

Farjeon Benjamin Leopold

The Betrayal of John Fordham



Benjamin Farjeon

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Farjeon B. L. Benjamin Leopold

The Betrayal of John Fordham

CHAPTER I.

JOHN FORDHAM'S CONFESSION

My name is John Fordham, and I am thirty-four years of age. So far as I can judge I am at present of sound mind, though sadly distraught, and my memory is fairly clear, except as to the occurrences of a certain terrible night in December two years ago, which are obscured by a black cloud which I have striven in vain to pierce. These occurrences, and the base use to which they have been turned by an enemy who has made my life a torture, have brought me to a pass which will cause me presently to stand before the world as a murderer. No man accuses me. It is I who accuse myself of the horrible crime, though I call God to witness that I know not how I came to do it, save that it must have been done in self-defense. But who will believe me in the face of the damning evidence which I afterwards found in my possession – and who will believe that when the fatal deed was done I did not see the features of the man I killed, and did not know who he was? My protestations will be regarded as weak inventions, and will be received with incredulity – as probably I should receive them were another man in my place, and I his judge. It is the guiltiest persons who most loudly proclaim their innocence, and I shall be classed among them.

Am I, then, weary of life that I deliberately place myself in deadly peril, and invite the last dread sentence of the law to be passed upon me? In one sense, yes. Not a day passes that my torturer does not present himself to sting and threaten me and aggravate my sufferings. My nights are sleepless; even when exhausted nature drives me into a brief stupor my fevered brain is crowded with frightful images and visions. So appalling are these fancies that there is a danger of my being driven mad. Death is preferable.

And yet, but a few moments before I committed the crime, I was looking forward hopefully to a life of peace and love with a dear and noble woman who sacrificed her good name for me, and whom I promised to marry when I was freed from a curse which had clung to me for years. The night was cold, the snow was falling, but there was joy in my heart, and I walked along singing. Great God! my heart throbs with anguish as I think of the heaven which might have been mine had not cruel fate suddenly dashed the cup of happiness from my lips. But it is useless to repine; I yield because it is forced upon me. One consoling thought is mine. The dear woman I love with a love as true and sincere as ever beat in the heart of man, will turn to me with pity, will visit me in the prison to which I go of my own accord, and in the solemn farewell we shall bid one another will extend her hands and forgive me for the wrong I have done her and our child.

These last words cause me to waver in my purpose.

Our child! Hers – mine. I am the sweet little fellow's father. I saw him yesterday with his mother, though neither he nor my dear Ellen knew that I was near them, for I was careful they should not see my face. How he has grown! Yesterday was his fourth 'birthday, and to-day Ellen is wondering who left the toy horse and cart at her lodgings. His sturdy little limbs, his lovely hair, his large brown eyes with their wonderful lashes, the music of his voice! What bliss, what torture I endured as I followed and listened to his prattle.

"Oh, mother!" he cried, dragging at her hand. "Look – look! Do look!"

His excitement was caused by a display of toys in a window, and they stood together – Ellen and my boy – gazing at the treasures there displayed. He liked this, he liked that, and wasn't this grand, and wasn't that beautiful? and, oh! look here, mother, and here, and here! He was especially

fascinated by the horse and cart. Very tenderly did Ellen coax his attention to a box of white lambs, which was to be obtained for sixpence, and they went into the shop, where it was placed in his arms, for his little hands could not grasp it firmly, and he wanted to carry it home himself. As he and his mother walked away I observed him look longingly over his shoulder at the horse and cart, and doubtless there was in his young mind a hope that one of these fine days when he was a big, big man such a treasure might also be in his possession, and that he would be able to ride off in it straight to fairyland. I am sure Ellen would have given it to him could she have afforded it, but she is obliged to be economical and sparing with her pennies. She earns a trifle by needlework, and, through a solicitor, she receives a pound a week from me, whom she believes to be thousands of miles away. Upon this she lives in modest comfort, saving every penny she can, and looking forward cheerfully to the future. The future! Alas for her – for Reggie – for me!

Reggie's father hanged for murder! But he need never know. He does not bear my name, for Ellen would not have it so. "Not till the laws of God and man sanction it," she said, and I let her have her way. Spirit of truth and justice! Show me the path wherein my duty lies.

More than one path is open to me. I could disappear at sea beneath the waters, and my enemy would never discover how and by what means I had severed the cord of life. He would hunt for me, and gnash his teeth at the escape of his prey. Some satisfaction in that. Oh, miserable fool, to express such a sentiment! But let it stand. I have no desire to conceal my weaknesses. Being gone, Ellen would still receive her pound a week. This is secured to her, and it is this my enemy would snatch from her. "You have money left," he cried. "I will have my share of it, or I will denounce you." He shall not succeed. He shall not rob Ellen, nor shall he denounce me. No man except myself shall bring me to the bar of justice.

I could kill him, and the world would be rid of a monster. I am strong; he is weak. I have held him with one hand, so that he could not move a step from the spot upon which he stood. Dead, he could do no more mischief. Wretch that I am! Add murder to murder? No. I will not burden my soul with conscious guilt.

I will do what I resolved to do, and this confession, when it is completed, shall be sent to Ellen. Condemn me, world. Ellen, in my last hours I look to you for one blessed ray of light. There was a dread crisis in my life when you were my guardian angel, and saved me from destruction. You will not fail me now. Receiving consolation at your dear hands, from your pure heart, I shall lay down my load, and with sobs of thankfulness shall bid the world farewell. In heaven, where the truth is known, we shall meet again.

CHAPTER II

Were it not necessary I would make no mention of my child-life, but this record would be incomplete were I to pass it over in silence. All that I can do is to dwell upon it as briefly as possible.

My mother died a few weeks after I was born; my father waited but twelve months before he married again, and in less than two years his second wife was a widow. Thus I lost both my parents at too early an age to retain the slightest recollection of them. By his second marriage my father had one child, a boy; my half-brother's name was Louis, and by him and my stepmother I was regarded with aversion – by her, indeed, with a much stronger feeling, for when I was old enough to reason out things for myself I learned that she hated me.

My father had made a fortune by commerce, and in his will he behaved justly to those who had a claim upon him. Half of his fortune was left to his widow, without restriction of any kind except that she was to rear and educate me, and that her home was to be mine until I was twenty-one years of age; then I was to become entitled to my share, one-fourth, which was so securely invested and protected that she could not touch it. The remaining one-fourth was left to Louis in the same way. Two of my father's friends were appointed trustees, to see to the proper disposition of his children's inheritance.

In the conditions of this will my stepmother found a double cause for resentment. She was angry in the first place that the whole of the fortune was not bequeathed to her, and in the second place that she was not appointed trustee; and she visited her anger upon me, an unoffending child, who could have had no hand in what she conceived to be a plot against her. Upon her son she lavished a full measure of passionate love, while I was allowed to roam about, neglected and uncared for. Nothing was too good for Louis, nothing too bad for me. He had the best room in the house to sleep in, I the worst; he was always beautifully dressed, and I was made to wear his cast-off clothes. It was the breast of the fowl for Louis, the drumstick for me, and dainty dishes were prepared for him which I was not allowed to taste; my meals were measured out, and if I asked for more I was refused. He was taken to theatres and entertainments, I was left at home. His Christmas trees were at once a delight and a torture to me. They could not prevent me from looking and longing, but not a toy fell to my share. The heartless woman told me that I had robbed her and her son of their inheritance, and I have no doubt that she had nursed this grievance into a conviction. "You are nothing but a pest and a nuisance," she said. And as a pest and a nuisance I was treated. In these circumstances it would have been strange indeed if my child-life had been happy.

I was glad when I was sent to school, and I did not look forward to the holidays with any feeling of pleasure. Studious by nature, I did well at school, and good reports of my progress were sent home, which my stepmother tore up before my face. Notwithstanding this systematic oppression I strove to win affection from her and Louis, but every advance I made met with cold repulse, the result being that we became less and less friendly. At length I gave up the attempt, and suffering from a sense of injustice preserved my self-respect by an assertion of independence. Instead of bending meekly beneath the lash, I stood up boldly, and seized and broke it. This really happened. One scene, which lives in my memory, will serve as an illustration.

I do not say it in praise of myself, because these things come by nature, but I have a tender feeling towards all living creatures, and cannot bear to see them tortured. To Louis it was a delight, and even his pets did not escape when he grew tired of them. He had some white rabbits, and one day I saw him bind all the limbs of one of them round its body till it resembled a ball in form. Then he threw it high in the air again and again, and frequently failing to catch it the poor thing fell upon the gravel path in the garden till it was covered with blood. I was fourteen years of age at the time, Louis was twelve. I darted forward, and picking up the wounded animal was loosening its bonds, when he snatched it from me. I endeavored to take it from him, telling him it was cruel to torture

the helpless creature. We had a struggle, and his screams brought his mother from the house. She fell upon me, and dragged me away.

"See what he has done," said Louis, pointing to the bleeding rabbit, which had fallen to the ground.

"You did it," I retorted.

"It's a lie," he screamed. "You did it, you did it."

It was not the first falsehood he had told by many to get me into trouble. Panting with rage, my stepmother ran back to the house, and returned with a cane she had often used upon me.

"I will punish you for the lie," she said. "How dare you say my darling would do such a cruel thing? You are a disgrace to the name you bear."

She flourished the cane; I stepped back.

"I have told the truth," I said, "and I don't intend to be punished any more by you for faults I do not commit."

"You do not intend!" she answered, advancing towards me. "I will teach you; I will teach you!"

Swish went the cane across my face; only once, for as she was about to repeat the blow I wrested it from her, broke it, and threw it over the garden wall. In a frenzy of ungovernable fury she seized the first weapon that caught her eye – a gardener's spade – and attacked me with it, and at the same moment Louis ran at me with a three-pronged rake. He slipped and fell, and in his fall wounded himself with the prongs. His cries of pain diverted his mother's attention from me; she flung away the spade, and caught him in her arms. Alarmed at the sight of blood dripping from his face I stepped forward to assist her.

"Keep off, you murderer!" she shrieked. "You have killed my boy! You will come to the gallows!"

She flew into the house with Louis, and I saw nothing more of her that day. Louis, as I afterwards learned, kept his room for a week; it was not till months had passed that we met again, and then I noticed a scar on his forehead which I was told he would carry with him to the grave. From that time I was made to feel that I had two bitter enemies in my father's house. Arrangements were made to keep me at school during holidays, and I was not sorry for it. Once a year only was I allowed to visit my home, and then I was shunned; my meals were served to me in a separate room, and not the slightest attention was paid to my wants. I grew to be accustomed to this, and took refuge in study, longing for the day to arrive when I should be free. I recall the conversation which took place on that day between my stepmother and me.

"You have made arrangements, I presume," she commenced, "for residing elsewhere?"

"I have been thinking what I had best do," I said.

"That is not what I asked you. It is perfectly immaterial to me what you have been thinking of. I presume your arrangements to live elsewhere are already made."

As a matter of fact they were not, but I could not pretend to misunderstand her.

"You wish me to leave the house soon?" I said.

"At once," she replied, "without a moment's unnecessary delay. You shall not eat another meal here. Your presence is hateful to me."

"I have known that all my life," I said, mournfully.

"Then why have you remained so long?" she asked, speaking with angry vehemence. "A man with a particle of spirit in him would have gone away years ago, but you, like the creature you are, have sponged upon me to the last hour. You are twenty-one to-day, and I am no longer legally obliged to keep you. Go, and disgrace yourself, as you are sure to do."

"I shall never do that."

"It has to be proved," she retorted. "As if any one knowing you would believe a word that passes your lips! We shall see your name in the papers in connection with some scandalous affair."

"You are mistaken. I bear my father's name, and I would suffer a hundred deaths rather than see it dragged through the mire."

"Swear it," she cried.

"I swear it. But, hating me as you do, why should you be so sensitive about my good name?"

"Your good name!" she said, scornfully. "It is only because I bear it, because Louis bears it, as well as you, that I exact the pledge from you. Otherwise, do you think I care what becomes of you?"

"Truly," I said, "I believe it would rejoice you to hear the worst."

"It would." %

"I hope to disappoint you. On my solemn word of honor nothing that I do shall ever make our name a theme for scandal or reproach."

"I hold you to that. We shall see whether there is any manhood in you, or the least sense of honor. Now, go!"

"Cannot we part without enmity?" I asked.

Persecuted and wronged as I had been, some touch of sentiment – of which I was not ashamed – moved me to the endeavor to soften the heart of my dead father's wife.

"No, we cannot," she answered. "To ask it proves your mean spirit. But do you think we shall forget you? We have something to remember you by Be sure – be sure that it will not be forgotten while there is blood in our veins."

"To what do you refer?"

