

ЭДИТ НЕСБИТ

THE

INCOMPLETE

AMORIST

Эдит Несбит

The Incomplete Amorist

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E. Nesbit

The Incomplete Amorist

To

Richard Reynolds and Justus Miles Forman

*"Faire naître un désir, le nourrir, le développer, le grandir, le satisfaire,
c'est un poème tout entier."*

—*Balzac.*

PEOPLE OF THE STORY

Eustace Vernon.
Betty Desmond
The Rev. Cecil Underwood
Miss Julia Desmond
Robert Temple
Lady St. Craye
Miss Voscoe
Madame Chevillon
Paula Conway
Mimi Chantal
Village Matrons, Concierges, Art Students, Etc.
The Incomplete Amorist
The Girl
Her Step-Father
Her Aunt
The Other Man
The Other Woman
The Art Student
The Inn-Keeper at Crez
A Soul in Hell
A Model

Book 1.—The Girl

CHAPTER I. THE INEVITABLE

"No. The chemises aren't cut out. I haven't had time. There are enough shirts to go on with, aren't there, Mrs. James?" said Betty.

"We can make do for this afternoon, Miss, but the men they're getting blown out with shirts. It's the children's shifts as we can't make shift without much longer." Mrs. James, habitually doleful, punctuated her speech with sniffs.

"That's a joke, Mrs. James," said Betty. "How clever you are!"

"I try to be what's fitting," said Mrs. James, complacently.

"Talk of fitting," said Betty, "If you like I'll fit on that black bodice for you, Mrs. Symes. If the other ladies don't mind waiting for the reading a little bit."

"I'd as lief talk as read, myself," said a red-faced sandy-haired woman; "books ain't what they was in my young days."

"If it's the same to you, Miss," said Mrs. Symes in a thick rich voice, "I'll not be tried on afore a room full. If we are poor we can all be clean's what I say, and I keeps my unders as I keeps my outside. But not before persons as has real imitation lace on their petticoat bodies. I see them when I was a-nursing her with her fourth. No, Miss, and thanking you kindly, but begging your pardon all the same."

"Don't mention it," said Betty absently. "Oh, Mrs. Smith, you can't have lost your thimble already. Why what's that you've got in your mouth?"

"So it is!" Mrs. Smith's face beamed at the gratifying coincidence. "It always was my habit, from a child, to put things there for safety."

"These cheap thimbles ain't fit to put in your mouth, no more than coppers," said Mrs. James, her mouth full of pins.

"Oh, nothing hurts you if you like it," said Betty recklessly. She had been reading the works of Mr. G.K. Chesterton.

A shocked murmur arose.

"Oh, Miss, what about the publy kows?" said Mrs. Symes heavily. The others nodded acquiescence.

"Don't you think we might have a window open?" said Betty. The May sunshine beat on the schoolroom windows. The room, crowded with the stout members of the "Mother's Meeting and Mutual Clothing Club," was stuffy, unbearable.

A murmur arose far more shocked than the first.

"I was just a-goin' to say why not close the door, that being what doors is made for, after all," said Mrs. Symes. "I feel a sort of draught a-creeping up my legs as it is."

The door was shut.

"You can't be too careful," said the red-faced woman; "we never know what a chill mayn't bring forth. My cousin's sister-in-law, she had twins, and her aunt come in and says she, 'You're a bit stuffy here, ain't you?' and with that she opens the window a crack,—not meaning no harm, Miss,—as it might be you. And within a year that poor unfortunate woman she popped off, when least expected. Gas ulsters, the doctor said. Which it's what you call chills, if you're a doctor and can't speak plain."

"My poor grandmother come to her end the same way," said Mrs. Smith, "only with her it was the Bible reader as didn't shut the door through being so set on shewing off her reading. And

my granny, a clot of blood went to her brain, and her brain went to her head and she was a corpse inside of fifty minutes."

Every woman in the room was waiting, feverishly alert, for the pause that should allow her to begin her own detailed narrative of disease.

Mrs. James was easily first in the competition.

"Them quick deaths," she said, "is sometimes a blessing in disguise to both parties concerned. My poor husband—years upon years he lingered, and he had a bad leg—talk of bad legs, I wish you could all have seen it," she added generously.

"Was it the kind that keeps all on a-breaking out?" asked Mrs. Symes hastily, "because my youngest brother had a leg that nothing couldn't stop. Break out it would do what they might. I'm sure the bandages I've took off him in a morning—"

Betty clapped her hands.

It was the signal that the reading was going to begin, and the matrons looked at her resentfully. What call had people to start reading when the talk was flowing so free and pleasant?

Betty, rather pale, began: "This is a story about a little boy called Wee Willie Winkie."

"I call that a silly sort of name," whispered Mrs. Smith.

"Did he make a good end, Miss?" asked Mrs. James plaintively.

"You'll see," said Betty.

"I like it best when they dies forgiving of everybody and singing hymns to the last."

"And when they says, 'Mother, I shall meet you 'ereafter in the better land'—that's what makes you cry so pleasant."

"Do you want me to read or not?" asked Betty in desperation.

"Yes, Miss, yes," hummed the voices heavy and shrill.

"It's her hobby, poor young thing," whispered Mrs. Smith, "we all 'as 'em. My own is a light cake to my tea, and always was. Ush."

Betty read.

When the mothers had wordily gone, she threw open the windows, propped the door wide with a chair, and went to tea. She had it alone.

"Your Pa's out a-parishing," said Letitia, bumping down the tray in front of her.

"That's a let-off anyhow," said Betty to herself, and she propped up a Stevenson against the tea-pot.

After tea parishioners strolled up by ones and twos and threes to change their books at the Vicarage lending library. The books were covered with black calico, and smelt of rooms whose windows were never opened.

When she had washed the smell of the books off, she did her hair very carefully in a new way that seemed becoming, and went down to supper.

Her step-father only spoke once during the meal; he was luxuriating in the thought of the *Summa Theologiae* of Aquinas in leather still brown and beautiful, which he had providentially discovered in the wash-house of an ailing Parishioner. When he did speak he said:

"How extremely untidy your hair is, Lizzie. I wish you would take more pains with your appearance."

When he had withdrawn to his books she covered three new volumes for the library: the black came off on her hands, but anyway it was clean dirt.

She went to bed early.

"And that's my life," she said as she blew out the candle.

Said Mrs. James to Mrs. Symes over the last and strongest cup of tea:

"Miss Betty's ailing a bit, I fancy. Looked a bit peaky, it seemed to me. I shouldn't wonder if she was to go off in a decline like her father did."

"It wasn't no decline," said Mrs. Symes, dropping her thick voice, "'e was cut off in the midst of his wicked courses. A judgment if ever there was one."

Betty's blameless father had been killed in the hunting field.

"I daresay she takes after him, only being a female it all turns to her being pernickety in her food and allus wanting the windows open. And mark my words, it may turn into a decline yet, Mrs. Symes, my dear."

Mrs. Symes laughed fatly. "That ain't no decline," she said, "you take it from me. What Miss Betty wants is a young man. It is but nature after all, and what we must all come to, gentle or simple. Give her a young man to walk out with and you'll see the difference. Decline indeed! A young man's what she wants. And if I know anything of gells and their ways she'll get one, no matter how close the old chap keeps her."

Mrs. Symes was not so wrong as the delicate minded may suppose.

Betty did indeed desire to fall in love. In all the story books the main interest of the heroine's career began with that event. Not that she voiced the desire to herself. Only once she voiced it in her prayers.

"Oh, God," she said, "do please let something happen!"

That was all. A girl had her little reticences, even with herself, even with her Creator.

Next morning she planned to go sketching; but no, there were three more detestable books to be put into nasty little black cotton coats, the drawing-room to be dusted—all the hateful china—the peas to be shelled for dinner.

She shelled the peas in the garden. It was a beautiful green garden, and lovers could have walked very happily down the lilac-bordered paths.

"Oh, how sick I am of it all!" said Betty. She would not say, even to herself, that what she hated was the frame without the picture.

As she carried in the peas she passed the open window of the study where, among shelves of dull books and dusty pamphlets, her step-father had as usual forgotten his sermon in a chain of references to the Fathers. Betty saw his thin white hairs, his hard narrow face and tight mouth, the hands yellow and claw-like that gripped the thin vellum folio.

"I suppose even he was young once," she said, "but I'm sure he doesn't remember it."

He saw her go by, young and alert in the sunshine, and the May air stirred the curtains. He looked vaguely about him, unlocked a drawer in his writing-table, and took out a leather case. He gazed long at the face within, a young bright face with long ringlets above the formal bodice and sloping shoulders of the sixties.

"Well, well," he said, "well, well," locked it away, and went back to *De Poenis Parvulorum*.

"I *will* go out," said Betty, as she parted with the peas. "I don't care!"

It was not worth while to change one's frock. Even when one was properly dressed, at rare local garden-party or flower-show, one never met anyone that mattered.

She fetched her sketching things. At eighteen one does so pathetically try to feed the burgeoning life with the husks of polite accomplishment. She insisted on withholding from the clutches of the Parish the time to practise Beethoven and Sullivan for an hour daily. Daily, for half an hour, she read an improving book. Just now it was The French Revolution, and Betty thought it would last till she was sixty. She tried to read French and German—Télémaque and Maria Stuart. She fully intended to become all that a cultured young woman should be. But self-improvement is a dull game when there is no one to applaud your score.

What the gardener called the gravel path was black earth, moss-grown. Very pretty, but Betty thought it shabby.

It was soft and cool, though, to the feet, and the dust of the white road sparkled like diamond dust in the sunlight.

She crossed the road and passed through the swing gate into the park, where the grass was up for hay, with red sorrel and buttercups and tall daisies and feathery flowered grasses, their colours all tangled and blended together like ravelled ends of silk on the wrong side of some great square of tapestry. Here and there in the wide sweep of tall growing things stood a tree—a may-tree shining like silver, a laburnum like fine gold. There were horse-chestnuts whose spires of blossom shewed like fat candles on a Christmas tree for giant children. And the sun was warm and the tree shadows black on the grass.

Betty told herself that she hated it all. She took the narrow path—the grasses met above her feet—crossed the park, and reached the rabbit warren, where the chalk breaks through the thin dry turf, and the wild thyme grows thick.

A may bush, overhanging a little precipice of chalk, caught her eye. A wild rose was tangled round it. It was, without doubt, the most difficult composition within sight.

"I will sketch that," said Eighteen, confidently.

For half an hour she busily blotted and washed and niggled. Then she became aware that she no longer had the rabbit warren to herself.

"And he's an artist, too!" said Betty. "How awfully interesting! I wish I could see his face."

But this his slouched Panama forbade. He was in white, the sleeve and breast of his painting jacket smeared with many colours; he had a camp-stool and an easel and looked, she could not help feeling, much more like a real artist than she did, hunched up as she was on a little mound of turf, in her shabby pink gown and that hateful garden hat with last year's dusty flattened roses in it.

She went on sketching with feverish unskilled fingers, and a pulse that had actually quickened its beat.

She cast little glances at him as often as she dared. He was certainly a real artist. She could tell that by the very way he held his palette. Was he staying with people about there? Should she meet him? Would they ever be introduced to each other?

"Oh, what a pity," said Betty from the heart, "that we aren't introduced *now*!"

Her sketch grew worse and worse.

"It's no good," she said. "I can't do anything with it."

She glanced at him. He had pushed back the hat. She saw quite plainly that he was smiling—a very little, but he *was* smiling. Also he was looking at her, and across the fifteen yards of gray turf their eyes met. And she knew that he knew that this was not her first glance at him.

She paled with fury.

"He has been watching me all the time! He is making fun of me. He knows I can't sketch. Of course he can see it by the silly way I hold everything." She ran her knife around her sketch, detached it, and tore it across and across.

The stranger raised his hat and called eagerly.

"I say—please don't move for a minute. Do you mind? I've just got your pink gown. It's coming beautifully. Between brother artists—Do, please! Do sit still and go on sketching—Ah, do!"

Betty's attitude petrified instantly. She held a brush in her hand, and she looked down at her block. But she did not go on sketching. She sat rigid and three delicious words rang in her ears: "Between brother artists!" How very nice of him! He hadn't been making fun, after all. But wasn't it rather impertinent of him to put her in his picture without asking her? Well, it wasn't she but her pink gown he wanted. And "between brother artists!" Betty drew a long breath.

"It's no use," he called; "don't bother any more. The pose is gone."

She rose to her feet and he came towards her.

"Let me see the sketch," he said. "Why did you tear it up?" He fitted the pieces together. "Why, it's quite good. You ought to study in Paris," he added idly.

She took the torn papers from his hand with a bow, and turned to go.

