

Far Above Rubies

By Netta Syrett

OLD Dr. Hilcrest's little house on the Bushberry Road, just outside Crewford Village, had a new tenant, and Crewford was shaken to its foundations with excitement and expectation.

All Crewford had so long been "led to the grave," as Briggs the town-crier somewhat unfortunately expressed it, by old Dr. Hilcrest, and his spectacled nose and white beard had become such indispensable features in the village, that the inhabitants were thrown into a state of incredulous amazement at the news of his projected retirement. Scarcely had they time to recover breath from the astounding intelligence, before the newcomer was actually upon them. "A boy, a mere boy, too!" as Miss Saunders exclaimed to another maiden lady, her bosom friend. "Scarcely seven-and-twenty I should think. My dear Sophy, it is hardly—delicate!"

Crewford, however, was not long in making the discovery that the young doctor was an acquisition. The children of Mr. Miles, the lawyer, who lived opposite Miss Saunders, and were conveniently stricken with measles the very day of his arrival, disobediently flattened their noses against the windows to watch for his coming, and began to laugh before ever he shook his fist

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at them from the gate ; and Miss Saunders herself implored her friend to have no scruples about consulting him for bronchitis. "He is steady as a churchwarden, my dear, and has the dignified manner of a man of sixty," was her verdict.

His little study in the small, old-fashioned house, where his bachelor predecessor had lived so many years, looked very pleasant and cosy one October evening, about a month after his arrival.

The chintz curtains were close drawn : there were a bright fire, a pair of slippers warming on the rug, and a large armchair drawn up close to the fender, in which lay a half-smoked pipe. The doctor was taking books out of a large packing case, and putting them on to the shelves which lined the room. When the last volume was in its place, he pushed the box aside, and sinking luxuriously into the big chair, took off his boots, and thrust his feet into the warmed slippers. He dropped the boots with a thud beside the fender, stooped for his pipe, relighted it, and sank back with a sigh of relief, puffing contentedly. His eyes travelled about the room, resting now on a picture, newly hung, now on the gay flowered curtains. The fire flickered and murmured softly, and little ruddy gleams danced on the wall, and bright, sudden flashes were reflected in the old-fashioned, low-hanging glass opposite.

Strong was pleasantly tired by the long day's round, and the little room seemed to him the embodiment of warmth and comfort. Lounging in the big chair, his head thrown back, his slippered feet thrust out towards the blaze, and his hands in his pockets, he gazed dreamily at the blue smoke wreaths from his pipe, and allowed his thoughts to stray over the past few years. He was young—Miss Saunders had rather over, than understated his age, in putting him down as seven-and-twenty—but already

already he looked back upon much hard, uphill work. The son of a poor clergyman, the education necessary to fit him for the profession of his choice, had been acquired at the price of much personal self-denial, and, as he also recognised, of considerable sacrifice at home. A troubled contraction of the brows, was the outcome of a remembrance of his father's thin, stooping figure bending over his books in the shabby little library at the Devonshire Vicarage.

His college days at Cambridge, and afterwards as a student at Guy's, marred as they were by the necessity of looking at every halfpenny spent on pleasure, were almost forgotten in the vivid memory of the June afternoon when Mollie Kendall first came to the rooms he shared with her brother. Mollie and he had been engaged now four years. Four years of incessant, untiring work on Strong's part, had resulted in the country practice for which his old father had with difficulty advanced the money, and though he recognised the inevitable struggle before him, he was undaunted. Fortune had hitherto favoured the brave ; there was no reason for doubting a continuance of her kindness.

He rose presently, with a yawn, and began to whistle softly, out of sheer content. He looked very boyish as he lounged about the room arranging his few possessions—photographs, a vase or two—on the mantel-piece or window ledge. The study was not yet completely furnished, and this evening arrangement of books and pictures was a never ending satisfaction to him. He altered the position of one photograph many times before deciding on its destination, and then took it down once more and stood a moment with it in his hand, looking at it. When he replaced it, it was with a gentle touch. His whistling ceased.

