GARDENER HELEN HAMILTON

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Gardener H.

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Содержание

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I saw a woman sleeping. In her sleep she dreampt Life stood before her, and held in each hand a gift – in the one Love, in the other Freedom. And she said to the woman, "Choose!"

And the woman waited long; and she said: "Freedom!" And Life said, "Thou hast well chosen. If thou hadst said, 'Love,' I would have given thee that thou didst ask for; and I would have gone from thee, and returned to thee no more. Now, the day will come when I shall return. In that day I shall bear both gifts in one hand." I heard the woman laugh in her sleep.

Olive Schreener's Dreams.

DEDICATED

With the love and admiration of the Author,

To Her Husband

Who is ever at once her first, most severe, and most sympathetic critic, whose encouragement and interest in her work never flags; whose abiding belief in human rights, without sex limitations, and in equality of opportunity leaves scant room in his great soul to harbor patience with sex domination in a land which boasts of freedom for all, and embodies its symbol of Liberty in the form of the only legally disqualified and unrepresented class to be found upon its shores.

PREFACE

In the following story the writer shows us what poverty and dependence are in their revolting outward aspects, as well as in their crippling effects on all the tender sentiments of the human soul. Whilst the many suffer for want of the decencies of life, the few have no knowledge of such conditions.

They require the poor to keep clean, where water by landlords is considered a luxury; to keep their garments whole, where they have naught but rags to stitch together, twice and thrice worn threadbare. The improvidence of the poor as a valid excuse for ignorance, poverty, and vice, is as inadequate as is the providence of the rich, for their virtue, luxury, and power. The artificial conditions of society are based on false theories of government, religion, and morals, and not upon the decrees of a God.

In this little volume we have a picture, too, of what the world would call a happy family, in which a naturally strong, honest woman is shrivelled into a mere echo of her husband, and the popular sentiment of the class to which she belongs. The daughter having been educated in a college with young men, and tasted of the tree of knowledge, and, like the Gods, knowing good and evil, can no longer square her life by opinions she has outgrown; hence with her parents there is friction, struggle, open revolt, though conscientious and respectful withal.

Three girls belonging to different classes in society; each illustrates the false philosophy on which woman's character is based, and each in a different way, in the supreme moment of her life, shows the necessity of self-reliance and self-support.

As the wrongs of society can be more deeply impressed on a large class of readers in the form of fiction than by essays, sermons, or the facts of science, I hail with pleasure all such attempts by the young writers of our day. The slave has had his novelist and poet, the farmer his, the victims of ignorance and poverty theirs, but up to this time the refinements of cruelty suffered by intelligent, educated women, have never been painted in glowing colors, so that the living picture could be seen and understood. It is easy to rouse attention to the grosser forms of suffering and injustice, but the humiliations of spirit are not so easily described and appreciated.

A class of earnest reformers have, for the last fifty years, in the press, the pulpit, and on the platform, with essays, speeches, and constitutional arguments before legislative assemblies, demanded the complete emancipation of women from the political, religious, and social bondage she now endures; but as yet few see clearly the need of larger freedom, and the many maintain a stolid indifference to the demand.

I have long waited and watched for some woman to arise to do for her sex what Mrs. Stowe did for the black race in "Uncle Tom's Cabin," a book that did more to rouse the national conscience than all the glowing appeals and constitutional arguments that agitated our people during half a century. If, from an objective point of view, a writer could thus eloquently portray the sorrows of a subject race, how much more graphically should some woman describe the degradation of sex.

In Helen Gardener's stories, I see the promise, in the near future, of such a work of fiction, that shall paint the awful facts of woman's position in living colors that all must see and feel. The civil and canon law, state and church alike, make the mothers of the race a helpless, ostracised class, pariahs of a corrupt civilization. In view of woman's multiplied wrongs, my heart oft echoes the Russian poet who said: "God has forgotten where he hid the key to woman's emancipation." Those who know the sad facts of woman's life, so carefully veiled from society at large, will not consider the pictures in this story overdrawn.

The shallow and thoughtless may know nothing of their existence, while the helpless victims, not being able to trace the causes of their misery, are in no position to state their wrongs themselves.

Nevertheless all the author describes in this sad story, and worse still, is realized in everyday life, and the dark shadows dim the sunshine in every household.

The apathy of the public to the wrongs of woman is clearly seen at this hour, in propositions now under consideration in the Legislature of New York. Though two infamous bills have been laid before select committees, one to legalize prostitution, and one to lower the age of consent, the people have been alike ignorant and indifferent to these measures. When it was proposed to take a fragment of Central Park for a race course, a great public meeting of protest was called at once, and hundreds of men hastened to Albany to defeat the measure.