"Don't go," he said. "You're not going? Don't you want to look at my picture?"

Now Betty knew as well as you do that you musn't speak to people unless you've been introduced to them. But the phrase "brother artists" had played ninepins with her little conventions.

"Thank you. I should like to very much," said Betty. "I don't care," she said to herself, "and besides, it's not as if he were a young man, or a tourist, or anything. He must be ever so old—thirty; I shouldn't wonder if he was thirty-five."

When she saw the picture she merely said, "Oh," and stood at gaze. For it *was* a picture—a picture that, seen in foreign lands, might well make one sick with longing for the dry turf and the pale dog violets that love the chalk, for the hum of the bees and the scent of the thyme. He had chosen the bold sweep of the brown upland against the sky, and low to the left, where the line broke, the dim violet of the Kentish hills. In the green foreground the pink figure, just roughly blocked in, was blocked in by a hand that knew its trade, and was artist to the tips of its fingers.

"Oh!" said Betty again.

"Yes," said he, "I think I've got it this time. I think it'll make a hole in the wall, eh? Yes; it is good!"

"Yes," said Betty; "oh, yes."

"Do you often go a-sketching?" he asked.

"How modest he is," thought Betty; "he changes the subject so as not to seem to want to be praised."

Aloud she answered with shy fluttered earnestness: "Yes—no. I don't know. Sometimes."

His lips were grave, but there was the light behind his eyes that goes with a smile.

"What unnecessary agitation!" he was thinking. "Poor little thing, I suppose she's never seen a man before. Oh, these country girls!" Aloud he was saying: "This is such a perfect country. You ought to sketch every day."

"I've no one to teach me," said Betty, innocently phrasing a long-felt want.

The man raised his eyebrows. "Well, after that, here goes!" he said to himself. "I wish you'd let *me* teach you," he said to her, beginning to put his traps together.

"Oh, I didn't mean that," said Betty in real distress. What would he think of her? How greedy and grasping she must seem! "I didn't mean that at all!"

"No; but I do," he said.

"But you're a great artist," said Betty, watching him with clasped hands. "I suppose it would be—I mean—don't you know, we're not rich, and I suppose your lessons are worth pounds and pounds."

"I don't give lessons for money," his lips tightened—"only for love."

"That means nothing, doesn't it?" she said, and flushed to find herself on the defensive feebly against—nothing.

"At tennis, yes," he said, and to himself he added: "*Vieux jeu*, my dear, but you did it very prettily."

"But I couldn't let you give me lessons for nothing."

"Why not?" he asked. And his calmness made Betty feel ashamed and sordid.

"I don't know," she answered tremulously, "but I don't think my step-father would want me to."

"You think it would annoy him?"

"I'm sure it would, if he knew about it."

Betty was thinking how little her step-father had ever cared to know of her and her interests. But the man caught the ball as he saw it.

"Then why let him know?" was the next move; and it seemed to him that Betty's move of rejoinder came with a readiness born of some practice at the game.

"Oh," she said innocently, "I never thought of that! But wouldn't it be wrong?"

"She's got the whole thing stereotyped. But it's dainty type anyhow," he thought. "Of course it wouldn't be wrong," he said. "It wouldn't hurt him. Don't you know that nothing's wrong unless it hurts somebody?"

"Yes," she said eagerly, "that's what I think. But all the same it doesn't seem fair that you should take all that trouble for me and get nothing in return."

"Well played! We're getting on!" he thought, and added aloud: "But perhaps I shan't get nothing in return?"

Her eyes dropped over the wonderful thought that perhaps she might do something for *him*. But what? She looked straight at him, and the innocent appeal sent a tiny thorn of doubt through his armour of complacency. Was she—after all? No, no novice could play the game so well. And yet—

"I would do anything I could, you know," she said eagerly, "because it is so awfully kind of you, and I do so want to be able to paint. What can I do?"

"What can you do?" he asked, and brought his face a little nearer to the pretty flushed freckled face under the shabby hat. Her eyes met his. He felt a quick relenting, and drew back.

"Well, for one thing you could let me paint your portrait."

Betty was silent.

"Come, play up, you little duffer," he urged inwardly.

When she spoke her voice trembled.

"I don't know how to thank you," she said.

"And you will?"

"Oh, I will; indeed I will!"

"How good and sweet you are," he said. Then there was a silence.

Betty tightened the strap of her sketching things and said:

"I think I ought to go home now."

He had the appropriate counter ready.

"Ah, don't go yet!" he said; "let us sit down; see, that bank is quite in the shade now, and tell me—"

"Tell you what?" she asked, for he had made the artistic pause.

"Oh, anything—anything about yourself."

Betty was as incapable of flight as any bird on a limed twig.

She walked beside him to the bank, and sat down at his bidding, and he lay at her feet, looking up into her eyes. He asked idle questions: she answered them with a conscientious tremulous truthfulness that showed to him as the most finished art. And it seemed to him a very fortunate accident that he should have found here, in this unlikely spot, so accomplished a player at his favorite game. Yet it was the variety of his game for which he cared least. He did not greatly relish a skilled adversary. Betty told him nervously and in words ill-chosen everything that he asked to know, but all the while the undercurrent of questions rang strong within her—"When is he to teach me? Where? How?"—so that when at last there was left but the bare fifteen minutes needed to get one home in time for the midday dinner she said abruptly:

"And when shall I see you again?"

"You take the words out of my mouth," said he. And indeed she had. "She has no *finesse* yet," he told himself. "She might have left that move to me."

"The lessons, you know," said Betty, "and, and the picture, if you really do want to do it."

"If I want to do it!—You know I want to do it. Yes. It's like the nursery game. How, when and where? Well, as to the how—I can paint and you can learn. The where—there's a circle of pines in the wood here. You know it? A sort of giant fairy ring?"

She did know it.

"Now for the when—and that's the most important. I should like to paint you in the early morning when the day is young and innocent and beautiful—like—like—" He was careful to break off in a most natural seeming embarrassment. "That's a bit thick, but she'll swallow it all right. Gone down? Right!" he told himself.

"I could come out at six if you liked, or—or five," said Betty, humbly anxious to do her part.

He was almost shocked. "My good child," he told her silently, "someone really ought to teach you not to do all the running. You don't give a man a chance."

"Then will you meet me here to-morrow at six?" he said. "You won't disappoint me, will you?" he added tenderly.

"No," said downright Betty, "I'll be sure to come. But not to-morrow," she added with undisguised regret; "to-morrow's Sunday."

"Monday then," said he, "and good-bye."

"Good-bye, and—oh, I don't know how to thank you!"

"I'm very much mistaken if you don't," he said as he stood bareheaded, watching the pink gown out of sight.

"Well, adventures to the adventurous! A clergyman's daughter, too! I might have known it."

CHAPTER II. THE IRRESISTIBLE

Betty had to run all the way home, and then she was late for dinner. Her step-father's dry face and dusty clothes, the solid comfort of the mahogany furnished dining room, the warm wet scent of mutton,—these seemed needed to wake her from what was, when she had awakened, a dream—the open sky, the sweet air of the May fields and *Him*. Already the stranger was Him to Betty. But, then, she did not know his name.

She slipped into her place at the foot of the long white dining table, a table built to serve a dozen guests, and where no guests ever sat, save rarely a curate or two, and more rarely even, an aunt.

"You are late again, Lizzie," said her step-father.

"Yes, Father," said she, trying to hide her hands and the fact that she had not had time to wash them. A long streak of burnt sienna marked one finger, and her nails had little slices of various colours in them. Her paint-box was always hard to open.

Usually Mr. Underwood saw nothing. But when he saw anything he saw everything. His eye was caught by the green smudge on her pink sleeve.

"I wish you would contrive to keep yourself clean, or else wear a pinafore," he said.

Betty flushed scarlet.

"I'm very sorry," she said, "but it's only water colour. It will wash out."

"You are nearly twenty, are you not?" the Vicar inquired with the dry smile that always infuriated his step-daughter. How was she to know that it was the only smile he knew, and that smiles of any sort had long grown difficult to him?

"Eighteen," she said.

"It is almost time you began to think about being a lady."

This was badinage. No failures had taught the Reverend Cecil that his step-daughter had an ideal of him in which badinage had no place. She merely supposed that he wished to be disagreeable.

She kept a mutinous silence. The old man sighed. It is one's duty to correct the faults of one's child, but it is not pleasant. The Reverend Cecil had not the habit of shirking any duty because he happened to dislike it.

The mutton was taken away.

Betty, her whole being transfigured by the emotions of the morning, stirred the stewed rhubarb on her plate. She felt rising in her a sort of wild forlorn courage. Why shouldn't she speak out? Her step-father couldn't hate her more than he did, whatever she said. He might even be glad to be rid of her. She spoke suddenly and rather loudly before she knew that she had meant to speak at all.

"Father," she said, "I wish you'd let me go to Paris and study art. Not now," she hurriedly explained with a sudden vision of being taken at her word and packed off to France before six o'clock on Monday morning, "not now, but later. In the autumn perhaps. I would work very hard. I wish you'd let me."

He put on his spectacles and looked at her with wistful kindness. She read in his glance only a frozen contempt.

"No, my child," he said. "Paris is a sink of iniquity. I passed a week there once, many years ago. It was at the time of the Great Exhibition. You are growing discontented, Lizzie. Work is the cure for that. Mrs. Symes tells me that the chemises for the Mother's sewing meetings are not cut out yet."

"I'll cut them out to-day. They haven't finished the shirts yet, anyway," said Betty; "but I do wish you'd just think about Paris, or even London."

"You can have lessons at home if you like. I believe there are excellent drawing-mistresses in Sevenoaks. Mrs. Symes was recommending one of them to me only the other day. With certificates from the High School I seem to remember her saying."

"But that's not what I want," said Betty with a courage that surprised her as much as it surprised him. "Don't you see, Father? One gets older every day, and presently I shall be quite old, and I shan't have been anywhere or seen anything."

He thought he laughed indulgently at the folly of youth. She thought his laugh the most contemptuous, the cruelest sound in the world. "He doesn't deserve that I should tell him about Him," she thought, "and I won't. I don't care!"

"No, no," he said, "no, no, no. The home is the place for girls. The safe quiet shelter of the home. Perhaps some day your husband will take you abroad for a fortnight now and then. If you manage to get a husband, that is."

He had seen, through his spectacles, her flushed prettiness, and old as he was he remembered well enough how a face like hers would seem to a young man's eyes. Of course she would get a husband? So he spoke in kindly irony. And she hated him for a wanton insult.

"Try to do your duty in that state of life to which you are called," he went on: "occupy yourself with music and books and the details of housekeeping. No, don't have my study turned out," he added in haste, remembering how his advice about household details had been followed when last he gave it. "Don't be a discontented child. Go and cut out the nice little chemises." This seemed to him almost a touch of kindly humour, and he went back to Augustine, pleased with himself.

Betty set her teeth and went, black rage in her heart, to cut out the hateful little chemises.

She dragged the great roll of evil smelling grayish unbleached calico from the schoolroom cupboard and heaved it on to the table. It was very heavy. The scissors were blunt and left deep red-blue indentations on finger and thumb. She was rather pleased that the scissors hurt so much.

"Father doesn't care a single bit, he hates me," she said, "and I hate him. Oh, I do."

She would not think of the morning. Not now, with this fire of impotent resentment burning in her, would she take out those memories and look at them. Those were not thoughts to be dragged through the litter of unbleached cotton cuttings. She worked on doggedly, completed the tale of hot heavy little garments, gathered up the pieces into the waste-paper basket and put away the roll.

Not till the paint had been washed from her hands, and the crumbled print dress exchanged for a quite respectable muslin did she consciously allow the morning's memories to come out and meet her eyes. Then she went down to the arbour where she had shelled peas only that morning.

"It seems years and years ago," she said. And sitting there, she slowly and carefully went over everything. What he had said, what she had said. There were some things she could not quite remember. But she remembered enough. "Brother artists" were the words she said oftenest to herself, but the words that sank themselves were, "young and innocent and beautiful like—like—"

"But he couldn't have meant me, of course," she told herself.

And on Monday she would see him again,—and he would give her a lesson!

Sunday was incredibly wearisome. Her Sunday-school class had never been so tiresome nor so soaked in hair-oil. In church she was shocked to find herself watching, from her pew in the chancel, the entry of late comers—of whom He was not one. No afternoon had ever been half so long. She wrote up her diary. Thursday and Friday were quickly chronicled. At "Saturday" she paused long, pen in hand, and then wrote very quickly: "I went out sketching and met a gentleman, an artist. He was very kind and is going to teach me to paint and he is going to paint my portrait. I do not like him particularly. He is rather old, and not really good-looking. I shall not tell father, because he is simply hateful to me. I am going to meet this artist at 6 to-morrow. It will be dreadful having to get up so early. I almost wish I hadn't said I would go. It will be such a bother."

