The Young Diana

by Marie Corelli

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THE YOUNG DIANA

MARIE CORELLI

THE YOUNG DIANA AN EXPERIMENT OF THE FUTURE

BY MARIE CORELLI

AUTHOR OF “THE LIFE EVERLASTING,” “INNOCENT,” “ROMANCE OF TWO WORLDS,” “BARABBAS,” ETC.

TORONTO WILLIAM BRIGGS

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THE YOUNG DIANA

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CHAPTER I

Once upon a time, in earlier and less congested days of literary effort, an Author was accustomed to address the Public as “Gentle Reader.” It was a civil phrase, involving a pretty piece of flattery. It implied three things: first, that if the Reader were not “gentle,” the Author’s courtesy might persuade him or her to become so—secondly, that criticism, whether favourable or the reverse, might perhaps be generously postponed till the reading of the book was finished,—and thirdly, that the Author had no wish to irritate the Reader’s feelings, but rather sought to prepare and smooth the way to a friendly understanding. Now I am at one with my predecessors in all these delicate points of understanding, and as I am about to relate what every

person of merely average intelligence is likely to regard as an incredible narrative, I think it as well to begin politely, in the old-fashioned “grand” manner of appeal, which is half apologetic, and half conciliatory. “Gentle Reader,” therefore, I pray you to be friends with me! Do not lose either patience or temper while following the strange adventures of a very strange woman,—though in case you should be disappointed in seeking for what you will not find, let me say at once that my story is not of the Sex Problem type. No! My heroine is not perverted from the paths of decency and order, or drawn to a bad end; in fact, I cannot bring her to an end at all, as she is still very much alive and doing uncommonly well for herself. Any end for Diana May would seem not only incongruous, but manifestly impossible.

Life, as we all know, is a curious business. It is like a stage mask with two faces,—the one comic, the other tragic. The way we look at it depends on the way it looks at us. Some of us have seen it on both sides, and are neither edified nor impressed.

Then, again—life is a series of “sensations.” We who live now are always describing life. They who lived long ago did the same. It seems that none of us have ever found, or can ever find, anything better to occupy ourselves withal. All through the ages the millions of human creatures who once were born and who are now dead, passed their time on this planet in experiencing “sensations,” and relating their experiences to one another, each telling his or her little “tale of woe” in a different way. So anxious were they, and so anxious are we, to explain the special and individual manner in which our mental and physical vibrations respond to the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves, that all systems of religion, government, science, art and philosophy have been, and are, evolved simply and solely out of the pains and pleasures of a mass of atoms who are “feeling” things and trying to express their feelings to each other. These feelings they designate by various lofty names, such as “faith,” “logic,” “reason,” “opinion,” “wisdom,” and so forth; and upon them they build temporary fabrics of Law and Order, vastly solid in

appearance, yet collapsible as a house of cards, and crumbling at a touch, while every now and again there comes a sudden, unlooked-for interruption to their discussions and plans—a kind of dark pause and suggestion of chaos, such as a great war, a plague or other unwelcome "visitation of God," wherein "feelings" almost cease, or else people are too frightened to talk about them. They are chilled into nervous silence and wait, afflicted by fear and discouragement, till the cloud passes and the air clears. Then the perpetual buzz of "feeling" begins again in the mixed bass and treble of complaint and rejoicing,—a kind of monotonous noise without harmony. External Nature has no part in it, for Man is the only creature that ever tries to explain the phenomena of existence. It is not in the least comprehensible why he alone should thus trouble and perplex himself,—or why his incessant consideration and analysis of his own emotions should be allowed to go on,—for, whatsoever education may do for us, we shall never be educated out of the sense of our own importance. Which is an odd fact, moving many thoughtful minds to never-ending wonder.

My heroine, Diana May, wondered. She was always wondering. She spent weeks, and months, and years, in a chronic state of wonder. She wondered about herself and several other people, because she thought both herself and those several other people so absurd. She found no use for herself in the general scheme of things, and tried, with much patient humility, to account for herself. But though she read books on science, books on psychology, books on natural and spiritual law, and studied complex problems of evolution and selection of species till her poor dim eyes grew dimmer, and the "lines from nose to chin" became ever longer and deeper, she could discover no way through the thick bog of her difficulties. She was an awkward numeral in a sum; she did not know why she came in or how she was to be got out.

Her father and mother were what are called "very well-to-do-people," with a pleasantly suburban reputation for respectability and regular church attendance. Mr. James Polydore May,—this was his name in full, as engraved on his visiting

card—was a small man in stature, but in self-complacency the biggest one alive. He had made a considerable fortune in a certain manufacturing business which need not here be specified, and he had speculated with it in a shrewd and careful manner which was not without a touch of genius, the happy result being that he had always gained and never lost. Now at the age of sixty, he was free from all financial care, and could rattle gold and silver in his trousers-pockets with a sense of pleasure in their clinking sound,—they had the sweetness of church-bells which proclaim the sure nearness of a prosperous town. He was not a bad-looking little veteran,—he had, as he was fond of saying of himself, “a good chest measurement,” and though his legs were short, they were not bandy. Inclined to corpulence, the two lower buttons of his waistcoat were generally left undone, that he might the more easily stretch himself after a full meal. His physiognomy was not so much intelligent as pugnacious—his bushy eyebrows, hair and moustache gave him at certain moments the look of an irascible old terrier. He had keen small eyes, coming close to the bridge of a rather pronounced Israelitish nose, and to these characteristics was added a generally assertive air,—an air which went before him like an advancing atmosphere, heralding his approach as a “somebody”—that sort of atmosphere which invariably accompanies nobodies. His admiration of the fair sex was open and not always discreet, and from his youth up he had believed himself capable of subjugating any and every woman. He had an agreeable “first manner” of his own on introduction,—a manner which was absolutely deceptive, giving no clue to the uglier side of his nature. His wife could have told whole stories about this “first manner” of his, had she not long ago given up the attempt to retain any hold on her own individuality. She had been a woman of average intelligence when she married him,—commonplace, certainly, but good-natured and willing to make the best of everything; needless to say that the illusions of youth vanished with the first years of wedded life (as they are apt to do), and she had gradually sunk into a flabby condition of resigned nonentity, seeing there was nothing else left for her. The dull,

tame tenor of her days had once been interrupted by the birth of her only child Diana, who as long as she was small and young, and while she was being educated under the usual system of governesses and schools, was an object of delight, affection, amusement and interest, and who, when she grew up and "came out" at eighteen as a graceful, pretty girl of the freshest type of English beauty, gave her mother something to love and to live for,—but alas!—Diana had proved the bitterest of all her disappointments. The "coming-out" business, the balls, the race-meetings and other matrimonial traps had been set in vain;—the training, the music, the dancing, the "toilettes"—had failed to attract,—and Diana had not married. She had fallen in love, as most girls do before they know much about men,—and she had engaged herself to an officer with "expectations" for whom, with a romantic devotion as out of date as the poems of Chaucer, she had waited for seven long years in a resigned condition of alarming constancy,—and then, when his "expectations" were realised, he had promptly thrown her over for a fairer and younger partner. By that time Diana was what is called "getting on." All this had tried the temper of Mrs. James Polydore May considerably—and she took refuge from her many vexations in the pleasures of the table and the consolations of sleep. The result of this mode of procedure was that she became corpulent and unwieldy,—her original self was swallowed up in a sort of featherbed of adipose tissue, from which she peered out on the world with protruding, lustreless eyes, the tip of her small nose seeming to protest feebly against the injustice of being well-nigh walled from sight between the massive flabby cheeks on either side of its never classic and distinctly parsimonious proportions. With oversleep and over-eating she had matured into a stupid and somewhat obstinate woman, with a habit of saying unmeaningly nice or nasty things:—she would "gush" affectionately to all and sundry,—to the maid who fastened her shoes as ardently as to a friend of many years standing,—yet she would mock her own guests behind their backs, or unkindly criticise the physical and mental defects of the very man or woman she had flattered obsequiously five

minutes before. So that she was not exactly a “safe” acquaintance,—you never knew where to have her. But,—as is often the case with these placidly smiling, obese ladies,—everyone seemed to be in a conspiracy to call her “sweet,” and “dear” and “kind,” whereas in very truth she was one of the most selfish souls extant. Her charities were always carefully considered and bestowed in quarters where she was likely to get most credit for them,—her profusely expressed sympathy for other people’s troubles exhausted itself in a few moments, and she would straightway forget what form of loss or misfortune she had just been commiserating,—while, despite her proverbial “dear” and “sweet” attributes, she had a sulky temper which would hold her in its grip for days, during which time she would neither speak nor be spoken to. Her chief interest and attention were centred on eatables, and she always made a point of going to breakfast in advance of her husband, so that she might select for herself the most succulent morsels out of the regulation dish of fried bacon, before he had a chance to look in. Husband and wife were always arguing with each other, and both were always wrong in each other’s opinion. Mrs. James Polydore May considered her worser half as something of a wayward and peevish child, and he in turn looked upon her as a useful domestic female—“perfectly simple and natural,” he was wont to say, a statement which, if true, would have been vastly convenient to him as he could then have deceived her more easily. But “deeper than ever plummet sounded” was the “simplicity” wherewith Mrs. James Polydore May was endowed, and the “natural” way in which she managed to secure her own comfort, convenience and ease while assuming to be the most guileless and unselfish of women; indeed there were times when she was fairly astonished at herself for having “arranged things so cleverly,” as she expressed it. Whenever a woman of her type admits to having “arranged things cleverly” you may be sure that the most astute lawyer alive could never surpass her in the height or the depth of duplicity.

Such, briefly outlined, were the characteristics of the couple who, in an

absent-minded moment, had taken upon themselves the responsibility of bringing a woman into the world for whom apparently the world had no use. Woman, considered in the rough abstract, is only the pack-mule of man,—his goods, his chattels, created specially to be the "vessel" of his passion and humour,—and without his favour and support she is by universal consent set down as a lonely and wandering mistake. Such is the Law and the Prophets. Under these circumstances, which have recently shown signs of yielding to pressure, Diana, the rapidly ageing spinster daughter of Mr. and Mrs. James Polydore May, was in pitiable plight. No man wanted her, not even to serve him as a pack-mule. No man sought to add her person to his goods and chattels, and at the time this true story opens, she was not fair or fascinating or young enough to serve him as a toy for his delight, a plaything of his pleasure. Life had been very monotonous for her since she had passed the turning-point of thirty years,—"nice" people, who always say nasty things, remarked "how passée she was getting,"—thereby helping the ageing process considerably. She, meanwhile, bore her lot with exemplary cheerfulness,—she neither grizzled nor complained, nor showed herself envious of youth or youthful loveliness. A comforting idea of "duty" took possession of her mind, and she devoted herself to the tenderest care of her fat mother and irritable father, waiting upon them like a slave, and saying her prayers for them night and morning as simply as a child, without the faintest suspicion that they were past praying for. The years went on, and she took pains to educate herself in all that might be useful,—she read much and thought more,—she mastered two or three languages, and spoke them with ease and fluency, and she was an admirable musician. She had an abundance of pretty light-brown hair, and all her movements were graceful, but alas!—the unmistakable look of growing old was stamped upon her once mobile features,—she had become angular and flat-chested, and the unbecoming straight line from waist to knee, which gave her figure a kind of pitiful masculinity, was developing with hard and bony relentlessness. One charm she had, which she herself recognised and took

care to cultivate—"a low, sweet voice, an excellent thing in woman." If one chanced to hear her speaking in an adjoining room, the effect was remarkable,—one felt that some exquisite creature of immortal youth and tenderness was expressing a heavenly thought in music.

Mr. James Polydore May, as I have already ventured to suggest, was nothing if not respectable. He was a J.P. This,—in English suburban places at least,—is the hall-mark of an unimpeachable rectitude. Another sign of his good standing and general uprightness was, that at stated seasons he always went for a change of air. We all know that the person who remains in one place the whole year round is beyond the pale and cannot be received in the best society. Mr. May had a handsome house and grounds in the close vicinity of Richmond, within easy distance of town, but when the London "season" ended, he and Mrs. May invariably discovered their home to be "stuffy," and sighed for more expansive breathing and purer oxygen than Richmond could supply. They had frequently taken a shooting or fishing in Scotland, but that was in the days when there were still matrimonial hopes for Diana, and when marriageable men could be invited, not only to handle rod and gun, but to inspect their "one ewe-lamb," which they were over-anxious to sell to the highest bidder. These happy dreams were at an end. It was no longer worth while to lay in extensive supplies of whisky and cigars by way of impetus to timid or hesitating Benedicts, when they came back from a "day on the moors," tired, sleepy and stupid enough to drift into proposals of marriage almost unconsciously. Mr. May seldom invited young men to stay with him now, for the very reason that he could not get them; they found him a "bore,"—his wife dull, and his daughter an "old maid,"—a term of depreciation still freely used by the golden youth of the day, despite the modern and more civil term of "lady bachelor." So he drew in the horns of his past ambition, and consoled himself with the society of two or three portly men of his own age and habits,—men who played golf and billiards, and who, if they could do nothing else, smoked continuously. And for the necessary "change of

air," the seaside offered itself as a means of health without too excessive an expenditure, and instead of "chasing the wild deer and following the roe," a simple hammock chair on the sandy beach, and a golf course within easy walking distance provided sufficient relaxation. Not that Mr. May was in any sense parsimonious; he did not take a cottage by the sea, or cheap lodgings,—on the contrary, he was always prepared to "do the thing handsomely," and to select what the house-agents call an "ideal" residence.

At the particular time I am writing of, he had just settled down for the summer in a very special "ideal" on the coast of Devon. It was a house which had formerly belonged to an artist, but the artist had recently died, and his handsome and not inconsolable widow stated that she found it dull. She was glad to let it for two or three months, in order to "get away" with that restless alacrity which distinguishes so many people who find anything better than their own homes, and Mr. and Mrs. Polydore May, though, as they said, it certainly was "a little quiet after London," were glad to have it, at quite a moderate rental for the charming place it really was. The gardens were exquisitely laid out and carefully kept; the smooth velvety lawns ran down almost to the sea, where a little white gate opened out from the green of the grass to the gold of the sand,—the rooms were tastefully furnished, and Diana, when she first saw the place, going some days in advance of her father and mother, as was her wont, in order to make things ready and comfortable for them, thought how happy she could be if only such a house and garden were hers to enjoy, independently of others. For a week before her respected and respectable parents came, in the intervals of unpacking, and arranging matters so that the domestic "staff" could assume their ordinary duties with smoothness and regularity, she wandered about alone, exploring the beauties of her surroundings, her thin, flat figure striking a curious note of sadness and solitude, as she sometimes stood in the garden among a wealth of flowers, looking out to the tender dove-grey line of the horizon across the sea. The servants peeping at her from kitchen and pantry

windows, made their own comments.

“Poor dear!” said the cook, thoughtfully—“she do wear thin!”

“Ah, it’s a sad look-out for ’er!” sighed the upper housemaid, who was engaged to a pork-butcher with an alarmingly red face, whom one would have thought any self-respecting young woman would have died rather than wedded. “To be all alone in the world like that, unpertected, as she will be when her pa and ma have gone!”

“Well, they won’t go in a hurry!” put in the butler, who was an observing man—“Leastways, Mr. May won’t; he’ll ’old on to life like a cat to a mouse—he will! He’s that hearty!—why, he thinks he’s about thirty instead of sixty. The missis, now,—if she goes on eating as she do,—she’ll drop off sudden like a burstin’ bean,—but he!—Ah! I shouldn’t wonder if he outlasted us all!”

“Lor, Mr. Jonson!” exclaimed the upper housemaid—“How you do talk!—and you such a young man too!”

Jonson smiled, inwardly flattered. He was well over forty, but like his master wished to be considered a kind of youth, fit for dancing, tennis and other such gamesome occupations.

“Miss Diana,” he now continued, with a judicial air—“has lost her chances. It’s a pity!—for no one won’t marry her now. There’s too many young gels about,—no man wants the old ’uns. She’ll have to take up a ‘mission’ or something to get noticed at all.”

Here a quiet-looking woman named Grace Laurie interposed. She was the ladies’ maid, and she was held in great respect, for she was engaged to marry (at some uncertain and distant date) an Australian farmer with considerable means.

“Miss Diana is very clever—” she said—“She could do almost anything she cared to. She’s got a great deal more in her than people think. And”—here Grace hesitated—“she’s prettily made, too, though she’s over thin,—when she comes from her bath with all her hair hanging down, she looks sweet!” A gurgle of half

hesitating, half incredulous laughter greeted this remark.

“Well, it’s few ladies as looks ‘sweet’ coming from the bath!” declared the butler with emphasis. “I’ve had many a peep at the missis——”

Here the laughter broke out loudly, with little cries of: “Oh! Oh!”—and the kitchen chatter ended.

It had come to the last day of Diana’s free and uncontrolled enjoyment of the charming seaside Eden which her parents had selected as a summer retreat,—and regretfully realising this, she strolled lingeringly about the garden, inhaling the sweet odours of roses and mignonette with the salty breath of the sea. The next morning Mr. and Mrs. Polydore May would arrive in time for luncheon, and once more the old domestic jog-trot would commence,—the same routine as that which prevailed at Richmond, with no other change save such as was conveyed in the differing scene and surroundings. Breakfast punctually at nine,—luncheon at one,—tea at four-thirty,—dinner at a quarter to eight. Dinner at a quarter to eight was one of Diana’s bugbears—why not have it at eight o’clock, she thought? The “quarter to” was an irritating juggling with time for which there was no necessity. But she had protested in vain; dinner at quarter to eight was one of her mother’s many domestic “fads.” Between the several meals enumerated there would be nothing doing,—nothing, that is to say, of any consequence or use to anybody. Diana knew the whole weary, stupid round,—Mr. May would pass the morning reading the papers either in the garden or on the sandy shore,—Mrs. May would give a few muddled and contradictory orders to the servants, who never obeyed them literally, but only as far as they could be conveniently carried out, and then would retire to write letters to friends or acquaintances; in the afternoon Mr. May would devote himself to golf, while his wife slept till tea-time,—then she would take a stroll in the garden, and perhaps—only perhaps—talk over a few household affairs with her daughter. Then came the “quarter to eight” dinner with desultory and

somewhat wrangling conversation, after which Mrs. May slept again, and Mr. May played billiards, if he could find anyone to play with him,—if not, he practised "tricky" things alone with the cue. Neither of them ever thought that this sort of life was not conducive to cheerfulness so far as their daughter Diana was concerned,—indeed they never considered her at all. When she was young—ah yes, of course!—it was necessary to find such entertainment and society for her as might "show her off,"—but now, when she was no longer marriageable in the conventionally accepted sense of marriage, she was left to bear the brunt of fate as best she might, and learn to be contented with the plain feminine duty of keeping house for her parents. It must be stated that she did this "keeping house" business to perfection,—she controlled expenses without a taint of meanness, managed the servants, and made the whole commonplace affair of ordinary living run smoothly. But whatever she did, she never had a word of praise from either her father or mother,—they took her careful service as their right, and never seemed to realise that most of their comforts and conveniences were the result of her forethought and good sense. Certainly they did not trouble themselves as to whether she was happy or the reverse.

She thought of this,—just a little, but not morosely—on the last evening she was to spend alone at "Rose Lea" as the "ideal" summer residence was called,—probably on account of its facing west, and gathering on its walls and windows all the brilliant flush of the sunset. She was somewhat weary,—she had been occupied for hours in arranging her mother's bedroom and seeing that all the numerous luxuries needed by that placid mass of superfluous flesh were in their place and order, and now that she had finished everything she had to do, she was glad to have the remainder of her time to herself in the garden, thinking, and—as usual—wondering. Her wonder was just simply this:—How long would she have to go on in the same clockwork mechanism of life as that which now seemed to be her destiny? She had made certain variations in the slow music of her days by study,—yes, that was true!—but

then no one made use of her studies,—no one knew the extent of her attainments, and even in her music she had no encouragement,—no one ever asked her to play. All her efforts seemed so much wasted output of energy. She had certain private joys of her own,—a great love of Nature, which like an open door in Heaven allowed her to enter familiarly into some of the marvels and benedictions of creative intelligence; she loved books, and could read them in French and Italian, as well as in her native English; and she had taken to the study of Russian with some success. Greek and Latin she had learned sufficiently well to understand the great authors of the elder world in their own script,—but all these intellectual diversions were organised and followed on her own initiative, and as she sometimes said to herself a trifle bitterly:

"Nobody knows I can do anything but check the tradesmen's books and order the dinner."

This was a fact,—nobody knew. Ordinary people considered her unattractive; what they saw was a scraggy woman of medium height with a worn face visibly beginning to wrinkle under a profusion of brown hair,—a woman who "had been" pretty when younger, but who now had a rather restrained and nervous manner, and who was seldom inclined to speak,—yet, who, when spoken to, answered always gently, in a sweet voice with a wonderfully musical accentuation. No one thought for a moment that she might possibly be something of a scholar,—and certainly no one imagined that above all things she was a great student of all matters pertaining to science. Every book she could hear of on scientific subjects, whether treating of wireless telegraphy, light-rays, radium, or other marvellous discoveries of the age, she made it her special business to secure and to study patiently and comprehendingly, the result being that her mind was richly stored with material for thought on far higher planes than the majority of reading folk ever attempt to reach. But she never spoke of the things in which she was so deeply interested, and as she was reserved and almost awkwardly shy in company, the occasional callers on her

mother scarcely noticed her, except casually and with a careless civility which meant nothing. She was seen to knit and to do Jacobean tapestry rather well, and people spoke to her of these accomplishments as being what they thought she was most likely to understand,—but they looked askance at her dress, which was always a little tasteless and unbecoming, and opined that "poor dear Mrs. May must be dreadfully disappointed in her daughter!"

It never occurred to these easy-tongued folk that Diana was dreadfully disappointed in herself. This was the trouble of it. She asked the question daily and could find no answer. And yet,—she was useful to her parents surely? Yes,—but in her own heart she knew they would have been just as satisfied with a paid "companion housekeeper." They did not really "love" her, now that she had turned out such a failure. Alas, poor Diana! Her hunger for "love" was her misfortune; it was the one thing in all the world she craved. It had been this desire of love that had charmed her impulsive soul when in the heyday of her youth and prettiness, she had engaged herself to the man for whom she had waited seven years, only to be heartlessly thrown over at last. She had returned all his letters in exchange for her own at the end of the affair,—all, save two,—and these two she read every night before she said her prayers to keep them well fixed in her memory. One of them contained the following passage:

"How I love you, my own sweet little Diana! You are to me the most adorable girl in the world,—and if ever I do an unkind thing to you or wrong you in any way may God punish me for a treacherous brute! My one desire in life is to make you happy."

The other letter, written some years later, was rather differently expressed.

"I am quite sure you will understand that time has naturally worked changes, in you as well as in myself, and I am obliged to confess that the feelings I once had for you no longer exist. But you are a sensible woman, and you are old enough now to realise that we are better apart."

"You are old enough now," was the phrase that jarred upon Diana's inward sense, like the ugly sound of a clanking chain in a convict's cell. "You are old enough now." Well, it was true!—she was "old enough,"—but she had taken this "oldness" upon her while faithfully waiting for her lover. And he had been the first to punish her for her constancy! It was very strange. Indeed, it was one of those many things that had brought her to her chronic state of wonderment. The great writers,—more notably great poets, themselves the most fickle of men,—eulogised fidelity in love as a heavenly virtue. Why then, when she had practised it, had she been so sorely rewarded? Yet, since the rupture of her engagement, and the long and bitter pain she had endured over this breaking up of all she had held most dear, her many studies and her careful reading had gradually calmed and strengthened her nature, and she was able to admit to herself that there were possibly worse things than the loss of a heartless lover who might have proved a still more heartless husband. She felt no resentment towards him, and his memory now scarcely moved her to a thrill of sorrow or regret. She only asked herself why it had all happened? Of course there was no answer to such a query,—there never is. And she was "old enough"—yes, quite "old enough" to put away all romance and sentimentality. Yet, as she walked slowly in the garden among the roses, and watched the sea sparkling in the warm after-glow of what had been an exceptionally fine sun setting, the old foolish craving stirred in her heart again. The scent of the flowers, the delicate breathings of the summer air, the flash of the sea-gulls' white wings skimming over the glittering sand pools,—all these expressions of natural beauty saddened while they entranced her soul. She longed to be one with them, sharing their life, and imparting to others something of their joy.

"They never grow old!" she said, half aloud. "Or if they do, it is not perceived. They seem always the same—always beautiful and vital."

Here she paused. A standard rose tree weighted with splendid blossom showed among its flowers one that had been cramped and spoiled by the over-profusion and

close pressure of its companions,—it was decaying amid the eager crowd of bursting buds that looked almost humanly anxious to be relieved of its presence. With soft, deft fingers Diana broke it away from the stem and let it drop to earth.

"That is me!" she said. "And that's what ought to become of me! Nothing withered or ugly ought to live in such a lovely world. I am a blot on beauty."

She looked out to sea again. The after-glow had almost faded; only one broad line of dull gold showed the parting trail of the sun.

"No—there's no hope!" she murmured, with an expressive gesture of her hands. "I must plod on day after day in the same old rut of things, doing my duty, which is perhaps all I ought to ask to do,—trying to make my mother comfortable and to keep my father in decent humour,—and then—then—when they go, I shall be alone in the world. No one will care what becomes of me,—even as it is now no one cares whether I live or die!"

This is the discordant note in many a life's music,—"no one cares." When "no one cares" for us, we do not care about ourselves or about anybody else. And in "not caring" we stumble blindly and unconsciously on our only chance of safety and happiness. A heartless truth!—but a truth all the same. For when we have become utterly indifferent to Destiny, Destiny like a spoiled child does all she can to attract our notice, and manifests a sudden interest in us of which we had never dreamed. And the less we care, the more she clings!

CHAPTER II

Diana was "old enough," as her recalcitrant lover had informed her, to value the blessing of a good night's rest. She had a clear conscience,—she was, indeed, that rara avis, in these days, a perfectly innocent-minded woman, and she slept as calmly and peacefully as a child. When she woke to the light of a radiant morning, with the sunshine making diamonds of the sea, she felt almost young again as she tripped to

and fro, putting the final touches of taste to the pretty drawing-room, and giving to every nook and corner that indefinable air of pleasant occupation which can only be bestowed by the hand of a dainty, beauty-loving woman. At the appointed hour, the automobile was sent to the station to meet Mr. and Mrs. James Polydore May, and punctual to time the worthy couple arrived, both husband and wife slightly out of humour with the heat of the fine summer's day and the fatigue of the journey from London.

"Well, Diana!" sighed her mother, turning a fat, buff-coloured cheek to be kissed, "is the house really decent and comfortable?"

"It's lovely!" declared Diana, cheerfully—"I'm sure you'll be happy here, Mother! The garden is perfectly delightful!"

"Your mother spoke of the house, not the garden," interposed Mr. May, judicially. "You really must be accurate, Diana! Yes—er—yes!—that will do!"—this, as Diana somewhat shrinkingly embraced him. "Your mother is always suspicious—and rightly so—of damp in rented country houses, but I think we made ourselves certain that there was nothing of that kind before we decided to take it. And no poultry clucking?—no noises of a farmyard close by? No? That's a comfort! Yes—er—it seems fairly suitable. Is luncheon ready?"

Diana replied that it was, and the family of three were soon seated at table in the dining-room, discussing lobster mayonnaise. As Mrs. May bent her capacious bosom over her plate, her round eyes goggling with sheer greed, and Mr. May ate rapidly as was his wont, casting sharp glances about him to see if he could find fault with anything, Diana's heart sank more and more. It was just the same sort of luncheon as at home in Richmond, tainted by the same sordid atmosphere of commonplace. Her parents showed no spark of pleasurable animation or interest in the change of scene or the loveliness of the garden and sea as glimpsed through the open French windows,—everything had narrowed into the savoury but compressed

limit of lobster mayonnaise.

“Too much mustard in this, as usual,” said Mr. May, scraping his plate noisily.

“Not at all,” retorted his wife, with placid obstinacy. “If there is anything Marsh knows how to make with absolute perfection, it is mayonnaise.”

Marsh was the cook, and the cause of many a matrimonial wrangle.

“Oh, of course, Marsh is faultless!” sneered Mr. May. “This house has been taken solely that Marsh shall have a change of air and extra perquisites!”

Mrs. May’s eyes goggled a little more prominently, and protecting her voluminous bust with a dinner-napkin, she took a fresh supply of mayonnaise. Diana, who was a small eater and who rather grudged the time her parents spent over their meals, took no part in this sort of “sparring,” which always went on between the progenitors of her being. She was thankful when luncheon was over and she could escape to her own room. There she found the maid, Grace Laurie, with some letters which had just arrived.

“These are for you, miss,” said Grace. “I brought them up out of the hall, as I thought you’d like to be quiet for a bit.”

Diana smiled, gratefully.

“Thank you, Grace. Mother is coming upstairs directly to lie down—will you see she has all she wants?”

“Yes, miss.” Then, after a pause, “It’s you that should lie down and get a rest, Miss Diana,—you’ve been doing ever such a lot all these days. You should just take it easy now.”

Diana smiled again. There was something of kindly compassion in the “take it easy” suggestion—but she nodded assentingly and the well-meaning maid left her.

There was a long mirror against the wall, and Diana suddenly saw her own reflection in it. A hot flush of annoyance reddened her face,—what a scarecrow she

looked to herself! So angular and bony! Her plain navy linen frock hung as straight as a man's trousers; no gracious curves of body gave prettiness to its uncompromising folds,—and as for her poor worn countenance, she could have thrown things at it for its doleful pointed chin and sharp nose! She looked steadfastly into her own eyes,—they were curious in colour, and rather pretty with their melting hues of blue and grey,—but, oh!—those crows'-feet at the corners!—oh, the wrinkling of the eyelids!—oh, the tiredness, and dimness and ache!

Turning abruptly away, she glanced at the small time-piece on her dressing-table. It was three o'clock. Then she took off her navy linen gown,—one of the "serviceable," ugly sort of things her father was never tired of recommending for her wear,—and slipped on a plain little white wrapper which she had made for herself out of a cheap length of nun's veiling. She loosened her hair and brushed it out,—it fell to her waist in pretty rippling waves, and it was full of golden "glints," so much so that spiteful persons of her own sex had even said—"at her age it can't be natural; it must be dyed!" Nevertheless, its curling tendency and its brightness were all its own, but Diana took no heed of its beauty, and she would have been more than incredulous had anyone told her that in this array, or, rather, disarray, she had the appearance of a time-worn picture of some delicate saint in a French mediæval "Book of Hours." But such was her aspect. And with the worn saint look upon her, she drew a reclining chair to the window and lay down, stretching herself restfully at full length, and gazing out to sea, her unopened letters on her lap. How beautiful was that seemingly infinite line of shining water, melting into shining sky!—how far removed from the little troubles and terrors of the world of mankind!

"I wonder——!" she murmured. The old story again!—she was always wondering! Then, with eyes growing almost youthful in their intense longing for comprehension, she became absorbed in one of those vague reveries, which, like the things of eternity, have no beginning and no end. She "wondered"—yes!—she wondered why, for example, Nature was so grand and reasonable, and Man so mean

and petty, when surely he could, if he chose, be master of his own fate,—master of all the miracles of air, fire and water, and supreme sovereign of his own soul! A passage in a book she had lately been reading recurred to her memory.

“If any man once mastered the secret of governing the chemical atoms of which he is composed, he would discover the fruit of the Tree of Life of which, as his Creator said, he would ‘take, eat and live for ever!’”

She sighed,—a sigh of weariness and momentary depression, then began turning over her letters and glancing indifferently at the handwriting on each envelope, till one, addressed in a remarkably clear, bold caligraphy, made her smile in evidently pleasurable anticipation.

“From Sophy Lansing,” she said. “Dear little Sophy! She’s always amusing, with her Suffragette enthusiasms, and her vivacious independent ways! And she’s one of those very few clever women who manage to keep womanly and charming in spite of their cleverness. Oh, what a fat letter!”

She opened it and read the dashing scrawl, still smiling.

“Dearest Di,

“I suppose you are now settling down ‘by the sad sea waves’ with Pa and Ma! Oh, you poor thing! I can see you hard at it like a donkey at a well, trotting ‘in the common round, the daily task’ of keeping Pa as tolerable in temper as such an old curmudgeon can be, and Ma as reposeful under her burden of superfluous flesh as is at all possible. What a life for you, patient Grizel! Why don’t you throw it up? You are really clever, and you could do so much. This is Woman’s Day, and you are a woman of exceptional ability. You know I’ve asked you over and over again to retire from the whole domestic ‘show,’ and leave those most uninteresting and selfish old parents of yours to their own devices, with a paid housekeeper to look after their food, which is all they really care about. Come and live with me in London. We should be quite happy together, for I’m good-natured and sensible, and

so are you, and we're neither of us contending for a man, so we shouldn't quarrel. And you'd wake up, Diana!—you'd wake to find that there are many more precious things in life than Pa and Ma! I could even find you a few men to entertain you, though most of them become bores after about an hour—especially the ones that think themselves vastly amusing. Like your Pa, you know!—who, when he tells a very ancient 'good story,' thinks that God Himself ought to give up everything else to listen to him! No, don't be shocked! I'm not really irreverent—but you know it's true. Woe betide the hapless wight, male or female, who dares utter a word while Pa Polydore is on the story trail! How I've longed to throw things at him! and have only refrained for your sake! Well! God a' mercy on us, as Shakespeare's Ophelia says, and defend us from the anecdotal men!

"You'll perhaps be interested to hear that a proposal of marriage was made to me last night. The bold adventurer is rather like your Pa,—well 'on' in years, rich, with a prosperous 'tum'—and a general aspect of assertive affluence. I said 'No,' of course, and he asked me if I knew what I was doing? Exactly as if he thought I might be drunk, or dreaming! I replied that I was quite aware of myself, of him, and the general locality. 'And yet you say No?' he almost whispered, in a kind of stupefied amazement. I repeated 'No'—and 'No,'—and clinched the matter by the additional remark that he was the last sort of man I would ever wish to marry. Then he smiled feebly, and said 'Poor child!—you have been sadly led astray! These new ideas——' I cut him short by ringing the bell and ordering tea, and fortunately just at the moment in came Jane Prowser—you know her!—the tall, bony woman who goes in for 'Eugenics,' and she did the scarecrow business quite effectively. As soon as she began to talk in her high, rasping voice he went! Then I had tea alone with the Prowser—rather a trying meal, as she would, she would describe in detail all the deformities and miseries of a child 'wot 'adn't no business to be born,' as my housemaid once remarked of a certain domestic upset. However, I got rid of her after she had eaten all the cress and tomato sandwiches, and then I started to read a

batch of letters from abroad. I'm so thankful for my foreign correspondents!—they write and spell so well, and always have something interesting to say. One of my great friends in Paris, Blanche de Rouailles, sent me a most curious advertisement, which she tells me is appearing in all the French papers—I enclose it for you, as you are so 'scientific' and it may interest you. It is rather curiously worded and sounds 'uncanny!' But it occupies nearly half a column in all the principal Paris papers and is repeated in five different languages,—French, Italian, Spanish, Russian and English. I suppose it's a snare or a 'do' of some sort. The world is full of scoundrels, even in science! Now remember what I tell you! Come to me at once if Pa and Ma kick over the traces and allow their ingrained selfishness to break out of bounds. There's plenty of room for you in my cosy little flat and we can have a real good time together. Don't bother about money,—with your talent and knowledge of languages you can soon earn some, and I'll put you in the way of it. You really must do something for your own advantage,—surely you don't mean to waste your whole life in soothing Pa and massaging Ma? It may be dutiful but it must be dull! I don't think all the massaging in the world will ever reduce Ma to normal proportions, and certainly nothing can ever cure Pa of his detestable humours which are always lurking in ambush below his surface 'manner,' ready to jump out like little black devils on the smallest provocation. We can never be really grateful enough, dear Di, for our single blessedness! Imagine what life would have been for us with husbands like Pa! Absolute misery!—for you and I could never have taken refuge in food and fat like Ma! We would have died sooner than concentrate our souls on peas and asparagus!—we would have gone to the stake like martyrs rather than have allowed our bosoms to swell with the interior joys of roast pork and stuffing! Oh yes!—there is much to be thankful for in our spinsterhood,—we can go to our little beds in peace, knowing that no pig-like snoring from the 'superior' brute will disturb the holy hours of the night!—and if we are clever enough to make a little money, we can spend it as we like, without being cross-examined as to why it is that the dress

we wore four years ago is worn out, and why we must have another! I could run on for pages and pages concerning the blessings and privileges of unmarried women, but I'll restrain my enthusiasm till we meet. Let that meeting be soon!—and remember that I am always at your service as a true friend and that I'll do anything in the world to help you out of your domestic harness. For the old people who 'drive' you can't and won't see what a patient, kind, helpful clever daughter they've got, and they don't deserve to keep you. Let them spend their spare cash on a housekeeper, who is sure to cheat them (and a good job too!) and take your freedom. Get away!—never mind how, or where, or when,—but don't spend all your life in drudging. You've done enough of it—get away! This is the best of good advice from your loving friend,

"Sophy Lansing."

A slight shadow of meditative gravity clouded Diana's face as she finished reading this letter. She was troubled by her own thoughts; Sophy's lively strictures on her parents were undoubtedly correct and deserved,—and yet—"father and mother" were "father and mother" after all! It is curious how these two words still keep their sentimental significance, despite "state" education! "Mother" in the lower classes is often a drab, and in the higher a frivolous wastrel; "father" in the slums may beat his children black and blue, and in Mayfair neglect them to the point of utmost indifference,—but "mother and father," totally undeserving as they often are, still come in for a share of their offspring's vague consideration and lingering respect. "Education" of the wrong sort, however, is doing its best to deprive them of this regard, and it appears likely that the younger generation will soon be so highly instructed as to be able to ignore "mother and father" as easily as full-fledged cygnets ignore the parent birds who drive them away from their nesting haunts. But Diana was "old-fashioned"; she had an affectionate nature, and she took pathetic pains to persuade herself that "Pa" and "Ma" meant to be kind, and must in their hearts love her, their only child. This was pure fallacy, but it was the only little bit of

hope and trust left to her in a hard world, and she was loth to let it go. The smallest expression of tenderness from that ruffled old human terrier, her father, would have brought her to his feet, an even more willing slave to his moods than she already was,—a loving embrace from her mother would have moved her almost to tears of joy and gratitude, and would have doubly strengthened her unreasoning and unselfish devotion to the “bogey” of her duty. But she never received any such sign of affection or encouragement from year’s end to year’s end,—and it was like a strange dream to her now to recall that when she had been young, in the time of her “teens,” her father had called her his “beautiful girl,” and her mother had chosen pretty frocks for her “darling child!” Youth and the prospects of marriage had made this difference in the temperature of parental tenderness. Now that she was at that fatal stop-gap called “middle-age” and a hopeless spinster, the pretty frocks and the “beautiful-girl-darling-child” period had vanished with her matrimonial chances. There was no help for it.

At this point in her thoughts she gave a little half-unconscious sigh. Mechanically she folded up Sophy Lansing’s letter, and as she did so, noticed that a slip of printed paper had fallen out of it and lay on the floor. She turned herself on her reclining chair and stooped for it,—then as she picked it up realised that it must be the advertisement in the five different languages which her friend had mentioned. Glancing carelessly over it at first, but afterwards more attentively, her interest was aroused by its unusual wording, and then as she read it over and over again she found in it a singular attraction. It ran as follows:

“To ANY WOMAN who is alone in the world WITHOUT CLAIMS on HER TIME or HER AFFECTIONS.

“A SCIENTIST, engaged in very IMPORTANT and DIFFICULT WORK, requires the ASSISTANCE and CO-OPERATION of a Courageous and Determined Woman of mature years. She must have a fair knowledge of modern science, and must not

shrink from dangerous experiments or be afraid to take risks in the pursuit of discoveries which may be beneficial to the human race. Every personal care, consideration and courtesy will be shown towards her, and she will be paid a handsome sum for her services and be provided with full board and lodging in an elegant suite of apartments placed freely at her disposal. She must be prepared to devote herself for one or two years entirely to the study of very intricate problems in chemistry, concerning which she will be expected to maintain the strictest confidence. She must be well educated, especially in languages and literature, and she must have no ties of any kind or business which can interrupt or distract her attention from the serious course of training which it will be necessary for her to pursue. This Advertisement cannot be answered by letter. Each applicant must present herself personally and alone between the hours of 6 a.m. and 8 a.m. on Tuesdays and Fridays only to

“DR. FÉODOR DIMITRIUS, “Château Fragonard, “Geneva.”

The more Diana studied this singular announcement, the more remarkable and fascinating did it seem. The very hours named as the only suitable ones for interviewing applicants, between six and eight in the morning, were unusual enough, and the whole wording of the advertisement implied something mysterious and out of the common.

“Though I dare say it is, as Sophy suggests, only a snare of some sort,” she thought. “And yet to me it sounds genuine. But I don’t think this Dr. Féodor Dimitrius will get the kind of woman he wants easily. A handsome salary with board and lodging are tempting enough, but few women would be inclined to ‘take risks’ in the inventions and discoveries of modern science. Some of them are altogether too terrible!”

She read the advertisement carefully through again, then rose and locked it away in her desk with Sophy Lansing’s letter. She glanced through the rest of her

correspondence, which was not exciting,—one note asking for the character of a servant, another for the pattern of a blouse, and a third enclosing a recipe for a special sort of jam, “with love to your sweet kind mother!”

She put them all by, and stretching her arms languidly above her head, caught another glimpse of herself in the mirror. This time it was more satisfactory. Her hair, hanging down to her waist, was full of a brightness, made brighter just now by the sunlight streaming through the window, and her nun’s veiling “rest gown” had a picturesque grace in its white fall and flow which softened the tired look of her face and eyes into something like actual prettiness. The fair ghost of her lost youth peeped at her for a moment, awakening a smarting sense of regretful tears. A light tap at the door fortunately turned the current of her thoughts, and the maid Grace Laurie entered, bearing a dainty little tray with a cup of tea invitingly set upon it.

“I’ve just taken some tea to Mrs. May in her bedroom,” she said. “And I thought you’d perhaps like a cup.”

“You’re a treasure, Grace!”—and Diana sat down to the proffered refreshment. “What shall we all do when you go away to be married?”

Grace laughed and tossed her head.

“Well, there’s time enough for that, miss!” she replied. “He ain’t in no hurry, nor am I! You see when you’re married you’re just done for,—there’s no more fun. It’s drudge, wash, cook and sew for the rest of your days, and no way of getting out of it.”

Diana, sipping her tea, looked at her, smiling.

“If that’s the way you think, you shouldn’t marry,” she said.

“Oh yes, I should!” and Grace laughed again. “A woman like me wants a home and a man to work for her. I don’t care to be in service all my days,—I may as well wash and sew for a man of my own as for anybody else.”

“But you love him, don’t you?” asked Diana.

“Well, he isn’t much to love!” declared Grace, with twinkling eyes. “His looks wouldn’t upset anyone’s peace! I’ve never thought of love at all—all I want is to be warm and comfortable in a decent house with plenty to eat,—and a good husband is a man who can do that, and keep it going. As for loving, that’s all stuff and nonsense!—as I always say you should never care more for a man with your ’ed than you can kick off with your ’eels.”

This profound utterance had the effect of moving Diana to the most delightful mirth. She laughed and laughed again,—and her laughter was so sweet and fresh that it was like a little chime of bells. Her voice, as already hinted, was her great charm, and whether she laughed or spoke her accents broke the air into little bars of music.

“Oh, Grace, Grace!” she said, at last. “You are too funny for words! I must learn that wise saying of yours by heart! What is it? ‘Never care more for a man with your ’ed than you can kick off with your ’eels’?—Splendid! And you mean it?”

Grace nodded emphatically.

“Of course I mean it! It don’t do to care too much for a man,—he’s always a sort o’ spoilt babe, and what he gets easy he don’t care for, and what he can’t have he’s always crying, crying after. You’ll find that true, Miss Diana!”

The sparkle of laughter quenched itself in Diana’s eyes and left her looking weary.

“Yes—I daresay you are right,” she said—“quite right, Grace!” And looking up, she spoke slowly and rather sadly. “Perhaps it’s true—some people say it is—that men like bad women better than good,—and that if a woman is thoroughly selfish, vain and reckless, treating men with complete indifference and contempt, they admire her much more than if she were loving and faithful.”

“Of course!” assented Grace, positively. “Look at Mrs. Potter-Barney!—the one the halfpenny newspapers call the ‘beautiful Mrs. Barney’! I know a maid who was told by another maid that she got five hundred guineas for a kiss!—and Lady

Wasterwick has had thousands of pounds for——”

Diana held up a hand,—she smiled still, but a trifle austerely.

“That will do, Grace!”

Grace coughed discreetly and subsided.

“Is mother still lying down?” then asked Diana.

“Yes, miss. She’ll be on her bed till the dinner dressing bell rings. And Mr. May’s asleep over his newspaper in the garden.”

Again Diana laughed her clear, pretty laugh. The somnolent habits of her parents were so enlivening, and made home-life so cheerful!

“Well, all right, Grace,” she said. “If there’s nothing for me to do I shall go for a walk presently. So you’ll know what to say if I’m asked for.”

Grace assented, and then departed. Diana finished her cup of tea in meditative mood,—then, resolving to throw her retrospective thoughts to the winds, prepared to go out. It was an exceptionally fine afternoon, warm and brilliant, and instead of her navy linen gown which had seen considerable wear and tear, she put on a plain white one which became her much better than the indigo blue, and, completing her costume with a very simple straw hat and white parasol, she went downstairs and out of the house into the garden. She had meant to avoid her father, whom she saw on the lawn, under the spreading boughs of a cedar tree, seated in one rustic arm-chair, with his short legs comfortably disposed on another, and the day’s newspaper modestly spread as a coverlet over his unbuttoned waistcoat,—but an inquisitive wasp happening to buzz too near his nose he made a dart at it with one hand, and opening his eyes, perceived her white figure moving across the grass.

“Who’s that? What’s that?” he called out, sharply. “Don’t glide about like a ghost! Is it you, Diana?”

“Yes,—it’s me,” she replied, and came up beside him.

He gave her a casual look,—then sniffed and smiled sardonically.

“Dear me! How fine we are! I thought it was some young girl of the neighbourhood leaving cards on your mother! Why are you wearing white? Going to a wedding?”

Diana coloured to the roots of her pretty hair.

“It’s one of my washing frocks,” she submitted.

“Oh, is it? Well, I like to see you in dark colours—they are more suited to—to your age. Only very young people should wear white.”

He yawned capaciously. “Only very young people,” he repeated, closing his eyes. “Try and remember that.”

“Mrs. Ross-Percival wears white,” said Diana, quietly. “You are always holding her up to admiration. And she’s sixty, if she’s a day.”

Mr. Polydore May opened his eyes and bounced up in his chair.

“Mrs. Ross-Percival is a very beautiful woman!” he snapped out. “One of the beautiful women of society. And she’s married.”

“Oh, yes, she’s a grandmother,” murmured Diana, smiling. “But you don’t tell her not to wear white.”

“Good God, of course not! It’s no business of mine! What are you talking about? She’s not my daughter!”

Diana laughed her pretty soft laugh.

“No, indeed! Poor Pa! That would be terrible!—she’d make you seem so old if she were! But perhaps you wouldn’t mind as she’s so beautiful!”

Mr. May stared at her wrathfully with the feeling that he was being made fun of.

“She is beautiful!” he said, firmly. “Only a jealous woman would dare to question it!”

Diana laughed again.

“Very well, she is beautiful! Wig and all!” she said, and moved away, opening her parasol as she passed from the shadow of the cedar boughs into the full sun.

“She’s getting beyond herself!” thought her father, watching her as she went, and noting what he was pleased to consider “affectation” in her naturally graceful way of walking. “And if she once begins that sort of game, she’ll be unbearable! Nothing can be worse than an old maid who gets beyond herself or above herself! She’ll be fancying some man is in love with her next!”

He gave a snort of scorn and composed himself to sleep again; meanwhile Diana had left the garden and was walking at an easy pace, which was swift without seeming hurried, down to the sea shore. It was very lovely there at this particular afternoon hour,—the tide was coming in, and the long shining waves rolled up one after the other in smooth lines of silver on sand that shone in wet patches like purest gold. The air was soft and warm but not oppressive, and as the solitary woman lifted her eyes to the peaceful blue sky arched like a sheltering dome above the peaceful blue sea, her solitude was for the moment more intensified. More keenly than ever she felt that there was no one to whom she could look for so much as a loving word,—not in her own home, at any rate. Her friends were few; Sophy Lansing was one of the most intimate,—but Sophy lived such a life of activity, throwing her energies into so many channels, that it was not possible to get into very close or constant companionship with her.

“While I live,” she said to herself, deliberately, “I shall have no one to care for me—I must make up my mind to that. And when I die,—if I go to heaven there will be no one there who cares for me,—and, if I go to hell, no one there either!” She laughed at this idea, but there were tears in her eyes. “It’s curious not to have anyone on earth or in heaven or hell who wants you! I wonder if there are many like that! And yet—I’ve never done anything wicked or spiteful to deserve being left so unloved.”

She had come to a small, deep cove, picturesquely walled in by high masses of rock whose summits were gay with creeping plants, grass and flowers, and though the sea was calm, the pressure of the incoming tide through the narrow inlet made waves that were almost boisterous, as they rushed in and out with a musical splash and roar. It was hardly safe or prudent to walk further on. “Any of those waves could carry one off one’s feet in a minute,” she thought, and went upwards from the beach beyond the highest mark left by the fringes of the sea, where the fragments of an old broken boat made a very good seat. Here she rested awhile, allowing vague ideas of a possible future to drift through her brain. The prospect of a visit to Sophy Lansing seemed agreeable enough,—but she very well knew that it would be opposed by her parents,—that her mother would say she could not spare her,—and that her father would demand angrily:

“What have I taken this seaside house for? Out of pure good-nature and unselfishness, just to give you and your mother a summer holiday, and now you want to go away! That’s the way I’m rewarded for my kindness!”

If anyone had pointed out that he had only thought of himself and his own convenience in taking the “seaside house,” and that he had chosen it chiefly because it was close to the golf links and also to the Club, where there was a billiard-room, and that his “women folk” were scarcely considered in the matter at all, he would have been extremely indignant. He never saw himself in any other light but that of justice, generosity and nobility of disposition. Diana knew his “little ways,” and laughed at them though she regretted them.

“Poor Pa!” she would sigh. “He would be so much more lovable if he were not quite so selfish. But I suppose he can’t help it.”

And, on turning all the pros and cons over in her mind, she came to the conclusion that it would not be fair to leave her mother alone to arrange all the details of daily life in a strange house and strange neighbourhood where the tradespeople were not

accustomed to the worthy lady's rather vague ideas of domestic management, such as the ordering of the dinner two hours before it ought to be cooked, and other similar trifles, resulting in kitchen chaos.

"After all, I ought to be very contented!" and lifting her head, she smiled resignedly at the placid sea. "It's lovely down here,—and I can always read a good deal,—and sew,—I can finish my bit of tapestry,—and I can master that wonderful new treatise on Etheric Vibration——"

Here something seemed to catch her breath,—she felt a curious quickening thrill as though an "etheric vibration" had touched her own nerves and set them quivering. Some words of the advertisement she had lately read sounded on her ears as though spoken by a voice close beside her:

"She must have a fair knowledge of modern science and must not shrink from dangerous experiments, or be afraid to take risks in the pursuit of discoveries which may be beneficial to the human race."

She rose from her seat a little startled, her cheeks flushing with the stir of some inexplicable excitement in her blood.

"How strange that I should think of that just now!" she said. "I wonder"—and she laughed—"I wonder whether I should suit Dr. Féodor Dimitrius!"

The idea amused her,—it was so new,—so impracticable and absurd! Yet it remained in her mind, giving sparkle to her eyes and colour and animation to her face as she walked slowly home in a sort of visionary reverie.

CHAPTER III

Within a very few days of their "settling down" at Rose Lea, everybody in the neighbourhood,—that is to say, everybody of "county" standing—that height of social magnificence—had left their cards on Mr. and Mrs. Polydore May. They had, of course, previously made the usual private "kind inquiries,"—first as to the

newcomers' financial position, and next as to their respectability, and both were found to be unimpeachable. One of the most curious circumstances in this curious world is the strictness with which certain little bipeds inquire into the reported life and conduct of other little bipeds, the inquisitors themselves being generally the most doubtful characters.

"Funny little man, that Mr. May!" said the woman leader of the "hunting set," who played bridge all day and as far into the night as she could. "Like a retired tradesman! Must have sold cheese and butter at some time of his life!"

"Oh, no!" explained a male intimate, whose physiognomy strangely resembled that of the fox he chased all the winter. "He made his pile in copper."

"Oh, did he? Then he's quite decent?"

"Quite!"

"That daughter of his——"

Here a snigger went round the "county" company. They were discussing the new arrivals at their afternoon tea.

"Poor old thing!"

"Must be forty if she's a day!"

"Oh, give the dear 'girl' forty-five at least!" said a Chivalrous Youth, declining tea, and helping himself to a whisky-soda at the side-board.

"They say she was jilted."

"No wonder!" And a bleating laugh followed this suggestion.

"I suppose," remarked one man of gloomy countenance and dyspeptic eye, "I suppose it's really unpardonable for a woman to get out of her twenties and remain unmarried, but if it happens so I don't see what's to be done with her."

"Smother her!" said the Chivalrous Youth, drinking his whisky.

Everybody laughed. What a witty boy he was!—no wonder his mother was proud of

him!

“We shall have to ask her to one or two tennis parties,” said the woman who had first spoken. “We can’t leave her out altogether.”

“She doesn’t play,” said the gloomy man. “She told me so. She reads Greek.”

A shrill chorus of giggles in falsetto greeted this announcement.

“Reads Greek! How perfectly dreadful! A blue-stocking!”

“No! Really! It’s too weird!” exclaimed the bridge-and-hunting lady. “I hope she’s not an ‘art’ person?”

“No.” And the gloomy man began to be cheerful, seeing that his talk had awakened a little interest. “No, not at all. She told me she liked pictures, but hated artists. I said she couldn’t have pictures without artists, and she agreed, but observed that fortunately all the finest pictures of the world were painted by artists who were dead. Curious way of putting it!”

“Going off it?” queried the Chivalrous Youth, having now drained his tumbler of drink.

“No, I don’t think so. The fact is—er—she—well, she appeared to me to be rather—er—clever!”

Clever? Oh, surely not! The “county” dames almost shuddered. Clever? She couldn’t be, you know!—not with that spoilt old-young sort of face! And her hair! All dyed, of course! And her voice was very affected, wasn’t it? Yes!—almost as if she were trying to imitate Sarah Bernhardt! So stupid in a woman of her age! She ought to know better!

So the little vicious, poisonous, gossiping mouths jabbered and hissed about the woman who was “left” like a forgotten apple on a bough to wither and drop unregarded to the ground. No one had anything kind to say of her. It mattered not at all that they were not really acquainted with her personally or sufficiently to be able

to form an opinion,—the point with these precious sort of persons was, and always is, that an unwanted feminine nonentity had arrived in the neighbourhood who was superfluous, and therefore likely to be tiresome.

"One can always leave her out of a dinner invitation," said one woman, thoughtfully. "It will be quite enough to ask Mr. and Mrs."

"Oh, quite!"

Thus it was settled; meanwhile Diana, happily unconscious of any discussion concerning her, went on the even tenor of her way, keeping house for her parents, reading her favourite authors, studying her "scientific" subjects, and working at her tapestry without any real companionship save that of books and her own thoughts, and the constant delight she had in the profusion of flowers with which the gardens of Rose Lea abounded. These she arranged with exquisite taste and effect in the various rooms, so artistically that on one occasion the vicar of the parish, quite a dull, unimaginative man, was moved, during an afternoon call, to compliment Mrs. Polydore May on the remarkable grace with which some branches of roses were grouped in a vase on the table. Mrs. May looked at them sleepily and smiled.

"Very pretty, yes!" she murmured. "I used to arrange every flower myself, but now my daughter Diana does it for me. You see she can give her time to it,—she has nothing else to do."