"There is a scar on my Louis' face inflicted by you, which he will bear with him to the grave."

"No, no," I cried. "It is not true to say I did it. I deplore the accident, but it was caused by his own cruelty."

"How dare you utter the lie? It is not the first time; you said as much on the day you tried to kill him. Yes, you would have murdered him had I not been by. We shall remember you by that, and it shall be evidence against you if there is ever occasion for it. Cruelty! My darling Louis cruel! He has the tenderest heart. You coward – you coward! Had he been as old and strong as you you would not have dared to attack him. But that is the way with such as you – to strike only the weak. Time will show – time will show! You are going into the world; there is no longer a check upon you. There will be a woman, perhaps, whom you will beat and torture. Oh, yes, you will do it; and you will lie to the world and whine that the fault is hers. Let those who stand by her come to me and Louis – we will give you a character; you shall be exposed in your true light. I hate you – I hate you – I hate you! May your life be a life of sorrow!"

And she flung herself from the room.

The time was to come when these cruel words were to be used against me with cruel effect; there was something prophetic in their venom.

I did not see Louis before I left the house, and on that day I commenced a new life.

CHAPTER III

For three years it was uneventful. I lived much alone, and made a few friends, with one or another of whom I took a holiday every year on the Continent. Then an event occurred which gave birth to the startling incidents and experiences of my life.

Ten years ago this month Barbara Landor and I were married. I was twenty-four, and Barbara was three years my senior. To a young man in love – as I must have been at that time, though my feelings for my wife soon underwent change, and I look back upon them now with amazement – such a disparity is not likely to cause uneasiness. It did not cause me any. I was swayed entirely by my passionate desire to make the woman with whom I was infatuated my wife.

I had known her only a short time before I proposed, and was accepted. Our engagement was of but a few weeks' duration, and during our courtship I observed nothing in Barbara's manner to disturb me. No one warned me; no friend bade me pause before I bound myself irrevocably to a woman who was to be my ruin. Occasionally her face was rather flushed, and she was eager and nervous, which I ascribed to the excitement of our engagement. Her sparkling eyes, her rapid speech, the occasional trembling of her hands – all this I set down to love. She confided to me that she had no fortune, and that she had thought of seeking employment as a governess or as a companion to a lady. She possessed great gifts, which, of course, I magnified; she was a good musician, could speak French, German and Italian fluently, and sang to me in those languages with a rich contralto voice.

"Had it not been for you," she said, "I might even have got into the chorus at the opera."

"Is not this better?" I asked, embracing her.

"Much better," she replied, returning my embrace.

She was a handsome woman, dark, tall, and commanding, and her nearest relative was a half-brother, Maxwell, much older than she, for whom I had no special liking. Naturally, after I had drawn from Barbara an avowal of her love, I addressed myself to him. He stood towards her in the light of a guardian, and she was living in his house. In reply to his questions I was very candid as to my worldly position and prospects, and he professed himself satisfied; but I remembered afterwards that when I came courting his sister he would look at me with an expression of amusement on his features, as though he was enjoying a joke he was keeping to himself. He was in the habit of boasting that he was a man of the world, and knew every trick on the board. It was chiefly at his urging that the marriage was precipitated.

"Long engagements are a mistake," he said. "Don't you think so?"

I replied that I was entirely of his opinion.

"That simplifies matters," he said, "because I am going abroad. I shall not take a sister with me, you may depend upon that."

It was a plain hint, and the wedding day was fixed. Soon after this, when I called to do my wooing, he told me that Barbara was not well enough to see me.

"She has a frightful headache," he said, "and is not in a condition to see anybody."

I was much distressed, and I asked if she had a doctor.

"Not necessary," he said. "She will get over it. When she is in that state best leave her alone, old fellow. There's a hint for you in your matrimonial campaign. Barbara hates the sight of doctors; she is a delicate creature, very highly strung, something of the full-blooded racer about her, the kind of woman that requires managing."

"I shall be able to manage her," I said confidently.

"I should think you would," he said, with a mocking smile. "Barbara and you are going to have a high old time of it. By the way, can you lend me a tenner for a few days?"

It was not the first time he had asked me for a loan, which was always to be paid in a few days; but he never returned a shilling of the money he borrowed from me. I gave him the ten pounds, and inwardly resolved to have as little as possible to do with him after my marriage.

I debated with myself whether I should communicate the news of my engagement to my stepmother and Louis, and acting upon the advice of Barbara – to whom I gave a truthful relation of my child-life – I wrote to them in affectionate terms. To me no answer was returned, but Barbara received a letter which she told me she tore up the moment she read it.

"Your stepmother must be an awful woman," she said, "but we can do without her and her beautiful son."

It was very considerate of Barbara, I thought, not to show me the letter, the tenor of which it was not difficult to guess, but I could not help looking grave.

"No long faces, you dear boy," cried Barbara. "Do you think I believe a word she says? Do you think I care for any one but you? If she hadn't been the meanest creature living she would at least have sent a wedding present."

The wedding was a very quiet one. A friend acted as my best man, and a few other of my friends were present. On Barbara's side there was only Maxwell, who gave his sister away. She looked beautiful, and was in high spirits. The ceremony over we hastened to Maxwell's house, where I and my friends expected to sit down to a wedding breakfast. To my surprise there was nothing on the table but the bridecake and a couple of bottles of wine. It was not a time to ask for an explanation of this inhospitable welcome to the wedding guests, but I was deeply mortified, and I saw that my friends were angry and offended. Maxwell made light of the matter; he filled the glasses, and in a florid speech proposed the health of bride and bridegroom, to which I responded very briefly.

"There is nothing else to wait for, I suppose," said my best man, in a sarcastic tone.

No one answered him, and with shrugs and halfhearted wishes for happiness he and the other guests took their departure, leaving Barbara and me and Maxwell alone.

"Don't quarrel with him," Barbara whispered to me; "he has the most awful temper."

For her sake I put the best face I could upon the slight that had been passed upon me. Maxwell appeared to be unconscious that he had behaved in any way offensively; he drank a great deal of wine, and urged Barbara to drink, but she refused.

"A glass with me, darling," I said. "To our future."

She raised the glass to her lips, and set it down, untasted, with a shudder. I had noticed at the meals we three had together that she drank nothing but water.

"You do not like wine?" I said.

"I detest it," she replied.

"I'll drink your share whenever you call upon me," shouted Maxwell. "She is quite right, isn't she, John? Milk for women, wine for men."

He was getting intoxicated, and began to troll out a song about wine and women. I strove to quiet him, but he went on laughing hilariously. Excited and enraged, I quickly emptied my glass, and was about to drink again, when Barbara laid her hand upon my arm. I put the full glass upon the table, at which Maxwell, who had been observing us, laughed louder still.

"Maxwell!" cried Barbara, angrily.

"Barbara!" cried Maxwell, with his bold eyes upon her. "Well, my lady?"

They looked strangely at one another, and it was Barbara who first lowered her eyes. There was something threatening in Maxwell's glance, and she seemed to be frightened of him. I was not sorry, for I accepted it as an indication that she would side with me in my desire not to court his society when we returned from our honeymoon trip. We were to start for the Continent in the evening, and there were still two or three hours before us. To pass this interval of time in Maxwell's company was not a pleasant prospect, but I scarcely knew how to avoid it. He evinced no disposition to leave Barbara and me together, and I felt awkward and out of place, and really as if it was I who was intruding. The

house was his, and in a certain sense we were his guests. A bright idea occurred to me. I proposed that Barbara should dress for our journey, and that we should go and lunch at an hotel. Barbara, however, said she could not eat, and Maxwell cried boisterously:

"What are you thinking of, brother-in-law? A newborn bride sitting down to eat at an hotel on her wedding day. She would sink to the ground in shame, wouldn't she, Barbara? But I accept your invitation with pleasure, my boy. I am famished, and you must be. I insist upon you fortifying yourself; it is a duty you owe to Barbara and to society at large. With what is before you, it is absolutely necessary that you should keep up your strength. Take my word for it; I'm an older bird than you. Let us go. Barbara will nibble a biscuit, or make a meal off a butterfly's wing, if she can catch one."

I turned to Barbara, and she whispered that it would be best. She was tired and would lie down while we were away. I saw that she was weary, and disgusted with her brother's behavior, so to save her from further annoyance, I consented to go with Maxwell.

"I don't like to leave you for a moment, darling," I said, "but I must get him away. I shall be back in good time; be sure you are ready."

I said this smilingly, as if I referred to woman's proverbial failing in seldom being ready at an appointed time when she has to dress for a journey or a dinner, or anything, in fact.

She did not return smile for smile. In a weak, helpless way she clung to me for a moment, and then abruptly left the room.

"Oh, turtle doves, turtle doves!" exclaimed Maxwell, hooking his arm in mine, as we walked along. "Oh, golden day, with love's fetters binding one fast! Auspicious epoch in a man's career when he is strung up for life! Love, honor, and obey, and all that sort of thing. Connubial bliss, Darby and Joan, till death doth us part. Not for me, my boy, not for me; but every man to his taste. Fol-de-riddle! Chorus of infatuated bridegrooms – fol-de-riddle, fol-de-riddle!"

"Hold your tongue," I said, between my teeth, "or I'll not stay with you another moment."

"Right you are, my sensitive plant," he returned. "I'm mum as the inside of a screwed down coffin."

But he continued to sing softly to himself, and to chuckle as he cast furtive glances at me. In such circumstances it was not likely that I could enjoy my meal, and I sat for the most part doing nothing, while Maxwell disposed of the various courses he ordered. Drinking did not affect his appetite, and he would have kept at the table all the day had I not called for the bill.

"Time to go, eh? Love's call must be obeyed," he said, rising, and pouring out the last glass of wine in the bottle. With his left hand on the table he steadied himself, and held up the glass.

"You're not half a bad sort, John, but you're a bit soft. You want hardening, my boy, and you'll get it."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"What do I mean? Why, that Barbara's all your own now, all your own. Well, here's a happy honeymoon to the fond couple." He drained the glass.

I hardly knew how to take his words, and I did not answer him. On our way back he borrowed twenty pounds of me, and I determined it should be the last he would ever get from me. I was strongly inclined at first to refuse, but I was afraid he would make a scene, and so for Barbara's sake I gave him the money.

"Thank you, John," he said, pocketing the notes. "You're a trump, but a trifle green. Here we are at the house. What a jolly wedding-day!"

I could have struck the mocking devil in the face, for by this time I was thoroughly out of temper; but, again for dear Barbara's sake, I refrained from uttering the hot words that rose to my lips.

The carriage was at the door and my wife was ready. Maxwell opened his arms for a parting embrace, but Barbara slipped from him and entered the carriage. As it moved away I caught a last glimpse of him standing on the doorstep laughing immoderately, and I almost fancied I heard him call after us, "What a jolly wedding day!"

CHAPTER IV

The next day we were in Paris. We had a miserable crossing and two miserable railway journeys. On neither of the lines could I get a compartment to ourselves, both the French and English trains being crowded to excess. On the steamboat Barbara was very ill, and I gave her into the charge of the stewardess, being too unwell myself to attend to her. We were not, as may be imagined, a very cheerful couple, nor was this a cheerful commencement of our honeymoon. I did my best, however, to keep up Barbara's spirits, but she continued to be sad and despondent, and did not rally till we reached the gay city. The bright sunshine and the animation of the streets did wonders for us. I held her hand in mine as we drove to the hotel in which I had engaged rooms, and life assumed a joyful aspect. The color came again to Barbara's cheeks, the sparkle to her eyes.

"The worst is over, dearest," I said, "and we are together – and alone."

She pressed my hand fondly.

Was I really in love? I cannot answer. The fire of youth was in my veins, the light of hope was in my heart. Call it what you will – love, passion, desire – Barbara was all in all to me, and our fond endearments caused the hours to fly at lightning speed. The embarrassments and mortifications of yesterday were forgotten; to-day was ours, to enjoy. We dined at the hotel, by Barbara's plate a caraffe of iced water, by mine a bottle of old Burgundy. At nine o'clock, knowing that Barbara had some unpacking to do – for it was my intention to remain in Paris a week – I said that I would take a stroll in the streets, and would return at ten.

"It will take me quite two hours," she said, with a trembling eagerness in her voice, "to get my boxes in order."

"I will return at eleven," I said gaily, kissing her.

I strolled through the brilliantly lighted streets in a dream of delight. There was no Maxwell near to disturb me with his mocking laughter. Barbara was her bright self again, and she and I were "man and wife."

"Man and wife," I murmured. "Nothing can come between us now, nothing can separate us. She is mine forever. I am really a married man."