“Next year, perhaps—certainly next year, I should think,” was in his mind. He tossed paper and envelopes out of the table drawer,

drawer, and sat down to write and tell her. The letter was a long one; Mollie read parts of it next day more than once, and smiled and blushed, and put the paper to her lips, and then re-read the account of his new patients with considerable, if somewhat abated, interest.

He had been called in by the Gilmans, at the Court, to attend one of the maids, he wrote; they were the richest people in the neighbourhood; it was a good connection, in fact, and the Gilmans themselves seemed rather jolly.

Strong had recalled Mrs. Gilman as he mentioned her name with a momentary feeling of curiosity. He had only exchanged half-a-dozen words with her, and she was not pretty, but she had certainly a curious charm of manner.

Mrs. Gilman stood by the window in her drawing-room some days later, and, half concealed by the heavy velvet curtains, watched the doctor's dog-cart whirl down the drive. She did not return to the fire till the last flash of wheels had disappeared round the bend by the lodge. Then, with a little shiver, she pulled the curtain further over the window, and turned away, a smile struggling ineffectually with a somewhat pronounced yawn, as she came back to the sofa. She pulled the cushions on to the floor close to the fire, and threw herself down upon them, leaning back against the couch. A half-opened book lay upon the padded arm of the sofa, just above her head. She stretched a lazy hand for it, found it was out of reach, and indifferently abandoned the effort.

Nestling more luxuriously among the cushions, she clasped her slender hands round her knees, and looked dreamily into the fire.

Occasionally a little amused smile robbed her face for a moment of its jaded expression, but her listless attitude, the droop of her shoulders,

shoulders, and a restless movement of her head now and again, spoke eloquently of hopeless, unmitigated boredom.

The room in which she sat, though small—Barbara Gilman hated big rooms—was furnished luxuriously. The folds of the heavy curtains over doors and windows gleamed in the firelight, which flashed also on the silver toys with which the many small tables were loaded, on the shining cushions tossed on the floor, and on the fragile china and glass of the tea-table.

Mrs. Gilman glanced at the linen-covered tray on which the tea-cups stood, and at the almost empty cake basket, and smiled again.

“He was a very unsophisticated boy—and awfully amusing when he talked with so grave an air about Dawson’s tiresome illness—just as though it wasn’t sufficiently annoying to have one’s maid ill, with the hunt ball coming on and not a rag to wear, without discussing her stupid symptoms by the hour! However,” Mrs. Gilman shrugged her shoulders with a sensation of lazy satisfaction, “we drifted pretty far from Dawson’s cough before tea was over.”

“I really didn’t know such men existed in this age,” she told herself, her thoughts wandering languidly. “John-Bullism I know, and decadence (in the happy day in town), but what is this? It’s the sort of thing one used to read about in stories that were not oblivious of the young person. High ideals, youthful enthusiasms, innocence—or is it ignorance—of evil? They are all such exhausting things in their way, but how curious to find them combined in one individual—and that a man. Really one might almost derive a new sensation from the study of such a being. And a new sensation *here*, of all places in the world! No, it’s certainly not to be despised.”

She moved a little to shield her face from the fire, and then
turned

turned her head, her quick glance lighting now on one, now on another part of the room. She regretted she had not bought a white-and-gold screen she had seen in town, for the corner by the door, and determined to send for it. She remembered, too, a wonderful Eastern jar, of green metal, the colour of a peacock's neck with the sun upon it; but there was no place for it. She satisfied herself that every niche of the room was occupied before turning with a dissatisfied air to the fire again. There was absolutely nothing more to be bought for the room, unless she made a thorough change in its style, and turned out the present furniture. She entertained the idea for a moment, but it was too much trouble to think out, and her vague plans drifted aimlessly for a breathing space, and dissolved, and she yawned again. Life was a dull affair, and things were only desirable till one obtained them. How she had longed for pretty rooms and dainty clothes to wear and delicious things to eat, in the old day, at home, in the shabby little villa at Wandsworth. Well! a miracle had happened, or so it had seemed to her, on her engagement to Jim Gilman, and now she had her heart's desires. Were they disappointing? Yes—but they were also well worth keeping. A hastily summoned vision of the draughty dining-room at Eglantine Villa, of the roast mutton and boiled rice puddings at the mid-day dinner, assured her of this. Mrs. Gilman was always frank with herself. Her material advantages were well worth keeping, even at the price of playing the part of the affectionate wife, a rôle which in itself was irksome. Still, as she reflected, every one pays in some form or other for cakes and ale, and Jim, though straightforward and good to the point of exhaustion, was providentially dense in proportion—and he was out a great deal, and there were always visits to town, and—Mrs. Gilman smiled quietly, and twisted the rings on her white fingers, without