The vicar smiled the usual smile of polite agreement to everything which always gives a touch of sickliness to the most open countenance, and said no more. Diana was not present, so she did not hear that her mother considered she "had nothing else to do" but arrange flowers. Even if she had heard it, she would hardly have contradicted it; it was one of those things which she would not have thought worth while arguing about. The fact that she governed all the domestic working of the house so that it ran like a perfectly-going machine on silent and well-oiled wheels, required no emphasis,—at least, not in her opinion,—and though she knew that not

one of the servants would have stayed in Mrs. May's service or put up with her vague, fussy, and often sulky disposition, unless she, Diana, had "managed" them, she took no credit to herself for the comfortable and well-ordered condition of things under which her selfish old parents enjoyed their existence. That she "had nothing else to do but arrange flowers" was a sort of house tradition with "Pa" and "Ma" through which they found all manner of excuse for saddling her with as much work as they could possibly give her in the way of constant attendance on themselves. But she did not mind. She was obsessed by the "Duty" fetish, which too often makes prisoners and slaves of those who should be free. Like all virtues, devotion to duty can become a vice if carried to excess, and it is unquestionably a vice when it binds unselfish souls to unworthy and tyrannical taskmasters.

The summer moved on in shining weeks of sunlight and still air, and Rose Lea lost nothing of its charm for Diana, despite the taint of the commonplace with which the eating and sleeping silkworm-lives of her parents invested it. Now and then a few visitors came from London,—men and women of the usual dull type, bringing no entertainment in themselves, and whose stay only meant a little more expenditure and a more lavish display of food. One or two portly club friends of James Polydore came to play golf and drink whisky with him, and they condescended to converse with Diana at meals, because, perforce, they thought they must,—but meals being over, they gave her no further consideration, except to remark casually one to another: "Pity old Polydore couldn't have got that daughter off his hands!" And the long, lovely month of August was nearly at its end when an incident happened which, like the small displacement of earth that loosens an avalanche, swept away all the old order of things, giving place to a new heaven and a new earth so far as Diana was concerned.

It had been an exceedingly warm day, and nightfall was more than usually welcome after the wide glare of the long, sunlit hours. Dinner was over, and Mr. and Mrs. Polydore May, fed to repletion and stimulated by two or three glasses of excellent

champagne, were resting in a dolce-far-niente condition, each cushioned within a deep and luxurious arm-chair placed on either side of the open French windows of the drawing-room. The lawn in front of them was bathed in a lovely light reflected from the after-glow of the vanished sun and a pale glimmer from the risen half-moon, which hung in soft brilliance over the eastern half of the quiet sea. Diana had left her parents to their after-dinner somnolence, and was walking alone in the garden, up and down a grass path between two rose hedges. She was within call should she be wanted by either “Pa” or “Ma,” but they were not aware of her close proximity. Mr. May was smoking an exceptionally choice cigar,—he was in one of his “juvenile” moods, and for once was not inclined to take his usual “cat-nap” or waking doze. He had been to a tennis party that afternoon and had worn, with a “young man’s fancy” a young man’s flannels, happily unconscious of the weird appearance he presented in that unsuitable attire,—and, encouraged by the laughter and applause of the more youthful players, who looked upon him as the “comic man” of the piece, he had acquitted himself tolerably well. So that for the moment he had cast off the dignity and weight of years, and the very air with which he smoked his cigar, flicking off the burnt ash now and again in the affected style of a “young blood about town,” expressed the fact that he considered himself more than a merely “well-preserved” man, and that if justice were done him he would be admitted to be “a violet in the youth of primy nature.”

His better-half was not in quite such pleasant humour; she was self-complacent enough, but the heat of the day had caused her to feel stouter and more unwieldy than usual, and inclined to wish:

“Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt,

Thaw and dissolve itself into a dew!”

When her husband lit his cigar, she had closed her eyes, thinking: “Now there will be a little peace!” knowing that a good cigar to an irritable man is like the bottle to a

screaming baby. But Mr. May was disposed to talk, just as he was disposed to admire the contour of his little finger whenever he drew his cigar from his mouth or put it back again.

“There were some smart girls playing tennis to-day,” he presently remarked. “One of them I thought very pretty. She was about seventeen.”

His wife yawned expansively. She made no comment.

“She was my partner,” went on Mr. May. “As skittish as you please!”

Mrs. May cuddled herself together among her cushions. The slightest glimmer of a smile lifted the corners of her pursy mouth towards her parsimonious nose. Her husband essayed once more the fascinating “flick” of burnt ash from his cigar.

“They’d have been as dull as a sermon at tea-time if it hadn’t been for me,” he resumed. “You see, I kept the ball rolling.”

“Naturally!—it’s tennis,” murmured his wife, drowsily.

“Don’t be a fool, Margaret! I mean I keep people amused.”

“I’m sure you do!” his “Margaret” agreed, as she smothered another yawn. “You’re the most amusing man I know!”

“Glad you admit it!” he said, captiously. “Not being amusing yourself, you ought to thank God you’ve got an amusing husband!”

This time Mrs. May emitted a bleating giggle.

“I do!”

“Now if it were not for Diana——”

His wife opened her eyes.

“What about Diana?”

“Well—Diana—put it how you like, but she’s Diana. She’ll never be anything else! Our daughter, oh, yes!—I know all that!—hang sentiment! Everybody calls her an

old maid—and she's in the way."

A light-footed figure pacing up and down the grass walk, unseen between the two rose hedges close by, came to a sudden pause—listening.

"She's in the way," repeated Mr. May, with somewhat louder emphasis. "Unmarried women of a certain age always are, you know. You can't class them with young people, and they don't like being parcelled off with old folks. They're out of it altogether unless they've got something to do which takes them away from their homes and saves them from becoming a social nuisance. They're superfluous. 'How is your daughter?' the women here ask me, with a kind of pitying smile, as though she had the plague, or was recovering from small-pox. To be a spinster over thirty seems to them a kind of illness."

"Well, it's an illness that cannot be cured with Diana now!" sighed Mrs. May. "Quite hopeless!"

"Quite." And her husband gave his chronic snort of ill-tempered defiance. "It's a most unfortunate thing—especially for me. You see, when I go about with a daughter like Diana, it makes me seem so old!"

"And me!" she interposed. "You talk only of yourself,—don't forget me!"

Mr. May laughed—a short, sardonic laugh.

"You! My dear Margaret, I don't wish to be unkind, but really you needn't worry yourself on that score! Surely you don't suppose you'll ever look young again? Think of your size, Margaret!—think of your size!"

Somewhat roused from her customary inertia by this remark, Mrs. May pulled herself up in her chair with an assumption of dignity.

"You are very coarse, James," she said—"very coarse indeed! I consider that I look as young as you do any day,—I ought to, for you are fully eight years my senior—I daresay more, for I doubt if you gave your true age when I married you. You want to

play the young man, and you only make yourself ridiculous,—I have no wish to play the young woman, but certainly Diana, with her poor, thin face—getting so many wrinkles, too!—does make me seem older than I am. She has aged terribly the last three or four years."

"She'll never see forty again," said Mr. May, tersely.

Mrs. May rolled up her eyes in pained protest.

"Why say it?" she expostulated. "You only give yourself and me away! We are her parents!"

"I don't say it in public," he replied. "Catch me! But it's true. Let me see!—why, Diana was born in——"

His wife gave an angry gesture.

"Never mind when she was born!" she said, with a tremble as of tears in her voice. "You needn't recall it! Our only child!—and she has spoilt her life and mine too!"

A faint whimper escaped her, and she put a filmy handkerchief to her eyes.

Mr. May took no notice. For women's tears he had a sovereign contempt.

"The fact is," he said, judicially, "we ought to have trained her to do something useful. Nursing, or doctoring, or dressmaking, or type-writing. She would have had her business to attend to, which would have kept her away from Us,—and I—we—could have gone about free as air. We need never have mentioned that we had a daughter."

Mrs. May looked scrutinizingly at her lace handkerchief. She remembered it had cost a couple of guineas, and now there was a hole in it. She must tell Diana to mend it. With this thought uppermost in her always chaotic mind, she said between two long-drawn sighs:

"After all, James, poor Diana does her best. She is very useful in the house."

"Stuff and nonsense! She does nothing at all! She spoils the servants, if that is what

you mean,—allows them to have their own way a great deal too much, in my opinion! It amuses her to play at housekeeping."

"She doesn't play at it," remonstrated Mrs. May, weakly endeavouring to espouse the cause of justice. "She is very earnest and painstaking about it, and does it very well. She keeps down expenses, and saves me a great deal of worry."

"Hm-m-m!" growled her husband. "It would do you good to be worried a bit! Take down your weight! Of course, what can't be cured must be endured, but I've spoken the brutal truth,—Diana, at her age, and with her looks, and all her chances of marriage gone, is in the way. For instance, suppose I go to a new neighbour's house, and I'm asked 'Have you any family?'—I reply: 'Yes, one daughter.' Then some fool of a woman says: 'Oh, do bring your girl with you next time!' Well, she's not a 'girl.' I don't wish to say she's not, but if I do take her with me 'next time,' everybody is surprised. You see, when they look at me, they expect my daughter to be quite a young person."

Mrs. May sank gradually back in her chair, as though she were slowly pushed by an invisible finger.

"Do they?" The query was almost inaudible.

"Of course they do! And upon my soul, it's rather trying to a man! You ought to sympathise, but you don't!"

"Well, I really can't see what's to be done!" she murmured, closing her eyes in sheer weariness. "Diana cannot help getting older, poor thing!—and she's our child——"

"Don't I know she's our child?" he snapped out. "What do you keep on telling me that for?"

"Why, I mean that you can't turn her out of the house, or say you don't want her, or anything of that sort. But I'm sure"—here, the round, pale eyes opened appealingly over the buff-coloured cheeks—"I'm sure, James, that if you don't wish to take her out with you she'd never dream of expecting you to do so. She's very

unselfish,—besides, she's so happy with her books."

"Books—books!—hang books!" he exclaimed, irascibly. "There's another drawback! If there's one thing people object to more than another, it's a bookish spinster! Any assumption of knowledge in a woman is quite enough to keep her out of society!"

His wife yawned.

"I dare say!" she admitted. "But I can't help it."

"You want to go to sleep,—that's what you want!" said Mr. May, contemptuously. "Well, sleep!—I'm going over to the Club."

She murmured an inward "Thank God!" and settled down in her chair to her deferred and much desired doze. Mr. May threw on his cap,—one of a jaunty shape, which he fondly imagined gave him the look of a dashing sportsman of some thirty summers—and stepped out on to the now fully moonlit lawn, crossing it at as "swinging" a pace as his little legs would allow him, and making for the high road just outside the garden gates.

Not till he had disappeared did the figure which had stayed statuesquely still between the two rose hedges show any sign of movement. Then it stirred, its dark grey draperies swaying like mist in a light wind. The bright moonlight fell on its uplifted face,—Diana's face, pale always, but paler than ever in that ghostly radiance from the skies. She had heard all,—and there was a curious sense of tightening pain in her throat and round her heart, as if an overflow of tears or laughter struggled against repression. She had stood in such a motionless attitude of strained attention that her limbs felt cramped and stiff, so that when she began to walk it was almost with difficulty. She turned her back to the house and went towards the sea, noiselessly opening the little white gate that led to the shore. She was soon on the smooth soft sand where the little wet pools glittered like silver in the moon, and, going to the edge of the sea, she stood awhile, watching wave after

wave glide up in small, fine lines and break at her feet in a delicate fringe of snowy foam. She was not conscious of any particularly keen grief or hurt feeling at the verdict of her general tiresomeness which her parents had passed upon her,—her thoughts were not in any way troubled; she only felt that the last thing she had clung to as giving value to life,—her affection and duty towards the old people,—was counted as valueless,—she was merely "in the way." Watching the waves, she smiled,—a pitiful little smile.

"Poor old dears!" she said, tenderly,—and again: "Poor old dears!"

Then there arose within her another impulse,—a suggestion almost wildly beautiful,—the idea of freedom! No one wanted her,—not even her father or her mother. Then was she not at liberty? Could she not go where she liked? Surely! Just as a light globe of thistledown is blown by the wind to fall where it will, so she could drift with the movement of casual things anywhere,—so long as she troubled nobody by her existence.

"The world is wide!" she said, half-aloud, stretching her arms with an unconscious gesture of appeal towards the sea. "I have stayed too long in one small corner of it!"

The little waves plashed one upon the other with a musical whisper as though they agreed with her thought,—and yet—yet there was something appalling in the utter loneliness of her heart. No one loved her,—no one wanted her! She was "in the way." Smarting tears filled her eyes,—but they angered her by their confession of weakness, and she dashed them away with a quick, defiant hand. She began to consider her position coldly and critically. Her thoughts soon ranged themselves in order like obedient soldiers at drill under their commanding officer,—each in its place and ready for action. It was useless to expect help or sympathy from anyone,—she would not get it. She must stand alone. It is perhaps a little hard and difficult to stand alone when one is a woman; it used to be considered cruel and pitiful, but in these days it has become such a matter of course that no one thinks

about it or cares. The nature and temperament of woman as God made her, have not altered; with all her “advancement,” she is just as amative, as credulous, as tender, as maternal as ever she was, longing for man’s love as her “right,” which it is, and becoming hardened and embittered when this right is withheld from her,—but the rush of the time is too swift and precipitous for any display of masculine chivalry on her behalf; she has elected to be considered co-equal with man, and she is now, after a considerable tussle, to be given her “chance.” What she will make of the long-deferred privilege remains a matter of conjecture.

Slowly, and with a vague reluctance, Diana turned away from the moonlit sea; the murmur of the little waves followed her, like suggestive whispers. A curious change had taken place in her mentality during the last few minutes. She, who was accustomed to think only of others, now thought closely and consistently of herself. She moved quietly towards the house, gliding like a grey ghost across the lawn which showed almost white in the spreading radiance of the moon,—the drawing-room windows were still open, and Mrs. May was still comfortably ensconced in her arm-chair, sleeping soundly and snoring hideously. Her daughter came up and stood beside her, quite unobserved. Nothing could have been more unlovely than the aspect she presented, sunk among the cushions, a mere adipose heap, with her fat cheeks, small nose and open mouth protruding above the folds of a grey woollen shawl which was her favourite evening wear, her resemblance to a pig being more striking than pleasing. But Diana’s watching face expressed nothing but the gentlest solicitude.

“Poor mother!” she sighed to herself. “She’s tired! And—and of course, it’s natural she should be disappointed in me. I’ve not been a success! Poor dear mother! God bless her!”

She went out of the room noiselessly, and made her way upstairs. She met Grace Laurie.

“I’m going to bed, Grace,” she said. “I’ve got a tiresome headache, and shall be better lying down. If mother wants to know where I am, will you tell her?”

“Yes, miss. Can I do anything for you?” Grace asked, for, as she often said afterwards, she “thought Miss Diana looked a bit feverish.”

“No, thanks very much!” Diana answered in her sweet-voiced, pleasant manner. “Bed is the best place for me. Good-night!”

“Good-night, miss.” And Diana entering her own room, locked the door. She was eager to be alone. Her window was open, and she went to that and looked out. All was silent and calm; the night was beautiful. The sea spread itself out in gently heaving stretches of mingled light and shade, and above it bent a sky in which the moon’s increasing splendour swamped the sparkling of the stars. The air was very still,—not a leaf on any small branch of tree or plant stirred. The scent of roses and sweet-briar and honeysuckle floated upwards like incense from the flower altars of the earth.

“I am free!” murmured Diana to the hushed night. “Free!”

And then, turning, she saw herself in the mirror, as she had already seen herself that day,—only with a greater sense of shock. The evening gown she wore, chosen to please her father’s taste, of dull, dowdy-grey chiffon, intensified her worn and “ageing” look; the colour of her hair was deadened by contrast with it, and in very truth she had at that moment a sad and deplorably jaded aspect.

“Free!” she repeated, in self-scorn. “And what is the use of freedom to me at my age!—and with my face and figure!”

She shrank from her own pitiful “double” in the glass,—it seemed asking her why she was ever born! Then, she put away all doleful thoughts that might weaken her or shake her already formed resolution:—“Nothing venture, nothing have!” she said. And, shutting her window, she drew the blinds and curtains close, so that no glimpse of light from her room might be seen by her father when he should cross the lawn on

his return from the Club. She had plenty to do, and she began to do it. She had a clear plan in view, and as she said to herself, a trifle bitterly, she “was old enough” to carry it out. And when all her preparations were fully made and completed, she went to bed and slept peacefully till the first break of dawn.

CHAPTER IV

When morning came it brought with it intense heat and an almost overpowering glare of sunshine, and Mr. James Polydore May, stimulated by the warm atmosphere, went down to breakfast in a suit of white flannels. Why not? A sportive and youthful spirit had entered into him with his yesterday’s experience of tennis, and his “skittish-as-you-please” partner of seventeen; and, walking with a jaunty step, he felt that there was, and could be, no objection to the wearing of white, as far as he was concerned. But—had he not said on the previous day to his daughter, “Only very young people should wear white?” Ah, yes—his daughter, as a woman, was too old for it! ... but he,—why, if the latest scientific dictum is correct, namely, that a man is only as old as his arteries, then he, James Polydore May, was convinced that arterially speaking, he was a mere boy! True, his figure was a little “gone” from its original slimness,—but plenty of golf and general “bracing-up” would soon put that all right, so that even the “skittish-as-you-please” young thing might not altogether despise his attentions. Whistling gaily the charming tune of “Believe me if all those endearing young charms,” he contemplated the well set out breakfast table with satisfaction. He was first in the field that morning, and his better half had not been at the fried bacon before him, selecting all the best bits as was her usual custom. He sat down to that toothsome dish and helped himself bountifully; then, missing the unobtrusive hand which generally placed his cup of tea beside him, he called to the parlour-maid:

“Where’s Miss Diana? Isn’t she up?”

“Oh, yes, sir. She was up very early—about six, I believe,—and she went down to

the cove to bathe, so she told the kitchen-maid."

"Not back yet?"

"No, sir."

Mr. May pulled out his watch and glanced at it. It was half-past nine. At that moment his wife entered the room.

"Oh, you're out of bed at last!" he said. "Well, now you can pour out my tea and mind you don't fill the cup too full. Diana hasn't got back from her dip."

Mrs. May was still rather sleepy, and, as usual, more or less inattentive to her husband's remarks. She began turning over the letters the post had just brought for her, whereat Mr. May gave a sharp rap on the table with the handle of a fork.

"My tea!" he repeated. "D'ye hear? I want my tea!"

Mrs. May rolled her pale eyes at him protestingly as she lifted the teapot.

"I hear perfectly," she answered with an assumption of dignity. "And please be civil! You can't bully me as you bully Diana."

"I bully Diana! I!" And Mr. May gave a short, scornful laugh. "Come, I like that! Why, the woman doesn't know what bullying is! She's had a path of roses all her life—roses, I tell you! Never a care,—never a worry,—no financial difficulties—always enough to eat, and a comfortable home to live in. What more can she want? Bully, indeed! If she had married that confounded officer for whom she wasted the best seven years of her life, then she'd have known something about bullying! Rather! And I daresay it 'ud have done her good. Better than being an old maid, anyhow."

Mrs. May handed him his tea across the table.

"I wonder where she is?" she questioned, plaintively. "I've never known her so late before."

"Went out at six," said Mr. May, with his mouth full of bacon. "The kitchen-maid

saw her go."

Mrs. May rang a small hand-bell at her side.

The parlour-maid answered it.

"Hasn't Miss Diana come in?"

"No, 'm."

Mrs. May rubbed her small nose perplexedly.

"Who saw her go out?"

"The kitchen-maid, 'm. She was cleaning the doorstep when Miss Diana came out, and said she was going for a sea bath. That was about six o'clock, 'm."

Again Mrs. May rubbed her nose.

"Send Grace here."

"Yes, 'm."

Another minute, and Grace Laurie appeared.

"Grace, did you see Miss Diana go out this morning?"

"No, 'm. Last night I met her on the stairs, and she said she had a headache and was going to bed early. I haven't seen her since."

"Good heavens, Margaret, what a fuss you're making!" here exclaimed Mr. May. "One would think she'd been carried off in an aeroplane! Surely she's old enough to take care of herself! She's probably gone for a walk after bathing, and forgotten the time."

"That's not like Miss Diana, sir," ventured Grace, respectfully. "She never forgets anything."

"Another cup of tea, Margaret, and look sharp!" interposed Mr. May, testily.

Mrs. May sighed, and poured hot water into the tea-pot. Then she addressed Grace in a low tone.

“Ask the kitchen-maid just what Miss Diana said.”

Grace retired, and returned again quickly.

“Miss Diana came down at about six this morning,” she said. “And Jenny, the kitchen-maid, was the only one of us up. She was cleaning the doorstep, and moved her pail for Miss Diana to pass. Miss Diana had on her navy blue serge and black straw sailor hat, and she carried what Jenny thought were her bathing things hanging over her arm. She was very bright and said: ‘Good-morning, Jenny! I’m going for a dip in the sea before the sun gets too hot.’ And so she went.”

“And so she went—Amen!” said Mr. May, biting a hard bit of toast noisily. “And so she’ll come back, and wonder what all the deuced fuss is about. As if a woman of her age couldn’t go for a bath and a walk without being inquired after as if she were a two-year-old! Are you going to have your breakfast, Margaret?—or do you prefer to read your letters first?”

His wife made no reply. She was watching the boiling of an egg in a small, specially constructed vessel for the purpose, which Diana had added to the conveniences of the breakfast table. She was annoyed that Diana herself was not there to attend to it. Diana always knew when the egg was done to a turn. Grace still lingered in the room. Mrs. May, languidly raising her fish-like eyes, saw her.

“You can go, Grace.”

“Yes, ’m. Shall I just run out to the shore and see if Miss Diana is coming?”

“Yes. And tell her to make haste back—I want her to do some shopping in the village for me.”

Grace left the room, closing the door behind her. A clock on the mantelpiece gave several little sharp ting-tings.

“What time is that?” asked Mrs. May.

“Ten o’clock,” replied her husband, unfolding the day’s newspaper and beginning to

read.

“Dear me! How very extraordinary of Diana to be out from six in the morning till now!” And with the aid of a spoon she carefully lifted the egg she had been watching as though it were the most precious object in life out of the boiling water, in mournful doubt as to whether, after all, it really was done perfectly. “It’s so unlike her.”

“Well, you may be pretty certain no one has run away with her,” said Mr. May, ironically. “She’s safe enough. The ‘dear child’ has not eloped!”

Mrs. May ignored both his words and his manner. She looked at him meditatively over the lid of the silver teapot and permitted herself to smile,—a small, fat, pursy smile.

“Those white flannels have got rather tight for you, haven’t they?” she suggested.

He flushed indignantly.

“Tight? Certainly not! Do they look tight?”

“Well—just a little!—but of course white always makes one appear stout——”

“Stout! You talk about stoutness? You! Why, I’m a paper-knife compared to you!—a positive paper-knife! I believe you actually grudge my wearing white flannels!”

His wife laughed.

“Indeed, no!” she declared. “It amuses me! I rather like it!”

“I should think you did!” he retorted. “Or, if you don’t, you ought to!”

She surveyed him pensively with round, lacklustre eyes.

“What a long time it is!” she said—“What a long, long time since you were thin!—really quite thin, James! Do you remember? When you proposed to me in father’s dining-room and the parlour-maid came in and lit the gas, just as you were going to——”

"You seem very reminiscent this morning," interrupted her husband, sharply. "Do white flannels move you to sentiment?"

"Oh, no!—not at all—not now!" she replied, with a small giggle. "Only one cannot but think of the change between then and now—it's almost humorous——"

"I should think it is!" he agreed. "It's more than humorous! It's comic! What d'ye expect? When I think of what you were!—a nice little pink and white thing with a small waist,—and see you now!"—here he snorted half contemptuously. "But there!—we can't all remain young, and you're quite comfortable looking—a sort of pillow of ease,—you might be worse——"

Here their mutual personal compliments were interrupted by the hurried entrance of Grace Laurie, looking pale and scared.

"Oh 'm, I'm afraid some accident has happened to Miss Diana!" she said, breathlessly. "I've been all the way down to the cove, and—and——"

Here she suddenly burst out crying. Mr. May bounced up from his chair.

"Deuce take the woman!—don't stand there grizzling! What's the matter? Speak out!"

Mrs. May stared feebly, her mouth opening slowly, like that of a fish on dry land.

"What—what is it, Grace?" she stammered. "You frighten me!"

"Yes 'm, I know, but I can't help it!" Grace answered, gaspingly. "But—but I've been down to the cove—and all round in every place, and there's Miss Diana's clothes all put together on the rocks, with her shoes and hat and bathing towel, but—but—there's no Miss Diana!" Here her emotions got the better of her, and she gave a small scream. "Oh, oh! I'm sure she's drowned!—oh, Miss Diana, poor thing! I'm sure she's drowned!—she's been carried off her feet by the waves!—there was a high tide this morning, and I know she's drowned! She's drowned, she's drowned!"

Her voice rose to a high shrill pitch, and she wrung her hands.

Mrs. May struggled weakly out of her chair, and then dropped heavily into it again.

“Drowned! Diana! Don’t be foolish, Grace! It’s not possible!”

Mr. May seized his cap and threw it on his head.

“Here, I’ll soon put a stop to all this nonsense!” he said. “Let me get down to the cove,—what’s the good of a parcel of silly fools of women shrieking and crying before they know what’s happened!” He marched up to Grace Laurie and grasped her by the shoulder. “Now, be calm! Can you be calm?”

Grace caught her breath, and wriggled herself away from the nip of his fingers.

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, then, repeat what you said just now,—you went down to the cove and saw——”

“Miss Diana’s clothes,—all put by on the rocks, just as she always puts them out of the way when she’s going to bathe,” said Grace. “And her bathing towel,—that hasn’t been used. And her shoes and stockings. But Miss Diana’s gone!”

“Oh dear, oh dear!” moaned Mrs. May. “What dreadful, dreadful things you are saying! What are we to do? Oh, I feel so ill! My sweet Diana!—my only, only precious child! Oh, James, James!”

And with her face suddenly working up into all sorts of lines and creases as though it were an india-rubber mask pulled from behind, she began to weep slowly and tricklingly, like a tap with a stoppage in its middle.

“Be quiet!” shouted Mr. May fiercely. “You unnerve me with all this snivelling!—and I won’t be unnerved! I’m going myself to the cove—I’ll soon clear up this business! I don’t believe anything has happened to Diana,—it’s a fine morning, and she’s probably enjoying a swim,—she can swim like a fish—you know she can!—she couldn’t drown!”

And with a half-suppressed oath he trotted out, all fuss and feathers, like an angry turkey-cock, his whole mentality arrayed against fate and circumstance, resolved to show that he was stronger than either.

By this time the ill news had spread, and the servants, the gardeners, and a few of the villagers went running down to the cove. It was true there had been a high tide that morning,—there was yet the glistening trail of the loftiest wave on the rocks where the freshly tossed seaweed clung. Safe out of all possible reach of the water, and neatly piled together on a ledge of rock, were Diana's simple garments, as Grace had said,—with her hat, stockings and shoes and the unused bathing towel. A veteran sailor had joined the group of onlookers, and now, drawing his pipe from his mouth, he asked:

"What time did the leddy coom down 'ere?"

Mr. May had by now lost a little of his self-assertiveness and was feeling distinctly uncomfortable. He was not a man of sentiment; though he could often feign emotion successfully enough to deceive the very elect. But just now he was, as he would himself have said, "very much upset." He knew that he ought to appear to his own servants and to the villagers like a fond father distracted with anxiety and suspense, and he was aware that his dumpy figure in tight white flannels did not "dress" the part. He replied curtly:

"She was here a little before six, I'm told——"

"Ah, poor thing, then she's been carried out of her depth!" said the old "salt." "There's a main deal o' suction with the sea in this 'ere cove when full tide cooms in——"

"She's an excellent swimmer," said Mr. May, gazing at the sea in a vaguely disappointed way, as though he thought each wave that swept slowly in ought to bring Diana riding triumphantly on top of it.

"Ay, ay!—that may be!—but swimmin' winnot allers save a woman what's light

weight an' ain't got the muscles of a man. There's a force o' water 'ere sometimes as 'ud sweep a cart an' 'oss off like a bit o' straw! Ay, ay!—she's gone for sure! an' mebbe her poor body'll never come nigh—leastways not 'ere,—it might, lower down the coast."

Here Grace Laurie, who was with the other servants watching, began to cry bitterly.

"Oh, Miss Diana!" she sobbed. "She was so good and kind! Oh, poor, dear Miss Diana!"

The old sailor patted her gently on the shoulder.

"Now don't ye fret, don't ye fret, my girl!" he said. "We're all swept off our feet sooner or later, when the big tide cooms in!—some goes first an' others last,—but 'tis all the same! Now you just pull yerself together an' take the poor leddy's clothes back 'ome—an' I an' my mates will watch all along shore, an' if we hears anythin' or finds anythin'——"

Mr. May coughed noisily.

"I am the father of the unfortunate lady," he said stiffly. "I cannot yet believe or realise this—this awful business; but anything you can do will be suitably rewarded—of course——"

"Thanky, sir, thanky! I makes no doubt on't!—but I'll not worrit ye with the hows an' the whens in yer sorrer, for sorrer ye must 'ave, for all ye looks so dry. What we 'ears we'll let ye know an' what we finds too——"

And he subsided into silence, watching Grace, who, with choked sobs and tears, took up Diana's clothes as tenderly as if they were living objects. Some of the other servants wept too, out of sympathy, and Jonson, the butler, approached his master with solemn deference.

"Will you take my harm, sir?" he said.

Mr. May stared at him angrily,—then, remembering the circumstances, assumed a

melancholy and resigned air.

“No, Jonson, thank you!” he answered. “I will walk home alone.” Then, after a pause. “You and Grace had better see to Mrs. May,—prepare her a little—it will be a terrible blow to her——”

He turned away, and as he went, the group of sight-seers went also, slowly dispersing and talking about the fatality in hushed voices, as though they were afraid the sea would hear.

The old sailor remained behind, smoking and watching the waves. Presently he saw something on the surface of the water that attracted his attention, and he went to the edge of the breaking surf and waited till the object was cast at his feet. It was a woman’s white canvas bathing shoe.

“Ay! ’Tother’ll mebbe come in presently,” he said. “Poor soul!—they’se washed off her feet,—she’s gone, for sure! I’ll keep this a bit—in case ’tother comes.”

And shaking it free from the sand and dripping water, he put it in his jacket pocket, and resumed his smoky meditations.

Meanwhile at Rose Lea the worst had been told. Mrs. May, weeping profusely, and tottering like a sack too full to stand upright, had been put to bed in a state bordering on collapse. Mr. May occupied himself in sending off telegrams and writing letters; two representatives of the local press called, asking for details of the “Shocking Bathing Fatality,” which they secured, first from the bereaved Mr. May himself, next from the butler, then from the maid, then from the cook, and then from the kitchen-maid, “who ’ad been the last to see the poor dear lady,” with the result that they had a sufficiently garbled and highly-coloured account to make an almost “sensational” column in their profoundly dull weekly newspaper.

The day wore on,—the house was invested with a strange silence; Diana’s presence, Diana’s busy feet tripping here and there on household business might have been considered trifling things; but the fact that she was no longer in evidence created a

curious, empty sense of loneliness. Mrs. May remained in bed, moaning and weeping drearily, with curtains drawn to shut out the aggressively brilliant sunshine; and Mr. May began to take a mysterious pleasure in writing the letters which told his friends in London and elsewhere of his “tragic and irreparable loss.” He surprised himself by the beautiful sentences he managed to compose. “Our only darling child, who was so beloved and precious to us and to all who knew her”—was one. “I shall do my best to cheer and support my dear wife, who is quite prostrated by this awful calamity,” was another. “You know how dear she was and how deeply cherished!” was a third. Sometimes, while he was writing, a small twinge of conscience hurt the mental leather whereof he was largely composed, and he realised his own hypocrisy. He knew he was not really sorry for what had happened. And yet—memory pointed him backward with something of reproach to the day when Diana, a pretty and winsome child, with fair hair dancing about her in bright curls, had clambered on his knee and caressed his ugly face, as though it were an adorable object,—and to the after time, when as a girl in the fine bloom of early youth, she had gone with him to her first ball, sweet and fresh as the roses which adorned her simple white gown, and had charmed everyone by her grace, gentleness and exquisite speaking voice, which in its softly modulated tones, exercised a potent witchery on all who heard it. True,—she had missed all her chances,—or rather all her chances had somehow missed her; and she had grown not exactly old, but passée—and—it was a pity she had not married!—but now!—now all her failures and shortcomings were for ever at an end! She was drowned;—the sea had wedded her and set its salty weed among her hair in place of the never-granted orange-blossom. Mr. May shivered a little at this thought,—after all, the sea was a cold and cruel grave for his only child! And yet no tear of human or fatherly emotion generated itself out of his dry brain to moisten his hard little eyes. He stiffened himself in his chair and resumed the writing of his letters which announced the “sudden and awful bereavement” which had befallen him, and was charmed by the ease with which the tenderest expressions

concerning his dead daughter flowed from his pen.

And, after a long, sobbing, snoring sleep, Mrs. May woke up to the practical every-day points of the situation and realised that there could be no funeral. This was an awful blow! Unless—unless the poor body of the drowned woman came ashore there could be no black procession winding its doleful way through the flowering lanes of the little Devonshire village, where it would have been picturesque to make a "show" of mourning. So far, the sea had cheated the undertaker.

"I cannot even put a wreath upon my darling's coffin!" she moaned. "And she loved flowers!"

Fresh sobs and tears followed this new phase of misfortune. Mrs. May was accustomed to find balm in Gilead for the death of any friend by sending a wreath for the corpse,—and her husband had been heard to say that if he died first he would be sure to have "a nasty wet wreath laid on his chest before he was cold."

Most of the burden and heat of the day fell on the maid, Grace Laurie, who had to take cups of soup, glasses of wine, and other strengthening refreshment to Mrs. May in her bedroom, and to see that Mr. May "had everything he wanted," which is the usual rule of a house sustained by the presence of a man. She was an honest, warm-hearted girl, and was genuinely sorry for the loss of Diana, far more so than were the "bereaved" parents. Once, during the later afternoon, when it was verging towards sunset, she went to Diana's room and entered it half trembling, moved by a sort of superstitious fear lest she should perhaps see the spirit of its late occupant. The window was open, and a rosy glow from the sky flushed the white muslin curtains with pale pink, and gave deeper colour to a posy of flowers in a vase on the dressing-table. Everything was scrupulously tidy; the servants had made the bed early in the morning, before the fatality had become known, and the whole room had an attractive air of peaceful expectation as though confident of its owner's return.

Grace opened the wardrobe,—there were all the few dresses Diana possessed, in their usual places, with two or three simple country hats. Was there anything missing? No sooner did this thought enter her head than Grace began to search feverishly. She opened drawers and boxes and cupboards,—but, so far as she knew, everything was as it always appeared to be. Yet she could not be quite sure. She was not Diana's own maid, except by occasional service and favour,—her duties were, strictly speaking, limited to personal attendance on Mrs. May. Diana was accustomed to do everything for herself, arranging and altering her own clothes, and even making them sometimes, so that Grace never quite knew what she really had in the way of garments. But as she looked through all the things hurriedly, they seemed to be just what Diana had brought with her from Richmond for the summer, and no more. The clothes found on the sea-shore Grace had herself placed on one chair, all folded in a sad little heap together. She opened the small jewel-box that always stood on the dressing-table, and recognised everything in it, even to the wristlet-watch which Diana always left behind when she went to bathe; apparently there was nothing missing. For one moment a sudden thought had entered her head, that perhaps Diana had run away?—but she as quickly realised the absurdity of such an idea!

"How stupid of me!" she said. "She had no cause to run away."

She looked round once again, sadly and hopelessly,—then went out and closed the door softly behind her. She felt there was a something mysterious and suggestive in that empty room.

Towards dinner-time Mrs. May struggled out of bed and sat up in an arm-chair, swathed in a voluminous dressing-gown.

"I cannot go down to dinner!" she wailed, to Grace. "The very idea of it is terrible! Tell Mr. May I want to speak to him."

Grace obeyed, and presently Mr. May came in obedience to the summons, wearing a

curious expression of solemn shamefacedness, as if he had done a mean trick some time and had just been found out. His wife gazed at him with red, watery eyes.

"James," she said, quaveringly, "it's dreadful to have to remember what you said last night about poor Diana!—oh, it's dreadful!"

"What did I say?" he asked, nervously. "I—I forget——"

"You said—oh, dear, oh, dear! I hope God may forgive you!—you said Diana was 'in the way!' You did!—Our child! Oh, James, James! Your words haunt me! You said she was 'in the way,' and now she has been taken from us! Oh, what a punishment for your wicked words! And you a father! Oh, how shall we ever get over it!"

Mr. Polydore May sat down by his wife's chair and looked foolish. He knew he ought to say that it was indeed a dreadful thing, and that of course they could never get over it,—but all the time he was perfectly aware that the "getting over it" would be an easy matter for them both. He had even already imagined it possible to secure a young and pretty "companion housekeeper" to assist Mrs. May in the cares of domestic management, and, when required, to wait upon James Polydore himself with all that deferential docility which should be easy to command for a suitable salary. That would be one way of "getting over it" quite pleasantly,—but in reply to his wife's melancholy adjuration, he judged it wisest to be silent.

She went on, drearily:

"Fortunately I have one black dress; it belonged to my poor sister's set of mourning for her husband, but as she married again and went to Australia within the year, it's really as good as new, and she sold it to me for a pound. And Grace can alter my bonnet; it's black, but it has a pink flower,—I must get a crape poppy instead, and black gloves,—Oh, James!—and you wore white flannels this morning!—I'm glad you've had the decency to change them!"

Mr. May had certainly changed them,—partly out of conviction that such change

was necessary, and partly because Jonson, the butler, had most urgently suggested it. And he was now attired in his “regulation” Sunday suit, which gave him the proper appearance of a respectable J.P. in mourning. All day he had practised an air of pious resignation and reserved sadness;—it was difficult to keep it up because his nature was captious and irascible, especially when things happened that were opposed to his personal convenience and comfort. His efforts to look what he was not gave him the aspect of a Methodist minister disappointed in the silver collection.

But perhaps on the whole, his wife was a greater humbug than he was. She was one of those curious but not uncommon characters who imagine themselves to be “full of feeling,” when truly they have no feeling at all. Nobody could “gush” with more lamentable pathos than she over a calamity occurring to any of her friends or acquaintances, but no trouble had ever yet lessened her appetite, or deprived her of sleep. Her one aim in life was to seem all that was conventionally correct,—to seem religious, when she was not, to seem sorry, when she was not, to seem glad, when she was not, to seem kind, when she was not, to seem affectionate, when she was not. Her only real passions were avarice, tuft-hunting and gluttony,—these were the fundamental chords of her nature, hidden deep behind the fat, urbane mask of flesh which presented itself as a woman to the world. There are thousands like her, who, unfortunately, represent a large section of the matronhood of Britain.

The news of Diana’s sudden and sad end soon spread among the old and new friends and neighbours of the Polydore Mays, arousing languid comment here and there, such as: “Poor woman! But, after all, there wasn’t much for her in life—she was quite the old maid!” Or,—as at Mr. May’s club: “Best thing that could have happened for old Polydore!—he can’t trot her round any more, and he’ll be able to play the man-about-town more successfully!”

Nobody gave a thought to the quiet virtues of the industrious, patient, unaffected daughter who had devoted herself to the duty of caring for and attending upon her

utterly selfish parents,—and certainly nobody ever remembered that her spinster-hood was the result of a too lofty and faithful conception of love, or that her nature was in very truth an exceptionally sweet and gracious one, and her intelligence of a much higher order than is granted to the average female. In that particular section of human beings among whom she had lived and moved, her career was considered useless because she had failed to secure a mate and settle down to bear the burden and brunt of his passions and his will. And so, as she had never displayed any striking talent, or thrust herself forward in any capacity, or shown any marked characteristic, and as the world is over full of women, she was merely one of the superfluous, who, not being missed, was soon forgotten.

CHAPTER V

On that same eminently tragic afternoon when Mr. Polydore May found it necessary to change his white flannels so soon after putting them on, and his wife had to think seriously of a crape poppy for her bonnet, two ladies sat in the charmingly arranged drawing-room of a particularly charming flat in Mayfair enjoying their afternoon tea. One was a graceful little woman arrayed in a captivating tea-gown; the other, a thin, rather worn-looking creature with a pale face and bright hair tucked closely away under a not very becoming felt hat, garbed in a severely plain costume of dark navy serge. The butterfly person in the tea-gown was Miss Sophy Lansing, a noted Suffragette, and the authoress of a brilliantly witty satire entitled “Adam and His Apple,” which, it was rumoured, had made even the Dean of St. Paul’s laugh. The tired-featured woman with the air of an intellectual governess out of place, was no other than the victim of the morning’s disastrous “death by drowning,”—Diana May. Dead in Devonshire, she was alive in London, and her friend, Sophy Lansing, was sitting beside her, clasping her hands in a flutter of delight, surprise and amusement all commingled.

“You dear!” she exclaimed. “How ever did you manage to get away? I never was so

astonished! Or so pleased! When I got your note by express messenger, I could hardly believe my eyes! What time did you arrive in town?"

"About midday," replied Diana. "I felt comfortably drowned by that time,—and I lunched at the Stores——"

"Drowned!" cried Sophy. "My dear, what do you mean?"

Diana released her hands from her friend's eager grasp and took off her hat. There was a gleam of whimsical humour in her eyes.

"One moment, and I'll explain everything," she said. "But, first of all, let me tell you why I sent you a message in advance, instead of coming to you direct. It's because I'm obliged for the present to be like a travelling royalty, incog. Your servants must not know my real name,—to them and to everybody else who sees me here, I'm Miss Graham,—not Miss May. Miss May is dead! As Peggotty says in 'David Copperfield,' she's 'drowndead.' 'Drowndead' this very morning!"

She laughed; Sophy Lansing looked as she felt, utterly bewildered.

"You are a positive enigma, Diana!" she said. "Of course when I got your note I understood you had some reason or other for wishing to be incog., and I told my maids that I expected a friend to stay with me, a Miss Graham, and that she would come this afternoon,—so that's all right! But about the drowning business——"

"You'll see it mentioned, no doubt, in the papers to-morrow," said Diana. "Under various headings: 'Bathing Fatality' or 'Sad End of a Lady.' And you'll probably get a black-bordered letter from Ma, or Pa, or both!"

"Diana!" exclaimed Sophy, vehemently. "You are too provoking! Tell me all about it!—straight!"

"There's not so very much to tell," answered Diana, in her sweet, mellow accents, thrilled at the moment by a note of sadness. "Only that last night I had the final disillusion of my life—I found that my father and mother did not really love

me——”

“Love you!” interrupted Sophy, heatedly. “You dear goose! There’s no such thing as love in their composition!”

“Maybe not,” said Diana. “But if there is, they’ve none to spare for me. You see, dear Sophy, it’s all the fault of my silly conceit,—I really thought I was useful, even necessary to the old people, and that they cared for me, but when I heard my father say most emphatically that I was ‘in the way,’ and my mother rather agreed to that, I made up my mind to relieve them of my presence. Which I have done. For ever!”

“For ever!” echoed Sophy. “My poor dear Diana——”

“No, I’m not a poor dear Diana,” she answered, smiling,—“I’m a dead and gone Diana! You will see me in the leading obituary columns of the newspapers to-morrow!”

“But how——”

“The how and the when and the why are thus!” and Diana played with the silken tassels of the girdle which belted in the dainty chiffon and lace of her friend’s tea-gown. “This very morning, as ever was, I went for my usual morning dip in the sea at a cove not a quarter of a mile away from the house. I knew that at a certain hour there would be a high tide, which, of course, on any other day I would have avoided. I went to the spot, dressed in two of everything——”

“Two of everything?” Sophy murmured bewilderedly.

“Yes, you pretty little thick-head! Two of everything! Don’t you see? Being as thin as a clothes’-prop, that was easy for me. Two ‘combys,’—two chemises, two petticoats, two serge gowns,—having no figure I wear no corsets, so I didn’t have two of those. Two pairs of knickers, two pairs of stockings,—one pair of shoes on, another pair off and carried secretly under my bathing gown along with my felt hat, as to start with I wore a black straw one. Then, when I got to the cove, I disrobed myself of one set of garments, and put them with my straw hat and one pair of shoes

all in an orderly heap on a rock out of the way of the water, as any sensible person preparing to bathe would do. Then I waited for the high tide. It came swiftly and surely, and soon filled the cove,—big waves came with it, rolling in with a splendid dash and roar, and at the proper psychological moment, I threw in all my bathing things, as far out to sea as I could from the summit of the rock where I stood—I saw them whirled round and round in the whelming flood!—in the whelming flood, Sophy!—where my dear Pa and Ma believe I also have been whelmed! Then, when they had nearly disappeared in the hollow of a receding mass of water, I put on my felt hat, and, completely clothed in my one set of decent garments, I quietly walked away."

"Walked away? Where to?"

"Not to the nearest railway station, you may be sure!" replied Diana. "I might have been known there and traced. I'm a good walker, and it was quite early—only a little after seven,—so I struck across some fields and went inland for about six or eight miles. Then I came upon a little out-of-the-way station connected with a branch line to London—happily a train was just due, and I took it. I had saved five pounds on the housekeeping last month,—I had intended to give them back to my mother—but—considering everything—I felt I might take that small sum for myself without so much as a prick of conscience! So that's my story—and here I am!"

"And here you'll stay!" said Sophy eagerly. "Not a soul shall know who you are——"

"I'll stay for two or three days, but not longer," said Diana. "I want to get abroad as quickly as possible. And I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to lend me a little money——"

"I'll lend or give you anything you want," interrupted Sophy quickly. "Surely you know that!"

"Surely I know that you are one of the kindest-hearted little women in the world!"

said Diana. “And your wealthy old bachelor uncle never did a wiser thing than when he left you two thousand a year! Why you remain single I can never understand!”

“That’s because you are a sentimental goose!” declared Sophy. “If you were worldly wise you would see that it’s just that two thousand that does it! The men who propose to me—and there are a good few of them!—want the two thousand first, and me afterwards! Or rather, let us say, some of them would be glad of the two thousand without me altogether! All the nonsense in poetry books about love and dove, and sigh and die, and moon and spoon doesn’t count! I’ve lived till I’m thirty-five and I’ve never met a man yet who was worth a trickle of a tear! They are all sensualists and money-grubbers,—polygamous as monkeys!—and the only thing to be done with them is to make them work to keep the world going, though even that seems little use sometimes.”

“Sophy dear, are you becoming a pessimist?” asked Diana, half smiling. “Surely it is a beautiful world!”

“Yes—it’s beautiful in a natural way—but the artificiality of human life in it is depressing and disgusting! Don’t let us talk of it!—tell me why you are going abroad? What are your plans?”

Diana took a neat leather case from her pocket and drew out of it a folded slip of paper.

“You sent me that!” she said.

“That advertisement!” she exclaimed. “The man who wants ‘Any woman alone in the world, without claims on her time or her affections’? Oh, Diana! You don’t mean it! You’re not really going on such a wild-goose chase?”

“What harm can it do?” said Diana, quietly. “I’m old enough to take care of myself. And I fulfil all the requirements. I am a woman of mature years—I’m courageous and determined, and I have a fair knowledge of modern science. I’m well educated, especially in ‘languages and literature,’ thanks to my solitary studies,—and as I’ve

nothing to look forward to in the world I'm not afraid to take risks. It really seems the very sort of thing for me! At any rate I can but go and present myself, as suggested, 'personally and alone' to this Dr. Dimitrius at Geneva,—and if he turns out an impostor, well!—Geneva isn't the worst of places, and I'm sure I could find something to do as a teacher of music, or a 'companion housekeeper.' In any case I'm determined to go there and investigate things for myself,—and whatever money you are good enough to lend me, dear Sophy, be sure I'll never rest till I pay you back every penny!"

Sophy threw an embracing arm round her and kissed her.

"If you never paid me back a farthing I shouldn't mind!" she said, laughing. "Dear Di, I'm not one of those 'friends' who measure love by money! Money and the passion for acquiring it make more than half the hypocrisy, cruelty and selfishness of the age. But all the same I'm not quite sure that I approve of this plan of yours——"

"My dear Sophy, why should you disapprove? Just think of it! Here am I, past forty, without any attraction whatsoever, no looks, no fortune, and nothing to look forward to in life except perhaps the chance of travel and adventure. I'm fond of studies in modern science, and I believe I've read every book of note on all the new discoveries,—and here's a man who plainly announces in his advertisement that he needs the assistance of a woman like me. There can be no harm done by my going to see him. Very likely by the time I get to Geneva he'll be what the servants call 'suited.' Then I'll try something else. For now, as long as I live I'm alone in the world and must stand on my own."

"Do you mean to say that you'll never go back to the old folks?" asked Sophy.

"How can I, when I'm dead!" laughed Diana. "No, no! It would be too awful for them to see me turning up again just when I had ceased to be in the way!"

Sophy frowned.

“Selfish old brutes!” she said.

Diana demurred.

“No, don’t say that!” she expostulated. “You must bear in mind that I’ve been a terrible disappointment to them. They wanted me to marry well,—for money rather than love—and when I wasted my youth for love’s sake, of course they were angry. They thought me a fool,—and really, so I was! I don’t think there can be anything more foolish than to sacrifice the best part of one’s life for any man. He is never worth it,—he never understands or appreciates it. To him women are all alike,—one as good or as bad as t’other. The mistake we make is when we fail to treat him as he treats us! He is a creature who from very babyhood upwards should be whipped rather than spoilt. That is why he is frequently more faithful to his mistress than his wife. He’s afraid of the one, but he can bully the other.”

Sophy clapped her hands.

“Well said, Di! You begin to agree with me at last! Once upon a time you were all for believing in the chivalrous thought and tenderness of men——”

“I wanted to believe,” interrupted Diana, with a half smile—“I can’t honestly say I did!”

“No one can who studies life ever so superficially,” declared Sophy. “Particularly the ordinary matrimonial life. A man selects a woman entirely for selfish purposes—she may be beautiful and he wishes to possess her beauty—or rich, and he wants the use of her money,—or well-connected, and he seeks to push himself through her relations; or a good cook and housekeeper and he wants his appetite well catered for. As for children—well!—sometimes he wants them and more often he doesn’t!—I remember what an awful fuss there was in the house of an unfortunate friend of mine who had twins. Her husband was furious. When he was told of the ‘interesting event’ he used the most unedifying language. ‘Two more mouths to feed!’ he groaned. ‘Good God, what a visitation!’ From the way he went

on, you'd have thought that he had had no share at all in the business! He didn't mind hurting his wife's feelings or saying hard things to her,—not he! And it's the same story everywhere you go. A few months of delightful courtship,—then marriage—then incessant routine of housekeeping, illness and child-bearing—and afterwards, when the children grow up, the long dull days of resigned monotony; toothlessness, which is only partially remedied by modern dentistry, and an end of everything vital or pleasurable! Except, of course, unless you kick over the traces and become a 'fast' matron with your weather-eye open on all men,—but that kind of woman is always such bad form. Marriage is not worth the trouble it brings,—even children are not unmixed blessings. I've never seen any I could not do without!—in fact"—and she laughed—"a bachelor woman with two thousand a year doesn't want a man to help her to spend it!"

"Quite true," said Diana, with a slight sigh. "But I haven't got two thousand a year, or anything a year at all!"

"Never mind!" and Sophy looked wisely confident—"you'll have all you want and more! Yes!—something tells me you are going to make a great success——"

"Sophy, Sophy! In what?"

"Oh, I don't know!" and the vivacious little lady jumped up from her chair and shook out her filmy skirts and floating ribbons. "But I feel it! It is one of those 'waves'—what do you call them?—'etheric vibrations!' Yes, that's it! Don't you feel those sort of things ever?"

Diana had also risen, and as she stood upright, very still, there was a curious look in her face of expectancy and wonder.

"Yes," she answered, slowly, "I felt one just now!"

Sophy laughed merrily.

"Of course! I imparted it to you! and you're going to be a wonderful creature!—I'm sure of it! Your poor brain,—so long atrophied by the domestic considerations of Pa

and Ma, is about to expand!—to breathe!—to move!—to act! Yes, Diana!—Think of it! Cinderella shall go to the Prince's Ball!"

Her bright laughter pealed out again, and Diana laughed too.

"Come and see your room," went on Sophy. "You're here at any rate for a day or two, and I'll keep you as secretly and preciously as a saint in a shrine. You've no luggage? Of course, I forgot!—I'll lend you a nightie!—and you must buy a lot of clothes to-morrow and a box to pack them in. It won't do for you to go abroad without any luggage. And I'll help you choose your garments, Di!—you must have something really becoming!—something not after the taste of 'Pa' or 'Ma!'"

"Am I to make a conquest of Dr. Féodor Dimitrius?" asked Diana, playfully. "One would think you had that sort of thing in view!"

"One never knows!" said Sophy, shaking a warning finger at her. "Dr. Dimitrius may be hideous—or he may be fascinating. And whether hideous or fascinating, he may be—amorous! Most men are, at moments!—and in such moments they'll make love to anything feminine."

"Not anything feminine of my age," said Diana, calmly. "He distinctly advertises for a woman of 'mature' years."

"That may be his cunning!" and Sophy looked mysterious. "If we are to believe history, Cleopatra was fifty when she enchanted Anthony."

"Dear old Egyptian days!" sighed Diana, with a whimsical uplifting of her eyebrows. "Would I had lived in them! With a long plaited black wig and darkened lashes, I too, might have found an Anthony!"

"Well, dress does make a difference," said Sophy seriously. "That is, of course, if you know where to get it made, and how to put it on, and don't bundle it round you in a gathered balloon like 'Ma!' What a sight that woman does look, to be sure!"

"Poor mother! I tried to make her clothes sit on her," murmured Diana, regretfully.

“But they wouldn’t!”

“Of course they wouldn’t! They simply couldn’t! Now take Mrs. Ross-Percival,—a real old, old harridan!—the terror of her grown-up daughters, who are always watching her lest her wig of young curls should come off,—she gets herself up in such a style that I once heard your father—an easily duped old thing!—say he thought her ‘the most beautiful woman in London!’ And it was all the dress, with a big hat, cosmetics and a complexion veil!”

Diana laughed.

“Pa’s a very susceptible little man!” she said tolerantly. “He has often amused me very much with his ‘amourettes.’ Sometimes it’s Mrs. Ross-Percival,—then he becomes suddenly violently juvenile and pays his devoirs to a girl of seventeen; I think he’d die straight off if he couldn’t believe himself still capable of conquering all hearts! And he’ll be able to get on in that line much better now that I’m drowned. I was ‘in the way.’”

“Silly old noodle!” said Sophy. “He’d better not come near me!—I should tell him a few plain truths of himself which he would not like!”

“Oh, he wouldn’t mind!” Diana assured her. “To begin with, he wouldn’t listen, and if he did, he would grin that funny little grin of his and say you were ‘over-wrought.’ That’s his great word! You can make no impression on Pa if he doesn’t want to be impressed. He has absolutely no feelings—I mean real feelings,—he has only just ‘impulses,’ of anger or pleasure, such as an animal has—and he doesn’t attempt to control either.”

They had by this time left the drawing-room, and were standing together in a charming little bedroom, furnished all in white and rose-colour.

“This is my ‘visitor’s room,’” said Sophy. ”And you can occupy it as long as you like. And I’ll bring you one of my Paris tea-gowns to slip on for dinner,—it’s lovely and you’ll look sweet!”

Diana smiled.

“I! Dear Sophy, you expect miracles!”

But Sophy was not so far wrong. That evening, Diana, arrayed in a gracefully flowing garment of cunningly interwoven soft shades, varying from the hue of Neapolitan violets to palest turquoise, and wearing her really beautiful bright hair artistically coiled on the top of her well-shaped head, was a very different looking Diana to the weary, worn and angular woman in severely cut navy serge who had presented the appearance of an out-of-place governess but a few hours before. If she could not be called young or beautiful, she was distinctly attractive, and Sophy Lansing was delighted.

“My dear, you pay for dressing!” she said, enthusiastically. “And—you mark my words!—you don’t look ‘mature’ enough for that Dr. Dimitrius!”