I saw in the window of a jeweler's shop a brooch with two hearts entwined. It was emblematical of Barbara's heart and mine, and I went in and purchased it, and purchased also at a florist's a bouquet of the loveliest flowers. It was now ten o'clock, and I had still an hour to myself. A long time to carry a large bouquet of flowers amidst a throng of people, but what cared I? Why should I hide my happiness? Was I not proud of my beautiful Barbara, whose pure and innocent heart I had won, and whose sweet companionship would brighten my days till we were both old and white-haired? Let the whole world know that the flowers were for my bride – let the whole world know that I was in love. Was not this the city of love? The hum of merry voices proclaimed it – the myriad stars, the soft air, the brilliant lights, the animated gestures of men and women, all proclaimed it. There were no dark shadows to blot the bright picture; joy was universal; there was no sadness, no death, no cankered care to wither the glad hopes of the future – all was light and love.

At a quarter to eleven I hastened to the hotel of which she was the sun, and paced the boulevard a few yards this way, a few yards that, and strolled into the courtyard, and looked at my watch, and impatiently counted the seconds, and fretted and fumed until the minute hand reached eleven. Then I eagerly mounted the stairs, and entered our sitting-room.

The lights were burning, and the room had a cheerful appearance. A communicating door led to the bedroom, and I listened at this door a moment, but heard no sound from within. I arranged the bouquet of flowers in a vase, which I filled with water, and then I turned out the lights, with the intention of entering our bridal chamber. But the door was fast. I tried very softly again and again to open it, and then with greater force, but it would not yield.

"Barbara," I called in a low tone, "it is I. Why have you locked the door?"

No answer reached my ears. I called several times, with the same result. Long before this I had become alarmed, and had re-lit the gas in the sitting-room. Stories of dark crimes committed in this city of light flashed through my mind. The door was locked, but that might be a blind. It was scarcely possible that Barbara could be in the room; she had been decoyed from the hotel upon some pretense, perhaps by the delivery of a false message from me. If so, what would be her fate? And even supposing her to be in her room, how to account for the frightful silence? Fool, criminal that I was to leave her alone, a hapless woman in a strange city! It was I, and I alone, who had brought the woman I loved into this perilous position.

I rushed down to the manager of the hotel, and asked if any visitors had been admitted into my rooms during my absence, or any message delivered to my wife. The manager, who was the soul of politeness, and who was smoking a cigarette after the labors of the day, made inquiries of the concierge and of the servants who had not retired to rest. No person had called to see madame; no message had been taken to her; she had not been seen to leave the hotel. Had she rung for refreshment or assistance? No. Had any sounds of disturbance been heard in her apartment? No, the apartment had been perfectly quiet. Were they certain that madame could not have left the hotel without being seen? It was not possible. She would have had to pass through the courtyard, and the concierge or an assistant was constantly on the watch, noting who came and who went. Then, how to account for the facts of her bedroom door being locked and of her not answering to my call? The servants could not account for it; the manager could not account for it. With profuse apologies he hazarded a question. Was madame subject to fainting fits? Was it that she had swooned? With my permission he would accompany me to the apartment, and together we could ascertain.

We ascertained nothing; we discovered no clue to the mystery. The door defied all our efforts to open it, and no reply was given to our summons. The suspense was maddening.

"See, monsieur," said the manager, stooping, and putting his eye to the key-hole, "the door is locked from within. The key is in the lock. Be tranquil; madame is safe; she has fallen into a sound sleep. I myself sleep so soundly that –"

I interrupted him impatiently.

"If my wife has fallen asleep she must be awakened."

He did not see the necessity; if I would be patient madame would herself awake when she had slept enough; then all would be well.

"My wife must be awakened," I repeated vehemently.

"Undoubtedly," he then said, falling complacently into my humor. "If you insist, monsieur, madame must be awakened."

"But how?" I cried, in a fever of anxiety, which with every passing moment grew more intense.

"As monsieur says," he replied, with exasperating coolness, "but how?"

"The lock must be forced."

"A million pardons, monsieur. The lock of the door is of a particular kind. It is not a common lock – no, no. It was put on especially for a distinguished visitor, who frequently occupies this apartment. It is what is called a patent lock, and is the property of our distinguished visitor. I cannot consent that it shall be forced."

"Then we will have a piece cut out of the door. By that means we can reach the key, and turn the lock from within."

"Again a million pardons. The door is of oak; it was made for our distinguished visitor. I cannot consent, monsieur, that the door shall be destroyed."

"Hang you! Stand aside!"

I pushed him away, and applied my shoulder to the door. I was young, I was strong, but I might as well have set myself against a rock. The door held firm and fast, and the noise I made did not arouse Barbara. Even in the midst of my despair I heard the manager remark, "These eccentric

English!" Finding my efforts vain, I beat the panels with my fists. A servant entered, and whispered to the manager.

"Desist, monsieur," he said, stepping forward, "you are disturbing our visitors. It cannot be permitted. In the adjoining apartment is a sick gentleman. He has already inquired whether there is a fire or an earthquake. If monsieur pleases, there is another way.'

"What is it? Quick – quick!"

"The window of madame's room looks out upon a courtyard at the back. It is easily reached by a ladder. The night is warm; madame may have left her window unfastened – "

I stopped any further explanation by hurrying him to the courtyard at the back. On the way he insisted upon informing me that the hotel was of the highest character and eminently respectable. No robbery had ever taken place in it; no crime had ever been committed within its walls. Madame was fatigued by her journey, and had probably taken an opiate. I should find her asleep in her bed quite safe – quite safe.

"The ladder – the ladder!" I cried, in a frenzy. "Where is the ladder?"

It was soon brought – though I thought it an age before it was fixed against the wall – and a porter commenced to ascend. But I pulled him back with a rough hand, and said I would go up myself. "These eccentric English!" I heard the manager again remark to those assembled around him.

His surmise was correct. The window was closed but not fastened; I pushed it open and stepped into the room.

It was dark, but by the light admitted through the open window I saw the form of my wife huddled upon the bed. I laid my hands upon her and called, "Barbara – dear Barbara!" A faint moan was the only response.

"Great God!" I cried. "She is dying!"

I swiftly lighted the gas, and the room was flooded with light. Then I discovered the horrible truth. An empty brandy bottle rolled from the bed to the floor, and on the dressing table was a corkscrew with the cork still in it. The cork was new, and the bright capsule by its side denoted that the bottle must have been full when it had been opened. I bent over Barbara's stupefied form, the fumes of liquor which tainted her hot breath were sickening. My wife was not dying. She was drunk!

The whole room was in a state of disorder; the bed curtains were torn, articles of feminine attire were scattered about, brushes and combs and other toilet requisites had been swept from the table, a chair had been upset; but at that moment I took little note of these signs, my attention being centred upon the degrading human spectacle which lay before me on the bed – my wife, the woman I had idealized as an embodiment of purity and simplicity.

I was not allowed to remain long undisturbed; I heard a smart rapping at the bedroom door, and I became instantly conscious that I had a new part to play. I closed and fastened the window, and drew the curtains across it, I lowered the gas almost to vanishing point, and then, turning the key in the lock, I opened the door just wide enough to see the manager's face.

"Madame is safe?" he inquired.

"Quite safe," I replied.

"As I said. Asleep?"

"Yes, asleep."

"As I said. There has been no crime or robbery?"

"There has been no crime or robbery."

"And madame is well?"

"Quite well."

"I trust you are satisfied, monsieur."

"Perfectly satisfied."

"Is anything more required?"

"Nothing more."

"No assistance of any kind? The chambermaid is here. Shall she attend to madame?"

"Her assistance is not needed. Good-night."

"Good-night, monsieur."

As he and the attendants left the adjoining room, I heard him remark for the third time, "These eccentric English!"

CHAPTER V

The first thing I did was to securely bolt and lock every door, to darken every window that gave access to our rooms. I must be alone with my shame and my grief. No one must know – the secret of this vile, this unutterable disgrace must not escape, must not be whispered, must not be suspected. From the friends who had been present at the wedding ceremony I could not expect sympathy after the way in which they had been treated; from strangers I could hope for none; by friends and strangers alike I should be pointed at and derided. I must wear a false face to all the world – as false as the face my wife had worn to me during our courtship. For in the first flush of the frightful discovery I did not stop to palter with myself, I did not attempt to disguise the truth, to delude myself with the hope that this was a new experience in Barbara's character. The fatal truth fastened itself in my heart. Signs which had borne no baneful significance in the past were now suddenly and rightfully interpreted. I understood Maxwell's mocking words and laughter:

"You want hardening, my boy, and you'll get it," he had said, Again, "Barbara is not in a condition to see anybody. When she is in that state, best leave her, old fellow. There's a hint for you in your matrimonial campaign." And then his last derisive exclamation, "What a jolly wedding day!" The meaning of the looks he and Barbara had exchanged on that day when we three were together after the ceremony, was now clear to me, as clear and withering as a blasting lightning stroke. She was a drunkard, and he was keeping the joke from me. His look conveyed the threat, "Be careful, or I will betray you." Aye, betray her before she betrayed herself! The momentary defiance in her eyes died away, and she trembled in his presence.

"I will betray you!" Good God, how I had been betrayed! Barbara was mine forever; as Maxwell had said, she was all my own. We were linked together; our fates were united. There were no separate paths which each could tread apart from the other. Hand in hand we must take our way, and death alone could tear us asunder. On my honor as a man there died within me during those few moments of torturing reflection all the love I had borne for Barbara. I awoke to the fact that it was not true love, but animal passion for her beauty, that had led me into this pit of shame and despair.

Some men arrive, by slow and devious roads, at a belief that shakes their faith to its foundations. Not so I. As surely as I knew that I lived and moved did I know that I was wedded to a drunkard, and that there was no civilized law that could divorce me from her. I was Barbara's shield and protector, her lord, her master, her victim. Her claim upon me was not to be evaded; even to dispute it would cover me with ignominy, would make my name a bye-word. I could not break the fetters of the law which bound us together and made us one. Had Barbara not been a confirmed drunkard, she could never have drank a full bottle of brandy in so short a time. Three or four glasses would have overcome her, and she could not have continued to tittle.

Think what you will of me, I declare that I had no compassion for the woman I had married. No pity for her stirred my heart. Perfect in its devilish cunning was the duplicity she had practised. "You do not like wine?" I had said to her. "I detest it," she had answered; and never in my presence had she drank anything except water. Most artfully had she concealed from me a secret which was to wreck all my hopes of happiness, which was to shut out from me all the pure and innocent pleasures which a man at my time of life might naturally look forward to. What pity could I have for one who had done this evil?

I made no attempt to rouse my wife, not because I feared I should not succeed, but because I had no desire to restore her to consciousness and to hold converse with her. I needed time to review more calmly the position in which I was placed and to decide upon my course of action in the future. Meanwhile I applied myself to an examination of the bedroom. One of Barbara's trunks was unlocked; the lid was down, but a litter of feminine apparel on the floor denoted that it had been hurriedly opened and the articles of clothing as hurriedly snatched from the top, with no intention, as Barbara

had indicated, of putting her things in order, but rather of getting quickly at something which lay beneath. Had I the right to search this trunk? was the question I mentally put to myself. I did not, however, stop to discuss it. Right or wrong, I raised the lid, and taking out the garments which first met my eyes I found beneath them damning proofs of Barbara's degradation. Five bottles of brandy were brought to light – the one she had emptied made the sixth. She had provided herself liberally, sufficient for six days at the rate she had commenced.

My first impulse was to throw them out of the window, but I checked myself in time. The noise of the broken glass would have brought the manager and his staff buzzing about me. What should I do with the cursed things? Leave them in her trunk? No; it would be inviting a series of disgraceful exhibitions such as that which lay within my view. From me she would receive no assistance to reach a lower depth than that into which she had fallen. I could at least make it difficult for her to obtain her next supply of liquor without my knowledge, so I carried the bottles to the outer room, and secreted them in one of my own trunks, determining to get rid of them by some means in the course of the next few hours. Then I huddled Barbara's clothes into her trunk, and closed the lid. Without casting another glance at my wife, who was now beginning to breathe more heavily, I returned to the sitting-room, and sinking into a chair, burst into a passionate fit of weeping.

Thus did I pass my bridal night.

CHAPTER VI

At seven in the morning I heard my wife shifting restlessly and moaning in her bedroom. I had not had a moment's sleep during the night. My eyes closed occasionally from weariness, but sleep did not come to me; nor did I woo it, for I felt the necessity of keeping awake, lest Barbara should create a disturbance. Her condition was a new and bitter experience to me, and I did not know what form it might take. In whatever form it presented itself I must be prepared to cope with it; and it behoved me, therefore, to keep on the watch.