Then she hid the diary in a drawer, under her confirmation dress and veil, and locked the drawer carefully.

He was not at church in the evening either. He had thought of it, but decided that it was too much trouble to get into decent clothes.

"I shall see her soon enough," he thought, "curse my impulsive generosity! Six o'clock, forsooth, and all to please a clergyman's daughter."

She came back from church with tired steps.

"I do hope I'm not going to be ill," she said. "I feel so odd, just as if I hadn't had anything to eat for days,—and yet I'm not a bit hungry either. I daresay I shan't wake up in time to get there by six."

She was awake before five.

She woke with a flutter of the heart. What was it? Had anything happened? Was anyone ill? Then she recognized that she was not unhappy. And she felt more than ever as though it were days since she had had anything to eat.

"Oh, dear," said Betty, jumping out of bed. "I'm going out, to meet Him, and have a drawing-lesson!"

She dressed quickly. It was too soon to start. Not for anything must she be first at the rendezvous, even though it were only for a drawing-lesson. That "only" pulled her up sharply.

When she was dressed she dug out the diary and wrote:

"This is terrible. Is it possible that I have fallen in love with him? I don't know. 'Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?' It is a most frightful tragedy to happen to one, and at my age too. What a long life of loneliness stretches in front of me! For of course he could never care for me. And if this *is* love—well, it will be once and forever with me, I know.

"That's my nature, I'm afraid. But I'm not,—I can't be. But I never felt so unlike myself. I feel a sort of calm exultation, as if something very wonderful was very near me. Dear Diary, what a comfort it is to have you to tell everything to!"

It seemed to her that she must certainly be late. She had to creep down the front stairs so very slowly and softly in order that she might not awaken her step-father. She had so carefully and silently to unfasten a window and creep out, to close the window again, without noise, lest the maids should hear and come running to see why their young mistress was out of her bed at that hour. She had to go on tiptoe through the shrubbery and out through the church yard. One could climb its wall, and get into the Park that way, so as not to meet labourers on the road who would stare to see her alone so early and perhaps follow her.

Once in the park she was safe. Her shoes and her skirts were wet with dew. She made haste. She did not want to keep him waiting.

But she was first at the rendezvous, after all.

She sat down on the carpet of pine needles. How pretty the early morning was. The sunlight was quite different from the evening sunlight, so much lighter and brighter. And the shadows were different. She tried to settle on a point of view for her sketch, the sketch he was to help her with.

Her thoughts went back to what she had written in her diary. If that *should* be true she must be very, very careful. He must never guess it, never. She would be very cold and distant and polite. Not hail-fellow well-met with a "brother artist," like she had been yesterday. It was all very difficult indeed. Even if it really did turn out to be true, if the wonderful thing had happened to her, if she really was in love she would not try a bit to make him like her. That would be forward and "horrid." She would never try to attract any man. Those things must come of themselves or not at all.

She arranged her skirt in more effective folds, and wondered how it would look as one came up the woodland path. She thought it would look rather picturesque. It was a nice heliotrope colour. It would look like a giant Parma violet against the dark green background. She hoped her hair was tidy. And that her hat was not very crooked. However little one desires to attract, one may at least wish one's hat to be straight.

She looked for the twentieth time at her watch, the serviceable silver watch that had been her mother's. Half-past six, and he had not come.

Well, when he did come she would pretend she had only just got there. Or how would it be if she gave up being a Parma violet and went a little way down the path and then turned back when she heard him coming? She walked away a dozen yards and stood waiting. But he did not come. Was it possible that he was not coming? Was he ill—lying uncared for at the Peal of Bells in the village, with no one to smooth his pillow or put eau-de-cologne on his head?

She walked a hundred yards or so towards the village on the spur of this thought.

Or perhaps he had come by another way to the trysting place? That thought drove her back. He was not there.

Well, she would not stay any longer. She would just go away, and come back ever so much later, and let him have a taste of waiting. She had had her share, she told herself, as she almost ran from the spot. She stopped suddenly. But suppose he did *not* wait? She went slowly back.

She sat down again, schooled herself to patience.

What an idiot she had been! Like any school-girl. Of course he had never meant to come. Why should he? That page in her diary called out to her to come home and burn it. Care for him indeed! Not she! Why she hadn't exchanged ten words with the man!

"But I knew it was all nonsense when I wrote it," she said. "I only just put it down to see what it would look like."

Mr. Eustace Vernon roused himself, and yawned.

"It's got to be done, I suppose. Buck up,—you'll feel better after your bath! Jove! Seven o'clock. Will she have waited? She's a keen player if she has. It's just worth trying, I suppose."

The church clock struck the half-hour as he turned into the wood. Something palely violet came towards him.

"So you *are* here," he said. "Where's the pink frock?"

"It's—it's going to the wash," said a stiff and stifled voice. "I'm sorry I couldn't get here at six. I hope you didn't wait long?"

"Not very long," he said, smiling; "but—Great Heavens, what on earth is the matter?"

"Nothing," she said.

"But you've been—you are—"

"I'm not," she said defiantly,—"*besides*, I've got neuralgia. It always makes me look like that."

"My Aunt!" he thought. "Then she *was* here at six and—she's been crying because I wasn't and—oh, where are we?" "I'm so sorry you've got neuralgia," he said gently, "but I'm awfully glad you didn't get here at six. Because my watch was wrong and I've only just got here, and I should never have forgiven myself if you'd waited for me a single minute. Is the neuralgia better now?"

"Yes," she said, smiling faintly, "much better. It was rather sharp while it lasted, though."

"Yes," he said, "I see it was. I am so glad you did come. But I was so certain you wouldn't that I didn't bring any of my traps. So we can't begin the picture to-day. Will you start a sketch, or is your neuralgia too bad?"

He knew it would be: and it was.

So they merely sat on the pine carpet and talked till it was time for her to go back to the late Rectory breakfast. They told each other their names that day. Betty talked very carefully. It was most important that he should think well of her. Her manner had changed, as she had promised herself it should do if she found she cared for him. Now she was with him she knew, of course, that she did not care at all. What had made her so wretched—no, so angry that she had actually cried, was simply the idea that she had been made a fool of. That she had kept the tryst and he hadn't. Now he had come she was quite calm. She did not care in the least.

He was saying to himself: "I'm not often wrong, but I was off the line yesterday. All that doesn't count. We take a fresh deal and start fair. She doesn't know the game, *mais elle a des moyens*. She's never played the game before. And she cried because I didn't turn up. And so I'm the first—think of

it, if you please—absolutely the first one! Well: it doesn't detract from the interest of the game. It's quite a different game and requires more skill. But not more than I have, perhaps."

They parted with another tryst set for the next morning. The brother artist note had been skilfully kept vibrating.

Betty was sure that she should never have any feeling for him but mere friendliness. She was glad of that. It must be dreadful to be really in love. So unsettling.

CHAPTER III. VOLUNTARY

Mr. Eustace Vernon is not by any error to be imagined as a villain of the deepest dye, coldly planning to bring misery to a simple village maiden for his own selfish pleasure. Not at all. As he himself would have put it, he meant no harm to the girl. He was a master of two arts, and to these he had devoted himself wholly. One was the art of painting. But one cannot paint for all the hours there are. In the intervals of painting Vernon always sought to exercise his other art. One is limited, of course, by the possibilities, but he liked to have always at least one love affair on hand. And just now there were none—none at least possessing the one charm that irresistibly drew him—newness. The one or two affairs that dragged on merely meant letter writing, and he hated writing letters almost as much as he hated reading them.

The country had been unfortunately barren of interest until his eyes fell on that sketching figure in the pink dress. For he respected one of his arts no less than the other, and would as soon have thought of painting a vulgar picture as of undertaking a vulgar love-affair. He was no pavement artist. Nor did he degrade his art by caricatures drawn in hotel bars. Dairy maids did not delight him, and the mood was rare with him in which one finds anything to say to a little milliner. He wanted the means, not the end, and was at one with the unknown sage who said: "The love of pleasure spoils the pleasure of love."

There is a gift, less rare than is supposed, of wiping the slate clean of memories, and beginning all over again: a certain virginity of soul that makes each new kiss the first kiss, each new love the only love. This gift was Vernon's, and he had cultivated it so earnestly, so delicately, that except in certain moods when he lost his temper, and with it his control of his impulses, he was able to bring even to a conservatory flirtation something of the fresh emotion of a schoolboy in love.

Betty's awkwardnesses, which he took for advances, had chilled him a little, though less than they would have done had not one of the evil-tempered moods been on him.

He had dreaded lest the affair should advance too quickly. His own taste was for the first steps in an affair of the heart, the delicate doubts, the planned misunderstandings. He did not question his own ability to conduct the affair capably from start to finish, but he hated to skip the dainty preliminaries. He had feared that with Betty he should have to skip them, for he knew that it is only in their first love affairs that women have the patience to watch the flower unfold itself. He himself was of infinite patience in that pastime. He bit his lip and struck with his cane at the buttercup heads. He had made a wretched beginning, with his "good and sweet," his "young and innocent and beautiful like—like." If the girl had been a shade less innocent the whole business would have been muffed—muffed hopelessly.

To-morrow he would be there early. A ship of promise should be—not launched—that was weeks away. The first timbers should be felled to build a ship to carry him, and her too, of course, a little way towards the enchanted islands.

He knew the sea well, and it would be pleasant to steer on it one to whom it was all new—all, all.

"Dear little girl," he said, "I don't suppose she has ever even thought of love."

He was not in love with her, but he meant to be. He carefully thought of her all that day, of her hair, her eyes, her hands; her hands were really beautiful—small, dimpled and well-shaped—not the hands he loved best, those were long and very slender,—but still beautiful. And before he went to bed he wrote a little poem, to encourage himself:

Yes. I have loved before; I know
This longing that invades my days,
This shape that haunts life's
busy ways I know since long and long ago.
This starry mystery of delight
That floats across my eager
eyes, This pain that makes earth Paradise,
These magic songs of day and night,
I know them for the
things they are: A passing pain, a longing fleet,
A shape that soon I shall not meet,
A fading dream of

veil and star. Yet, even as my lips proclaim
The wisdom that the years have lent,
Your absence is joy's banishment
And life's one music is your name.
I love you to the heart's hid core:
Those other loves? How can one learn
From marshlights how the great fires burn?
Ah, no—I never loved before!

When he read it through he entitled it, "The Veil of Maya," so that it might pretend to have no personal application.

After that more than ever rankled the memory of that first morning.

"How could I?" he asked himself. "I must indeed have been in a gross mood. One seems sometimes to act outside oneself altogether. Temporary possession by some brutal ancestor perhaps. Well, it's not too late."

Next morning he worked at his picture, in the rabbit-warren, but his head found itself turning towards the way by which on that first day she had gone. She must know that on a day like this he would not be wasting the light,—that he would be working. She would be wanting to see him again. Would she come out? He wished she would. But he hoped she wouldn't. It would have meant another readjustment of ideas. He need not have been anxious. She did not come.

He worked steadily, masterfully. He always worked best at the beginning of a love affair. All of him seemed somehow more alive, more awake, more alert and competent. His mood was growing quickly to what he meant it to be. He was what actors call a quick study. Soon he would be able to play perfectly, without so much as a thought to the "book," the part of Paul to this child's Virginia.

Had Virginia, he wondered, any relations besides the step-father whom she so light-heartedly consented to hoodwink? Relations who might interfere and pray and meddle and spoil things?

However ashamed we may be of our relations they cannot forever be concealed. It must be owned that Betty was not the lonely orphan she sometimes pretended to herself to be. She had aunts—an accident that may happen to the best of us.

A year or two before Betty was born, a certain youth of good birth left Harrow and went to Ealing where he was received in a family in the capacity of Crammer's pup. The family was the Crammer and his daughter, a hard-headed, tight-mouthed, black-haired young woman who knew exactly what she wanted, and who meant to get it. Poverty had taught her to know what she wanted. Nature, and the folly of youth—not her own youth—taught her how to get it. There were several pups. She selected the most eligible, secretly married him, and to the day of her death spoke and thought of the marriage as a love-match. He was a dreamy youth, who wrote verses and called the Crammer's daughter his Egeria. She was too clever not to be kind to him, and he adored her and believed in her to the end, which came before his twenty-first birthday. He broke his neck out hunting, and died before Betty was born.

His people, exasperated at the news of the marriage, threatened to try to invalidate it on the score of the false swearing that had been needed to get the boy of nineteen married to the woman of twenty-four. Egeria was frightened. She compromised for an annuity of two hundred pounds, to be continued to her child.