But the proposed invasion of the personal rights of woman, and the wholesale desecration of childhood has scarce created a ripple on the surface of society. The many do not know what laws their rulers are making, and the few do not care, so long as they do not feel the iron teeth of the law in their own flesh. Not one father in the House or Senate would willingly have his wife, sister, or daughter subject to these infamous bills proposed for the daughters of the people. Alas! for the degradation of sex, even in this republic. When one may barter away all that is precious to pure and innocent childhood at the age of ten years, you may as well talk of a girl's safety with wild beasts in the tangled forests of Africa, as in the present civilizations of England and America, the leading nations on the globe.

Some critics say that every one knows and condemns these facts in our social life, and that we do not need fiction to intensify the public disgust. Others say, Why call the attention of the young and the innocent to the existence of evils they should never know. The majority of people do not watch legislative proceedings.

To keep our sons and daughters innocent, we must warn them of the dangers that beset their path on every side.

Ignorance under no circumstances ensures safety. Honor protected by knowledge, is safer than innocence protected by ignorance.

A few brave women are laboring to-day to secure for their less capable, less thoughtful, less imaginative sisters, a recognition of a true womanhood based on individual rights. There is just one remedy for the social complications based on sex, and that is equality for woman in every relation in life.

Men must learn to respect her as an equal factor in civilization, and she must learn to respect herself as mother of the race. Womanhood is the great primal fact of her existence; marriage and maternity, its incidents.

This story shows that the very traits of character which society (whose opinions are made and modified by men) considers most important and charming in woman to ensure her success in social life, are the very traits that ultimately lead to her failure.

Self-effacement, self-distrust, dependence and desire to please, compliance, deference to the judgment and will of another, are what make young women, in the opinion of these believers in sex domination, most agreeable; but these are the very traits that lead to her ruin.

The danger of such training is well illustrated in the sad end of Ettie Berton. When the trials and temptations of life come, then each one must decide for herself, and hold in her own hands the reins of action. Educated women of the passing generation chafe under the old order of things, but, like Mrs. Foster in the present volume, are not strong enough to swim up stream. But girls like Gertrude, who in the college curriculum have measured their powers and capacities with strong young men and found themselves their equals, have outgrown this superstition of divinely ordained sex domination. The divine rights of kings, nobles, popes, and bishops have long been questioned, and now that of sex is under consideration and from the signs of the times, with all other forms of class and caste, it is destined soon to pass away.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton

I

To say that Mrs. Foster was cruel, that she lacked sympathy with the unfortunate, or that she was selfish, would be to state only the dark half of a truism that has a wider application than class or sex could give it; a truism whose boundary lines, indeed, are set by nothing short of the ignorance of human beings hedged in by prejudice and handicapped by lack of imagination. So when she sat, with dainty folded hands whose jeweled softness found fitting background on the crimson velvet of her trailing gown, and announced that she could endure everything associated with, and felt deep sympathy for, the poor if it were not for the besetting sin of uncleanliness that found its home almost invariably where poverty dwelt, it would be unjust to pronounce her hard-hearted or base.

"It is all nonsense to say that the poor need be so dirty," she announced, as she held her splendid feather fan in one hand and caressed the dainty tips of the white plumes with the tips of fingers only less dainty and white.

"I have rarely ever seen a really poor man, woman, or child who was at the same time really clean looking in person, and as to clothes – "

She broke off with an impatient and disgusted little shrug, as if to say – what was quite true – that even the touch of properly descriptive words held for her more soilure than she cared to bear contact with.

John Martin laughed. Then he essayed to banter his hostess, addressing his remarks meanwhile to her daughter.

"One could not imagine your mamma a victim of poverty and hunger, much less of dirt, Miss Gertrude," he began slowly; "but even that sumptuous velvet gown of hers would grow to look more or less – let us say – rusty, in time, I fear, if it were the only costume she possessed, and she were obliged to eat, cook, wash, iron, sew, and market in it."

The two ladies laughed merrily at the droll suggestion, and Miss Gertrude pursed up her lips and developed a decided squint in her eyes as she turned them upon the folds of her mother's robe. Then she took up Mr. Martin's description where the laugh had broken in upon it.

"Too true, too true," she drawled; "and if she dusted the furniture a week or so with that fan, I'm afraid it would lose more or less of its – gloss. Mamma quite prides herself upon the delicate peach-fuzz-bloom, so to speak, of those feathers. Just look at them!" The girl reached over and took the fan from her mother's lap. She spread the fine plumes to their fullest capacity, and held them under the rays of the brass lamp that stood near their guest. Then she made a flourish with it in the direction of the music stand, as if she were intent upon whisking the last speck of dust from the sheets of Tannhauser that lay on its top A little cry of alarm and protest escaped Mrs. Foster's lips and she stretched oat her hand to rescue the beloved fan.