I paid no attention to Barbara's moans, but went to my dressing-room and bathed my face with cold water which refreshed and strengthened me. In the front courtyard the birds were singing and the fountain was playing. I threw the window open; the air was sweet and fresh, and I was grateful for the relief it afforded me.

My wife continued to groan and toss about, and still I did not go to her. At length she called my name in a fretful voice.

"Well?" I said, standing by the bedside.

"Why did you not come to me before?" she asked, querulously. "Did you not hear me?"

"Yes, I heard you."

"And you kept away! How could you, love, how could you, when I am suffering so?" She paused for a sympathetic word from me, which she did not receive. "I am so ill, dear John, so very, very ill! My head is on fire. Give me your hand."

I made no responsive movement, and she looked at me from beneath her half-closed lids.

"You are not looking well yourself, John. Have you had a bad night?"

"A most horrible night."

"I am so sorry, dear. Watching by my side for so many hours has tired you."

"I have not been watching by your side."

"You bad boy – what could you have been doing; and why do you speak to me so unfeelingly? I am sure I have done nothing to deserve it. Oh, my poor head! You did not know I was accustomed to these headaches."

"No, I did not know."

"I ought to have told you, dear."

"Yes, you ought to have told me. It would have been better for both of us."

"I don't see that; unless you have deceived me, it could have made no difference in your feelings, and I believed every word you said – yes, I did, John, dear." She shuddered and moaned, as though seized with an ague. "Get me something, or I shall go mad with pain!"

"What will you have? A cup of tea?"

An expression of disgust spread over her features. "Tea! It is the worst thing I could take. You do not understand – of course you do not understand. Put your arm round me, dear; let me lean my head on your shoulder; it will relieve me." I did not stir. "What do you mean by treating me so cruelly? I am your wife, and you promised to love and cherish me. Have you forgotten so soon, so soon?" I did not reply, and her voice grew more imploring. "When women suffer as I do, John, they need something to keep up their strength. Oh, this frightful sinking! I am sure a little brandy would do me good. Don't be shocked; I wouldn't ask for it if I wasn't certain it would remove this horrible pain."

"Otherwise," I said, with sad and bitter emphasis, "you would not touch it, you have such abhorrence of it."

"Why, of course I have. I take it only as a medicine." I picked up the empty brandy bottle, and placed it on the dressing table. "Oh, that," she exclaimed. "It was filled with lemonade, and I drank it every drop while you were away last night. What kept you so long? Oh, my head is racked! I hope no pretty Frenchwoman –"

"Be silent!" I cried, sternly. "Of what use is this subterfuge? You cannot deceive me."

"I never tried to r I would not be so wicked. It is cruel of you to pick a quarrel with me the moment we are married. People wouldn't believe it if they were told. For God's sake, get me a little brandy!"

"From me, Barbara, not one drop!"

"You won't?"

"No, I will not."

"Brute! Leave my room!"

I was glad to obey her, feeling how idle it was to pursue the conversation. The moment I was gone I heard her scramble from the bed and lock the door. Then I heard the sound of things being violently tossed about, and presently the door was unlocked, and she stood before me with a flaming face.

"You are a thief!" she screamed. "You are a sneak and a spy – "

"Hush, Barbara! The people in the hotel will hear you."

"Let them hear! What do I care? You are my husband, and you are a thief. How dare you rob me? How dare you sneak, and pry, and search my boxes, while I am asleep? You'll be picking my pocket, next, I suppose. But I'll show you that a married woman has rights. You men can't grind poor weak women into the dust any longer. I'll show you!" She rang the bell violently.

"The servants must not see you in that state, Barbara," I said, with my back against the door.

"They shall see me in any state I please, and I will let them know – I will let all the world know – that we have been married hardly a day, and that this is the way you are treating me. I give you fair warning. If you don't get me the brandy I will scream the house down!"

What could I do? A waiter rapped at the door, and asked what monsieur required. I gave him the order, and when the brandy was brought I took it from him without allowing him to enter. Before I had time to turn round Barbara snatched the decanter from my hand, and ran with it into the bedroom. In a few minutes she returned, looking, to my astonishment, bright and well.

"See what good it has done me," she said, in a blithe tone. "When I am suffering nothing has such an effect upon me as a small glass of brandy. It pulls me together in a moment almost. The doctor ordered it especially for me, and when I can't get it at once I feel as if I should go mad. I don't know what I say or do, so I am not accountable, you know. Ask the doctor. I'll let you into my secret, my dear.' All women take it, from the highest to the lowest. Fact, upon my word. You are a goose. Now, we will not quarrel any more, will we? Kiss me, and make it up."

I kissed her to keep her quiet, and, indeed, I felt that I was helpless in the hands of this brazen and cunning woman.

"Barbara," I said, "you have caused me the greatest grief I have ever experienced."

"I am so sorry, so very, very sorry!" she murmured. "Can I say more than that?"

"You can, Barbara. You can promise me never to drink spirits again."

"Do you think I ever intend to?" she asked, in a tone of astonishment.

"I don't know."

"Now listen to me, love," she said, with an ingenuous smile. "I will never touch another drop as long as I live."

"Do you mean that truly?"

"Truly, truly, truly! I was so ill, and so unhappy at being left alone! I can't bear you out of my sight, John, dear, and if you won't take advantage of it I don't mind confessing I am a wee bit jealous. We will not talk of it any more, will we?"

"It is a solemn promise you have given me."

"A solemn, solemn promise, love. If you have any doubts of me I will go down on my knees and swear it."

"I take your word, Barbara."

While Barbara was dressing the manager of the hotel waited upon me, and to my surprise handed me my account. As I had not been in the house twenty-four hours I inquired if it was usual for his visitors to pay from day to day. No, he replied blandly it was not usual. Then why call upon me so soon for payment? Did he mistrust me? He was shocked at the suggestion. Mistrust an English gentleman? Certainly not – no, no. This with perfect politeness and much deprecatory waving of his hands.

"But you expect a settlement of this account," I said, irritated by his manner.

"If monsieur pleases. And if monsieur will be so obliging as to seek another hotel in which he will be more comfortable, more at his ease – "

"I understand," I said. "You turn me out. Why?"

"If monsieur will be pleased to listen. The servants were not used to the ways of monsieur and madame; and there had been complaints from visitors. The sick gentleman in the next apartment – "

"Enough," I said, impatiently. "I leave your hotel within the hour, and I will never set foot in it again."

He was grieved, devastated, but if monsieur had so resolved —

These uncompleted sentences were very significant, and afforded a sufficiently clear explanation of the proceeding. With suppressed anger I ran my eye down the account, and pointed to an item of five francs for brandy.

"Supplied this morning," he explained, "to monsieur's order. Five francs – yes, monsieur would find it quite correct."

"I required only a small glass," I said. "It is an imposition."

He trusted not; such an accusation had never been brought against him. Would monsieur be kind enough to produce the decanter? A proper deduction would be made if only one small glass had been taken.

"Produce the decanter! Certainly I will."

I called to Barbara to give me the decanter, and, her white arm bared to the shoulder, she handed it out to me. It was empty. I blushed from shame.

"Does monsieur find the account correct?"

"It is correct. Here is your money."

He receipted the bill and departed with polite bows and more deprecatory waving of his hands. As I sat with my closed eyes covered by my hand, Barbara touched my shoulder. I looked up into her smiling face.

"Have I made myself beautiful, dear?"

Most assuredly she would have been so in other men's eyes, for she was eminently attractive, but she was not in mine. Her beautiful outside served only to accentuate what was corrupt within.

"Why do you not answer? Are you not proud of your wife?"

Proud of her? Great God! Proud of a woman who had brought this shame upon me, and who, but an hour ago, was as degraded a spectacle as imagination could compass.

"Don't get sulky again," she said, and as I still did not speak, she asked vehemently, "What is the matter now?"

"Simply that we are turned out of the hotel," I replied.

"Is that all? The insolent ruffians! It is a thousand pities we ever came here. But why get sulky over it? Paris is crammed with hotels, and they will only be too glad to take our money."

"It is not that, Barbara. I wish to know if you drank all the brandy in the decanter."

"All? It wasn't more than a thimbleful. And see what good it did me."

"Did you finish it before you promised never to touch spirits again?"

"What a tragedy voice, and what a tragedy face! Of course I did. Do you think I would be so dishonorable as to break a promise I gave you – you, of all, men? That isn't showing much confidence in me."

"You will keep that promise faithfully, Barbara?"

"I should be ashamed to look you in the face if I did not mean to keep it faithfully. You will never find me doing anything underhanded or behind your back, John."

I rallied at this. My happiness was lost, but there was a hope that our shame would not be revealed to the world. As for what had occurred in this hotel, once we were gone it would soon be forgotten. The swiftly turning kaleidoscope of life in Paris is too absorbing in its changes to allow the inhabitants to dwell long upon one picture, especially on a picture the principle figures in which were persons so insignificant as ourselves.

"Not a sou," cried Barbara, snapping her fingers in the faces of the servants who swarmed about us when we were seated in the carriage; "not one sou, you greedy beggars!" We drove out of the courtyard, and Barbara, turning to me, said in her sweetest tone, "I hope you will be very good to me, John, for you see how weak I am. Oh, what I have gone through since you put the wedding ring on my finger! The dear wedding ring!" She put it to her lips and then to mine. "I do nothing but kiss it when I am alone. It means so much to both of us – love, faithfulness, truth, trust in one another. All our troubles are over now, are they not, love? And we are really commencing our honeymoon."

CHAPTER VII

There was no difficulty in obtaining accommodation at another hotel. The choice rested with me, for I was not particular as to terms, I had no scruple in spending part of my capital, my intentions having always been to adopt a profession, and not to pass my days in idleness. My inclination was for literature; I was vain enough to believe that I had in me the makings of a novelist, and I had already in manuscript the skeleton of a work of fiction upon which I intended to set to work when I was settled down in life. Before our marriage I had confided my ambitious schemes to Barbara.

"Delightful!" she exclaimed. "My husband will be a famous author. What a proud woman I shall be when I hear people praise his books!"

I brought away from the hotel letters which had arrived for me, and Barbara carried the bouquet I had purchased for her on the previous night. The moment we were in our new quarters she called for a vase, and placed the flowers in water. The brooch I had purchased at the same time was still in my pocket; the device of two hearts entwined was a mockery now in its application to Barbara and myself.

"How sweet of you to buy these flowers," she said, with tender glances at me. "You will always love me, will you not – you will always buy flowers for me? I have heard people say that marriage acts upon love like cold water on fire – puts it out, but I should die with grief if I thought that would be so with us. What are your letters about, dear?"

They were from agents, giving me particulars of two houses, either of which would be a suitable residence for us when we returned to London, and set up housekeeping. Barbara and I had made many pleasant journeys in search of a house, and we had selected two in the neighborhood of West Kensington. One was unfurnished, the other had been the residence for a few months of a gentleman who had furnished it in good style, and was desirous of selling the furniture and his interest in the lease. I preferred the former, Barbara the latter, and I now gave her the letters to read. The furnished house was offered to me for a sum which I considered moderate, and an answer had to be given immediately, as another likely purchaser was making inquiries about it.

"Now sit down, like a good boy," said Barbara, "and send the agent a cheque, and settle it at once. It will be the dearest little home, and we shall be as happy as the day is long."

I had no heart to argue the matter; after the experiences of the last twenty-four hours one house was as good to me as another. A home we must have, and I earnestly desired to avoid contention, so for the sake of peace I did as Barbara wished, and wrote to the agent to close the bargain. While I was attending to my correspondence Barbara was bustling about and chatting with a chambermaid with whom she appeared to be already on confidential terms.

"What delightful rooms these are," she said, looking over my shoulder as I was writing, "and what a clever business man my dear boy is! I am ever so glad we moved from that disagreeable hotel. You must consult me in these things for the future; I have an instinct which always guides me right. The moment I entered the place I knew we should not be comfortable there. Go on with your letters while Annette assists me to unpack. You must not look on, sir; I shall not let you into the secrets of a lady's wardrobe till we have been married a year at least. When you have finished your letters you can arrange your private treasures while I am arranging mine, or if you are too tired you can lie on the sofa and smoke a cigar. Would it shock you very much if I smoked a cigarette? It is quite the fashionable thing for ladies to do."

I replied that I did not like to see women smoke.

"Then you shall not see me do it," she said, vivaciously. "I would die rather than give you one moment's annoyance."

