' he said.

'I fear you will not,' she replied.

His coming back to her after the departure of the guests last night shone on him in splendid colours of single-minded loverlike devotion. 'I came to speak to my own heart. I thought it would give you pleasure; thought I could trust you utterly. I had not the slightest conception I was imperilling my honour . . . !'

He stopped. Her bloodless fixed features revealed an intensity of anguish that checked him. Only her mouth, a little open for the sharp breath, appeared dumbly beseeching. Her large eyes met his like steel to steel, as of one who would die fronting the weapon.

He strangled a loathsome inclination to admire.

'So good bye,' he said.

She moved her lips.

He said no more. In half a minute he was gone.

To her it was the plucking of life out of her breast.

She pressed her hands where heart had been. The pallor and cold of death took her body.



CHAPTER XXXV

Reveals how the true heroine of Romance comes finally to her, time of triumph

The shutting of her house-door closed for Dacier that woman's history in connection with himself. He set his mind on the consequences of the act of folly—the trusting a secret to a woman. All were possibly not so bad: none should be trusted.

The air of the street fanned him agreeably as he revolved the horrible project of confession to the man who had put faith in him. Particulars might be asked. She would be unnamed, but an imagination of the effect of naming her placarded a notorious woman in fresh paint: two members of the same family her victims!



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And last night, no later than last night, he had swung round at this very corner of the street to give her the fullest proof of his affection. He beheld a dupe trotting into a carefully-laid pitfall. She had him by the generosity of his confidence in her. Moreover, the recollection of her recent feeble phrasing, when she stood convicted of the treachery, when a really clever woman would have developed her resources, led him to doubt her being so finely gifted. She was just clever enough to hoodwink. He attributed the dupery to a trick of imposing the idea of her virtue upon men. Attracted by her good looks and sparkle, they entered the circle of her charm, became delightfully intimate, suffered a rebuff, and were from that time prepared to serve her purpose. How many other wretched dupes had she dangling? He spied at Westlake, spied at Redworth, at old Lord Larrian, at Lord Dannisburgh, at Arthur Rhodes, dozens. Old and young were alike to her if she saw an end to be gained by keeping them hooked. Tonans too, and Whitmonby. Newspaper editors were especially serviceable. Perhaps 'a young Minister of State' held the foremost rank in that respect: if completely duped and squeezeable, he produced more substantial stuff.

The background of ice in Dacier's composition was brought to the front by his righteous contempt of her treachery. No explanation of it would have appeased him. She was guilty, and he condemned her. She stood condemned by all the evil likely to ensue from her misdeed. Scarcely had he left her house last night when she was away to betray him!—He shook her from him without a pang. Crediting her with the one merit she had—that of not imploring for mercy—he the more easily shook her off. Treacherous, she had not proved theatrical. So there was no fuss in putting out her light, and it was done. He was justified by the brute facts. Honourable, courteous, kindly gentleman, highly civilized, an excellent citizen and a patriot, he was icy at an outrage to his principles, and in the dominion of Love a sultan of the bow-string and chopper period, sovereignly endowed to stretch a finger for the scimitared Mesrou to make the erring woman head and trunk with one blow: and away with those remnants! This internally he did. Enough that the brute facts justified him.

St. James's park was crossed, and the grass of the Green park, to avoid inquisitive friends. He was obliged to walk; exercise, action of any sort, was imperative, and but for some engagement he would have gone to his fencing-rooms for a bout with the master. He remembered his engagement and grew doubly embittered. He had absurdly pledged himself to lunch with Quintin Manx; that was, to pretend to eat while submitting to be questioned by a political dullard strong on his present right to overhaul and rail at his superiors. The house was one of a block along the North-Western line of Hyde park. He kicked at the subjection to go there, but a promise was binding, though he gave it when stunned. He could have silenced Mr. Manx with the posing interrogation: Why have I so long consented to put myself at the mercy of a bore? For him, he could not answer it, though Manx, as leader of the Shipping interest, was influential. The man had to be endured, like other doses in politics.