"Gertrude! how can you?" She settled back comfortably against the cushions of the low divan with her rescued treasure once more waving in gentle gracefulness before her.

"Oh, no," she protested. "Of course one could not work or live constantly in one or two gowns and look fresh, but one could look and be clean and – and whole. A patch is not pretty I admit, but it is a decided improvement upon a bare elbow."

"I don't agree with you at all," smiled her guest; "I don't believe I ever saw a patch in all my life that would be an improvement upon – upon – " He glanced at the lovely round white arms before him, and all three laughed. Mrs. Foster thought of how many Russian baths and massage treatments had tended to give the exquisite curve and tint to her arm.

"Then beside," smiled Mr. Martin, "a rent or hole may be an immediate accident, liable to happen to the best of us. A patch looks like premeditated poverty." Gertrude laughed brightly, but her mother did not appear to have heard. She reverted to the previous insinuation.

"Oh, well; that is not fair! You know what I mean. I'm talking of elbows that burst or wear out – not about those that never were intended to be in. Then, besides, it is not the elbow I object to; it is the hole one sees it through. *It* tells a tale of shiftlessness and personal untidiness that saps all sympathy for the poverty that compelled the long wearing of the garment."

"Why, my dear Mrs. Foster," said Martin, slowly, "I wonder if you have any idea of a grade of poverty that simply can't be either whole or clean. Did – ?"

"I'll give up the whole, but I won't give in on the clean. I can easily see how a woman could be too tired, too ill, or too busy to mend a garment; I can fancy her not knowing how to sew, or not having thread, needles, and patches; but, surely, surely, Mr. Martin, no one living is too poor to keep clean. Water is free, and it doesn't take long to take a bath. Besides – "

Gertrude looked at her mother with a smile. Then she said with her sarcastic little drawl again: —

"Russian, or Turkish?"

"Well, but fun' and nonsense aside, Gertrude," said her mother, "a plain hot bath at home would make a new creature out of half the wretches one sees or reads of, and – "

"Porcelain lined bath-tub, hot and cold water furnished at all hours. Bath-room adjoining each sleeping apartment," laughed Mr. Martin. "What a delightful idea you have of abject poverty, Mrs. Foster. I do wish Fred could have heard that last remark of yours. I went with his clerk one day to collect rents down in Mulberry Street. He had the collection of the rents for the Feedour estate on his hands – "

"What's that about the rents of the Feedour estate?" inquired the head of the house, extending his hand to their guest as he entered. Mrs. Foster put out her hand and her husband touched the tips of her fingers to his lips, while Gertrude slipped her arm through her father's and drew him to a seat beside her. Her eyes were dancing, and she showed a double row of the whitest of teeth.

"Oh, Mr. Martin was just explaining to mamma how your clerk collects rent for the porcelain bath-tubs in the Feedour property down in Mulberry Street. Mamma thinks that bath-rooms should be free – hot and cold water, and all convenient appointments."

Fred Foster looked at their guest for a moment, and then both men burst into a hearty laugh.

"I don't see anything to laugh at," protested Mrs. Foster. "Unless you are guying me for thinking Mr. Martin in earnest about the tubs being rented. I suppose, of course, the bath-rooms go with the apartments, and one rent covers the whole of it. In which case, I still insist that there is no reason why the poor can't be clean, and if they have only one suit of clothes, they can wash them out at night and have them dry next morning."

The men laughed again.

"Gertrude, has your mamma read her essay yet before the Ladies' Artistic and Ethical Club on the 'Self-Inflicted Sorrows of the Poor?'" asked Mr. Foster, pinching his daughter's chin, and allowing a chuckle of humorous derision to escape him as he glanced at their guest.

"No," said the girl, a trifle uneasily; "Lizzie Feedour read last time. Mamma's is next, and she has read her paper to me. It is just as good as it can be. Better than half the essays used to be at college, not excepting Mr. Holt's prize thesis on economics. I wish the poor people could hear it. She speaks very kindly of their faults even while criticising them. You – "

"Don't visit the tenement houses of the Feedour estate, dear, until after you read your paper to the club," laughed her husband, "or your essay won't take half so well. College theses and cold facts are not likely to be more than third cousins; eh, Martin? I'm sure the part on cleanliness would be easier for her to manage in discussion before she visited the Spillini family, for example."

"Which one is that, Fred?" asked Mr. Foster.