Annette was the chambermaid, a tall, thin-faced, spare woman of middle age; and a stranger, observing her and my wife together, would have supposed they had been long acquainted. Barbara was given to sudden and violent likings and dislikings, and had once said to me, "I love impulsive

people. They are ever so much better and so much more genuine than people who hum and ha, and want time to consider whether they are fond of you or not. They resemble spiders who, after watching for days and days, creep out of their corners when you least expect it, and bind you tight so that you can't move, and say, 'I have made up my mind; I am going to eat you bit by bit.'" I thought this speech very clever when I first heard it, and I became immediately a worshiper of impulsiveness. That Barbara should strike up a sudden friendship with the new chambermaid did not, therefore, surprise me. Together they proceeded with the unpacking of Barbara's wardrobe, Barbara darting in upon me now and then to give me a kiss, "on the sly," she whispered, "for she mustn't see." Then she would return to Annette, and they would laugh and talk. My letters written, I lit a cigar and took up a French newspaper. Once Barbara brought a peculiar flavor into the room, and I asked her what it was.

"Cloves," she replied. "I dote on them." She popped one into my mouth, and said, "Now we are equal and you can't complain. Oh, John, promise me never, never to eat onions alone. I am passionately fond of them. You are beginning to find out all my little failings."

She ran into the bedroom to tell Annette the joke, and there was much giggling between them.

"How provoking!" she cried, darting in for the twentieth time. "I have mislaid the key of my small trunk. Lend me your keys; perhaps one of them will fit."

I gave her my bunch of keys, and she was a long time trying them. I took no notice of this, being engrossed in a feuilleton, and taking from the style in which the exciting incidents were described a lesson for the novel I contemplated writing.

"Not one of them will fit," said Barbara, throwing the keys into my lap. Shortly afterwards she called out, "Congratulate me, John, I have found my key. It was in my pocket all the time. See what a simple little woman you have married; and you thought me clever, you foolish boy!"

So far as I can recall my impressions I am endeavoring to describe them faithfully. I went through many transitions of feeling in those days, now hoping, now despairing, now accusing myself of doing my wife an injustice, now sternly convinced that I was right. On this day I was comforted, Barbara was so bright, so ingenuous, and I firmly believed she would keep the promise she had given me. She brought into play all the arts and fascinations by which she had beguiled me in our courting days. She ordered me to take her for a drive, to buy her violets, to drive to the Magasin de Louvre to make purchases (where she selected a number of things she did not need), to take her to a famous restaurant to dine – "it is so dull," she said, "to dine in a stuffy little room all by ourselves" – and, dinner over, she invited me to accompany her to a theatre where a comedy was being played which Annette had told her was very amusing.

"I can't live without excitement," she said. "I love theatres, I love bright weather, I love flowers, I love handsome men – why do you look so grave, sir? Do you not love handsome women? You are a ninny if you don't, and if you don't, sir, why did you marry me?"

"Barbara," I said gravely, "it is a strange question, I know, but do you think we are suited to one another?"

"It is a strange question," she replied, laughing. "My dear, we were made for one another. Fie, love! Do you forget that marriages are made in Heaven?"

"Ours, Barbara?"

"Certainly, ours."

Wonderful were the inconsistencies of her utterances; one moment questioning whether she had not made a mistake in marrying me, the next declaring that our marriage was made in heaven.

"I have not a secret from you," I said.

"Nor I from you," she returned. "I hope you agree with me, John, that there should be perfect confidence between man and wife, that they should hide nothing from one another."

"I do agree with you; not even the smallest matter should be hidden."

"Yes, John, love, not even the smallest matter. Little things are often very important, and it is so awkward to be found out. I am so glad we are of one mind about this. When we first engaged I said

to Maxwell, 'John shall know everything about me – everything. All my faults and failings – nothing shall be hidden from him. Then he can't reproach me afterwards. I will be perfectly frank with him.' Maxwell called me a fool, and said there were lots of things people ought to keep to themselves, and that I should be horrified if I were told all the dreadful things you had done. He spoke of wild oats, and bachelors living alone, and the late suppers they had in their chambers with girls and all sorts of queer company. But I was determined. You might deceive me, but I would not deceive you. I would not have that upon my conscience."

"You really kept nothing from me, Barbara?"

"Nothing, love."

"And you are keeping nothing from me now?"

"Nothing, love."

I did not press her farther. Her smiling eyes looked into mine, and I had received incontestible proof that she was lying to my face.

CHAPTER VIII

I was an inveterate smoker, and at this period my favorite habit was a consolation to me. I smoked at all hours of the day, and Barbara had encouraged me, saying that she loved the smell of a cigar. But on the morning following the conversation I have just recorded she complained that my cigar made her ill, and I went into the boulevard to smoke it. When I had thrown away the stump I returned to the hotel to attend to my trunks, which were not yet unpacked. These trunks were in a small ante-room, the key of which I had put in my pocket. I had adopted this precaution in order that they should not be in Barbara's sight, that she should not be left alone with them, and that when I unpacked them she should not see what they contained. Upon my return to the hotel Barbara was in her bed-room, attending to her toilet, and Annette was with her. It was Barbara's first visit to Paris, and we had arranged to make the round of its principal attractions.

The first trunk I opened was that in which I had deposited the five bottles of brandy I had found among Barbara's dresses. To my astonishment they were gone.

I was positive I had placed them there, but to make sure I searched my second trunk, with the same result. The bottles had been abstracted. By whom, and by what means?

The cunning hand was Barbara's.

What kind of a woman was I wedded to who spoke so fair and acted so treacherously, who could smile in my face with secret designs in her heart against my peace and happiness? I could go even farther than that, and say against my honor. Fearful lest my indignation might cause me to lose control over myself and lead to a scandalous scene, I locked the trunk and left the hotel. In the open air I could more calmly review the deplorable position into which I had been betrayed.

It is the correct word to use. Treacherously, basely, had I been betrayed.

It was long before I was sufficiently composed to apply myself to the consideration of the plan by means of which Barbara obtained the bottles of brandy. The lock of the trunk had not been tampered with, and no force had been used in opening it. She must have had a duplicate key. How did she become possessed of it?

I examined my keys, and I fancied I discerned traces of wax upon them. I inquired my way to the nearest locksmith, and giving him the bunch asked whether an impression in wax had been taken of any of them.

"Of a certainty, monsieur," he said, "else I could not have made them."

"It is you, then, who made the duplicates?"

"Assuredly, it is I, monsieur."

"Of how many?"

"Of two, monsieur."

"Of these two?" indicating the keys of my two trunks.

"Exactly, monsieur."

"From impressions in wax which you received."

"Yes, yes, monsieur," he said, redundantly affirmative. "Have you come to ask for them? But they were delivered and paid for last night."

"By a thin-faced, middle-aged woman, with gray eyes and a white face?"

"The description is perfect. I trust the keys are to your satisfaction, and that they fit the locks."

"They fit admirably," I said, and I gave him good morning.

Annette! She was in my wife's pay; together they had conspired against me. The first practical step towards obtaining access to my boxes was taken when Barbara informed me that she had mislaid one of her keys, and borrowed my bunch; then the impressions in wax, and Annette going to the locksmith to give the order; then the packet containing the keys which Annette had secretly conveyed to my wife while my back was turned; then Barbara's complaint this morning that my cigar made

her ill, and my going out to smoke. During my absence my trunk was opened and rifled. The petty little mystery was solved.

It was late when I returned to the hotel. I expected a stormy scene, it being now two hours after the time I had appointed to take Barbara to see the sights of Paris; but she was not in our rooms to reproach me. In the bedroom I noticed that two padlocks had been newly fixed to each of her trunks. I went into the office to make inquiries.

"Madame is out," said the manager.

"On foot?"

"No, monsieur; in the carriage that was ordered."

"Did she go alone?"

"No, monsieur; Annette accompanied her."

"Annette!" I exclaimed. "Has she not her duties to attend to here?"

"She is no longer in our service," was the reply. "She is engaged by madame. It was sudden, but she begged to be allowed to leave. Your wife implored also, monsieur, and as another woman who had been with us before as chambermaid was ready to take her place, we consented – to oblige madame."

"Is Annette a good servant?"

"An excellent domestic."

"Trustworthy, honest, and sober?"

"Perfectly. Madame could not desire a better."

Every word he spoke was in Annette's favor, and I felt that another burden was on my life. If I could not cope with Barbara alone, how much less able was I to cope with her now that she had such an ally as this sly creature?

At five o'clock they came in together, my wife flushed and elated, Annette quiet and placid as usual.

"I have had a lovely day," said Barbara, as Annette assisted her to disrobe. "I suppose my dear boy has been running all over the city in search of me."

"You are mistaken," I replied. "I have not searched for you at all."

"I am not going to believe everything you say, you bad boy," she said, darting into the bedroom.

I divined the reason; it was to ascertain whether the padlocks on her boxes had been tampered with. Reassured on this point, she resumed her chatter.

"How lonely my dear boy must have been! I declare he has been smoking. Annette, give me my clothes. Will you have one, John? No? Is it not good of Annette to accept the situation I offered her? She will travel with us to Switzerland and Italy, and will tell us all we want to know about the hotels there, and what is worth seeing, and what not. She will save you no end of money. And what a perfect lady's maid she is! I wonder what possessed me to leave England without one; but I am glad now that I did not engage one there, for I could not have got anybody half so handy and clever as Annette."

While my wife was speaking Annette made no sign, and nothing in her manner indicated that she understood what was being said in her praise. Had she been a stone image she could not have shown less interest. This was carrying acting too far, for her name being frequently mentioned, she would naturally have exhibited some curiosity.

"And only thirty-five pounds a year," my wife continued, and would have continued her prattle had I not interrupted her.

"I should like to speak to you alone, Barbara."

"We are alone, you dear boy." I looked towards the imperturbable woman she had engaged. "Oh, do you object to Annette? What difference can she make? She understands no language but her own."

"I should prefer to be alone with you."

"To say disagreeable things, I suppose, when there are no witnesses present. Oh, I know you. She shall not go."

"Do you think it right to oppose me in such a small matter? Surely we ought to keep our quarrels to ourselves."

"Who is quarreling?" she retorted. "I am not. And as to what is right and wrong, I am as good a judge as you."

"Annette," said I, addressing the woman in French, "leave the room."

"Oui, monsieur," she replied, with perfect submissiveness, and was about to go when my wife said:

"Annette, remain here."

"Oui, madame," she replied, without any indication of surprise at these contradictory orders. To outward appearance she was an absolutely passive agent, ready at a word to go hither or thither, to say yea or nay, without the least feeling or interest in the matter; but any one who judged her by this standard would have found himself grievously at fault.

"Very well," I said. "I will postpone speaking of a very serious subject till I can do so out of the hearing of strangers. I will only say now that you should not have engaged this woman without consulting me."

"Indeed, I shall not consult you," returned Barbara, "upon my domestic arrangements, and I am astonished at your interference. It is I who have to attend to them, and I will not be thwarted and ordered to do this or that. You think a wife is a slave; I will show you that she is not." She paused a moment, and then shrugged her shoulders. "What you have to say had best be said at once, perhaps. In heaven's name let us get it over." She stepped to Annette's side, and whispered a word or two in her ear; the next moment we were alone. "Now, John, what is it?"

"With the connivance of that woman you have had false keys made, with which, in my absence – artfully contrived by yourself – you have opened my trunks."

"Go on."

"You admit it."

"I admit nothing. Go on."

"With those false keys you ransacked my trunks, and stole certain articles from them."

"Stole?" she cried with a scornful laugh. "A proper word for you to use."

"Never mind the word –"

"But I shall mind the word. You will be dictating to me next how I shall express myself. If there is a thief here, it is you. I call you thief to your face. You ought to feel flattered that I followed your example, but nothing seems to please you. And you should consider, my dear – what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. You opened my trunks on the sly; I opened yours on the sly, and took possession of my property which you had stolen from me."

"I admit," I said, speaking without passion, "that I was wrong –"

"Oh, indeed! And that admission justifies you?"

"The end justified me; what I found justified me."

"In your opinion, because you can do no wrong. Seriously, my love, do you look upon me as a child, and do you think I will allow myself to be spied upon and robbed with impunity?"

"What I did was for your good."

"Allow me, if you please, to be the judge of what is good for me. Will it offend you to hear me say that no gentleman would act as you have done?"

It would have been wiser, perhaps, had I refrained from uttering the retort that rose to my lips.

"Would any lady act as you have acted?"

But who can control himself when he is brought face to face with an overwhelming and undeserved misfortune.

"Best leave ladies and gentlemen out of the question," she said, mockingly. "As you pay me the compliment of declaring that I am not a lady, pay me the further compliment of designating what I am."

I was silent.

"I will give you a little lesson in frankness, my dear. When I married you I believed I was marrying a man of honor, unfortunately I was mistaken. It has not taken me long to discover that my husband is a common spy – attached to the detective office, probably, the sort of man who listens at keyholes and searches his wife's pockets when she is asleep. Don't forget, love, that it was you who commenced it. If I were a milksop I should sit down and weep, as some poor creatures do, but I am not a milksop; I can protect myself. Therefore, John. I am not going to make myself unhappy; I am much too sensible. I am not an old woman yet, and I intend to enjoy my life. And now, my dear," she added, after a moment's pause, "I am waiting for your next insult."