CHAPTER VI

There are certain people who take a bland and solemn pleasure in the details of death and disaster,—who are glad to assume an air of what they call “Christian resignation,” and who delight in funerals and black-edged note-paper. Regular church-goers are very frequently most particular about this last outward sign and token of the heart’s incurable sorrow; some choose a narrow black edge as being less obtrusive but more subtle,—others a broad, as emblematic of utter hopelessness. The present writer once happened on a cynical stationer, who had his own fixed ideas on this particular department of mourning which was so closely connected with his trade.

“The broader the edge, the less the grief,” he assured me. “Just as I say of widows, the longer the veil, the sooner the second wedding,—and the more wreaths there are on a hearse, the fewer the friends of the deceased. That’s my experience.”

But no one should accept these remarks as anything but the cynical view of a small

tradesman whose opinion of his clients was somewhat embittered.

A letter with a black border which was neither broad nor narrow, but discreetly medium, appeared among Sophy Lansing's daily pile of correspondence the morning after Diana's arrival at her flat, and, recognising the handwriting on the envelope, she at once selected it from the rest, and ran into her friend's room, waving it aloft triumphantly.

"Look!" she exclaimed. "From your poor, afflicted Pa! To announce the sad news!"

Diana, fresh from her bath, her hair hanging about her and the faint pink of her cheeks contrasting becomingly with the pale blue of her dressing-gown, looked up rather wistfully.

"Do open it!" she said. "I'm sure it will be a beautiful letter! Pa can express himself quite eloquently when he thinks it worth while. I remember he wrote a most charming 'gush' of sympathy to a woman who had lost her husband suddenly,—she was a titled person, and Pa worships titles,—and when he had posted it he said: 'Thank God that's done with! It's bad enough to write a letter of condolence at all, but when you have to express sorrow for the death of an old fool who is better out of the world than in it, it's a positive curse!'"

She laughed, adding: "I know he isn't really sorry for my supposed 'death'; if the real, bare, brutal truth were told, he's glad!"

Sophy Lansing paused in the act of opening the letter.

"Diana!" she exclaimed in a tone of thrilling indignation. "If he's such an old brute as that——"

"Oh, no, he isn't really an old brute!" Diana averred, gently. "He's just a very ordinary sort of man. Lots of people pretend to be sorry for the deaths of their friends and relatives when they're not; and half the mourning in the world is sheer hypocrisy! Pa's a bit of a coward, too—he hates the very thought of death, and when some person he has known commits this last indiscretion of dying, he forgets it as

quickly as possible. I don't blame him, I'm sure. Everyone can't feel deeply—some people can't feel at all."

Here Sophy opened the letter and glanced at it. Presently she looked up.

"Shall I read it to you?" she asked.

Diana nodded. With a small, preparatory cough, which sounded rather like a suppressed giggle, Sophy thereupon read the following effusion:

"Dear Miss Lansing,

"I hardly know how to break to you the news of the sudden and awful tragedy which has wrecked the happiness of our lives! Our beloved only child, our darling daughter Diana is no more! I am aware what a shock this will be to your feelings, for you loved her as a friend, and I wish any words of mine could soften the blow. But I am too stunned myself with grief and horror to write more than just suffices to tell you of the fatal calamity. The poor child was overtaken by a high tide while bathing this morning, and was evidently carried out of her depth. For some hours I have waited and hoped against hope that perhaps, as she was a good swimmer, she might have reached some other part of the shore, but alas! I hear from persons familiar with this coast that the swirl of water in a high tide is so strong and often so erratic that it is doubtful whether even her poor body will ever be found! A sailor has just called here with a melancholy relic—her poor little bathing shoes! He picked up one this morning, soon after the accident, he says, and the other has lately been washed ashore. I cannot go on writing,—my heart is too full! My poor wife is quite beside herself with sorrow. We can only place our trust in God that He will, with time, help us to find consolation for our irreparable loss. We shall not forget your affection for our darling, and shall hope to send you her little wristlet watch as a souvenir.

"Yours, in the deepest affliction, "James Polydore May."

Diana had listened with close and almost fascinated attention.

"Of course it isn't true," she said, when the reading was finished. "It can't be true."

“What can’t be true?” queried Sophy, puckering her well-arched eyebrows.

“All that!” and Diana waved her hand expressively. “Pa’s not a bit ‘stunned with grief and horror!’ You couldn’t fancy him in such a condition if you tried! And mother is not in the least ‘beside herself.’ She’s probably ordering her mourning. Why, they are already parcelling out my trinkets, and before I’ve been ‘drowned’ twenty-four hours they’re thinking of sending you my wristlet watch by way of an ‘In Memoriam.’ I hope they will,—I should love you to have it! But people who are ‘stunned with grief and horror’ and ‘beside themselves’ are not able to make all these little arrangements so quickly! Ah, Sophy! An hour ago I was actually fancying that perhaps I had behaved cruelly,—there was a stupid, lingering sentiment in my mind that suggested the possible suffering and despair of my father and mother at having lost me!—but after that letter I am reassured! I know I have done the right thing.”

Sophy looked at her with a smile.

“You are a curious creature!” she said. “Surely Pa expresses himself very touchingly?”

“Too touchingly by half!” answered Diana. “Had he really felt the grief he professes to feel, he could not have written to you or to any other friend for several days about it——”

“Perhaps,” interrupted Sophy, “he thought it would be in the papers, and that unless he wrote it might be taken for someone else——”

“He knew it would be in the papers,” said Diana, “and naturally wished to let his acquaintances know that he, and no other man of the name of May, is the bereaved father of the domestic melodrama. Well!”—and she shook back her hair over her shoulders—“it’s finished! I am dead!—and ‘born again,’ as the Scripture saith,—at rather a mature age!—but I may yet turn out worth regenerating!—who knows?”

She laughed, and turned to the dressing-table to complete her toilette. Sophy put

affectionate arms about her.

“You are a dear, strange, clever, lovable thing, anyway!” she said. “But really, I’ve had quite a sleepless night thinking about that Dr. Dimitrius! He may be a secret investigator or a spy, and if you go to him he may want you to do all sorts of dreadful, even criminal things!——”

“But I shouldn’t do them!” laughed Diana. “Sophy, have you no confidence in my mental balance?”

“I have, but some people wouldn’t,” Sophy replied. “They would say that a woman of your age ought to know better than to leave a comfortable home where you had only the housekeeping to do, and give up the chance of an ample income at your parents’ death, just to go away on a wild-goose chase after new adventures, and all because you imagined you weren’t loved! Oh, dear! Love is only ‘a springe to catch woodcocks!’ as the venerable Polonius so wisely remarks in Hamlet. I know a sneering cynic who says that women are always ‘asking for love!’”

Diana paused in the act of brushing out a long bright ripple of hair. Her eyes grew sombre—almost tragic.

“So they are!” she said. “They ask for it because they know God meant them to have it! They know they were created for lover-love, wife-love, mother-love,—just think what life means to them when cheated out of all three through the selfishness and treachery of man! Their blood gets poisoned—their thoughts share the bitterness of their blood—they are no longer real women; they become abnormal and of no sex,—they shriek with the Suffragettes, and put on trousers to go ‘on the land’ with the men—they do anything and everything to force men’s attention—forgetting that efforts made on the masculine line completely fail in attraction for the male sex. It is the sensual and physical side of a woman that subjugates a man,—therefore when she is past her youth she has little or no ‘chance,’ as they call it. If she happens to be brainless, she turns into a sour, grizzling, tea-drinking nonentity and talks nothing

but scandal and diseases,—if she is intellectually brilliant, well!—sometimes she ‘rounds’ on the dogs that have bayed her into solitude, and, like a wounded animal, springs to her revenge!”

The words came impetuously from her lips, uttered in that thrillingly sweet voice which was her special gift and charm.

Sophy’s bright eyes opened in sheer astonishment.

“Why, Diana!” she exclaimed. “You talk like a tragedy queen!”

Diana shrugged her shoulders lightly.

“Do I?” and she slowly resumed the brushing of her hair. “There’s nothing in what I say but the distinctly obvious. Love is the necessity of life to a woman, and when that fails——”

“Diana, Diana!” interrupted Sophy, shaking a warning finger at her—“you talk of love as if it really were the ‘ideal’ thing described by poets and romancists, when it’s only the sugar-paper to attract and kill the flies! We women begin life by believing in it; but every married friend of mine tells me that all the ‘honey’ of the ‘moon’ is finished in a couple of months, never again to be found in the pot-au-feu of matrimony! Out of a thousand men taken at random perhaps one will really love, in the best and finest sense; the rest are only swayed by animal passion such as is felt by the wolf, the bear, or even the rabbit!—I really think the rabbit is the most exact prototype! How many wives one knows whose husbands not only neglect them, but are downright rude to them!—Why, my dear, your notion of ‘love’ is a dream, beyond all realisation!”

“Possibly!” and Diana went on with her hair-brushing. “But whatever it is, or whatever I imagined it to be, I don’t want it now. I want—revenge!”

“Revenge?” Sophy gave a little start of surprise. “You? You, always gentle, patient and adaptable! You want ‘revenge’? On whom? On what?”

“On all and everything that has set me apart and alone as I am!” Diana answered. “Perhaps science can show me a way to it! If so, I shall not have lived in vain!”

“Diana!” exclaimed her friend. “One would think you were going to bring microbes in a bottle, or something awful of that sort, and kill people!”

“Not I!” and Diana laughed quite merrily. “Killing is a common thing—and vulgar. But—I have strange dreams!” She twisted up her hair dexterously and coiled it prettily round her small, compact head. “Yes!—I have strange dreams!” she went on. “In these times we are apt to forget the conquests possible to the brain,—we let fools over-ride us when we could far more easily over-ride them. In my ‘salad days,’ which lasted far too long, I ‘asked for love’—now I ask for vengeance! I gave all my heart and soul to a man whose only god was Self,—and I got nothing back for my faith and truth. So I have a long score to settle!—and I shall try to have some of my spent joys returned to me—with heavy interest!”

“But how?” inquired Sophy, perplexed. “You don’t expect to get any ‘spent joys’ out of this Dr. Dimitrius, do you?”

Diana smiled. “No!”

“And if he proves to be a charlatan, as he probably will, you say you’ll go as companion or governess or housekeeper to somebody out in Geneva—well, where are you going to find any joy in such a life as that?”

Diana looked at her, still smiling.

“My dear, I don’t expect anything! Who was it that said: ‘Blessed are they that expect nothing, for they shall not be disappointed’? The chief point I have now to dwell upon is, that I am to all intents and purposes Dead! and, being dead, I’m free!—almost as free as if my spirit had really escaped from its mortal prison. Really, there’s something quite vitalising in the situation!—just now I feel ready for anything. I shouldn’t mind trying an airship voyage to the moon!”

“With Dr. Dimitrius?” suggested Sophy, laughing.

"Well, I don't know anything about Dr. Dimitrius yet," answered Diana. "Judging from his advertisement I imagine he is some wealthy 'crank' who fancies himself a scientist. There are any amount of them wandering about the world at the present time. I shall soon be able to tell whether he's a humbug or an honest man,—whether he's mad or sane—meanwhile, dear little Sophy, let's have breakfast and then go shopping. We've done with Pa and Ma—at any rate I have, bless their dear old hearts!—we know they're 'stunned with grief and horror' and 'beside themselves' and as happy in their 'misery' as they ever were in their lives. I can see my mother getting fitted for her mourning, and 'Pa' arguing with the hatter as to the proper width of his hat-band, and all the neighbours calling, and proffering 'sympathy' when they don't care a scrap! It's a curious little humbug of a world, Sophy!—but for the remainder of my time I'll try to make it of use to me. Only you'll have to lend me some money to begin upon!"

"Any amount you want!" said Sophy, enthusiastically—"You must have proper clothes to travel in!"

"I must," agreed Diana, with humorously dramatic emphasis. "I haven't had any since I was 'withdrawn' from the matrimonial market for lack of bidders. Mother used to spend hundreds on me so long as there was any hope—I had the prettiest frocks, the daintiest hats,—and in these I 'radiated' at all the various shows,—Ranelagh, Hurlingham, Henley, Ascot, Goodwood,—how sick I used to be of it! But when these little crowsfeet round my eyes began to come"—and she touched her temples expressively—"then poor, disappointed Ma drew in the purse-strings. She found that very 'young' hats didn't suit me—delicate sky-pinks and blues made me look sallow,—so she and Pa decided on giving me an 'allowance'—too meagre to stand the cost of anything but the plainest garments—and—so, here I am! Pa says 'only very young people should wear white'—but the vain old boy got himself up in white flannels the other day to play tennis and thought he looked splendid! But what's the odds, so long as he's happy!"

She laughed and turned to the mirror to complete her toilette, and in less than an hour's time she and Sophy Lansing had finished their breakfast and were out together in Bond Street, exploring the mysteries of the newest Aladdin's palace of elegant garments, where the perfect taste and deft fingers of practised Parisian fitters soon supplied all that was needed to suit Diana's immediate requirements. At one very noted establishment, she slipped into a "model" gown of the finest navy serge, of a design and cut so admirable that the couturier could hardly be said to flatter when he declared that "Madame looked a princess in it."

"Do princesses always look well?" she asked, with a quaint little uplifting of her eyebrows.

The great French tailor waved his hands expressively.

"Ah, Madame! It is a figure of speech!"

Diana laughed,—but she purchased the costume, Sophy whispering mysteriously in her ear: "Let us take it with us in the automobile! One never knows!—they might change it! And you'll never get anything to suit you more perfectly."

Miss Lansing was worldly-wise; she had not gained the reputation of being one of the best-dressed women in London without learning many little ins and outs of "model" gowns which are hidden from the profane. Many and many a time had she been "taken in," on this deep question,—many a "model" had she chosen, leaving it to be sent home, and on receipt had found it to be only a clever "copy" which, on being tried on, had proved a misfit. And well she knew that complaint was useless, as the tailor or modiste who supplied the goods would surely prove a veritable Ananias in swearing that she had received the "model," and the model only. On this occasion she had her way, and, despite the deprecating appeal of the couturier that he might be allowed to send it, the becoming costume was packed and placed safely in the automobile, and she and Diana drove off with it.

"You never could look better in anything!" declared Sophy. "Promise me you'll

wear it when you make your first call on Dr. Dimitrius!”

“But, my dear, it may be too much for him!” laughed Diana. “He wants ‘a courageous and determined woman of mature years,’—and so charming a Paris costume may not ‘dress’ the part!”

“Never mind whether it does or not,” said Sophy. “I can’t believe he wants an old frump! You may not believe me, Di, but you look perfectly fascinating in that gown—almost young again!”

Diana’s blue eyes clouded with a touch of sadness. She sighed a little.

“Almost!—not quite!” she answered. “But—‘dress does make a difference!’—there’s no doubt of it! These last few years I’m not ashamed to say I’ve longed for pretty clothes—I suppose it’s the dying spirit of youth trying to take a last caper! And now, with all these vanity purchases, I am horribly in your debt. Dear Sophy, how shall I ever repay you?”

“Don’t know and don’t care!” said Sophy, recklessly. “I’m not a grasping creditor. And something tells me you are going to be very rich!—perhaps this man Dimitrius is a millionaire and wants a clever woman for his wife—a sort of Madame Curie to help him with his experiments——”

“Then I shall not suit him,” interrupted Diana, “for I never intend to be wife to any man. First of all, I’m too old—secondly, if I were young again, I wouldn’t. It isn’t worth while!”

“But didn’t you say you wanted to be loved?” queried Sophy.

“Does marriage always fulfil that need?” counter-queried Diana.

They exchanged glances—smiled—shrugged shoulders and dropped the conversation.

Two days later Diana left England for Geneva.

CHAPTER VII

Geneva is one of those many towns in Switzerland which give the impression of neat commonplace in the midst of romance,—the same impression which is conveyed by a housewife's laying out of domestic linen in the centre of a beautiful garden. The streets are clean and regular,—the houses well-built and characterless, sometimes breaking forth into "villas" of fantastic appearance and adornment, which display an entire absence of architectural knowledge or taste,—the shops are filled with such trifles as are likely to appeal to tourists, but have little to offer of original production that cannot be purchased more satisfactorily elsewhere, and the watches that glitter in the chief jeweller's window on the Quai des Bergues are nothing better than one sees in the similar windows of Bond Street or Regent Street. There is nothing indeed remarkable about Geneva itself beyond its historic associations and memories of famous men, such as Calvin and Rousseau;—its chief glory is gained from its natural surroundings of blue lake and encircling chain of mountains, with Mont Blanc towering up in the distance,

"In a wreath of mist,

By the sunlight kiss'd,

And a diadem of snow."

The suburbs are far more attractive than the town; for, beyond the radius of the streets and the hateful, incessant noise of the electric trams, there are many charming residences set among richly wooded grounds and brilliant parterres of flowers, where the most fastidious lover of loveliness might find satisfaction for the eyes and rest for the mind, especially on the road towards Mont Salève and Mornex. Here one sees dazzling mists streaming off the slopes of the mountains,—exquisite tints firing the sky at sunrise and sunset, and mirrored in the infinite blue of the lake,—and even in the heats of summer, a delicious breeze blows over the fresh green fields with the cold scent of the Alpine snow in its breath. And here on a fresh beautiful autumn

morning Diana May found herself walking swiftly along with light and eager steps, her whole being alive with interested anticipation. Never had she felt so well; health bounded in her pulse and sparkled in her eyes, and the happy sense of perfect freedom gave to every movement of her thin, supple figure, that elasticity and grace which are supposed to be the special dower of extreme youth, though, as a matter of fact, youth is often ungainly in action and cumbersome in build. She had stayed two days and nights at a quiet little hotel in Geneva on arrival, in order to rest well and thoroughly, after her journey from England before presenting herself at the Château Fragonard, the residence of the mysterious Dr. Dimitrius; and she had made a few casual yet careful inquiries as to the Château and its owner. Nobody seemed to know more than that "Monsieur le Docteur Dimitrius" was a rich man, and that his Château had been built for him by a celebrated French architect who had spared neither labour nor cost. He was understood to be a scientist, very deeply absorbed in difficult matters of research,—he was unmarried and lived alone with his mother. Just now he had so much to do that he was advertising in all the papers for "an intellectual elderly lady" to assist him. Diana was indebted for this last "personal note" to a chatty bookseller in the Rue du Mont Blanc. She smiled as she listened, turning over some of the cheap fiction on his counter.

"He is not suited yet?" she inquired.

"Ah, no, Madame! It is not likely he will be suited! For what lady will admit herself to be sufficiently elderly? Ah, no? It is not possible!"

Later on, she learned that the Château Fragonard was situated some distance out of Geneva, and well off the high road.

"Madame wishes to see the grounds?" inquired the cheery driver of a little carriage plying for hire. "It would be necessary to ask permission. But they are very fine!—Ah, wonderful!—as fine as those of Rothschild! And if one were not admitted, it is easy to take a boat, and view them from the lake! The lawns slope to

the water's edge."

"Exquisite!" murmured Diana to herself. "It will be worth while trying to remain in such a paradise!"

And she questioned the willingly communicative cocher as to how long it might take to walk to the Château?

"About an hour," he replied. "A pleasant walk, too, Madame! One sees the lake and mountains nearly all the way."

This information decided her as to her plans. She knew that the eccentric wording of the Dimitrius advertisement required any applicant to present herself between six and eight in the morning, which was an ideal time for a walk in the bracing, brilliant Alpine air. So she determined to go on foot the very next day; and before she parted with the friendly driver, she had ascertained the exact position of the Château, and the easiest and quickest way to get there.

And now,—having risen with the first peep of dawn, and attired herself in that becoming navy serge "model," which her astute friend Sophy had borne triumphantly out of the French tailor's emporium, she was on her way to the scene of her proposed adventure. She walked at a light, rapid pace—the morning was bright and cool, almost cold when the wind blew downward from the mountains, and she was delightfully conscious of that wonderful exhilaration and ease given to the whole physical frame by a clear atmosphere, purified by the constant presence of ice and snow. As she moved along in happiest mood, she thought of many things;—she was beginning to be amazed, as well as charmed, by the various changes which had, within a week, shaken her lately monotonous life into brilliant little patterns like those in a kaleidoscope. The web and woof of Circumstance was no longer all dull grey, like the colour her father had judged most suitable for her now that she was no longer young,—threads of rose and sky blue had found their hopeful way into the loom. Her days of housekeeping, checking tradesmen's bills

and flower-arranging seemed a very long way off; it was hardly credible to her mind that but a short time ago she had been responsible for the ordering of her parents' lunches and dinners and the general management of the summer "change" at Rose Lea on the coast of Devon,—that fatal coast where she had been so cruelly drowned! Before leaving London, she had seen a few casual paragraphs in the newspapers concerning this disaster, headed "Bathing Fatality"—"Sad End of a Lady"—or "Drowned while Bathing," but, naturally, being a nobody, she had left no gap in society,—she was only one of many needless women. And it was an altogether new and aspiring Diana May that found herself alive on this glorious morning in Switzerland; not the resigned, patient, orderly "old maid" with a taste for Jacobean embroidery and a wholesome dislike of the "snap-snap-snarl" humours of her father.

"I never seem to have been my own real self till now!" she said inwardly. "And now I hardly realise that I have a father and mother at all! What a tyrannical bogy I have made of my 'duty' to them! And 'love' is another bogy!"

She glanced at her watch,—one of Sophy Lansing's numerous dainty trifles—"Keep it in exchange," Sophy had said, "for yours which your bereaved parents are going to send me as an 'In Memoriam'!" It was ten minutes to seven. Looking about her to take note of her bearings, she saw on the left-hand side a deep bend in the road, which curved towards a fine gateway of wrought iron, surmounted by a curious device representing two crossed spears springing from the centre of a star,—and she knew she had arrived at her destination. Her heart beat a little more quickly as she approached the gateway—there was no keeper's lodge, so she pulled at a handle which dimly suggested the possibility of a bell. There was no audible response,—but to all appearance the gates noiselessly unbarred themselves, and slowly opened. She entered at once without hesitation, and they as slowly closed behind her. She was in the grounds of the Château Fragonard. Immense borders of heliotrope in full bloom fringed either side of the carriage drive where she stood, and the mere lifting of her eyes showed masses of flowering shrubs and finely-grown trees bending their

shadowy branches over velvety stretches of rich green grass, or opening in leafy archways here and there to disclose enchanting glimpses of blue water or dazzling peaks of far-off snow. She would have been glad to linger among such lovely surroundings, for she had a keen comprehension of and insight into the beauty of Nature and all the joys it offers to a devout and discerning spirit, but she bethought herself that if Dr. Dimitrius was anything of an exact or punctilious person, he would expect an applicant to be rather before than after time. A silver-toned chime, striking slowly and musically on the sunlit silence, rang seven o'clock as she reached the Château, which looked like a miniature palace of Greek design, and was surrounded with a broad white marble loggia, supported by finely fluted Ionic columns, between two of which on each side a fountain played. But Diana had scarcely time to look at anything while quickly ascending the short flight of steps leading to the door of entrance; she saw a bell and was in haste to ring it. Her summons was answered at once by a negro servant dressed in unassuming dark livery.

"Dr. Dimitrius?" she queried.

The negro touched his lips with an expressive movement signifying that he was dumb,—but he was not deaf, for he nodded an affirmative to her inquiry, and by a civil gesture invited her to enter. In another few seconds she found herself in a spacious library—a finely proportioned room, apparently running the full length of the house, with large French windows at both ends, commanding magnificent views.

Left alone for several minutes, she moved about half timidly, half boldly, looking here and there—at the great globes, celestial and terrestrial, which occupied one corner,—at the long telescope on its stand ready for use and pointed out to the heavens—and especially at a curious instrument of fine steel set on a block of crystal, which swung slowly up and down incessantly, striking off an infinitesimal spark of fire as it moved.

“Some clock-work thing,” she said half aloud. “But where is its mechanism?”

“Ah, where!” echoed a deep, rather pleasant voice close at her ear. “That, as Hamlet remarked, is the question!”

She started and turned quickly with a flush of colour mounting to her brows,—a man of slight build and medium height stood beside her.

“You are Dr. Dimitrius?” she said.

He smiled. “Even so! I am he! And you——?”

Swiftly she glanced him over. He was not at all an alarming, weird, or extraordinary-looking personage. Young?—yes, surely young for a man—not above forty; and very personable, if intelligent features, fine eyes and a good figure can make a man agreeable to outward view. And yet there was something about him more than mere appearance,—she could not tell what it was, and just then she had no time to consider. She rushed at once into the business of her errand.

“My name is May,—Diana May,” she said, conscious of nervousness in speaking, but mastering herself by degrees. “I have come from England in answer to your advertisement. I am interested—very deeply interested—in matters of modern science, and I have gained some little knowledge through a good deal of personal, though quite unguided study. I am most anxious to be useful—and I am not afraid to take any risks——”

She broke off, a little confused under the steady scrutiny of Dr. Dimitrius’s eyes. He placed an easy chair by the nearest window. “Pray sit down!” he said, with a courteous gesture,—then, as she obeyed: “You have walked here from Geneva?”

“Yes.”

“When did you arrive from England?”

“Two days ago.”

“Have you stated to anyone the object of your journey?”

"Only to one person—an intimate woman friend who lent me the money for my travelling expenses."

"I see!" And Dimitrius smiled benevolently. "You have not explained yourself or your intentions to any good Genevese hotel proprietor?"

She looked up in quick surprise.

"No, indeed!"

"Wise woman!" Here Dimitrius drew up a chair opposite to her and sat down. "My experience has occasionally shown me that lone ladies arriving in a strange town and strange hotel, throw themselves, so to speak, on the bosom of the book-keeper or the landlady, and to her impart their whole business. It is a mistake!—an error of confiding innocence—but it is often made. You have not made it,—and that is well! You have never married?"

Diana coloured—then answered with gentleness:

"No. I am what is called a spinster,—an old maid."

"The first is by far the prettiest name," said Dimitrius. "It evokes a charming vision of olden time when women sat at their spinning wheels, each one waiting for Faust, à la Marguerite, unaware of the Devil behind him! 'Old maid' is a coarse English term,—there are coarse English terms! and much as I adore England and the English, I entirely disapprove of their 'horseplay' on women! No doubt you know what I mean?"

"I think I do," replied Diana, slowly. "It is that when a woman is neither a man's bound slave nor his purchased toy, she is turned into a jest."

"Precisely! You have expressed it perfectly!" and his keen eyes flashed over her comprehensively. "But let us keep to business. You are a spinster, and I presume you are, in the terms of my advertisement, 'alone in the world, without claims on your time or your affections.' Is that so?"

Quietly she answered:

“That is so.”

“Now you will remember I asked for ‘a courageous and determined woman of mature years.’ You do not look very ‘mature’——”

“I am past forty,” said Diana.

“A frank, but unnecessary admission,” he answered, smiling. “You should never admit to more years than your appearance gives you. However, I am glad you told me, as it better suits my purpose. And you consider yourself ‘courageous and determined’?”

She looked at him straightly.

“I think I am—I hope I am,” she said. “I have had many disillusions and have lost all I once hoped to win; so that I can honestly say even death would not matter to me, as I have nothing to live for. Except the love of Nature and its beauty——”

“And its wisdom and mastery of all things,” finished Dimitrius. “And to feel that unless we match its wisdom with our will to be instructed, and its mastery with our obedience and worship, we ‘shall surely die’!”

His eyes flashed upon her with a curious expression, and just for a passing moment she felt a little afraid of him. He went on, speaking with deliberate emphasis:

“Yes,—if you are indeed a student of Nature, you surely know that! And you know also that the greatest, deepest, most amazing, and most enlightening discoveries made in science during the last thirty years or so are merely the result of cautious and sometimes casual probing of one or two of this vast Nature’s smaller cells of active intelligence. We have done something,—but how much remains to do!”

He paused,—and Diana gazed at him questioningly. He smiled as he met her eager and interested look.

“We shall have plenty of time to talk of these matters,” he said—“if I decide that

you can be useful to me. What languages do you know besides your own?"

"French, Italian and a little Russian," she answered. "The two first quite fluently,—Russian I have studied only quite lately—and I find it rather difficult——"

"Being a Russian myself I can perhaps make it easy for you," said Dimitrius, kindly. "To study such a language without a teacher shows considerable ambition and energy on your part."

She flushed a little at the mere suggestion of praise and sat silent.

"I presume you have quite understood, Miss May," he presently resumed, in a more formal tone, "that I require the services of an assistant for one year at least—possibly two years. If I engage you, you must sign an agreement with me to that effect. Another very special point is that of confidence. Nothing that you do, see, or hear while working under my instructions is ever to pass your lips. You must maintain the most inviolable secrecy, and when once you are in this house you must neither write letters nor receive them. If you are, as I suggested in my advertisement, 'alone in the world, without any claims on your time or your affections,' you will not find this a hardship. My experiments in chemistry may or may not give such results as I hope for, but while I am engaged upon them I want no imitative bunglers attempting to get on the same line. Therefore I will run no risks of even the smallest hint escaping as to the nature of my work."

Diana bent her head in assent.

"I understand," she said—"And I am quite willing to agree to your rules. I should only wish to write one letter, and that I can do from the hotel,—just to return the money my friend lent me for my expenses. And I should ask you to advance me that sum out of whatever salary you offer. Then I need give no further account of myself. Sophy,—that is my friend—would write to acknowledge receipt of the money, and then our correspondence would end."

“This would not vex or worry you?” inquired Dimitrius.

She smiled. “I am past being vexed or worried at anything!” she said. “Life is just a mere ‘going on’ for me now, with thankfulness to find even a moment of interest in it as I go!”

Dimitrius rose from his chair and walked up and down, his hands clasped behind his back. She watched him in fascinated attention, with something of suspense and fear lest after all he should decide against her. She noted the supple poise of his athletic figure, clad in a well-cut, easy summer suit of white flannels,—his dark, compact head, carried with a certain expression of haughtiness, and last, but not least, his hands, which in their present careless attitude nevertheless expressed both power and refinement.

Suddenly he wheeled sharply round and stood, facing her.

“I think you will do,” he said,—and her heart gave a quick throb of relief which, unconsciously to herself, suffused her pale face with a flush of happiness—“I think I shall find in you obedience, care, and loyalty. But there is yet an important point to consider,—do you, in your turn, think you can put up with me? I am very masterful, not to say obstinate; I will have no ‘scamp’ work,—I am often very impatient, and I can be extremely disagreeable. You must take all this well into your consideration, for I am perfectly honest with you when I say I am not easy to serve. And remember!”—here he drew a few steps closer to her and looked her full in the eyes—“the experiments on which I am engaged are highly dangerous,—and, as I stated in my advertisement, you must not be ‘afraid to take risks,’—for if you agree to assist me in the testing of certain problems in chemistry, it may cost you your very life!”

She smiled.

“It’s very kind of you to prepare me for all the difficulties and dangers of my way,” she said. “And I thank you! But I have no fear. There is really nothing to be afraid

of,—one can but die once. If you will take me, I'll do my faithful best to obey your instructions in every particular, and so far as is humanly possible, you shall have nothing to complain of."

He still bent his eyes searchingly upon her.

"You have a good nerve?"

"I think so."

"You must be sure of that! My laboratory is not a place for hesitation, qualms, or terrors," he said. "The most amazing manifestations occur there sometimes——"

"I have said I am not afraid," interrupted Diana, with a touch of pride. "If you doubt my word, let me go,—but if you are disposed to engage me, please accept me at my own valuation."

He laughed, and his face lightened with kindliness and humour.

"I like that!" he said. "I see you have some spirit! Good! Now, to business. I have made up my mind that you will suit me,—and you have also apparently made up your mind that I shall suit you. Very well. Your salary with me will be a thousand a year——"

Diana uttered a little cry.

"A thou—a thousand a year!" she ejaculated. "Oh, you mean a thousand francs?"

"No, I don't. I mean a thousand good British pounds sterling,—the risks you will run in working with me are quite worth that. You will have your own suite of rooms and your own special hours of leisure for private reading and study, and all your meals will be supplied, though we should like you to share them with us at our table, if you have no objection. And when you are not at work, or otherwise engaged, I should be personally very much obliged if you would be kind and companionable to my mother."

Diana could scarcely speak; she was overwhelmed by what she considered the

munificence and generosity of his offer.

“You are too good,” she faltered. “You wish to give me more than my abilities merit——”

“I must be the best judge of that,” he said, and moving to a table desk in the centre of the room he opened a drawer and took out a paper. “Will you come here and read this? And then sign it?”

She went to his side, and taking the paper from his hand, read it carefully through. It was an agreement, simply and briefly worded, which bound her as confidential assistant and private secretary to Féodor Dimitrius for the time of one year positively, with the understanding that this period should be extended to two years, if agreeable to both parties. Without a moment’s hesitation, she took up a pen, dipped it in ink, and signed it in a clear and very firmly characteristic way.

“A good signature!” commented Dimitrius. “If handwriting expresses anything, you should be possessed of a strong will and a good brain. Have you ever had occasion to exercise either?”

Diana thought a moment—then laughed.

“Yes!—in a policy of repression!”

A humorous sparkle in his eyes responded to her remark.

“I understand! Well, now”—and he put away the signed agreement in a drawer of his desk and locked it—“you must begin to obey me at once! You will first come and have some breakfast, and I’ll introduce you to my mother. Next, you will return to your hotel in Geneva, pay your bill, and remove your luggage. I can show you a short cut back to the town, through these grounds and by the border of the lake. By the way, how much do you owe your friend in England?”

“About a hundred pounds.”

“Here is an English bank-note for that sum,” said Dimitrius, taking it from a roll of

paper money in his desk. “Send it to her in a registered letter. And here is an extra fifty pound note for any immediate expenses,—you will understand you have drawn this money in advance of your salary. Now when you get to your hotel, have your luggage taken to the railway station and left in the Salle des Bagages,—they will give you a number for it. Then when all this is done, walk quietly back here by the same private path through the grounds which you will presently become acquainted with, and I will send a man I sometimes employ from Mornex, to fetch your belongings here. In this way the good gossiping folk of Geneva will be unable to state what has become of you, or where you have chosen to go. You follow me?”

“Quite!” answered Diana—“And I shall obey you in every particular.”

“Good! Now come and see my mother.”

He showed her into an apartment situated on the other side of the entrance hall—a beautiful room, lightly and elegantly furnished, where, at a tempting-looking breakfast table, spread with snowy linen, delicate china and glittering silver, sat one of the most picturesque old ladies possible to imagine. She rose as her son and Diana entered and advanced to meet them with a charming grace—her tall slight figure, snow-white hair, and gentle, delicate face, lit up with the tenderest of blue eyes, making an atmosphere of attractive influence around her as she moved.

“Mother,” said Dimitrius, “I have at last found the lady who is willing to assist me in my work—here she is. She has come from England—let me introduce her. Miss Diana May,—Madame Dimitrius.”

“You are very welcome,”—and Madame Dimitrius held out both hands to Diana, with an expressive kindness which went straight to the solitary woman’s heart. “It is indeed a relief to me to know that my son is satisfied! He has such great ideas!—such wonderful schemes!—alas, I cannot follow or comprehend them!—I am not clever! You have walked from Geneva?—and no breakfast? My dear, sit down,—the coffee is just made.”

And in two or three minutes Diana found herself chatting away at perfect ease, with two of the most intelligent and companionable persons she had ever met,—so that the restraint under which she had suffered for years gradually relaxed, and her own natural wit and vivacity began to sparkle with a brightness it had never known since her choleric father and adipose mother had “sat upon her” once and for all, as a matrimonial failure. Madame Dimitrius encouraged her to talk, and every now and then she caught the dark, almost sombre eyes of Dimitrius himself fixed upon her musingly, so that occasionally the old familiar sense of “wonder” arose in her,—wonder as to how all her new circumstances would arrange themselves,—what her work would be—and what might result from the whole strange adventure. But when, after breakfast, she was shown the beautiful “suite” of apartments destined for her occupation, with windows commanding a glorious view of the lake and the Mont Blanc chain of mountains, and furnished with every imaginable comfort and luxury, she was amazed and bewildered at the extraordinary good luck which had befallen her, and said so openly without the slightest hesitation. Madame Dimitrius seemed amused at the frankness of her admiration and delight.

“This is nothing for us to do,” she said, kindly. “You will have difficult and intricate work and much fatigue of brain; you will need repose and relaxation in your own apartments, and we have made them as comfortable as we can. There are plenty of books, as you see,—and the piano is a ‘bijou grand,’ very sweet in tone. Do you play?”

“A little,” Diana admitted.

“Play me something now!”

Obediently she sat down, and her fingers wandered as of themselves into a lovely “prélude” of Chopin’s—a tangled maze of delicate tones which crossed and recrossed each other like the silken flowers of fine tapestry. The instrument she

played on was delicious in touch and quality, and she became so absorbed in the pleasure of playing that she almost forgot her listeners. When she stopped she looked up, and saw Dimitrius watching her.

“Excellent! You have a rare gift!” he said. “You play like an artist and thinker.”

She coloured with a kind of confusion,—she had seldom or never been praised for any accomplishment she possessed. Madame Dimitrius smiled at her, with tears in her eyes.

“Such music takes me back to my youth,” she said. “All the old days of hope and promise! ... Ah! ... you will play to me often?”

“Whenever you like,” answered Diana, with a thrill of tenderness in her always sweet voice,—she was beginning to feel an affection for this charming and dignified old lady, who had not outlived sentiment so far as to be unmoved by the delicate sorrows of Chopin. “You have only to ask me.”

“And now,” put in Dimitrius, “as you know where you will live, you must go back to Geneva and get your luggage, in the way I told you. We’ll go together through the grounds,—it’s half an hour’s walk instead of nearly two hours by the road.”

“It did not seem like two hours this morning,” said Diana.

“No, I daresay not. You were eager to get here, and walking in Switzerland is always more delight than fatigue. But it is actually a two hours’ walk. Our private way is easier and prettier.”

“Au revoir!” smiled Madame Dimitrius. “You, Féodor, will be in to luncheon,—and you, Miss May?——”

“I give her leave of absence till the afternoon,” said Dimitrius. “She must return in time for that English consoler of trouble—tea!” He laughed, and with a light parting salute to his mother, preceded Diana by a few steps to show the way. She paused a moment with a look half shy, half wistful at the kindly Madame Dimitrius.

"Will you try to like me?" she said, softly. "Somehow, I have missed being liked! But I don't think I'm really a disagreeable person!"

Madame took her gently by both hands and kissed her.

"Have courage, my dear!" she said. "I like you already! You will be a help to my son,—and I feel that you will be patient with him! That will be enough to win more than my liking—my love!"

With a grateful look and smile Diana nodded a brief adieu, and followed Dimitrius, who was already in the garden waiting for her.

"Women must always have the last word!" he said, with a good-humoured touch of irony. "And even when they are enemies, they kiss!"

She raised her eyes frankly to his.

"That's true!" she answered. "I've seen a lot of it! But your mother and I could never be enemies, and I—well, I am grateful for even a 'show' of liking."

He looked surprised.

"Have you had so little?" he queried. "And you care for it?"

"Does not everyone care for it?"

"No. For example, I do not. I have lived too long to care. I know what love or liking generally mean—love especially. It means a certain amount of pussy-cat comfort for one's self. Now, though all my efforts are centred on comfort in the way of perfect health and continuous enjoyment of life for this 'Self' of ours, I do not care for the mere pussy-cat pleasure of being fondled to see if I will purr. I have no desire to be a purring animal."

Diana laughed—a gay, sweet laugh that rang out as clearly and youthfully as a girl's. He gave her a quick, astonished glance.

"I amuse you?" he inquired, with a slight touch of irritation.

"Yes, indeed! But don't be vexed because I laugh! You—you mustn't imagine that

anybody wants to make you ‘purr!’ I don’t! I’d rather you growled, like a bear!” She laughed again. “We shall get on splendidly together,—I know we shall!”

He walked a few paces in silence.

“I think you are younger than you profess to be,” he said, at last.

“I wish I were!” she answered, fervently. “Alas, alas! it’s no use wishing. I cannot ‘go like a crab, backwards.’ Though just now I feel like a mere kiddie, ready to run all over these exquisite gardens and look at everything, and find out all the prettiest nooks and corners. What a beautiful place this is!—and how fortunate I am to have found favour in your eyes! It will be perfect happiness for me just to live here!”

Dimitrius looked pleased.

“I’m glad you like it,” he said—and taking a key from his pocket, he handed it to her. “Here we are coming to the border of the lake, and you can go on alone. Follow the private path till you come to a gate which this key will open—then turn to the left, up a little winding flight of steps, under trees—this will bring you out to the high road. I suppose you know the way to your hotel when you are once in the town?”

“Yes,—and I shall know my way back again to the Château this afternoon,” she assured him. “It’s kind of you to have come thus far with me. You are breaking your morning’s work.”

He smiled. “My morning’s work can wait,” he said. “In fact, most of my work must wait—till you come!”

With these words he raised his hat in courteous salutation and left her, turning back through his grounds—while she went on her way swiftly and alone.

CHAPTER VIII

Arrived at her hotel, Diana gave notice that she was leaving that afternoon. Then she packed up her one portmanteau and sent it by a porter to the station, with

instructions to deposit it in the “Salle des Bagages,” to await her there. He carried out this order, and brought the printed number entitling her to claim her belongings at her convenience.

“Madame is perhaps going to Vevy or to Montreux?” he suggested, cheerfully. “The journey is pleasanter by boat than by the train.”

“No doubt!—yes, of course!—I am quite sure it is!” murmured the astute Diana with an abstracted smile, giving him a much larger “tip” than he expected, which caused him to snatch off his cap and stand with uncovered head, as in the presence of a queen. “But I have not made up my mind where I shall go first. Perhaps to Martigny—perhaps only to Lausanne. I am travelling for my own amusement.”

“Ah, oui! Je comprends! Bonne chance, Madame!” and the porter backed reverently away from the wonderful English lady who had given him five francs, when he had only hoped for one,—and left her to her own devices. Thereupon she went to her room, locked the door, and wrote the following letter to Sophy Lansing:

“Dearest Sophy,

“Please find enclosed, as business people say, an English bank-note for a hundred pounds, which I think clears me of my debt to you in the way of money, though not of gratitude. By my ‘paying up’ so soon, you will judge that I have ‘fallen on my feet’—and that I have accepted ‘service’ under Dr. Dimitrius. What is more, and what will please you most, is that I am entirely satisfied with my situation, and am likely to be better off and happier than I have been for many years. The Doctor does not appear to be at all an ‘eccentric,’—he is evidently a bona-fide scientist, engaged, as he tells me, in working out difficult problems of chemistry, in which I hope and believe I may be of some use to him by attending to smaller matters of detail only; he has a most beautiful place on the outskirts of Geneva, in which I have been allotted a charming suite of rooms with the loveliest view of the Alps from the windows,—and last, by no means least, he has a perfectly delightful mother, a sweet

old lady with snow-white hair and the ‘grand manner,’ who has captivated both my heart and imagination at once. So you may realise how fortunate I am! Everything is signed and settled; and there is only one stipulation Dr. Dimitrius makes, and this is, that while I am working with him, I may neither write nor receive letters. Now I have no one I really care to write to except you; moreover, it is impossible for me to write to anyone, as I am supposed to be dead! So it all fits in very well as it should. You, of course, know nothing about me, save that I was unfortunately drowned!—and when you see ‘Pa’ and ‘Ma’ clothed in their parental mourning, you will, I hope, manage to shed a few friendly tears with them over my sudden departure from this world. (N.B. A scrap of freshly cut onion secreted in your handkerchief would do the trick!) I confess I should have liked to know your impression of my bereaved parents when you see them for the first time since my ‘death!’—but I must wait. Meanwhile, you can be quite easy in your mind about me, for I consider myself most fortunate. I have a splendid salary—a thousand a year!—just think of it!—a thousand Pounds, not Francs!—and a perfectly enchanting home, with every comfort and luxury. I am indeed ‘dead’ as the poor solitary woman who devoted her soul to the service of ‘Pa’ and ‘Ma’; a new Diana May has sprung from the ashes of the old spinster!—it is exactly as if I had really died and been born again! All the world seems new; I breathe the air of a delicious and intelligent freedom such as I have never known. I shall think of you very often, you bright, kind, clever little Sophy!—and if I get the chance, I will now and then send you a few flowers,—or a book,—merely as a hint to you that all is well. But, in any case, whether you receive such a hint or not, have no misgivings or fears in regard to me;—for years I haven’t been so happy or so well off as I am now. I’m more than thankful that my lonely hours of study have not been entirely wasted, and that what I have learned may prove of some use at last. Now, dear Sophy, au revoir! Your good wishes for me are being fulfilled; my ‘poor brain so long atrophied by domestic considerations of Pa and Ma,’ as you put it, is actually expanding!—and

who knows?—your prophecy may come true—Cinderella may yet go to the Prince's Ball! If I have cause to resign my present post, I will write to you at once; but not till then. This you will understand. I have registered this letter so that really there is no need for you to acknowledge its receipt,—the post-office may be relied upon to deliver it to you safely. And I think it is perhaps best you should not write.

"Much love and grateful thanks for all your help and kindness to

"Your 'departed' friend, "Diana May."

This letter, with its bank-note enclosure, she sealed; and then, taking a leisurely walk along the Rue du Mont Blanc to the General Post Office, she patiently filled in the various formal items for the act of registration which the Swiss postal officials make so overwhelmingly tiresome and important, and finally got her packet safely despatched. This done, she felt as if the last link binding her to her former life was severed. Gone was "Pa"; gone was "Ma!"—gone were the few faded sentiments she had half unconsciously cherished concerning the man she had once loved and who had heartlessly "jilted" her,—gone, too, were a number of sad and solitary years,—gone, as if they had been a few unimportant numerals wiped off a slate,—and theirs was the strangest "going" of all. For she had lived through those years,—most surely she had lived through them,—yet now it did not seem as if they had ever been part of her existence. They had suddenly become a blank. They counted for nothing except the recollection of long hours of study. Something new and vital touched her inner consciousness,—a happiness, a lightness, a fresh breathing-in of strength and self-reliance. From the Rue du Mont Blanc she walked to the Pont, and stood there, gazing for some time at the ravishing view that bridge affords of the lake and mountains. The sun shone warmly with that mellow golden light peculiar to early autumn, and the water was blue as a perfect sapphire, flecked by tiny occasional ripples of silver, like sudden flashing reflections of sunbeams in a mirror; one or two pleasure-boats with picturesque "lateen" sails looked like great

sea-birds slowly skimming along on one uplifted wing. The scene was indescribably lovely, and a keen throb of pure joy pulsated through her whole being, moving her to devout thankfulness for simply being alive, and able to comprehend such beauty.

"If I had been really and truly drowned I think it would have been a pity!" she thought, whimsically. "Not on account of any grief it might have caused—for I have no one to grieve for me,—but solely on my own part, for I should have been senseless, sightless, and tucked away in the earth, instead of being here in the blessed sunshine! No!—I shouldn't have been tucked away in the earth, unless they had found my body and had a first-class funeral with Ma's usual wreath lying on the coffin,—I should have been dashed about in the sea, and eaten by the fishes. Not half so pleasant as standing on the Pont du Mont Blanc and looking at the snowy line of the Alps! When people commit suicide they don't think, poor souls!—they don't realise that there's more happiness to be got out of the daily sunshine than either money, food, houses, or friends can ever give! And one can live on very little, if one tries." Here she laughed. "Though I shall have no chance to try! A thousand a year for a single woman, with a lovely home and 'board' thrown in, does not imply much effort in managing to keep body and soul together! Of course my work may be both puzzling and strenuous—I wonder what it will really be?"

And she started again on her old crusade of "wonder." Yet she did not find anything particular to wonder at in the appearance, manner, or conversation of Dr. Dimitrius. She had always "wondered" at stupidity,—but never at intelligence. Dimitrius spoke intelligently and looked intelligent; he did not "pose" as a wizard or a seer, or a prophet. And she felt sure that his mother would not limit her conversation to the various items of domestic business; she could not fancy her as becoming excited over a recipe for jam, or the pattern for a blouse. This variety of subjects were the conversational stock-in-trade of English suburban misses and matrons whose talk on all occasions is little more than a luke-warm trickle of words which mean nothing. There would be some intellectual stimulus in the Dimitrius household,—of that she

felt convinced. But in what branch of scientific research, or what problem of chemistry her services would be required, she could not, with all her capacity for wondering, form any idea.

She walked leisurely back to the hotel, looking at the shops on her way,—at the little carved wooden bears carrying pin-cushions, pen-trays and pipe-racks,—at the innumerable clocks, with chimes and without,—at the "souvenirs" of pressed and mounted edelweiss, inscribed with tender mottoes suitable for lovers to send to one another in absence,—and before one window full of these she paused, smiling.

"What nonsense it all is!" she said to herself. "I used to keep the faded petals of any little flower I chanced to see in his buttonhole, and put them away in envelopes marked with his initials and the date!—what a fool I was!—as great a fool as that sublime donkey, Juliette Drouet, who raved over her 'little man', Victor Hugo! And the silly girls who send this edelweiss from Switzerland to the men they are in love with, ought just to see what those men do with it! That would cure them! Like the Professor who totalled up his butcher's bill on the back of one of Charlotte Bronté's fervent letters, nine out of ten of them are likely to use it as a 'wedge' to keep a window or door from rattling!"

Amused with her thoughts, she went on, reached her hotel and had luncheon, after which she paid her bill. "Madame is leaving us?" said the cheery dame du comptoir, speaking very voluble French. "Alas, we are sorry her stay is so short! Madame goes on to Montreux, no doubt?"

"Madame" smiled at the amiable woman's friendly inquisitiveness.

"No," she answered.—"And yet—perhaps—yes! I am taking a long holiday and hope to see all the prettiest places in Switzerland!"

"Ah, there is much that is grand—beautiful!" declared the proprietress. "You will occupy much time! You will perhaps return here again?"

"Oh, yes! That is very likely!" replied Diana, with a flagrant assumption of candour.

“I have been very comfortable here.”

“Madame is too good to say so! We are charmed! The luggage has gone to the station? Yes? That is well! Au revoir, Madame!”

And with many gracious nods and smiles and repeated au revoirs, Diana escaped at last, and went towards the station, solely for the benefit of the hotel people, servants included, who stood at the doorway watching her departure. But once out of their sight she turned rapidly down a side street which she had taken note of in the morning, and soon found her way to the close little alley under trees with the steps which led to the border of the lake, but which was barred to strangers and interlopers by an iron gate through which she had already passed, and of which she had the key. There was no difficulty in unlocking it and locking it again behind her, and she drew a long breath of relief and satisfaction when she found herself once more in the grounds of the Château Fragonard.

“There!” she said half aloud—“I have shut away the old world!—welcome to the new! I’m ready for anything now—life or death!—anything but the old jog-trot, loveless days of monotonous commonplace,—there will be something different here. Loveless I shall always be—but I’m beginning to think there’s another way of happiness than love!—though old Thomas à Kempis says: ‘Nothing is sweeter than love, nothing more pleasant, nothing fuller and better in Heaven and earth’; but he meant the love of God, not the love of man.”

She grew serious and absorbed in thought, yet not so entirely abstracted as to be unconscious of the beauty of the gardens through which she was walking,—the well-kept lawns, the beds and borders of flowers,—the graceful pergolas of climbing roses, and the shady paths which went winding in and out through shrubberies and under trees, here and there affording glimpses of the lake, glittering as with silver and blue. Presently at a turn in one of these paths she had a view of the front of the Château Fragonard, with its fountains in full play on either side, and was enchanted

with the classic purity of its architectural design, which seemed evidently copied from some old-world model of an Athenian palace.

“I don’t think it’s possible to see anything lovelier!” she said to herself. “And what luck it is for me to live here! Who could have guessed it! It’s like a dream of fairyland!”

She gathered a rose hanging temptingly within reach, and fastened it in her bodice.

“Let me see!” she went on, thinking—“It’s just a week since I was ‘drowned’ in Devon! Such a little while!—why Ma hasn’t had time yet to get her mourning properly fitted! And Pa! I wonder how he really ‘carries’ himself, as they say, under his affliction! I think it will be a case of ‘bearing up wonderfully,’ for both of them. One week!—and my little boat of life, tied so long by a worn rope to a weedy shore, has broken adrift and floated away by itself to a veritable paradise of new experience. But,—am I counting too much on my good fortune, I wonder? Perhaps there will be some crushing drawback,—some terrorizing influence—who knows! And yet—I think not. Anyhow, I have signed, sealed, and delivered myself over to my chosen destiny;—it is wiser to hope for the best than imagine the worst.”

Arrived at the hall door of the Château she found it open, and passed in unquestioned, as an admitted member of the household. She saw a neat maid busying herself with the arrangement of some flowers, and of her she asked the way to her rooms. The girl at once preceded her up the wide staircase and showed her the passage leading to the beautiful suite of apartments she had seen in the morning, remarking:

“Madame will be quite private here,—this passage is shut off from the rest of the house, and is an entry to these rooms only, and if Madame wants any service she will ring and I will come. My name is Rose.”

“Thank you, Rose!” and Diana smiled at her, feeling a sense of relief to know that she could have the attention of a simple ordinary domestic such as this

pleasant-looking little French femme-de-chambre,—for somehow she had connected the dumb negro who had at first admitted her to the Château with a whole imagined retinue of mysterious persons, sworn to silence in the service of Dimitrius. “I will not trouble you more than I can help—hark!—what is that noise?”

A low, organ-like sound as of persistent thudding and humming echoed around her,—it suggested suppressed thunder. The girl Rose looked quite unconcerned.

“Oh, that is the machine in the Doctor’s laboratory,” she said. “But it does not often make any noise. We do not know quite what it is,—we are not permitted to see!” She smiled, and added: “But Madame will not long be disturbed—it will soon cease.”

And indeed the thunderous hum died slowly away as she spoke, leaving a curious sense of emptiness on the air. Diana still listened, vaguely fascinated,—but the silence remained unbroken. Rose nodded brightly, in pleased affirmation of her own words, and left the room, closing the door behind her.

Alone, Diana went to the window and looked out. What a glorious landscape was spread before her!—what a panorama of the Divine handiwork in Nature! Tears sprang to her eyes—tears, not of sorrow, but of joy.

“I hope I am grateful enough!” she thought. “For now I have every reason to be grateful. I tried hard to feel grateful for all my blessings at home,—yet somehow I couldn’t be!—there seemed no way out of the daily monotony—no hope anywhere!—but now—now, with all this unexpected good luck I could sing ‘Praise God from whom all blessings flow!’ with more fervour than any Salvationist!”

She went into the cosy bedroom which adjoined her salon to see if she looked neat and well-arranged enough in her dress to go down to tea,—there was a long mirror there, and in it she surveyed herself critically. Certainly that navy “model” gown suited her slim figure to perfection—“And,” she said to herself, “if people only looked at my hair and my too, too scraggy shape, they might almost take me for

‘young!’ But woe’s me!”—and she touched the corners of her eyes with the tips of her fingers—“here are the wicked crow’s-feet!—they won’t go!—and the ‘lines from nose to chin’ which the beauty specialists offer to eradicate and can’t,—the ugly ruts made by Time’s unkind plough and my own too sorrowful habit of thought,—they won’t go, either! However, here it doesn’t matter,—the Doctor wanted ‘a woman of mature years’—and he’s got her!” She smiled cheerfully at herself in the mirror which reflected a shape that was graceful in its outline if somewhat too thin—“distinctly willowy” as she said—and then she began thinking about clothes, like any other feminine creature. She was glad Sophy had made her buy two charming tea-gowns, and one very dainty evening party frock; and she was now anxious to give the “number” of the luggage she had left at the Salle des Bagages to Dr. Dimitrius, so that it might be sent for without delay. Meanwhile she looked at all the elegancies of her rooms, and noted the comfort and convenience with which everything was arranged. One novelty attracted and pleased her,—this was a small round dial, put up against the wall, and marked with the hours at which meals were served. A silver arrow, seemingly moved by interior clockwork, just now pointed to “Tea, five o’clock,” and while she was yet looking at it, a musical little bell rang very persistently behind the dial for about a minute, and then ceased.

“Tea-time, of course!” she said, and glancing at her watch she saw it was just five o’clock. “What a capital invention! One of these in each room saves all the ugly gong-beating and bell-ringing which is common in most houses; I had better go.”

She went at once, running down the broad staircase with light feet as buoyantly as a girl, and remembering her way easily to the room where she had breakfasted in the morning. Madame Dimitrius was there alone, knitting placidly, and looking the very picture of contentment. She smiled a welcome as Diana entered.