Martin, a droll twinkle in his eye. "The family of eight, with Irish mother and Italian father, who live in one room and take boarders?"

There was a little explosive "oh" of protest from Gertrude, while her mother laughed delightedly.

"Mr. Martin, you are so perfectly absurd. Why didn't you say that the room was only ten by fifteen feet and had but one window!"

"Because I don't think it is quite so big as that, and there is no outside window at all," said he, quite gravely. "And their only bath-tub for the entire crowd is a small tin basin also used to wash dishes in."

"W-h-a-t!" exclaimed Mrs. Foster, as if she were beginning to suspect their guest's sanity, for she recognized that his mood had changed from one of banter.

The portière was drawn aside, and other guests announced. As Mrs. Foster swept forward to meet them, Gertrude grasped her father's arm and looked into his eyes with something very like terror in her own. "Papa," she said hastily, in an intense undertone; "Papa, is he in earnest? Do the Feedour girls collect rent from such awful poverty as that? Do eight human beings eat and sleep – live – in one room anywhere in a Christian country? Does – ?"

Her father took both of her hands in his own for a moment and looked steadily into her face.

"Hundreds of them, darling," he said, gently. "Don't stare at Miss Feedour that way. Go speak to her. She is looking toward us, and your mother has left her with Martin quite long enough. He is in an ugly humor to-night. Go – no, come," he said, slipping her hand in his arm and drawing her forward through the long rooms to where the group of guests were greeting each other with that easy familiarity which told of frequent intercourse and community of interests and social information.

II

Two hours later Gertrude found herself near a low window seat upon which sat John Martin. She could not remember when he had not been her father's closest friend, and she had no idea why his moods had changed so of late. He was much less free and fatherly with her. She wondered now if he despised her because she knew so little of the real woes of a real world about her, while she, in common with those of her station, sighed so heavily over the needs of a more distant or less repulsive human swarm.

"Will you take me to see the Spillini family some day soon, Mr. Martin," she asked, seating herself by his side. "Papa said that you were telling the truth – were not joking as I thought at first."

Her eyes were following the graceful movements of Lizzie Feedour, as that young lady turned the leaves of a handsome volume that lay on the table before her, and a gentleman with whom she was discussing its merits and defects.

"I don't believe the call would be a pleasure on either side," said Mr. Martin, brusquely, "unless we sent word the day before and had some of the family moved out and a chair taken in."

The girl turned her eyes slowly upon him, but she did not speak. The color began to climb into his face and dye the very roots of his hair. She wondered why. Her own face was rather paler than usual and her eyes were very serious.

"You don't want to take me," she said. "I wonder why men always try to keep girls from knowing things – from learning of the world as it is – and then blame them for their ignorance! You naturally think I am a very silly, light girl, but – "

A great panic overtook John Martin's heart. He could hardly keep back the tears. He felt the blood rush to his face again, but he did not know just what he said.

"I do not – I do not! You are – I – I – should hate to be the one to introduce you to such a view of life. I was an old fool to talk as I did this evening. I – "

"Oh, that is it!" exclaimed Gertrude, relieved. "You found me ignorant, and content because I was ignorant, and you regret that you have struck a chord – a serious chord – where only make-believe or merry ones were ever struck between us before."

John Martin fidgeted.

"No, it is not that I would like to strike the first serious chord for you – in your heart, Gertrude."

He had called her Gertrude for years. Indeed the Miss upon his lips was of very recent date, but there was a meaning in the name just now as he spoke it that gave the girl a distinct shock. She felt that he was covering retreat in one direction by a mendacious advance in another. She arose suddenly.

"Lizzie Feedour is looking her best tonight," she said. "She grows handsomer every day."

She had moved forward a step, but he caught the hand that hung by her side. She faced him with a look of mingled protest and surprise in her face; but when her eyes met his, she understood.

"Gertrude, darling!" was all he could say. This time the blood dyed her face and a mist blinded her for a moment. She remembered feeling glad that her back was turned to everyone but him, and that the window drapery hid his face from the others, for the intensity of appeal touched with the faintest shimmer of happiness and hope told so plain a story that she felt, rather than thought, how absurd it would look to anyone else. She did not realize why it seemed less absurd to her. She drew her hand away and the color died out of his face. Her own was burning. She had turned to leave the room when his disappointed face swam before her eyes again. She put out her hand quickly as if bidding him good-night and drew him toward the door. He moved beside her as in a dream.

"After you take me to see the Spillini family," she said, trying to appear natural to any eyes that might be upon her, "we – I – " They had reached the portière. She drew it aside and he stepped beyond.