"I am afraid it is useless to argue with you," I said, sadly.

"Upon this subject, quite useless," she replied. "Upon any other I am your humble servant. Have you finished, then? Thank you. Annette!"

The woman came in so promptly as to convince me that she had been listening in the passage.

"She waited outside by my orders," said my wife, laughing.

I left them together.

CHAPTER IX

When I had left Barbara and Annette together, I took myself seriously to task. I asked myself whether I understood Barbara's character, and the answer seemed clear. I had not studied it; I did not understand it. She was a beautiful creature with whom I had fallen in love; it was surface love, and I had made no attempt to probe the inner life. In this respect I was no worse off than multitudes of men and women who marry without knowing each other. Was Barbara to blame for it? No. She was in a state of dependence upon a brother whose character I detested. I had offered myself and was accepted. For the fate in store for me I, and I alone, was to blame.

I would be lenient towards her; I would devise some wise plan by which she could be wooed from the wrong path. After all, she was, perhaps, to be pitied. Thus did I argue, thus did I manufacture excuses for her, thus did I school myself into a calmer frame of mind.

In this better mood I met her when Annette was not with her, and asked where she would dine.

"Where you please," she answered, meekly.

Her softened tone filled me with pity and remorse.

"My wish is to please you," I said.

She glanced at me in surprise.

"Are you setting a trap for me?" she asked.

"No, Barbara, only I have been thinking that we do not quite understand one another."

"It seems so," she admitted, in a mournful voice, "and it is making me very unhappy."

"Well, don't let it make you unhappy any longer. We both have faults, and we will try to correct them."

"You dear boy!" she cried, throwing her arms round my neck. "Then you confess you were in the wrong?"

"Yes, I confess it, Barbara."

"And I confess that I was in the wrong. Now, we are equal."

After a pause:

"No one is quite perfect, John."

"It is not within human limits, Barbara."

"We agree – we agree!" she danced about the room in delight. "Isn't it delightful? Oh, I was beginning to despair!"

There was really something childlike in her voice and manner, and I followed her movements with admiration. Suddenly she stopped, and throwing herself on the sofa, hid her face in the cushion, and began to sob.

It was the first time that an act of mine had caused a woman to sob, and it unmanned me. I sat by her side and soothed her with awkward, endearing words, and my efforts were rewarded; she became calmer.

"It is so sweet, so sweet, when you are like this!" she murmured, and dried her eyes. "You are my dear old boy again, just as you were before we were married. Oh, John, why did you go over my boxes on the sly?"

"It was wrong; I have confessed it."

"But I like to hear you say it. You were wrong!"

"Yes, I was wrong."

"You mean it, dear – you are not deceiving me?"

"No, Barbara, I am not deceiving you."

She pouted. "It is nothing but 'Barbara, Barbara.' 'Yes, Barbara,' 'No, Barbara.' Not so very long ago you would say, 'No, my love,' 'Yes, my darling.' Now, my dear, dear boy, say out of your very heart, 'I am not deceiving you, my darling.'"

I repeated the words; to have refused, to have hesitated, would have destroyed the good work, the better understanding, of which I seemed to see the promise.

"I am not deceiving you, my darling."

"Oh, how good it is to hear you speak like that! It is like waking out of a horrid dream to a delightful reality. And you truly, truly love me?"

Again I answered, under pressure. "I truly love you."

"Then I don't care for anything else in the wide, wide world, and I am the happiest woman in it. You had almost forgotten, had you not, John, that I was alone in this city, without a friend but you? I have only you – only you. I hardly cared to live, for what is life without love? But I was frightening myself unnecessarily – or were you doing it just to try me. You will be kind to me, will you not, dear?"

"Indeed, I have no other desire."

"See how a foolish woman can create shadows that terrify her. That is what I did; but they are gone now, all blown away by my dear boy's tender words. And you don't mind my little faults – you will put up with them."

I ventured a saving clause. "Yes, Barbara, and I will try to correct them."

"Of course you will; I expect you to. But you must do it in a nice way. Long lectures are horrid. When I try to correct yours – for that will be only fair play, John, will it, not? – you will see how gentle I will be."

"At the same time, Barbara, while we are correcting each other's faults, we must help ourselves by trying to correct our own."

"I promise, with all my heart; and when I make a promise in that way you may be perfectly sure that it will be performed. That is a virtue I really possess. And so we will go on correcting each other till we are old, old people, ready to become angels, when we sha'n't have any faults at all to correct. For angels are faultless, you know. I am deeply religious, John, dear. There are angels and devils. The good people become angels, the wicked people devils."

"You are mixing up things, rather, are you not, Barbara?"

"Well, it is full of mystery, and who does know for certain? But one can believe; there is no harm in that, is there?"

"None at all."

"And I believe there is a heaven and a hell. You believe it, too, of course?"

"Assuredly I believe there is a heaven, but not that there is a hell hereafter."

She pondered over the words. "A hell hereafter! Why the 'hereafter,' dear?"

"Because I have a firm conviction that we may suffer hell in this life, but not in the next."

"A hell in this life! That would be awful. We will not suffer it, love."

"I trust not, sincerely."

"Trust not!" You mean you are sure we shall not, surely."

"I am sure we shall not, Barbara."

I was as wax in her hands, standing, so to speak, forever on the edge of a precipice of her creating, and compelled to the utterance of sentiments to which I could not conscientiously subscribe, in order to escape the wreck of a possible happiness.

"That I believe in hell fire and you do not," she said, thoughtfully, "shall not be a cause of difference between us. Everybody thinks his own ideas of religion are right. Perhaps by and by I will try to convert you, and if you feel very strongly on the subject of hell you shall try to convert me. Which do you think worse – a hell in this life, or a hell in the next?"

"I have never considered it. Don't let us worry ourselves about theological matters during our honeymoon."

"You are right, John; see how quickly I give in to you. I will tell you why, sir – because it is a wife's duty. You will never find me behindhand in that. Our honeymoon! How nicely you said it."

There shall be nothing but sunshine and flowers, and the singing of birds, and love. Oh, what a happy, happy time! And you are no longer angry with me that I have engaged Annette?"

"I am not angry with you at all."

"John," she said, shaking her finger playfully at me, "that is an evasion, and you mustn't set me bad examples. Answer my question immediately, sir."

"Well, Barbara, so long as she does not bring discord between us – "

She stopped me with a kiss. "No, John, that will not do – it really will not do, you bad boy. You mustn't take unreasonable antipathies to people. A lady's-maid has a great deal to put up with, and mistresses are often very trying. There, you see, I don't spare myself – oh, no, I am a very just person, and I like every one to be justly treated. Say at once, sir, that you are no longer angry with me for engaging Annette."

Mistrusting the woman as I did, I was forced, for the sake of peace, to express approval of her. Barbara clapped her hands, and declared we should be quite a happy family.

It was after this interview that Barbara had a religious fit. Twice a day she went to the Madeleine, and spent an hour there upon her knees. Sometimes Annette accompanied her, sometimes I, upon her invitation. I asked her why she, a Protestant, frequented a Catholic place of worship.

"What does it matter, the place?" she asked, in return, speaking in a gentle tone. "It does one good to pray. Even to kneel in such a temple without saying a prayer strengthens one's soul. Through the solemn silence, broken now and then by a sob from some poor woman's broken heart, a message comes from God. Women are greatly to be pitied, John."

"Men, too, sometimes," I said.

"Oh, no," she answered, quickly, "there is no comparison."

A trifling incident may be set down here, in connection with the brooch, with its device of two hearts, which I had purchased as a present for Barbara on the first night we were in Paris, and which I afterwards determined not to give her. I was in the sitting-room clearing my pockets. Among the things I had taken out was the brooch, which I had almost forgotten. I was still of the opinion that it would be an unsuitable gift, and I was thinking what to do with it when Annette passed through the sitting-room to the bedroom, her eyes, as usual, lowered to the ground. In the course of the day I went to the jeweler of whom I had purchased the brooch, and he took it back at half the price I had paid for it. I thought no more of the matter.

CHAPTER X

I had taken circular tickets for a two months' ramble through Switzerland and Italy, intending to visit Lucerne, Berne, Interlaken, Chamouni, and Geneva, then on to the Italian lakes, and I was studying the plan I had mapped out, and making notes of bye-excursions from the principal towns, when Barbara burst in upon me with the exclamation that she was sick of Paris. This surprised me. We had intended to remain for two weeks, only one of which had elapsed, and I had supposed that the busy, brilliant life of the gay city would be so much to Barbara's liking that I should have a difficulty in getting her away from it. For my own part I was glad to leave, glad to travel sooner than we intended to regions where we should be in closer contact with nature. Barbara had never visited Switzerland or Italy, and I hoped that association with the lakes and mountains of those beautiful countries would be beneficial to her, would help her to shake off the fatal habit which she had allowed to grow upon her.

"Very well, Barbara," I said, "we will leave for Lucerne to-morrow."

"How long does it take to get to Geneva?" she asked.

"From Lucerne?"

"No, from here."

"There is a morning train, which gets there in the evening."

"Then we will go to-morrow morning to Geneva."

"But that will make a muddle of the route I have mapped out, and jumble up the dates."

"What does that matter? You can easily make out another; our time is our own. I want to be in Geneva to-morrow night."

"For any particular reason?" I asked, rather annoyed, for I knew how difficult it was to divert her from anything upon which she had set her mind.

"For a very particular reason. Maxwell will be there."

"Did he tell you so before we left England?"

"No; he tells me in a letter, and says how nice it will be for us to meet there."

I thought otherwise. I had no wish to see Maxwell, but I did not say so.

"When did you hear from him?"

"This morning."

"His letter did not come to the hotel. They told me in the office that there were none for us."

"He doesn't address me at the hotel."

"Where then, for goodness sake? The hotel is the proper place."

"Perhaps I don't care about always doing what is proper," she retorted, lightly. "Besides, do I need your permission to carry on a correspondence with my brother?"

"Not at all; you are putting a wrong construction upon my words."

"Oh, of course. I don't do anything right, do I? Never mind, you may make yourself as unpleasant as you like, but you won't get me to join in a wrangle. Do I pry into your letters? Well, then, don't pry into mine."

"I have no desire to do so. Only, as I suppose this is not the first letter you have received from Maxwell since we have been in Paris – "

She interrupted me with "I have had three letters from him."

"Well, I thought you might have mentioned it – that's all."

"I didn't wish to annoy you."

"Why should it annoy me?"

"Now, John," she said, in a more conciliatory tone, "haven't I eyes in my head? Women, really, are not quite brainless. Do you think I didn't find out long ago that there was no love lost between you and Maxwell? Not on his side – oh, no; on yours."

I could have answered that, according to my observation of her, her feelings towards Maxwell were similar to mine, but I was determined to avoid, as far as was possible, anything in the shape of argument that might lead to contention.

"I do hope you will get to like him better," she continued, "and you will when you understand him. That is what we were talking about a few days ago, isn't it? – about the advisability of people understanding each other before they pronounce judgment. If they don't they are so apt to do each other an injustice. Maxwell is as simple as a child; the worst of it is, he takes a delight in placing himself at a disadvantage when he is talking to you, saying the wrong thing, you know, but never meaning the least harm by it – oh, no. He leaves you to find it out – so boyish, isn't it? He is inconsistent; it is a serious fault, but it is a serious misfortune, too, when one can't help it. It is a shame to blame us for our imperfections; we didn't make them; they are born with us."

"But, Barbara," I said, a feeling of bewildered helplessness stealing over me at the contradictions to which she was everlastingly giving utterance, "we are reasonable beings."

"Oh, yes, to a certain extent, but no farther. The question is to what extent. Take the son of a thief, now; how can he help being a thief? He was born one."

"You wouldn't punish him for stealing?"

"I don't think I would, for how can he help it? I would teach him – I would lead him gently."

I brightened up. "That is what we are trying to do."

"Yes; for it is so wrong to take what doesn't belong to us – and to take it on the sly, too! To go over boxes when one is ill and unconscious. Fie, John! I hoped we were not going to speak of that again."

"But it is you who brought it up."

"Oh, no, love, it was you. You shouldn't allow things to rankle in your mind; it is hardly manly. What was I saying about Maxwell? Oh, his inconsistency. I am glad I am not inconsistent, but I am not going to boast of it. Only you might take a lesson from me. The weak sometimes can help the strong. Remember the fable of the lion and the mouse."

I changed the subject.

"We will start for Geneva to-morrow morning. It is a delightful journey."