“So you have come back to us!” she said. “I am very glad! One lady who answered my son’s advertisement, went to see after her luggage in the same manner as you

were told to do—and—ran away!”

“Ran away!” echoed Diana. “What for?”

The old lady laughed.

“Oh, I think she got afraid at the last moment! Something my son said, or looked, scared her! But he was not surprised,—he has always given every applicant a chance to run away!”

“Not me!” said Diana, merrily. “For he made me sign an agreement, and gave me some of my salary in advance—he would hardly expect me to run away with his money?”

“Why not?” and Dimitrius himself entered the room. “Why not, Miss May? Many a woman and many a man has been known to make short work with an agreement,—what is it but ‘a scrap of paper’? And there are any number of Humans who would judge it ‘clever’ to run off with money confidingly entrusted to them!”

“You are cynical,” said Diana. “And I don’t think you mean what you say. You know very well that honour stands first with every right-thinking man or woman.”

“Right-thinking! Oh, yes!—I grant you that,”—and he drew a chair up to the tea-table where his mother had just seated herself. “But ‘right-thinking’ is a compound word big enough to cover a whole world of ethics and morals. If ‘right-thinking’ were the rule instead of the exception, we should have a real Civilisation instead of a Sham!”

Diana looked at him more critically and attentively than she had yet done. His personality was undeniably attractive,—some people would have considered him handsome. He had wonderful eyes,—they were his most striking feature—dark, deep, and sparkling with a curiously brilliant intensity. He had spoken of his Russian nationality, but there was nothing of the Kalmuck about him,—much more of the picturesque Jew or Arab. An indefinable grace distinguished his movements, unlike the ordinary type of lumbersome man, who, without military or other training, never

seems to know what to do with his hands or his feet. He noticed Diana's intent study of him, and smiled—a charming smile, indulgent and kindly.

"I mystify you a little already!" he said. "Yes, I am sure I do!—but there are so many surprises in store for you that I think you had better not begin putting the pieces of the puzzle together till they are all out of the box! Never mind what I seem to you, or what I may turn out to be,—enjoy for the present the simple safety of the Commonplace; there's nothing so balancing to the mind as a quiet contemplation of the tea-table! By the way, did you arrange about your luggage as I told you?"

Diana nodded a cheerful assent.

"Here's the number," she said. "And if you are going to send for it, would you do so quite soon? I want to change my dress for dinner."

Dimitrius laughed as he took the number from her hand.

"Of course you do!" he said. "Even 'a woman of mature years' is never above looking her best! Armed with this precious slip of paper, I will send for your belongings at once——"

"It's only a portmanteau," put in Diana, meekly. "Not a Saratoga trunk."

He gave her an amused look.

"Didn't you bring any Paris 'confections'?"

"I didn't wait in Paris," she replied. "I came straight on."

"A long journey!" said Madame Dimitrius.

"Yes. But I was anxious to get here as soon as I could."

"In haste to rush upon destiny!" observed Dimitrius, rising from the tea-table. "Well! Perhaps it is better than waiting for destiny to rush upon you! I will send for your luggage—it will be here in half an hour. Meanwhile, when you have quite finished your tea, will you join me in the laboratory?"

He left the room. Madame Dimitrius laid down her knitting needles and looked

wistfully at Diana.

“I hope you will not be afraid of my son,” she said, “or offended at anything he may say. His brain is always working—always seeking to penetrate some new mystery,—and sometimes—from sheer physical fatigue—he may seem brusque,—but his nature is noble——”

She paused, with a slight trembling of the lip and sudden moisture in her kind blue eyes.

Impulsively, Diana took her thin delicate old hand and kissed it.

“Please don’t worry!” she said. “I am not easily offended, and I certainly shall not be afraid! I like your son very much, and I think we shall get on splendidly together—I do, indeed! I’m simply burning with impatience to be at work for him! Be quite satisfied that I shall do my best! I’m off to the laboratory now.”

She went with a swift, eager step, and on reaching the outer hall was unexpectedly confronted by the dumb negro who had at first admitted her to the Château. He made her a sign to follow him, and she obeyed. Down a long, winding, rather dark passage they went till their further progress was stopped by a huge door made of some iridescent metal which glowed as with interior fire. It was so enormously thick, and wide and lofty, and clamped with such weighty bars and mysteriously designed fastenings, that it might have been the door imagined by Dante when he wrote: “All hope abandon, ye who enter here.” Diana felt her heart beating a little more quickly, but she kept a good grip on her nerves, and looked questioningly at her guide. His dark face gave no sign in response; he merely laid one hand on the centre panel of the door with a light pressure.

“Come in!” said the voice of Dimitrius. “Don’t hesitate!”

At that moment the whole door lifted itself as it were from a deep socket in the ground and swung upwards like the portcullis of an ancient bridge, only without any noise, disclosing a vast circular space covered in by a dome of glass, or some

substance clearer than glass, through which the afternoon glory of the September sunshine blazed with an almost blinding intensity. Immediately under the dome, and in the exact centre of the circular floor, was a wonderful looking piece of mechanism, a great wheel which swept round and round incessantly and rapidly, casting from its rim millions and millions of sparks of light or fire.

"Come in!" again called Dimitrius. "Why do you stand waiting there?"

Diana looked back for a second,—the great metal door had closed behind her,—the negro attendant had disappeared,—she was shut within this great weird chamber with Dimitrius and that whirling Wheel! A sudden giddiness overcame her—she stretched out her hands blindly for support—they were instantly caught in a firm, kind grasp.

"Keep steady! That's right!" This, as she rallied her forces and tried to look up. "It's not easy to watch any sort of Spherical Motion without wanting to go with it among 'the dancing stars!' There! Better?"

"Indeed, yes! I'm so sorry and ashamed!" she said. "Such a stupid weakness! But I have never seen anything like it——"

"No, I'm sure you have not!" And Dimitrius released her hands and stood beside her. "To give you greater relief, I would stop the Wheel if I could—but I cannot!"

"You cannot?"

"No. Not till the daylight goes. Then it will gradually cease revolving of itself. It is only a very inadequate man-made exposition of one of the Divine mysteries of creation,—the force of Light which generates Motion, and from Motion, Life. Moses touched the central pivot of truth in his Book of Genesis when he wrote: 'The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.... And God said, Let there be Light. And there was Light.' From that 'Light,' the effulgence of God's own Actual Presence and Intelligence, came the Movement which dispelled 'darkness.' Movement, once begun, shaped all that which before

was ‘without form’ and filled all that had been ‘void.’ Light is the positive exhalation and pulsation of the Divine Existence—the Active Personality of an Eternal God;—Light, which enters the soul and builds the body of every living organism,—therefore Light is Life.”

CHAPTER IX

Diana listened to the quiet, emphatic tones of his voice in fascinated attention.

“Light is Life,” he repeated, slowly. “Light—and the twin portion of Light,—Fire. The Rosicrucians have come nearer than any other religious sect in the world to the comprehension of things divine. Darkness is Chaos,—not death, for there is no death—but confusion, bewilderment and blindness which gropes for a glory instinctively felt but unseen. In these latter days, science has discovered the beginning of the wonders of Light,—they have always existed, but we have not found them, ‘loving darkness rather than light.’ I say the ‘beginning of wonders,’ for with all our advancement we have only become dimly conscious of the first vibration of the Creator’s living presence. Light!—which is ‘God walking in His garden,’—which is colour, sound, heat, movement—all the Divine Power in eternal radiation and luminance!—this is Life;—and in this we live,—in this we may live, and renew our lives,—ay, and in this we may retain youth beyond age! If we only have courage!—courage and the will to learn!”

His brilliant dark eyes turned upon her with a searching steadfastness, and her heart beat quickly, for there was something in his look which suggested that it was from her he expected “courage and the will to learn.” But she made no comment. Suddenly, and with an abrupt movement, he pulled with both hands at a lever apparently made of steel,—like one of the handles in a signal-box,—and with his action the level floor beneath the great revolving wheel yawned asunder, showing a round pool of water, black as ink and seemingly very deep. Diana recoiled from it, startled. Dimitrius smiled.

“Suppose I asked you to jump in?” he said.

She thought a moment.

“Well,—I should want to take off my dress first,” she answered. “It’s a new one.”

He laughed.

“And then?”

“Then?—Why, then I shouldn’t mind!” she said. “I can swim.”

“You would not be afraid?”

She met his eyes bravely.

“No—I should not be afraid!”

“Upon my word, I believe you! You’re a plucky woman! But then you’ve nothing to lose by your daring, having lost all—so you told me. What do you mean by having lost all?”

“I mean just what I say,” she replied quietly. “Father, mother, home, lover, youth, beauty and hope! Isn’t that enough to lose?”

And, as she spoke, she gazed almost unseeingly at the wonderful Wheel as it whirled round and round, glittering with a thousand colours which were reflected in the dark mirror of the water below it. The sun was sinking, and the light through the over-arching glass dome was softer, and with each minute became more subdued,—and she noted with keen interest that the revolution of the wheel was less rapid and dizzying to the eye.

“Enough to lose—yes!” said Dimitrius. “But the loss is quite common. Most of us, as we get on in life, lose father and mother, home, and even lover!—but that we should lose youth, beauty and hope is quite our own affair! We ought to know better!” She looked at him in surprise.

“How should we know better?” she asked. “Age must come,—and with age the wrinkling and spoiling of all beautiful faces, to say nothing of the aches and pains

and ailments common to a general break-up of the body-cells. We cannot defy the law of Nature."

"That is precisely what we are always doing!" said Dimitrius. "And that is why we make such trouble for ourselves. We not only defy the law of Nature in a bodily sense by over-eating, over-drinking and over-breeding, but we ignore it altogether in a spiritual sense. We forget,—and wilfully forget, that the body is only the outward manifestation of a Soul-creature, not the Soul-creature itself. So we starve the Light and feed the Shadow, and then foolishly wonder that, with the perishing Light, the Shadow is absorbed in darkness."

He pulled at the steel lever again, and the mysterious pool of water became swiftly and noiselessly covered as part of the apparently solid ground.

"One more thing before we go," he resumed, and, taking a key from his pocket, he unlocked a tiny door no bigger than the door of a child's doll house. "Come and see!"

Diana obeyed, and bending down to peer into the small aperture disclosed, saw therein a tube or pipe no thicker than a straw, from which fell slowly drop by drop a glittering liquid into a hollow globe of crystal. So brilliant and fiery was the colour of this fluid, that it might have been an essence of the very sunlight. She looked at Dimitrius in silent inquiry. He said nothing—and presently she ventured to ask in a half whisper:

"What is it?"

His expression, as he turned and faced her, was so rapt and transfigured as to be quite extraordinary.

"It is life,—or it is death!" he answered. "It is my Great Experiment of which you will be the practical test! Ah, now you look amazed indeed!—your eyes are almost young in wonder!—and yet I see no fear! That is well! Now think and understand! All this mechanism,—which is far more complex than you can imagine,—this dome

of crystal above us,—this revolving wheel moved by Light alone,—the deep water beneath us through which the condensed and vibrating Light rushes with electric speed,—these million whirling atoms of fire,—all this, I say, is merely—remember!—merely to produce these miniature drops, smaller by many degrees than a drop of dew, and so slowly are they distilled, that it has taken me ten years to draw from these restless and opposing elements a sufficient quantity for my great purpose. Ten years!—and after all, who knows? All my thought and labour may be wasted!—I may have taken the wrong road! The fiery sword turns every way, and even now I may fail!"

His face darkened,—the hope and radiance died out of it and left it grey and drawn—almost old. Diana laid her hand on his arm with a soft, consoling touch.

"Why should you fail?" she asked, gently. "You yourself know the object of your quest and the problem you seek to solve,—and I am sure you have missed no point that could avail to lead you in the right direction. And if, as I now imagine, you need a human life to risk itself in the ultimate triumph of your work, you have mine entirely at your service. As I have told you several times already, I am not afraid!"

He took the hand that lay upon his arm and kissed it with grave courtesy.

"I thank you!" he said. "I feel that you are perfectly sincere—and honesty always breeds courage. Understand, my mother has never seen this workshop of mine—she would be terrified. The dome was built for me by my French architect, ostensibly for astronomical purposes—the rest of the mechanism, bit by bit, was sent to me from different parts of the world and I put it up myself assisted only by Vasho, my negro servant, who is dumb. So my secret is, as far as possible, well kept."

"I shall not betray it," said Diana, simply.

He smiled.

"I know you will not," he answered.

With almost a miser's care he locked the tiny door which concealed the mystery of

the fiery-golden liquid dropping so slowly, almost reluctantly, into its crystal receptacle. The sun had sunk below the horizon, and shadows began to creep over the clearness of the dome above them, while the great Wheel turned at a slower pace—and ever more slowly as the light grew dim.

"We will go now," he said. "One or two ordinary people are coming to dine—and your luggage will have arrived. I want you to live happily here, and healthfully—your health is a most important consideration with me. You look thin and delicate——"

"I am thin—to positive scragginess," interrupted Diana, "but I am not delicate."

"Well, that may be; but you must keep strong. You will need all your strength in the days to come."

They were at the closed door of the laboratory, which by some unseen contrivance, evidently controlled by the pressure of the hand against a particular panel, swung upwards in the same way as it had done before, and when they passed out, slid downwards again behind them. They were in the corridor now, dimly lit by one electric lamp.

"You are not intimidated by anything I have shown you?" said Dimitrius, then. "After all, you are a woman and entitled to 'nerves!'"

"Quite so,—nerves properly organised and well under control," answered Diana, quietly. "I am full of wonder at what I have seen, but I am not intimidated."

"Good!" And a sudden smile lit up his face, giving it a wonderful charm. "Now run away and dress for dinner! And don't puzzle yourself by thinking about anything for the present. If you must think, wait till you are alone with night and the stars!"

He left her, and she went upstairs at once to her own rooms. Here repose and beauty were expressed in all her surroundings and she looked about her with a sigh of comfort and appreciation. Some careful hand had set vases of exquisitely arranged flowers here and there,—and the scent of roses, carnations and autumn violets made

the already sweet air sweeter. She found her modest luggage in her bedroom, and set to work unpacking and arranging her clothes.

"He's quite right,—I mustn't think!" she said to herself. "It would never do! That wheel grinding out golden fire!—that mysterious pool of water in which one might easily be drowned and never heard of any more!—and those precious drops, locked up in a tiny hole!—what can all these things mean? There!—I'm thinking and I mustn't think! But—is he mad, I wonder? Surely not! No madman ever put up such a piece of mechanism as that Wheel! I'm thinking again!—I mustn't think!—I mustn't think!"

She soon had all her garments unpacked, shaken out, and arranged in their different places, and, after some cogitation, decided to wear for the evening one of the Parisian "rest" or "tea" gowns her friend Sophy Lansing had chosen for her,—a marvellous admixture of palest rose and lilac hues, with a touch or two of pearl glimmerings among lace like moonlight on foam. She took some pains to dress her pretty hair becomingly, twisting it up high on her small, well-shaped head, and when her attire was complete she surveyed herself in the long mirror with somewhat less dissatisfaction than she was accustomed to do.

"Not so bad!" she inwardly commented, approving the picturesque fall and flow of the rose and lilac silk and chiffon which clung softly round her slim figure. "You are not entirely repulsive yet, Diana!—not yet! But you will be!—never fear! Just wait a little!—wait till your cheeks sink in a couple of bony hollows and your throat looks like the just-wrung neck of a scrawny fowl!" Here she laughed, with a quaint amusement at the unpleasant picture she was making of herself in the future. "Yes, my dear! Not all the clouds of rosy chiffon in the world will hide your blemishes then!—and your hair!—oh, your hair will be a sort of grizzled ginger and you'll have to hide it! So you'd better enjoy this little interval—it won't last long!" Suddenly at this point in her soliloquy some words uttered by Dimitrius rang back

on her memory: “That we should lose youth, beauty and hope is quite our own affair. We ought to know better.” She repeated them slowly once or twice. “Strange!—a very strange thing to say!” she mused. “I wonder what he meant by it? I’m sure if it had been my ‘own affair’ to keep youth, beauty and hope, I would never have lost them! Oddly enough I seem to have got back a little scrap of one of the losses—hope! But I’m thinking again—I mustn’t think!”

She curtsied playfully to her own reflection in the mirror, and seeing by the warning “time dial” for meals that it was nearly the dinner hour, she descended to the drawing-room. Three or four people were assembled there, talking to Madame Dimitrius, who introduced Diana as “Miss May, an English friend of ours who is staying with us for the winter”—an announcement which Diana herself tacitly accepted as being no doubt what Dr. Dimitrius wished. The persons to whom she was thus presented were the Baroness Rousillon, a handsome Frenchwoman of possibly fifty-six or sixty,—her husband, the Baron, a stout, cheerful personage with a somewhat aggravating air of perpetual bonhomie,—Professor Chauvet, a very thin little old gentleman with an aquiline nose and drooping eyelids from which small, sparkling dark eyes gleamed out occasionally like needle-points, and a certain Marchese Luigi Farnese, a rather sinister-looking dark young man, with a curiously watchful expression, as of one placed on guard over some hidden secret treasure. They were all exceedingly amiable, and asked Diana the usual polite questions,—whether she had had a pleasant journey from England?—was the Channel rough?—was the weather fine?—was she a good sailor?—and so on, all of which she answered pleasantly in that sweet and musical voice which always attracted and charmed her hearers.

“And you come from England!” said Professor Chauvet, blinking at her through his eyelids. “Ah! it is a strange place!”

Diana smiled, but said nothing.

“It is a strange place!” reiterated the Professor, with more emphasis. “It is a place of violent contrasts without any intermediate tones. Stupidity and good sense, moral cowardice and physical courage, petty grudging and large generosity, jostle each other in couples all through English society, yet after, and with these drawbacks, it is very attractive!”

“I’m so glad you like it,” said Diana, cheerfully. “I expect the same faults can be found in all countries and with all nations. We English are not the worst people in the world!”

“By no means!” conceded the Professor, inclining his head courteously. “You might almost claim to be the best—if it were not for France,—and Italy,—and Russia!”

The Baroness Rousillon smiled.

“How clever of you, Professor!” she said. “You are careful to include all nationalities here present in your implied compliment, and so you avoid argument!”

“Madame, I never argue with a lady!” he replied. “First, because it is bad manners, and second, because it is always useless!”

They all laughed, with the gentle tolerance of persons who know an old saying by heart. Just then Dr. Dimitrius entered and severally greeted his guests. Despite her efforts to seem otherwise entertained, Diana found herself watching his every movement and trying to hear every word he said. Only very few men look well in evening dress, and he was one of those few. A singular distinction marked his bearing and manner; in any assemblage of notable people he would have been assuredly selected as one of the most attractive and remarkable. Once he caught her eyes steadfastly regarding him, and smiled encouragingly. Whereat she coloured deeply and felt ashamed of her close observation of him. He took the Baroness Rousillon in to dinner, the Baron following with Madame Dimitrius, and Diana was left with a choice between two men as her escort. She looked in smiling inquiry at both. Professor Chauvet settled the point.

"Marchese, you had better take Miss May," he said, addressing the dark Italian. "I never allow myself to go in to dinner with any woman—it's my habit always to go alone."

"How social and independent of you!" said Diana, gaily, accepting the Marchese's instantly proffered arm. "You like to be original?—or is it only to attract attention to yourself?"

The Professor opened his eyes to their fullest extent under their half-shut lids. Here was an Englishwoman daring to quiz him!—or, as the English themselves would say, "chaff" him! He coughed, glared, and tried to look dignified, but failed,—and was fain to trot, or rather shuffle, in to the dining-room somewhat meekly at the trailing end of Diana's rose and lilac chiffon train. When they were all seated at table, he looked at her with what was, for him, unusual curiosity, realising that she was not quite an "ordinary" sort of woman. He began to wonder about her, and where she came from,—it was all very well to say "from England"—but up to now, all conversation had been carried on in French, and her French had no trace whatever of the British accent. She sat opposite to him, and he had good opportunity to observe her attentively, though furtively. She was talking with much animation to the Marchese Farnese,—her voice had the most enchanting modulation of tone,—and, straining his ears to hear what she was saying, he found she was speaking Italian. At this he was fairly nonplussed and somewhat annoyed—he did not speak Italian himself. All his theories respecting the British female were upset. No British female—he said this inwardly—no single one of the species in his knowledge, talked the French of France, or the Italian of Tuscany. He watched her with an almost grudging interest. She was not young,—she was not old.

"Some man has had the making or the marring of her!" he thought, crossly. "No woman ever turned herself out with such aplomb and savoir faire!"

Meanwhile Diana was enjoying her dinner. She was cleverly "drawing out" her

partner at table, young Farnese, who proved to be passionately keen on all scientific research, and particularly so on the mysterious doings of Féodor Dimitrius. Happy to find himself next to a woman who spoke his native tongue with charm and fluency, he “let himself go” freely.

“I suppose you have known Dr. Dimitrius for some time?” he asked.

Diana thought for a second,—then replied promptly:

“Oh, yes!”

“He’s a wonderful man!” said Farnese. “Wonderful! I have myself witnessed his cures of cases given up by all other doctors as hopeless. I have asked him to accept me as a student under him, but he will not. He has some mystery which he will allow no one but himself to penetrate.”

“Really!” and Diana lifted her eyebrows in an arch of surprise. “He has never given me that impression.”

“Ah, no!” and Farnese smiled rather darkly. “He would not appear in that light to one of your sex. He does not care for women. His own mother is not really aware of the nature of his studies or the object of his work. Nobody has his confidence. As you are a friend of his you must know this quite well?”

“Oh, yes!—yes, of course!” murmured Diana, absently. “But nobody expects a very clever man to explain himself to his friends—or to the public. He must always do his work more or less alone.”

“I agree!” said the Marchese. “And this is why I cannot understand the action of Dimitrius in advertising for an assistant——”

“Oh, has he done so?” inquired Diana, indifferently.

“Yes,—for the last couple of months he has put a most eccentric advertisement in many of the journals, seeking the services of an elderly woman as assistant or secretary—I don’t know which. It’s some odd new notion of his, and, I venture to

think, rather a mistaken one—for if he will not trust a man student, how much less can he rely on an old woman!"

"Eccellenza, you are talking to a woman now," said Diana, calmly. "But never mind! Go on—and don't apologise!"

Farnese's dark olive skin flushed red.

"But I must!" he stammered, awkwardly. "I ask a thousand pardons!"

She glanced at him sideways with a laughing look.

"You are forgiven!" she said. "Women are quite hardened to the ironies and satires of your sex upon us,—and if we have any cleverness at all we are more amused by them than offended. For we know you cannot do without us! But certainly it is very odd that Dr. Dimitrius should advertise for an old woman! I never heard anything quite so funny!"

"He does not, I think, advertise for an actually old woman," said Farnese, relieved to find that she had taken his clumsy remark so lightly. "The advertisement when I saw it mentioned a woman of mature years."

"Oh, well, that's a polite way of saying an old woman, isn't it?" smiled Diana. "And—do tell me!—has he got her?"

"Why no!—not yet. Probably he will not get her at all. Even let us suppose a woman offered herself who admitted that she was 'of mature years,' that very fact would be sufficient proof of her incapacity."

"Indeed!" and Diana lifted her eyebrows again. "Why?"

The Marchese smiled a superior smile.

"Perhaps I had better not explain!" he said. "But for a woman to arrive at 'mature years' without any interests in life except to offer her probably untrained services to a man she knows nothing of except through the medium of an advertisement is plain evidence that any such woman must be a fool!"

Diana laughed merrily—and her laughter was the prettiest ripple of music.

“Oh, yes!—of course! I see your meaning!” she said. “You are quite right! But after all perhaps the elderly female is only wanted to add up accounts, or write down measurements or something of that kind—just ordinary routine work. Some lonely old spinster with no claims upon her might be glad of such a chance——”

“Are you discussing my advertisement?” interrupted Dimitrius suddenly, sending a glance and smile at Diana from the head of the table. “I have withdrawn it.”

“Have you really?” said the Marchese. “That is not to say you are suited?”

“Suited? Oh, no! I shall never be suited! It was a foolish quest,—and I ought to have known better!” His dark eyes sparkled mirthfully. “You see I had rather forgotten the fact that no woman cares to admit she is ‘of mature years,’—I had also forgotten the well-known male formula that ‘no woman can be trusted.’ However, I have only lost a few hundred francs in my advertising—so I have nothing to regret except my own folly.”

“Had you many applications?” inquired Professor Chauvet.

Dimitrius laughed.

“Only one!” he answered, gaily. “And she was a poor lone lady who had lost all she thought worth living for. Of course she was—impossible!”

“Naturally!” and the Professor nodded sagaciously—“She would be!”

“What was she like?” asked Diana, with an amused look.

“Like no woman I have ever seen!” replied Dimitrius, smiling quizzically at her. “Mature, and fully ripened in her opinions,—fairly obstinate, and difficult to get rid of.”

“I congratulate you on having succeeded!” said Farnese.

“Succeeded? In what way?”

“In having got rid of her!”

“Oh, yes! But—I don’t think she wanted to go!”

“No woman ever wants to go if there’s a good-looking bachelor with whom she has any chance to stay!” said the Baron Rousillon, expanding his shirt front and smiling largely all round the table. “The ‘poor lone lady’ must have taken your rejection of her services rather badly.”

“That’s the way most men would look at it,” replied Dimitrius. “But, my dear Baron, I’m afraid we are rather narrow and primitive in our ideas of the fair sex—not to say conceited. It is quite our own notion that all women need us or find us desirable. Some women would much rather not be bored with us at all. One of the prettiest women I ever knew remained unmarried because, as she frankly said, she did not wish to be a housekeeper to any man or be bored by his perpetual company. There’s something in it, you know! Every man has his own particular ‘groove’ in which he elects to run—and in his ‘groove’ he’s apt to become monotonous and tiresome. That is why, when I advertised, I asked for a woman ‘of mature years,’—someone who had ‘settled down,’ and who would not find it wearisome to trot tamely alongside of my special ‘groove,’ but of course it was very absurd on my part to expect to find a woman of that sort who was at the same time well-educated and clever.”

“You should marry, my dear Dimitrius!—you should marry!” said the Baroness Rousillon, with a brilliant flash of her fine eyes and an encouraging smile.

“Never, my dear Baroness!—never!” he replied, with emphasis. “I am capable of many things, but not of that most arrant stupidity! Were I to marry, my work would be ruined—I should become immersed in the domesticities of the kitchen and the nursery, living my life at no higher grade than the life of the farmyard or rabbit-warren. In my opinion, marriage is a mistake,—but we must not argue such a point in the presence of a happily married couple like yourself and the Baron. Look at our excellent friend, Chauvet! He has never married.”

"Thank God!" ejaculated the Professor, devoutly,—while everybody laughed. "Ah, you may laugh! But it is I who laugh last! When I see the unfortunate husband going out for a slow walk with his wife and three or four screaming, jumping children, who behave like savages, not knowing what they want or where they wish to go, I bless my happy fate that I can do my ten miles a day alone, revelling in the beauty of the mountains and lakes, and enjoying my own thoughts in peace. Like Amriel, I have not married because I am afraid of disillusion!"

"But have you thought of the possible woman in the case?" asked Diana, sweetly and suddenly. "Might she not also suffer from 'disillusion' if you were her husband?"

Laughter again rang round the table,—the Professor rose, glass of wine in hand, and made Diana a solemn bow.

"Madame, I stand reproved!" he said. "And I drink to your health and to England, your native country! And in reply to your question, I am honest enough to say that I think any woman who had been so unfortunate as to marry me, would have put herself out of her misery a month after the wedding!"

Renewed merriment rewarded this amende honorable on the part of Chauvet, who sat down well pleased with himself—and well pleased, too, with Diana, whom he considered quick-witted and clever, and whose smile when he had made his little speech had quite won him over.

Madame Dimitrius, chiefly intent on the hospitable cares of the table, had listened to all the conversation with an old lady's placid enjoyment, only putting in a word now and then, and smiling with affectionate encouragement at Diana, and dessert being presently served, and cigars and cigarettes handed round by the negro, Vasho, who was the sole attendant, she gave the signal for the ladies to retire.

"You do not smoke?" said the Marchese Farnese, as Diana moved from her place.

"No, indeed!"

"You dislike it?"

"For women,—yes."

"Then you are old-fashioned!" he commented, playfully.

"Yes. And I am very glad of it!" she answered, quietly, and followed Madame Dimitrius and the Baroness Rousillon out of the room. As she passed Dimitrius, who held open the door for their exit, he said a few low-toned words in Russian which owing to her own study of the language she understood. They were:

"Excellent! You have kept your own counsel and mine, most admirably! I thank you with all my heart!"

CHAPTER X

That first evening in the Château Fragonard taught Diana exactly what was expected of her. It was evident that both Dimitrius and his mother chose to assume that she was a friend of theirs, staying with them on a visit, and she realised that she was not supposed to offer any other explanation of her presence. The famous advertisement had been "withdrawn," and the Doctor had plainly announced that he was "not suited," and that he had resigned all further quest of the person he had sought. That he had some good reason for disguising the real facts of the case Diana felt sure, and she was quite satisfied to fall in with his method of action. The more so, when she found herself an object of interest and curiosity to the Baroness Rousillon, who spared no effort to "draw her out" and gain some information as to her English home, her surroundings and ordinary associations. The Baroness had a clever and graceful way of cross-examining strangers through an assumption of friendliness, but Diana was equally clever and graceful in the art of "fence" and was not to be "drawn." When the men left the dinner-table and came into the drawing-room she was placed as it were between two fires,—Professor Chauvet and the Marchese Farnese, both of whom were undisguisedly inquisitive, Farnese especially—and

Diana was not slow to discover that his chief aim in conversing with her was to find out something,—anything—which could throw a light on the exact nature of the work in which Dimitrius was engaged. Perceiving this, she played with him like a shuttlecock, tossing him away from his main point whenever he got near it, much to his scarcely concealed irritation. Every now and again she caught a steel-like flash in the dark eyes of Dimitrius, who, though engaged in casual talk with the Baron and Baroness Rousillon, glanced at her occasionally in fullest comprehension and approval,—and somehow it became borne in upon her mind that if Farnese only knew the way to the scientist's laboratory, he would have very little scruple about breaking into any part of it with the hope of solving its hidden problem.

"Why do you imagine there is any mystery about the Doctor's works?" she asked him. "I know of none!"

"He would never let any woman know," replied Farnese, with conviction. "But she might find out for herself if she were clever! There is a mystery without doubt. For instance, what is that great dome of glass which catches the sunlight on its roof and glitters in the distance, when I look towards the Château from my sailing boat on the lake——?"

"Oh, you have a sailing boat on the lake?" exclaimed Diana, clasping her hands in well-affected ecstasy. "How enchanting! Like Lord Byron, when he lived at the Villa Diodati!"

"Ah!" put in Professor Chauvet. "So you know your Byron! Then you are not one of the moderns?"

Diana smiled.

"No. I do not prefer Kipling to the author of 'Childe Harold.'"

"Then you are lost—irretrievably lost!" said the Professor. "In England, at any rate. In England, if you are a true lover of literature, you must sneer at Byron because it's academic to do so—Oxford and Cambridge have taken to decrying genius and

worshipping mediocrity. Byron is the only English poet known and honoured in other countries than England—your modern verse writers are not understood in France, Italy or Russia. Half a dozen of Byron's stanzas would set up all the British latter-day rhymers with ideas,—only, of course, they would never admit it. I'm glad I've met an Englishwoman who has sense enough to appreciate Byron."

"Thank you!" said Diana in a small, meek voice. "You are most kind!"

Here Farnese rushed in again upon his argument.

"That glass dome——"

Diana smothered a tiny yawn.

"Oh, that's an astronomical place!" she said, indifferently. "You know the kind of thing! Telescopes, globes, mathematical instruments—all those sort of objects."

The Marchese looked surprised,—then incredulous.

"An astronomical place?" he repeated. "Are you sure? Have you seen it?"

"Why, yes, of course!" and she laughed. "Haven't you?"

"Never! He allows no visitors inside it."

"Ah, I expect you're too inquisitive!" and she looked at him with a bland and compassionate tolerance. "You see, being a woman, I don't care about difficult studies, such as astronomy. Women are not supposed to understand the sciences,—they never can grasp anything in the way of mathematics, can they?"

Farnese hesitated.

Chauvet interposed quickly.

"They can,—but to my mind they cease to be women when they do. They become indifferent to the softer emotions——"

"What emotions?" queried Diana, unfurling a little fan and waving it slowly to and fro.

“The emotions of love,—of tenderness,—of passion——”

“Ah, yes! You mean the emotions of love, of tenderness, of passion—for what? For man? Well, of course!—the most surface knowledge of mathematics would soon put an end to that sort of thing!”

“Dear English madame, you are pleased to be severe!” said Chauvet. “Yet the soft emotions are surely ‘woman’s distinguishing charm’?”

She laughed.

“Men like to say so,” she replied. “Because it flatters their vanity to rouse these ‘soft emotions’ and translate them into love for themselves. But have you had any experience, Professor? If any woman had displayed ‘soft emotions’ towards you, would you not have been disposed to nip them in the bud?”

“Most likely! I am not an object for sentimental consideration,—I never was. I should have greatly regretted it if one of your charming sex had wasted her time or herself on me.”

Just then Madame Dimitrius spoke.

“Dear Miss May, will you play us something?”

She readily acquiesced, and seating herself at the grand piano, which was open, soon scored a triumph. Her playing was exquisitely finished, and as her fingers glided over the keys, the consciousness that she was discoursing music to at least one or two persons who understood and appreciated it gave her increased tenderness of touch and beauty of tone. The dreary feeling of utter hopelessness which had pervaded her, body and soul, when playing to her father and mother, “Ma” asleep on the sofa, and “Pa” hidden behind a newspaper, neither of them knowing or caring what composer’s work she performed, was changed to a warm, happy sense of the power to give pleasure, and the ability to succeed—and when she had finished a delicately wild little sonata of Grieg’s, pressing its soft, half-sobbing final chord as daintily and hushfully as she would have folded a child’s hands in sleep, a murmur

of real rapture and surprised admiration came from all her hearers.

“But you are an artiste!” exclaimed the Baroness Rousillon. “You are a professional virtuoso, surely?”

“Spare me such an accusation!” laughed Diana. “I don’t think I could play to an audience for money,—it would seem like selling my soul.”

“Ah, there I can’t follow you,” said Chauvet. “That’s much too high-flown and romantic for me. Why not sell anything if you can find buyers?”

His little eyes glittered ferret-like between his secretive eyelids, and Diana smiled, seeing that he spoke ironically.

“This is an age of selling,” he went on. “The devil might buy souls by the bushel if he wanted them!—(and if there were such a person!) And as for music!—why, it’s as good for sale and barter nowadays as a leg of mutton! The professional musician is as eager for gain as any other merchant in the general market,—and if the spirit of Sappho sang him a song from the Elysian fields, he’d sell it to a gramophone agency for the highest bid. And you talk about ‘selling your soul!’ dear Madame, with a thousand pardons for my brusquerie, you talk nonsense! How do you know you have a soul to sell?”

Before she could reply, Dimitrius interposed,—his face was shadowed by a stern gravity.

“No jesting with that subject, Professor!” he said. “You know my opinions. Sacred things are not suited for ordinary talk,—the issues are too grave,—the realities too absolute.”

Chauvet coughed a little cough of embarrassment, and took out a pair of spectacles from his pocket, polished them and put them back again for want of something else to do. The Marchese Farnese looked up,—his expression was eager and watchful—he was on the alert. But nothing came of his expectancy.

"Play to us again, Miss May," continued Dimitrius in gentler accents. "You need be under no doubt as to the existence of your soul when you can express it so harmoniously."

She coloured with pleasure, and turning again to the piano played the "Prélude" of Rachmaninoff with a verve and passion which surprised herself. She could not indeed explain why she, so lately conscious of little save the fact that she was a solitary spinster "in the way" of her would-be juvenile father, and with no one to care what became of her, now felt herself worthy of attention as a woman of talent and individuality, capable of asserting herself as such wherever she might be. The magnificent chords of the Russian composer's despairing protest against all insignificance and meanness, rolled out from under her skilled finger-tips with all the pleading of a last appeal,—and everyone in the room, even Dimitrius himself, sat, as it were, spellbound and touched by a certain awe. An irresistible outburst of applause greeted her as she carried the brilliant finale to its close, and she rose, trembling a little with the nervous and very novel excitement of finding her musical gifts appreciated. Professor Chauvet got up slowly from his chair and came towards her.

"After that, you may lead me where you like!" he said. "I am tame and humble! I shall never disagree with a woman who can so express the pulsations of a poet's brain,—for that is what Rachmaninoff has put in his music. Yes, chère Anglaise!—I never flatter—and you play superbly. May I call you chère Anglaise?"

"If it pleases you to do so!" she answered, smiling.

"It does please me—it pleases me very much"—he went on—"it is a sobriquet of originality and distinction. An Englishwoman of real talent is precious—therefore rare. And being rare, it follows that she is dear—even to me! Chère Anglaise, you are charming!—and if both you and I were younger I should risk a proposal!"

Everyone laughed,—no one more so than Diana.

"You must have had considerable training to be such a proficient on the piano?" inquired Farnese, with his look of almost aggressive curiosity.

"Indeed no!" she replied at once. "But I have had a good deal of time to myself one way and the other, and as I love music, I have always practised steadily."

"We must really have an 'afternoon' in Geneva," said the Baroness Rousillon then. "You must be heard, my dear Miss May! The Genevese are very intelligent—they ought to know what an acquisition they have to their musical society——"

"Oh, no!" interrupted Diana, anxiously—"Please! I could not play before many people——"

"No,—like everything which emanates from Spirit, music of the finest quality is for the few," said Dimitrius. "'Where two or three are gathered together there am I in the midst of them'—is the utterance of all god-like Presences. Only two or three can ever understand."

Diana thanked him mutely by a look, and conversation now became general. In a very short time the little party broke up, and Dimitrius accompanied his guests in turn to the door. The Rousillons took Farnese with them in their automobile,—Professor Chauvet, putting on a most unbecoming and very shabby great-coat, went on his way walking—he lived but half-a-mile or so further up the road.

"In a small cottage, or châlet,"—he explained—"A bachelor's hermitage where I shall be happy to see you, Miss May, if you ever care to come. I have nothing to show you but books, minerals and a few jewels—which perhaps you might like to look at. Strange jewels!—with histories and qualities and characteristics—is it not so, Dimitrius?"

Dimitrius nodded.

"They have their own mysteries, like everything else," he said.

Diana murmured her thanks for the invitation and bade him good-night,—then, as he went out of the room with his host, she turned to Madame Dimitrius and with a gentle, almost affectionate consideration, asked if she could do anything for her before going to bed.

"No, my dear!" answered the old lady, taking her hand and patting it caressingly. "It's kind of you to think about me—and if I want you I'll ask you to come and help an old woman to be more useful than she is! But wait a few minutes—I know Féodor wishes to speak to you."

"I have not displeased him, I hope, in any way?" Diana said, a little anxiously. "I felt so 'at home,' as it were, that I'm afraid I spoke a little too frankly as a stranger——"

"You spoke charmingly!" Madame assured her—"Brightly, and with perfect independence, which we admire. And need I say how much both my son and I appreciated your quickness of perception and tact?"

She laid a slight emphasis on the last word. Diana smiled and understood.

"People are very inquisitive," went on Madame. "And it is better to let them think you are a friend and guest of ours than the person for whom my son has been advertising. That advertisement of his caused a great deal of comment and curiosity,—and now that he has said he has withdrawn it and that he does not expect to be suited, the gossip will gradually die down. But if any idea had got about that you were the result of his search for an assistant, you would find yourself in an embarrassing position. You would be asked no end of questions, and our charming Baroness Rousillon would be one of the first to make mischief—but thanks to your admirable self-control she is silenced."

"Will anything silence her?" and Dimitrius, entering, stood for a moment looking at his mother and Diana with a smile. "I doubt it! But Miss May is not at all the kind of woman the Baroness would take as suitable for a scientific doctor's assistant,—fortunately. She is not old enough."

"Not old enough?" and Diana laughed. "Why, what age ought I to be?"

"Sixty at least!" and he laughed with her. "The Baroness is a great deal older than you are, but she still subjugates the fancy of some men. Her idea of a doctor's private secretary or assistant is a kind of Macbeth's witch, too severely schooled in the virtues of ugliness to wear rose-coloured chiffon!"

Diana flushed a little as he gave a meaning glance at her graceful draperies,—then he added:

"Come out for a moment in the loggia,—moonlight is often talked about and written about, but it seldom gives such an impression of itself as on an early autumn night in Switzerland. Come!"

She obeyed,—and as she followed him to the marble loggia where the fountains were still playing, an irresistible soft cry of rapture broke from her lips. The scene she looked upon was one of fairy-like enchantment,—the moonlight, pearly pure, was spread in long broad wings of white radiance over the lawns in front of the Château, and reaching out through the shadows of trees, touched into silver the misty, scarcely discernible peaks of snow-mountains far beyond. A deep silence reigned everywhere—that strange silence so frequently felt in the vicinity of mountains,—so that when the bell of the chiming clock set in the turret of the Château struck eleven, its sound was almost startling.

"This would be a night for a sail on the lake," said Dimitrius. "Some evening you must come."

She made no reply. Her soul was in her eyes—looking, looking wistfully at the beauty of the night, while all the old, unsatisfied hunger ached at her heart—the hunger for life at its best and brightest—for the things which were worth having and holding,—and absorbed in a sudden wave of thought she hardly remembered for the moment where she was.

"Millions of people look at this moon to-night without seeing it," said Dimitrius,

after a pause, during which he had watched her attentively. “Millions of people live in the world without knowing anything about it. They,—themselves,—are to them, the universe. Like insects, they grub for food and bodily satisfaction,—like insects, they die without having ever known any higher aim of existence. Yet, looking on such loveliness as this to-night, do you not feel that something more lasting, more real than the usual mode of life was and is intended for us? Does it not seem a flaw in the Creator’s plan that this creation should be invested with such beauty and perfection for human beings who do not even see it? Do we make the utmost of our capabilities?”

She turned her eyes away from the moonlit landscape and looked at him with rather a sad smile.

“I cannot tell—I do not know,” she answered. “I am not skilled in argument. But what almost seems to me to be the hardest thing in life is, that we have so little time to learn or to understand. As children and as very young people we are too brimful of animal spirits to think about anything,—then, when we arrive at ‘mature years’ we find we are ‘shelved’ by our fellow-men and women as old and unwanted. Women especially are sneered at for age, as if it were a crime to live beyond one’s teens.”

“Only the coarsest minds and tongues sneer at a woman’s age,” said Dimitrius. “They are the pigs of the common stye, and they must grunt. I see you have suffered from their grunting! That, of course, is because you have not put on the matrimonial yoke. You might get as old as the good Abraham’s wife, Sara, without a sneer, so long as you had become legitimately aged through waiting on the moods and caprices of a husband!” He laughed, half ironically,—then drawing nearer to her by a step, went on in a lower tone:

“What would you say if you could win back youth?—not only the youth of your best days, but a youth transfigured to a fairness and beauty far exceeding any that you

have ever known? What would you give, if with that youth you could secure an increased mental capacity for enjoying it?—an exquisite vitality?—a delight in life so keen that every beat of your heart should be one of health and joy?—and that you should hold life itself"—here he paused, and repeated the words slowly—"that you should hold life itself, I say, in a ceaseless series of vibrations as eternal as the making and re-making of universes?"

His dark eyes were fixed upon her face with an intensity of meaning, and a thrill ran through her, half of fear, half of wonderment.

"What would I say?—what would I give? You talk like another Mephistopheles to a female Faustus!" she said, forcing a laugh. "I would not give my soul, because I believe I have a soul, and that it is what God commands me to keep,—but I would give everything else!"

"Your soul is part of your life," said Dimitrius. "And you could not give that without giving your life as well. I speak of holding your life,—that is to say, keeping it. Understand me well! The soul is the eternal and indestructible pivot round which the mechanism of the brain revolves, as the earth revolves round the sun. The soul imparts all light, all heat, all creation and fruition to the brain, though it is but a speck of radiant energy, invisible to the human eye, even through the most powerful lens. It is the immortal embryo of endless existences, and in whatsoever way it instructs the brain, the brain should be in tune to respond. That the brain seldom responds truly, is the fault of the preponderating animalism of the human race. If you can follow me, still listen!"

She listened indeed,—every sense alert and braced with interest.

"All ideas, all sentiments, all virtues, all sins, are in the cells of the brain," he went on. "The soul plays on these cells with vibrating touches of light, just as you play on the notes of the piano, or as a typist fingers the keyboard of the machine. On the quality or characteristic of the soul depends the result. Youth is in the cells of the

brain. Should the cells become dry and withered, it is because the soul has ceased to charge them with its energy. But when this is the case, it is possible—I say it is possible!—for science to step in. The spark can be re-energised,—the cells can be re-charged."

Diana caught her breath. Was he mad?—or sane with a sanity that realises a miracle? She gazed at him as though plunging her eyes into a well of mystery.

He smiled strangely. "Poor lady of mature years!" he said. "You have heard me, have you not? Well, think upon what I have said! I am not mad, be assured!—I am temperate in reason and cool in blood. I am only a scientist, bent on defying that Angel at the gate of Eden with the flaming sword who 'keeps the way of the Tree of Life,' lest men should take and eat and live for ever! It would not do for men in the aggregate to live for ever, for most of them are little more than mites in a cheese,—but as the Prophet Esdras was told: 'This present world is made for the many, but the world to come for the few.' That 'world to come' does not mean a world after death—but the world of here and now—a world 'for the few' who know how to use it, and themselves!—a world where the same moonlight as this shines like a robe of woven pearl spread over all human ugliness and ignorance, leaving only God's beauty and wisdom! Look at it once more!—make a picture of it in your mind!—and then—good-night!"

She raised her eyes to the dense purple of the sky, and let them wander over the lovely gardens, drenched in silver glory—then extended her hand.

"Thank you for all you have told me," she said. "I shall remember it. Good-night!"

CHAPTER XI

The next day Diana entered upon her work,—and for a fortnight following she was kept fully employed. But nothing mysterious, nothing alarming or confusing to the mind was presented for her contemplation or co-operation. Not once was she called

upon to enter the laboratory where the strange wheel whirled at the bidding of the influence of light, going faster or slower, according to the ascension or declension of the sun; and not once did Dimitrius refer to the subject of his discourse with her on that first moonlight night of her arrival. Her knowledge of Latin and Greek stood her in good stead, for she was set to translate some musty rolls of vellum, on which were inscribed certain abstruse scientific propositions of a thousand years old,—problems propounded by the Assyrians, and afterwards copied by the Latins, who for the most part, had left out some of the original phraseology, thereby losing valuable hints and suggestions, which Dimitrius was studying to discover and replace. Diana was a careful, clever, and devotedly conscientious worker; nothing escaped her, and she shirked no pains to unravel the difficulties, which to less interested students, might have seemed insuperable. Much as she desired to know more of Dimitrius himself and his own special line of research, she held her peace and asked no questions, merely taking his instructions and faithfully doing exactly as she was told. She worked in the great library where he had at first received her, and where the curious steel instrument she had noticed on entering, swung to and fro continuously, striking off a pin's point of fire as it moved. Sometimes in the pauses of her close examination of the faded and difficult Latin script on which all her energies were bent, she would lift her eyes and look at this strange object as though it were a living companion in the room, and would almost mentally ask it to disclose its meaning; and one morning, impelled by a sudden fancy, she put her watch open on the table, and measured the interval between one spark of fire and the next. She at once found that the dots of flame were struck off with precision at every second. They were, in fact, seconds of time.

"So that, if one had leisure to watch the thing," she mused, "one would know that when sixty fire-flashes have flown into air, one minute has passed. And I wonder what becomes of these glittering particles?"

She knew well enough that they did not perish, but were only absorbed into another

elemental organism. She had observed, too, that the movement of the whole machine, delicately balanced on its crystal pedestal, was sharp and emphatic when the sun was at the meridian, and more subdued though not less precise in the afternoon. She had very little opportunity, however, to continue a long watching of this inexplicable and apparently meaningless contrivance after midday, as then her hours of work were considered over and she was free to do as she liked. Sometimes she remained in her own apartments, practising her music, or reading,—and more often than not she went for a drive out into the open country with Madame Dimitrius with the light victoria and pair, which was a gift from Dimitrius to his mother, who could not be persuaded to drive in a motor-car. It was a charming turn-out, recognised in the neighbourhood as “the Doctor’s carriage”—for though Geneva and its environs are well supplied with many professors of medicine and surgery, Dimitrius seemed at this period to have gained a reputation apart from the rest as “the” doctor, par excellence. Once Diana asked him whether he had a large practice? He laughed.

“None at all!” he replied. “I tell everybody that I have retired from the profession in order to devote all my time to scientific research—and this is true. But it does not stop people from sending for me at a critical moment when all other efforts to save a life have failed. And then of course I do my best.”

“And are you always successful?” she went on.

“Not always. How can I be? If I am sent for to rescue a man who has overfed and over-drunken himself from his youth onwards, and who, as a natural consequence, has not a single organ in his body free from disease, all my skill is of no avail—I cannot hinder him from toppling into the unconsciousness of the next embryo, where, it is to be hoped, he will lose his diseases with his fleshy particles. I can save a child’s life generally—and the lives of girls and women who have not been touched by man. The life-principle is very strong in these,—it has not been tampered

with."

He closed the conversation abruptly, and she perceived that he had no inclination to talk of his own healing power or ability.

After about a month or six weeks at the Château Fragonard, Diana began to feel very happy,—happier than she had ever been in her life. Though she sometimes thought of her parents, she knew perfectly that they were not people to grieve long about any calamity,—besides which, her "death" was not a calamity so far as they were concerned. They would call it such, for convention's sake and in deference to social and civil observances—but "Ma" would console herself with a paid "companion-housekeeper"—and if that companion-housekeeper chanced to be in the least good-looking or youthful, "Pa" would blossom out into such a juvenility of white and "fancy" waistcoats and general conduct as frequently distinguishes elderly gentlemen who are loth to lose their reputation for gallantry. And Diana wasted no time in what would have been foolish regret, had she felt it, for her complete and fortunate severance from "home" which was only home to her because her duty made her consider it so. A great affection had sprung up between her and Madame Dimitrius; the handsome old lady was a most lovable personality, simple, pious, unaffected, and full of a devotion for her son which was as touching as it was warm and deep. She had absolute confidence in him, and never worried him by any inquisitiveness concerning the labours which kept him nearly all day away from her, shut up in his laboratory, which he alone had the secret of opening or closing. Hers was the absolute reliance of "the perfect love which casteth out fear;" all that he did was right and must be right in her eyes,—and when she saw how whole-heartedly and eagerly Diana threw herself into the tedious and difficult work he had put before her to do, she showed towards that hitherto lonely and unloved woman a tenderness and consideration to which for years she had been unaccustomed. Very naturally Diana responded to this kindness with impulsive warmth and gratitude, and took pleasure in performing little services, such as a daughter might do, for the

sweet-natured and gentle lady whose friendship and sympathy she appreciated more and more each day. She loved to help her in little household duties,—to mend an occasional tiny hole in the fine old lace which Madame generally wore with her rich black silk gowns,—to see that her arm-chair and foot-stool were placed just as she liked them to be,—to wind the wool for her knitting, and to make her laugh with some quaint or witty story. Diana was an admirable raconteuse, and she had a wonderful memory,—moreover, her impressions of persons and things were tinged with the gaiety of a perceptive humour. Sometimes Dimitrius himself, returning from a walk or from a drive in his small open auto-car, would find the two sitting together by a cheerful log fire in the drawing-room, laughing and chatting like two children, Diana busy with her embroidery, her small, well-shaped, white hands moving swiftly and gracefully among the fine wools from which she worked her "Jacobean" designs, and his mother knitting comforts for the poor in preparation for the winter which was beginning to make itself felt in keen airs and gusts of snow. On one of these occasions he stood for some minutes on the threshold, looking at them as they sat, their backs turned towards him, so that they were not at once aware of his presence. Diana's head, crowned with its bright twists of hair, was for the moment the chief object of his close attention,—he noted its compact shape, and the line of the nape of the neck which carried it—a singularly strong and perfect line, if judged by classic methods. It denoted health and power, with something of pride,—and he studied it anatomically and physiologically with all the interest of a scholar. Suddenly she turned, and seeing him apparently waiting at the door, smiled a greeting.

"Do you want me?" she asked.

He advanced into the room.

"Ought I to want you?" he counter-queried. "These are not working hours! If you were a British workman such an idea as my wanting you 'out of time' would never

enter your head! As a British working woman, you should stipulate for the same privileges as a British working man."

He drew a chair to the fire, and as his mother looked at him with loving, welcoming eyes, he took her hand and kissed it.

"Winter is at hand," he continued, giving a stir with the poker to the blazing logs in the grate. "It is cold to-day—with the cold of the glaciers, and I hear that the snow blocks all the mountain passes. We are at the end of October—we must expect some bitter weather. But in Switzerland the cold is dry and bracing—it strengthens the nerves and muscles and improves the health. How do you stand a severe winter, Miss May?"

"I have never thought about it," she answered. "All seasons have beauty for me, and I have never suffered very much by either the cold or the heat. I think I have been more interested in other things."

He looked at her intently.

"What other things?"

She hesitated. A faint colour stole over her cheeks.

"Well,—I hardly know how to express it—things of life and death. I have always been rather a suppressed sort of creature—with all my aims and wishes pent up,—pressed into a bottle, as it were, and corked tight!" She laughed, and went on. "Perhaps if the cork were drawn there might be an explosion! But, wrongly or rightly, I have judged myself as an atom of significance made insignificant by circumstances and environment, and I have longed to make my 'significance,' however small, distinct and clear, even though it were only a pin's point of meaning. If I said this to ordinary people, they would probably exclaim 'How dull!' and laugh at me for such an idea——"

"Of course!—dull people would laugh," agreed Dimitrius. "People in the aggregate laugh at most things, except lack of money. That makes them cry—if not outwardly,

then inwardly. But I do not laugh,—for if you can forget heat and cold and rough weather in the dream of seeking to discover your own significance and meaning in a universe where truly nothing exists without its set place and purpose, you are a woman of originality as well as intelligence. But that much of you I have already discovered."

She glanced at him brightly.

"You are very kind!"

"Now do you mean that seriously or ironically?" he queried, with a slight smile. "I am not really 'very kind'—I consider myself very cruel to have kept you chained for more than a month to rolls of vellum inscribed with crabbed old Latin characters, illegible enough to bewilder the strongest eyes. But you have done exceedingly well,—and we have all three had time to know each other and to like each other, so that a harmony between us is established. Yes—you have done more than exceedingly well——"

"I am glad you are pleased," said Diana, simply, resting one hand on her embroidery frame and looking at him with somewhat tired, anxious eyes. "I was rather hoping to see you this evening, though it is, as you say, after working hours, for I wanted very much to tell you that the manuscript I am now deciphering seems to call for your own particular attention. I should prefer your reading it with me before I go further."

"You are very conscientious," he said, fixing his eyes keenly upon her—"Is she not, mother mine? She is afraid she will learn something important and necessary to my work before I have a chance to study it for myself. Loyal Miss Diana!"

Madame Dimitrius glanced wistfully from her son to Diana, and from Diana back to her son again.

"Yes, she is loyal, Féodor! You have found a treasure in her," she said—"I am sure of it. It seems a providence that she came to us."

"Is it not Shakespeare who says, 'There's a special providence in the fall of a

sparrow'?" he queried lightly. "How much more 'special' then is the coming of a Diana!"

It was the first time he had used her Christian name without any ceremonious prefix in her presence, and she was conscious of a thrill of pleasure, for which she instantly reproached herself. "I have no business to care what or how he calls me," she thought. "He's my employer,—nothing more."

"Diana," repeated Dimitrius, watching her narrowly from under his now half-shut eyelids. "Diana is a name fraught with beautiful associations—the divine huntress—the goddess of the moon! Diana, the fleet of foot—the lady of the silver bow! What poets' dreams, what delicate illusions, what lovely legends are clustered round the name!"

She looked at him, half amused, half indifferent.

"Yes,—it is a thousand pities I was ever given such a name," she said. "If I were a Martha, a Deborah or a Sarah, it would suit me much better. But Diana! It suggests a beautiful young woman——"

"You were young once!" he suggested, meaningly.