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Dacier did not once think of the great ship-owner's niece till Miss Constance Asper stepped into her drawing-room to welcome him. She was an image of repose to his mind. The calm pure outline of her white features refreshed him as the Alps the Londoner newly alighted at Berne; smoke, wrangle, the wrestling city's wickedness, behind him.

'My uncle is very disturbed,' she said. 'Is the news—if I am not very indiscreet in inquiring?'

'I have a practice of never paying attention to newspaper articles,' Dacier replied.

'I am only affected by living with one who does,' Miss Asper observed, and the lofty isolation of her head above politics gave her a moral attractiveness in addition to physical beauty. Her water-colour sketches were on her uncle's walls: the beautiful in nature claimed and absorbed her. She dressed with a pretty rigour, a lovely simplicity, picturesque of the nunnery. She looked indeed a high-born young lady-abbess.

'It's a dusty game for ladies,' Dacier said, abhorring the women defiled by it.

And when one thinks of the desire of men to worship women, there is a pathos in a man's discovery of the fair young creature undefiled by any interest in public affairs, virginal amid her bower's environments.

The angelical beauty of a virgin mind and person captivated him, by contrast. His natural taste was to admire it, shunning the lures and tangles of the women on high seas, notably the married: who, by the way, contrive to ensnare us through wonderment at a cleverness caught from their traffic with the masculine world: often—if we did but know!— a parrot-repetition of the last male visitor's remarks. But that which the fair maiden speaks, though it may be simple, is her own.

She too is her own: or vowed but to one. She is on all sides impressive in purity. The world worships her as its perfect pearl: and we are brought refreshfully to acknowledge that the world is right.

By contrast, the white radiation of Innocence distinguished Constance Asper celestially. As he was well aware, she had long preferred him— the reserved among many pleading pressing suitors. Her steady faithfulness had fed on the poorest crumbs.

He ventured to express the hope that she was well.

'Yes,' she answered, with eyelids lifted softly to thank him for his concern in so humble a person.

'You look a little pale,' he said.



She coloured like a sea-water shell. 'I am inclined to paleness by nature.'

Her uncle disturbed them. Lunch was ready. He apologized for the absence of Mrs. Markland, a maternal aunt of Constance, who kept house for them. Quintin Manx fell upon the meats, and then upon the Minister. Dacier found himself happily surprised by the accession of an appetite. He mentioned it, to escape from the worrying of his host, as unusual with him at midday: and Miss Asper, supporting him in that effort, said benevolently: 'Gentlemen should eat; they have so many fatigues and troubles.' She herself did not like to be seen eating in public. Her lips opened to the morsels, as with a bird's bill, though with none of the pecking eagerness we complacently observe in poultry.



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'But now, I say, positively, how about that article?' said Quintin.

Dacier visibly winced, and Constance immediately said 'Oh! spare us politics, dear uncle.'

Her intercession was without avail, but by contrast with the woman implicated in the horrible article, it was a carol of the seraphs.

'Come, you can say whether there's anything in it,' Dacier's host pushed him.

'I should not say it if I could,' he replied.

The mild sweetness of Miss Asper's look encouraged him.

He was touched to the quick by hearing her say: 'You ask for Cabinet secrets, uncle. All secrets are holy, but secrets of State are under a seal next to divine.'

Next to divine! She was the mouthpiece of his ruling principle.

'I 'm not, prying into secrets,' Quintin persisted; 'all I want to know is, whether there 's any foundation for that article—all London's boiling about it, I can tell you—or it's only newspaper's humbug.'

'Clearly the oracle for you is the Editor's office,' rejoined Dacier.

'A pretty sort of answer I should get.'

'It would at least be complimentary.'

'How do you mean?'

'The net was cast for you—and the sight of a fish in it!'

Miss Asper almost laughed. 'Have you heard the choir at St. Catherine's?' she asked.

Dacier had not. He repented of his worldliness, and drinking persuasive claret, said he would go to hear it next Sunday.

'Do,' she murmured.