"Everything is delightful in your company, you dear boy. You are glad that we shall soon see Maxwell, are you not?"

"Yes, I am glad if it will give you pleasure."

"Thank you, dear. Could any newly-married couple be happier than we are? Give me a kiss and I will go and do my packing."

I recall these conversations with amazement. I was as a man who was groping in the dark, vainly striving to thread his way through the labyrinths in which he was environed. There was an element of masterly cunning in Barbara's character by the exercise of which I found myself continually placed in a wrong light; words I did not speak, motives I did not entertain, sentiments which were foreign to my nature, were so skillfully foisted upon me, that, communing afterwards with my thoughts, I asked myself whether I was not the author of them and had forgotten that they had proceeded from me. But Barbara's own conflicting utterances were a sufficient answer to these doubts. One day she informed me that Maxwell had a contempt for me, the next that he had a high opinion of me. Now she despised him, now she was longing for his society. One moment he was all that was bad, the next all that was good.

I did not allow these contradictions to weigh with me. My aim was to do my duty by my wife, and to save her from becoming a confirmed drunkard; to that end all the power that was within me was directed.

In order not to put temptation in Barbara's way I became a teetotaler, and from that day to this, except upon one occasion, have not touched liquor of any kind.

"No wine, John?" Barbara said, as we were eating dinner.

"No, Barbara; I am better without it."

"Turned teetotaler?" She looked at me with a quizzical smile.

"Yes."

"About the most foolish thing you could do. Wine is good for a man. Everything is good in moderation."

"I agree with you – in moderation."

"I said in moderation – the word is mine, not yours. You will alter your mind soon."

"Never," I said.

"It would be common politeness to ask if I would have some."

"Will you, Barbara?"

"No," she replied vehemently, "you know I hate it."

The next morning we were comfortably seated in the train for Geneva. Annette was knitting, I was looking through some English papers and magazines I had obtained at Brentano's, and Barbara was reading a French novel she had purchased at the railway stall. She appeared to be so deeply interested in it that I asked her what it was. She handed it to me. I started as I looked at the title. "L'Assoimmoir!" I handed it back to her, thinking it strange she should have selected the work, but drawing from it a happy augury, for there is no story in which the revolting effects of drink are portrayed with greater coarseness and power. It did not occur to me that I should have been sorry to see such a work in the hands of a pure-minded woman, and that the absence of the reflection was a wrong done to a woman who was but newly married – and that woman my own wife! My thought was: What effect will the story have upon Barbara? Will it show her in an impressive and personal way the awful depths of degradation to which drink can bring its victims, and will it be a warning to her?

"Have you read it?" she asked.

"Yes," I answered. "It is a terrible story; it teaches a terrible lesson."

"I have heard so," she said, "and I was quite anxious to read it myself. It opens brightly."

"Wait till you come to the end," I thought.

She went on with the reading, and was so engrossed in the development of the sordid, wretched tragedy that she paid but little attention to the scenery through which we were passing. I did not interrupt her. "Let it sink into her soul," I thought. "God grant that it may appall and terrify her!"

In the afternoon the book was finished. But she was loth to lay it aside. She read the last few pages, and referred to others which presumably had produced an impression upon her. Then she put the book down. I looked at her inquiringly.

"You are right," she said. "It does indeed teach a terrible lesson."

I did not pursue the subject. If the effect I hoped for had not been produced no words of mine would bring it about.

A fellow passenger engaged me in conversation, and we stood upon the landing stage awhile. When I returned to the carriage I detected that Barbara had been tipling; the signs were unmistakable. Later in the day she made reference to the story and expressed sympathy for the victims of the awful vice.

"Is that your only feeling respecting the story?" I asked.

"What other feeling can I have?" she replied, sorrowfully. "It was born in them. Poor Gervaise! Poor Coupeau! I don't know which I pity most."

"And the terrible lesson, Barbara?"

"Everything in moderation," she said, and after a little pause, added, "Besides, it isn't true; it isn't possible. Novel writers are compelled to draw upon their imaginations, and they invent unheard-of things – as you will do, I suppose with your stories. Make them hot and strong, John, and you will stand a greater chance of success. People like to have their blood curdled. If I had the talent to write a novel I should stick at nothing. Look at –," she mentioned the name of a living English author whose stories were wonderfully successful – "he deals in nothing but blood; in every novel he writes he kills

hundreds and hundreds of people, and slashes them up dreadfully. His pages absolutely reek with gore. Now, you can't convince me that he is describing real life; he is describing things that never occurred, that never could have occurred. It is just the same with this story that I have been reading. Very clever, of course, and very horrible, but absolutely untrue."

That was her verdict, and I knew it was useless to argue with her.

We arrived at Geneva between eight and nine o'clock. In accordance with Barbara's wish, we took the omnibus of the Hotel de la Paix, where Maxwell was to meet us. She was disappointed that he was not at the station; we looked out for him, but we did not see him.

It happened that the lady and gentleman of whom I have spoken took the same omnibus and were seated when we entered. They drew into a corner of the omnibus, and the gentleman shifted his place so that he sat between his companion and Barbara. He seemed to be desirous that the ladies should not sit next to each other.

A disappointment awaited Barbara at the hotel. Maxwell was not there. When I gave my name to the proprietor and was speaking about the rooms we were to occupy, he said, "There is a letter for madame," and handed it to her. It was from Maxwell. She read it with a frown.

"It is a shame – a shame!" she cried.

"What does he say?" I asked.

"He will not be here till the end of the week," she replied, fretfully. "He may not be here at all."

"I am sorry," I said.

"You are not," she retorted, fiercely. "You are glad."

And certainly it was she who spoke the truth.

We went up in the lift to look at our rooms, and then I came down again to order dinner. Returning to inform Barbara that it would be ready in twenty minutes, I found the door locked.

"Let me alone," Barbara cried from within. "I don't want any dinner. You can have it without me. It won't spoil your appetite."

I turned to go downstairs and met Annette.

"Is my wife unwell?" I asked.

"Madame is disturbed that her brother has not arrived," the woman answered. "She does not require me any longer to-night. I am to get something to eat and go to bed. Good-night, monsieur."

"Good-night, Annette."

She had spoken sulkily, as though vexed at not being allowed to wait upon her mistress.

I had my dinner alone, and afterwards strolled along the banks of the beautiful lake, smoking a cigar. There was no moon, but the sky was bright with stars. I was in no hurry, knowing that when Barbara was in one of her passionate fits it was best to give her plenty of time to get over it. My presence irritated her, and I did not care to be the butt of her unreasonable anger.

CHAPTER XI

There was still no news of Maxwell, and I was pleased to be spared his presence.

Now, I cannot say whether the scene which took place later in the day between me and Barbara was inspired by a communication which she had just received from Annette, or whether she had been already enlightened upon the subject, and had stored up the pretended grievance for use against me when she was in the humor for it. It matters little either way, and perhaps it would have been wiser of me to treat the accusation with contempt; but there are limits to a man's patience, and I could not always keep control of myself. It was commenced by Barbara inquiring whether my lady friend had followed us to Geneva, and by her answering the question herself.

"But of course she has. You have laid your plans artfully. Keep her out of my way, or I'll strangle her."

"You are mad," I muttered, and indeed, I must either have believed so, or that she was at her devil's tricks again.

"Not yet," she screamed, and then I knew that she had been drinking. "Not yet. You may drive me to it in the end, but the end hasn't come yet. No, not by many a long day, Johnnie, my dear! Only don't let me get hold of her, or there'll be murder done."

"Tell me what you mean," I said, closing the doors and windows, for I was anxious that the people in the hotel should not hear, "and I may be able to answer you."

"Where is the lady's brooch you bought in Paris?" she asked. "Show it to me, and I'll be satisfied. Well, where is it?"

Then I recollected that Annette had passed through the room of the hotel in Paris when I emptied my pockets there; I was looking at the brooch, debating what I should do with it.

"You are thinking what to say," Barbara continued. "I will save you the trouble of inventing a lie. Say that you bought it for me."

"It would be the truth. I did buy it for you."

"Give it me, then; it belongs to me."

"I cannot give it to you; I have parted with it."

"I knew it without your telling me. You gave it to the other woman."

"There is no other woman in the case. Be reasonable, Barbara. Things are bad enough, God knows, but I can honestly say you have no cause for jealousy. The brooch was intended for you, but I changed my mind, and returned it to the jeweler."

"Not thinking it suitable for me."

"Exactly. I did not think it suitable for you."

"The device was not appropriate, eh?"

"It was not appropriate."

"I wonder you are not ashamed to look me in the face. It was a device of two hearts entwined – yours and another woman's – and it was not a suitable device to offer to me, whom you had married but the day before!" (I thought with dismay that Annette must have sharp eyes to have seen it in that brief moment when she passed me, looking slyly on the ground.) "You are a clumsy liar, John. If you want to know, it was because I was maddened by your shameful conduct that I left you last night. I was sorry for it afterwards. I reasoned with myself, saying, He is my husband, and it is my duty to be by his side. That is why I was not sorry when you found me this morning. You may break my heart, but I will never leave you again, never, never! Now that I have found you out don't presume to lecture me again upon any little faults I may have – but keep your women out of my sight, my dear."

I argued no longer; my heart was filled with bitterness; the smallest of my actions was turned against me with such ingenuity as to render me powerless.

I will not dwell upon the incidents that enlivened the remaining weeks of this mockery of a honeymoon. Again and again did I find Barbara under the influence of drink, and again and again did I seek refuge in silence, for every word I spoke was twisted into an accusation against myself. We saw nothing of Maxwell, and after a month's tour Barbara declared she was tired of foreign countries and foreign people, and yearned to take her proper place in our dear little home in London. "Where you will discover," she said (she was in one of her amiable moods), "that I am a model wife, and a perfect treasure of a housekeeper."

We were in London nearly two months before we settled in our new home, which, as I have stated, was situated in West Kensington. Immediately upon our return Barbara and I drove to the house, and took a tour of inspection through the rooms. It seemed to me that a few days would suffice for the necessary alterations and additions, but Barbara was of a different opinion. This piece of furniture did not suit her, that would not do, the other was altogether out of place. She did not like the paper on the walls, the ceilings were frightful, the patterns of the carpets horrible. Before our marriage we had come to London to see the house, and then she was satisfied with everything, now she is satisfied with nothing. If I ventured to make a remonstrance her reply was:

"Do let me manage! What can you know about domestic affairs? Leave them to me; I will soon put things to rights."

Seeing that her idea of putting things to rights would cost a large sum of money, I said:

"Remember, Barbara, I am not a millionaire."

"Perhaps not," she answered, "but you have thousands and thousands of pounds, you stingy fellow, and we must commence comfortably. Our whole happiness depends upon it. I sha'n't ruin you, my dear. Besides, are you not going to coin money out of your books?"

"They have to be written first."

"Of course. And to write striking stories you must have a cosy study. Do you think it is my comfort I am looking after? My dear old boy, you shall have the snuggest den in London."

"When they are written – if they ever are" – I was tortured by a doubt whether my mind would be sufficiently at ease for literary work – "they may not find favor with the publishers."

"I will manage them, John. Don't meet troubles half way. There is a clever song – did you ever hear it? – 'Never trouble trouble till trouble troubles you.' That is what I call common sense."

The result was that she had her way. My one desire was for peace. Love held no place in my heart. The utmost I could hope for was that I should not be plunged into disgrace.

I had very little to do with the new arrangements of the house. Finding that every suggestion I made was received with opposition, I became wearied with the whole affair, my share in which was limited to paying the bills. This exactly suited Barbara, who now and then rewarded me by declaring that she was having a delightful time. During these few weeks we lived in a furnished flat in Bloomsbury, and having nothing else to do, I spent the greater part of the day in the reading-room of the British Museum, for which I had held a ticket since I left my stepmother's house. Barbara and I would breakfast together in the morning, and make arrangements for a late dinner. Then we would separate; Barbara for West Kensington, accompanied by Annette, I for the British Museum, or for a lonely walk or ride. Once or twice a week, when the weather was fine, I would ride on the top of an omnibus to its terminus, and return to my starting-point by the same conveyance. My favorite ride was eastward, through Whitechapel, and occasionally I would alight in the centre of that wonderful thoroughfare – where a greater variety of the forms of human life can be met than in any other part of the modern Babylon – and plunge into the labyrinth of narrow streets and courts with which the district abounds. What made the deepest impression upon me in my wanderings thereabouts was the poverty of the residents and the immense number and the magnificence of the gin palaces, in the immediate vicinity of the most flourishing of which were usually congregated groups of wretched men, women and children – chiefly the latter during the midday hours of my visits – whose one idea of life and life's duties was drink. The subject had a fascination for me, and my heart sank as I noted

the hideous degradation to which it brings its victims. The soddened, bestial faces, the shameless lasciviousness, the frightful language, the hags of forty who looked seventy, the young children with preternatural cunning stamped on their features, and from whose ready tongue familiar blasphemies proceeded; girl-mothers with exposed breasts putting glasses of gin to their babies' lips – these were horrible and common sights. I was standing watching such a scene in a narrow, squalid street, flanked at each corner by a gorgeous, shining palace of gin, when I noticed a policeman at my side. We entered into conversation, and I learned that he had placed himself near me as a protection.