"Ah, yes, once!" and she sighed. "Once is a long time ago!"

"I never regret youth," said Madame Dimitrius. "My age has been much happier and more peaceful. I would not go back to my young days."

"That is because you have fulfilled your particular destiny," interposed her son,—"You fell in love with my father—what happy times they must have been when the first glamour of attraction drew you both to one another!—you married him,—and I am the result! Dearest mother, there was nothing more for you to do, with your devoted and gentle nature! You became the wife of a clever man,—he died, having fulfilled his destiny in giving you—may I say so?—a clever son,—myself! What more can any woman ask of ordinary nature?"

He laughed gaily, and putting his arm round his mother, fondled her as if she were a child.

“Yes, beloved!—you have done all your duty!” he went on. “But you have sacrificed your own identity—the thing that Miss Diana calls her ‘significance.’ You lost that willingly when you married—all women lose it when they marry:—and you have never quite found it again. But you will find it! The slow process of evolution will make of you a ‘fine spirit’ when the husk of material life is cast off for wider expansion.”

As he spoke, Diana looked at mother and son with the odd sense of being an outside spectator of two entirely unconnected identities,—the one overpowering and shadowing the other, but wholly unrelated and more or less opposed in temperament. Madame Dimitrius was distinguished by an air of soft and placid dignity, made sympathetic by a delicate touch of lassitude indicative of age and a desire for repose, while Féodor Dimitrius himself gave the impression of a strong energy restrained and held within bounds as a spirited charger is reined and held in by his rider, and, above all, of a man aware of his own possibilities and full of set resolve to fulfil them.

“Is that embroidery of a very pressing nature?” he suddenly said, then, with a smile. “Or do you think you could spare a few moments away from it?”

She at once put aside her frame and rose.

“Did I not ask you when you came in if you wanted me?” she queried. “Somehow I was quite sure you did! You know I am always ready to serve you if I can.”

He still had one arm round his mother,—but he raised his eyes and fixed them on Diana with an expression which was to her new and strange.

“I know you are!” he said, slowly. “And I shall need your service in a difficulty—very soon! But not just now. I have only a few things to say which I think should not be put off till to-morrow. We’ll go into the library and talk there.”

He bent down and kissed his mother's snowy and still luxuriant hair, adding for her benefit:

"We shall not be long, dearest of women! Keep warm and cosy by the fire, and you will not care for the 'significance' of yourself so long as you are loved! That is all some women ask for,—love."

"Is it not enough?" said Diana, conscious of her own "asking" in that direction.

"Enough? No!—not half or quarter enough! Not for some women or some men—they demand more than this (and they have a right to demand more) out of the infinite riches of the Universe, Love,—or what is generally accepted under that name, is a mere temporary physical attraction between two persons of opposite sex, which lessens with time as it is bound to lessen because of the higher claims made on the soul,—a painful thing to realise!—but we must not shiver away from truth like a child shivering away from its first dip in the sea, or be afraid of it. Lovers forget lovers, friends forget friends, husbands forget wives and vice versa,—the closest ties are constantly severed——"

"You are wrong, Féodor—we do not forget!" said Madame Dimitrius, with tender reproach in her accents. "I do not forget your father—he is dear to me as lover and husband still. And whether God shall please to send my soul to heaven or to hell, I could never forget my love for you!"

"Beloved, I know!—I feel all you say—but you are an exception to the majority—and we will not talk personalities! I cannot"—here he laughed and kissed her hand again—"I cannot have my theories upset by a petite Maman!"

He left the room then and Diana followed him. Once in the library he shut the door and locked it.

"Now you spoke of something in your translations that seemed to call for my attention," he said. "I am ready to hear what it is."

Diana went to the table desk where she habitually worked, and took up some pages

of manuscript, neatly fastened together in readable form.

“It is a curious subject,” she said. “In the Assyrian originals it seems to have been called ‘The problem of the Fourth, Sixth and Seventh, culminating in the Eighth.’ Whether the Latin rendering truly follows the ancient script, it is, of course, impossible to say,—but while deciphering the Latin, I came to the conclusion that the Fourth, Sixth and Seventh were named in the problem as ‘rays’ or ‘tones’ of light, and the proposed culmination of the Eighth——”

“Stop!” exclaimed Dimitrius, in a strained, eager voice. “Give me your papers!—let me see!”

She handed them to him at once, and he sat down to read. While he was thus occupied, her gaze constantly wandered to the small, scythe-like instrument mowing off the seconds in dots of flame as a mower sweeps off the heads of daisies in the grass. A curious crimson colour seemed to be diffused round the whole piece of mechanism,—an effect she had never noticed before, and then she remembered it was late in the afternoon and that the sun had set. The rosy light emanating from the instrument and deeply reflected in the crystal pedestal on which it was balanced, seemed like an after-glow from the sky,—but the actual grey twilight outside was too pronounced and cold to admit of such an explanation.

Suddenly Dimitrius looked up.

“You are right!” he said. “This ancient problem demands my closest study. And yet it is no problem at all, but only an exposition of my inmost thought!” He paused,—then: “Come here, Diana May!” he continued—“I may as well begin with you. Come and sit close beside me.”

She obeyed. With his eyes fixed upon her face, he went on:

“You, as a woman of superior intelligence, have never supposed, I am sure, that I have secured your services merely to decipher and copy out old Latin script? No!—I see by your look that you have fully realised that such is not all the actual need I

have of you. I have waited to find out, by a study of your character and temperament, when and how I could state plainly my demands. I think I need not wait much longer. Now this ancient treatise on ‘Problems,’ obscure and involved in wording as it is, helps me to the conviction that I am on the right track of discovery. It treats of Light. ‘The problem of the Fourth, Sixth and Seventh,’ with its ‘ultimate culmination of the Eighth’ is the clue. In that ‘ultimate culmination’ is the Great Secret!”

His eyes flashed,—his features were transfigured by an inward fervour.

“Have the patience to follow me but a little,” he continued. “You have sense and ability and you can decipher a meaning from an apparent chaos of words. Consider, then, that within the limitations of this rolling ball, the earth, we are permitted to recognise seven tones of music and seven tones of colour. The existing numbers of the creative sum, so far as we can count them, are Seven and Five, which added together make Twelve, itself a ‘creative’ number. Man recognises in himself Five Senses, Touch, Taste, Sight, Hearing, Smell—but as a matter of fact he has Seven, for he should include Intuition and Instinct, which are more important than all the others as the means of communicating with his surroundings. Now ‘the culmination of the Eighth’ is neither Five nor Seven nor Twelve,—it is the close or rebound of the Octave—the end of the leading Seven—the point where a fresh Seven begins. It is enough for humanity to have arrived at this for the present—for we have not yet sounded the heights or depths of even the first Seven radiations which we all agree to recognise. We admit seven tones of music, and seven tones of colour, but what of our seven rays of light? We have the ‘violet ray,’ the ‘X ray’—and a newly discovered ray showing the working bodily organism of man,—but there are Seven Rays piercing the density of ether, which are intended for the use and benefit of the human being, and which are closely connected with his personality, his needs and his life. Seven Rays!—and it is for us to prove and test them all!—which is the very problem you have brought to my notice in this old Latin document: ‘the Fourth,

Sixth and Seventh, culminating in the Eighth.’”

He put the papers carefully together on the table beside him, and turned to Diana.

“You have understood me?”

She bent her head.

“Perfectly!”

“You recall the incidents of the first day of your arrival here?—your brief visit to my laboratory, and what you saw there?”

She smiled.

“Do you think I could ever forget?”

“Well!—that being so I do not see why I should wait,” he said, musingly, and speaking more to himself than to her. “There is no reason why I should not begin at once the task which is bound to be long and difficult! My ‘subject’ is at my disposal—I am free to operate!”

He rose and went to an iron-bound cabinet which he unlocked and took from thence a small phial containing what appeared to be a glittering globule like an unset jewel, which moved restlessly to and fro in its glass prison. He held it up before her eyes.

“Suppose I ask you to swallow this?” he said.

For all answer, she stretched out her hand to take the phial. He laughed.

“Upon my word, you are either very brave or very reckless!” he exclaimed—“I hardly know what to think of you! But you shall not be deceived. This is a single drop of the liquid you saw in process of distillation within its locked-up cell,—it has a potent, ay, a terrific force and may cause you to swoon. On the other hand it may have quite the contrary effect. It should re-vivify—it may disintegrate,—but I cannot guarantee its action. I know its composition, but, mark you!—I have never tested it on any human creature. I cannot try it on myself—for if it robbed me of my capacity to work, I have no one to carry on my researches,—and I would not try it on my

mother,—she is too old, and her life is too precious to me——”

“Well, my life is precious to nobody,” said Diana, calmly. “Not even to myself. Shall I take your ‘little dram’ now?”

Dimitrius looked at her in amazement that was almost admiration.

“If you would rather wait a few days, or even weeks longer, do so,” he answered. “I will not persuade you to any act of this kind in a hurry. For it is only the first test of many to come.”

“And if I survive the first I shall be good for the last,” said Diana, merrily. “So come, Doctor Féodor!—give me the mysterious ‘drop’ of liquid fire!”

Her face was bright with animation and courage—but his grew pale and haggard with sudden fear. As he still hesitated, she sprang up and took the phial from his hand.

“Diana! Let me hold you!” he cried, in real agitation—and he caught her firmly round the waist—“Believe me—there is danger!——But—if you will——”

“One, two, three, and away!” said she, and taking the tiny glass stopper from the phial she swallowed its contents.

“One, two, three, and away!” it was, indeed!—for she felt herself whirled off into a strange, dark, slippery vortex of murderous cold—which suddenly changed to blazing heat—then again to cold,—she saw giant pinnacles of ice, and enormous clouds of flame rolling upon her as from a burning sky—then, she seemed to be flying along over black chasms and striving to escape from a whirlwind which enveloped her as though she were a leaf in a storm,—till at last no thought, no personal consciousness remained to her, and, giving up all resistance, she allowed herself to fall,—down, down ever so far!—when, all at once a vital freshness and elasticity possessed her as though she had been suddenly endowed with wings, and she came to herself standing upright as before, with Dimitrius holding her in the strong grasp of one arm.

"Well!" she said, aware that she trembled violently, but otherwise not afraid: "It wasn't bad! Not much taste about it!"

She saw that he was deadly pale—his eyes were misty with something like tears in them.

"You brave woman!" he said, in a low tone—"You daring soul!—But—are you sure you are all right?—Can you stand alone?"

She drew away from his hold.

"Of course! Firm as a rock!"

He looked at her wonderingly,—almost with a kind of terror.

"Thank God!" he murmured—"thank God I have not killed you! If I had——!"

He dropped into a chair and buried his face in his hands.

Still trembling a little as she was, she felt deeply touched by his evident emotion, and with that sudden, new and surprising sense of lightness and buoyancy upon her she ran to him and impulsively knelt down beside him.

"Don't think of it, please!" she said, entreatingly, her always sweet voice striking a soothing note on the air—"Don't worry! All is well! I'm as alive as I can be. If you had killed me I quite understand you would have been very sorry,—but it really wouldn't have mattered—in the interests of science! The only trouble for you would have been to get rid of my body,—bodies are always such a nuisance! But with all your knowledge I daresay you could have ground me into a little heap of dust!" And she laughed, quite merrily. "Please don't sit in such an attitude of despair!—you're not half cold-hearted enough for a scientist!"

He raised his head and looked at her.

"That's true!" he said, and smiled. "But—I wonder what has made you the strange woman you are? No fear of the unknown!—No hesitation, even when death might be the result of your daring,—surely there never was one of your sex like you!"

"Oh, yes, I'm sure there have been, and are many!" she answered, rising from her knees, and smiling in cheerful response to his happier expression: "Women are queer things!—and there's a part of their 'queerness' which men never understand. When they've lost everything—I mean everything which they, with their particular nature and sentiment, regard as precious, the chief of these being love, which you don't think matters much to anybody, they get reckless. Some of them take to drink—others to drugs—others to preaching in the streets—others to an openly bad life,—or to any crooked paths leading away and as far as possible from their spoilt womanhood. Men are to blame for it,—entirely to blame for treating them as toys instead of as friends—men are like children who break the toys they have done with. And a woman who has been broken in this way has 'no fear of the unknown' because the known is bad enough,—and she does not 'hesitate to face death,' being sure it cannot be worse than life. At any rate, that's how I feel—or, rather, how I have felt;—just now I'm extraordinarily glad to be alive!"

"That is because you are conscious of a narrow escape," he said, with a keen glance at her. "Isn't it so?"

She considered for a moment.

"No, I don't believe it is!" she replied. "It's something quite different to that. I'm not in the least aware that I've had a narrow escape!—but I do know that I feel as happy as a schoolgirl out for her first holiday! That's rather an odd sensation for a woman 'of mature years!' Oh, I know what it is! It's the globule!"

She laughed, and clapped her hands.

"That's it! Doctor, you may thank your stars that your first test has succeeded! Here I am, living!—and something is dancing about in my veins like a new sort of air and a new sort of sunshine! It's a lovely feeling!"

He rose from the chair where he had thrown himself in his momentary dejection, and approaching her, took her hand and laid his fingers on her pulse. He had entirely

recovered his usual air of settled and more or less grave composure.

“Yes,” he said, after a pause, “your pulse is firmer—and younger. So far, so good! Now, obey me. Go and lie down in your own room for a couple of hours. Sleep, if you can,—but, at any rate, keep in a recumbent position. You have a charming view from your windows,—and even in a grey autumn twilight like this, there is something soothing in the sight of the Alpine snow-line. Rest absolutely quiet till dinner time. And—afterwards—you will tell me how you feel,—or, rather, I shall be able to judge for myself.” He released her hand, but before doing so, kissed it with a Russian’s usual courtesy. “I repeat,—you are a brave woman!—as brave as any philosopher that ever swallowed hemlock! And, if your courage holds out sufficiently to endure the whole of my experiment, I shall owe you the triumph and gratitude of a life-time!”

CHAPTER XII

Once in her own pretty suite of rooms, Diana locked the door of the entresol, so that no one might enter by chance. She wished to be alone that she might collect her thoughts and meditate on the “narrow escape” which she had experienced without actually realising any danger. Her sitting-room was grey with the creeping twilight, and she went to the window and opened it, leaning out to breathe the snowy chillness of the air which came direct from the scarcely visible mountains. A single pale star twinkled through the misty atmosphere, and the stillness of approaching night had in it a certain heaviness and depression. With arms folded on the window-sill she looked as far as her eyes could see—far enough to discern the glimmering white of the Savoy Alps which at the moment presented merely an outline, as of foam on the lip of a wave. After a few minutes she drew back and shut the window, pulling the warm tapestry curtains across it, and pressing the button which flooded her room with softly-shaded electric light. Then she remembered—she had been told to rest in a recumbent position, so, in obedience to

this order she lay down on the comfortable sofa provided for her use, stretching herself out indolently with a sense of delightful ease. She was not at all in a “lazing” mood, and though she tried to go to sleep she could not.

“I’m broad awake,” she said to herself. “And I want to think! It isn’t a case of ‘mustn’t think’ now—I feel I must think!”

And the first phase of her mental effort was her usual one of “wonder.” Why had she so much confidence in Dimitrius? How was it that she was quite ready to sacrifice herself to his “experiment”?

“It seems odd,” she argued—“and yet, it isn’t. Because the fact is plain that I have nothing to live for. If I had any hope of ever being a ‘somebody’ or of doing anything really useful of course I should care for my life, but, to be quite honest with myself, I know I’m of no use to anyone, except to—him! And I’m getting a thousand a year and food and a home—a lovely home!—so why shouldn’t I trust him? If—in the end—his experiment kills me—as he seemed to think it might, just now—well!—one can only die once!—and so far as the indifferent folks at home know or believe, I’m dead already!”

She laughed, and nestled her head cosily back on the silken sofa-cushions. “Oh, I’m all right, I’m sure! Whatever happens will be for the best. I’m certainly not afraid. And I feel so well!”

She closed her eyes—then opened them again, like a child who has been told to go to sleep and who gives a mischievous bright glance at its nurse to show that it is wide awake. Moving one little slim foot after the other she looked disapprovingly at her shoes.

“Ugly things!” she said. “They were bought in the Devonshire village—flat and easy to get about the house with—suitable for a housekeeping woman ‘of mature years!’ I don’t like them now! They don’t seem to suit my feet at all! If I had really ‘turned up my toes to the daisies’ when I swallowed that mysterious globule these shoes

would not have added to the grace of my exit!”

Amused at herself she let her thoughts wander as they would—and it was curious how they flew about like butterflies settling only on the brightest flowers of fancy. She had grown into a habit of never looking forward to anything—but just now she found herself keenly anticipating a promised trip to Davos during the winter, whither she was to accompany Dimitrius and his mother. She was a graceful skater—and a skating costume seemed suggested—why not send her measurements to Paris and get the latest? A pleasant vision of rich, royal blue cloth trimmed with dark fur flitted before her—then she fancied she could hear her father’s rasping voice remarking: “Choose something strong and serviceable—linsey-woolsey or stuff of that kind—your mother used to buy linsey-woolsey for her petticoats, and they never wore out. You should get that sort of material—never mind how it looks!—only very young people go in for mere fashion!”

She indulged in a soft little giggle of mirth at this reminiscence of “Pa,” and then with another stretch out of her body, and a sense of warmest, deepest comfort, she did fall asleep at last—a sleep as sweet and dreamless as that of a child.

She was roused by a knocking at the door of the entresol, and sprang up, remembering she had locked it. Running to open it, she found the femme-de-chambre, Rose, standing outside.

“I am so sorry to disturb Madame,” said the girl, smiling. “But there is only now a quarter of an hour to dinnertime, and Monsieur Dimitrius sent me to tell you this, in case you were asleep.”

“I was asleep!” and Diana twisted up a tress of her hair which had become loosened during her slumber. “How dreadfully lazy of me! Thank you, Rose! I won’t be ten minutes dressing.”

While she spoke she noticed that Rose looked at her very curiously and intently, but made no remark. Passing into the rooms, the maid performed her usual duties of

drawing blinds, closing shutters and turning on the electric lights in the bedroom,—then, before going, she said:

“Sleep is a great restorer, Madame! You look so much better for an afternoon’s rest!”

With that she retired,—and Diana hurried her toilette. She was in such haste to get out of her daily working garb into a “rest gown” that she never looked in the mirror till she began to arrange her hair, and then she became suddenly conscious of an alteration in herself that surprised her. What was it? It was very slight—almost too subtle to be defined,—and she could not in the least imagine where the change had occurred, but there was undoubtedly a difference between the face that had looked at her from that same mirror some hours previously and the one that looked at her now. It was no more than the lightest touch given by some great painter’s brush to a portrait—a touch which improves and “lifts” the whole expression. However, she had no time to wait and study the mystery,—minutes were flying, and the silver arrow of the warning dial pointed to the figure eight, and its attendant word “Dinner.” Even as she looked, the chime struck the hour,—so she almost jumped into a gown of pale blue, chosen because it was easy to put on, and pinning a few roses from one of the vases in her room among the lace at her neck, she ran downstairs just in time to see Dimitrius taking his mother on his arm, as he always did when there were no guests, into the dining-room. She followed quickly with the murmured apology:

“I’m so sorry to be late!”

“Never mind, my dear,” said Madame Dimitrius. “Féodor tells me you have had some hard work to do, and that he wished you to rest. I hope you slept?”

But, as she put the question, her eyes opened widely in a sudden expression of wonderment, and she gazed at Diana as though she were something very strange and new.

"Yes, she must have slept, I think," put in Dimitrius quietly and with marked emphasis. "She looks thoroughly rested."

But Madame Dimitrius was still preoccupied by thoughts that bewildered her. She could hardly restrain herself while the servant Vasho was in the room, and the moment he left it to change the courses, she began:

"Féodor, don't you see a great difference——"

He made her a slight warning sign.

"Dear Mother, let us defer questions till after dinner! Miss Diana! To your health!" And he held up his glass of champagne towards her. "You are looking remarkably well!—and both my mother and I are glad that the air of Switzerland agrees with you!"

Half pleased, half puzzled, Diana smiled her recognition of the friendly toast, but in her own mind, wondered what it all meant? Why did dear old Madame Dimitrius stare at her so much? Why did even Vasho, the negro servant, roll the whites of his eyes at her as though she were somebody he had never seen before? And taking these things into account, why did Dimitrius himself maintain such an indifferent and uninterested demeanour?

Nevertheless, whatever the circumstances might portend, she was more disposed to mirth than gravity, and the delicious timbre of her voice made music at table, both in speaking and laughter,—the music of mingled wit and eloquence, rare enough in a man, but still rarer in a woman. Very few women have the art of conversing intelligently, and at a dinner nowadays the chief idea seems to be to keep on "safe" ground, avoiding every subject of any real interest. But Diana was not particular in this regard,—she talked, and talked well. On this evening she seemed to throw herself with greater zest into the always for her congenial task of keeping her mysterious "employer" and his mother amused,—and Dimitrius himself began to feel something of the glamour of a woman's fascination against which he had

always been as he boasted—"spirit-proof." His was a curious and complex nature. For years and years, ever since his early boyhood, he had devoted himself to the indefatigable study of such arts and sciences as are even now regarded as only "possible," but "non-proven,"—and he had cut himself off from all the ordinary ambitions as well as from the social customs and conventions of the world, in order to follow up a certain clue which his researches had placed in his hands. Though his ultimate intention was to benefit humanity he was so fearful of miscalculating one line of the mathematical problem he sought to solve, that for the time being, humanity weighed as nothing in his scale. He would admit of no obstacle in his path, and though he was not a cruel man, if he had found that he would need a hundred human "subjects" to work upon, he would have killed them all without compunction, had killing been necessary to the success of his experiments. And yet,—he had a heart, which occasionally gave him trouble as contending with his brain,—for the brain was cool and calculating, and the heart was warm and impulsive. He had never actually shunned women, because they too, as well as men, were needful points of study,—but most of the many he had met incurred his dislike or derision because of what he considered their unsettled fancies and general "vagueness." His mother he adored; but to no other woman had he ever accorded an atom of really deep or well-considered homage. When he advertised for a woman to help him in his experimental work, he did so, honestly because he judged a woman, especially "of mature years," was of no particular use to anybody, or, if she did happen to be of use, she could easily be replaced. With an almost brutal frankness, he had said to himself: "If the experiment I make upon her should prove fatal, she will be the kind of human unit that is never missed."

But Diana was an unexpected sort of "unit." Her independence, clear perception and courage were a surprise to him. Her "mature years" did not conceal from him the fact that she had once been charming to look at,—and one point about her which gave him especial pleasure was her complete resignation of any idea that she could

have attraction for men at her age. He knew how loth even the oldest women are to let go this inborn notion of captivating or subjugating the male sex,—but Diana was wholesomely free from any touch of the "volatile spinster,"—and unlike the immortal Miss Tox in "Dombey and Son," was not in the least prone to indulge in a dream of marriage with the first man who might pay her a kindly compliment. And his dread of the possible result of his first experimental essay upon her was perfectly genuine, while his relief at finding her none the worse for it was equally sincere. Looking at her now, and listening to her bright talk and to the soft ripple of her low, sweet laughter, his thoughts were very busy. She was his "subject;" a living subject bound by her signed agreement to be under his command and as much at his disposal as a corpse given over for anatomical purposes to a surgeon's laboratory. He did not propose to have any pity upon her, even if at any time her condition should call for pity. His experiment must be carried out at all costs. He did not intend to have any more "heart" for her than the vivisector has for the poor animal whose throbbing organs he mercilessly probes;—but to-night he was conscious of a certain attraction about her for which he was not prepared. He was in a sense relieved when dinner was over, and when she and his mother left the room. As soon as they had gone he addressed Vasho:

"Did you see?"

The negro inclined his head, and his black lips parted in a smile.

"It is the beginning!" said Dimitrius, meditatively. "But the end is far off!"

Vasho made rapid signs with his fingers in the dumb alphabet. His words were:

"The Master will perhaps be over-mastered!"

Dimitrius laughed, and patted the man kindly on the shoulder.

"Vasho, you are an oracle! How fortunate you are dumb! But your ears are keen,—keep them open!"

Vasho nodded emphatically, and with his right hand touched his forehead and then

his feet, signifying that from head to foot he was faithful to duty.

And Dimitrius thereupon went into the drawing-room, there to find Diana seated on a low stool beside his mother's chair, talking animatedly about their intended visit to Davos Platz. Madame Dimitrius instantly assailed him with the question she had previously started at dinner.

"Féodor, you put me off just now," she said, "but you really must tell me if you see any change in Diana! Look at her!"—and she put one hand under Diana's chin and turned her face more up to the light—"Isn't there a very remarkable alteration in her?"

Dimitrius smiled.

"Well, no!—not a very remarkable one," he answered, with affected indifference. "A slight one,—certainly for the better. All doctors agree in the opinion that it is only after a month or two in a different climate that one begins to notice an improvement in health and looks——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted his mother, with a slight touch of impatience. "It's not that sort of thing at all! It's something quite different!"

"Well, what is it?" laughed Diana. "Dear, kind Madame Dimitrius!—you always see something nice in me!—which is very flattering but which I don't deserve! You are getting used to my appearance—that's all!"

"You are both in league against me!" declared the old lady, shaking her head. "Féodor knows and you know that you are quite different!—I mean that you have a different expression—I don't know what it is——"

"I'm sure I don't!" Diana said, still laughing. "I feel very well and very happy—much better than I have felt for a long time—and of course if one feels well one looks well——"

"Did you feel as well and happy a few hours ago, when you left me to go and do

some work for Féodor?" asked Madame. "You did not look then as you look now!"

Diana glanced at Dimitrius questioningly, mutely asking what she should say next. He gave her a reassuring smile.

"You are like a Grand Inquisitor, mother mine!" he said. "And sharp as a needle in your scrutiny! Perhaps you are right!—Miss May is a little altered. In fact I think I may acknowledge and admit the fact—but I'm sure it is so slight a change that she has scarcely noticed it herself. And when she has retired and gone to bed, you and I will have a little private talk about it. Will that satisfy you?"

She looked at him trustfully and with a great tenderness.

"I am not unsatisfied even now, my son!" she answered, gently—"I am only curious! I am like the lady in the fairy tale of 'Blue Beard'—I want to unlock your cupboard of mystery! And you won't cut my head off for that, will you?"

He laughed.

"I would sooner cut off my own!" he said, gaily. "Be sure of that! You shall know all that is needful, in good time! Meanwhile, Miss Diana had better leave us for the present"—Diana at once rose and came towards him to say good-night—"I hope I am not giving you too abrupt a dismissal," he added, "but I think, under the circumstances, you should get all the rest you can."

She bent her head in mute obedience, thanking him with a smile. As she turned with a softly breathed "good-night" to Madame Dimitrius, the old lady drew her close and kissed her.

"Bless you, my dear!" she said. "If you change in your looks, do not change in your heart!"

"That can hardly be guaranteed," said Dimitrius.

Diana looked at him.

"Can it not? But I will be my own guarantee," she said. "I shall not change—not in

love for my friends. Good-night!”

As she left the room they both looked after her,—her figure had a supple, swaying grace of movement which was new and attractive, and in an impulse of something not unlike fear, Madame Dimitrius laid her hand entreatingly on her son’s arm.

“What have you done to her, Féodor? What are you doing?”

His eyes glittered with a kind of suppressed menace.

“Nothing!” he answered. “Nothing, as yet! What I shall do is another matter! I have begun—and I cannot stop. She is my subject,—I am like that old-world painter, who, in sheer devotion to his art, gave a slave poison, in order that he might be able to watch him die and so paint a death-agony accurately.”

“Féodor!” She gave a little cry of terror.

“Do not be afraid, mother mine! My task is an agony of birth—not death!—the travail of a soul reconstituting the atoms of its earthly habitation,—recharging with energy the cells of its brain—the work of a unit whose house of clay is beginning to crumble, and to whom I give the material wherewith to build it up again! It all depends, of course, on the unit’s own ability,—if you break a spider’s web, the mending of it depends on the spider’s industry, tenacity and constructive intelligence,—but, whatever happens, mark you!—whatever happens, I have begun my experiment, and I must go on! I must go on to the very end,—no matter what that end may be!”

She looked at him in wonder and appeal.

“You will not,—you cannot be cruel, Féodor?” she said, in a voice which trembled with suppressed alarm. “You will not injure the poor woman who works for you so patiently, and who trusts you?”

“How can I tell whether I shall or shall not injure her?” he demanded, almost fiercely. “Science accepts no half service. The ‘poor woman,’ as you call her, knows

her risks and has accepted them. So far, no injury has been done. If I succeed, she will have cause to thank me for the secret I have wrenched from Nature,—should I fail, she will not complain very much of a little more hurried exit from a world, where, according to her own statement, she is alone and unloved."

Madame Dimitrius clasped and unclasped her delicate old hands nervously, and the diamonds in a ring she wore glittered scarcely more than the bright tears which suddenly fell from her eyes. Moved by a pang of remorse, he fell on his knees beside her.

"Why, mother!" he murmured, soothingly—"you should not weep! Can you not trust me? This woman, Diana May, is a stranger, and nothing to you. Certainly she is a kind, bright creature, with a great many undeveloped gifts of brain and character, which make her all the more useful to me. I give her as much chance as I give myself. If I let her alone,—that is to say, if I ignore all the reasons for which I engaged her, and allow her to become a mere secretary, or your domestic companion,—she goes on in the usual way of a woman of her years,—withering slowly—sinking deeper in the ruts of care, and fading into a nonentity for whom life is scarcely worth the living. On the other hand, if I continue my work upon her——"

"But what work?" asked his mother, anxiously. "What result do you expect?"

He rose from his kneeling attitude, and straightened himself to his full height, lifting his head with an unconscious air of defiance and pride.

"I expect Nature to render me obedience!" he said. "I expect the surrender of the Flaming Sword! It 'turns every way to keep the way of the Tree of Life'—but the hilt must be given into my hand!"

"Féodor! Oh, my son! Such arrogance is blasphemy!"

"Blasphemy? Mother, you wrong yourself and me by the thought! Blasphemy is a lie to God, like the utterance of the 'Credo' by people who do not believe,—but there is no blasphemy in searching for a truth as part of God's mind, and devoutly

accepting it when found! The priest who tells his congregation that God is to be pleased or pacified by sufficient money in the collection plate blasphemes,—but I who most humbly adore His unspeakable Beneficence in placing the means of health and life in our hands, and who seek to use those means intelligently, do not blaspheme! I praise God with all my heart,—I believe in Him with all my soul!"

His attitude at the moment was superb; his expression as of one inspired. His mother looked at him fondly, but the tears were still in her eyes.

"Féodor," she said at last tremulously—"I—I have grown fond of Diana. I shall not be able to look on and see her suffer!"

He bent his brows upon her almost sternly.

"When you do see her suffer it will be time to speak"—he answered—"Not before! And whatever else you see, having no connection with 'suffering' in any way, you must allow to pass without comment or inquiry. You love me, I know,—well, you will never prove your love for me more than by consenting to this. If at any moment you can tell me that Diana May is unhappy or in pain, I promise you I will do my best to spare her. But if nothing of this sort happens I rely on your silence and discretion. May I do so?"

She inclined her head gently.

"You may!"

He took her hand and kissed its soft, finely wrinkled whiteness.

"That's my kind mother!" he said, tenderly—"Always indulgent to me and my fancies as you have been, I know you will not fail me now! And so,—whatever change you observe or think you observe in my 'subject,' you must accept it as perfectly natural (for it will be) and not surprising or disturbing. And you must tactfully check the comments and questions of others. I foresee that Chauvet will be tiresome,—he has taken a great fancy to Diana. And Farnese, of course, is a perpetual note of interrogation. But these people must be kept at a distance. You

have grown fond of Diana, you say,—fond of this complete stranger in our house!—but I am glad of it, for she needs some sort of tenderness in a life which seems to have been exceptionally lonely. Grow still fonder of her, if you like!—indeed, it is probable you will. For though she is anything but a child, she has all a child's affection in her which apparently has been wasted, or has met with scant return."

"You think so?" And Madame Dimitrius looked up with a smile.

"I do think so, assuredly, but because I think so it does not follow that any return can come from me," he said. "You are a person of sentiment—I am not. You are the one to supply her with the manna which falls from the heaven of a loving heart. And by doing so you will help my experiment."

"You will not tell me what the experiment really is?" she asked.

"No. Because, if it fails I prefer to ridicule myself rather than that you should ridicule me. And if I succeed the whole value of my discovery consists in keeping it secret."

"Very well!" And his mother rose and put away her knitting. "You shall do as you will, Féodor!—you were always a spoilt boy and you will be spoilt to the end! My fault, I know!"

"Yes, your fault, beloved!" he said—"But a fault of instinctive knowledge and wisdom! For if you had not let me follow my own way I might not have stumbled by chance on another way—a way which leads——"

He broke off abruptly with a wonderful "uplifted" look in his eyes. She came to him and laid her gentle hands upon his shoulders.

"A way which leads—where, my Féodor? Tell me!"

He drew her hands down and held them warmly clasped together in his.

"The way to that 'new heaven and new earth' where God is with men!" he

answered, in a low, rapt tone—"'Where there shall be no more death, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain,' and where 'the former things are passed away!' Be patient with my dream! It may come true!"

CHAPTER XIII

Meantime, Diana, up in her own room, was engaged in what to her had, of late years, been anything but an agreeable pastime,—namely, looking at herself in the mirror. She was keenly curious to find out what was the change in her appearance which had apparently surprised Madame Dimitrius so much that she could hardly be restrained, even by her masterful son, from expressing open wonderment. She stood before the long cheval glass, gazing deeply into it as if it were the magic mirror of the "Lady of Shalott," and as if she saw

"The helmet and the plume

Of bold Sir Lancelot."

Her face was serious,—calmly contemplative,—but to herself she could not admit any positive change. Perhaps the slightest suggestion of more softness and roundness in the outline of the cheeks and an added brightness in the eyes might be perceived,—but this kind of improvement, as she knew, happened often as a temporary effect of something in the atmosphere, or of a happier condition of mind, and was apt to vanish as rapidly as it occurred. Still looking at herself with critical inquisitiveness, she slipped out of her pale blue gown and stood revealed in an unbecoming gauntness of petticoat and camisole,—so gaunt and crude in her own opinion that she hastened to pull the pins out of her hair, so that its waving brightness might fall over her scraggy shoulders and flat chest and hide the unfeminine hardness of these proportions. Then, with a deep sigh, she picked up her gown from the floor where she had let it fall, shook out its folds and hung it up in the wardrobe.

"It's all nonsense!" she said. "I'm just the same thin old thing as ever! What difference Madame Dimitrius can see in me is a mystery! And he——"

Here, chancing to turn her head rather quickly from the wardrobe towards the mirror again, she saw the charming profile of—a pretty woman!—a woman with fair skin and a sparkling eye that smiled in opposition to the gravity of rather set lip-lines,—and the suddenness of this apparition gave her quite a nervous start.

"Who is it?" she half whispered to the silence,—then, as she moved her head again and the reflection vanished, "Why, it's me! I do believe it's me!"

Amazed, she sat down to think about it. Then, with a hand-glass she tried to recapture the vision, but in vain!—no position in which she now turned gave just the same effect.

"It's enough to drive one silly!" she said—"I won't bother myself any more about it. The plain truth is that I'm better in health and happier in mind than I've ever been, and of course I look as I feel. Only the dear Madame Dimitrius hasn't noticed it before—and he?—well, he never notices anything about me except that I do his work well, or well enough to suit him. If his mysterious 'globule' had killed me, I wonder whether he would have been really sorry?"

She considered a moment,—then shook her head in a playful negative and smiled incredulously. She finished undressing, and throwing a warm boudoir wrap about her, a pretty garment of pale rose silk lined with white fur which had been a parting gift from her friend Sophy Lansing, and which, as she had declared, was "fit for a princess," she went into her sitting-room, where there was a cheerful wood fire burning, and sat down to read. Among the several books arranged for her entertainment on a row of shelves within reach of the hand, was one old one bearing the title: "Of the Delusions whereby the Wisest are Deluded"—and the date 1584. Taking this down she opened it haphazard at a chapter headed: "Of the Delusion of Love." It was written in old style English with many quaint forms of expression,

more pointed and pithy than our modern “newspaper slang.”

“How many otherwise sober and sane persons are there,” soliloquised the ancient author—“who nevertheless do pitifully allow themselves to be led astray by this passion, which considered truly, is no more than the animal attraction of male for female, and female for male, no whit higher than that which prevails in the insect and brute world. For call it Love as they will, it is naught but Lust, as low an instinct or habit as that of craving for strong liquor or any wherewithall to still the insatiate demands of uncontrolled appetite. Love hath naught to do with Lust,—for Love is a Principle, not a Passion. For this cause it is comforting to read in Holy Scripture that in Heaven there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage, for there we are as the angels. And to be as the angels implyeth that we shall live in the Principle and not in the Passion. Could we conceive it possible on this earth for such an understanding to be arrived at between two persons of intelligence that they should love each other in this highest sense, then there would be no satiety in their tenderness for one another, and the delicacies of the soul would not be outraged by the coarseness of the body. It is indeed a deplorable and mournful contemplation, that we should be forced to descend from the inexpressible delights of an imagined ideal to the repulsive condition of the material stye, and that the fairest virgin, bred up softly, with no rougher composition of spirit than that of a rose or a lily, should be persuaded by this delusion of ‘love’ to yield her beauties to the deflowering touch which destroys all maidenly reserve, grace and modesty. For the familiarity of married relations doth, as is well known, put an end to all illusions of romance, and doth abase the finest nature to the gross animal level. And though it is assumed to be necessary that generations should be born without stint to fill an already over-filled world, meseemeth the necessity is not so great as it appeareth. Wars, plagues and famines are bred from the unwisdom of over-population, for whereas the over-production of mites in a cheese do rot the cheese, so doth the over-production of human units rot the world. Therefore it is apparent to the sage and profound that while the material

and animal portion of the race may very suitably propagate their kind, they having no higher conception of their bodies or their souls, the more intelligent and cleanly minority of purer and finer temperament may possibly find the way to a nobler and more lasting ‘love’ than that which is wrongfully called by such a name,—a love which shall satisfy without satiating, and which shall bind two spirits so harmoniously in one, that from their union shall be born an immortal offspring of such great thoughts and deeds as shall benefit generations unborn and lead the way back to the lost Paradise!”

Here Diana let the book fall in her lap, and sat meditating, gazing into the hollows of the wood fire. Love! It was the thing she had longed for,—the one joy she had missed! To be loved,—to be “dear to someone else” seemed to her the very acme of all desirable attainment. For with Tennyson’s hero in “Maud” she felt:

“If I be dear to some one else

I should be to myself more dear.”

Her thoughts went “homing” like doves down the air spaces of memory to the days when she had, or was fooled into believing she had, a lover whose love would last,—a bold, splendid creature, with broad shoulders and comely countenance, and “eyes which looked love to eyes that spake again,”—and when, as the betrothed bride of the Splendid Creature, she had thanked God night and morning for giving her so much happiness!—when the light in the skies and the flowers in the fields apparently took part in the joyous gratitude of her spirit, and when the very songs of the birds had seemed for her a special wedding chorus! She went over the incidents of that far-away period of her existence,—and presently she began to ask herself what, after all, did they amount to? Why, when they were all cruelly ended, had she shed such wild tears and prayed to God in such desperate agony? Was it worth while to have so shaken her physical and spiritual health for any Splendid Creature? For what had he done to merit such passionate regret?—such weeping and wailing? He

had kissed her a great deal (when he was in the mood for kissing), and sometimes more than she quite cared for. He had embraced her in gusts of brief and eager passion, tinged with a certain sensuality which roused in her reluctant repulsion—he had called her by various terms of endearment such as “sweetest,” “dearest,” and “wood-nymph,” a name he had bestowed upon her on one occasion when he had met her by chance in a shady corner of Kew Gardens, and which he thought poetical, but which she privately considered silly,—but what real meaning could be attached to these expressions? When, all suddenly, his regiment was ordered to India, and she had to part from him, he had sworn fidelity, and with many protestations of utmost tenderness had told her that “as soon as cash would allow,” he would send for her to join him, and marry her out there,—and for this happy consummation she had waited, lovingly and loyally, seven years. Meanwhile his letters grew shorter and fewer,—till at last, when his father died and he came into a large fortune, he struck the final blow on the patient life that had been sacrificed to his humour. He wrote a last letter, telling her he was married,—and so everything of hope and promise fell away from her like the falling leaves of a withering flower, though her friend, Sophy Lansing, in hot indignation at the callous way in which she had been treated, advised her to “take on another man at once.” But poor Diana could not do this. Hers was a loyal and tender spirit,—she was unable to transfer her affections from one to another au grand galop. She thought of it all now in a half amused way, as she sat in her easy chair by the sparkling fire, in the charming room which she could for the present call her own, surrounded by every comfort and luxury, and she looked at her ringless hand,—that small, daintily-shaped hand, on which for so many wasted years her lover’s engagement ring had sparkled as a sign of constancy. Poor little hand!—it was shown off with effect at the moment, lying with a passive prettiness on the roseate silk of her “boudoir wrap”—as white as the white fur which just peeped beneath the palm. Suddenly she clenched it.

“I should like to punish him!” she said. “It may be small—it may be spiteful—but it

is human! I should like to see him suffer for his treachery! I should have no pity on him or his fat wife!" Here she laughed at herself. "How absurd I am!" she went on—"making 'much ado about nothing!' The fat wife herself is a punishment for him, I'm sure! He's rich, and has a big house in Mayfair and five very ugly children,—that ought to be enough for him! I saw his wife by chance at a bazaar quite lately—like a moving jelly!—rather like poor mother in the fit of her clothes,—and smiling the ghastly smile of that placid, ineffable content which marks the fool! If I could do nothing else I'd like to disturb that smug, self-satisfied constitution of oozing oil!—yes, I would!—and who knows if I mayn't do it yet!"

She rose, and the antique book "Of Delusions" fell to the floor. Her slim figure, loosely draped in the folds of crimson silk and white fur, looked wonderfully graceful and well-poised, and had there been a mirror in the sitting-room, as there was in the bedroom, she might possibly have seen something in her appearance worthy of even men's admiration. But her thoughts were far away from herself,—she had before her eyes the picture of her old lover grown slightly broader and heavier in build, with ugly furrows of commonplace care engraven on his once smooth and handsome face,—"hen-pecked" probably by his stout better-half and submitting to this frequently inevitable fate with a more or less ill grace, and again she laughed,—a laugh of purest unforced merriment.

"Here I am, like Hamlet, 'exceeding proud and revengeful,' and after all I ought to be devoutly thankful!" she said. "For, if I analyse myself honestly, I do not really consider I have lost anything in losing a man who would certainly have been an unfaithful husband. What I do feel is the slight on myself! That he should have callously allowed me to wait all those years for him, and then—have cast me aside like an old shoe, is an injury which I think I may justly resent—and which,—if I ever get the chance—I may punish!" Here her brows clouded, and she sighed. "What an impossible idea! I talk as if I were young, with all the world before me!—and with power to realise my dreams!—when really everything of that sort is

over for me, and I have only to see how I can best live out the remainder of life!"

Then like a faint whisper stealing through the silence, came the words which Dimitrius had spoken on the first night of her arrival—that night when the moonlight had drenched the garden in a shower of pearl and silver,—"What would you give to be young?"

A thrill ran through her nerves as though they had been played upon by an electric vibration. Had Dimitrius any such secret as that which he hinted at?—or was he only deluding himself, and was his brain, by over much study, slipping off the balance? She had heard of the wisest scientists who, after astonishing the world by the brilliancy of their researches and discoveries, had suddenly sunk from their lofty pinnacles of attained knowledge to the depth of consulting "mediums," who pretended to bring back the spirits of the dead that they might converse with their relatives and friends in bad grammar and worse logic,—might not Dimitrius be just as unfortunate in his own special "scientific" line?

Tired at last of thinking, she resolved to go to bed, and in her sleeping chamber, she found herself facing the long mirror again. Something she saw there this time appeared really to startle her, for she turned abruptly away from it, threw off her wrap, slipped into her night-gown, and brushed her hair hastily without looking at herself for another second. And kneeling at her bedside as she said her prayers she included an extra petition, uttered in a strangely earnest whisper:

"From all delusions of vanity, self-love and proud thinking, good Lord, deliver me!"

The next morning she awoke, filled and fired with a new resolve. She had slept well and was strong in energy and spirit, and she determined, as she expressed it to herself, to "have it out" with Dr. Dimitrius. So after breakfast, when he was about to go to his laboratory as usual, she stopped him on the way.

"I want to speak to you," she said. "Please give me a few moments of your time."

"Now?" he queried, with a slight uplifting of his eyebrows.

She bent her head.

“Now!”

“In the library, then,” he said, and thither they went together.

On entering the room he closed the door behind them and stood looking at her somewhat quizzically.

“Well?”

“Well!” she echoed, slightly smiling. “Are you wondering what I want to say? You ought not to wonder at all,—you ought to know!”

“I know nothing!” he answered—“I may guess—but guessing is risky. I prefer to hear.”

“So you shall hear,”—and she drew a little closer to him—“If I express myself foolishly you must tell me,—if you think me officious or over-bold, you must reprove me—there is only one thing I will not bear from you, and that is, want of confidence!”

He looked at her in something of surprise.

“Want of confidence? My dear Miss Diana, you surely cannot complain on that score! I have trusted you more than I have ever trusted any man or any woman——”

“Yes,” she interrupted him, quickly—“I know that wherever it is absolutely necessary to trust me you have done so. But where you think it is un-necessary, you have not. For example—why don’t you tell me just straight what you mean to do with me?”

His dark, lustrous eyes flashed up under their drooping lids.

“What I mean to do with you?” he repeated—“Why what do you imagine——”

“I imagine nothing,” she answered, quietly. “The things you teach are beyond all imagination! But see!—I have signed myself and my services away to you for a certain time, and as you have yourself said, you did not engage me merely to copy

old Latin script. What you really want of me is, as I begin to understand, just what the vivisector wants with the animal he experiments upon. If this is so, I offer no opposition. I am not afraid of death—for I am out of love with life. But I want to know your aims—I want to understand the actual thing you are striving for. I shall be better able to help you if I know. You put me through one test yesterday—you saw for yourself that I had no fear of the death or life properties of the thing I took from your hand without any hesitation—I have not even spoken of the amazing and terrifying sensations it gave me—I am ready to take it again at any moment. You have a willing servant in me—but, as I say, I feel I could help you more if I knew the ultimate end for which you work,—and you must trust me!"

He listened attentively to every word,—charmed with the silvery softness of her voice and its earnest yet delicate inflections.

"I do trust you!" he said, when she had ceased speaking. "If I did not, you would not be here a day. I trusted you from the moment I saw you. If I had not, I should never have engaged you. So be satisfied on that score. For the rest—well!—I confess I have hesitated to tell you more than (as you put it) seemed necessary for you to know,—the old fear and the narrow miscomprehension of woman is still inherent in me, as in all of my sex, though I do my best to eliminate it,—and I have thought that perhaps if I told you all my intentions with regard to yourself, you might, at the crucial moment, shrink back and fail me——"

"When I shrink from anything you wish me to do, or fail in my undertaking to serve you loyally, I give you leave to finish me off in any way you please!" she said, calmly—"and without warning!"

He smiled—but his eyes were sombre with thought.

"Sit down," he said, and signed to her to take a chair near the window. "I will tell you as much as I can—as much as I myself know. It is briefly said."

He watched her closely, as, in obedience to his wish, she seated herself, and he

noted the new and ardent brilliance in her eyes which gave them a look of youthful and eager vitality. Then he drew up another chair and sat opposite to her. Outside the window the garden had a wintry aspect—the flowerbeds were empty,—the trees were leafless, and the summits of the distant Alps peered white and sharp above a thick, fleece-like fog which stretched below.

"You say you are out of love with life," he began. "And this, only because you have been spared the common lot of women—the so-called 'love' which would have tied you to one man to be the drudge of his coarse passions till death. Well!—I admit it is the usual sort of thing life offers to the female sex,—but to be 'out of love' with the stupendous and beautiful work of God because this commonest of commonplace destinies has been denied you, is—pardon my brusquerie,—mere folly and unreasoning sentiment. However, I am taking you at your word,—you are 'out of love' with life, and you are not afraid of death. Therefore, to me you are not a woman—you are a 'subject':—you put it very clearly just now when you said that I need you as the vivisector needs the animal he experiments upon—that is perfectly correct. I repeat, that for my purpose, you are not a woman,—you are simply an electric battery."

She looked up, amazed—then laughed as gaily as a child.

"An electric battery!" she echoed. "Oh, dear, oh, dear! I have imagined myself as many things, but never that!"

"And yet that is what you really are," he said, unmoved by her laughter. "It is what we all are, men and women alike. Our being is composed of millions of cells, charged with an electric current which emanates from purely material sources. We make electricity to light our houses with—and when the battery is dry we say the cells need recharging—a simple matter. Youth was the light of your house of clay—but the cells of the battery are dry—they must be recharged!"

She sat silent for a moment, gazing at him as though seeking to read his inmost

thought. His dark, fine eyes met hers without flinching.

“And you,—you propose to recharge them?” she said, slowly and wonderingly.

“I not only propose to do it—I have already begun the work!” he answered. “You want me to be straightforward—come, then!—give me the same confidence! Can you honestly say you see no difference and feel no difference in yourself since yesterday?”

She gave a quick sigh.

“No, I cannot!” she replied. “I do see and feel a change in myself! This morning I was almost terrified at the sense of happiness which possessed me!—happiness for nothing but just the joy of living!—it overwhelmed me like a wave!” She stretched out her arms with a gesture of indefinable yearning—“Oh, it seemed as if I had all the world in my hands!—the light, the air, the mere facts of breathing and moving were sufficient to make me content!—and I was overcome by the fear of my own joy! That is why I determined to ask you plainly what it means, and what I am to expect from you!”

“If all goes well you may expect such gifts as only the gods of old time were able to give!” he said, in thrilling accents,—“Those poor gods! They represented the powers that have since been put into man’s hands,—their day is done! Now, listen!—I have told you that I have commenced my work upon you,—and you are now the centre of my supreme interest. You are precisely the ‘subject’ I need,—for, understand me well!—if you had led a ‘rackety’ life, such as our modern women do—if you had been obsessed by rabid passions, hysterical sentiments, greedy sensualities or disordered health, you would have been no use to me. Your ‘cells,’ speaking of you as a battery, would, under such conditions, have been worn out, and in a worn-out state could not have been recharged. The actual renewal, or perpetual germination of cells is a possibility of future science,—but up to the present we have not arrived at the right solution of the problem. Now, perhaps, you understand why I was to some

extent startled when you took that first ‘charge’ from my hand yesterday,—it was a strong and a dangerous test,—for if one or any of your ‘cells’ had been in a broken or diseased state it might have killed you instantly—as instantly as by a flash of lightning——”

“And if it had,” interrupted Diana, with a smile—“what would you have done?”

“I should have disposed of your remains,” he answered, coolly. “And I should have arranged things so that no one would have been any the wiser—not even my mother.”

She laughed.

“You really are a first-class scientist!” she said. “No pity—no remorse—no regret——!”

His eyes flashed up in a sort of defiance.

“Who could feel pity, remorse, or regret for the fate of one miserable unit,” he exclaimed—“one atom among millions, sacrificed in the pursuit of a glorious discovery that may fill with hope and renewed power the whole of the human race! Tens of thousands of men are slain in war and the useless holocaust is called a ‘Roll of Honour,’ but if one superfluous woman were killed in the aid of science it would be called murder! Senseless hypocrisy!—The only thing to regret would be failure! Failure to achieve result,—horrible! But success!—what matter if a hundred thousand women perished, so long as we possess the Flaming Sword!”

He spoke with an almost wild excitation, and Diana began to think he must be mad. Mad with a dream of science,—mad with the overpowering force and flow of ideas too vast for the human brain!

“Why,” she asked, in purposely cold and even tones—“have you chosen a woman as your ‘subject’? Why not a man?”

“A man would attempt to become my rival,” he answered at once. “And he would

not submit to coercion without a struggle. It is woman's nature instinctively to bend under the male influence,—one cannot controvert natural law. Woman does not naturally resist; she yields. I told you I wanted obedience and loyalty from you,—I knew you would give them. You have done so, and now that you partially know my aims I know you will do so still."

"I shall not fail you," said Diana, quietly. "But,—if I may know as much,—suppose you succeed in your idea of recharging the 'cells' which make up Me, what will be the result to Myself?"

"The result to yourself?" he repeated. "Little can you imagine it!—little will you believe it even if I attempt to describe it! What will it mean to you, I wonder, to feel the warmth and vigour of early youth once more tingling in your veins?—the elasticity and suppleness of youth in your limbs?—to watch the delicate and heavenly magic of a perfect beauty transfiguring your face to such fairness that it shall enchant all beholders!——"

"Stop,—stop!" cried Diana, almost angrily, springing up from her chair and putting her hands to her ears. "This is mere folly, Dr. Dimitrius! You talk wildly,—and unreasonably! You must be mad!"

"Of course I am mad!" he answered, rising at the same moment and confronting her—"As mad as all original discoverers are! As mad as Galileo, Newton, George Stephenson or Madame Curie! And I am one with them in the madness that makes for a world's higher sanity! Come, look at me!" and he took both her hands firmly in his own—"Honestly, can you say I am mad?"

His eyes, dark and luminous, were steadfast and frank as the eyes of a faithful animal,—his expression serious,—even noble. As she met his calm gaze the colour flushed her cheeks suddenly, then as quickly faded, leaving her very pale.

"No—I cannot!" she said, swiftly and humbly. "Forgive me! But you deal with the impossible!"

He loosened her hands.

“Nothing is impossible!” he said. “Whatsoever the brain of a man conceives in thought can be born in deed. Otherwise there would be a flaw in the mathematics of the Universe, which is a thing utterly inconceivable.” He paused,—then went on. “I have told you all that you wished to know. Are you satisfied?”

She looked at him, and a faint smile lifted the corners of her mouth.

“If you are satisfied, I am,” she replied. “What I seem to understand is this,—if you succeed in your experiment I shall feel and look younger than I do now,—we will leave the ‘beauty’ part out of it,—and if you fail, the ‘cells’ you have begun to charge with your mysterious compound, will disintegrate, and there’ll be an end of me?”

“You have put the case with perfect accuracy,” he said. “That is so.”

“Very well! I am prepared!”—and she went to the table desk where she usually worked—“and now I’ll go on deciphering Latin script.”

She seated herself, and, turning over the papers she had left, began to write.

An odd sense of compunction came over him as he looked at her and realised her courage, patience, and entire submission to his will, and yet—his careful and vigilant eye noted the improved outlines of cheek and chin, the delicate, almost imperceptible softening of the lately thin and angular profile,—and the foretaste of a coming scientific triumph was stronger in him than any other human feeling. Nevertheless she was a woman, and——

Moved by a sudden impulse, he approached and bent over her as she worked.

“Diana,” he said, very softly and kindly—“you will forgive me if I have seemed to you callous, or cruel?”

Her heart beat quickly—she was annoyed with herself at the nervous tremor which ran through her from head to foot.

"I have nothing to forgive," she answered, simply—"I am your paid 'subject,'—not a woman at all in your eyes. And being so, I am content to live—or die—in your service."

He hesitated another moment,—then possessing himself of the small hand that moved steadily across the paper on which she was writing, he dexterously drew the pen from it and raised it to his lips with a grave and courteous gentleness. Then, releasing it, without look or word he went from the room, treading softly, and closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER XIV

So she knew! She knew that, as usual, she was, personally, a valueless commodity. So far as herself, her own life and feelings were concerned, her fate continued to follow her—no one was kindly or vitally interested in her,—she was just a "subject" for experiment. She had suspected this all along—yet now that she had heard the fact stated coldly and dispassionately, she was more or less resentful. She waited a few minutes, her heart beating quickly and the vexed blood rising to her brows and making her cheeks burn,—waited till she was sure Dimitrius would not re-enter,—then, suddenly flinging down her pen, she rose and paced the room hurriedly to and fro, scarce knowing what she did. Was it not hard,—hard! she said to herself, with an involuntary clenching of her hands as she walked up and down, that she should never be considered more than a passive "thing" to be used for other folks' advantage or convenience? How had it happened that no one in all the world had ever thought of putting himself (or herself) to "use" for Her sake! The calm calculations of Féodor Dimitrius on her possible death under his treatment had (though she would not admit it to herself) inwardly hurt her. Yet, after all, what had she any right to expect? She had answered a strange, very strange advertisement, and through that action had come into association with the personality of a more than strange man of whose character and reputation she knew little or nothing. And,

so far, she had “fallen on her feet,”—that is to say, she had secured a comfortable home and handsome competence for the services she had pledged herself to render. Then, as she had taken the whole thing on trust had she any cause to complain of the nature of those services? No!—and in truth she did not complain,—she only felt—felt, to the core of her soul the callous indifference which Dimitrius had plainly expressed as to her fate in the dangerous “experiment” he had already commenced upon her. Hot tears sprang to her eyes,—she struggled with them, ashamed and humiliated.