"There is no companionship between two people who look upon life so unequally. Those who know all about the world that contains the Spillini family and those who know nothing of such a world

are very far apart in thought and in development There is no mental comradeship. I feel very far from my father to-night for the first time – mamma and I. I have looked at her all the evening in wonder – and at him. I wonder how they have contrived to live so far apart. How could he help sharing his views and knowledge of life with her, if he thinks her and wishes her to be his real companion and comrade. I could not live that way."

She seemed to have forgotten the newer, nearer question, in contemplating the problem that had startled her earlier in the evening. John Martin thought it was all a bit of kind-hearted acting to cover his retreat. He dropped her hand. A man-servant was holding his coat. He thrust his arms in and took his hat.

"Will you take me to see the Spillini family *tomorrow?*" asked a soft voice from the portière. A great wave of joy rushed over John Martin. He did not know why.

"Yes," he said, in a tone that was so distinctly happy that the man-servant stared. The folds of the portière fell together and John Martin passed out onto Fifth Avenue, in an ecstasy.

He is willing to share his knowledge of life with me – of life as he sees and knows it – she thought, as she lay awake that night. He does not wish to live on one plane and have me live on another. That looks like real love. Poor mamma! Poor papa! How far apart they are. To him life is a real thing. He knows its meaning and what it holds. She only knows a shell that is furbished up and polished to attract the eye of children. It is as if he were reading a book to her in a language he understood and she did not. The sound would be its entire message to her, while he gathered in and kept to himself all the meaning of the words – the force of the thoughts. How can they bear such isolation. How can they? she thought with a new feeling of passionate protest that mingled with her dreams.

III

Sure an' I'd like to die meself if dyin' wasn't so costly," remarked Mrs. Spillini, as she gazed with tear-stained eyes at the little body that occupied the only chair in the dismal room. "Do the best we kin, buryin' the baby is goin' to cost more than we made all winter out o' all three boarders. Havin' the baby cost a dreadful lot altogether, an' now it's dyin's a dreadful pull agin."

Gertrude Foster opened her Russian leather purse and Mrs. Spillini's eyes brightened shrewdly. There was no need for the hesitancy and choice of words that gave the young girl so much care and pain. Familiarity with all the mean and gross of life from childhood until one is the mother of six living and four dead children, does not leave the finest edge of sentiment and pride upon the poverty-cursed victims of fate.

"If you would allow me to leave a mere trifle of money for you to use for the baby, I don't – it is only – " began Gertrude; but the ready hand had reached out for the money and a quick "Thanky mum; much obliged" had ended the transaction.

"I shall not tell mamma *that"*, thought Gertrude, and she did not look at John Martin. It was her first glimpse into a grade of life to which all things, even birth and death, take on a strictly commercial aspect; where not only the edge of sentiment is dulled by dire necessity, but where the sentiment itself is buried utterly beneath the incrustations of an ignorance that is too dumb and abject to learn, and a poverty that is too insistent to recognize its own ignorance and degradation.

"Won't you set down?" inquired Mrs. Spillini, as with a sudden movement she slid the small corpse onto the floor under the edge of the table. "I'd a' ast you before, but – "

"O, don't!" exclaimed the girl; but before her natural impulse to stoop and gather up the small bundle had found action possible, John Martin had placed it on the table.

"Oh, Lord; don't!" exclaimed the woman, in sudden dismay. "The boarders'd kick if they was to see it *there*. Boarders is different from the family. We could ate affen the table afther, but boarders – boarders'd kick."

"Could – do you think of anything else we could do for you?" inquired Gertrude, faintly, as she held open the door and tried to think she was not dizzy and sick from the dreadful, polluted air, and the shock of the revelation, with all that it implied, before her.

Four dirty faces, and as many ragged bodies, were too close to her for comfort. There was a vile stew cooking on the stove. The air was heavy and foul with it Gertrude distinctly felt the greasy moisture on her kid gloves as they touched each other.

"No, I don't know's they's anything *more* you can do," replied the passive, hopeless wreck of what it was almost sacrilege to call womanhood. "I don't know's they's anything more you could *do* unless you could let the boarders come in now. They ain't got but a little over ten minutes to eat in an' dinner's ready," she replied, as she lifted the pot of steaming stuff into the middle of the table and laid two tin plates, a large knife and a bunch of iron forks and spoons beside it.

"Turn that chair to the wall," she added sharply to one of the children, who hastened to obey the command. "They'll *all* have to stand up to it this time. I ain't a goin' to shift that baby round no more till it's buried, now that I *kin* bury it. Take this side of the table, Pete. I don't feel like eatin.' You kin have my place 'n the ole man ain't here. Let go of that tin cup, you trillin' young one. All the coffee they is, is in that. Have a drink, Mike?" she asked, passing the coveted cup to the second boarder. Gertrude was half-way down the dark hallway, and John Martin held her arm firmly lest she step into some unseen trap or broken place in the floor.