without pursuing reflection further, at this point. But visits to town were far too infrequent, and in the meantime here she was mewed up in a wretched country house, and Jim hated visitors, and if you wanted to rely on a man's good nature it wasn't safe to urge things he disliked, too frequently—and then her thoughts all at once drifted to the doctor again.

“He was awfully puzzled,” she told herself. “I can't think why I didn't laugh! I wonder what he thought of me?”

As a matter of fact, Strong was thinking of her at the moment: sitting frowning in his armchair, holding an extinct, half-forgotten pipe listlessly in his right hand. The mixture of admiration and instinctive repugnance which coloured his thoughts as he recalled her, could she have divined his mental state, would probably have filled her with a half-resentful sense of flattered vanity.

The sound of whistling, followed by the answering, hoarse bark of dogs, roused her from her lazy musing. She rose slowly from her nest among the cushions, stretching herself daintily, with soft, slow movements, which recalled the action of a graceful little cat, reluctantly leaving the warmth of the fire. She picked up the pillows, and threw them hastily in their right positions on the sofa, and then crossed the room to a high-backed chair, on which an embroidered work-bag hung. She had taken out its contents, a strip of needle-work, and was bending over its intricate meshes with an absorbed air, before the door opened.

“Hullo, little woman! how cosy and domestic you look.”

A breath of upland air entered the room with the man who stood in rough shooting-suit and gaiters, on the threshold. His face was bronzed with daily exposure to rain, sun, and wind, and an outdoor atmosphere surrounded him like an exhalation.

“I can come in, I suppose? I'm not very dirty,” he assured her, glancing at his thick laced boots. “This room always makes

makes me feel a clumsy brute," he said, sinking down in an arm-chair opposite his wife. "A sort of rhinoceros in a parrot's cage!"

"Thank you," she murmured, with a little grimace. "What pretty similes you choose, Jim."

He laughed.

"They were never my strong point, I admit—but it's a very nice little parrot."

He got up, crossed the room to where she was sitting, and bending down, playfully pinched her ear.

She raised her face with a smile full of wifely devotion, and he stooped to kiss her.

"Had visitors?" he asked presently, with a glance at the still uncleared tea-table.

"No. Oh! yes—I forgot," she added, carelessly rising to ring the bell. "Dr. Strong came in; he called to see Dawson, you know."

"Ah! What sort of fellow is he?" He took a piece of cake out of the basket as he spoke, and placed a large crumb on the nose of the terrier, which had followed him into the room. "Trust!"

"Oh! a nice boy, I think. He's very attentive—seems to think Dawson's had rather a severe touch of influenza."

"Paid for!" Milman exclaimed, and the dog seized the cake with a snap of his jaws.

"We'd better ask him to dinner, Bab."

"Yes, I suppose we must," she replied, going on with her needlework.

Strong's fears with regard to the seriousness of the maid's illness were not unfounded. A sharp attack of pleurisy followed the

the influenza, and, as a consequence, his visits at the Court grew more and more frequent.

Mrs. Gilman was generally standing in the hall as he came downstairs.

Behind her lithe, graceful figure, framed in the heavy drapery round the doorway, there was a glimpse of the richly scented, little room, glowing warmly in the firelight.

"Do you think she is better?" was her usual, anxious question; it was accompanied by a necessary, upward glance at the doctor who stood on the stairs above her.

"Come in and tell me about her." And then Strong followed her into the room, and sat down on the divan drawn up close to the fire, before which stood the tea-table, with its white, fringed cloth and burden of dainty silver.