The passion of this woman's life was power. One cannot be very powerful with just two hundred a year, and a doubtful position as the widow of a boy whose relations are prepared to dispute one's marriage. Mrs. Desmond spent three years in thought, and in caring severely for the wants of her child. Then she bought four handsome dresses, and some impressive bonnets, went to a Hydropathic Establishment, and looked about her. Of the eligible men there Mr. Cecil Underwood seemed, on enquiry, to be the most eligible. So she married him. He resisted but little, for his parish needed a clergywoman sadly. The two hundred pounds was a welcome addition to an income depleted by the purchase of rare editions, and at the moment crippled by his recent acquisition of the Omiliac of Vincentius in its original oak boards and leather strings; and, above all, he saw in the three-year-old Betty the child he might have had if things had gone otherwise with him and another when they both were young.

Mrs. Desmond had felt certain she could rule a parish. Mrs. Cecil Underwood did rule it—as she had known she could. She ruled her husband too. And Betty. When she caught cold from working all day among damp evergreens for the Christmas decorations, and, developing pneumonia, died, she died resentfully, thanking God that she had always done her duty, and quite unable to imagine how the world would go on without her. She felt almost sure that in cutting short her career of usefulness her Creator was guilty of an error of judgment which He would sooner or later find reason to regret.

Her husband mourned her. He had the habit of her, of her strong capable ways, the clockwork precision of her household and parish arrangements. But as time went on he saw that perhaps he was more comfortable without her: as a reformed drunkard sees that it is better not to rely on brandy for one's courage. He saw it, but of course he never owned it to himself.

Betty was heart-broken, quite sincerely heart-broken. She forgot all the mother's hard tyrannies, her cramping rules, her narrow bitter creed, and remembered only the calm competence, amounting to genius, with which her mother had ruled the village world, her unflagging energy and patience, and her rare moments of tenderness. She remembered too all her own lapses from filial duty, and those memories were not comfortable.

Yet Betty too, when the self-tormenting remorseful stage had worn itself out, found life fuller, freer without her mother. Her step-father she hated—had always hated. But he could be avoided. She went to a boarding-school at Torquay, and some of her holidays were spent with her aunts, the sisters of the boy-father who had not lived to see Betty.

She adored the aunts. They lived in a world of which her village world did not so much as dream; they spoke of things which folks at home neither knew of nor cared for; and they spoke a language that was not spoken at Long Barton. Of course, everyone who was anyone at Long Barton spoke in careful and correct English, but no one ever troubled to turn a phrase. And irony would have been considered very bad form indeed. Aunt Nina wore lovely clothes and powdered her still pretty face; Aunt Julia smoked cigarettes and used words that ladies at Long Barton did not use. Betty was proud of them both.

It was Aunt Nina who taught Betty how to spend her allowance, how to buy pretty things, and, better still, tried to teach her how to wear them. Aunt Julia it was who brought her the Indian necklaces, and promised to take her to Italy some day if she was good. Aunt Nina lived in Grosvenor Square and Aunt Julia's address was most often, vaguely, the Continent of Europe. Sometimes a letter addressed to some odd place in Asia or America would find her.

But when Betty had left school her visits to Aunt Nina ceased. Mr. Underwood feared that she was now of an age to be influenced by trifles, and that London society would make her frivolous. Besides he had missed her horribly, all through her school-days, though he had yielded to the insistence of the aunts. But he had wanted Betty badly. Only of course it never occurred to him to tell her so.

So Betty had lived on at the Rectory carrying on, with more or less of success, such of her Mother's Parish workings as had managed to outlive their author, and writing to the aunts to tell them how bored she was and how she hated to be called "Lizzie."

She could not be expected to know that her stepfather had known as "Lizzie" the girl who, if Fate had been kind, would have been his wife or the mother of his child. Betty's letters breathed contempt of Parish matters, weariness of the dullness of the country, and exasperation at the hardness of a lot where "nothing ever happened."

Well, something had happened now.

The tremendous nature of the secret she was keeping against the world almost took Betty's breath away. It was to the adventure, far more than to the man, that her heart's beat quickened. Something had happened.

Long Barton was no longer the dullest place in the world. It was the centre of the universe. See her diary, an entry following a gap where a page had been torn out:

"Mr. V. is very kind. He is teaching me to sketch. He says I shall do very well when I have forgotten what I learned at school. It is so nice of him to be so straightforward. I hate flattery. He has begun my portrait. It is beautiful, but he says it is exactly like me. Of course it is his painting that makes it beautiful, and not anything to do with me. That is not flattery. I do not think he could say anything unless he really thought it. He is that sort of man, I think. I am so glad he is so good. If he were a different sort of person perhaps it would not be quite nice for me to go and meet him without any one knowing. But there is nothing *of that sort*. He was quite different the first day. But I think then he was off his guard and could not help himself. I don't know quite what I meant by that. But, anyway, I am sure he is as good as gold, and that is such a comfort. I revere him. I believe he is really noble and unselfish, and so few men are, alas!"

The noble and unselfish Vernon meanwhile was quite happy. His picture was going splendidly, and every morning he woke to the knowledge that his image filled all the thoughts of a good little girl with gray dark charming eyes and a face that reminded one of a pretty kitten. Her drawing was not half bad either. He was spared the mortifying labour of trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. In one of his arts as in the other he decided that she had talent. And it was pleasant that to him should have fallen the task of teacher in both departments. Those who hunt the fox will tell you that Reynard enjoys, equally with the hounds and their masters, the pleasures of the chase. Vernon was quite of this opinion in regard to his favourite sport. He really felt that he gave as much pleasure as he took. And his own forgettings were so easy that the easy forgetting of others seemed a foregone conclusion. His forgetting always came first, that was all. But now, the Spring, her charm and his own firm *parti pris* working together, it seemed to him that he could never forget Betty, could never wish to forget her.

Her pretty conscious dignity charmed him. He stood still to look at it. He took no step forward. His role was that of the deeply respectful "brother artist." If his hand touched hers as he corrected her drawing, that was accident. If, as he leaned over her, criticising her work, the wind sent the end of her hair against his ear, that could hardly be avoided in a breezy English spring. It was not his fault that the little thrill it gave him was intensified a hundred-fold when, glancing at her, he perceived that her own ears had grown scarlet.

Betty went through her days in a dream. There were all the duties she hated—the Mothers' meetings, the Parish visits when she tried to adjust the quarrels and calm the jealousies of the stout aggressive Mothers, the carrying round the Parish Magazine. There were no long hours, now. In every spare moment she worked at her drawing to please him. It was the least she could do, after all his kindness.

Her step-father surprised her once hard at work with charcoal and board and plumb-line, a house-maid posing for her with a broom. He congratulated himself that his little sermon on the advantages of occupation as a cure for discontent had borne fruit so speedy and so sound.

"Dear child, she only wanted a word in season," he thought. And he said:

"I am glad to see that you have put away vain dreams, Lizzie. And your labours will not be thrown away, either. If you go on taking pains I daresay you will be able to paint some nice blotting-books and screens for the School Bazaar."

"I daresay," said Betty, adding between her teeth, "If you only knew!"

"But we mustn't keep Letitia from her work," he added, vaguely conscientious. Letitia flounced off, and Betty, his back turned, tore up the drawing.

And, as a beautiful background to the gross realism of Mothers' meetings and Parish tiresomenesses, was always the atmosphere of the golden mornings, the dew and the stillness, the gleam of his white coat among the pine-trees. For he was always first at the tryst now.

Betty was drunk; and she was too young to distinguish between vintages. When she had been sober she had feared intoxication. Now she was drunk, she thanked Heaven that she was sober.

CHAPTER IV. INVOLUNTARY

Six days of sunlight and clear air, of mornings as enchanting as dreams, of dreams as full of magic as May mornings. Then an interminable Sunday hot and sultry, with rolling purple clouds and an evening of thunder and heavy showers. A magenta sunset, a night working, hidden in its own darkness, its own secret purposes, and a Monday morning gray beyond belief, with a soft steady rain.

Betty stood for full five minutes looking out at the straight fine fall, at the white mist spread on the lawn, the blue mist twined round the trees, listening to the splash of the drops that gathered and fell from the big wet ivy leaves, to the guggle of the water-spout, the hiss of smitten gravel.

"He'll never go," she thought, and her heart sank.

He, shaving, in the chill damp air by his open dimity-draped window, was saying:

"She'll be there, of course. Women are all perfectly insensible to weather."

Two mackintoshes met in the circle of pines.

"You have come," he said. "I never dreamed you would. How cold your hand is!"

He held it for a moment warmly clasped.

"I thought it might stop any minute," said Betty; "it seemed a pity to waste a morning."

"Yes," he said musingly, "it would be a pity to waste a morning. I would not waste one of these mornings for a kingdom."

Betty fumbled with her sketching things as a sort of guarantee of good faith.

"But it's too wet to work," said she. "I suppose I'd better go home again."

"That seems a dull idea—for me," he said; "it's very selfish, of course, but I'm rather sad this morning. Won't you stay a little and cheer me up?"

Betty asked nothing better. But even to her a tete-a-tete in a wood, with rain pattering and splashing on leaves and path and resonant mackintoshes, seemed to demand some excuse.

"I should think breakfast and being dry would cheer you up better than anything," said she. "And it's very wet here."

"Hang breakfast! But you're right about the wetness. There's a shed in the field yonder. A harrow and a plough live there; they're sure to be at home on a day like this. Let's go and ask for their hospitality."

"I hope they'll be nice to us," laughed Betty; "it's dreadful to go where you're not wanted."

"How do you know?" he asked, laughing too. "Come, give me your hand and let's run for it."

They ran, hand in hand, the wet mackintoshes flapping and slapping about their knees, and drew up laughing and breathless in the dry quiet of the shed. Vernon thought of Love and Mr. Lewisham, but it was not the moment to say so.

"See, they are quite pleased to see us," said he, "they don't say a word against our sheltering here. The plough looks a bit glum, but she'll grow to like us presently. As for harrow, look how he's smiling welcome at you with all his teeth."

"I'm glad he can't come forward to welcome us," said Betty. "His teeth look very fierce."

"He could, of course, only he's enchanted. He used to be able to move about, but now he's condemned to sit still and only smile till—till he sees two perfectly happy people. Are you perfectly happy?" he asked anxiously.

"I don't know," said Betty truly. "Are you?"

"No—not quite perfectly."

"I'm so glad," said Betty. "I shouldn't like the harrow to begin to move while we're here. I'm sure it would bite us."

He sighed and looked grave. "So you don't want me to be perfectly happy?"

She looked at him with her head on one side.

"Not here," she said. "I can't trust that harrow."

His eyelids narrowed over his eyes—then relaxed. No, she was merely playing at enchanted harrows.

"Are you cold still?" he asked, and reached for her hand. She gave it frankly.

"Not a bit," she said, and took it away again. "The run warmed me. In fact—"

She unbuttoned the mackintosh and spread it on the bar of the plough and sat down. Her white dress lighted up the shadows of the shed. Outside the rain fell steadily.

"May I sit down too? Can Mrs. Plough find room for two children on her lap?"

She drew aside the folds of her dress, but even then only a little space was left. The plough had been carelessly housed and nearly half of it was where the rain drove in on it. So that they were very close together.

So close that he had to throw his head back to see clearly how the rain had made the short hair curl round her forehead and ears, and how fresh were the tints of face and lips. Also he had to support himself by an arm stretched out behind her. His arm was not round her, but it might just as well have been, as far as the look of the thing went. He thought of the arm of Mr. Lewisham.

"Did you ever have your fortune told?" he asked.

"No, never. I've always wanted to, but Father hates gipsies. When I was a little girl I used to put on my best clothes, and go out into the lanes and sit about and hope the gipsies would steal me, but they never did."

"They're a degenerate race, blind to their own interests. But they haven't a monopoly of chances—fortunately." His eyes were on her face.

"I never had my fortune told," said Betty. "I'd love it, but I think I should be afraid, all the same. Something might come true."

Vernon was more surprised than he had ever been in his life at the sudden involuntary movement in his right arm. It cost him a conscious effort not to let the arm follow its inclination and fall across her slender shoulders, while he should say:

"Your fortune is that I love you. Is it good or bad fortune?"

He braced the muscles of his arm, and kept it where it was. That sudden unreasonable impulse was a mortification, an insult to the man whose pride it was to believe that his impulses were always planned.

"I can tell fortunes," he said. "When I was a boy I spent a couple of months with some gipsies. They taught me lots of things."

His memory, excellently trained, did not allow itself to dwell for an instant on his reason for following those gipsies, on the dark-eyed black-haired girl with the skin like pale amber, who had taught him, by the flicker of the camp-fire, the lines of head and heart and life, and other things beside. Oh, but many other things! That was before he became an artist. He was only an amateur in those days.