'Well, you seem to be a pair against me,' her uncle grumbled. 'Anyhow I think it's important. People have been talking for some time, and I don't want to be taken unawares; I won't be a yoked ox, mind you.'

'Have you been sketching lately?' Dacier asked Miss Asper.



She generally filled a book in the autumn, she said.

'May I see it?'

'If you wish.'

They had a short tussle with her uncle and escaped. He was conducted to a room midway upstairs: an heiress's conception of a saintly little room; and more impressive in purity, indeed it was, than a saint's, with the many crucifixes, gold and silver emblems, velvet prie-Dieu chairs, jewel-clasped sacred volumes: every invitation to meditate in luxury on an ascetic religiousness.

She depreciated her sketching powers. 'I am impatient with my imperfections. I am therefore doomed not to advance.'

'On the contrary, that is the state guaranteeing ultimate excellence,' he said, much disposed to drone about it.

She sighed: 'I fear not.'

He turned the leaves, comparing her modesty with the performance. The third of the leaves was a subject instantly recognized by him. It represented the place he had inherited from Lord Dannisburgh.

He named it.

She smiled: 'You are good enough to see a likeness? My aunt and I were passing it last October, and I waited for a day, to sketch.'



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'You have taken it from my favourite point of view.'

'I am glad.'

'How much I should like a copy!'

'If you will accept that?'

'I could not rob you.'

'I can make a duplicate.'

'The look of the place pleases you?'

'Oh! yes; the pines behind it; the sweet little village church; even the appearance of the rustics;—it is all impressively old English. I suppose you are very seldom there?'

'Does it look like a home to you?'

'No place more!'

'I feel the loneliness.'

'Where I live I feel no loneliness!'

'You have heavenly messengers near you.'

'They do not always come.'

'Would you consent to make the place less lonely to me?'

Her bosom rose. In deference to her maidenly understanding, she gazed inquiringly.

'If you love it!' said he.

'The place?' she said, looking soft at the possessor.

'Constance!'

'Is it true?'

'As you yourself. Could it be other than true? This hand is mine?'

'Oh! Percy.'



Borrowing the world's poetry to describe them, the long prayed-for Summer enveloped the melting snows.

So the recollection of Diana's watch beside his uncle's death-bed was wiped out. Ay, and the hissing of her treachery silenced. This maidenly hand put him at peace with the world, instead of his defying it for a worthless woman—who could not do better than accept the shelter of her husband's house, as she ought to be told, if her friends wished her to save her reputation.

Dacier made his way downstairs to Quintin Manx, by whom he was hotly congratulated and informed of the extent of the young lady's fortune: on the strength of which it was expected that he would certainly speak a private word in elucidation of that newspaper article.

'I know nothing of it,' said Dacier, but promised to come and dine. Alone in her happiness Constance Asper despatched various brief notes under her gold-symbolled crest to sisterly friends; one to Lady Wathin, containing the, single line:

'Your prophesy is confirmed.'

Dacier was comfortably able to face his Club after the excitement of a proposal, with a bride on his hands. He was assaulted concerning the article, and he parried capitally. Say that her lips were rather cold: at any rate, they invigorated him. Her character was guaranteed—not the hazy idea of a dupe. And her fortune would be enormous: a speculation merely due to worldly prudence and prospective ambition.



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At the dinner-table of four, in the evening, conversation would have seemed dull to him, by contrast, had it not, been for the presiding grace of his bride, whose habitually eminent feminine air of superiority to the repast was throned by her appreciative receptiveness of his looks and utterances. Before leaving her, he won her consent to a very early marriage; on the plea of a possibly approaching Session, and also that they had waited long. The consent, notwithstanding the hurry of preparations, it involved, besides the annihilation of her desire to meditate on so solemn a change in her life and savour the congratulations of her friends and have the choir of St. Catherine's rigorously drilled in her favourite anthems was beautifully yielded to the pressure of circumstances.

There lay on his table at night a letter; a bulky letter. No need to tear it open for sight of the signature: the superscription was redolent of that betraying woman. He tossed it unopened into the fire.