By the end of the month he had spent many half hours in Mrs. Gilman's drawing-room.

The thought of them and of his hostess, remained with him during the long evenings he spent in his own little study, smoking and gazing into the fire, with Mrs. Gilman's red hair against a background of emerald-green cushion, vividly present to his imagination.

Strangely enough, he did not think less often of Mollie Kendall. She was as clearly present in his mind, when he recalled the little room at the Court, as was Mrs. Gilman.

Indeed, he never thought of one woman without the other; they were inseparable, incongruously linked in his thoughts. It was, could he conceivably have expressed the situation in metaphor, as though he held bound together a violet, fragrant, blue-eyed, breathing frankly its story of English woods, of streams babbling through deep moss, of the children's ringing laughter and a fantastically delicate orchid, scentless, mysterious, its pale lips closed.

Strong

Strong was perplexed and baffled. Unfitted as his downright objective nature made him for the task of mental analysis, he strove, with an almost pathetic honesty, to unravel the web of conflicting sensations which, he felt uneasily, grew more involved as time went on.

Two things were, however, clear to him. One, that he was not in the faintest degree in love with Mrs. Gilman; the other, that his love for Mollie, his tenderness for her, his desire for their marriage, were intensified by his involuntary habit of constantly contrasting her with the woman who shared his thoughts of her.

This conviction seemed to him to make it unnecessary to contrive any means of lessening his intimacy with the Gilmans, a course which, in view of the fact that the Court people were the acknowledged leaders of the neighbourhood, would have been in the highest degree impolitic. Nevertheless, and he was glad to feel assured of this, he would have risked any loss to his position through taking such a step, if he had felt it necessary.

He knew nothing of the modern claim for the imperative, almost sacred nature of impulse; he knew, indeed, little of modern thought on any social subject, partly because of the engrossing, objective character of his work, but chiefly, perhaps, that his nature was so opposed to its teaching, that it was not so much that he failed to assimilate, or entirely rejected it, as that he passed it by unheeding.

He did not understand his own hesitation in accepting the Gilmans' hospitality, and he was vaguely irritated by his own undefined, irrational scruples.

Why in the world should he not value the acquaintance of a clever woman of the world, who drew his thoughts from their accustomed channels, and forced them to recognise that there

were other paths worthy to be followed? Paths that led in the direction of art and literature, as well as towards science. It was good for him to talk to her, he argued; he was narrow, it was the fault of his profession, he acknowledged it, and wished for a wider outlook.

At this point, the point where a little of the modern atmosphere he ignored would have saved him, his reflections invariably ran off the right track. To his unsophisticated intelligence, Mrs. Gilman was brilliant, witty, profound, simply because he had never had an opportunity of comparing her counterfeit coin—the catch-words, the allusive jargon, the borrowed paradoxes and epigrams of a modern school—with what was its genuine claim to brilliance and distinction. It is easy to make a cheap glitter for a man of Strong's type, and Mrs. Gilman practised the economies for which no alternative was possible. He was, moreover, so flatteringly dazzled by paste that, in any case, diamonds would have been sinfully thrown away upon him.

Such as it was, however, her conversation represented for Strong the only culture obtainable in Crewford, and he strove to consider the fact powerful enough to account for the influence she undoubtedly exercised upon him.

But in his heart of hearts, when he began patiently to sift motives and emotions, he knew this did not solve the mystery of the attraction which drew him day after day to her room.

"Confound it!" he found himself exclaiming, half aloud, one evening. "What is it? I don't care for her. Good heavens, no!" with a short laugh. "I believe I—rather dislike her than otherwise."

He paused a moment, pondering over the idea, and dismissed it with another bewildered laugh, as one more insoluble problem.

"Don't even know whether I dislike her? Hang the woman,
any

any way, she occupies too much of my time. I won't see so much of her," he resolved suddenly; "the girl's all right now. I can make that the excuse."

With the determination, his perplexities at once vanished. He looked at Mollie's photograph for a moment before going in search of his candle, and a very tender, boyish smile came to his lips before they framed themselves for the soft whistling which meant that his mind was at rest.