"Did they teach you how to tell fortunes—really and truly?" asked Betty. "We had a fortune-teller's tent at the School Bazaar last year, and the youngest Smithson girl dressed up in spangles and a red dress and said she was Zara, the Eastern Mystic Hand-Reader, and Foreteller of the Future. But she got it all out of Napoleon's Book of Fate."

"I don't get my fortune-telling out of anybody's book of anything," he said. "I get it out of people's hands, and their faces. Some people's faces are their fortunes, you know."

"I know they are," she said a little sadly, "but everybody's got a hand and a fortune, whether they've got that sort of fortune-face or not."

"But the fortunes of the fortune-faced people are the ones one likes best to tell."

"Of course," she admitted wistfully, "but what's going to happen to you is just as interesting to *you*, even if your face isn't interesting to anybody. Do you always tell fortunes quite truly; I mean do

you follow the real rules? or do you make up pretty fortunes for the people with the pretty fortune-faces."

"There's no need to 'make up.' The pretty fortunes are always there for the pretty fortune-faces: unless of course the hand contradicts the face."

"But can it?"

"Can't it? There may be a face that all the beautiful things in the world are promised to: just by being so beautiful itself it draws beautiful happenings to it. But if the hand contradicts the face, if the hand is one of those narrow niggardly distrustful hands, one of the hands that will give nothing and take nothing, a hand without courage, without generosity—well then one might as well be born without a fortune-face, for any good it will ever do one."

"Then you don't care to tell fortunes for people who haven't fortune faces?"

"I should like to tell yours, if you would let me. Shall I?"

He held out his hand, but her hand was withheld.

"I ought to cross your hand with silver, oughtn't I?" she asked.

"It's considered correct—but—"

"Oh, don't let's neglect any proper precaution," she said. "I haven't got any money. Tell it me to-morrow, and I will bring a sixpence."

"You could cross my hand with your watch," he said, "and I could take the crossing as an I.O.U. of the sixpence."

She detached the old watch. He held out his hand and she gravely traced a cross on it.

"Now," he said, "all preliminary formalities being complied with, let the prophet do his work. Give me your hand, pretty lady, and the old gipsy will tell you your fortune true."

He held the hand in his, bending back the pink finger-tips with his thumb, and looked earnestly at its lines. Then he looked in her face, longer than he had ever permitted himself to look. He looked till her eyes fell. It was a charming picture. He was tall, strong, well-built and quite as good-looking as a clever man has any need to be. And she was as pretty as any oleograph of them all.

It seemed a thousand pities that there should be no witness to such a well-posed tableau, no audience to such a charming scene. The pity of it struck Destiny, and Destiny flashed the white of Betty's dress, a shrill point of light, into an eye a hundred yards away. The eye's owner, with true rustic finesse, drew back into the wood's shadow, shaded one eye with a brown rustic hand, looked again, and began a detour which landed the rustic boots, all silently, behind the shed, at a spot where a knot-hole served as frame for the little picture. The rustic eye was fitted to the knot-hole while Vernon holding Betty's hand gazed in Betty's face, and decided that this was no time to analyse his sensations.

Neither heard the furtive rustic tread, or noted the gleam of the pale rustic eye.

The labourer shook his head as he hurried quickly away. He had daughters of his own, and the Rector had been kind when one of those daughters had suddenly come home from service, ill, and with no prospect of another place.

"A-holdin' of hands and a-castin' of sheep's eyes," said he. "We knows what that's the beginnings of! Well, well, youth's the season for silliness, but there's bounds—there's bounds. And all of a mornin' so early too. Lord above knows what it wouldn't be like of a evenin'." He shook his head again, and made haste.

Vernon had forced his eyes to leave the face of Betty.

"Your fortune," he was saying, "is, curiously enough, just one of those fortunes I was speaking of. You will have great chances of happiness, if you have the courage to take them. You will cross the sea. You've never travelled, have you?"

"No,—never further than Torquay; I was at school there, you know; and London, of course. But I should love it. Isn't it horrid to think that one might grow quite old and never have been anywhere or done anything?"

"That depends on oneself, doesn't it? Adventures are to the adventurous."

"Yes, that's all very well—girls can't be adventurous."

"Yes,—it's the Prince who sets out to seek his fortune, isn't it? The Princess has to sit at home and wait for hers to come to her. It generally does if she's a real Princess."

"But half the fun must be the seeking for it," said Betty.

"You're right," said he, "it is."

The labourer had reached the park-gate. His pace had quickened to the quickening remembrance of his own daughter, sitting at home silent and sullen.

"Do you really see it in my hand?" asked Betty,— "about my crossing the sea, I mean."

"It's there; but it depends on yourself, like everything else."

"I did ask my step-father to let me go," she said, "after that first day, you know, when you said I ought to study in Paris."

"And he wouldn't, of course?"

"No; he said Paris was a wicked place. It isn't really, is it?"

"Every place is wicked," said he, "and every place is good. It's all as one takes things."

The Rectory gate clicked sharply as it swung to behind the labourer. The Rectory gravel scrunched beneath the labourer's boots.

Yes, the Master was up; he could be seen.

The heavy boots were being rubbed against the birch broom that, rooted at Kentish back doors, stands to receive on its purple twigs the scrapings of Kentish clay from rustic feet.

"You have the artistic lines very strongly marked," Vernon was saying. "One, two, three—yes, painting—music perhaps?"

"I am very fond of music," said Betty, thinking of the hour's daily struggle with the Mikado and the Moonlight Sonata. "But three arts. What could the third one be?" Her thoughts played for an instant with unheard-of triumphs achieved behind footlights—rapturous applause, showers of bouquets.

"Whatever it is, you've enormous talent for it," he said; "you'll find out what it is in good time. Perhaps it'll be something much more important than the other two put together, and perhaps you've got even more talent for it than you have for others."

"But there isn't any other talent that I can think of."

"I can think of a few. There's the stage,—but it's not that, I fancy, or not exactly that. There's literature—confess now, don't you write poetry sometimes when you're all alone at night? Then there's the art of being amusing, and the art of being—of being liked."

"Shall I be successful in any of the arts?"

"In one, certainly."

"Ah," said Betty, "if I could only go to Paris!"

"It's not always necessary to go to Paris for success in one's art," he said.

"But I want to go. I'm sure I could do better there."

"Aren't you satisfied with your present Master?"

"Oh!"—It was a cry of genuine distress, of heartfelt disclaim. "You *know* I didn't mean that! But you won't always be here, and when you've gone—why then—"

Again he had to control the involuntary movement of his left arm.

"But I'm not going for months yet. Don't let us cross a bridge till we come to it. Your head-line promises all sorts of wonderful things. And your heart-line—" he turned her hand more fully to the light.

In the Rector's study the labourer was speaking, standing shufflingly on the margin of the Turkey carpet. The Rector listened, his hand on an open folio where fat infants peered through the ornamental initials.

"And so I come straight up to you, Sir, me being a father and you the same, Sir, for all the difference betwixt our ways in life. Says I to myself, says I, and bitter hard I feels it too, I says:

'George,' says I, 'you've got a daughter as begun that way, not a doubt of it—holdin' of hands and sittin' close alongside, and you know what's come to her!'"

The Rector shivered at the implication.

"Then I says, says I: 'Like as not the Rector won't thank you for interferin'. Least said soonest mended,' says I."

"I'm very much obliged to you," said the Rector diffculty, and his hand shook on Ambrosius's yellow page.

"You see, Sir," the man's tone held all that deferent apology that truth telling demands, "gells is gells, be they never so up in the world, all the world over, bless their hearts; and young men is young men, d—n them, asking your pardon, Sir, I'm sure, but the word slipped out. And I shouldn't ha' been easy if anything had have gone wrong with Miss, God bless her, all along of the want of a word in season. Asking your pardon, Sir, but even young ladies is flesh and blood, when it comes to the point. Ain't they now?" he ended appealingly.

The Rector spoke with an obvious effort, got his hand off the page and closed the folio.

"You've done quite right, George," he said, "and I'm greatly obliged to you. Only I do ask you to keep this to yourself. You wouldn't have liked it if people had heard a thing like that about your Ruby before—I mean when she was at home."

He replaced the two folios on the shelf.

"Not me, Sir," George answered. "I'm mum, I do assure you, Sir. And if I might make so bold, you just pop on your hat and step acrost directly minute. There's that little hole back of the shed what I told you of. You ain't only got to pop your reverend eye to that there, and you'll see for yourself as I ain't give tongue for no dragged scent."

"Thank you, George," said the Rector, "I will. Good morning. God bless you."

The formula came glibly, but it was from the lips only that it came.

Lizzie—his white innocent Lily-girl! In a shed—a man, a stranger, holding her hand, his arm around her, his eyes—his lips perhaps, daring—

The Rector was half way down his garden drive.

"Your heart-line," Vernon was saying, "it's a little difficult. You will be deeply beloved."

To have one's fortune told is disquieting. To keep silence during the telling deepens the disquiet curiously. It seemed good to Betty to laugh.

"Soldier, sailor, tinker, tailor," she said, "which am I going to marry, kind gipsy?"

"I don't believe the gipsies who say they can see marriage in a hand," he answered gravely, and Betty feared he had thought her flippant, or even vulgar; "what one sees are not the shadows of coming conventions. One sees the great emotional events, the things that change and mould and develop character. Yes, you will be greatly beloved, and you will love deeply."

"I'm not to be happy in my affairs of the heart then." Still a careful flippancy seemed best to Betty.

"Did I say so? Do you really think that there are no happy love affairs but those that end in a wedding breakfast and bridesmaids, with a Bazaar show of hideous silver and still more hideous crockery, and all one's relations assembled to dissect one's most sacred secrets?"

Betty had thought so, but it seemed coarse to own it.

"Can't you imagine," he went on dreamily, "a love affair so perfect that it could not but lose its finest fragrance if the world were called to watch the plucking of love's flower? Can't you imagine a love so great, so deep, so tender, so absolutely possessing the whole life of the lover that he would almost grudge any manifestation of it? Because such a manifestation must necessarily be a repetition of some of the ways in which unworthy loves have been manifested, by less happy lovers? I can seem to see that one might love the one love of a life-time, and be content to hold the treasure in one's heart, a treasure such as no other man ever had, and grudge even a word or a look that might make it less the single perfect rose of the world."

"Oh, dear!" said Betty to herself.

"But I'm talking like a book," he said, and laughed. "I always get dreamy and absurd when I tell fortunes. Anyway, as I said before, you will be greatly beloved. Indeed, unless your hand is very untruthful, which I'm sure it never could be, you are beloved now, far more than you can possibly guess."

Betty caught at her flippancy but it evaded her, and all she found to say was, "Oh," and her eyes fell.

There was a silence. Vernon still held her hand, but he was no longer looking at it.

A black figure darkened the daylight.

The two on the plough started up—started apart. Nothing more was wanted to convince the Rector of all that he least wished to believe.

"Go home, Lizzie," he said, "go to your room," and to her his face looked the face of a fiend. It is hard to control the muscles under a sudden emotion compounded of sorrow, sympathy and an immeasurable pity. "Go to your room and stay there till I send for you."

Betty went, like a beaten dog.

The Rector turned to the young man.

"Now, Sir," he said.

CHAPTER V. THE PRISONER

When Vernon looked back on that interview he was honestly pleased with himself. He had been patient, he had been kind even. In the end he had been positively chivalrous. He had hardly allowed himself to be ruffled for an instant, but had met the bitter flow of Mr. Underwood's biblical language with perfect courtesy.

He regretted, of course, deeply, this unfortunate misunderstanding. Accident had made him acquainted with Miss Desmond's talent, he had merely offered her a little of that help which between brother artists—The well-worn phrase had not for the Rector the charm it had had for Betty.

The Rector spoke again, and Mr. Vernon listened, bare-headed, in deepest deference.

No, he had not been holding Miss Desmond's hand—he had merely been telling her fortune. No one could regret more profoundly than he,—and so on. He was much wounded by Mr. Underwood's unworthy suspicions.

The Rector ran through a few texts. His pulpit denunciations of iniquity, though always earnest, had lacked this eloquence.

Vernon listened quietly.

"I can only express my regret that my thoughtlessness should have annoyed you, and beg you not to blame Miss Desmond. It was perhaps a little unconventional, but—"

"Unconventional—to try to ruin—"

Mr. Vernon held up his hand: he was genuinely shocked.

"Forgive me," he said, "but I can't hear such words in connection with—with a lady for whom I have the deepest respect. You are heated now, Sir, and I can make every allowance for your natural vexation. But I must ask you not to overstep the bounds of decency."