When they reached the street door she turned to him with wide eyes.

"Great God," she moaned, "and people go to church and pray and thank God – and collect rent from such as they! Men offer premiums to mothers and fathers for large families of children – to be

brought up like that? In a world where that is possible! Oh, I think it is wicked, wicked, wicked, to allow it – any of it – all of it! How can you?"

John Martin looked hopeless and helpless.

"I don't," he said, in pathetic self-defense, feeling somehow that the blame was personal.

"Oh, I don't mean you!" she exclaimed, almost impatiently. "I mean all who know it – who have known and understood it all along. How could men allow it? How dared they? And to think of encouraging such people to marry – to bring into a life like that such swarms of helpless children. Oh, the sin and shame and outrage of it!"

John Martin was dazed that she should look upon it as she did. He was surprised that she spoke so openly. He did not fully comprehend the power and force of real conviction and feeling overtaken in a sincere and fearlessly frank nature by such a knowledge for the first time.

"I should not have brought you here," he said, feebly, as they entered the waiting carriage which her mother had insisted she should take if she would go "slumming," as she had expressed it.

She turned an indignant face upon him.

"Why?" she demanded.

He tried to say something about a shock to her nerves, and such sights and knowledge being not for women.

"I had begun to feel that he respected me – believed in me – wanted, in truth and not merely in name, to share life with me," she thought, "but he does not: it is all a sham. He wants someone who shall *not* share life with him – not even his mental life."

"You would come here with papa, would you not?" she asked, presently. "You would talk over, look at, think of the problems of life with him," – her voice began to tremble.

"Certainly," he said, "but that is different. It – "

"Yes, it is different; quite different. You love papa, and it would be a pain to you to keep your mental books locked up from him. You respect papa, and you would not be able to live a life of pretense with him. You – "

"Gertrude! Oh, darling! I love you. I love you. You know that," he said, grasp ing both her hands and covering them with kisses. She snatched them away, and covered her face with them to hide the tears which were a surprise and shock to herself.

"I should not have taken her there," he thought. "I'm a great fool."

He did not at all comprehend the girl's point of view, and she resented his. He could not imagine why, and her twenty years of inexperience in handling such a view of life as had suddenly grown up within her, made her unable to express quite fully why she did resent his assumption that she should not be allowed to use her heart or brain beyond the limits set for their exercise by conventional theory. She could not express in words why she felt insulted and outraged in her self-respect that he should assume that life was and should be led by her, upon a distinctly different and narrower plane than his own. She knew that she could not accept his explanation, that it was his intense love that wished to shield her from knowledge of all that was ugly – of all the deeper and sadder meanings of human experience; but she felt unequal to making him understand by any words at her command how far from her idea of an exalted love such an assumption was.

That he should sincerely believe that as a matter of course much that was and should be quite common in his own life should be kept from, covered up, blurred into indistinction to her, came to her with a shock too sudden and heavy for words. She had built an exalted ideal of absolute mental companionship between those who loved. She had always thought that one day she should pass through the portals of some vast building by the side of a husband to whom all within was new as it would be to her. She had fancied that neither spoke; that both read the tablets of architecture – and of human legend on every face – so nearly alike that by a glance of the eye she could say to him, "I know what you are thinking of all this. It stirs such or such a memory. It strikes the chord that holds these thoughts or those." But she read as plainly now that this man who thought he loved her, whom she had grown

to feel she might one day love, had no such conception of a union of lives. To him marriage would mean a physical possession of a toy more or less valuable, more or less to be cherished or to be set under a glass case, whenever his real life, his real thoughts, his deeper self were stirred. These were to be kept for men – his mentally developed equals. She understood full well that if she could have said this to him he would have been shocked, would have resented such a contemptuous interpretation of what he truly believed to be a wholly respectful love, offered upon wholly respectful terms. But to her, it seemed the mere tossing down of a filbert to a pretty kitten, that it might amuse him for a few moments with its graceful antics. When he tired of the kitten, or bethought him of the serious duties of life, he could turn the key and count on finding the amusing little creature to play with again next day in case he cared to relax himself with a sight of its gambols. She resented such a view of the value of her life. She was humiliated and indignant. The perfectly apparent lack of comprehension on his part of any lapse of respect in attitude toward her, the entire unconsciousness of the insult to her whole nature, in his assumption of a divine right of individual growth and development to which she had no claim, stung her beyond all power of speech. The very fact that he had no comprehension of the affront himself, added to it its utterly hopeless feature. The love of a man offered on such terms is an insult, she said, over and over to herself; but aloud she said nothing.