"What do you and I care for any stupid woman, little girl!" he would have said, had Mollie herself been there to hear him.

"She is much better," he said, following Mrs. Gilman, the next day, into the drawing-room, after his visit to the maid. He stood talking by the mantel-piece, as though in readiness to go as soon as necessary conversation should be over. "I think if I look in again on Thursday or Friday I needn't trouble you again. She will do now, if you take care of her for a little while. She oughtn't to begin work for a week or two. If you could send her home for a fortnight, or——"

"Two lumps?" Mrs. Gilman interrupted. She held the sugar suspended over the tea-cup, and glanced up at him.

He hesitated.

"I really oughtn't to stay, I haven't made an end of work for to-day," he began.

"But tea is one of the pleasures of life," she returned, passing the cup to him, "not a mere duty to be scrupulously avoided."

There was a moment's pause before he took the usual low chair near the fire, with a laugh.

Mrs. Gilman helped herself to one of the tiny cakes out of the cake basket.

"I always

"I always associate you with that chair, or the chair with you—whichever you consider the prettiest way of putting it," she said, with a little movement of her head towards Strong. She addressed him in the slow, lazy voice in which one intimate friend might speak to another.

"It seems quite natural for you to be there. And this is practically your last visit; I'm sorry. I shall miss our talks." There was the faintest note of sadness in the last words. She lifted the cup to her lips, set it down untasted, and gazed a moment absently into the fire.

Strong flushed, and moved a little uneasily, glanced furtively at her, and was glad that at the moment she was so obviously unconscious of him.

"Yes," he said, awkwardly, "we seem to have talked a great deal. I was a regular ignorant Philistine before you took me in hand, Mrs. Gilman, and I'm afraid I haven't made much progress in spite of your teaching. I've ordered some of the books you talk about, though, and I'm trying to cultivate a taste for art; but—I'm really awfully sorry—I still prefer my old hunting pictures to Whistler. I'm afraid you'll have to give me up as a bad job. I'm not a quick pupil."

She turned her head slowly, and let her eyes dwell for a moment on his face.

"You are an interesting one," she said, wistfully. "I have so enjoyed our talks. I"—she paused, hesitated a little, and dropped her eyes—"I am rather lonely. Don't quite forsake me." She looked up at him again, with a half-pleading, half-smiling glance, and her voice was a little tremulous.

Strong's heart beat quicker.

"I shall be glad to come whenever you ask me," he murmured. There was a short silence.

His

His eyes were riveted in a sort of fascinated gaze on her half-averted face.

He was thinking, confusedly, how wonderfully she was dressed, and how Mollie would tease him about his efforts to describe what she wore. Her gown seemed to him a mist of soft, yet brilliant colour, the firelight flashed on the jewelled girdle at her waist, and her white hands, clasped on her lap, lay like gathered lilies on a bed of dimly glowing flowers. What was it that made her face so attractive? It was not pretty, even framed as it was in low, falling masses of glorious red hair—not pretty, but curiously fascinating. Her eyes were beautiful, yet he had hitherto always thought it was the expression of her eyes that repelled him.

“How is the little lady!” she asked at last, turning sharply to him. Her voice had regained its accustomed half-mocking brightness. The trend of Strong’s reflections was suddenly deflected.

Instinctively he resented the tone of the inquiry, and drew himself up a little stiffly before replying, “She is well, I believe.”

She raised her eyebrows ironically.

“*You believe!*—you know you write every day. And how soon are you going to act Benedick to her Beatrice?”

“Not so soon as I could wish,” he replied, putting the cup down on the table.

“You intend to hug your chains, I see,” she returned, leaning her head back against the cushion with a nestling movement with which he had grown familiar.

He did not reply, and she sat turning the rings on her finger absently, and looking into the red heart of the fire.

Strong wished to rise, make some excuse about work, and go, but something irresistibly impelled him to sit watching her.

The

The droop of her mouth, and her downcast eyes gave him an odd uncomfortable sensation. She moved at last with a half sigh.