“Children and girls cry!” she said, with self-contempt. “I, being a woman ‘of mature years,’ ought to know better! But, oh, it is hard!—hard!”

Her thoughts flew to Madame Dimitrius,—had she followed her first feminine impulse, she would have run to that kind old lady and asked for a little pity, sympathy and affection!—but she knew such an act would seem weak and absurd. Still walking up and down, her steps gradually became more measured and even,—with one hand against her eyes, she pressed away the tear drops that hung on her lashes—then, pausing, looked again, as she so often looked at the never stopping steel instrument that struck off its little fiery sparks with an almost wearisome exactitude and monotony. Stretching out her hand, she tried to catch one of the flying dots of flame as one would catch a midge or a moth,—she at last succeeded, and the glowing mote shone on her open palm like a ruby for about half a minute—then vanished, leaving no trace but a slight tingling sensation on the flesh it had touched.

“A mystery!” she said—“as involved and difficult to understand as my ‘master’ himself!”

She looked through the window at the grey-cold winter landscape, and let her eyes travel along the distant peaks of the Alpine ranges, where just now the faintest gleam of sunshine fell. The world,—the natural world—was beautiful!—but how

much more beautiful it would seem if one had the full heart and vigour to enjoy its beauty! If, with youth to buoy up the senses, one had the trained eye and mind to perceive and appreciate the lovely things of life!—could one ask for greater happiness?

“When we are quite young we hardly see Nature,” she mused. “It is only in later years that we begin to find out how much we have missed. Now, if I, with my love of beauty, were young——”

Here her meditations came to an abrupt halt. Had not Dimitrius promised that if he succeeded in his experiment, youth would be hers again?—youth, united to experience?—but would that be a desirable result? She wondered.

“The old, old story!” she sighed. “The old legend of Faust and the devil!—the thirst of mankind for a longer extension of youth and life!—only, in my case, I have not asked for these things, nor have I tried to summon up the devil. I am just an unwanted woman,—unwanted so far as the world is concerned, but useful just now as a ‘subject’ for the recharging of cells!”

She gave a half weary, half scornful gesture, and resumed her work, and for an hour or more sat patiently translating and writing. But her thoughts were rebels and went breaking into all manner of unfamiliar places,—moreover, she herself felt more or less rebellious and disposed to fight against destiny. At midday the sun, which had been teasing the earth with shy glimpses of glory all the morning, shone out superbly, and set such a coronal of light on her hair as she sat at her desk, that if she could have seen herself she might have been flattered at the effect. But she was only conscious of the brightness that filled the room—a brightness that equally took possession of her mind and filled her with cheerfulness. She even allowed herself a little run into the realms of fancy.

“Suppose that he should succeed in his perfectly impossible task,” she said. “I,—his ‘subject’—shall have him in my power! I never thought of that! Yet it’s worth

thinking about! I shall have given him the triumph of his life! He will set some value upon me then,—and he'll never be able to forget me! More than that, according to his own assertion, I shall be young!—and he spoke of beauty too!—all nonsense, of course—but if!—if!—if he makes me the crowning success of all his studies, I shall hold him in the hollow of my hand!"

Stimulated by this thought, she sprang up and stood proudly erect, a smile on her lips and radiance in her eyes.

"With all his learning, his calculations and his cold-blooded science,—yes—I shall hold him in the hollow of my hand!"

Recalling herself to her duties, she put all her papers and writing materials neatly away in order for the next morning's work, and leaving the library, went out in the garden for a turn in the fresh air before luncheon. The noonday sunshine was at the full, and her whole being responded to its warmth and brightness. A new outlook had presented itself to her view, and all hesitation, vexation, fear and depression vanished like a mist blown aside by the wind. She was entirely resolved now to go through with whatsoever strange ordeals Dimitrius might ordain, no matter how much physical or mental suffering she might have to endure.

"The die is cast!" she said, gaily—addressing herself to a group of pine trees stiff with frost—"I'm all for youth and beauty!—or—Death! On, on, Diana!"

That afternoon she went off for a walk by herself as it was frequently her custom to do. She was allowed perfect freedom of action after the morning working hours,—she could go and come as she liked,—and both Dr. Dimitrius and his mother made it plainly evident that they trusted her implicitly. She avoided Geneva—she instinctively felt that it would be wiser not to be seen there, as the people of the hotel where she had stayed might recognise her. One of her favourite walks was along the Mornex road to a quaint little villa occupied by Professor Chauvet. This somewhat grim and ironical man of much learning had taken a great

fancy to her, and she always made herself charming in his company, partly out of real liking for him and partly out of compassion for his loneliness. For, apparently, he had no one in the world to care whether he lived or died, the only person to attend upon him being a wrinkled, toothless old woman from the Canton Grisons, whose cooking was execrable, while her excessive cleanliness was beyond reproach. Diana loved to hear the Professor's half-cynical, half-kindly talk,—she laughingly encouraged him to "lay down the law," as he delighted to do, on all things human and divine, and she was never tired of turning over his really unique and wonderful collection of unset gems, of which he had enough to excite the cupidity of any American wife of a millionaire,—enough certainly to make him rich, though he lived in the style of an exceedingly poor man.

"You have the saddest fire I ever saw!" she said, on this particular afternoon, as she entered his study without warning, as she was now quite accustomed to do, and found him sitting absorbed over a book, regardless of the smouldering wood in the grate which threatened to become altogether extinguished. "Let me make it cheerful for you!"

She set to work, while he pushed his spectacles up from his eyes to his forehead and regarded her with unassisted vision.

"What have you been doing to yourself?" he asked, then. "Are you sure you are quite well?"

She looked up from the logs she was piling dexterously together, surprised and smiling.

"Quite well? Of course I am! Never felt better! Do I look ill?"

Professor Chauvet got up and stretched his legs.

"Not ill," he replied,—"No,—but feverish! Singularly so! Eyes too bright—lips too red,—spiteful women would say you had put belladonna in the one and carmine on the other! Let me feel your pulse!"

She laughed, and gave him her hand. He pressed his fingers on the cool, firm wrist.

"No—nothing the matter there!" he said, wrinkling his fuzzy brows in a puzzled line. "It is the pulse of youth and strong heart action. Well! What is it?"

"What is what?" queried Diana, merrily, as she settled the logs to her satisfaction, and kindled them into sparkling flame. "I know of nothing in myself that is, or isn't!"

He smiled a wry smile.

"There you express the sum and substance of all philosophy!" he said. "Plato himself could go no further! All the same, there's an IS about you that WASN'T! What do you make of that? And if you haven't been doing anything to yourself what has our friend Féodor Dimitrius been doing to you?"

The question, though put suddenly, did not throw her off her guard. She met it with clear, upraised eyes and a look of wonder.

"Why, what on earth should he do?" she asked, lightly. "He's giving me quite a pleasant time in Switzerland—that's all!"

"Oh! That's all, eh?" repeated Chauvet, baffled for the moment. "Well, I'm glad you are having a pleasant time. Judging by your looks, Switzerland agrees with you. But Dimitrius is a queer fellow. It's no use falling in love with him, you know!"

She laughed very merrily.

"My dear Professor! You talk as if I were a girl, likely to 'moon' and sentimentalise over the first man that comes in my way! I'm not young enough for that sort of thing."

The Professor stuck his hands deep in his pockets and appeared to meditate.

"No—perhaps not," he said. "But experience has taught me that people fall in love at the most unexpected ages. I have seen a child of four,—a girl,—coquetting with a boy of seven,—and I have also seen an old gentleman of seventy odd making

himself exceedingly unpleasant by his too rabid admiration of a married lady of forty. These things will occur!"

"But that's not love!" laughed Diana, seating herself in a deep easy chair opposite to him. "Come, come, Professor! You know it isn't! It's nonsense!—and in the case of the old gentleman, very distressing nonsense! Now, show me that jewel you spoke of the other day—one that I've never seen—it's called the Eye of something or somebody——"

"The Eye of Rajuna," said Chauvet, solemnly, "a jewel with the history of a perished world behind it. Now, Miss May, you must not look at this remarkable stone in a spirit of trifling—it carries, compressed within its lustre, the soul's despair of a great Queen!"

He paused, as if thinking,—then went to an iron-bound safe which stood in one corner of the room, and unlocked it. Fumbling for a minute or two in its interior recesses, he presently produced a curious case made of rough hide and fastened with a band of gold. Opening it, a sudden flash of light sparkled from within—and Diana raised herself in her chair to look, with a little exclamation of wonderment. The extraordinary brilliancy of the jewel disclosed was like nothing she had ever seen—the stone appeared to be of a deep rose colour, but in its centre there was a moving point, as of blood-red liquid. This floating drop glittered with an unearthly lustre, and now and again seemed to emit rays as of living light.

"What a marvellous gem!" Diana murmured. "And how beautiful! What do you call it?—a ruby or a coloured diamond?"

"Neither," answered Chauvet. "It does not belong to any class of known gems. It is the 'Eye of Rajuna'—and in ages past it was set in the centre of the forehead of the statue of an Assyrian queen. She was a strange person in her day—of strong and imperious primitive passions,—and she had rather a violent way of revenging herself for a wrong. She had a lover—all good-looking queens have lovers—it is

only the ugly ones who are virtuous—and he grew tired of her in due course, as lovers generally tire——”

“Do they?” put in Diana.

“Of course they do! That’s why the bond of marriage was invented—to tie a man fast up to family duties so that he should not wander where he listeth—though he wanders just as much—but marriage is the only safeguard for his children. Rajuna, the Queen, however, did not approve of her lover’s wandering—and being, in her day, a great ruler, she could of course do as she liked with him. So she had him brought before her in chains, and slowly hacked to pieces in her presence—a little bit here and a little bit there, keeping him alive as long as possible so that he might see himself cut up—and finally when the psychological moment came, she had herself robed and crowned in full imperial style, and, taking a sharp knife in her own fair hands, cut out his heart herself and threw it to her dogs in the palace courtyard below! This was one of the many jewels she wore on that historic occasion!—and it was afterwards placed in the forehead of the statue which her people erected to the memory of their ‘good and great Queen Rajuna!’”

Diana listened with fascinated interest—her eyes fastened on the weird jewel, and her whole expression one of complete absorption in the horror of the story she had heard. She was silent so long that Chauvet grew impatient.

“Well! What do you think of it all?” he demanded.

“I think she—that Assyrian queen—was quite right!” she answered, slowly. “She gave her false lover, physically, what he had given her morally. He had hacked her to pieces,—bit by bit!—he had taken her ideals, her hopes and confidences, and cut them all to shreds—and he had torn her heart out from its place! Yes!—she was quite right!—a traitor deserves a traitor’s death!—I would have done the same myself!”

He stared and glowered frowningly.

“You? You,—a gentle Englishwoman?—you would have done the same?”

She took the jewel from its case and held it up to the light, its red brilliance making her slender fingers rosy-tipped.

“Yes, I would!” and she smiled strangely. “I think women are all made in much the same mould, whether English or Assyrian! There is nothing they resent so deeply as treachery in love.”

“Yet they are treacherous themselves pretty often!” said the Professor.

“When they are they are not real women,” declared Diana. “They are pussy-cats,—toys! A true woman loves once and loves always!”

He looked at her askance.

“I think you have been bitten, my dear lady!” he said. “Your eloquence is the result of sad experience!”

“You are right!” she answered, quietly, still holding the “Eye of Rajuna” and dangling it against the light. “Perfectly so! I have been ‘bitten’ as you put it—but—it is long ago.”

“Yet you cherish the idea of vengeance?”

She laughed a little.

“I don’t know! I cannot say! But when one has had life spoilt for one all undeservedly, one may wish to see the spoiler morally ‘hung, drawn and quartered’ in a sort of good old Tudor way! Yet my story is quite a common one,—I was engaged to a man who threw me over after I had waited for him seven years—lots of women could tell the same tale, I dare say!—he’s married, and has a very fat wife and five hideous children——”

“And are you not sufficiently avenged?” exclaimed Chauvet, melodramatically, with uplifted hands. “A fat wife and five hideous children! Surely far worse than the Eye of Rajuna!”

Her face was clear and radiant now as she put the jewel back in its case.

“Yes, possibly! But I sometimes fancy I should like to make sure that it is worse! I’m wickedly human enough to wish to see him suffer!”

“And yet he’s not worth such an expenditure of nerve force!” said Chauvet, smiling kindly. “Why not spare yourself for somebody else?”

She looked at him with something of pathos in her eyes.

“Somebody else? My dear Professor, there’s not a soul in all the world that cares for me!”

“You are wrong,—I care!” he replied, with an emphasis that startled her—“I care so much that I’ll marry you to-morrow if you’ll have me!”

She was so amazed that for the moment she could not speak. He, perfectly calm and collected, continued with a kind of oratorical fervour:

“I will marry you, I say! I find you charming and intelligent. Charm in woman is common—intelligence is rare. You are a happy combination of the two. You are not a girl—neither am I a boy. But if you take me, you will not take a poor man. I am rich—much richer than anybody knows. I have become interested in you—more than this, I have grown fond of you. I would try my best—for the rest of my life—which cannot be very long—to make you happy. I would give you a pretty house in Paris—and all the luxuries which dainty women appreciate. And I promise I would not bore you. And at my death I would leave you all I possess—even the ‘Eye of Rajuna!’ Stop now, before you speak! Think it over! I wish to give you plenty of time”—here his voice trembled a little—“for it will be a great blow—yes, a very great blow to me if you refuse!”

Taken by surprise as she was, Diana could not but appreciate the quiet and chivalrous manner of the Professor, as after having made his declaration and proposal, he stood “at attention” as it were, waiting for her first word.

She rose from her chair and laid one hand on his arm.

“Dear Professor——” she began, hesitatingly.

“Yes—that’s good!” he said. “‘Dear Professor’ is very good! And after that, what next?”

“After that, just this,” said Diana. “That I thank you for your kind and generous offer with all my heart! Still more do I thank you for saying you have grown fond of me! Nobody has said that for years! But I will not do you such wrong as to take advantage of your goodness to a woman you know nothing of—not, at any rate, till you know something more! And,—to be quite honest with you—I don’t think I have it in my heart to love any man now!”

The Professor took the hand that rested on his arm and patted it encouragingly.

“My dear lady, I am not asking for love!” he said. “I would not do such an absurd thing for the world! Love is the greatest delusion of the ages,—one of the ‘springes to catch woodcocks,’ as your Shakespeare says. I don’t want it,—I never had it, and don’t expect it. I merely ask for permission to take care of you and make you as happy as I can for the rest of my life. I should like to do that!—I should indeed! The stupid and conventional world will not allow me to do it without scandal, unless I marry you—therefore I ask you to go through this form with me. I would not be selfish,—I would respect you in every way——”

He broke off—and to close an embarrassing sentence gently kissed the hand he held.

Tears stood in Diana’s eyes.

“Oh, you are good, you are good!” she murmured. “And I feel so ungrateful because I cannot please you by at once saying ‘yes!’ But I should feel worse than ungrateful if I did—because it would be unfair to you!—it would, really! And yet——”

“Don’t say an absolute ‘No,’ my dear!” interrupted the Professor, hastily. “Take time! I’ll give you as long as you like—and live in hope!”

She smiled, though her eyes were wet. Her thoughts were all in a whirl. How had it chanced that she, so long content to be considered “an old maid,” should now receive an offer of marriage? Had she a right to refuse it? Professor Chauvet was a distinguished man of science, well known in Paris; his wife would occupy a position of dignity and distinction. Her salon would be filled with men of mark and women of high social standing. And he “had grown fond of her” he said. That was the best and most wonderful thing of all! That anyone should be “fond” of her seemed to poor, lonely Diana the opening of the gates of Paradise.

“May I—may I——” she faltered, presently.

“You may do anything!” replied Chauvet, soothingly. “You may even box my ears, if it will relieve your feelings!”

She laughed, and looked up at him. It was a kind, rugged, clever face she saw—plain, but shrewd, and though marked like a map with lines of thought and care, not without character and impressiveness.

“I was rude to you the first night we met!” she said, irrelevantly.

“So was I to you,” he responded. “And you got the better of me. That’s probably why I like you!”

She hesitated again. Then:

“May I wait——”

“Of course!” he said. “Any time! Not too long—I want to settle it before I die!”

“Will it do when I have finished my visit to Madame Dimitrius?” she asked. “She wishes me to stay with her for some months—she likes my company——”

“I should think she does!” interposed Chauvet. “So should I!”

She laughed again.

“You really are very nice!” she said. “You ought to have married long ago!”

“That’s neither here nor there,” he answered. “I’m glad I didn’t—I might have had a

fat wife and five hideous children, like your old lover—and my life wouldn't have been worth a sou!"

"Wouldn't it?" She was quite playful by this time, and taking a knot of violets from her own dress, pinned them in his buttonhole, much to his delight.

"Of course not! With a fat wife and five children what would have become of my work? I should never have done anything. As it is the world may have to thank me for a few useful discoveries,—though I dare say it will have to thank Féodor Dimitrius more."

Her heart gave a quick throb.

"Do you think him very clever?" she asked.

"Clever? Clever as the devil! There never was such a man for bold experiment! I wonder he hasn't killed himself before now with his exploits in chemistry. However, let us keep to the point. As I understand it, you give me a little hope. You will not say 'yes' or 'no' till your time with Madame Dimitrius is expired—till your visit to the Château Fragonard is ended. Is that so?"

She bent her head.

"And may I walk on air—buoyed up by hope—till then?"

She looked a little troubled.

"Dear Professor, I cannot promise anything!" she said. "You see I am taken altogether by surprise—and—and gratitude—give me time to think!"

"I will!" he said, kindly. "And meanwhile, we will keep our own confidence—and the subject shall be closed till you yourself reopen it. There! You can rely upon me. But think it all over well, reasonably, and clearly—a husband who would care much for you, ten thousand a year, a house in Paris and every comfort and luxury you could wish for is not an absolutely melancholy prospect! Bless you, my dear! And now I'll lock up the 'Eye of Rajuna'—it has looked upon us and has seen nothing of

falsehood or treachery to warrant the shedding of blood!”

He moved away from her to place the jewel in his safe, and as he did so, said:

“I have an aqua-marine here which is the colour of a Sicilian sea in full summer—and I should like to give it to you now,—I intend it for you—but the hawk eye of Dimitrius would notice it if you wore it, and you would suffer the cross-examination of a Torquemada! However, you shall have it very soon—as soon as I can invent a little fable to give cover to its presentation. And,—let me see!——” here he turned round, smiling.—“Well, upon my word, you have made up the fire capitally! Quite bright and cheery!—and full of hope!”

CHAPTER XV

That evening Diana for the first time saw Dimitrius in a somewhat irritable mood. He was sharp and peremptory of speech and impatient in manner.

“Where have you been all the afternoon?” he demanded, at dinner, fixing his eyes upon her with a piercing intensity.

“With Professor Chauvet,” she answered. “I wanted to see a famous Assyrian jewel he has—it is called ‘The Eye of Rajuna.’”

Dimitrius shrugged his shoulders.

“And you are interested in that kind of thing?” he queried, with a touch of disdain. “A stolen gem, and therefore an unlucky one—‘looted’ by a French officer from the forehead of a mutilated statue somewhere in the East. It’s not a thing I should care to have.”

“Nor I,” agreed Diana, amicably. “But it’s worth seeing.”

“The Professor is a great authority on precious stones,” said Madame Dimitrius. “You know, Féodor, you have always credited him with very exceptional knowledge on the subject.”

“Of course!” he replied. “But I was not aware that Miss May had any hankerings

after jewels."

Diana laughed. She was amused to see him more or less in a kind of suppressed temper.

"I haven't!" she declared, gaily. "It would be no use if I had! Jewels are, and always have been, beyond my reach. But I like to know positively from the Professor that they are living things, feeling heat and cold just as we do, and that some of them shrink from diseased persons and lose their lustre, and are brilliant and happy with healthy ones. It is very fascinating!"

"The Professor is not!" remarked Dimitrius, ironically.

She raised her eyes, smilingly.

"No?"

"He's a very worthy man," put in Madame Dimitrius, gently. "And very distinguished in his way. He's certainly not handsome."

"No men are, nowadays," said Dimitrius. "The greed of money has written itself all over human physiognomy. Beauty is at a discount,—there were never so many downright ugly human beings as there are to-day. The Mark of the Beast is on every forehead."

"I don't see it anywhere on yours!" said Diana, sweetly.

A reluctant half-smile brightened his features for a moment,—then he gave a disdainful gesture.

"I dare say it's there all the same!" he replied, shortly. "Or it may be branded too deeply for you to see!" He paused—and with an abrupt change of tone, said: "Mother, can you be ready to go to Davos this week?"

She looked up, placidly smiling.

"Certainly! I shall be very glad to go. Diana will like it too, I'm sure."

"Good! Then we'll start the day after to-morrow. I have engaged rooms. There are

one or two things I must settle before leaving—not very important." Here he rose from the table, dinner being concluded, and addressed Diana. "I want you for a few moments," he said, rather peremptorily. "Join me, please, in the laboratory."

He left the room. His mother and Diana looked at one another in smiling perplexity. Diana laughed.

"He's cross!" she declared. "Chère Madame, he's cross! It is a positive miracle! The cool scientist and calm philosopher is in a bit of a temper!"

Madame Dimitrius gave a rather regretful and unwilling assent. Truth to tell, the gentle old lady was more bewildered than satisfied with certain things that were happening, and which perplexed and puzzled her. As, for example, when Diana took her arm and affectionately escorted her from the dining-room to the drawing-room, she could not refrain from wondering at the singular grace and elegance of the once plain and angular woman,—she might almost be another person, so different was she to the one who had arrived at the Château Fragonard in answer to her son's advertisement. But she had promised to say nothing, and she kept her word, though she thought none the less of the "Flaming Sword" and the terrific problem her son had apparently determined to solve. Meanwhile, Diana, having settled her cosily by the fire with her knitting, ran quickly off to obey the command of Dimitrius. She had never been asked to go near the laboratory since her first visit there, and she hardly knew how to find the corridor leading to it. She looked for the negro, Vasho, but though he had waited upon them at dinner he was now nowhere to be seen. So, trusting to memory and chance she groped her way down a long passage so dark that she had to feel the walls on both sides to steady her steps as she went, and she was beginning to think she had taken an entirely wrong direction, when a dull, coppery glitter struck a shaft of light through the gloom and she knew she was near her goal. A few more cautious steps, and she stood opposite the great door, which glowed mysteriously red and golden, as though secret fire were mixing living flame with its

metal. It was shut. How could she open it?—or make her presence outside it known? Recollecting that Vasho had merely laid his hand upon it, she presently ventured to do the same, and soon had the rather terrifying satisfaction of seeing the huge portal swing upwards yawningly, disclosing the interior of the vast dome and the monstrous Wheel. But what a different scene was now presented to her eyes! When first she had entered this mysterious "laboratory" it had been in broad daylight, and the sun had poured its full glory through the over-arching roof of crystal,—but now it was night and instead of sunshine there was a cloud of fire! Or, rather, it might be described as a luminous mist of the deep, rich hue of a damask rose. Through this vaporous veil could be seen the revolving Wheel, which now had the appearance of a rainbow circle. Every inch of space was full of the radiant rose haze, and it was so dazzling and confusing to the sight that for a moment Diana could not move. With a vague sense of terror she dimly felt that the door had closed behind her,—but steadying her nerves she waited, confident that Dimitrius would soon appear. And she was right. He stepped suddenly out of the rosy mist with a casual air, as if there were nothing unusual in the surroundings.

"Well!" he said.—"Courageous as ever?"

"Is there anything to be afraid of?" she asked. "To me it looks wonderful!—beautiful!"

"Yes—it is the essence of all wonder and all beauty," he answered. "It is a form of condensed light,—the condensation which, when imprisoned by natural forces within a mine under certain conditions, gives you rubies, diamonds and other precious stones. And in the water beneath, which you cannot see just now, owing to the vapour, there is sufficient radium to make me ten times a millionaire."

"And you will not part with any of it?"

"I do part with some of it when I find it useful to do so," he said. "But very seldom. I am gradually testing its real properties. The scientists will perhaps be five hundred

years at work discussing and questioning what I may prove in a single day! But I do not wish to enter upon these matters with you,—you are my ‘subject,’ as you know, and I want to prepare you. The time has come when you must be ready for anything——”

“I am!” she interrupted, quickly.

“You respond eagerly!”—and he fixed his eyes upon her with a strange, piercing look. “But that is because you are strong and defiant of fate. You are beginning to experience that saving vanity which deems itself indestructible!”

She made no answer. She lifted her eyes to the highest point of the slowly turning wheel, and its opaline flare falling through the rose mist gave her face an unearthly lustre.

“We are going to Davos Platz,” he continued, “because it will not do to remain here through the winter. I want the finest, clearest air, rarefied and purified by the constant presence of ice and snow, to aid me in my experiment,—moreover, certain changes in you will soon become too apparent to escape notice, and people will talk. Already Baroness Rousillon is beginning to ask questions——”

“About me?” asked Diana, amused.

“About you. Tell me, have you looked in your mirror lately?”

“Only just to do my hair,” she answered. “I avoid looking at my own face as much as possible.”

“Why?”

She hesitated.

“Well! I don’t want to be deluded into imagining myself good-looking when I’m not.”

He smiled.

“Resolute woman! Now listen! From this day forward I shall give you one measure

of what you call my ‘golden fire’ every fortnight. You have experienced its first effect. What future effects it may have I cannot tell you. But as the subject of my experiment you must submit to the test. If you suffer bodily pain or mental confusion from its action tell me at once, and I will do my best to spare you unnecessary suffering. You understand?”

She had grown very pale, even to the lips,—but she answered, quietly:

“I understand! You have never asked me exactly what I did feel the first time I took it. I may as well confess now that I thought I was dying.”

“You will think so again and yet again,” he said, coolly. “And you may die! That’s all I have to say about it!”

She stood immovable, bathed, as it were, in the rosy radiance exhaled by the slow and now almost solemn movement of the great Wheel. She thought of the kindliness of Professor Chauvet,—his plain and unadorned proposal of marriage,—his simple admission that he had “grown fond” of her,—his offer of his name and position united to a house in Paris and ten thousand a year!—and contrasted all this with the deliberate, calculating callousness of the man beside her, lost to every consideration but the success or failure of his “experiment,”—and a passionate resentment began to burn in her soul. But she said nothing. She had rushed upon her own fate,—there was no way out of it now.

He moved away from her to unlock the tiny fairy-like shrine, which concealed the slow dropping of the precious liquid mysteriously distilled by the unknown process which apparently involved so much vast mechanism, and, placing a small phial under the delicate tube from which the drops fell at long, slow intervals, waited till one, glittering like a rare jewel, was imprisoned within it. She watched him, with more disdain than fear,—and her eyes were brilliant and almost scornful as he raised himself from his stooping position and faced her. The pale blue dress she wore was transformed by the rosy light around her into a rich purple, and as she stood fixedly

regarding him there was something so proud and regal in her aspect that he paused, vaguely astonished.

"What is the matter with you?" he asked. "Are you angry?"

"Who am I that I should be angry?" she retorted. "I am only your slave!"

He frowned.

"Are you going to play the capricious woman at this late hour and show temper?" he said, impatiently. "I am in no humour for reproaches. You promised loyalty——"

"Have I broken my promise?" she demanded.

"No—not yet! But you look as if you might break it!"

She gave a slight, yet expressive gesture of contempt.

"What a poor thing you are as a man, after all!" she exclaimed. "Here, in the presence of the vast forces you have bent to your use,—here, with your 'subject,' a mere woman, entirely at your disposal, you doubt!—you disbelieve in my sworn word, which is as strong as all your science, perhaps stronger! Come!—you look like a conspirator who has extracted poison from some mysterious substance, and who is longing to try it on a victim! Do you want me to take it now?"

He gazed at her with a sudden sense of fear. Almost her courage overmastered his will. There was something austere and angelic in that slight figure with the rosy waves of vapour playing about it and turning its azure draperies to royal purple, and for the first time he wondered whether there was not something deliberately brutal in his treatment of her. Rallying his self-possession he answered:

"When we are outside this place you can take it, if you will——"

"Why not inside?" she asked. "Here, where the vapours of your witches' cauldron simmer and steam—where I can feel your melting fires pricking every vein and nerve!" and she stretched out her arms towards the Wheel of strange opalescent light which now revolved almost at a snail's pace. "Make short work of me, Dr.

Dimitrius!—this is the place for it!”

On a sudden impulse he sprang to her side and seized her hand.

“Diana! You think me a pitiless murderer!”

She looked straight into his eyes.

“No, I don’t. I think you simply a man without any feeling except for yourself and your own aims. There are thousands,—aye, millions of your sex like you,—you are not extraordinary.”

“If I succeed you will have cause to thank me——”

“Possibly!” she answered, with a slight smile. “But you know gratitude sometimes takes curious and unexpected forms! One of the commonest is hatred of the person who has done you a kindness! Come, give me that fire-drop,—it is restless in its prison! We are fighting a strange duel, you and I—you are all for self, and your own ultimate triumph—I am selfless, having nothing to lose or to win——”

“Nothing?” he repeated. “Foolish woman!—you cannot foresee—you cannot project yourself into the future. Suppose I gave you youth?—suppose with youth I gave you beauty?—Would you then call me selfish?”

“Why, yes, of course!” she answered, composedly. “You would not give such gifts to me because you had any desire to make me happy—nor would you give them if you could secure them for yourself without endangering your life! If you succeed in your attempts they would fall to my lot naturally as part of your ‘experiment,’ and would prove your triumph. But as far as my personality is concerned, you would not care what became of me, though with youth and beauty I might turn the tables on you!” She laughed,—then said again: “Give me my dose!”

“I told you before that it would be better to take it when we go outside the laboratory,” he answered. “Suppose you became insensible! I could not leave you here.”

"Why not?" she demanded, recklessly. "It would not matter to you. Please give it to me!—Whether I live or die I like doing things quickly!"

With a certain sense of mingled compassion, admiration and reluctance, he handed her the phial. She looked with intent interest at the shining drop pent within, which glowed like a fine topaz, now fiery orange, now red, now pale amber, and moved up and down as rapidly and restlessly as quicksilver.

"How pretty it is!" she said. "If it would only condense and harden into a gem one would like to wear it in a ring! It would outshine all Professor Chauvet's jewels. Well, Dr. Dimitrius, good-night! If I fall into your dark pool don't trouble to fish me out!—but if not, don't leave me here till morning!"

And, smiling, she put the phial to her lips and swallowed its contents.

Dimitrius stood, silently watching. Would she swoon, as she almost did the last time?—or would she be convulsed? No!—she remained erect,—unswerving:—but, as if by some automatic movement, she lifted her arms slowly and clasped her hands above her head in an attitude of prayer. Her eyes closed—her breathing was scarcely perceptible—and so she remained as though frozen into stone. Moved beyond his usual calm by wonderment at this unexpected transformation of a living woman into a statue, he called her,—but she gave no answer. And then another remarkable thing happened. An aureole of white light began to form round her figure, beginning from the head and falling in brilliant rays to the feet,—her dress seemed a woven tissue of marvellous colours such as one finds painted for the robes of saints in antique missals, and her features, outlined against the roseate mist that filled the laboratory, were pure and almost transparent as alabaster. Thrilled with excitement, he could not speak—he dared not move,—he could only look, look, as though all his forces were concentrated in his eyes. How many minutes passed he could not determine, but he presently saw the light begin to pale,—one ray after another disappeared, quite slowly and as though each one were absorbed by some mysterious means into the

motionless figure which had seemingly projected them,—then, with equal slowness, Diana's upraised hands relaxed and her arms dropped to her sides—her eyes opened, brilliant and inquiring.

He went to her side. "Diana!" he said, in carefully hushed tones. "Diana——"

"Why did you wake me?" she asked plaintively, in a voice of melting sweetness. "Why take me away from the garden I had found? It was all mine!—and there were many friends—they said they had not seen me for centuries! I should have liked to stay with them a little longer!"

He listened, in something of alarm. Had she lost her senses? He knew it was possible that the potent force of his mysterious distillation might so attack the centres of the brain as to reverse their normal condition. He touched her hand,—it was warm and soft as velvet.

"Still dreaming, Diana?" he said, as gently as he could. "Will you not come with me now?"

She turned her eyes upon him. There was no sign of brain trouble in those clear orbs of vision—they were calm mirrors of sweet expression.

"Oh, it is you!" she said in more natural tones. "I really thought I had gone away from you altogether! It was a delightful experience!"

He was a trifle vexed. He hardly cared to hear that going away from him altogether was "a delightful experience." She was rapidly recovering from her trance-like condition, and swept back her hair from her brows with a relieved, yet puzzled gesture.

"So it's all over!" she said. "I'm here just the same as ever! I was sure I had gone away!"

"Where?" he asked.

"Oh, ever so far!" she answered. "I was carried off by people I couldn't see—but

they were kind and careful, and it was quite easy going. And then I came to a garden—oh!—such an exquisite place, full of the loveliest flowers—somebody said it was mine! I wish it were!"

"You were dreaming," he said, impatiently. "There's nothing in dreams! The chief point to me is that you have not suffered any pain. You have nothing to complain of?"

She thought a minute, trying to recall her sensations.

"No," she answered, truthfully, "nothing."

"Good! Then I can proceed without fear," he said. "Enough for to-night—we will go."

Her eyes were fixed on the revolving Wheel.

"It goes slowly because the sunshine has gone, I suppose?" she asked. "And all the light it produces now is from the interior stores it has gathered up in the day?"

He was surprised at the quickness of her perception.

"Yes—that is so," he said.

"Then it never stops absolutely dead?"

"Never."

She smiled.

"Wonderful Dimitrius! You have built up a little mechanical universe of your own and you are the god of it! You must be very pleased with yourself!"

"I am equally pleased with you," he said. "You surpass all my expectations."

"Thanks so much!" and she curtsied to him playfully. "May I say good-night? Will not your mother wonder where we are?"

"My mother is too sensible a woman to question my movements," he replied. "Come! You are sure you feel strong and well?"

“Quite sure!” she said, then paused, surprised at the intense way he looked at her.

“Have you ever heard these lines?” he asked, suddenly:

“O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!

Her beauty hangs upon the cheek of night,

Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop’s ear—

Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!”

Diana smiled happily.

“Of course! Shakespeare’s utterance! Who else has ever written or could write such lines?”

“I’m glad you know them!” he said, musingly. “They occurred to me just now—when——”

He broke off abruptly.

“Come!” he repeated. “We shall not see this place again for a couple of months—perhaps longer. And—the sooner we get away the better!”

“Why?” asked Diana, surprised.

“Why?” and a curious half-frowning expression darkened his brows. “You must wait to know why! You will not have to wait long!”

He signed to her to keep close behind him; and together they moved like phantom figures through the rosy mist that enveloped them, till, at the touch of his wizard hand, the door swung upwards to give them egress and descended again noiselessly as they passed out. The corridor, previously dark, was now dimly lit, but it was more a matter of groping than seeing, and Diana was glad when they reached the pleasantly warm and well-illumined hall of the house. There he turned and faced her.

“Now, not a word!” he said, with imperative sharpness. “Not a word of what you have seen, or—dreamed—to my mother! Say good-night to her, and go!”

She lifted her eyes to his in something of wonder and protest,—but obeyed his gesture and went straight into the drawing-room where Madame Dimitrius sat as usual, quietly knitting.

“I am to bid you good-night!” she said, smiling, as she knelt down for a moment by the old lady’s chair. “Dear, your son is very cross!—and I’m going to bed!”

Madame Dimitrius gazed upon her in utter amazement and something of fear. The face uplifted to hers was so radiant and fair that for a moment she was speechless, and the old hands that held the knitting trembled. Remembering her son’s command in good time, she made a strong effort to control herself, and forced a smile.

“That’s right, my dear!” she said. “Bed is the best place when you’re tired. I don’t think Féodor means to be cross——”

“Oh, no!” agreed Diana, springing up from her kneeling attitude, and kissing Madame’s pale cheek. “He doesn’t ‘mean’ to be anything—but he is! Good-night, dearest lady! You are always kind and sweet to me—and I’m grateful!”

With those words and an affectionate wave of her hand, she went,—and the moment she had left the room Dimitrius entered it. His mother rose from her chair, and made a gesture with her hands as though she were afraid and sought to repel him. He took those nervous, wavering hands and held them tenderly in his own.

“What’s the matter, mother mine?” he asked, playfully. “You have seen her?”

“Féodor! Féodor! You are dealing with strange powers!—perhaps powers of evil! Oh, my son! be careful, be careful what you do!” she implored, almost tearfully. “You may not go too far!”

“Too far, too far!” he echoed, lightly. “There is no too far or farthest where Nature and Science lead! The Flaming Sword!—it turns every way to keep the Tree of Life!—but I see the blossom under the blade!”

She looked up at his dark, strong face in mingled fondness and terror.

"You cannot re-create life, Féodor!" she said.

"Why not?" he demanded. "To-day our surgeons graft new flesh on old and succeed in their design—why should not fresh cells of life be formed through Nature's own germinating processes to take the place of those that perish? It is not an impossible theory,—I do not waste my time on problems that can never be solved. Come, come, Mother! Put your superstitious terrors aside—and if you have the faith in God that I have, you will realise that there are no 'powers of evil' save man's own uncontrolled passions, which he inherits from the brute creation, and which it is his business to master! No mere brute beast foraging the world for prey can be an astronomer, a scientist, a thinker, or a ruler of the powers of life,—but a MAN, with self-control, reason, and devout faith with humility, can!—for is not the evolvement of his being only 'a little lower than the angels'?"

She sighed, half incredulous.

"But beauty——" she said. "Actual beauty——"

"Beauty is a thing of health, form and atmosphere," he answered. "Easy enough to attain with these forces suitably combined, and no malign environment. Now, dearest mother, puzzle yourself no more over my mysteries! You have seen Diana—and you can guess my reason for wishing to get away to Davos Platz as soon as possible. People here will talk and wonder,—at Davos no one has seen her—not as she was when she first arrived here—and no questions are likely to be asked. Besides,—the experiment is not half completed—it has only just begun."

"When will it be finished?" his mother asked.

He smiled, and stooping, kissed her forehead.

"Not till the summer solstice," he said. "When light and heat are at their best and strongest, then I may reach my goal and win my victory!"

"And then?"

“And then?” he echoed, smiling. “Ah, who knows what then! Possibly a happier world!—and yet—did not the Angel Uriel say to the Prophet Esdras: ‘The Most High hath made this world for the many, but the world to come for the few!’ My secret is a part of the world to come!”

CHAPTER XVI

Two or three days later the Château Fragonard was closed,—its windows were shuttered and its gates locked. The servants were dismissed, all save Vasho, who, with his black face, white teeth, rolling eyes and dumb lips, remained as sole custodian. The usual callers called in vain,—and even the Baroness Rousillon, a notable and persistent inquirer into all matters of small social interest, could learn nothing beyond the fact (written neatly on a card which Vasho handed to all visitors) that “Dr. and Madame Dimitrius had left home for several weeks.” Of Diana May no information was given. Among those who were the most surprised and deeply chagrined at this turn of events was the Marchese Farnese, who had himself been compelled to be away for some time on business in Paris, but who had returned as soon as he could to Geneva in the hope of improving his acquaintance with Diana sufficiently to procure some sort of reliable information as to the problems and projects of Dimitrius. His disappointment was keen and bitter, for not only did he find her gone, but he could obtain no clue as to her whereabouts. And even Professor Chauvet had been left very much in the dark, for Diana had only written him the briefest note, running thus:

“Dear Kind Friend!

“I’m going away for a little while with Madame Dimitrius, who needs change of air and scene, but I will let you know directly I come back. I shall think of you very often while absent!

“Affectionately yours, “Diana.”

Chauvet put by these brief lines very preciously in the safe where he kept his jewels,—"Affectionately yours" was a great consolation, he thought!—they almost touched the verge of tenderness!—there was surely hope for him! And he amused himself in his solitary hours with the drawing of an exquisite design for a small coronal to be worn in Diana's hair, wherein he purposed having some of his rarest jewels set in a fashion of his own.

Meanwhile the frozen stillness of an exceptionally dreary and bitter winter enveloped the Château Fragonard and its beautiful gardens, and no one was ever seen to go to it, or come from it, though there were certain residents on the opposite side of the lake who could perceive its roof and chimneys through the leafless trees and who declared that its great glass dome was always more or less illumined as though a light were constantly kept burning within. Rumour was busy at first with all sorts of suggestions and contradictions, but as there appeared to be no foundation for any one of them, the talk gradually wore itself out, most people being always too much interested in themselves to keep up any interest in others for long.

But, had Rumour a million eyes, as it is said to have a million tongues, it might well have had occasion to use them all during the full swing of that particular "season" at Davos Platz, where, in the "winter sports" and gaieties of the time, Diana was an admired "belle" and universal favourite. She, who only three or four months previously had been distinctly "on the shelf" or "in the way," was now flattered and sought after by a whole train of male admirers, who apparently could never have enough of her society. She conversed brilliantly, danced exquisitely, and skated perfectly,—so perfectly indeed that one fatuous elderly gentleman nicknamed her "the Ice Queen," and another, younger but not less enterprising, addressed her as "Boule de Neige," conceiving the title prettier in French than in rough English as "Snowball." She accepted the attentions lavished upon her with amused indifference, which made her still more attractive to men whose "sporting" tendencies are invariably sharpened by obstacles in the way of securing their game,

and, much to her own interest, found herself the centre of all sorts of rivalries and jealousies.

“If they only knew my age!” she thought one day. “If they only knew!”

But they did not know. And it would have been quite impossible for them to guess. Thus much Diana herself was now forced to concede. Every day her mirror showed her a fair, unworn face, with the softly rounded outline of youth, and the clear eyes which betoken the unconscious joy of perfect health and vitality, and the change in her was so marked and manifest that she no longer hesitated to speak to Madame Dimitrius about it when they were alone together. At first the old lady was very nervous of the subject, and fearful lest she should in some way displease her masterful son,—but Diana reassured her, promising that he should never know the nature or extent of their confidences. It was a great relief to them both when they entered into closer mutual relations and decided to talk to each other freely—especially to Madame Dimitrius, who was anxious to be made certain that Diana was not in any physical suffering or mental distress through the exercise of Féodor’s extraordinary and, as she imagined, almost supernatural powers. She was soon satisfied on that score, for Diana could assure her, with truth, that she had never felt better or brighter.

“It’s like a new life,” she said, one day, as she sat at the window of their private sitting-room in the hotel, which commanded a fine view of the snowy mountain summits. “I feel as if I had somehow been born again! All my past years seem rolled away like so much rubbish! I’ve often thought of those words: ‘Except ye be born again ye shall not enter into the Kingdom of God.’ They used to be a mystery to me, but they’re not so mysterious now! And it is just like ‘entering the Kingdom of God’ to look out on this glorious beauty of the mountains, the snow and the pine trees, and to feel alive to it all, grateful for it all, loving it all,—as I do!”

Madame Dimitrius regarded her earnestly.

"You do not think, then," she suggested, "that my son is guilty of any offence against the Almighty by his dealings with these strange, unknown forces——"

"Dear Madame!" interrupted Diana, quickly—"do not for a moment entertain such an idea! It belongs to those foolish times when the Church was afraid to know the truth and tortured people for telling it! What offence can there be in exerting to the utmost, the intelligent faculties God has given us, and in studying to find out the wonderful advantages and benefits which may be possessed by those who cultivate reason and knowledge! I think it is a far greater offence against God, to wilfully remain in ignorance of His goodness to us all!"

"Perhaps!"—and the old lady sighed—then smiled. "I'm afraid I am one of those who 'darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge!' But, after all, the great thing for me is that I see you well and happy—and greatest marvel of all—growing younger every day! You see that for yourself, don't you?—and you feel it?"

"Yes." And, as she spoke, a strange, far-away look came into Diana's eyes. "But—there is one thing I wish I could explain, even to myself! I feel well, happy, keenly alive to all I see and hear,—and yet—there is an odd sensation back of it all!—a feeling that I have no feeling!"

"My dear Diana!" And Madame Dimitrius's pale blue eyes opened a little wider. "What a strange thing to say! You are full of feeling!"

Diana shook her head decisively.

"No, I'm not! It's all put on! It is, really! That is, so far as human beings and human events are concerned. I feel nothing whatever about them! The only 'feeling' I have is a sort of suppressed ecstasy of delight in beauty—the beauty of the skies, the effects of sunlight on the hills and plains, the loveliness of a flower or a bit of exquisite natural scenery—but I have somehow lost the sense of all association with humanity!"

"But—my dear girl!——" began Madame, in perplexity.

Diana laughed.

“Ah, now you call me a ‘girl,’ too!” she exclaimed, merrily. “Just as they all do here in this hotel! I’m not a girl at all—I’m a woman of ‘mature years,’ but nobody would believe it! Even Dr. Féodor himself is getting puzzled—for he addressed me as ‘dear child’ this very morning!” She laughed again—her pretty laugh,—which was like a musical cadence.

“Yes, dear Madame!—it’s a fact!—with my renewal of youth I’m developing youth’s happy-go-lucky indifference to emotions! People,—the creatures that walk about on two legs and eat and talk—have absolutely no interest for me!—unless they do something absurd which they imagine to be clever—and that makes me laugh,—sometimes,—not always! Even your wonderful son, with his amazing powers and his magnetic eyes which used to send a thrill right down my spine, fails to move me now to any concern as to my ultimate fate in his hands. I know that he is, so far, succeeding in his experiment; but what the final result may be I don’t know—and—I don’t care!”

“You don’t care!” echoed Madame, in bewilderment. “Really and truly? You don’t care?”

“No, not a bit! That’s just the worst of it! See here, you dear, kind woman!—here I am; a bought ‘subject’ for Dr. Féodor to try his skill upon. He told me plainly enough on one occasion that it wouldn’t matter and couldn’t be helped if I died under his treatment—and I quite agreed with him. Up to the present I’m not dead and don’t feel like dying—but I’m hardening! Yes! that’s it! Steadily, slowly hardening! Not in my muscles—not in my arteries—no!—but in my sentiments and emotions which are becoming positively nil!” Her merry laugh rang out again, and her eyes sparkled with amusement. “But what a good thing it is, after all! Men are so fond of telling one that they hate ‘emotions’—so it’s just as well to be without them! Now, for instance, I’m having a splendid time here—I love all the exercise in the

open air, the skating, tobogganing, and dancing in the evening,—it's all great fun, but I don't 'feel' that it is as splendid as it seems! Men flatter me every day,—they say 'How well you skate!' or 'How well you dance!' 'How well you play!' or even 'How charming you look!' and if such things had been said to me in England six months ago I should have been so happy and at ease that I should never have been afraid and awkward as I generally was in society—but now! Why now I simply don't care!—I only think what fools men are!"

"But you must remember," said Madame Dimitrius gently—"you were very different in appearance six months ago to what you are now——"

"Exactly! That's just it!" And Diana gave an expressive gesture of utter disdain. "That's what I hate and despise! One is judged by looks only. I'm just the same woman as ever—six months ago I danced as well, skated as well, and played the piano as well as I do now—but no one ever gave me the smallest encouragement! Now everything I do is made the subject of exaggerated compliment, by the men of course!—not by the women; they always hate a successful rival of their own sex! Ah, how petty and contemptible it all is! You see I'm growing young looks with old experience!—rather a dangerous combination of forces, I think!—however, if our souls become angels when we die, they will have a vast experience to look back upon, dating from the beginning of creation!"

"And, looking back so far, they will understand all," said Madame Dimitrius. "As one of our great writers has said: 'To know all is to pardon all.'"

Diana shrugged her shoulders.

"Perhaps!" she carelessly conceded. "But that's just where I should fail as an angel! I cannot 'pardon all.' I hold a standing grudge against injustice, callousness, cruelty and cowardice. I forgive none of these things. I loathe a hypocrite—especially a pious one! I should take pleasure in revenge of some sort on any such loathsome creature. I would rather save a fly from drowning in the milk-jug than a treacherous

human being from the gallows!”

“Dear me!” and Madame smiled—“you speak very strongly, Diana! Especially when you assure me that you cannot ‘feel!’”

“Oh, I can feel hatred!” said Diana. “That sort of feeling seems to have a good grip of me! But love, interest, sympathy for other folks—no!—ten thousand times no! One might love a man with all the ardour and passion of a lifetime, and yet he may be capable of boasting of your ‘interest’ in him at his club and damaging your reputation—(you know some clubs are like old washerwomen’s corners where they meet to talk scandal)—and you may waste half your time in interest and sympathy for other folks and they’ll only ask dubiously, ‘What is it all for?’ and ‘round’ on you at the first opportunity, never crediting you with either honesty or unselfishness in your words or actions. No, no! It’s best to ‘play’ the world’s puppets—never to become one of them!”

“You are bitter, my dear!” commented Madame. “I think it is because you have missed a man’s true love.”

Diana laughed and sprang up from her chair.

“Maybe!” she replied. “But—‘a man’s true love’—as I see it, seems hardly worth the missing! You are a dear, sentimental darling!—you have lived in the ‘early Victorian’ manner, finding an agreeable lover who gave you his heart, after the fashion of an antique Valentine, and whom you married in the proper and conventional style, and in due course gave him a baby. That’s it! And oh, SUCH a baby! Féodor Dimitrius!—doctor of sciences and master of innumerable secrets of nature—yet, after all, only your ‘baby!’ It is a miracle! But I wonder if it was worth while! Don’t mind my nonsense, dearest lady!—just think of me as hardening and shining!—like bits of the glacier we saw the other day which move only about an inch in a thousand years! There’s a ‘sports’ ball on the ice to-night—a full moon too!—and your wonderful son has agreed to skate with me—I wish you would come

and look at us!"

"I'm too old," said Madame Dimitrius, with a slight sigh. "I wish Féodor would make me young as he is making you!"

"He's afraid!" and Diana stood, looking at her for a moment. "He's afraid of killing you! But he's not afraid of killing me!"

With that she went,—and Madame, laying down her work, folded her hands and prayed silently that no evil might come to her beloved son through the strange mysteries which he was seeking to solve, and which to her simple and uninstructed mind appeared connected with the powers of darkness rather than the powers of light.

That evening Diana scored a triumph as belle of the "sports" ball. Attired in a becoming skating costume of black velvet trimmed with white fur, with a charming little "toque" hat to match, set jauntily on her bright hair, and a bunch of edelweiss at her throat, she figured as an extremely pretty "girl," and her admirers were many. When Dimitrius came to claim his promised "glissade" by her side, she welcomed him smilingly, yet with an indifference which piqued him.

"Are you tired?" he asked. "Would you rather not skate any more just now?"

She gave him an amused look.

"I am never tired," she said. "I could skate for ever, if it were not, like all things, certain to become monotonous. And I'm sure it's very good of you to skate with a woman 'of mature years' when there are so many nice girls about."

"You are the prettiest 'girl' here," he answered, with a smile. "Everyone says so!"

"And what do you say to everyone?" she demanded.

"I agree. Naturally!"

He took her hand, and together they started skimming easily over the ice, now shining like polished crystal in the radiance of the moon and the light thrown from

torches set round the expanse of the skating ground by the hotel purveyors of pleasure for their visitors. Diana's lightness and grace of movement had from the first been the subject of admiring comment in the little world of humanity, gathered for the season on those Swiss mountain heights, but this evening she seemed to surpass herself, and, with Dimitrius, executed wonderful steps and "figures" at flying speed with the ease of a bird on the wing. Men looked on in glum annoyance that Dimitrius should have so much of her company, and women eyed her with scarcely concealed jealousy. But at the end of an hour she said she had "had enough of it," and pulling off her skates she walked with a kind of sedate submissiveness beside Dimitrius away from the gay scene on the ice back to the hotel. Their way led through an avenue of pine trees, which, stiffly uplifting their spear-like points to the frosty skies and bright moon, looked like fantastic giant sentinels on guard for the night. Stopping abruptly in the midst of the eerie winter stillness she said suddenly:

"Dr. Féodor, do you know I've had three proposals of marriage since I've been here?"

He smiled indulgently.

"Ay, indeed! I'm not surprised! And you have refused them all?"

"Of course! What's the good of them?"

His dark eyes glittered questioningly upon her through their veiling, sleepy lids.

"The good of them? Well, really, that is for you to decide! If you want a husband——"

"I don't!" she said, emphatically, with a decisive little stamp of her foot on the frozen ground. "I should hate him!"

"Unhappy wretch! Why?"

"Oh, because!"—she hesitated, then laughed—"because he would be always about! He'd have the right to go with me everywhere—such a bore!"

“Love——” began Dimitrius, sententiously.

“Love!” She flashed a look of utter scorn upon him. “You don’t believe in it—neither do I! What have we to do with love?”

“Nothing!” he agreed, quietly. “But—you are really rewarding my studies, Diana! You are growing very pretty!”

She turned from him with a gesture of offended impatience and walked on. He caught up to her.

“You don’t like my telling you that?” he said.

“No. Because the ‘prettiness’ is your forced product. It’s not my natural output.”

He seized her hand somewhat roughly and held it as in a vice.

“You talk foolishly!” he said, in a low, stern voice. “My ‘forced product’ as you call it, is not mine, except in so far that I have found and made use of the forces of regenerative life which are in God’s life and air and which enter into the work of all creation. Your ‘prettiness’ is God’s work!—lift up your eyes to the Almighty Power which ‘maketh all things new!’”

Awed and startled by the impassioned tone of his voice and his impressive manner, she stood inert, her hand remaining passively in his firm grasp.

“Men propose to you,” he went on, “because they find you attractive, and because your face and figure excite their passions—there is no real ‘love’ in the case, any more than there is in most proposals. The magnetism of sex is the thing that ‘pulls’—but you—you, my ‘subject,’ have no sex! That’s what nobody outside ourselves is likely to understand. The ‘love’ which is purely physical,—the mating which has for its object the breeding of children, is not for you any more than it would be for an angel—you are removed from its material and sensual contact. But the love which should touch your soul to immortal issues, and which by its very character is expressed through youth and beauty,—that may come to you!—that may

be yours in due time! Meanwhile, beware how you talk of my ‘forced product’—for behind all the powers I am permitted to use is the Greatest Power of all, to Whom I am but the poorest of servants!”

A deep sigh broke from him and he released her hand as suddenly as he had grasped it.

“You have felt no ill effects from the treatment?” he then asked, in a matter-of-fact tone.

“No,” she answered. “None at all—except——”

“Except—what?”

“Oh, well!—no very great matter! Only that I seem to have lost something out of myself—I have no interest in persons or events—no sympathy with human kind. It’s curious, isn’t it? I feel that I belong more to the atmosphere than to the earth, and that I love trees, grass, flowers, birds and what is called the world of Nature more than the world of men. Of course I always loved Nature,—but what was once a preference has now become a passion—and perhaps, when you’ve done with me, if I live, I shall go and be a sort of hermit in the woods, away altogether from ‘people.’ I don’t like flesh and blood!—there’s a kind of coarseness in it!” she concluded carelessly as she resumed her walk towards the hotel.

He was puzzled and perplexed. He watched her as she moved, and noted, as he had done several times that evening, the exquisite lightness of her step.

“Well, at any rate, you are not, physically speaking, any the worse for receiving my treatment once a fortnight?” he asked.

“Oh, no! I am very well indeed!” she replied at once. “I can truthfully assure you I never felt better. Your strange ‘fire-drop’ never gives me any uncanny ‘sensations’ now—I don’t mind it at all. It seems to fill me with a sort of brightness and buoyancy. But I have no actual ‘feeling’ about it—neither pleasure nor pain. That’s rather odd, isn’t it?”