"A famous thieves' quarter this, sir," he said; "I thought you mightn't know."

"Thank you for the warning," I replied; "the people are very poor; all the houses seem to be tumbling down."

"They belong to a big swell."

"Does he not come to inspect them?"

The policeman – an intelligent man, evidently with some education – laughed. "He may have seen them once in his lifetime, and that was enough for him. The property is managed by an agent, in the employ of the steward of the estate, who walks through it perhaps once a year."

"The rents must be very low."

"Not low enough for them that live here. There isn't a house in the street with less than three or four families in it."

I pointed to two girls whose ages could not have been more than fifteen or sixteen, each with a baby at her breast, "What becomes of them when they grow old?"

"They never grow old," was his significant reply.

"Are you a reporter for a newspaper, sir?"

"No; I am here merely out of curiosity."

"Don't come at night – alone," he said, as he turned away.

His question had put an idea into my head which I thought might be carried into effect for the benefit of that half of the world that does not know how the other half lives.

I make no excuse for introducing this episode into my story; the sights I saw had an indirect bearing upon my own life.

In the evening Barbara and I would meet in our Bloomsbury flat, and go out to dinner, generally to a foreign restaurant, and sometimes afterwards to a theatre or a music hall, the latter being always of Barbara's choosing. I followed in her wake; the least resistance or reluctance to carry out her wishes only brought fresh misery upon me. She continued to tipple, but not in my presence; it seemed to be a principle of her life to do everything in secret. On Sundays she went to church, and professed to be much edified by the discourse. She would pray at home, too. Once when I entered our sitting-room I discovered her on her knees before a couch, her face buried in the cushion. She remained there so long that I put my hand on her shoulder. She did not move. Looking down I found she was asleep, with a vacuous smile on her countenance. I moved to another part of the room, and soon afterwards she staggered to her feet, and stood, reeling to and fro. "Annette!" she called querulously. The woman entered, and supported her to her bedroom. The next day she complained of her heart.

"I was very ill yesterday," she said. "I fainted while I was praying. My prayers were for you, John."

I did not answer her, and she asked me whether I ever thought of the future world.

"It is our duty, my dear," she said. "Life in this is very sad."

CHAPTER XII

While the house was being prepared for our reception, I heard nothing of Maxwell. I thought of him often, and I sometimes fancied that Barbara was not so ignorant as myself of his whereabouts and doings – a supposition which proved to be true, but his name was not mentioned by either of us. In looking back upon those days I can see that I was acting a part as well as Barbara. I was miserably conscious of it at the time, but it did not strike me as it strikes me now. Words of affection had no meaning, and we knew it – and knowing it, nursed in our hearts the belief that the other was a hypocrite. I have no desire to show myself in a favorable light to Barbara's disadvantage. Her judgment of me was warped by her passion for drink, and my judgment of her was perhaps harsher than it should have been because of the bitter disappointment under which I labored. I could not always be patient, I could not always endure in silence; she stung me by her sly cunning, by the artful entanglements she wove for me, by the detestable assumption of religious fervor which she used to mask the degrading vice which made my life a hell. I had to be continually on the alert to avoid public exposure, and in this endeavor Annette was useful, for she did what she could to shield her mistress. Self-interest was her motive, for Barbara was continually making her presents of money and articles of jewelry and dress. I was quite aware that she was my enemy, that when she spoke of me she lied and traduced me, but I could find no fault with her when she was in my presence. It may be that she held me in contempt because I did not beat or kill my wife.

We gave up our flat, and took up our quarters in the home in which before my marriage I had hoped to live an honorable and happy life. That hope was dead, and in my contemplations of the future I could see no ray of light. There was but one source of relief – work. Hard toil, exhausting manual labor would have done me good; failing that, I had my pen. My visits to the vice-haunted haunts of London had supplied me with a theme.

"What does my dear boy think of it?" Barbara asked, on the morning we entered the house.

"It looks very clean and new," I replied, as we walked through the rooms.

"It is what I aimed at, dear. We are going to commence a new life. No more wrangles or disagreements, no more misunderstandings, everything that is unpleasant wiped off the slate. I am never going to worry you again. Can I say more than that?"

"We shall be all the happier, Barbara, if you keep that in mind."

"Of course I shall keep it in mind. And you, too, John – you will keep it in mind, and not worry me. Fair play's a jewel. This is my morning room. Isn't it sweet? And this," opening a communicating door, "is my prayer room, my very, very own. I shall come here whenever I feel naughty, and pray to be good. Oh, what a consolation there is in prayer!"

The walls were lined with pictures of sacred subjects and moral exordiums in Oxford frames. There was an altar with prayer books ostentatiously arranged, and a cushion for her to kneel upon when at her devotions. She looked at me for approval, and I said that prayer chastened and purified.

"It is what it will do for me, dear John. However earnest and wishful to do right one may be there are always little crosses. I intended this room for your study, but I felt that you would rather I put it to its present use."

"Then there is no study in the house for me?"

"No, dear. We can't have everything we wish. I thought you might take a room elsewhere for your literary work. You can go and scribble there whenever you feel inclined; it will be so much better for you. There will be nothing to disturb you – no sweeping and scrubbing of floors and difficulties with servants, which put men out so. You see how I thought of you while I was arranging things. There are some nice quiet streets off the Strand where you can take chambers and be comfortable and cosy. If you had a business in the city you would have to go to it every morning, so it is just as if you were a business man. We shall dine at home at half-past six. I shall expect you to be very

punctual, or the cooking will be spoilt and the cook will give notice. Oh, the worry of servants! But I take all that on myself."

I was not displeased at the arrangement. Had it been left to me I should have chosen it, so I said I was quite satisfied, and she clapped her hands and kissed me.

"I have an agreeable surprise for you," she then said. "Maxwell is in London."

"You have seen him?"

"Oh, yes, every day almost. He has been of immense assistance to me in choosing furniture and wall paper, and managing the people who did the work. If it hadn't been for him I should have been dreadfully imposed upon, and it would have been ever so much out of your pocket. You will be glad to hear that he will dine with us this evening."

I said I should be glad to see him; and indeed it was a matter of indifference to me, but I determined to be on my guard against him.

"I was angry with him," she continued, "for not meeting us in Geneva, as he promised; but he couldn't, poor fellow. He met with an accident, and had to lay up in a poky little village in Italy. It is such a comfort to me that he is near us. There is no one like our own."

"Is he living in London?"

"For the present. He has been unfortunate and has lost a lot of money – the stupid fellow is so trustful. He went security for a friend and was taken in. Don't you go security for people, John, it's a mistake. I have another surprise for you. 'Our first dinner in our dear little home shall be an unexpected pleasure to John,' I said to myself, when I was looking over my letters, and came across one from your mother."

"My stepmother, Barbara."

"It's all the same. Such a pretty, friendly letter; so full of good advice! Young wives need advice, and old wives can give it them."

"But when did you hear from her?" I asked.

"Don't you remember? It was when we were engaged."

"I remember that I wrote to her of our engagement, and that she did not reply to me. She wrote to you instead. Is that the letter you refer to?"

"Yes."

"You told me that you tore up the letter the moment you read it, and that she must be an awful woman. I distinctly recollect your saying that we could do without her and her beautiful son."

"What a memory you have, John! Or are you making it up?"

"I am not making it up. You did not tear up the letter?"

"No," she said with a beaming smile, "I kept it by me, and I am sure you are mistaken in what you think I said. I did not show it to you because I knew you had some feeling against her and Louis, and I didn't want to annoy you. I am not the woman to make mischief between such near relations. Little differences will arise, and it is our duty to try and smooth them over. That is what I did, and you will be delighted to hear that they are content to let bygones be bygones, and are burning to see you."

"I will think over it."

"I have thought over it for you, dear. They are coming to dinner this evening."

"Do you consider it right, Barbara, to invite them without consulting me?"

"I do, my dear. I am a peacemaker. Our housewarming will be quite a family party."

I submitted, wondering to what length Barbara would go in her duplicity, and whether she or I was mistaken in our recollection of the circumstances in connection with this particular letter. I did not wonder long. I knew that I was right.

Maxwell made his appearance an hour before dinner, and – having made up my mind – I received him with a cordiality which I did not feel.

"Well, here you are," he said, with a searching glance at me, "a regular married man after your lovely holiday tour. Enjoyed yourself?"

"Barbara has given you a full account, no doubt," I replied, all the evil that was in my nature aroused by his mocking voice; "judge from that."

"You must be a model husband, then," he said, laughing quietly to himself, "and she a model wife. I owe you an apology for not joining you on the Continent. The fact is" – he looked to see that Barbara was out of hearing – "I was not traveling alone, and upon considering the matter I came to the conclusion that our company might not suit you. A question of morals, you know."

"I am obliged to you."

"For keeping away? Good. One to you. Where are you going, Barbara?"

"Domestic affairs," she replied. "To do the cooking." And she left the room.

"Was your accident very serious?" I asked.

"Accident!" he exclaimed. "What accident?"

"Then you did not meet with one?"

"Not that I am aware of. I had the jolliest time."

I dropped the subject, and we talked of other matters, with a lame attempt at civility on both sides, until Barbara re-entered the room, when he cried out:

"I say, Barbara, what is this about my meeting with an accident on the Continent?"

"You did meet with an accident," she said, boldly.

"Did I? Well, then, I did." He looked me full in the face, and laughed.

"I am disgusted with you, Maxwell," Barbara exclaimed. "Don't pay any attention to him, John; you can't believe a word out of his mouth."

Thereupon he laughed still more boisterously, winding up with, "Don't expect me to take a hand in your matrimonial squabbles; you must settle them yourselves."

"We don't have any, do we, John?" said Barbara, in her sweetest tone.

Maxwell appeared to be immensely amused, and they had a bantering bout, in which I took neither share nor interest. When they appealed to me I replied in monosyllables, until Barbara said:

"There, you have offended him. Ask his pardon immediately. I won't have my dear boy annoyed."

His eyes twinkled as he held out his hand, which I was compelled to take to avoid an open rupture. "I ask your pardon, John."

"That's all right," said Barbara, gaily. "For goodness sake, don't let us have any quarreling on our house-warming day."

I felt as if I were in a hornets' nest.

A few minutes afterwards my stepmother and Louis were announced, and Barbara ran forward to welcome them.

"I am so glad you have come! There's no need of an introduction, is there? I am John's wife, Barbara. You must call me Barbara – yes, I insist upon it. This is my brother Maxwell. Maxwell, Mrs. Fordham – how funny there should be two of us! And this is your son, Mr. Louis Fordham, John's brother. I hate formality. You mustn't be shocked at my saying that I am a bit of a Bohemian. So is Maxwell, but he goes farther than I do, of course, as he is a man. I hope you are one, too, Mr. Louis?"

"I will become one," said Louis, gallantly, "under your instructions. How do you do, John? What a pretty house you've got!"

I shook hands with him and with my stepmother. Louis was cordial enough in his manner; my stepmother was frigid. Years had passed since I had seen her or Louis, but she had not forgotten, and never would forget. Only with her death would the old animosity die out. She was no older in appearance; Louis had grown into a well-built man, and she doted on him, as she had done since his birth. A good-looking man, too, but for the scar on his forehead. As I raised my eyes to it – with no evil meaning, I am sure – the blood rushed into it, and it became scarlet, while a dark look flashed into my stepmother's eyes.

"He will bear it with him to his grave," said my stepmother.

"What a pity!" said Barbara, who had observed this bye-play. "How did it happen?"

"John gave it him," said my stepmother, coldly.

"But they were boys then," said Barbara, defending me maliciously, "and boys are so cruel."

"The boy is father to the man," remarked my stepmother, with venomous emphasis.

"Now, John," said Barbara, "what have you to say to it?"

My impulse was to reply that the story was false, but I checked myself in time, and simply said:

"Nothing. Either my memory or yours" – to my stepmother – "is at fault."

"You have a shocking memory, John," said Barbara. "Not your fault, my dear – you were born with it. We all forgive you, don't we, Mrs. Fordham – and you, too, Louis? It would be dreadful if we nursed every little grievance, and saved disagreeable things for future use against one another. Let us talk of something pleasant."

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