"I want you to see these," she said at last, rising as she spoke and moving slowly towards the mantel-piece.

She drew an envelope from behind a little clock, and took some photographs from it.

"They have just come home. Do you think they are like me?" she asked, leaning over her shoulder at Strong, who rose and followed her to the mantel-piece.

He took them from her and examined them one by one.

"Well, what do you think of them?" she asked, softly. She was standing close to him, and as she bent over the photographs her thick, wavy hair touched his hand. Strong withdrew it hurriedly.

"They are charming," he said, with an effort, and laid them on the mantel-piece.

She gave a little, low laugh of half-caressing mockery.

"You are not going to ask for one? What a good boy! Now see virtue rewarded."

She chose the prettiest, and held it towards him, raising her eyes at the same time.

They were brilliant with laughing mockery, and something else which for one sudden moment sent the blood to his heart. Her rich hair fell low against her faintly flushed cheek, the fragrant folds of her dress brushed his hand. For one second he stood penetrated by her rare tantalising beauty before an irresistible impulse seized him, and he bent swiftly, drew her to him, and kissed her.

She drew back, but kept her eyes on his face, and then in one brief moment, with all his faculties quickened, intensified by the
swift

swift reaction from sudden passion, Strong read intuitively Barbara Gilman's history of the past few weeks.

The flash penetrated the obscure recesses of his own mind at the same moment, and in the pitiless glare he saw what had before been hidden from him—the secret of her influence. It was miserably, ludicrously simple after all. As he looked at the woman before him, he recognised that in spite of the fact that accident had made her the honoured wife of a man near his own rank in life, she belonged, by nature, to a class which she herself probably held in virtuous contempt and horror.

It was one of those moments of mutual revelation when speech is recognised as a clumsy, unnecessary middleman between soul and soul.

As she looked at him, Mrs. Gilman's eyes slowly dilated. Their expression of half insolent triumph faded. Resentful anger took its place. This boy, who, lacking all the qualities that go to the making of a man of the world, had filled her with contemptuous amusement—this boy, dared to despise her.

Her forehead contracted into a sudden frown.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked sharply, the words involuntarily escaping her lips.

Strong still kept his eyes on her face. He was pale. She noticed that he looked all at once years older.

“I think I had better not tell you,” he replied deliberately, taking up his hat.

She flushed.

“I thought you might have been considering an apology,” she said with dangerous coldness, “but I don't think you need trouble. No apology, however abject, could atone for your disgraceful conduct. Please go.” She pointed to the door.

Strong

Strong continued to look at her, without changing his expression.

"Nevertheless, I apologise," he said quietly. "It is a man's rôle to offer an apology, I believe."

She drew a deep breath.

"I am sorry I cannot accept it. It is perhaps fair to warn you that I never conceal anything from my husband," she added over her shoulder, as Strong moved towards the door.

He bowed, turning with his hand on the door-handle, and the faintest smile on his lips. As he walked down the hall, the smile deepened unpleasantly, and he wondered vaguely that he could at the moment find her icily virtuous demeanour so grimly comic.

She saw the smile, and her lips whitened. Her heart beat fast for anger. He was master of the situation. She, a woman of the world, had been out-matched and despised by a green boy! The photograph she had given him lay on the mantel-piece. She snatched it up with a sudden movement, tore it again and again, and flung it on to the fire.

She stood motionless a moment, gazing at the leaping flames, her eyebrows drawn together, then, in a frenzy of rage, she struck her hand against the marble side of the fireplace.

It was bruised, and the pain brought tears to her eyes, as she put it to her lips in a fury of self-pity. There was a step outside, the door-handle was turned, and her husband entered.

"All in the dark, Bab!" he called cheerfully, stumbling against a chair.

She turned from the fire, and went swiftly to meet him, breaking into sobs.

Then, as he caught her in his arms with incoherent, wondering, soothing words, she clung to him, caressing him.

"Oh! I wanted you so badly," she murmured through her
tears.

tears. "You dear Jim—you dear Jim, don't be angry, will you? I want to tell you something—something dreadful!"