They were at the entrance door of the hotel, and stood on the steps before going in. The moonlight fell slantwise on Diana's face and showed it wonderfully fair and calm, like that of a sculptured angel in some niche of a cathedral.

"Yes—perhaps it is odd," he answered. "As I have already told you, I am not cognisant of the possible action of the commingled elements I have distilled,—I can only test them and watch their effect upon you, in order to gain the necessary knowledge. But that you have no 'feeling' seems to me an exaggerated statement,—for instance, you must have 'felt' a good deal of pleasure in your skating to-night?"

"Not the least in the world!" and the smile she gave him was as chill as a moonbeam on snow. "I skated on the ice with the same volition as a bubble floats along the air,—as unconscious as the bubble—and as indifferent! The bubble does not care when it breaks—nor do I! Good-night!"

She pushed open the swing door of the hotel and passed in.

He remained outside in the moonlight, vexed with himself and her, though he could not have told why. He lit a cigar and strolled slowly backwards and forwards in the front of the hotel, trying to soothe his inward irritation by smoking, but the effect was rather futile.

"She is wonderfully pretty and attractive now," he mused. "If all succeeds she will be beautiful. And what then? I wonder! With every process of age stopped and reversed, and with all the stimulating forces of creative regeneration working in every cell of her body it is impossible to tell how she may develop—and yet—her mentality may remain the same! This is easily accounted for, because all one's experiences of life from childhood make permanent impressions on the brain and stay there. Like the negatives stored in a photographer's dark room one cannot alter them. And the puzzle to me is, how will her mentality 'carry' with her new personality? Will she know how to hold the balance between them? I can see already

that men are quite likely to lose their heads about her—but what does that matter! It is not the first time they have maddened themselves for women who are set beyond the pale of mere sex."

He looked up at the still sky,—the frostily sparkling stars,—the snowy peaks of the mountains and the bright moon.

"Thank God I have never loved any woman save my mother!" he said. "For so I have been spared both idleness and worry! To lose one's time and peace because a woman smiles or frowns is to prove one's self a fool or a madman!"

And going into the hotel, he finished his cigar in the lounge where other men were smoking, all unaware that several of them detested the sight of his handsome face and figure for no other reason than that he seemed ostensibly to be the guardian, as his mother was the chaperon, of the prettiest "girl" of that season at Davos, Diana May, and therefore nothing was more likely than that she should fall in love with him and he with her. It is always in this sort of fashion that the goose-gabble of "society" arranges persons and events to its own satisfaction, never realising that being only geese they cannot see beyond the circle of their own restricted farmyard.

CHAPTER XVII

It was quite the end of the season at Davos before Dimitrius quitted it and took his mother and Diana on to the Riviera. Here, in the warm sunshine of the early Southern spring he began to study with keener and closer interest the progress of his "subject," whose manner towards him and general bearing became more and more perplexing as time went on. She was perfectly docile and amiable,—cheerful and full of thoughtful care and attention for Madame Dimitrius,—and every fortnight took his mysterious "potion" in his presence without hesitation or question, so that he had nothing to complain of—but there was a new individuality about her which held her aloof in a way that he was at a loss to account for. Wherever she went she was admired,—men stared, talked and sought introductions, and she received all the

social attention of an acknowledged “belle” without seeking or desiring it.

One evening at a hotel in Cannes she was somewhat perturbed by seeing a portly elderly man whom she recognised as a club friend of her father’s, and one who had been a frequent week-end visitor at Rose Lea. She hoped he would not hear her name, but she was too much the observed of all observers to escape notice, and it was with some trepidation that she saw him coming towards her with the rolling gait suggestive of life-long whisky-sodas—a “man-about-town” manner she knew and detested.

“Pardon me!” he said, with an openly admiring glance, “but I have just been wondering whether you are any relation of some friends of mine in England named May. Curiously enough, they had a daughter called Diana.”

“Really!” And Diana smiled—a little cold, haughty smile which was becoming habitual with her. “I’m afraid I cannot claim the honour of their acquaintance!”

She spoke in a purposely repellent manner, whereat the bold intruder was rendered awkward and abashed.

“I know I should not address you without an introduction,” he said stammeringly. “I hope you will excuse me! But my old friend Polly——”

“Your old friend—what?” drawled Diana, carelessly, unfurling a fan and waving it idly to and fro.

“Polly—we call him Polly for fun,” he explained. “His full name is James Polydore May. And his daughter, Diana, was drowned last summer—drowned while bathing.”

“Dear me, how very sad!” and Diana concealed a slight yawn behind her fan. “Poor girl!”

“Oh, she wasn’t a girl!” sniggered her informant. “She was quite an old maid—over forty by a good way. But it was rather an unfortunate affair.”

“Why?” asked Diana. “I don’t see it at all! Women over forty who have failed to get

married shouldn't live! Don't you agree?"

He sniggered again.

"Well,—perhaps I do!—perhaps I do! But we mustn't be severe—we mustn't be severe! We shall get old ourselves some day!"

"We shall indeed!" Diana responded, ironically. "Even you must have passed your twentieth birthday!"

He got up a spasmodic laugh at this, but looked very foolish all the same.

"Did you—in these psychic days—think I might be the drowned old maid reincarnated?" she continued, lazily, still playing with her fan.

This time his laugh was unforced and genuine.

"You! My dear young lady! The Miss May I knew might be your mother! No,—it was only the curious coincidence of names that made me wonder if you were any relative."

"There are many people in the world of the same name," remarked Diana.

"Quite so! You will excuse me, I'm sure, and accept my apologies!"

She bent her head carelessly and he moved away.

A few minutes later Dimitrius approached her.

"Come out on the terrace," he said. "It's quite warm and there's a fine moon. Come and tell me all about it!"

She looked at him in surprise.

"All about it? What do you mean?"

"All about the little podgy man who was talking to you! You've met him before, haven't you? Yes? Come along!—let's hear the little tale of woe!"

His manner was so gentle and playful that she hardly understood it—it was something quite new. She obeyed his smiling gesture and throwing a light scarf

about her shoulders went out with him on the terrace which dominated the smooth sloping lawn in front of the hotel, where palms lifted their fringed heads to the almost violet sky and the scent of mimosa filled every channel of the moonlit air.

"I heard all he said to you," went on Dimitrius. "I was sitting behind you, hidden by a big orange tree in a tub,—not purposely hidden, I assure you! And so you are drowned!"

He laughed,—then, as he saw she was about to speak, held up his hand.

"Hush! I can guess it all! Not wanted at home, except as a household drudge—unloved and alone in the world, you made an exit—not a real exit—just a stage one!—and came to me! Excellently managed!—for now, being drowned and dead, as the old Diana, you can live in your own way as the young one! And you are quite safe! Your own father wouldn't know you!"

She was silent, looking gravely out to sea and the scarcely visible line of the Esterel Mountains.

"You mustn't resent my quickness in guessing!" he continued. "I can always put two and two together and make four! Our podgy friend has been unconsciously a very good test of the change in you."

She turned her head and looked fixedly at him.

"Yes. Of the outward change. But of the inward, even you know nothing!"

"Do I not? And will you not tell me?"

She smiled strangely.

"It will be difficult. But as your 'subject' I suppose I am bound to tell——"

He made a slight, deprecatory gesture.

"Not unless you wish."

"I have no wishes," she replied. "The matter is, like everything else, quite indifferent to me. You have guessed rightly as to the causes of my coming to you—my father

and mother were much disappointed at my losing all my ‘chances’ as the world puts it, and failing to establish myself in a respectable married position—I was a drag on their wheel, though they are both quite old people,—so I relieved them of my presence in the only way I could think of to make them sure they were rid of me for ever. Then—on the faith of your advertisement I came to you. You know all the rest—and you also know that the ‘experiment’ for which you wanted ‘a woman of mature years’ is—so far—successful. But——”

“There are no buts,” interrupted Dimitrius. “It is more than fulfilling my hopes and dreams!—and I foresee an ultimate triumph!—a discovery which shall revivify and regenerate the human race! You too—surely you must enjoy the sense of youth—the delight of seeing your own face in the mirror——?”

Diana shrugged her shoulders.

“It leaves me cold!” she said. “It’s a pretty face—quite charming, in fact!—but it seems to me to be the face of somebody else! I don’t feel in myself that I possess it! And the ‘sense of youth’ you speak of has the same impression—it is somebody else’s sense of youth!” Her eyes glittered in the moonlight, and her voice, low and intensely musical, had a curious appealing note in it. “Féodor Dimitrius, it is not human!” He was vaguely startled by her look and manner.

“Not human?——” he repeated, wonderingly.

“No—not human! This beauty, this youth which you have recreated in me, are not human! They are a portion of the air and the sunlight—of the natural elements—they make my body buoyant, my spirit restless. I long for some means to lift myself altogether from the gross earth, away from heavy and cloddish humanity, for which I have not a remnant of sympathy! I am not of it!—I am changed,—and it is you that have changed me. Understand me well, if you can!—You have filled me with a strange force which in its process of action is beyond your knowledge,—and by its means I have risen so far above you that I hardly know you!”

She uttered these strange words calmly and deliberately in an even tone of perfect sweetness.

A sudden and uncontrollable impulse of anger seized him.

“That is not true!” he said, almost fiercely. “You know me for your master!”

She bent her head, showing no offence.

“Possibly! For the present.” And again she looked lingeringly, gravely out towards the sea. “Shall we go in now?”

“One moment!” he said, his voice vibrating with suppressed passion. “What you feel, or imagine you feel, is no actual business of mine. I have set myself to force a secret of Nature from the darkness in which it has been concealed for ages—a secret only dimly guessed at by the sect of the Rosicrucians—and I know myself to be on the brink of a vast scientific discovery. If you fail me now, all is lost——”

“I shall not fail you,” she interposed quietly.

“You may—you may!” and he gave a gesture half of wrath, half of appeal. “Who knows what you will do when the final ordeal comes! With these strange ideas of yours—born of feminine hysteria, I suppose—who can foretell the folly of your actions?—or the obedience? And yet you promised—you promised——”

She turned to him with a smile.

“I promised—and I shall fulfil!” she said. “What a shaken spirit is yours!—You cannot trust—you cannot believe! I have told you, and I repeat it—that I place my life in your hands to do what you will with it—to end it even, if so you decide. But if it continues to be a life that lives, on its present line of change, it will be a life above you and beyond you! That is what I wish you to understand.”

She drew her scarf about her and moved along the terrace to re-enter the lounge of the hotel. The outline of her figure was the embodiment of grace, and the ease of her step suggested an assured dignity.

He followed her,—perplexed, and in a manner ashamed at having shown anger. Gently she bade him “good-night” and went at once to her room. Madame Dimitrius had retired quite an hour previously.

Once alone, she sat down to consider herself and the position in which she was placed. Before her was her mirror, and she saw reflected therein a young face, and the lustre of young eyes darkly blue and brilliant, which gave light to the features as the sun gives light to the petals of a flower. She saw a dazzlingly clear skin as fair as the cup of a lily, and she studied each point of perfection with the critical care of an analyst or dissector. Every line of age or worry had vanished,—and the bright hair of which she had always been pardonably proud, had gained a deeper sheen, a richer hue, while it had grown much more luxuriant and beautiful.

“And now,” she mused, “now,—how is it that when I can attract love, I no longer want it? That I do not care if I never saw a human being again? That human beings bore and disgust me? That something else fills me,—desires to which I can give no name?”

She rose from her chair and went to the window. It opened out to a small private balcony facing the Mediterranean, and she stood there as in a dream, looking at the deep splendour of the southern sky. One great star, bright as the moon itself, shone just opposite to her, like a splendid jewel set on dark velvet. She drew a deep breath.

“To this I belong!” she said, softly—“To this—and only this!”

She made an exquisite picture, had she known it,—and had any one of her numerous admirers been there to see her, he might have become as ecstatic as Shakespeare’s Romeo. But for herself she had no thought, so far as her appearance was concerned,—something weird and mystical had entered into her being, and it was this new self of hers that occupied all her thoughts and swayed all her emotions.

Just before they left Cannes to return to Geneva, Dimitrius asked her to an interview with himself and his mother alone. They had serious matters to discuss, he said, and

important details to decide upon. She found Madame Dimitrius pale and nervous, with trembling hands and tearful eyes,—while Dimitrius himself had a hard, inflexible bearing as of one who had a disagreeable duty to perform, but who, nevertheless, was determined to see it through.

"Now, Miss May," he said, "we have come to a point of action in which it is necessary to explain a few things to you, so that there shall be no misunderstanding or confusion. My mother is now, to a very great extent, in my confidence, as her assistance and co-operation will be necessary. It is nearing the end of April, and we propose to return to the Château Fragonard immediately. We shall open the house and admit our neighbours and acquaintances to visit us as usual, but—for reasons which must be quite apparent to you—you are not to be seen. It is to be supposed that you have returned to England. You follow me?"

He spoke with a businesslike formality, and Diana, smiling, nodded a cheerful acquiescence,—then seeing that Madame Dimitrius looked troubled, went and sat down by her, taking her hand and holding it affectionately in her own. "You will keep to your suite of apartments," Dimitrius continued, "and Vasho will be your sole attendant,—with the exception of my mother and myself!" Here a sudden smile lightened his rather stern expression. "I shall give myself the pleasure of taking you out every day in the fresh air,—fortunately, from our gardens one can see without being seen."

Diana, still caressing Madame Dimitrius's fragile old hand, sat placidly silent.

"You are quite agreeable to this arrangement?" went on Dimitrius—"You have nothing to suggest on your own behalf?"

"Nothing whatever!" she answered. "Only—how long is it to last?"

He raised his eyes and fixed them upon her with a strange expression.

"On the twenty-first of June," he said, "I make my final test upon you—the conclusion of my 'experiment.' After the twenty-fourth you will be free. Free to go

where you please—to do as you like. Like Shakespeare's 'Prospero,' I will give my 'fine sprite' her liberty!"

"Thank you!" and she laughed a little, bending her head towards Madame Dimitrius. "Do you hear that, dear lady? Think of it! What good times there are in store for me! If I can only 'feel' that they are good!—or even bad!—it would be quite a sensation!" And she flashed a bright look at Dimitrius as he stood watching her almost morosely. "Well!" she said, addressing him, "after the twenty-fourth of June, if I live, and if you permit it, I want to go back to England. Can that be arranged?"

"Assuredly! I will find you a chaperone——"

"A chaperone!" Her eyes opened widely in surprise and amusement. "Oh, no! I'm quite old enough to travel alone!"

"That will not be apparent to the world"—And he smiled again in his dark, reluctant way—"But—we shall see. In any case, if you wish to go to England, you shall be properly escorted."

"And if you go, will you not come back to us?" asked Madame Dimitrius, rather wistfully. "I do not want to part with you altogether!"

"You shall not, dear Madame! I will come back." And she gently kissed the hand she held. "Even Professor Chauvet may want to see me again!"

Dimitrius gave her a sharp glance.

"That old man is fond of you?" he said, tentatively.

"Of course he is!" And she laughed again. "Who would not be fond of me! Excellent Dr. Dimitrius! Few men are so impervious to woman as yourself!"

"You think me impervious?"

"I think a rock by the sea or block of stone more impressionable!" she replied, merrily. "But that is as it should be. Men of science must be men without feeling,—they could not do their work if they 'felt' things."

"I disagree," said Dimitrius, quickly—"it is just because men of science 'feel' the brevity and misery of human life so keenly that they study to alleviate some of its pangs, and spare some of its waste. They seek to prove the Why and the Wherefore of the apparent uselessness of existence——"

"Nothing is useless, surely!" put in Diana—"Not even a grain of dust!"

"Where is the dust of Carthage?" he retorted—"Of Babylon? Of Nineveh? With what elements has it commingled to make more men as wise, as foolish, as sane, or as mad as the generations passed away? The splendour, the riches, the conquests, the glories of these cities were as great or greater than any that modern civilisation can boast of—and yet—what remains? Dust? And is the dust necessary and valuable? Who can tell! Who knows!"

"And with all the mystery and uncertainty, is it not better to trust in God?" said Madame Dimitrius, gently. "Perhaps the little child who says 'Our Father' is nearer to Divine Truth than all the science of the world."

"Sweetly thought and sweetly said, my Mother!" answered Dimitrius. "But, believe me, I can say 'Our Father' with a more perfect and exalted faith now than I did when I was a child at your knee. And why? Because I know surely that there is 'Our Father' which is in Heaven!—and because He permits us to use reason, judgment and a sane comprehension of Nature, even so I seek to learn what I am confident He wishes us to know!"

"At all risks?" his mother hinted, in a low tone.

"At all risks!" he answered. "A political government risks millions of human lives to settle a temporary national dispute—I risk one life to make millions happier! And"—here he looked steadily at Diana with a certain grave kindness in his eyes—"she is brave enough to take the risk!"

Diana met his look with equal steadiness.

"I do not even think about it!" she said—"It does not seem worth while!"

CHAPTER XVIII

The strange spirit of complete indifference, and the attitude of finding nothing, apparently, worth the trouble of thinking about, stood Diana in such good stead, that she found no unpleasantness or restriction in being more or less a prisoner in her own rooms on her return to the Château Fragonard. The lovely house was thrown open to the usual callers and neighbours,—people came and went,—the gardens, glorious now with a wealth of blossom, were the favourite resort of many visitors to Madame Dimitrius and her son,—and Diana, looking from her pretty salon through one of the windows which had so deep an embrasure that she could see everything without any fear of herself being discovered, often watched groups of men and smartly attired women strolling over the velvety lawns or down the carefully kept paths among the flowers, though always with a curious lack of interest. They seemed to have no connection with her own existence. True to his promise, Dr. Dimitrius came every day to take her out when no other persons were in the house or grounds,—and these walks were a vague source of pleasure to her, though she felt she would have been happier and more at ease had she been allowed to take them quite alone. Madame Dimitrius was unwearying in her affectionate regard and attention, and always spent the greater part of each day with her, displaying a tenderness and consideration for her which six months previously would have moved her to passionate gratitude, but which now only stirred in her mind a faint sense of surprise. All her sensations were as of one, who, by some mysterious means, had been removed from the comprehension of human contact,—though her intimacy with what the world is pleased to consider the non-reasoning things of creation had become keenly intensified, and more closely sympathetic.

There was unconcealed disappointment among the few, who, during the past autumn, had met her at the Château, when they were told she had gone back to England. Baroness de Rousillon was, in particular, much annoyed, for she had made a compact with the Marchese Farnese to enter into close and friendly relations with

Diana, and to find out from her, if at all possible, the sort of work which went on in the huge domed laboratory wherein Dimitrius appeared to pass so much of his time. Farnese himself said little of his vexation,—but he left Geneva almost immediately on hearing the news, and without informing Dimitrius of his intention, went straight to London, resolved to probe what he considered a "mystery" to its centre. As for Professor Chauvet, no words could describe his surprise and deep chagrin at Diana's departure; he could not bring himself to believe that she had left Geneva without saying good-bye to him. So troubled and perplexed was he, that with his usual bluntness he made a clean confession to Dimitrius of his proposal of marriage. Dimitrius heard him with grave patience and a slight, supercilious uplifting of his dark eyebrows.

"I imagined as much!" he said, coldly, when he had heard all. "But Miss May is not young, and I should have thought she would have been glad of the chance of marriage you offered her. Did she give you any hope?"

Chauvet looked doubtfully reflective.

"She did and she didn't," he at last answered, rather ruefully. "And yet—she's not capricious—and I trust her. As you say, she's not young,—good heavens, what a heap of nonsense is talked about 'young' women!—frequently the most useless and stupid creatures!—only thinking of themselves from morning till night!—Miss May is a fine, intelligent creature—I should like to pass the few remaining years of my life in her company."

Dimitrius glanced him over with an air of disdainful compassion.

"I dare say she'll write to you," he said. "She's the kind of woman who might prefer to settle that sort of thing by letter."

"Can you give me her address?" at once asked the Professor, eagerly.

"Not at the moment," replied Dimitrius, composedly. "She has no fixed abode at present,—she's travelling with friends. As soon as I hear from her, I will let you

know!”

Chauvet, though always a trifle suspicious of other men’s meanings, was disarmed by the open frankness with which this promise was given, and though more or less uneasy in his own mind, allowed the matter to drop. Dimitrius was unkindly amused at his discomfiture.

“Imagine it!” he thought—“That exquisite creation of mine wedded to so unsatisfactory a product of ill-assorted elements!”

Meanwhile, Diana, imprisoned in her luxurious suite of rooms, had nothing to complain of. She read many books, practised her music, worked at her tapestry, and last, not least, studied herself. She had begun to be worth studying. Looking in her mirror, she saw a loveliness delicate and well-nigh unearthly, bathing her in its growing lustre as in a mysteriously brilliant atmosphere. Her eyes shone with a melting lustre like the eyes of a child appealing to be told some strange sweet fairy legend,—her complexion was so fair as to be almost dazzling, the pure ivory white of her skin showing soft flushes of pale rose with the healthful pulsing of her blood—her lips were of a dewy crimson tint such as one might see on a red flower-bud newly opened,—and as she gazed at herself and reluctantly smiled at her own reflection, she had the curious impression that she was seeing the picture of somebody else in the glass,—somebody else who was young and enchantingly pretty, while she herself remained plain and elderly. And yet this was not the right view to take of her own personality, for apart altogether from her outward appearance she was conscious of a new vitality,—an abounding ecstasy of life,—a joy and strength which were well-nigh incomprehensible,—for though these sensations dominated every fibre of her being, they were not, as formerly, connected with any positive human interest. For one thing, she scarcely thought of Dimitrius at all, except that she had come to regard him as a sort of extraneous being—an upper servant told off to wait upon her after the fashion of Vasho,—and when she went out

with him, she went merely because she needed the fresh air and loved the open skies, not because she cared for his company, for she hardly spoke to him. Her strange behaviour completely puzzled him, but his deepening anxiety for the ultimate success of his “experiment” deterred him from pressing her too far with questions.

One evening during the first week in June, when the moon was showing a half crescent in the sky, a light wind ruffled the hundreds of roses on bush and stem that made the gardens fragrant, he went to her rooms to propose a sail on the lake. He heard her playing the piano,—the music she drew from the keys was wild and beautiful and new,—but as he entered, she stopped abruptly and rose at once, her eyes glancing him over carelessly as though he were more of an insect than a man. He paused, hesitating.

“You want me?” she asked.

“For your own pleasure,—at least, I hope so!” he replied, almost humbly. “It’s such a beautiful evening—would you come for a sail on the lake? The wind is just right for it and the boat is ready.”

She made no reply, but at once threw a white serge cloak across her shoulders, pulling its silk-lined hood over her head, and accompanied him along a private passage which led from the upper floor of the house to the garden.

“You like the idea?” he said, looking at her somewhat appealingly. She lifted her eyes—bright and cold as stars on a frosty night.

“What idea?”

“This little trip on the lake?”

“Certainly,” she answered. “It has been very warm all day—it will be cool on the water.”

Dimitrius bethought himself of one of the teachings of the Rosicrucians: “Whoso is

indifferent obtains all good. The more indifferent you are, the purer you are, for to the indifferent, all things are One!"

Some unusual influence there was radiating from her presence like a fine air filled with suggestions of snow. It was cold, yet bracing, and he drew a long breath as of a man who had scaled some perilous mountain height and now found himself in a new atmosphere. She walked beside him with a light swiftness that was almost aerial—his own movements seemed to him by comparison abnormally heavy and clumsy. Seeking about in his mind for some ordinary subject on which to hang a conversation, he could find nothing. His wits had become as clumsy as his feet. Pushing her hood a little aside, she looked at him.

"You had a garden-party to-day?" she queried.

"Yes,—if a few people to tea in the gardens is a garden-party," he answered.

"That's what it is usually called," said Diana, carelessly. "They are generally very dull affairs. I thought so, when I watched your guests from my window—they did not seem amused."

"You cannot amuse people if they have no sense of amusement," he rejoined. "Nor can you interest them if they have no brains. They walked among miracles of beauty—I mean the roses and other flowers—without looking at them; the sunset over the Alpine range was gorgeous, but they never saw it—their objective was food—that is to say, tea, coffee, cakes and ices—anything to put down the ever open maw of appetite. What would you? They are as they are made!"

She offered no comment.

"And you," he continued in a voice that grew suddenly eager and impassioned—"You are as you are made!—as I have made you!"

She let her hood fall back and turned her face fully upon him. Its fairness, with the moonlight illumining it, was of spiritual delicacy, and yet there was something austere in it as in the face of a sculptured angel.

"As I have made you!" he repeated, with triumphant emphasis. "The majority of men and women are governed chiefly by two passions, Appetite and Sex. You have neither Appetite nor Sex,—therefore you are on a higher plane——"

"Than yours?" she asked.

The question stung him a little, but he answered at once:

"Possibly!"

She smiled,—a little cold smile like the flicker of a sun-ray on ice. They had arrived at the border of the lake, and a boat with the picturesque lateen sail of Geneva awaited them with Vasho in charge. Diana stepped in and seated herself among a pile of cushions arranged for her comfort,—Dimitrius took the helm, and Vasho settled himself down to the management of the ropes. The graceful craft was soon skimming easily along the water with a fair light wind, and Diana in a half-reclining attitude, looking up at the splendid sky, found herself wishing that she could sail on thus, away from all things present to all things future! All things past seemed so long past!—she scarcely thought of them,—and "all things future"?—What would they be?

Dimitrius, seated close beside her at the stern, suddenly addressed her in a low, cautious tone.

"You know that this is the first week in June?"

"Yes."

"Your time is drawing very near," he went on. "On the evening of the twentieth you will come to me in the laboratory. And you will be ready—for anything!"

She heard him, apparently uninterested, her face still upturned to the stars.

"For anything!" she repeated dreamily—"For an End, or a new Beginning! Yes,—I quite understand. I shall be ready."

"Without hesitation or fear?"

"Have I shown either?"

He ventured to touch the small hand that lay passively outside the folds of her cloak.

"No,—you have been brave, docile, patient, obedient," he answered. "All four things rare qualities in a woman!—or so men say! You would have made a good wife, only your husband would have crushed you!"

She smiled.

"I quite agree. But what crowds of women have been so 'crushed' since the world began!"

"They have been useful as the mothers of the race," said Dimitrius.

"The mothers of what race?" she asked.

"The human race, of course!"

"Yes, but which section of it?" she persisted, with a cold little laugh. "For instance,—the mothers of the Assyrian race seem to have rather wasted their energies! What has become of that race which they bore, bred and fostered? Where is the glory of those past peoples? What was the use of them? They have left nothing but burnt bricks and doubtful records!"

"True!—but Destiny has strange methods, and their existence may have been necessary."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I fail to see it!" she said. "To me it all seems waste—wanton, wicked waste. Man lives in some wrong, mistaken way—the real joy of life must be to dwell on earth like a ray of light, warming and fructifying all things unconsciously—coming from the sun and returning again to the sun, never losing a moment of perfect splendour!"

"But, to have no consciousness is death," said Dimitrius. "A ray of light is indifferent to joy. Consciousness with intelligence makes happiness."

She was silent.

"You are well?" he asked, gently.

"Perfectly!"

"And happy?"

"I suppose so."

"You cannot do more than suppose? People will hardly understand you if you can only 'suppose' you are happy!"

She flashed a look upon him of disdain which he felt rather than saw.

"Do I expect people to understand me?" she demanded. "Do I wish them to do so? I am as indifferent to 'people' and their opinions as you are!"

"That is saying a great deal!" he rejoined. "But,—I am a man—you are a woman. Women must study conventions——"

"I need not," she interrupted him. "Nor should you speak of my sex, since you yourself say I am sexless."

He was silent. She had given him a straight answer. Some words of a great scientist from whom he had gained much of his own knowledge came back to his memory:

"To attain true and lasting life, all passions must be subjugated,—all animosities of nature destroyed. Attraction draws, not only its own to itself, but the aura or spirit of other things which it appropriates so far as it is able. And this appropriation or fusion of elements is either life-giving or destructive."

He repeated the words "This appropriation or fusion of elements is either life-giving or destructive"—to himself, finding a new force in their meaning and application.

"Diana," he said, presently, "I am beginning to find you rather a difficult puzzle!"

"I have found myself so for some time," she answered. "But it does not matter. Nothing really matters."

"Nothing?" he queried. "Not even love? That used to be a great matter with you!"

She laughed, coldly.

“Love is a delusion,” she said. “And no doubt I ‘used’ to think the delusion a reality. I know better now.”

He turned the helm about, and their boat began to run homeward, its lateen sail glistening like the uplifted wing of a sea-gull. Above them, the snowy Alpine range showed white as the tips of frozen waves—beneath, the water rippled blue-black, breaking now and again into streaks of silver.

“I’m afraid you have imbibed some of my cynicism,” he said, slowly. “It is, perhaps, a pity! For now, when you have come to think love a ‘delusion,’ you will be greatly loved! It is always the way! If you have nothing to give to men, it is then they clamour for everything!”

He looked at her as he spoke and saw her smile—a cruel little smile.

“You are lovely now,” he went on, “and you will be lovelier. For all I can tell, you may attain an almost maddening beauty. And a sexless beauty is like that of a goddess,—slaying its votaries as with lightning. Supposing this to be so with you, you should learn to love!—if only out of pity for those whom your indifference might destroy!”

She raised herself on her elbow and looked at him curiously. The moonlight showed his dark, inscrutable face, and the glitter of the steely eyes under the black lashes, and there was a shadow of melancholy upon his features.

“You forget!” she said—“You forget that I am old! I am not really young in the sense you expect me to be. I know myself. Deep in my brain the marks of lonely years and griefs are imprinted—of disappointed hopes, and cruelties inflicted on me for no other cause than too much love and constancy—those marks are ineffaceable! So it happens that beneath the covering of youth which your science gives me, and under the mark of this outward loveliness, I, the same Diana, live with a world’s experience, as one in prison,—knowing that whatever admiration or liking I may

awaken, it is for my outward seeming, not for my real self! And you can talk of love! Love is a divinity of the soul, not of the body!"

"And how many human beings have 'soul,' do you think?" he queried, ironically. "Not one in ten million!"

The boat ran in to shore and they landed. Diana looked back wistfully at the rippling light on the water.

"It was a beautiful sail!" she said, more naturally than she had expressed herself for many days. "Thank you for taking me!"

She smiled frankly up into his eyes as she spoke, and her spiritualised loveliness thrilled him with sudden surprise.

"It is I who must thank you for coming," he answered, very gently. "I know how keenly you are now attuned to Nature—you have the light of the sun in your blood and force of the air in your veins, and whether you admit it or not, you enjoy your life without consciousness of joy! Strange!—but true!—yet—Diana—believe me, I want you to be happy!—not only to 'suppose' yourself happy! Your whole being must radiate like the sunlight, of which it is now in part composed."

She made no reply, but walked in her floating, graceful way beside him to the house, where he took her to the door of her own apartments, and there left her with a kindly "good-night."

"I shall not see very much of you now till the evening of the twentieth," he said. "And then I hope you will not only pray for yourself, but—for me!"

CHAPTER XIX

The fated eve,—eve of the longest day in the year,—came in a soft splendour of misty violet skies and dimly glittering stars—after lovely hours of light and warmth which had bathed all nature in radiant summer glory from earliest dawn till sunset. Diana had risen with the sun itself in the brightest of humours without any

forebodings of evil or danger resulting from the trial to which she was ready to be subjected, and when Madame Dimitrius came up to spend the afternoon with her as usual, she was gayer and more conversational than she had been for many a day. It was Madame who seemed depressed and anxious, and Diana, looking quite charming in her simple gown of white batiste with a bunch of heliotrope at her bosom, rather rallied her on her low spirits.

"Ah, my dear!" sighed the old lady—"If I could only understand Féodor!—but I cannot! He does not seem to be my son—he grows harsh and impatient,—this wicked science of his has robbed him of nature! He is altogether unlike what he used to be when he first began these studies—and to-day the reason I am sad is that he tells me I am not to come to you any more till the afternoon of the twenty-fifth!—five days!—it seems so strange! It frightens me——"

"Dear, why be frightened?" and Diana smiled encouragingly. "You know now what he is trying to do—and you can see for yourself that he has partially succeeded! I'm quite pleased to hear that you are coming to see me again in five days!—that shows he thinks I shall be alive to receive you!"

Madame Dimitrius looked at her in a scared way.

"Alive? But of course! Surely, oh, surely, you have never thought it possible——"

"That Science may kill me?" Diana finished, carelessly. "Very naturally I have thought it possible! Science sometimes kills more than it saves,—owing to our fumbling ignorance. And I wonder—supposing Dr. Féodor makes sure of his discovery—supposing he can give youth and beauty to those who are willing to go through his experiment—I wonder whether it is worth while to possess these attractions without any emotional satisfaction?"

"Then you are not satisfied?" asked Madame a little sorrowfully. "You are not happy?"

Diana moved to the open window, and with an expressive gesture, pointed to the fair

landscape of lake and mountain.

“With this I am happy!” she answered. “With this I am satisfied! I feel that all this is part of Me!—it is one with me and I with it—my own blood cannot be closer to me than this air and light. But the pleasure a woman is supposed to take in her looks if she is beautiful,—the delight in pretty things for one’s self,—this does not touch me. I have lost all such sensations. When I was a girl I rather liked to look at myself in the glass,—to try contrasts of colour or wear a dainty jewelled trinket,—but now when I see in the mirror a lovely face that does not belong to me, I am not even interested!”

“But, my dear Diana, the lovely face does belong to you!” exclaimed Madame Dimitrius. “You are yourself, and no other!”

Diana looked at her rather wistfully.

“I am not so sure of that!” she said. “Now please don’t think I am losing my senses, for I’m not! I’m perfectly sane, and my thoughts are particularly clear. But Science is a terrible thing!—it is a realisation more or less of the Egyptian Sphinx—a sort of monster with the face of a spirit and the body of an animal. Science, dear Madame—please don’t look so frightened—has lately taught men more about killing each other than curing! It also tells us that nothing is, or can be lost; all sights and sounds are garnered up in the treasure-houses of air and space. The forms and faces of human creatures long dead are about us,—the aura of their personalities remains though their bodies have perished. Now I feel just as if I had unconsciously absorbed somebody else’s outward personality—and here I am, making use of it as a sort of cover to my own. My own interior self admires my outward appearance without any closer connection than that felt by anyone looking at a picture. I live within the picture—and no one seeing the picture could think it was I!”

Poor Madame Dimitrius listened to Diana’s strange analysis of herself with feelings of mingled bewilderment and terror. In her own mind she began to be convinced that

her son's "experiment" would destroy his "subject's" mentality.

"It seems all very dreadful!" she murmured, tremblingly. "And I think, dear Diana, you should say something of this to Féodor. For I am afraid he is making you suffer, and that you are unhappy."

"No,—that is not so," and Diana smiled reassuringly. "I do not suffer—I have forgotten what suffering is like! And I am not unhappy, because what is called 'happiness' has no special meaning for me. I exist—that is all! I am conscious of the principal things of existence—air, light, movement—these keep me living without any real effort or desire on my own part to live!"

She spoke in a dreamy way, with a far-off look in her eyes,—then, perceiving that Madame Dimitrius looked nervously distressed, she brought herself back from her dreamland as it were with an effort, and went on:

"You must not worry about me in the least, dear Madame! After all, it may be an excellent thing for me that I appear to have done with emotions! One has only to think how people constantly distress themselves for nothing! People who imagine themselves in love, for instance!—how they torment themselves night and day!—if they fail to get letters from each other!—if they quarrel!—if they think themselves neglected!—why, it is a perpetual turbulence! Then the parents who spend all their time looking after their children!—and the children grow up and go their own way,—they grow from pretty little angels into great awkward men and women, and it is as if one had played with charming dolls, and then saw them suddenly changed into clothes-props! Well, I am free from all these tiresome trivialities—I have what I think the gods must have,—Indifference!"

Madame Dimitrius sighed.

"Ah, Diana, it is a pity you were never made a happy wife and mother!" she said, softly.

"I thought so too,—once!" and Diana laughed carelessly—"But I'm sure I'm much

better off as I am! Now, dear, we'll part for the present. I want to rest a little—and to say my prayers—before Dr. Féodor sends for me."

Madame at once rose to leave the room. But, before doing so, she took Diana in her arms and kissed her tenderly.

"God bless and guard thee, dear child!" she murmured. "Thou art brave and loyal, and I have grown to love thee! If Féodor should bring thee to harm, he is no son of mine!"

For a moment the solitary-hearted, unloved woman felt a thrill of pleasure in this simple expression of affection,—the real sensation of youth filled her veins, as if she were a confiding girl with her mother's arms about her, and something like tears sprang to her eyes. But she suppressed the emotion quickly. Smiling and apparently unmoved, she let the gentle old lady go from her, and watched her to the last as she moved with the careful step of age along the entresol and out through the entrance to the head of the staircase, where she disappeared. Once alone, Diana stood for a few moments lost in thought. She knew instinctively that her life was at stake,—Dimitrius had reached the final test of his mysterious dealings with the innermost secrets of Nature, and he had passed the "problem of the Fourth, Sixth and Seventh," which according to his theories, meant certain refractions and comminglings of light. Now he had arrived at "the ultimate culmination of the Eighth," or, as he described it "the close or the rebound of the Octave,"—and in this "rebound" or "culmination" his subject, Diana, was to take part as a mote within a sun-ray. She did not disguise from herself the danger in which she stood,—but she had thought out every argument for and against the ordeal which she had voluntarily accepted. She measured the value of her life from each standpoint and found it nil, except in so far as her love for natural beauty was concerned. She would be sorry, she said inwardly, to leave the trees, the flowers, the birds, the beautiful things of sky and sea, but she would not be sorry at all to see the last of human beings! With

all her indifference, which even to her own consciousness, enshrined her as within barriers of ice, her memory was keen,—she looked back to the few months of distance and time which separated her from the old life of the dutiful daughter to inconsiderate and selfish parents—and beyond that, she went still further and saw herself as a young girl full of hope and joy, given up heart and soul to the illusion of love, from which she was torn by the rough hand of the very man to whom she had consecrated her every thought. In all this there was nothing enviable or regrettable that she should now be sorry or afraid to die—and in her life to come—if she lived—what would there be? Her eyes turned almost without her own consent towards the mirror—and there she read the answer. She would possess the power to rule and sway the hearts of all men,—if she cared! But now it had so happened that she did not care. Smouldering in her soul like the last spent ashes of a once fierce fire, there was just one passion left—the strong desire of vengeance on all the forces that had spoilt and embittered her natural woman's life. She was no longer capable of loving, but she knew she could hate! A woman seldom loves deeply and truly more than once in her life—she stakes her all on the one chance and hope of happiness, and the man who takes advantage of that love and ruthlessly betrays it may well beware. His every moment of existence is fraught with danger, for there is no destructive power more active and intense than love transformed to hate through falsehood and injustice. And Diana admitted to herself, albeit reluctantly, that she could hate deeply and purposefully. She hated herself for the fact that it was so,—but she was too honest not to acknowledge it. Her spirit had been wounded and maltreated by all on whom she had set her affections,—and as her way of life had been innocent and harmless, she resented the unfairness of her fate. Wrong or right, she longed to retaliate in some way on the petty slights, the meannesses, the hypocrisies and neglect of those who had assisted in spoiling her youth and misjudging her character, and though she was willing to "love her enemies" in a broad and general sense, she was not ready to condone the easy callousness and

cruelty of the persons and circumstances which had robbed her of the natural satisfaction and peace of happy womanhood.

For a long time she sat at the open window, lost in a reverie—till she saw the sun beginning to sink in a splendid panoply of crimson and gold, with streaming clouds of fleecy white and pale amber spreading from east to west, from north to south, like the unfurling flags of some great fairy's victorious army, and then a sudden thrill ran through her blood which made her heart beat and her face grow pale—it was close upon the destined hour when—ah!—she would not stop to think of the "when" or the "where"—instinctively she knelt down, and with folded hands said her prayers simply as a child, though with more than a child's fervour. She had scarcely breathed the last "Amen," when a light tap came on her door, and on her calling "Come in"—Vasho entered, carrying a small parcel with a note from Dimitrius. Handing it to her, he signified by his usual expressive signs that he would wait outside for the answer. As soon as he had retired, she opened the note and read as follows:

"You will please disrobe yourself completely, and wear only this garment which I send. No other material must touch any part of your body. Let your hair be undone and quite free—no hairpins must remain in it, and no metal of any sort must be upon your person,—no ring, bracelet, or anything whatsoever. When you are ready, Vasho will bring you to me in the laboratory."

Having mastered these instructions she undid the packet which accompanied them,—and unfolded a plain, long, white robe of the most exquisitely beautiful texture woven apparently of many double strands of silk. It was perfectly opaque—not the slightest glimmer of the light itself could be seen through it, yet it shone with a curious luminance as though it had been dipped in frosted silver. For a moment she hesitated. A tremor of natural dread shook her nerves,—then, with a determined effort, mastering herself, she hurried into her bedroom, and there

undressing, laid all her clothes neatly folded up on the bed. The action reminded her of the way she had folded up her clothes with similar neatness and left them on the rocks above the sea on the morning she had decided to effect a lasting disappearance by “drowning.”

“And now”—she thought—“Now comes a far greater plunge into the unknown than ever I could have imagined possible!”

In a few minutes she was “attired for the sacrifice,” as she said, addressing these words to herself in the mirror, and a very fair victim she looked. The strange, white sheeny garment in which she was clothed from neck to feet gave her the appearance of an angel in a picture,—and the youthful outline of her face, the delicacy of her skin, the deep brilliancy of her eyes, all set off against a background of glorious amber-brown hair, which rippled in plentiful waves over her shoulders and far below her waist, made her look more of a vision than a reality.

“Good-bye, you poor, lonely Diana!” she said, softly. “If you never come back I am glad I saw you just like this—for once!”

She kissed her hand to her own reflection, then turned and went swiftly through the rooms, not looking back. Vasho, waiting for her in the outer hall, could not altogether disguise his wonderment at sight of her,—but he saluted in his usual passively humble Eastern manner, and led the way, signing to her to follow. The house was very quiet,—they met no one, and very soon arrived at the ponderous door of the laboratory, which swung noiselessly upwards to give them entrance. Within, there seemed to be a glowing furnace of fire; the great Wheel emitted such ceaseless and brilliant showers of flame in its rotations that the whole place was filled with light that almost blinded the eyes, and Diana could scarcely see Dimitrius, when, like a black speck detaching itself from the surrounding sea of crimson vapour, he advanced to meet her. He was exceedingly pale, and his eyes were feverishly brilliant.

“So you have come!” he said. “I am such a sceptic that at this last moment I doubted whether you would!”

She looked at him steadfastly, but answered nothing.

“You are brave—you are magnificent!” he went on, his voice sinking to a lower tone—“But, Diana—I want you to say one thing before I enter on this final task—and that is—‘I forgive you!’”

“I will say it if you like,” she answered. “But why should I? I have nothing to forgive!”

“Ah, you will not see,—you cannot understand——”

“I see and understand perfectly!” she said, quickly. “But, if I live, my life remains my own—if I die, it will be your affair—but there can be no cause for grudge either way!”

“Diana,” he repeated, earnestly—“Say just this—‘Féodor, I forgive you!’”

She smiled—a strange little smile of pity and pride commingled, and stretched out both hands to him. To her surprise he knelt before her and kissed them.

“Féodor, I forgive you!” she said, very sweetly, in the penetrating accents which were so exclusively her own.—“Now, Magician, get to your work quickly! Apollonius of Tyana and Paracelsus were only children playing on the shores of science compared to you! When you are ready, I am!”

He sprang up from his kneeling attitude, and for a moment looked about him as one half afraid and uncertain. His amazing piece of mechanism, the great Wheel, was revolving slowly and ever more slowly, for outside in the heavens the sun had sunk, and the massed light within the laboratory’s crystal dome was becoming less and less dazzling. Astonishing reflections of prismatic colour were gathered in the dark water below the Wheel, as though millions of broken rainbows had been mixed with its mysterious blackness. Quietly Diana waited, her white-robed figure contrasting

singularly with all the fire-glow which enveloped her in its burning lustre,—and her heart beat scarcely one pulse the quicker when Dimitrius approached her, holding with extreme care a small but massive crystal cup. It was he who trembled, not she, as she looked at him inquiringly. He spoke, striving to steady his voice to its usual even tone of composure.

"This cup," he said—"if it contains anything, contains the true elixir for which all scientists have searched through countless ages. They failed, because they never prepared the cells of the human body to receive it. I have done all this preparatory work with you, and I have done it more successfully than I ever hoped. Every tiniest cell or group of cells that goes to form your composition as a human entity is now ready to absorb this distillation of the particles which generate and shape existence. This is the Sacramental Cup of Life! It is what early mystics dreamed of as the Holy Grail. Do not think that I blaspheme!—no!—I seek to show the world what Science can give it of true and positive communion with the mind of God! The elements that commingle to make this Universe and all that is therein, are the real 'bread and wine' of God's love!—and whoever can and will absorb such food may well 'preserve body and soul unto everlasting life.' Such is the great union of Spirit with Matter—such is the truth after which the Churches have been blindly groping in their symbolic 'holy communion' feebly materialised in 'bread and wine' as God's 'body and blood.' But the actual 'body and blood' of the Divine are the ever-changing but never destructible elements of all positive Life and Consciousness. And you are prepared to receive them."

A thrill of strange awe ran through Diana as she heard. His reasoning was profound, yet lucid,—it was true enough, she thought; that God,—that is to say, the everlasting spirit of creative power,—is everywhere and in everything,—yet to the average mind it never occurs to inquire deeply as to the subtle elements wherewith Divine Intelligence causes this "everywhere" and "everything" to be made. She remained silent, her eyes fixed on the crystal cup, knowing that for her it held destiny.

"You are prepared," resumed Dimitrius. "I have left nothing undone. And yet—you are but woman——"

"Not weaker than man!" she interrupted him, quickly. "Though men have sought to make her so in order to crush her more easily! Give me the cup!"

He looked at her in undisguised admiration.

"Wait!" he said. "You shall not lose yourself in the infinite profound, without knowing something of the means whereby you are moved. This cup, as you see, is of purest crystal, hewn rough from rocks that may have been fused in the fires of the world's foundation. Within it are all the known discoverable particles of life's essence, and when I say 'discoverable,' I wish you to understand that many of these particles were not discovered or discoverable at all till I set my soul to the work of a spy on the secrets of Nature. I have already told you that this test may be life or death to you—if it should be death, then I have failed utterly! For, by all the closest and most minute mathematical measurements, it should be life!"

Smiling, she stretched out her hand:

"Give me the cup!" she repeated.

"If it should be death," he went on, speaking more to himself than to her—"I think it will be more your fault than mine. Not voluntarily your fault, except that perhaps you may have concealed from me details of your personality and experience which I ought to have known. And yet I believe you to be entirely honest. Success, as I have told you, depends on the perfect health and purity of the cells—so that if you were an unprincipled woman, or if you had led a tainted life—or you were a glutton, or one who drank and took drugs for imaginary ailments—the contents of this cup would kill you instantly, because the cells having been weakened and lacerated could not stand the inrush of new force. But had you been thus self-injured, you would have shown signs of it during these months of preparation, and so far I have seen nothing that should hinder complete victory."

“Then why delay any longer?”—and Diana gave a gesture of visible impatience—“It is more trying to me to wait here in suspense on your words than to die outright!”

He looked at her half pleadingly—then turned his eyes towards the great Wheel, which was now, after sunset, going round with an almost sleepy slowness. One moment more of hesitation, and then with a firm hand he held out the cup.

“Take it!” he said—“And may God be with you!”

With a smile she accepted it, and putting her lips to the crystal rim, drained its contents to the last drop. For half or quarter of a second she stood upright,—then, as though struck by a flash of lightning, she fell senseless.

Quickly Dimitrius sprang to her side, picked up the empty cup as it rolled from her hand, and called:

“Vasho!”

Instantly the tall Ethiopian appeared, and obeying his master’s instructions, assisted him to lift the prone figure and lay it on a bench near at hand. Then they both set to work to move a number of ropes and pulleys which, noiselessly manipulated, proved to be an ingenious device for lowering a sort of stretcher or couch, canopied in tent-like fashion and made entirely of the same sort of double stranded silk material in which Diana had clothed herself for her “sacrifice.” This stretcher was lowered from the very centre of the dome of the laboratory,—and upon it the two men, Dimitrius and his servant, carefully and almost religiously placed the passive form, which now had an appearance of extreme rigidity, like that of a corpse. Dimitrius looked anxiously at the closed eyes, the waxen pallor of the features, and the evident tension of the muscles of the neck and throat,—then, with a kind of reckless swiftness and determination, he began to bind the apparently lifeless body round and round with broad strips of the same luminous sheeny stuff which composed the seeming funeral couch of his “subject” in the fashion of an Egyptian mummy.

Vasho, acting under orders, assisted him as before—and very soon Diana's form was closely swathed from head to foot, only the eyes, mouth and ears being left uncovered. The laboratory was now illumined only by its own mysterious fires—outside was a dark summer sky, powdered with faint stars, and every lingering reflex of the sunset had completely vanished. With the utmost care and minutest attention Dimitrius now looked to every detail of the strange, canopied bier on which the insensible subject of his experiment was laid,—then, giving a sign to Vasho, the ropes and pulleys by which it was suspended were once more set in motion, and slowly, aerially and without a sound it swung away and across the dark pool of water to a position just under the great Wheel. The Wheel, revolving slowly and casting out lambent rays of fire, illumined it as a white tent might be illumined on the night blackness of a bare field,—it rested just about four feet above the level of the water and four feet below the turning rim of the Wheel. When safely and accurately lodged in this position, Dimitrius and his servant fastened the ropes and pulleys to a projection in the wall, attaching them to a padlock of which Dimitrius himself took the key. Then, pausing, they looked at each other. Vasho's glittering eyes, rolling like dark moonstones under his jetty brows, asked mutely a thousand questions; he was stricken with awe and terror and gazed at his master as beseechingly as one might fancy an erring mortal might look at an incarnate devil sent to punish him, but in the set white face of Dimitrius there was no sign of response or reassurance. Two or three minutes passed, and, going to the edge of the pool, Dimitrius looked steadily across it at the white pavilion with its hidden burden swung between fire and water,—then slowly, but resolutely, turned away. As he did so, Vasho suddenly fell on his knees, and catching at his master's hand, implored him by eloquent signs of fear, pity and distress, not to abandon the hapless woman, thus bound and senseless, to a fate more strange and perhaps more terrible than any human being had yet devised to torture his fellow human being. Dimitrius shook off his touch impatiently, and bade him rise from his knees.

"Do not pray to me!" he said, harshly—"Pray to your God, if you have one! I have a God whose Intelligence is so measureless and so true that I know He will not punish me for spending the brain with which He has endowed me, in an effort to find out one of His myriad secrets. There was a time in this world when men knew nothing of the solar system,—now God has permitted them to know it. In the same way we know nothing of the secret of life, but shall we dare to say that God will never permit us to know? That would be blasphemy indeed! We 'suffer fools gladly,'—we allow tricksters such as 'mediums,' fortune-tellers and the like to flourish on their frauds, but we give little help to the man of spiritual or psychological science, whose learning might help us to conquer disease and death! No, Vasho!—your fears have no persuasion for me!—I am thankful you are dumb! There is no more to do—we may go!"

Vasho's moonstone eyes still turned lingeringly and compassionately on the white pavilion under the Wheel of fire. He made expressive signs with his fingers, to which his master answered, almost kindly:

"She will die, you think! If so, my toil is wasted—my supreme experiment is a failure! She must live. And I have sufficient faith in the accuracies of God and Nature as to be almost sure she will! Come!"

He took the reluctant Vasho by the arm and led him to the mysterious door, which swung up in its usual mysterious way at his touch. They passed out, and as the portal swung down again behind them, Dimitrius released a heavy copper bar from one side and clamped it across the whole door, fastening it with lock and key.

"I do this in case you should be tempted to look in," he said, with a stern smile to his astonished attendant. "You have been faithful and obedient so far—but you know the secret of opening this door when no bar is placed across it,—but with it!—ah, my Vasho!—the devil himself may fumble in vain!"

Vasho essayed a feeble grin,—but his black skin looked a shade less black, as he

heard his master's words and saw his resolute action. Gone was the faint hope the poor blackamoor had entertained of being of some use or rescue to the victim prisoned in the laboratory,—she was evidently doomed to abide her fate. And Dimitrius walked with an unfaltering step through the long corridor from the laboratory into the hall of his house, and then sent Vasho about his usual household business, while he himself went into the garden and looked at the still beauty of the evening. Everywhere there was fragrance and peace—innumerable stars clustered in the sky, and the faint outline of the snowy Alps was dimly perceptible. From the lawn, he could see the subdued glitter of the glass dome of the laboratory; at that moment it had the effect of a crystal sphere with the palest of radiance filtering through.

"And to-morrow is the longest day!" he said with a kind of rapt exultation. "Pray Heaven the sun may shine with all its strongest force and utmost splendour from its rising to its setting! So shall we imprison the eternal fire!"

CHAPTER XX

The next morning dawned cloudlessly, and a burning sun blazed intense summer heat through all the hours of the longest and loveliest day. Such persistent warmth brought its own languor and oppression, and though all the doors and windows of the Château Fragonard were left open, Madame Dimitrius found herself quite overwhelmed by the almost airless stillness, notwithstanding a certain under-wave of freshness which always flowed from the mountains like a breathing of the snow.

"How is Diana?" she asked of her son, as, clad in a suit of cool white linen, he sauntered in from the garden to luncheon.

"I believe she is very well," he answered, composedly. "She has not complained."

"I hope she has nothing to complain of," said the old lady, nervously. "You promised me, Féodor, that you would not let her suffer."

“I promised you that if she was unhappy or in pain, I would do my best to spare her as much as possible,” he replied. “But, up to the present, she is neither unhappy nor in pain.”

“You are sure?”

“Sure!”

Vasho, who was in attendance, stared at him in something of questioning terror, and his mother watched him with a mute fondness of appeal in her eyes which, however, he did not or would not see. She could not but feel a certain pride in him as she looked at his fine, intellectual face, rendered just now finer and more attractive by the tension of his inward thought. Presently he met her searching, loving gaze with a smile.

“Do you not think, Mother mine,” he said, “that I merit some of the compassion you extend so lavishly to Miss May, who is, after all, a stranger in our house? Can you not imagine it possible that I, too, may suffer? Permit yourself to remember that it is now twenty-five years since I started on this quest, and that during that time I have not rested day or night without having my brain at work, puzzling out my problem. Now that I have done all which seems to me humanly possible, have you no thought of me and my utter despair if I fail?”

“But you will not fail——”

“In every science, for one success there are a million failures,” he replied. “And dare I complain if I am one of the million? I have been fortunate in finding a subject who is obedient, tractable, and eminently courageous,—sometimes, indeed, I have wondered whether her courage will not prove too much for me! She is a woman of character—of strong, yet firmly suppressed emotions; and she has entered a characterless household——”

“Characterless?” repeated Madame Dimitrius, in surprised tones—“Can you say that?”

"Of course! What play of character can be expected from people who are as self-centred as you and I? You have no thought in life beyond me, your erratic and unworthy son,—I have no thought beyond my scientific work and its results. Neither you nor I take interest in human affairs or human beings generally; any writer of books venturing to describe us, would find nothing to relate, because we form no associations. We let people come and go,—but we do not really care for them, and if they stayed away altogether we should not mind."

"Well, as far as that goes, Diana tells me she is equally indifferent," said Madame.

"Yes,—but her indifference is hardly of her own making," he replied. "She is not aware of its source or meaning. Her actual character and temperament are deep as a deep lake over which a sudden and unusual frost has spread a temporary coating of ice. She has emotions and passions—rigidly and closely controlled. She cares for things, without knowing she cares. And at any moment she may learn her own power——"

"A power which you have given her," interposed his mother.

"True,—and it may be a case of putting a sword into the hand that is eager to kill," he answered. "However, her strength will be of the psychological type, which gross material men laugh at. I do not laugh, knowing the terrific force hidden within each one of us, behind the veil of flesh and blood. Heavens!—what a world it would be if we all lived according to the spirit rather than the body!—if we all ceased to be coarse feeders and animal sensualists, and chose only the purest necessaries for existence in health and sanity!—it would be Paradise regained!"

"If your experiment succeeds as you hope," said Madame Dimitrius, "what will happen then? You will let Diana go?"