The Rector bit his lip, and Vernon went on:

"I have listened to your abuse—yes, your abuse—without defending myself, but I can't allow anyone, even her father, to say a word against her."

"I am not her father," said the old man bitterly. And on the instant Vernon understood him as Betty had never done. The young man's tone changed instantly.

"Look here," he said, and his face grew almost boyish, "I am really most awfully sorry. The whole thing—what there is of it, and it's very little—was entirely my doing. It was inexcusably thoughtless. Miss Desmond is very young and very innocent. It is I who ought to have known better,—and perhaps I did. But the country is very dull, and it was a real pleasure to teach so apt a pupil."

He spoke eagerly, and the ring of truth was in his voice. But the Rector felt that he was listening to the excuses of a serpent.

"Then you'd have me believe that you don't even love her?"

"No more than she does me," said Vernon very truly. "I've never breathed a word of love to her," he went on; "such an idea never entered our heads. She's a charming girl, and I admire her immensely, but—" he sought hastily for a weapon, and defended Betty with the first that came to hand, "I am already engaged to another lady. It is entirely as an artist that I am interested in Miss Betty."

"Serpent," said the Rector within himself, "Lying serpent!"

Vernon was addressing himself silently in terms not more flattering. "Fool, idiot, brute to let the child in for this!—for it's going to be a hell of a time for her, anyhow. And as for me—well, the game is up, absolutely up!"

"I am really most awfully sorry," he said again.

"I find it difficult to believe in the sincerity of your repentance," said the Rector frowning.

"My regret you may believe in," said Vernon stiffly. "There is no ground for even the mention of such a word as repentance."

"If your repentance is sincere"—he underlined the word—"you will leave Long Barton to-day." Leave without a word, a sign from Betty—a word or a sign to her? It might be best—if—

"I will go, Sir, if you will let me have your assurance that you will say nothing to Miss Desmond, that you won't make her unhappy, that you'll let the whole matter drop."

"I will make no bargains with you!" cried the Rector. "Do your worst! Thank God I can defend her from you!"

"She needs no defence. It's not I who am lacking in respect and consideration for her," said Vernon a little hotly, "but, as I say, I'll go—if you'll just promise to be gentle with her."

"I do not need to be taught my duty by a villain, Sir!—" The old clergyman was trembling with rage. "I wish to God I were a younger man, that I might chastise you for the hound you are." His upraised cane shook in his hand. "Words are thrown away on you! I'm sorry I can't use the only arguments that can come home to a puppy!"

"If you were a younger man," said Vernon slowly, "your words would not have been thrown away on me. They would have had the answer they deserved. I shall not leave Long Barton, and I shall see Miss Desmond when and how I choose."

"Long Barton shall know you in your true character, Sir, I promise you."

"So you would blacken her to blacken me? One sees how it is that she does not love her father."

He meant to be cruel, but it was not till he saw the green shadows round the old man's lips that he knew just how cruel he had been. The quivering old mouth opened and closed and opened, the cold eyes gleamed. And the trembling hand in one nervous movement raised the cane and struck the other man sharply across the face. It was a hysterical blow, like a woman's, and with it the tears sprang to the faded eyes.

Then it was that Vernon behaved well. When he thought of it afterwards he decided that he had behaved astonishingly well.

With the smart of that cut stinging on his flesh, the mark of it rising red and angry across his cheek, he stepped back a pace, and without a word, without a retaliatory movement, without even a change of facial expression he executed the most elaborately courteous bow, as of one treading a minuet, recovered the upright and walked away bareheaded. The old clergyman was left planted there, the cane still jiggling up and down in his shaking hand.

"A little theatrical, perhaps," mused Vernon, when the cover of the wood gave him leave to lay his fingers to his throbbing cheek, "but nothing could have annoyed the old chap more."

However effective it may be to turn the other cheek, the turning of it does not cool one's passions, and he walked through the wood angrier than he ever remembered being. But the cool rain dripping from the hazel and sweet chestnut leaves fell pleasantly on his uncovered head and flushed face. Before he was through the wood he was able to laugh, and the laugh was a real laugh, if rather a rueful one. Vernon could never keep angry very long.

"Poor old devil!" he said. "He'll have to put a special clause in the general confession next Sunday. Poor old devil! And poor little Betty! And poorest me! Because, however, we look at it, and however we may have damn well bluffed over it, the game *is* up—absolutely up."

When one has a definite end in view—marriage, let us say, or an elopement,—secret correspondences, the surmounting of garden walls, the bribery of servants, are in the picture. But in a small sweet idyll, with no backbone of intention to it, these things are inartistic. And Vernon was, above and before all, an artist. He must go away and he knew it. And his picture was not finished. Could he possibly leave that incomplete? The thought pricked sharply. He had not made much progress with the picture in these last days. It had been pleasanter to work at the portrait of Betty. If he moved to the next village? Yes, that must be thought over.

He spent the day thinking of that and of other things.

The Reverend Cecil Underwood stood where he was left till the man he had struck had passed out of sight. Then the cane slipped through his hand and fell rattling to the ground. He looked down

at it curiously. Then he reached out both hands vaguely and touched the shaft of the plough. He felt his way along it, and sat down, where they had sat, staring dully before him at the shadows in the shed, and at the steady fall of the rain outside. Betty's mackintosh was lying on the floor. He picked it up presently and smoothed out the creases. Then he watched the rain again.

An hour had passed before he got stiffly up and went home, with her cloak on his arm.

Yes, Miss Lizzie was in her room—had a headache. He sent up her breakfast, arranging the food himself, and calling back the maid because the tray lacked marmalade.

Then he poured out his own tea, and sat stirring it till it was cold.

She was in her room, waiting for him to send for her. He must send for her. He must speak to her. But what could he say? What was there to say that would not be a cruelty? What was there to ask that would not be a challenge to her to lie, as the serpent had lied?

"I am glad I struck him," the Reverend Cecil told himself again and again; "*that* brought it home to him. He was quite cowed. He could do nothing but bow and cringe away. Yes, I am glad."

But the girl? The serpent had asked him to be gentle with her—had dared to ask him. He could think of no way gentle enough for dealing with this crisis. The habit of prayer caught him. He prayed for guidance.

Then quite suddenly he saw what to do.

"That will be best," he said; "she will feel that less."

He rang and ordered the fly from the Peal of Bells, went to his room to change his old coat for a better one, since appearances must be kept up, even if the heart be breaking. His thin hair was disordered, and his tie, he noticed, was oddly crumpled, as though strange hands had been busy with his throat. He put on a fresh tie, smoothed his hair, and went down again. As he passed, he lingered a moment outside her door.

Betty watching with red eyes and swollen lips saw him enter the fly, saw him give an order, heard the door bang. The old coachman clambered clumsily to his place, and the carriage lumbered down the drive.

"Oh, how cruel he is! He might have spoken to me *now*! I suppose he's going to keep me waiting for days, as a penance. And I haven't really done anything wrong. It's a shame! I've a good mind to run away!"

Running away required consideration. In the meantime, since he was out of the house, there was no reason why she should not go downstairs. She was not a child to be kept to her room in disgrace. She bathed her distorted face, powdered it, and tried to think that the servants, should they see her, would notice nothing.

Where had he gone? For no goal within his parish would a hired carriage be needed. He had gone to Sevenoaks or to the station. Perhaps he had gone to Westerham—there was a convent there, a Protestant sisterhood. Perhaps he was going to make arrangements for shutting her up there! Never!—Betty would die first. At least she would run away first. But where could one run to?

The aunts? Betty loved the aunts, but she distrusted their age. They were too old to sympathise really with her. They would most likely understand as little as her step-father had done. An Inward Monitor told Betty that the story of the fortune-telling, of the seven stolen meetings with no love-making in them, would sound very unconvincing to any ears but those of the one person already convinced. But she would not be shut up in a convent—no, not by fifty aunts and a hundred step-fathers!

She would go to Him. He would understand. He was the only person who ever had understood. She would go straight to him and ask him what to do. He would advise her. He was so clever, so good, so noble. Whatever he advised would be *right*.

Trembling and in a cold white rage of determination, Betty fastened on her hat, found her gloves and purse. The mackintosh she remembered had been left in the shed. She pictured her step-father trampling fiercely upon it as he told Mr. Vernon what he thought of him. She took her golf cape.

At the last moment she hesitated. Mr. Vernon would not be idle. What would he be doing? Suppose he should send a note? Suppose he had watched Mr. Underwood drive away and should come boldly up and ask for her? Was it wise to leave the house? But perhaps he would be hanging about the church yard, or watching from the park for a glimpse of her. She would at least go out and see.

"I'll leave a farewell letter," she said, "in case I never come back."

She found her little blotting-book—envelopes, but no paper. Of course! One can't with dignity write cutting farewells on envelopes. She tore a page from her diary.

"You have driven me to this," she wrote. "I am going away, and in time I shall try to forgive you all the petty meannesses and cruelties of all these years. I know you always hated me, but you might have had some pity. All my life I shall bear the marks on my soul of the bitter tyranny I have endured here. Now I am going away out into the world, and God knows what will become of me."

She folded, enveloped, and addressed the note, stuck a long hat-pin fiercely through it, and left it, patent, speared to her pin-cushion, with her step-father's name uppermost.

"Good-bye, little room," she said. "I feel I shall never see you again."

Slowly and sadly she crossed the room and turned the handle of the door. The door was locked.

Once, years ago, a happier man than the Reverend Cecil had been Rector of Long Barton. And in the room that now was Betty's he had had iron bars fixed to the two windows, because that room was the nursery.

That evening, after dinner, Mr. Vernon sat at his parlour window looking idly along the wet bowling-green to the belt of lilacs and the pale gleams of watery sunset behind them. He had passed a disquieting day. He hated to leave things unfinished. And now the idyll was ruined and the picture threatened,—and Betty's portrait was not finished, and never would be.

"Come in," he said; and his landlady heavily followed up her tap on his door.

"A lady to see you, Sir," said she with a look that seemed to him to be almost a wink.

"A lady? To see me? Good Lord!" said Vernon. Among all the thoughts of the day this was the one thought that had not come to him.

"Shall I show her in?" the woman asked, and she eyed him curiously.

"A lady," he repeated. "Did she give her name?"

"Yes, Sir. Miss Desmond, Sir. Shall I shew her in?"

"Yes; shew her in, of course," he answered irritably.

And to himself he said:

"The Devil!"

CHAPTER VI. THE CRIMINAL

If you have found yourself, at the age of eighteen, a prisoner in your own bedroom you will be able to feel with Betty. Not otherwise. Even your highly strung imagination will be impotent to present to you the ecstasy of rage, terror, resentment that fills the soul when locked door and barred windows say, quite quietly, but beyond appeal: "Here you are, and here, my good child, you stay."

All the little familiar objects, the intimate associations of the furniture of a room that has been for years your boudoir as well as your sleeping room, all the decorations that you fondly dreamed gave to your room a *cachet*—the mark of a distinctive personality,—these are of no more comfort to you than would be strange bare stone walls and a close unfamiliar iron grating.

Betty tried to shake the window bars, but they were immovable. She tried to force the door open, but her silver buttonhook was an insufficient lever, and her tooth-brush handle broke when she pitted it in conflict against the heavy, old-fashioned lock. We have all read how prisoners, outwitting their gaolers, have filed bars with their pocket nail-scissors, and cut the locks out of old oak doors with the small blade of a penknife. Betty's door was only of pine, but her knife broke off short; and the file on her little scissors wore itself smooth against the first unmoved bar.

She paced the room like a caged lioness. We read that did the lioness but know her strength her bars were easily shattered by one blow of her powerful paw. Betty's little pink paws were not powerful like the lioness's, and when she tried to make them help her, she broke her nails and hurt herself.

It was this moment that Letitia chose for rapping at the door.

"You can't come in. What is it?" Betty was prompt to say.

"Mrs. Edwardes's Albert, Miss, come for the Maternity bag."

"It's all ready in the school-room cupboard," Betty called through the door. "Number three."

She resisted an impulse to say that she had broken the key in the lock and to send for the locksmith. No: there should be no scandal at Long Barton,—at least not while she had to stay in it.

She did not cry. She was sick with fury, and anger made her heart beat as Vernon had never had power to make it.

"I will be calm. I won't lose my head," she told herself again and again. She drank some water. She made herself eat the neglected breakfast. She got out her diary and wrote in it, in a handwriting that was not Betty's, and with a hand that shook like totter-grass.