She had heard, vaguely, through her tumult of feeling, his terms of endearment, his appeals to her tenderness and – alas! unfortunately for him – his apologies for having taken her to such a place. She became distinctly aware of these latter first and it steadied her. They had reached Washington Square.

"Yes, that revelation in Mulberry Street was a horrible shock to me," she said, looking at him for the first time since they had entered the carriage; "but, do you know, I think there are more shocking things than even that done in the name of love every day – things as heartless and offensively uncomprehending of what is fine and true in life as that wretched woman's conduct with the lifeless form of her baby."

He recognized a hard ring in her voice, but her eyes looked kind and gentle.

"How do you mean?" he asked, touching her hand as it lay on her empty purse in her lap.

"I don't believe I could ever make you understand what I mean, we are so hopelessly far apart," she said, a little sadly. "That an explanation is necessary – that is the hopeless part. That that poor woman did not comprehend that her conduct and callousness were shocking —*that* was the hopeless part. To make you understand what I mean would be like making her understand all the hundreds of awful things that her conduct meant to us. If it is not in one's nature to comprehend without words, then words are useless."

His vehement protests stirred her sympathy again.

"You say that love brings people near together. Do you know I am beginning to think that nothing could be a greater calamity than that? Drawn together by a love that rests on a physical basis for those who refuse to allow it root in a common sympathy and a community of thought it must fail sooner or later. A humbled acceptance of the crumbs of her husband's life, or a resentful endurance of it, may result from the accursed faithfulness or the pitiful dependence of wives, but surely – surely no greater calamity could befall her and no worse fate lie in wait for him."

Her lover stared at her, pained and puzzled. When they reached her door he grasped her hand.

"I thought you loved me last night, and I went away in an ecstasy of hope. Today – "

"Perhaps I do love you," she said; "but I do not respect you, because you do not respect me." He made a quick sound of dissent, but she checked him. "You do not respect womanhood; you only patronize women – you only patronize me. I could not give you a right to do that for life. Good-bye. Don't come in this time. Wait. Let us both think."

"Let us both think," he repeated, as he started down the street. "Think! Think what? I had no idea that Gertrude would be so utterly unreasonable. It is a girl's whim. She'll get over it, but it is deucedly uncomfortable while it lasts."

"Mamma," said Gertrude, when she reached her mother's pretty room on the third floor. "Mamma, do you suppose if a girl really and truly loved a man that she would stop to think whether he had a high or a low estimate of womanhood?"

The girl's mother looked up startled. She was quite familiar with what she had always termed the "superhumanly aged remarks" of her daughter, but the new turn they had taken surprised her.

"I don't believe she would, Gertrude. Why? Are you imagining yourself in love with some man who is not chivalrous toward women?" Mrs. Foster smiled at the mere idea of her daughter caring much for any man. She thought she had observed her too closely to make a mistake in the matter.

Gertrude evaded the first question.

"I once heard a very brilliant man say – what I did not then understand – that chivalry was always the prelude to imposition. I believe I don't care very especially for chivalry. Fair play is better, don't you think so?" She did not pause for a reply, but began taking off her long gloves.

"Which would you like best from papa, flattery or square-toed, honest truth?"

Her mother laughed.

"Gertrude, you are perfectly ridiculous. The institution of marriage, as now established, wouldn't hang together ten minutes if your square-toed, honest truth, as you call it, were to be tried between husbands and wives. Most wives are frightened nearly to death for fear they will become acquainted with the truth some day. They don't want it. They were not – built for it." Gertrude began to move about the room impatiently. Her mother smiled at her and went on: "Don't you look at it that way? No? Well, you are young yet. Wait until you've been married three years – "

The girl turned upon her with an indignant face. Then suddenly she threw her arms about her mother's neck.

"Poor mamma, poor mamma," she said. "Didn't you find out for three years *after?* How did you bear it? I should have committed suicide. I – "

"Oh, no you wouldn't!" said her mother, with a bitter little inflection. "They all talk that way. Girls all feel so, if they know enough to feel at all – to think at all. They rage and wear out their nerves – as you are doing now, heaven knows why – and the beloved husband calls a doctor and buys sweets and travels with the precious invalid, and never once suspects that he is at the bottom of the whole trouble. It never dawns upon him that what she is dying for is a real and loyal companionship, such as she had fondly dreamed of, and not at all for sea air. It doesn't enter his mind that she feels humiliated because she knows that a great part of his life is a sealed book to her, and that he wishes to keep it so."