* * * * *

Two months later, Strong stood by the window in his dismantled study, reading a letter in the waning light of a December afternoon.

The same packing-cases that had lumbered the room three months before, stood again on the skirting against the wall. They were full of pictures and books. The walls were bare; the tables without covers. A travelling-rug and a half-filled portmanteau lay on the floor. His face, thrown into relief by the light that entered through a side window, was terribly altered. It had the grey pallor that comes of anxiety and suspense. There were hollows in his cheeks, and the hand that held the paper nearer to the light, trembled like the hand of an old man. The letter was from his sister, giving him particulars of his father's death. It was incoherent, as words written under the strain of grief usually are, but the keynote of the letter was struck in the stress she laid on the fact that her father seemed to make no effort to rally from his illness, when he heard that Strong was giving up the Crewford practice. "He was weak before, of course," she wrote with unintentional cruelty, "but when he heard the news, he seemed utterly crushed and broken, and hardly spoke again. I did all I could to keep from him the reports we hear about you, and the reason you are leaving Crewford, but ill news flies, Jack, and we couldn't help hearing the gossip. I have not heard from Mollie, since Major Kendall went down to Crewford a week ago. Do write plainly—but it doesn't seem to matter now father has gone."

There was more of the letter, but he threw it down unfinished with a laugh.

"No,

"No, it really doesn't matter," he repeated half aloud, and began to search in a leather case which he took from his breast-pocket for another letter which he knew by heart. It was a broken-hearted little note from Mollie. He glanced through it, crumpled the paper fiercely in his hand, and then smoothed it again to read the last sentence.

"We sail for India to-morrow. Father's leave is over and he insists on taking me out with him; we shall not come home for years. I dare not think of it—I hope I shall die before——"

Strong looked again at the date. She had sailed the previous day.

He drew a chair up slowly before the empty table and deliberately tore both letters, Mollie's and his sister's into shreds. He took great pains to fold the paper exactly, and apparently gave his whole mind to the task. When they were reduced to a heap of infinitesimal fragments, he rose, opened the window, and scattered them to the wind. The white scraps whirled and eddied over the bare rose bushes before the window, and drifted like flakes of snow on to the earth at their roots. When the last flake was at rest, he closed the window softly, as though some one lay dead in the room, turned the key in the lock, stooped over the portmanteau a moment, and took from it something which he put on the table.

There were a few trifles still unpacked on the mantel-piece, and he turned to it and began to collect them mechanically and place them neatly in the packing-case. He surprised himself in the act, and laughed aloud. What would packing-cases and pictures matter in a few moments? He turned over the last photograph and glanced at it. It was of his sister. As he looked, his left hand slid over the table, feeling for what he had laid there. He grasped it presently, and stood a full minute looking from it to the
portrait

portrait in his other hand. All at once with a groan, he flung the pistol from him, and at the same time dropped the photograph savagely into the packing case.

"Damn it!" he muttered. "A fellow mustn't even die. He's got to live, and to try and keep a sister he doesn't care for out of the workhouse."

* * * * *

Five or six years later, Mrs. Gilman was driving down Piccadilly. There was a crush at the corner of Bond Street, and the carriage drew up close to the curb. As she sat idly watching the passers-by, she saw with a start of recognition Strong's face amongst them. He stopped at the edge of the pavement, waiting to cross, and in a moment their eyes met. Involuntarily, with a woman's instinct, she glanced first at his clothes, as the best source of information as to prosperity, or the reverse. He was as well dressed as she remembered him at Crewford, years ago, and, as she noticed this, her heart began to beat fast with a sense of resentful anger. He was doing well then after all. His eyes were still fixed upon her, and she forced herself to meet his gaze. Once more, as in the drawing-room at the Court five years ago, their long look was eloquent. She saw before her a man prematurely aged, his face lined, with work perhaps, possibly with suffering, though of that she could not guess. All traces of the boy had vanished; it was a calm, inscrutable face, the lips closely pressed together, the eyes steady and quiet. He looked full at her, calmly, indifferently even, and as she returned his glance the flame of anger flared more fiercely. She had robbed him of life's joys, it was true, but he had conquered—she felt it. Again he was master of the situation. His look, too impersonal to be even critical, scorched her.