"What will become of me? What has become of *him*? My step-father must have done something horrible to him. Perhaps he has had him put in prison; of course he couldn't do that in these modern times, like in the French revolution, just for talking to some one he hadn't been introduced to, but he may have done it for trespassing, or damage to the crops, or something. I feel quite certain something has happened to him. He would never have deserted me like this in my misery if he were free. And I can do nothing to help him—nothing. How shall I live through the day? How can I bear it? And this awful trouble has come upon him just because he was kind to another artist. The world is very, very, very cruel. I wish I were dead!" She blotted the words and locked away the book. Then she burnt that farewell note and went and sat in the window-seat to watch for her step-father's return.

The time was long. At last he came. She saw him open the carriage door and reach out a flat foot, feeling for the carriage step. He stepped out, turned and thrust a hand back into the cab. Was he about to hand out a stern-faced Protestant sister, who would take her to Westerham, and she would never be heard of again? Betty set her teeth and waited anxiously to see if the sister seemed strong. Betty was, and she would fight for her liberty. With teeth and nails if need were.

It was no Protestant sister to whom the Reverend Cecil had reached his hand. It was only his umbrella. Betty breathed again.

Well, now at least he'll come and speak to me: he must come himself; even *he* couldn't give the key to the servants and say: "Please go and unlock Miss Lizzie and bring her down!"

Betty would not move. "I shall just stay here and pretend I didn't know the door was locked," said she.

But her impatience drove her back to the caged-lioness walk and when at last she heard the key turn in the door she had only just time to spring to the window-seat and compose herself in an attitude of graceful defiance.

It was thrown away.

The door only opened wide enough to admit a dinner tray pushed in by a hand she knew. Then the door closed again.

The same thing happened with tea and supper.

It was not till after supper that Betty, gazing out on the pale watery sunset, found it blurred to her eyes. There was no more hope now. She was a prisoner. If He was not a prisoner he ought to be. It was the only thing that could excuse his silence. He might at least have gone by the gate or waved a handkerchief. Well, all was over between them, and Betty was alone in the world. She had not cried all day, but now she did cry.

Vernon always prided himself on having a heart for any fate, but this was one of the interviews that one would rather have avoided. All day he had schooled himself to resignation, had almost reconciled himself to the spoiling of what had promised to be a masterpiece. Explications with Betty would brush the bloom off everything. Yet he must play the part well. But what part? Oh, hang all meddlers!

"Miss Desmond," said the landlady; and he braced his nerves to meet a tearful, an indignant or a desperate Betty.

But there was no Betty to be met; no Betty of any kind.

Instead, a short squarely-built middle-aged lady walked briskly into the room, and turned to see the door well closed before she advanced towards him.

He bowed with indescribable emotions.

"Mr. Eustace Vernon?" said the lady. She wore a sensible short skirt and square-toed brown boots. Her hat was boat-shaped and her abundant hair was screwed up so as to be well out of her way. Her face was square and sensible like her shoulders, and her boots. Her eyes dark, clear and near sighted. She wore gold-rimmed spectacles and carried a crutch-handled cane. No vision could have been less like Betty.

Vernon bowed, and moved a chair towards her.

"Thank you," she said, and took it. "Now, Mr. Vernon, sit down too, and let's talk this over like reasonable beings. You may smoke if you like. It clears the brain."

Vernon sat down and mechanically took out a cigarette, but he held it unlighted.

"Now," said the square lady, leaning her elbows on the table and her chin on her hands, "I am Betty's aunt."

"It is very good of you to come," said Vernon helplessly.

"Not at all," she briskly answered. "Now tell me all about it."

"There's nothing to tell," said Vernon.

"Perhaps it will clear the ground a little if I say at once that I haven't come to ask your intentions, because of course you haven't any. My reverend brother-in-law, on the other hand, insists that you have, and that they are strictly dishonourable."

Vernon laughed, and drew a breath of relief.

"I fear Mr. Underwood misunderstood,—" he said, "and—"

"He is a born misunderstander," said Miss Julia Desmond. "Now, I'm not. Light your cigarette, man; you can give me one if you like, to keep you in countenance. A light—thanks. Now will you speak, or shall I?"

"You seem to have more to say than I, Miss Desmond."

"Ah, that's because you don't trust me. In other words, you don't know me. That's one of the most annoying things in life: to be really an excellent sort, and to be quite unable to make people see it at the first go-off. Well, here goes. My worthy brother-in-law finds you and my niece holding hands in a shed."

"We were not," said Vernon. "I was telling her fortune—"

"It's my lead now," interrupted the lady. "Your turn next. He being what he is—to the pure all things are impure, you know—instantly draws the most harrowing conclusions, hits you with a stick.—By the way, you behaved uncommonly well about that."

"Thank you," said Vernon, smiling a little. It is pleasant to be appreciated.

"Yes, really very decently, indeed. I daresay it wouldn't have hurt a fly, but if you'd been the sort of man he thinks you are—However that's neither here nor there. He hits you with a stick, locks the child into her room—What did you say?"

"Nothing," said Vernon.

"All right. I didn't hear it. Locks her in her room, and wires to my sister. Takes a carriage to Sevenoaks to do it too, to avoid scandal. I happen to be at my sister's, on my way from Cairo to Norway, so I undertake to run down. He meets me at the station, and wants me to go straight home and blackguard Betty. But I prefer to deal with principals."

"You mean—"

"I mean that I know as well as you do that whatever has happened has been your doing and not that dear little idiot's. Now, are you going to tell me about it?"

He had rehearsed already a form of words in which "Brother artists" should have loomed large. But now that he rose, shrugged his shoulders and spoke, it was in words that had not been rehearsed.

"Look here, Miss Desmond," said he, "the fact is, you're right. I haven't any intentions—certainly not dishonourable ones. But I was frightfully bored in the country, and your niece is bored, too—more bored than I am. No one ever understands or pities the boredom of the very young," he added pensively.

"Well?"

"Well, that's all there is to it. I liked meeting her, and she liked meeting me."

"And the fortune-telling? Do you mean to tell me you didn't enjoy holding the child's hand and putting her in a silly flutter?"

"I deny the flutter," he said, "but—Well, yes, of course I enjoyed it. You wouldn't believe me if I said I didn't."

"No," said she.

"I enjoyed it more than I expected to," he added with a frankness that he had not meant to use, "much more. But I didn't say a word of love—only perhaps—"

"Only perhaps you made the idea of it underlie every word you did speak. Don't I know?" said Miss Desmond. "Bless the man, I've been young myself!"

"Miss Betty is very charming," said he, "and—and if I hadn't met her—"

"If you hadn't met her some other man would. True; but I fancy her father would rather it had been some other man."

"I didn't mean that in the least," said Vernon with some heat. "I meant that if I hadn't met her she would have gone on being bored, and so should I. Don't think me a humbug, Miss Desmond. I am more sorry than I can say that I should have been the means of causing her any unhappiness."

"Causing her unhappiness,—poor little Betty, poor little trusting innocent silly little girl! That's about it, isn't it?"

It was so like it that he hotly answered:

"Not in the least."

"Well, well," said Miss Desmond, "there's no great harm done. She'll get over it, and more's been lost on market days. Thanks."

She lighted a second cigarette and sat very upright, the cigarette in her mouth and her hands on the handle of her stick.

"You can't help it, of course. Men with your coloured eyes never can. That green hazel—girls ought to be taught at school that it's a danger-signal. Only, since your heart's not in the business any more than her's is—as you say, you were both bored to death—I want to ask you, as a personal favour to me, just to let the whole thing drop. Let the girl alone. Go right away."

"It's an unimportant detail, and I'm ashamed to mention it," said Vernon, "but I've got a picture on hand—I'm painting a bit of the Warren."

"Well, go to Low Barton and put up there and finish your precious picture. You won't see Betty again unless you run after her."

"To tell the truth," said Vernon, "I had already decided to let the whole thing drop. I'm ashamed of the trouble I've caused her and—and I've taken rooms at Low Barton."

"Upon my word," said Miss Desmond, "you are the coldest lover I've ever set eyes on."

"I'm not a lover," he answered swiftly. "Do you wish I were?"

"For Betty's sake, I'm glad you aren't. But I think I should respect you more if you weren't quite so arctic."

"I'm not an incendiary, at any rate," said he, "and that's something, with my coloured eyes, isn't it?"

"Well," she said, "whatever your temperature is, I rather like you. I don't wonder at Betty in the least."

Vernon bowed.

"All I ask is your promise that you'll not speak to her again."

"I can't promise that, you know. I can't be rude to her. But I'll promise not to go out of my way to meet her again." He sighed.

"As, yes—it is sad—all that time wasted and no rabbits caught." Again Miss Desmond had gone unpleasantly near his thought. Of course he said:

"You don't understand me."

"Near enough," said Miss Desmond; "and now I'll go."

"Let me thank you for coming," said Vernon eagerly; "it was more than good of you. I must own that my heart sank when I knew it was Miss Betty's aunt who honoured me with a visit. But I am most glad you came. I never would have believed that a lady could be so reasonable and—and—"

"And gentlemanly?" said the lady. "Yes,—it's my brother-in-law who is the old woman, poor dear! You see, Mr. Vernon, I've been running round the world for five and twenty years, and I've kept my eyes open. And when I was of an age to be silly, the man I was silly about had your coloured eyes. He married an actress, poor fellow,—or rather, she married him, before he could say 'knife.' That's the sort of thing that'll happen to you, unless you're uncommonly careful. So that's settled. You give me your word not to try to see Betty?"

"I give you my word. You won't believe in my regret—"

"I believe in that right enough. It must be simply sickening to have the whole show given away like this. Oh, I believe in your regret!"

"My regret," said Vernon steadily, "for any pain I may have caused your niece. Do please see how grateful I am to you for having seen at once that it was not her fault at all, but wholly mine."

"Very nicely said: good boy!" said Betty's aunt. "Well, my excellent brother-in-law is waiting outside in the fly, gnashing his respectable teeth, no doubt, and inferring all sorts of complications from the length of our interview. Good-bye. You're just the sort of young man I like, and I'm sorry we haven't met on a happier footing. I'm sure we should have got on together. Don't you think so?"

"I'm sure we should," said he truly. "Mayn't I hope—"

She laughed outright.

"You have indeed the passion for acquaintance without introduction," she said. "No, you may *not* call on me in town. Besides, I'm never there. Good-bye. And take care of yourself. You're bound to be bitten some day you know, and bitten badly."

"I wish I thought you forgave me."

"Forgive you? Of course I forgive you! You can no more help making love, I suppose—no, don't interrupt: the thing's the same whatever you call it—you can no more help making love than a cat can help stealing cream. Only one day the cat gets caught, and badly beaten, and one day you'll get caught, and the beating will be a bad one, unless I'm a greater fool than I take myself for. And now I'll go and unlock Betty's prison and console her. Don't worry about her. I'll see that she's not put upon. Good night. No, in the circumstances you'd better *not* see me to my carriage!"

She shook hands cordially, and left Vernon to his thoughts.

Miss Desmond had done what she came to do, and he knew it. It was almost a relief to feel that now he could not try to see Betty however much he wished it,—however much he might know her to wish it. He shrugged his shoulders and lighted another cigarette.

Betty, worn out with crying, had fallen asleep. The sound of wheels roused her. It seemed to rain cabs at the Rectory to-day.

There were voices in the hall, steps on the stairs. Her door was unlocked and there entered no tray of prisoner's fare, no reproachful step-father, no Protestant sister, but a brisk and well-loved aunt, who shut the door, and spoke.

"All in the dark?" she said. "Where are you, child?"

"Here," said Betty.

"Let me strike a light. Oh, yes, there you are!"

"Oh, aunt,—has he sent for you?" said Betty fearfully. "Oh, don't scold me, auntie! I am so tired. I don't think I can bear any more."

"I'm not going to scold you, you silly little kitten," said the aunt cheerfully. "Come, buck up! It's nothing so very awful, after all. You'll be laughing at it all before a fortnight's over."

"Then he hasn't told you?"

"Oh, yes, he has; he's told me everything there was to tell, and a lot more, too. Don't worry, child. You just go straight to bed and I'll tuck you up, and we'll talk it all over in the morning."

"Aunty," said Betty, obediently beginning to unfasten her dress, "did he say anything about *Him*?"

"Well, yes—a little."

"He hasn't—hasn't done anything to him, has he?"

"What could he do? Giving drawing lessons isn't a hanging matter, Bet."

"I haven't heard anything from him all day,—and I thought—"

"You won't hear anything more of him, Betty, my dear. I've seen your Mr. Vernon, and a very nice young man he is, too. He's frightfully cut up about having got you into a row, and he sees that the only thing he can do is to go quietly away. I needn't tell you, Betty, though I shall have to explain it very thoroughly to your father, that Mr. Vernon is no more in love with you than you are with him. In fact he's engaged to another girl. He's just interested in you as a promising pupil."

"Yes," said Betty, "of course I know that."