She paused, and her daughter stroked her cheek. This was indeed a revelation to the girl. She had been wholly deceived by her mother's gay manner all these years. She was taking herself sharply to task now.

"But by and by when she succeeds in killing all her self-respect; when she makes up her mind that the case is hopeless, and that she must expect absolutely no frankness in life beyond the limits of conventional usage prescribed for purblind babies; after she arrives at the point where she discovers that her happiness is a pretty fiction built on air foundation – well, daughter, after that she – she strives to murder all that is in her beyond and above the petty simpleton she passes for – and she succeeds fairly well, doesn't she?"

There was a cynical smile on her lips, and she made an elaborate bow to her daughter.

"Oh, mamma, I beg your pardon!" exclaimed the girl, almost frightened. "I truly beg your pardon! If – you – I – "

Her mother looked steadily out of the window. Then she said, slowly, "How did you come to find all this out *before* you were married, child? Have I not done a mother's duty by you in keeping you in ignorance, so far as I could, of all the struggles and facts of life – of – "

The bitter tone was in her voice again. Gertrude was hurt by it, it was so full of self-reproach mingled with self-contempt. She slipped her arm about her mother's waist.

"Don't, mamma," she said. "Don't blame yourself like that. I'm sure you have always done the best possible – the – "

Her mother laughed, but the note was not pleasant.

"Yes, I always did the lady-like thing, – nothing. I floated with the tide. Take my advice, daughter, – float. If you don't, you'll only tire yourself trying to swim against a tide that is too strong for you and – and nothing will come of it. Nothing at all." The girl began to protest with the self-confidence of youth, but her mother went on. She had taken the bit in her teeth to-day and meant to run the whole race.

"Do you suppose I did not know about the Spillini family? About the thousands of Spillini families? Do you suppose I did not know that the rent of ten such families – their whole earnings for a year – would be spent on – on a pretty inlaid prayer-book like this?" She tapped the jeweled cross and turned it over on her lap. The girl's eyes were wide and almost fear-filled as she studied her handsome care-free mother in her new mood.

"Did you really suppose I did not know that this gem on the top of the cross is dyed with the life-blood of some poor wretch, and that this one represents the price of the honor of a starving girl?" She shivered, and the girl drew back. "Did you fancy me as ignorant and as – happy – as I have talked? Don't you know that it is the sole duty of a well-bred woman to be ignorant – and happy? Otherwise she is morbid!" She pronounced the word affectedly, and then laughed a bitter little laugh.

"Don't, mamma," said the girl, again. "I quite understand now, quite – " She laid her head on her mother's bosom and was silent. Presently she felt a tear drop on her hair. She put her hand up to her mother's cheek and stroked it.

"The game went against you, didn't it, mamma?" she said softly. "And you were not to blame." She felt a little shiver run over her mother's frame and a sob crushed back bravely that hurt her like a knife. Presently two hands lifted the girl's face.

"You don't despise me, daughter? In my position the price of a woman's peace is the price of her own self-respect. I did not lose the game. I gave it up!"

Gertrude kissed her on eyes and lips. "Poor mamma, poor mamma," she said softly, "I wonder if I shall do the same!" For the first time since she entered the room, the daughter appeared to appeal for, rather than to offer, sympathy and strength. Her mother was quick to respond.

"If you never learn to love anyone very much, daughter, you may hope to keep your self-respect. If you do you will sell it all – for his. And – and – "

"Lose both at last?" asked the girl, hoarsely. Katherine Foster closed her eyes for a moment to shut out her daughter's face.

"Will you ever have had his?" she asked, with her eyes still closed. "Do men ever truly respect their dupes or their inferiors? Do you truly respect anyone to whom you are willing to deny truth, honor, dignity? Is it respect, or only a tender, pitying love we offer an intellectual cripple – one whose mental life we know to be, and desire to keep, distinctly below our own? Do – " She opened her eyes and they rested on an onyx clock. She laughed. "Come, daughter," she said, "it is time to dress for the Historical Club's annual dinner. You know I am one of the guests of honor to-day. They honor me so truly that I am not permitted to join the club or be ranked as a useful member at all. My work they accept – flatter me by praising in a lofty way; but I can have no status with them as an historian – I am a woman!"

Gertrude sprang to her feet. Her eyes flashed fire.

"Don't go! I wouldn't allow them to – " The door opened softly. Mr. Foster's face appeared.

"Why, dearie, aren't you ready for the Historical Club? I wouldn't have you late for anything. You know I, as the vice-president, am to respond to the toast on, 'Woman: the highest creation, and God's dearest gift to mankind.' It wouldn't look well if you were not there."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.