With a swift, violent movement she leant forward in the carriage.

"Drive

"Drive on," she called savagely to the man, who started, flicked the horses suddenly, and they plunged forward, narrowly escaping the wheels of a hansom. Before she was whirled past him, she saw for the second time in their acquaintance the ghost of a smile upon his lips. Her face was white as she leant back in the corner of the victoria, her hands clenched under the carriage rug.

The same evening she and her husband were in the private sitting-room of their hotel at Westminster. She was putting some feathery branches of chrysanthemum into tall jars about the room. Two or three of the flowers, flame-coloured, with long, curling petals like the tentacles of some sea creature, lay on the table. These she presently took up, and fastened at her waist in the loose folds of her evening dress. The harmony of the gorgeous colour of the flowers with the gown she wore, gave the supreme perfecting touch to her appearance.

Her husband sat in an arm-chair by the fire, a cigarette between his fingers, and watched her. She felt the admiration in his eyes and turned to him lingeringly, with the slow smile which never failed of the effect she intended, in whatever direction it was bestowed.

He rose immediately, put his arm round her, and turned her face up to his.

"'Pon my word, I believe you are prettier than when I married you, Bab!" he declared with an awkward laugh.

She touched his cheek with her hair, and stood a moment while he stroked it tenderly, then gently moved away.

"Middleton's late," he observed, with a glance at the clock.

"Yes," she returned, carelessly, "but there's really plenty of time."

"I heard

"I heard something about that fellow, you know who I mean—Strong—to-day," he said presently, after a short silence.

She half-turned her head, then paused, and reached for a fan on the mantel-piece.

"Yes?" she said, indifferently.

"The brute's doing better than he deserves, though that's not saying much," he went on, his face darkening. "He's scraped some sort of practice together in some God-forsaken suburb—Hackney or Clapton, I believe—and his sister's keeping house for him."

"How did you hear?" She was shielding her face from the fire with the fan she held.

"Dr. Danford was talking about him, curiously enough, after dinner last night. It seems one of his children met with an accident—thrown from a pony or something—and was taken into Strong's place."

There was a pause while Gilman puffed in silence, a frown gathering.

"Danford spoke enthusiastically of the chap," he went on after a moment, knocking the ashes from his cigarette; "says he's bound to come to the front. He's read a paper before some medical congress or other that's considered pretty brilliant. Confound our smooth, oily, nineteenth-century manner of doing business like this," he broke out fiercely. "What wouldn't I give to have put a bullet through him that time, instead of being driven to ruin his practice by making the place too hot to hold him! One can't let one's wife's name get bandied about, though. One has to keep her out of it—that's the worst of it," he added, gloomily, "or else——"

"Why do you talk about him! What does it matter?" she asked, vehemently, rising and crushing the fan in her hand as she spoke.

spoke. How she hated the man! The sound of his name brought vividly before her the quiet, indifferent glance he had that morning bestowed upon her. It roused once more the fury of impotent anger with which she recognised her utter powerlessness to affect him. And Jim, of course, blundering idiot that he was, must needs remind her. "I hate the subject," she exclaimed. She was trembling, and her voice shook.

Her husband was on his feet in a moment.

"What a fool I am!" he said, seizing her hand. "Poor little girl, how could I remind you! You are too good for me, Bab," he murmured tenderly, bending over her. "I ought to have realised what a good woman feels when a brute like that dares to insult her. But we'll never speak of it again, dear."

She lifted her face for his kiss, and then gently disengaged herself as a man's voice became audible outside.

As she turned her head, an almost imperceptible smile curled her lip, and she laid her hand for one second against the front of her low gown, where she felt the edge of a stiff envelope, and heard its faint rustle.

The door opened at the moment, and, for a breathing space, the eyes of the man who entered sought and met hers.

"Hullo, Middleton! you're late," Gilman exclaimed. "We shall have to start at once if we're going to hear the overture. Bab and I had given you up, and were just settling down to a Darby and Joan evening, weren't we, Bab?"