CHAPTER VII. THE ESCAPE

"It's all turned out exactly like what I said it was going to, exactly to a T," said Mrs. Symes, wrapping her wet arms in her apron and leaning them on the fence; "if it wasn't that it's Tuesday and me behindhand as it is, I'd tell you all about it."

"Do the things good to lay a bit in the rinse-water," said Mrs. James, also leaning on the fence, "sorter whitens them's what I always say. I don't mind if I lend you a hand with the wringing after. What's turned out like you said it was going to?"

"Miss Betty's decline." Mrs. Symes laughed low and huskily. "What did I tell you, Mrs. James?"

"I don't quite remember not just at the minute," said Mrs. James; "you tells so many things."

"And well for some people I do. Else they wouldn't never know nothing. I told you as it wasn't no decline Miss Betty was setting down under. I said it was only what's natural, her being the age she is. I said what she wanted was a young man, and I said she'd get one. And what do you think?"

"I don't know, I'm sure."

"She did get one," said Mrs. Symes impressively, "that same week, just as if she'd been a-listening to my very words. It was as it might be Friday you and me had that little talk. Well, as it might be the Saturday, she meets the young man, a-painting pictures in the Warren—my Ernest's youngest saw 'em a-talking, and told his mother when he come home to his dinner."

"To think of that, and me never hearing a word!" said Mrs. James with frank regret.

"I knew it ud be 'Whistle and I'll come to you, my lad,'" Mrs. Symes went on with cumbrous enjoyment, "and so it was. They used to keep their rondyvoos in the wood—six o'clock in the morning. Mrs. Wilson's Tom used to see 'em reg'lar every day as he went by to his work."

"Lor," said Mrs. James feebly.

"Of course Tom he never said nothing, except to a few friends of his over a glass. They enjoyed the joke, I promise you. But old George Marbould—he ain't never been quite right in his head, I don't think, since his Ruby went wrong. Pity, I always think. A great clumsy plain-faced girl like her might a kept herself respectable. She hadn't the temptation some of us might have had in our young days."

"No indeed," said Mrs. James, smoothing her hair, "and old George—what silliness was he up to this time?"

"Why he sees the two of 'em together one fine morning and 'stead of doing like he'd be done by he ups to the Vicarage and tells the old man. 'You come alonger me, Sir,' says he, 'and have a look at your daughter a-kissin' and huggin' up in Beale's shed, along of a perfect stranger.' So the old man he says, 'God bless you,'—George is proud of him saying that—and off he goes, in a regular fanteague, beats the young master to a jelly, for all he's an old man and feeble, and shuts Miss up in her room. Now that wouldn't a been *my* way."

"No, indeed," said Mrs. James.

"I should a asked him in," said Mrs. Symes, "if it had been a gell of mine, and give him a good meal with a glass of ale to it, and a tiddy drop of something to top up with, and I'd a let him light his nasty pipe,—and then when he was full and contented I'd a up and said, 'Now my man, you've 'ad time to think it over, and no one can't say as I've hurried you nor flurried you. But it's time as we began talking. So just you tell me what you're a-goin to do about it. If you 'ave the feelings of a man,' I'd a said 'you'll marry the girl.'"

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. James with emotion.

"Instead of which, bless your 'art, he beats the young man off with a stick, like as if he was a mad dog; and young Miss is a goin' to be sent to furrin parts to a strick boardin' school, to learn her not to have any truck with young chaps."

"'Ard, I call it," said Mrs. James.

"An' well you may—crooil 'ard. How's he expect the girl to get a husband if he drives the young fellers away with walking-sticks? Pore gell! I shouldn't wonder but what she lives and dies a maid, after this set-out."

"We shall miss 'er when she goes," said Mrs. James.

"I don't say we shan't. But there ain't no one as you can't get on without if you're put to it And whether or not, she's going to far foreign parts where there ain't no young chaps."

"Poor young thing," said Mrs. James, very sympathetic. "I think I'll drop in as I'm passing, and see how she takes it."

"If you do," said Mrs. Symes, unrolling her arms, white and wrinkled with washing, to set them aggressively on her lips, "it's the last word as passes between us, Mrs. James, so now you know."

"Lord, Maria, don't fly out at me that way." Mrs. James shrank back: "How was I to know you'd take it like that?"

"Do you suppose," asked Mrs. Symes, "as no one ain't got no legs except you? *I'm* a going up, soon as I've got the things on the line and cleaned myself. I only heard it after I'd got every blessed rag in soak, or I'd a gone up afore."

"Mightn't I step up with you for company?" Mrs. James asked.

"No, you mightn't. But I don't mind dropping in as I come home, to tell you about it. One of them Catholic Nunnery schools, I expect, which it's sudden death to a man but to set his foot into."

"Poor young thing," said Mrs. James again.

Betty was going to Paris.

There had been "much talk about and about" the project. Now it was to be.

There had been interviews.

There was the first in which the elder Miss Desmond told her brother-in-law in the plain speech she loved exactly what sort of a fool he had made of himself in the matter of Betty and the fortune-telling.

When he was convinced of error—it was not easily done—he would have liked to tell Betty that he was sorry, but he belonged to a generation that does not apologise to the next.

The second interview was between the aunt and Betty. That was the one in which so much good advice was given.

"You know," the aunt wound up, "all young women want to be in love, and all young men too. I don't mean that there was anything of that sort between you and your artist friend. But there might have been. Now look here,—I'm going to speak quite straight to you. Don't you ever let young men get monkeying about with your hands; whether they call it fortune-telling or whether they don't, their reason for doing so is always the same—or likely to be. And you want to keep your hand—as well as your lips—for the man you're going to marry. That's all, but don't you forget it. Now what's this I hear about your wanting to go to Paris?"

"I did want to go," said Betty, "but I don't care about anything now. Everything's hateful."

"It always is," said the aunt, "but it won't always be."

"Don't think I care a straw about not seeing Mr. Vernon again," said Betty hastily. "It's not that."

"Of course not," said the aunt sympathetically.

"No,—but Father was so hateful—you've no idea. If I'd—if I'd run away and got married secretly he couldn't have made more fuss."

"You're a little harsh—just a little. Of course you and I know exactly how it was, but remember how it looked to him. Why, it couldn't have looked worse if you really *had* been arranging an elopement."

"He *hadn't* got his arm around me," insisted Betty; "it was somewhere right away in the background. He was holding himself up with it."

"Don't I tell you I understand all that perfectly? What I want to understand is how you feel about Paris. Are you absolutely off the idea?"

"I couldn't go if I wasn't."

"I wonder what you think Paris is like," mused the aunt. "I suppose you think it's all one wild razzle-dazzle—one delirious round of—of museums and picture galleries."

"No, I don't," said Betty rather shortly.

"If you went you'd have to work."

"There's no chance of my going."

"Then we'll put the idea away and say no more about it. Get me my Continental Bradshaw out of my dressing-bag: I'm no use here. Nobody loves me, and I'll go to Norway by the first omnibus to-morrow morning."

"Don't," said Betty; "how can you say nobody loves you?"

"Your step-father doesn't, anyway. That's why I can make him do what I like when I take the trouble. When people love you they'll never do anything for you,—not even answer a plain question with a plain yes or no. Go and get the Bradshaw. You'll be sorry when I'm gone."

"Aunt Julia, you don't really mean it."

"Of course not. I never mean anything except the things I don't say. The Bradshaw!"

Betty came and sat on the arm of her aunt's chair.

"It's not fair to tease me," she said, "and tantalise me. You know how mizzly I am."

"No. I don't know anything. You won't tell me anything. Go and get—"

"Dear, darling, pretty, kind, clever Aunt," cried Betty, "I'd give my ears to go."

"Then borrow a large knife from cook, and sharpen it on the front door-step! No—I don't mean to use it on your step-father. I'll have your pretty ears mummified and wear them on my watch-chain. No—mind my spectacles! Let me go. I daresay it won't come to anything."

"Do you really mean you'd take me?"

"I'd take you fast enough, but I wouldn't keep you. We must find a dragon to guard the Princess. Oh, we'll get a nice tame kind puss-cat of a dragon,—but that dragon will not be your Aunt Julia! Let me go, I say. I thought you didn't care about anything any more?"

"I didn't know there could be anything to care for," said Betty honestly, "especially Paris. Well, I won't if you hate it so, but oh, aunt—" She still sat on the floor by the chair her aunt had left, and thought and thought. The aunt went straight down to the study.

"Now, Cecil," she said, coming briskly in and shutting the door, "you've made that poor child hate the thought of you and you've only yourself to thank."

"I know you think so," said he, closing the heavy book over which he had been stooping.

"I don't mean," she added hastily, for she was not a cruel woman, "that she really hates you, of course. But you've frightened her, and shaken her nerves, locking her up in her room like that. Upon my word, you are old enough to know better!"

"I was so alarmed, so shaken myself—" he began, but she interrupted him.

"I didn't come in and disturb your work just to say all that, of course," she said, "but really, Cecil, I understand things better than you think. I know how fond you really are of Betty."

The Reverend Cecil doubted this; but he said nothing.

"And you know that I'm fond enough of the child myself. Now, all this has upset you both tremendously. What do you propose to do?"

"I—I—nothing I thought. The less said about these deplorable affairs the better. Lizzie will soon recover her natural tone, and forget all about the matter."

"Then you mean to let everything go on in the old way?"

"Why, of course," said he uneasily.

"Well, it's your own affair, naturally," she spoke with a studied air of detachment which worried him exactly as it was meant to do.

"What do you mean?" he asked anxiously. He had never been able wholly to approve Miss Julia Desmond. She smoked cigarettes, and he could not think that this would have been respectable in any other woman. Of course, she was different from any other woman, but still—. Then the Reverend Cecil could not deem it womanly to explore, unchaperoned, the less well-known quarters of four continents, to penetrate even to regions where skirts were considered improper and side-saddles were unknown. Even the nearness of Miss Desmond's fiftieth birthday hardly lessened at all the poignancy of his disapproval. Besides, she had not always been fifty, and she had always, in his recollection of her, smoked cigarettes, and travelled alone. Yet he had a certain well-founded respect for her judgment, and for that fine luminous common-sense of hers which had more than once shewn him his own mistakes. On the rare occasions when he and she had differed he had always realized, later, that she had been in the right. And she was "gentlemanly" enough never once to have said: "I told you so!"

"What do you mean?" he asked again, for she was silent, her hands in the pockets of her long coat, her sensible brown shoes sticking straight out in front of her chair.

"If you really want to know, I'll tell you," she said, "but I hate to interfere in other people's business. You see, I know how deeply she has felt this, and of course I know you have too, so I wondered whether you hadn't thought of some little plan for—for altering the circumstances a little, so that everything will blow over and settle down, so that when you and she come together again you'll be better friends than ever."

"Come together again," he repeated, and the paper-knife was still restless, "do you want me to let her go away? To London?"

Visions of Lizzie, in unseemly low-necked dresses surrounded by crowds of young men—all possible Vernons—lent a sudden firmness to his voice, a sudden alertness to his manner.

"No, certainly not," she answered the voice and the manner as much as the words. "I shouldn't dream of such a thing. Then it hadn't occurred to you?"

"It certainly had not."

"You see," she said earnestly, "it's like this—at least this is how I see it: She's all shaken and upset, and so are you, and when I've gone—and I must go in a very little time—you'll both of you simply settle down to thinking over it all, and you'll grow farther and farther apart!"

"I don't think so," said he; "things like this always right themselves if one leaves them alone. Lizzie and I have always got on very well together, in a quiet way. We are neither of us demonstrative."

"Now Heaven help the man!" was the woman's thought. She remembered Betty's clinging arms, her heartfelt kisses, the fervency of the voice that said, "Dear darling, pretty, kind, clever Aunt! I'd give my ears to go." Betty not demonstrative! Heaven help the man!

"No," she said, "I know. But when people are young these things rankle."

"They won't with her," he said. "She has a singularly noble nature, under that quiet exterior."

Miss Desmond drew a long breath and began afresh.

"Then there's another thing. She's fretting over this—thinks now that it was something to be ashamed of; she didn't think so at the time, of course."

"You mean that it was I who—"

This was thin ice again. Miss Desmond skated quickly away from it with, "Well, you see, I've been talking to her. She really *is* fretting. Why she's got ever so much thinner in the last week."

"I could get a locum," he said slowly, "and take her to a Hydropathic Establishment for a fortnight."

"Oh dear, oh dear!" said Miss Desmond to herself. Aloud she said: "That *would* be delightful, later. But just now—well, of course it's for you to decide,—but it seems to me that it would be better for you two to be apart for a while. If you're here alone together—well, the very sight of you will remind each other—That's not grammar, as you say, but—"

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