As it was thick, it burned sullenly, discolouring his name on the address, as she had done, and still offering him a last chance of viewing the contents. She fought on the consuming fire to have her exculpation heard.

But was she not a shameless traitor? She had caught him by his love of his country and hope to serve it. She had wound into his heart to bleed him of all he knew and sell the secrets for money. A wonderful sort of eloquence lay there, on those coals, no doubt. He felt a slight movement of curiosity to glance at two or three random sentences: very slight. And why read them now? They were valueless to him, mere outcries. He judged her by the brute facts. She and her slowly-consuming letter were of a common blackness. Moreover, to read them when he was plighted to another woman would be senseless. In the discovery of her baseness, she had made a poor figure. Doubtless during the afternoon she had trimmed her intuitive Belial art of making 'the worse appear the better cause': queer to peruse, and instructive in an unprofitable department of knowledge-the tricks of the sex.

He said to himself, with little intuition of the popular taste: She wouldn't be a bad heroine of Romance! He said it derisively of the Romantic. But the right worshipful heroine of Romance was the front-face female picture he had won for his walls. Poor Diana was the flecked heroine of Reality: not always the same; not impeccable; not an ignorant-innocent, nor a guileless: good under good leading; devoted to the death in a grave crisis; often wrestling with her terrestrial nature nobly; and a growing soul; but not one whose purity was carved in marble for the assurance to an Englishman that his possession of the changeless thing defies time and his fellows, is the pillar of his home and universally enviable. Your fair one of Romance cannot suffer a mishap without a plotting villain, perchance many of them; to wreak



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the dread iniquity: she cannot move without him; she is the marble block, and if she is to have a feature, he is the sculptor; she depends on him for life, and her human history at least is married to him far more than to the rescuing lover. No wonder, then, that men should find her thrice cherishable featureless, or with the most moderate possible indication of a countenance. Thousands of the excellent simple creatures do; and every reader of her tale. On the contrary, the heroine of Reality is that woman whom you have met or heard of once in your course of years, and very probably despised for bearing in her composition the motive principle; at best, you say, a singular mixture of good and bad; anything but the feminine ideal of man. Feature to some excess, you think, distinguishes her. Yet she furnishes not any of the sweet sensual excitement pertaining to her spotless rival pursued by villany. She knocks at the doors of the mind, and the mind must open to be interested in her. Mind and heart must be wide open to excuse her sheer descent from the pure ideal of man.

Dacier's wandering reflections all came back in crowds to the judicial Bench of the Black Cap. He felt finely, apart from the treason, that her want of money degraded her: him too, by contact. Money she might have had to any extent: upon application for it, of course. How was he to imagine that she wanted money! Smilingly as she welcomed him and his friends, entertaining them royally, he was bound to think she had means. A decent propriety bound him not to think of the matter at all. He naturally supposed she was capable of conducting her affairs. And— money! It soiled his memory: though the hour at Rovio was rather pretty, and the scene at Copsley touching: other times also, short glimpses of the woman, were taking. The flood of her treachery effaced them. And why reflect? Constance called to him to look her way.

Diana's letter died hard. The corners were burnt to black tissue, with an edge or two of discoloured paper. A small frayed central heap still resisted, and in kindness to the necessity for privacy, he impressed the fire-tongs to complete the execution. After which he went to his desk and worked, under the presidency of Constance.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

A high wind will make a dead leaf fly like a bird
Beware the silent one of an assembly!
Brittle is foredoomed
Common sense is the secret of every successful civil agitation
Its glee at a catastrophe; its poor stock of mercy
Money is of course a rough test of virtue
Salt of earth, to whom their salt must serve for nourishment
Sentimentality puts up infant hands for absolution
She herself did not like to be seen eating in public



Slightest taste for comic analysis that does not tumble to farce
The greed of gain is our volcano
The man had to be endured, like other doses in politics
Vagrant compassionateness of sentimentalists
What might have been
What the world says, is what the wind says
Without those consolatory efforts, useless between men



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[The End]

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