"She will go whether I 'let' her or not," he replied. "She will have done all I require of her."

His mother was silent, and he, as though weary of the conversation, presently rose

and left the room. Stepping out on the lawn in the full blaze of noonday, he looked towards the dome of the laboratory, but could scarcely fix his eyes upon its extreme brilliancy, which was blinding at every point. He felt very keenly that it was indeed the longest day of the year; never had hours moved so slowly,—and despite the summer glory of the day,—so drearily. His thoughts dwelt persistently on the bound and imprisoned form swung in solitude under the great Wheel, which he knew must now be revolving at almost lightning speed, churning the water beneath it into prismatic spray,—and every now and then a strong temptation beset him to go and unlock the door of the prison house, and see whether his victim had wakened to the consciousness of her condition. But he restrained this impulse.

With evening the slender curve of the new moon glided into the sky, looking like the pale vision of a silver sickle, and a delicious calm pervaded the air. His thoughts gradually took on a more human tendency,—he allowed himself to pity his "subject." After all, what an arid sort of fate had been hers! The only child of one of those painfully respectable British couples who never move out of the conventional rut, and for whom the smallest expression or honest opinion is "bad form,"—and herself endowed (by some freak of Nature) with exceptional qualities of brain, what a neutral and sad-coloured existence hers had been when love and the hope of marriage had deserted her! No wonder she had resolved to break away and seek some outlet for her cramped and imprisoned mentality.

"Though marriage is drab-coloured enough!" he mused—"Unless husband and wife are prudent, and agree to live apart from each other for so many months in the year. And now—if my experiment succeeds she will make a fool or a lunatic of every man her eyes rest upon—except myself!"

The days wore away slowly. As each one passed, Madame Dimitrius grew more and more uneasy, and more and more her eyes questioned the unresponsive face of her son. Vasho, too, could not forbear gazing with a kind of appealing terror at his

master's composed features and easy demeanour; it was more than devilish, he thought, that a man could comport himself thus indifferently when he had a poor human victim shut up within a laboratory where the two devouring elements of fire and water held the chief sway. However, there was nothing to be done. A figure of stone or iron was not more immovable than Dimitrius when once bent to the resolved execution of a task, no matter how difficult such task might be. Looking at the cold, indomitable expression of the man, one felt that he would care nothing for the loss of a thousand lives, if by such sacrifice he could attain the end in view. But though his outward equanimity remained undisturbed, he was inwardly disquieted and restless. He saw two alternatives to his possible success. His victim might die,—in which case her body would crumble to ashes in the process to which it was being subjected,—or she might lose her senses. Death would be kinder than the latter fate, but he was powerless to determine either. And even at the back of his mind there lurked a dim suggestion of some other result which he could not formulate or reckon with.

The longest waiting must have an end, but never to his thought did a longer period of time stretch itself out between the evening of the twentieth of June and that of the twenty-fourth, Midsummer Day. The weather remained perfect; intensely warm, bright and still. Not a cloud crossed the burning blue of the daylight, and at evening, the young moon, slightly broadening from a slender sickle to the curve of a coracle boat floating whitely in the deep ether, shed fairy silver over the lake and the Alpine snows above it. During these days, many people of note and scientific distinction called at the Château Fragonard,—Féodor Dimitrius was a personage to be reckoned with in many departments of knowledge, and his exquisite gardens afforded coolness and shade to those wanderers from various lands who were touring Switzerland in search of health and change of scene. Near neighbours and acquaintances also came and went, but such is the generally vague attitude of mind assumed by ordinary folk to other than themselves, that scarcely any among the few

who had met Diana and accepted her as a chance visitor to Madame Dimitrius, now remembered her, except the Baron and Baroness de Rousillon, who still kept up a slight show of interest as to her whereabouts, though their questions were lightly evaded and never fully answered. Professor Chauvet, irritated and unhappy at receiving no news whatever of the woman for whom he had conceived a singular but sincere affection, had taken it into his head to go suddenly to Paris, to see after his house and garden there, which had long been unoccupied; a fancy possessed him that if, or when, Diana did write to him, he would answer her from Paris, so that they might meet there or in London, without the surveillance or comment of Dimitrius. Meanwhile, Dimitrius himself, a figure of impenetrable reserve and cold courtesy, let his visitors come and go as they listed, apparently living the life of a scientist absorbed in studies too profound to allow himself to be troubled or distracted by the opinions of the outer world.

Midsummer Day, the Feast of St. John, and a day of poetic and superstitious observance, came at last and drifted along in a stream of gold and azure radiance, the sun sinking round as a rose in a sky without a cloud. To the last moment of its setting Dimitrius waited, watch in hand. All day long he had wandered aimlessly in the garden among his flowers, talking now and then to his gardeners, and stopping at every point where he could see the crystal dome of his laboratory shine clear like the uplifted minaret of some palace of the East, and it was with the greatest difficulty that he compelled himself to walk with a slow and indifferent mien when the moment arrived for him to return to the Château. His heart galloped like a run-away race-horse, while he forced his feet into a sauntering and languid pace as though he were more than oppressed by the heat of the day,—and he stopped for a moment to speak to his mother, whose reclining chair was in the loggia where she could enjoy the view of the gardens and the fountains in full play.

“I am—” he said, and paused,—then went on—“I am going to the laboratory for an hour or two. If I am late for dinner, do not wait for me.”

Madame Dimitrius, busy with some delicate lacework, looked up at him inquiringly.

“Are you seeing Diana this evening?” she asked.

He nodded assent.

“Give her my love and tell her how glad I am that her days of solitude are over, and that I shall come to her to-morrow as soon as you will allow me.”

He nodded again, and with a tender hand stroked the silver bandeaux of the old lady’s pretty hair.

“After all, old age is quite a beautiful thing!” he said, and stooping, he kissed her on the brow. “It is, perhaps, wrong that we should wish to be always young?”

He passed on then, and, entering his library, rang a bell. Vasho appeared.

“Vasho, the hour has come!” he said, whereat Vasho, the dumb, uttered an inarticulate animal sound of terror. “Either I have succeeded, or I have failed. Let us go and see!”

He paused for a moment, his eyes resting on the mysterious steel instrument, which, always working in its accustomed place on its block of crystal, struck off its tiny sparks of fire with unceasing regularity.

“You gave me the first clue!” he said, addressing it. “You were a fluke—a chance—a stray hint from the unseen. And you will go on for ever if nothing disturbs your balance—if nothing shakes your exact mathematical poise. So will the Universe similarly go on for ever, if similarly undisturbed. All a matter of calculation, equality of distribution and exact poise—designed by a faultless Intelligence! An Intelligence which we are prone to deny—a Divinity we dare to doubt! Man perplexes himself with a million forms of dogma which he calls ‘religions,’ when there is truly only one religion possible for all the world, and that is the intelligent, reasoning, devout worship of the true God as made manifest in His works. These works none but the few will study, preferring to delude themselves

with the fantastic spectres of their own imaginations. Yet, when we have learned what in time we must know,—the words of the Evangelist may be fulfilled: ‘I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first earth and the first heaven were passed away.... And there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain.’ So we may have a joyous world, where youth and life are eternal, and where never a heart-throb of passion or grief breaks the halcyon calm! Shall we care for it, I wonder? Will it not prove monotonous?—and when all is smooth sailing, shall we not long for a storm?”

A quick sigh escaped him,—then remembering Vasho’s presence, he shook off his temporary abstraction.

“Come, Vasho!” he said, “I must go and find this marvel of my science—living or dead! And don’t look so terrified!—one would think you were the victim! Whatever happens, you are safe!”

Vasho made expressive signs of apologetic humility and appeal, to which Dimitrius gave no response save an indulgent smile.

“Come!” he repeated. They left the library, Dimitrius leading the way, and walked through the long corridor to the door of the laboratory. Gleams of gold and silver shone from the mysterious substance of which it was composed, and curious iridescent rays flashed suddenly across their eyes as if part of it had become transparent. “The sun’s flames have had power here,” remarked Dimitrius. “Almost they have pierced the metal.”

Answering to pressure in the usual manner, the portal opened and closed behind them as they entered. For a moment it was impossible to see anything, owing to the overwhelming brilliancy of the light which filled every part of the domed space—a light streaked here and there with gold and deep rose-colour. The enormous Wheel was revolving slowly—and beneath its rim, the canopied white stretcher was suspended over the dark water below, as it had been left four days previously. The

prisoned victim had not stirred. For two or three minutes Dimitrius stood looking eagerly, his eyes peering through the waves of light that played upon his sense of vision almost as drowningly as the waves of the sea might have played upon his power of breathing. Vasho, shaken to pieces by his uncontrollable inward terrors, had fallen on his knees and hidden his face in his hands. Dimitrius roused him from this abject attitude.

"Get up, Vasho! Don't play the fool!" he said, sternly. "What ails you? Are you afraid? Look before you, man!—there is no change in the outline of that figure—it is merely in a condition of suspended animation. If she were dead—understand me!—she would not be there at all! The stretcher would be empty! Come,—I want your help with these pulleys."

Vasho, striving to steady his trembling limbs, went to his imperious master's assistance as the pulleys were unlocked and released.

"Now, gently!" said Dimitrius. "Let the ropes go easy—and pull evenly!"

They worked together, and gradually—with a smooth, swaying, noiseless movement,—the canopied couch with its motionless occupant was swung away from the Wheel across the water and laid at their feet. The canopy itself sparkled all over as with millions of small diamonds,—and as they raised and turned it back, curled in their hands and twisted like a live thing. A still brighter luminance shone from end to end of the closely bound and swathed figure beneath it,—a figure rigid as stone, yet though so rigid, uncannily expressive of hidden life. Dimitrius knelt down beside it and began to unfasten the close wrappings in which it was so fast imprisoned, from the feet upwards, signing to Vasho to assist him. Each one of the glistening white silken bands was hot to the touch, and as it was unwound, cast out little sparks and pellets of fire. The widest of these was folded over and over across the breast, binding in the arms and hands, and as this was undone, the faintest stir of the body was perceptible. At last Dimitrius uncovered the face and head—and

then—both he and Vasho sprang up and started back, amazed and awestruck. Never a lovelier thing could be found on earth than the creature which lay so passively before them,—a young girl of beauty so exquisite that it hardly seemed human. The goddess of a poet's dream might be so imagined, but never a mere thing of flesh and blood. And as they stood, staring at the marvel, the alabaster whiteness of the flesh began to soften and flush with roseate hues,—a faint sigh parted the reddening lips, the small, childlike hands, hitherto lying limp on either side, were raised as though searching for something in the air,—and then, slowly, easefully, and with no start of surprise or fear, Diana awoke from her long trance and stretched herself lazily, smiled, sat up for a moment, her hair falling about her in an amber shower, and finally stepped from her couch and stood erect, a vision of such ethereal fairness and youthful queenliness that all unconscious of his own action, Dimitrius sank on his knees in a transport of admiration, whispering:

"My triumph! My work! My wonder of the world!"

She, meanwhile, with the questioning air of one whose surroundings are utterly unfamiliar, surveyed him in his kneeling attitude as though he were a stranger. Drawing herself up and pushing back the wealth of hair that fell about her, she spoke in the exquisitely musical voice that was all her own, though it seemed to have gained a richer sweetness.

"Why do you kneel?" she asked. "Are you my servant?"

For one flashing second he was tempted to answer:

"Your master!"

But there was something in the stateliness of her attitude and the dignity of her bearing that checked this bold utterance on his lips, and he replied:

"Your slave!—if so you will it!"

A smile of vague surprise crossed her features.

"Remind me how I came here," she said. "There is something I cannot recall. I have been so much in the light and this place is very dark. You are a friend, I suppose—are you not?"

A chilly touch of dread overcame him. His experiment had failed, if despite its perfection of physical result, the brain organisation was injured or destroyed. She talked at random, and with a lost air, as if she had no recollection of any previous happenings.

"Surely I am your friend!" he said, rising from his knees and approaching her more nearly. "You remember me?—Féodor Dimitrius?"

She passed one hand across her brow.

"Dimitrius?—Féodor Dimitrius?" she repeated,—then suddenly she laughed,—a clear bright laugh like that of a happy child—"Of course! I know you now—and I know my self. I am Diana May,—Diana May who was the poor unloved old spinster with wrinkles round her eyes and 'feelings' in her stupidly warm heart!—but she is dead! I live!"

She lifted her arms, the silver sheen of her mysterious gleaming garment falling back like unfurled wings.

"I live!" she repeated. "I am the young Diana!—the old Diana is dead!"

Her arms dropped to her sides again, and she turned to Dimitrius with a bewitching smile.

"And you love me!" she said. "You love me as all men must love me!—even he loves me!" and she pointed playfully to Vasho, cowering in fear as far back in a shadowy corner as he could, out of the arrowy glances of her lovely eyes,—then, laughing softly again, she gathered her robe about her with a queenly air. "Come, Dr. Féodor Dimitrius! Let us go! I see by the way you look at me that you think your experiment has been too much for my brain, but you are mistaken. I am quite clear in memory and consciousness. You are the scientist who advertised for 'a woman of

mature years,'—I am Diana May who was 'mature' enough to answer you, and came from London to Geneva on the chance of suiting you,—I have submitted to all your commands, and here I am!—a success for you, I suppose, but a still greater success for myself! I do not know what has happened since I came into this laboratory a while ago—nor am I at all curious,—was that my coffin!"

She indicated the stretcher with its white canopy from which she had arisen. He was about to answer her, when she stopped him.

"No, tell me nothing! Say it is my chrysalis, from which I have broken out—a butterfly!" She smiled—"Look at poor Vasho! How frightened he seems! Let us leave this place,—surely we have had enough of it? Come, Dr. Dimitrius!—it's all over! You have done with me and I with you. Take me to my rooms!"

Her air and tone of command were not to be gainsaid. Amazed and angry at his own sudden sense of inferiority and inefficiency, Dimitrius signed to the trembling Vasho to open the door of the laboratory, and held out his hand to Diana to guide her. She looked at him questioningly.

"Must I?" she asked. "You are quite enough in love with me already!—but if you take my hand——!"

Her eyes, brilliant and provocative, flashed disdainfully into his. He strove to sustain his composure.

"You are talking very foolishly," he said, with studied harshness. "If you wish to convince me that you are the same Diana May who has shown such resolute courage and modesty, and—and—such obedience to my will, you must express yourself more reasonably."

Her light laugh rippled out again.

"Oh, but I am not the same Diana May!" she answered. "You have altered all that. I was old, and a woman,—now I am young, and a goddess!"

He started back, amazed at her voice and attitude.

“A goddess—a goddess!” she repeated, triumphantly. “Young with a youth that shall not change—alive with a life that shall not die! Out of the fire and the air I have absorbed the essence of all beauty and power!—what shall trouble me? Not the things of this little querulous world!—not its peevish men and women!—I am above them all! Féodor Dimitrius, your science has gathered strange fruit from the Tree of Life, but remember!—the Flaming Sword turns every way!”

He gazed at her in speechless wonderment. She had spoken with extraordinary force and passion, and now stood confronting him as an angel might have stood in the Garden of Paradise. Her beauty was overwhelming—almost maddening in its irresistible attraction, and his brain whirled like a mote in a ring of fire. He stretched out his hands appealingly:

“Diana!” he half whispered—“Diana, you are mine!—my sole creation!”

“Not so,” she replied. “You blaspheme! Nothing is yours. You have used the forces of Nature to make me what I am,—but I am Nature’s product, and Nature is not always kind! Let us go!”

She moved towards the door. Vasho stood ready to open it, his eyes cast down, and his limbs trembling,—as she approached she smiled kindly at him, but the poor negro was too scared to look at her. He swung the portal upward, and she passed through the opening. Dimitrius followed, not venturing to offer his hand a second time. He merely gave instructions to Vasho to set the laboratory in order and remove every trace of his “experiment,”—then kept close beside the erect, slight, graceful figure in the shining garment that glided along with unerring steps through the corridor into the familiar hall, where for a moment, Diana paused.

“Is your mother well?” she asked.

“Quite well.”

“I am glad. You will prepare her to see me to-morrow?”

"I will!"

She passed on, up the staircase, and went straight to her own rooms. It was plain she had forgotten nothing, and that she had all her senses about her. As Dimitrius threw open the door of her little salon she turned on the threshold and fully confronted him.

"Thank you!" she said. "I hope you are satisfied that your experiment has succeeded?"

He was pale to the lips, and his eyes glowed with suppressed fire,—but he answered calmly:

"I am more than satisfied if—if you are well!"

"I am very well," she replied, smiling. "I shall never be ill. You ought to know that if you believe in your own discovery. You ought to know that I am no longer made of mortal clay, 'subject to all the ills that flesh is heir to.' Your science has filled me with another and more lasting form of life!"

He was silent, standing before her with head bent, like some disgraced school-boy.

"Good-night!" she said, then, in a gentler tone—"I do not know how long I have been the companion of your 'Ordeal by Fire!'—I suppose I ought to be hungry and thirsty, but I am not. To breathe has been to me sufficient nourishment—yet for the sake of appearances you had better let Vasho—poor frightened Vasho!—bring me food as usual. I shall be ready for him in an hour."

She motioned him away, and closed the door. As she disappeared, a light seemed to vanish with her and the dark entresol grew even darker. He went downstairs in a maze of bewilderment, dazzled by her beauty and conscious of her utter indifference,—and stood for a moment at the open door of the loggia, looking out at the still, dark loveliness of the summer evening.

"And so it is finished!" he said to himself. "All over! A completed triumph and

marvel of science! But—what have I made of her? She is not a woman! Then—what is she?"

CHAPTER XXI

While Dimitrius thus perplexed himself with a psychological question for which he could find no satisfactory answer, Diana was happily free from doubts and fears of any kind whatsoever. When she found herself alone in her rooms she was conscious of a strange sense of sovereignty and supremacy which, though it was in a manner new to her, yet did not seem unnatural. She was not in the least conscious of having passed four days, practically, in a state of suspended animation, no more, perhaps, than is the Indian fakir who suffers himself to be buried in the earth for a sufficient time to allow the corn to grow over him. She looked about her, recognising certain familiar objects which were her own, and others which belonged to the Dimitrius household,—she touched the piano lightly as she passed it,—glanced through the open window at the dusky, starlit skies, and then went into her bedroom, where, turning on the electric burner, she confronted herself in the mirror with a smile. Beauty smiled back at her in every line and curve, in every movement; and she criticised her own appearance as she might have criticised a picture, admiring the sheeny softness and sparkle of the mysterious garment in which she was arrayed. But after a few moments of this quiet self-contemplation, she recollected more mundane things, and going to the wardrobe, took out the rose-pink wrap Sophy Lansing had given her.

"I wonder," she said, half laughing, "what Sophy would say to me now! But, after all, what a far-away person Sophy seems!"

Standing before the mirror she deliberately let the shining "robe of ordeal" slip from her body to the floor. Nude as a pearl, she remained for a moment, gazing, as she knew, at the loveliest model of feminine perfection ever seen since the sculptor of the Venus de Medici wrought his marble divinity. Yet she was not surprised or

elated; no touch of vanity or self-complacency moved her. The astonishing part of the whole matter was that it seemed quite natural to her to be thus beautiful; beauty had become part of her existence, like the simple act of breathing, and called for no special personal notice. She slipped on a few garments, covering all with her rose-silk wrapper, and twisted up her hair. And so she was clothed again as Diana May,—but what a different Diana May! She heard Vasho moving in the sitting-room, and looking, saw that he was setting out a dainty little table with game and fruit and wine. He caught sight of her fair face watching him from the half-open door which divided bedroom from sitting-room, and paused, abashed—then made a sort of Eastern salutation, full of the most abject humility.

"Poor Vasho!" she said, advancing. "How strange that you should be so afraid of me! What do you take me for? You must not be afraid!"

No goddess, suddenly descending from the skies to earth, could have looked more royally beneficent than she, and Vasho made rapid signs of entire devotion to her service.

"No," she said—"You are your master's man. He will need your help—when I am gone!"

The negro's countenance expressed a sudden dismay—and she laughed.

"Yes—when I am gone!" she repeated, "and that will be very soon! I am made for all the world now!"

His eyes rolled despairingly,—he made eloquent and beseeching signs of appeal.

"You will be sorry?" she said. "Yes—I daresay you will! Now go along,—they want you downstairs. It is foolish to be sorry for anything."

She smiled at him as he backed from her presence, looking utterly miserable, and disappeared. Left alone, she touched a glass of wine with her lips, but quickly set it down.

"What a curious taste!" she said. "I used to like it,—I don't like it at all now. I'm not thirsty and I'm not hungry. I want nothing. It's enough for me to breathe!"

She moved slowly up and down with an exquisite floating grace, a perfect vision of imperial beauty, her rose-red "rest gown" with its white fur lining trailing about her; and presently, sitting down by the open window, she inhaled the warm summer air, and after a while watched the moon rise through a foam of white cloud, which seemed to have sprayed itself sheer down from the Alpine snows. Her thoughts were clear; her consciousness particularly active,—and, with a kind of new self-possession and intellectuality, she took herself, as it were, mentally to pieces, and examined each section of herself as under a psychological microscope.

"Let me be quite sure of my own identity," she said, half aloud. "I am Diana May—and yet I am not Diana May! I have lost the worn old shell of my former personality, and I have found another personality which is not my own, and yet somehow is the real Me!—the Me for whom I have been searching and crying ever since I could search and cry!—the Me I have dreamed of as rising in the shape of a Soul from my dead body! I am clothed with a life vesture made of strange and imperishable stuff,—I cannot begin to describe or understand it, except as an organisation free from all pain and grossness—and what is more positive still—free from all feeling!"

She paused here, interested in the puzzle of her thoughts. Raising her eyes, she looked out at the divine beauty of the night.

"Yes," she went on musing—"That is the strangest part of it!—I have no feeling. This is the work of science—therefore my condition will be within reach of all who care to accept it. I look out at the garden,—the moonlight,—but not as I used to look. They have no feeling, and seem just a natural part of myself. They do not move me to any more sensation than the recognition that they live as I do, with me and for me. If I can get hold of myself at all surely, I think my chief consciousness is

that of power,—power, with no regard for its exercise or result."

She waited again, disentangling her mind from all clinging or vague recollections.

"This man, Féodor Dimitrius, interested me at one time," she said. "His utter selfishness and callous absorption in his own studies moved me almost to pain. Now he does not interest me at all. His mother is kind,—very simple—very stupid and well-meaning—but I could not stay with her for long. Who else must I remember?"

Suddenly she laughed.

"Pa and Ma!" she exclaimed—"I must not forget them! Those dear, respectable parents of mine, who only cared for me as long as I was an interesting object to themselves, and found me 'in the way' when their interest ceased! Flighty Pa! Wouldn't he just love to be rejuvenated and turned out as a sort of new Faustus, amorous and reckless of everybody's feelings—but his own! Oh, yes, I mustn't forget Pa! I'm young enough to wear white now!—I'll go and see him as soon as I get back to England—before Ma's best mourning gown grows rusty!" She laughed again, the most enchanting dimples lightening her face as mirth radiated from her lips and eyes—then all at once she became serious, almost stern, and stood up as though lifted erect by some thought which impelled action. One hand clenched involuntarily.

"Captain the Honourable Reginald Cleeve!" she said, in slow tones of emphatic scorn—"Especially the Honourable! I must not forget him!—or his fat wife!—or his appallingly hideous and stupid children! I must look at them all!—and not only must I look at them—they must look at me!"

Her hand relaxed,—her eyes, limpid and lustrous, turned again towards the open window and moonlit summer night.

"Yet—is vengeance worth while?" she mused—"Vengeance on a mote—a worm—a low soul such as that of the man I once almost worshipped? Yes!—the gods know it is worth while to punish a liar and traitor! When the world becomes unclean and full

of falsehood a great war is sent to purge its foulness,—when a man destroys a life's happiness it is just that his own happiness should also be destroyed."

She had come to the conclusion of her meditations, and seeing the hour was ten o'clock, she opened her door and put the untouched little supper-table with all its delicacies outside in the entresol to be cleared away; then locking herself in for the night, prepared to go to bed. It was now that a sudden thrill of doubt quivered through her beautiful "new" organisation,—the nervous idea that perhaps she would not be able to pray! She took herself severely to task for this thought.

"All things are of God!" she said, aloud—"Whatever science has made of me I can be nothing without His will. To Him belong the sun and air, the light and fire!—to Him also I belong, and to Him I may render thanks without fear."

She knelt down and uttered the familiar "Our Father" in slow, soft tones of humility and devotion. To anyone who could have watched her praying thus, she would have seemed

"A splendid angel newly drest

Save wings, for heaven!"

And when she laid her head on her pillow she fell asleep as sweetly as a young child, her breathing as light, her dreamless unconsciousness as perfect.

The morning found her refreshed by her slumber, stronger and more self-possessed than before; and when clad in her ordinary little white batiste gown she looked, as indeed she was bodily, if not mentally, a mere slip of a girl,—a lovely girl, slender as a rod and fair as a lily, radiating in every expression and movement with an altogether extraordinary beauty. After the breakfast hour came Madame Dimitrius, eager, curious, affectionate;—but at first sight of her, stood as though rooted to the floor, and began to tremble so violently that Diana put an arm about her to save her from falling. But, with a white, scared face and repelling hand, the old woman pushed her aside.

"Do not touch me, please!" she said, in feeble, quavering tones—"I—I did not expect this! I was prepared for much—but not this!—this is devil's work! Oh, my son, my son! He is possessed by the powers of evil!—may God deliver him! No, no!"—this, as Diana, with her beautiful smile of uplifted sweetness and tolerance, strove to speak—"Nothing you can say will alter it! It is impossible that such a thing could be done without rebellion against the laws of God! You—you are not Diana May—you are some other creature, not made of flesh and blood!"

Diana heard her with a gentle patience.

"Very possibly you are right," she said, quietly. "But whatever I am made of must be some of God's own material, since there is nothing existent without Him! Why, even if there is a devil, the devil himself cannot exist apart from God!"

Madame Dimitrius uttered a pained cry, and then began to sob hysterically.

"Oh, do not speak to me, do not speak to me!" she wailed. "My son, my son! My Féodor! His soul is the prey of some evil spirit—and it seems to me as if you are that spirit's form and voice! You are beautiful—but not with merely a woman's beauty!—his science has called some strange power to him—you are that power!—you will be his doom!" She wrung her hands nervously, and moaning, "Let me go!—let me go!" turned to leave the room.

Diana stood apart, making no effort to detain her. A look of wondering compassion filled her lovely eyes.

"Poor woman!" she breathed, softly. "Poor weak, worn soul!"

Then suddenly she spoke aloud in clear, sweet, decisive tones.

"Dear Madame," she said—"you distress yourself without cause! You need not be afraid of me,—I will do you no harm! As for your son, his fate is in his own hands; he assumes to be master of it. I shall not interfere with him or with you,—for now I shall leave you both for ever! I have submitted myself to his orders,—I have been his paid 'subject,' and he cannot complain of any want of obedience on my

part,—his experiment has succeeded. Nothing therefore now remains for me to do here, and he has no further need of me. I promise you I will go as quickly as I can!—and if, as you say, I am not human, why so much the worse for humanity!"

She smiled, and her attitude and expression were royally triumphant. Madame Dimitrius had reached the door of the apartment, and with her hand leaning against it turned back to look at her in evident terror. Then she essayed to speak again.

"I am sorry," she faltered—"if I seem strange and harsh—but—but you are not Diana May—not the woman I knew! She had grown younger and prettier under my son's treatment—but you!—you are a mere girl!—and I feel—I know you are not, you cannot be human!"

A light of something like scorn flashed from Diana's eyes.

"Is humanity so valuable!" she asked.

But this question was more than enough for Madame Dimitrius. With a shuddering exclamation of something like utter despair, she hurriedly opened the door, and stumbled blindly out into the corridor, there to be caught in the arms of her son, who was coming to Diana's rooms.

"Why, mother!" he ejaculated—"what is this?"

Diana stood at her half-open door, looking at them both like a young angel at the gate of paradise.

"Your mother is frightened of me," she explained gently. "She says I am not human. I daresay that's very likely! But do try and comfort her, and tell her that I have no evil intentions towards her or you. And that I am going away as soon as you will allow me to do so."

His brows contracted.

"Mother," he said reproachfully, "is this how you keep your promise to me? I gave you my confidence—you see the full success of my great experiment—and yet you

reward me thus?"

She clung to him desperately.

"Féodor!—Féodor!" she cried—"My son,—my only child! You shall not blame me,—me, your mother! I love you, Féodor!—and love teaches many things! Oh, my son!—you have drawn from your science something that is not of this world!—something that has no feeling—no emotion!—this creature of your making is not Diana!"

As she spoke her face grew livid,—she beat the air with her feeble old hands, as though she fought some invisible foe, and fell in a dead faint.

Quickly Dimitrius lifted her in his arms, and laid her on the sofa in Diana's sitting-room. Diana came to his aid, and deftly and tenderly bathed her forehead and hands with cool water. When she showed signs of returning consciousness Diana said whisperingly:

"I will go now! She must not be frightened again—she must not see me when she wakes. You understand? Poor, dear old lady! She imagines I am not human, and she has told me I shall be your doom!" She smiled. "Do you think I shall?"

Her loveliness shone upon him like a light too brilliant to endure. His heart beat furiously, but he would not look at her,—he bent his head over his mother's passive figure, busying himself with restoratives,—and answered nothing.

She waited a minute,—then added—"You will arrange for my leaving here as soon as possible? After what she has said, it will be best for your mother that I should go at once."

Then, and then only, he lifted his dark eyes,—they were sad and strained.

"I will arrange everything," he said. "No doubt the sooner we part, the better!"

She smiled again,—then moved swiftly away into her bedroom and locked the door. Slowly Madame Dimitrius recovered and looked around her with an alarmed

expression.

“She has gone?”

“Yes,” her son replied, with a bitterness he could not restrain. “She has gone!—and she will go! You have driven away the loveliest thing ever seen on earth! my creation! Through you she will leave me altogether—and yet you say you love me!”

“I do! I do love you!” cried his mother, weeping. “Féodor, Féodor, I love you as no other can or will! I love you, and by my love I claim your soul! I claim it from the powers of evil!—I claim it for God!”

CHAPTER XXII

The swiftness and silence of Diana’s departure from the Château Fragonard was of an almost uncanny nature. There were no affectionate leave-takings,—and she made no attempt to see Madame Dimitrius, who, thoroughly unnerved and ill, remained in her bedroom,—nor would she permit of any escort to the station, or “seeing off” by way of farewell. She simply left the house, having packed and labelled her own luggage to be sent after her,—and walked quietly with Dr. Dimitrius, through the lovely gardens all in their summer beauty, to the private gate opening out to the high road, from whence it was an easy ten minutes to the station. He was very silent, and his usual composure had entirely deserted him.

“I cannot part with you like this,” he said, in low, nervous tones, as she gave him her hand in “good-bye.” “As soon as my mother recovers from this strange breakdown of hers, I shall follow you. I must see you again——”

She smiled.

“Must you?”

“Of course I must! I am deeply grateful to you,—do not think I can forget your patience—your courage——” He paused, deeply moved. “I hate the idea of your travelling all alone to London!”

"Why?" she asked, in an amused tone—"I came all alone!"

"Yes—but it was different——"

"You mean I looked 'mature,' then?" she laughed. "Oh, well! Nobody will interfere with a girl returning home from school in Geneva!"

A pained smile crossed his face.

"Yes!—you can play that part very well!" he admitted. "But you cannot live alone without someone to look after you!"

She gave a light gesture of indifference.

"No? Well, I will get some dear old lady 'in reduced circumstances' to do that. There are so many of them—all with excellent references. Someone about my own age would do,—for after all, I'm over forty!"

He uttered an exclamation of impatience.

"Why will you say that?"

"Because it's true!" she replied. "According to this planet's time. But"—here her eyes flashed with a strange and almost unearthly lustre—"there are other planets—other countings! And by these, I am—well!—what I am!"

He looked at her in mingled doubt and wonder.

"Diana!" he said, entreatingly—"Will you not trust me?"

"In what way?" she asked, with sudden coldness—"What trust do you seek?"

"Listen!" he went on eagerly—"My science has worked its will upon you, with the most amazing success—but there is something beyond my science—something which baffles me,—which I cannot fathom! It is in you, yourself—you have learned what I have failed to learn,—you know what I do not know!"

A smile suddenly irradiated her lovely face,—so might an angel smile in giving a benediction.

"I am glad you realise that!" she said, quietly—"For it is true! But what I have learned—what I know—I cannot explain to myself or impart to others."

He stood amazed,—not so much at her words as at her manner of uttering them. It was the unapproachable, ethereal dignity of her attitude and expression that awed and held him in check.

"You would not understand or believe it possible," she went on, "even if I tried to put into words what is truly a wordless existence, apart from you altogether,—apart not only from you, but from all merely human things——"

"Ah!" he interrupted quickly—"That is just the point. You say 'merely' human, as if you had passed beyond humanity!"

She looked at him steadily.

"Humanity thinks too much of itself," she said, slowly. "Its petty ambitions,—its miserable wars,—its greed of gain and love of cruelty!—what is it worth without the higher soul! In this universe—even in this planet, humanity is not all! There are other forces—other forms—but—as I have said, I cannot explain myself, and it is time to say good-bye. I am glad I have been of use in helping you to succeed in what you sought to do; and now I suppose you will make millions of money by your ability to re-establish life and youth. And will that make you happy, I wonder?"

His face grew stern and impassive.

"I do not seek happiness," he said—"Not for myself. I hope to make happiness for others. Yet truly I doubt whether happiness is possible in this world, except for children and fools."

"And sorrow?" she queried.

"Sorrow waits on us hand and foot," he replied—"There is no condition exempt from it."

"Except mine!" she said, smiling. "I am relieved of both sorrow and joy—I never

seem to have known either! I am as indifferent to both as a sunbeam! Good-bye!”

He held her hand, and his dark eyes searched her lovely face as though looking for a gleam of sympathy.

“Good-bye!” he rejoined—“But not for long! Remember that! Those whom you knew in England will not recognise you now,—you will have many difficulties, and you may need a friend’s counsel—I shall follow you very soon!”

“Why should you?” she asked, lightly. His grasp on her hand tightened unconsciously.

“Because I must!” he answered, passionately. “Don’t you see? You draw me like a magnet!—and I cannot resist following my own exquisite creation!”

She released her hand with a decided movement.

“You mistake!” she said—“I am not your creation. You, of yourself, can create nothing. I am only a result of your science which you never dreamed of!—which you could not foresee!—and which you will never master! Good-bye!”

She left him at once with this word, despite his last entreating call, “Diana!” and passing through the private gate to the high road, so disappeared. Like a man in a trance, he stood watching till the last glimpse of her dress had vanished—then, with a mist of something like tears in his eyes, he realised that a sudden blank loneliness had fallen upon him like a cloud.

“Something I shall never master!” he repeated, as he went slowly homeward. “If woman I shall!—but if not——”

And here he checked his thoughts, not daring to pursue them further.

So they parted,—he more bewildered and troubled by the “success” of his experiment than satisfied,—while she, quite unconscious of any particular regret or emotion, started on her journey to England. Never had she received so much attention, and the eagerness displayed by every man she met to wait upon her and

assist her in some way or other, amused her while it aroused a certain scorn.

"It is only looks that move them!" she said to herself. "The same old tale!—Youth and beauty!—and never a care whether I am a good or an evil thing! And yet one is asked to 'respect' men!"

She went on her way without trouble. The chef de gare at Geneva was full of gentle commiseration at the idea of so young and lovely a creature travelling alone, and placed her tenderly, as though she were a hot-house lily to be carried "with care," in a first-class compartment of "Dames Seules" where a couple of elderly ladies received her graciously, with motherly smiles, and remarked that she was "very young to travel alone." She deprecated their attention with becoming grace—but said very little. She looked at their wrinkles and baggy throats, and wondered, whether, if they knew of Dr. Dimitrius and went to him, he could ever make them young and beautiful again? It seemed impossible,—they were too far gone! They were travelling to London, however; and she cheerfully accepted their kindly proposal that she should make the journey in their company. On the way through Paris she wrote a brief letter to Sophy Lansing, saying that she would call and see her as soon after arrival in London as possible, and adding as a postscript: "I have changed very much in my appearance, but I hope you will still know me as your friend, Diana."

The two ladies with whom chance or fate had thrown her in company, turned out to be of the "old" English aristocracy, and were very simple, gently-mannered women who had for many years been intimate friends. They were both widows; their children were grown up and married, and many reverses of fortune, with loss of kindred, had but drawn them more closely together. Every year they took little inexpensive holidays abroad, and they were returning home now after one of these spent at Aix-les-Bains. They were fascinated by the extraordinary beauty of the girl they had volunteered to chaperon, and, privately to one another, thought and said she

ought to wear a veil. For no man saw her without seeming suddenly "smitten all of a heap," as the saying is,—and, after one or two embarrassing experiences at various stations en route, where certain of these "smitten" had not scrupled to walk up and down the platform outside their compartment just to look at the fair creature within, one of the worthy dames suggested, albeit timidly, that perhaps—only perhaps!—a veil might be advisable?—as they were soon going across the sea—and the rough salt wind and spray were so bad for the complexion! Diana smiled. She understood. And for the rest of the journey she tied up her beautiful head and face in American fashion with an uncompromising dark blue motor veil through which hardly the tip of her nose could be seen.

They crossed the Channel at night, and breakfasted together at Dover. Once in the train bound for London, Diana's companions sought tactfully to find out who she was. Something quite indefinable and unusual about her gave them both a touch of "nerves." She seemed removed and aloof from life's ordinary things, though her manner was perfectly simple and natural. She gave her name quite frankly and added that she was quite alone in the world.

"I have one friend,—Miss Sophy Lansing," she said—"You may have heard of her. She is a leading Suffragette and a very clever writer. I am going to her now."

The ladies glanced at each other and smiled.

"Yes,—we have heard of her," said one. "But I hope she will not make you a Suffragette! Life has much better fortune in store for you than that!"

"You think so?"—and Diana shrugged her graceful shoulders indifferently—"Anyway, I am not interested in political matters at all. They are always small and quarrelsome,—like the buzzing of midges on a warm day!"

One of her companions now took out her card-case.

"Do come and see me in town!" she said kindly—"I should be very glad if you would. I live a very quiet hum-drum life and seldom see any young people."

Diana smiled as she accepted the card.

"Thank you so much!" she murmured,—seeing at a glance the name and address "Lady Elswood, Chester Square," and thinking how easy it was for youth and beauty to find friends—"I will certainly come."

"And don't forget me!" said the other lady—"I live just round the corner,—only a few steps from Lady Elswood's house, so you can come and see me also."

Diana expressed her acknowledgment by a look, reading on the second card now proffered: "Mrs. Gervase," and the address indicated.

"I will!" she said, and yet in her own mind she felt that these two good-natured women were the merest shadows to her consciousness, and that she had not the remotest idea of going to visit them at any time.

London reached, they parted,—and Diana, taking a taxi-cab and claiming her modest luggage from the Custom-house officials, was driven straight to Sophy Lansing's flat in Mayfair, which she had left under such different circumstances close on a year ago. Miss Lansing was in, said the servant who opened the door,—and Diana had hardly waited in the drawing-room five minutes, when there was a rush of garments and quick feet and Sophy herself appeared. But at the door she stopped—transfixed.

"There's some mistake," she said at once—"You must have come to the wrong flat. I expected a friend,—Miss May. You are not Miss May."

Diana held out both hands.

"Sophy, don't you know me?" she said, smiling—"Won't you know me? Surely you recognise my voice? I told you in my letter from Paris that I was changed—I thought you would understand——"

But Sophy stood mute and bewildered, her back against the door by which she had just entered. For half a minute she felt she knew the sweet thrill of the voice that was

Diana's special gift,—but when she looked at the exquisite girlish beauty of the—the "person" who had intruded upon her, as she thought, on false pretences, she was unreasonably annoyed, her annoyance arising, though she would never have admitted it, from a helpless consciousness of her own inferiority in attractiveness.

"Nonsense!" she said, sharply. "Whoever you are, you can't take me in! My friend is a middle-aged woman,—older than I am—you are a mere girl! Do you think I don't know the difference? Please leave my house!"

At these words, a delightful peal of lilting laughter broke from Diana's lips. Sophy stared, indignant and speechless, while Diana slipped off a watch bracelet from her slender wrist.

"Very well, dear!" she said. "If you don't want to know me, you shan't! Here is the little watch you lent me when I went away last year—after I was drowned, you remember?—in place of my own which I'm glad to see you are wearing. You know I took up a position with the Dr. Féodor Dimitrius whose advertisement you sent me,—he wanted me to help him in a scientific experiment. Well!—I did,—and I am the result of his work. I see you don't believe me, so I'll go. I told the taxi-man to wait. I'm so sorry you won't have me!"

Sophy Lansing listened amazed and utterly incredulous. That voice—that sweet laughter—they had a familiar ring; but the youthful features, the exquisite complexion of clear cream and rose—these were no part of the Diana she had known, and she shook her head obstinately.

"You may have met my friend in Geneva," she said, stiffly. "But how you got my watch from her, I am at a loss to imagine—unless she lent it to you to travel with. You look to me like a run-away schoolgirl playing a practical joke. But whoever you are, you are not Diana May."

Smilingly Diana laid the watch she had taken off down on the table.

"Very well, I will leave this here," she said. "It is yours,—and when I am gone it

will help you to remember and think over all the circumstances. You had my letter from Paris?"

"I had a letter," replied Sophy, coldly, "from my friend, Miss May."

Diana laughed again.

"I wrote it," she said. "How droll it seems that you should know my handwriting and not know me! And I thought you would be so pleased!—you, who said I was going to be 'a wonderful creature,' and that 'Cinderella should go to the Prince's Ball!' And now you won't recognise me!—it's just as if you were 'jealous because I'm pretty!' I may as well explain before I go, that Dr. Dimitrius, for whom I've been working all the year, is one of those scientific 'cranks' who think they can restore lost youth, create beauty and prolong life—like Faust, you know! He wanted a subject to practise upon,—and as I was no earthly use to anyone, he took me! And he's turned me out as you see me—all new and fresh as the morning! And I believe I shall last a long while!"

But here Sophy Lansing uttered a half suppressed scream.

"Go away!" she gasped—"You—you are a mad girl! You've escaped from some asylum!—I'm sure you have!"

With swift dignity Diana drew herself up and gazed full and pitifully at her quondam friend.

"Poor Sophy!" she said—"I'm sorry for you! I thought you had more character—more self-control! I am not mad—I am far saner than you are. I have told you the truth—and one more thing I can tell you—that I have lost all power to be hurt or offended or disappointed, so you need not think your failure to believe me or your loss of friendship causes me the least pain! I have gone beyond all that. You are keeping the door closed,—will you let me pass?"

Really frightened and trembling violently, Sophy Lansing moved cautiously to one side, and as cautiously opened the door. Her scared eyes followed every movement

of the graceful, aerial girl-figure which professed to be Diana's, and she shrank away from the brilliant glance of the heavenly dark blue eyes that rested upon her with such almost angelic compassion. She heard a softly breathed "Good-bye!" and a gentle sweep of garments, then—a pause, and Diana was gone. She rushed to the window. Yes,—there was the taxi waiting,—another minute, and she saw her girl visitor enter it. The vehicle soon disappeared, its noisy grind and whir being rapidly lost in the roar of the general traffic.

"It was not—it could not have been Diana!" almost sobbed Sophy to herself. "I felt—oh, yes!—I felt it was something not quite human!"

Then, turning to the table where the watch-bracelet had been left, she took it up. It was indubitably her bracelet, with her monogram in small rubies and diamonds on the back of the watch. She had certainly lent it—almost given it—to Diana, and she herself was wearing Diana's own watch which Mr. and Mrs. Polydore May had given her as "a souvenir of our darling child!" It was all like a wild dream!—where had this girl come from?

"She is frightfully beautiful!" exclaimed Sophy at last, in an outburst of excited feeling—"Simply unearthly! Even if she were Diana, I could not have her here!—with me!—never—never! She would make me look so old! So plain—so unattractive! But of course she is not Diana!—no 'beauty doctor' could make a woman over forty look like a girl of eighteen or less! She must be an adventuress of some sort! She couldn't be so beautiful unless she were. But she won't palm herself off on me! My poor old Diana! I wonder what has become of her!"

Meanwhile "poor old Diana," somewhat perplexed by the failure of her friend to accept her changed appearance on trust, was thinking out the ways and means of her new life. She had plenty of money, for Dimitrius had placed two thousand pounds to her credit in a London bank,—a sum which she had no hesitation in accepting, as the price of her life, risked in his service. The thought now struck her that she would go

to this bank, draw a small cheque, and explain that she had arrived alone in London, and wished to be recommended to some good hotel. This proved to be an excellent idea. The manager of the bank received her in his private office, and, fairly dazzled by her beauty, placed his friendliest services at her disposal, informing her that he was a personal friend of Dimitrius, and that he held him in the highest esteem and honour. To prove his sincerity he personally escorted her to a quiet private hotel of the highest respectability, chiefly patronised by “county” ladies “above suspicion.” Here, on his recommendation, she took a small suite overlooking the Park. Becoming more and more interested in her youth, loveliness and loneliness, he listened sympathetically while she mentioned her wish to find some middle-aged lady of good family who would reside with her as a chaperone and companion for a suitable annual salary,—and he promised to exert himself in active search for a person of quality who would be fitted for the post. He was a good-looking man, and though married, was susceptible to the charms of the fair sex, and it was with undisguised reluctance that he at last took his leave of the most beautiful creature he had ever seen, with many expressions of courtesy, and commiserating her enforced temporary solitude.

“I wish I could stay with you!” he said, regardless of convention.

“I’m sure you do!” answered Diana, sweetly. “Thank you so much! You have been most kind!”

A look from the lovely eyes accompanied these simple words which shot like a quiver of lightning through the nerves of the usually curt, self-possessed business man, and caused him to stammer confusedly and move awkwardly as at last he left the room. When he was gone Diana laughed.

“They are all alike!” she said—“All worshippers of outward show! Suppose that good man knew I was over forty? Why, he wouldn’t look at me!”

The manageress of the hotel just then entered, bringing the book in which all hotel

visitors registered their names. She was quite a stately person, attired in black silk, and addressed Diana with a motherly air, having been told by the bank manager, for whom she had a great respect, to have good care of her. Diana wrote her name in a dashing, free hand, putting herself down as a British subject, and naming Geneva as her last place of residence, when her attention was arrested by a name three or four lines above that on which she was writing—and she paused, pen in hand.

"Are those people staying here?" she asked.

The manageress looked where she pointed.

"Captain the Honourable Reginald Cleeve, Mrs. Cleeve, two daughters and maid," she said. "Yes—they are here,—they always come here during a part of the season."

Diana finished writing her own inscription and laid down the pen. She was smiling, and her eyes were so densely blue and brilliant that the manageress was fairly startled.

"I will dine in my room this evening," she said. "I have had a long journey, and am rather tired. To-morrow, perhaps, I'll come down to dinner——"

"Don't put yourself out at all about that," said the manageress, kindly. "It's not comfortable for a girl to dine in a room full of strangers—or perhaps you know Mrs. Cleeve and could sit at her table——?"

"No—I do not know Mrs. Cleeve," said Diana, decidedly—"I've seen her at a charity bazaar and I believe she's very stout—but I claim no acquaintance."

"She is stout," agreed the manageress with a smile, as she left the room.

Diana stood still, absorbed in thought. Her features were aglow with some internal luminance,—her whole form was instinct with a mysteriously radiant vitality.

"So Destiny plays my game!" she said, half aloud. "On the very first day of my return to the scene of my poor earthly sorrows I lose an old friend and find an old lover!"

CHAPTER XXIII

Destiny having apparently taken sides with Diana in her new existence, she lost no time in availing herself of the varied and curious entertainment thrown in her way. The first thing she did on the next day but one of her arrival in London was to attempt a visit to her own former old home in Richmond, in order to see her "bereaved" parents. A private automobile from the hotel was supplied for her use at the hour she named in the afternoon,—an hour when she knew by old experience her mother would be dozing on the sofa after lunch, and her father would be in a semi-somnolent condition over the day's newspaper. As she passed through the hotel lounge on her way to enter the car, she came face to face with her quondam lover, Captain the Honourable Reginald Cleeve, a heavily-built, fairly good-looking man of about fifty or more. She wondered, as she saw him, what had become of the once rather refined contour of the features she had formerly admired, and why the eyes that had "looked love into eyes that spake again" were now so small and peepy, and half hidden under lids that were red and puffy. Dressed with a quiet elegance and simplicity, she moved slowly towards him,—he was lighting a cigar and preparing to go out, but as he caught sudden sight of her he dropped the lit match with a "By Jove!" stamped its flame out under his foot, and hastening to the hotel door of exit, opened it, and, lifting his hat, murmured "Allow me!" with a glance of undisguised admiration. She bowed slightly and smiled her thanks—her smile was most enchanting, creating as it were a dazzle of light in the eyes of those who beheld it,—then she passed out into the street, where the hotel porter assisted her into her automobile, and watched her being driven away till she had disappeared. Captain Cleeve strolled up to the hotel office where the manageress sat at her desk,—he was on friendly terms with her, and could ask any question he liked.

"Is that young lady staying here?" he now inquired—"The one who has just gone out?"

“Yes. She came two days ago from abroad. A very beautiful girl, is she not?”

Cleeve nodded.

“Rather! I never saw anything like her. Do you know who she is?”

“Her name is May,—Miss Diana May,” replied the manageress. “She was recommended here by,—dear me! Is there anything the matter?”

For Captain the Honourable had gone suddenly white, and as suddenly become violently red in the face, while he gripped the edge of the counter against which he leaned as though afraid of falling.

“No—no!” he answered, impatiently—“It’s nothing! Are you sure that’s her name?—Diana May?”

“Quite sure! The manager of our bank brought her here, explaining that she had just arrived from Switzerland, where she has been educated—I think—in the house of one of his own friends who lives in Geneva—and that she was for the present alone in London. He is looking out for a lady chaperone and companion for her,—she has plenty of money.”

Cleeve pulled at his moustache nervously—then gave a forced laugh.

“Curious!” he ejaculated—“I used to know a girl named Diana May years ago—before—before I was married. Not like this girl—no!—though she was pretty. I wonder if she’s any relation? I must ask her.”

“She seemed to know your name when she saw it in our register,” said the manageress, “for she inquired if you and your family were staying here. I said ‘Yes’—and ‘did she know Mrs. Cleeve?’—but she replied that she did not.”

Captain the Honourable had become absent-minded, and murmured “Oh!” and “Ah!” as if he were not paying very much attention. He strolled away and out into the street, with the name “Diana May” ringing in his ears, and the vision of that exquisitely lovely girl before his eyes. A dull spark of resentment sprang up in him

that he should be a married man with a wife too stout to tie her own shoes, and the father of children too plain-featured and ungraceful to be looked at a second time.

"We are fools to marry at all!" he inwardly soliloquized. "At fifty-five a man may still be a lover—and lover of a girl, too—when long before that age a woman is done for!"

Meanwhile Diana was having adventures of a sufficiently amusing kind, had she retained the capability of being amused by anything "merely" human. She arrived at her former old home a little on the outskirts of Richmond, and bade the driver of her automobile wait at the carriage gate, preferring to walk up the short distance of the drive to the house. How familiar and yet unfamiliar that wide sweep of neatly-rolled gravel was! banked up on each side with rhododendrons, through which came occasional glimpses of smooth green lawn and beds of summer flowers! How often she had weeded and watered those beds, when the gardener went off on a "booze," as had been his frequent custom, pretending he had been "called away" by the illness of a near relative! Pausing on the doorstep of the house she looked around her,—everything was as it used to be,—the whole place expressing that unctuous pride and neatness ordinary to the suburban villa adorned by suburban taste. She rang the bell, and a smart parlour-maid appeared,—not one of the old "staff" which had been under Diana's management.

"Is Mrs. Polydore May in?" she asked.

The maid perked a saucy head. The dazzling beauty of the visitor offended her—she had claims to a kind of music-hall prettiness herself.

"Mrs. May is in, but she's resting and doesn't wish to be disturbed," she replied—"Unless you've some pertikler appointment——"

"My business is very urgent," said Diana, calmly. "I am a relative of hers, just returned from abroad. I must see her—or Mr. May——"

"Perhaps Miss Preston——" suggested the parlour-maid.

Diana smiled. Miss Preston! Who was she? A new inmate of the household?—a companion for “Ma”—and “young” enough for “Pa”?

“Yes—Miss Preston will do,” she said, and forthwith she was shown into a shady little morning-room which she well remembered, where she used to tot up the tradesmen’s books and sort the bills. A saucy-looking girl with curly brown hair rose from the perusal of a novel and stared at her inquiringly and superciliously.

“I have called to see Mrs. May”—she explained “on very particular and personal business.”

“What name?” inquired the girl, with a standoffish air.

“The same as her own. Kindly tell her, please. Miss May.”

“I really don’t know whether she will see you,” said the girl, carelessly. “I am her secretary and companion——”

“So I imagine!” and Diana, without being asked, sank gracefully into an easy chair, which she remembered as comfortable—“I was also her secretary and companion—for some time! She knows me very well!”

“Oh, in that case——But does she expect you?”

“Hardly!” And Diana smiled. “But I’m sure she’ll be glad to see me. You are Miss Preston? Yes? Well then, Miss Preston, do please go and tell her!”

At that moment, a loud voice called:

“Lucy! Loo—cee! Where’s my pipe?”

Diana laughed.

“The same old voice!” she said. “That’s Mr. May, isn’t it? He’s calling you—and he doesn’t like being kept waiting, does he?”

Miss Preston’s face had suddenly flushed very red.

“I’ll tell Mrs. May,” she stammered, and hurriedly left the room.

Diana gazed about her on all the little familiar things she had so often dusted and arranged in their different places. They were all so vastly removed now in association that they might have been relics of the Stone Age so far as she was concerned. All at once the door opened and a reddish face peered in, adorned with a white terrier moustache—then a rather squat body followed the face and "Pa" stood revealed. With an affable, not to say engaging air, he said:

"I beg your pardon! Are you waiting to see anyone?"

Diana rose, and her exquisite beauty and elegance swept over his little sensual soul like a simoon.

"Yes!" she answered, sweetly, while he stared like a man hypnotised—"I want to see Mrs. May—and you!"

"Me!" he responded, eagerly—"I am only too charmed!"

"But I had better speak to Mrs. May first," she continued—"I have something very strange to tell her about her daughter——"

"Her daughter! Our daughter! My poor Diana!" And Mr. May immediately put on the manner of a pious grocer selling short weight—"Our darling was drowned last summer!—drowned! Drowned while bathing in a dangerous cove on the Devon coast. Terrible—terrible!—And she was so——"

"Young?" suggested Diana, sympathetically.

"No—er—no!—not exactly young!—she was not a girl like you!—no!—but she was so—so useful—so adaptable! And you have something strange to tell us about her?—well, why not begin with me?"

He approached her more closely with a "conquering" smile. She repressed her inclination to laugh, and said, seriously:

"No—I really think I had better explain matters to Mrs. May first—and I should like to be quite alone, please,—without Miss Preston."

At that moment Miss Preston returned and said:

“Mrs. May will see you.” Then, addressing Mr. May, she added: “This lady says she is some relative of yours—her name is May.”

Mr. James Polydore’s small grey-green eyes opened as widely as their lids would allow.

“A relative?” he repeated. “Surely you are mistaken?—I hardly think——”

“Please don’t perplex yourself!” said Diana, sweetly. “I will explain everything to Mrs. May—she will remember! Can I go to her now?”

“Certainly!” and Mr. May looked bewildered, but was too much overwhelmed by his visitor’s queenly air and surpassing loveliness to collect his wits, or ask any very pressing questions. “Let me show you the way!”

He preceded her along the passage to the drawing-room where Mrs. May, newly risen from the sofa, stood waiting to receive her mysterious caller,—fatter and flabbier than ever, and attired in an ill-fitting grey gown with “touches” of black about it by way of the remainder of a year’s mourning. Diana knew that old grey gown well, and had often deplored its “cut” and generally hopeless floppiness.

“Margaret,” announced Mr. May, with a jaunty air—“Here is a very charming young lady come to see you—Miss May!” Then to Diana: “As you wish to have a private talk, I’ll leave you, and return in a few minutes.”

“Thanks very much!” answered Diana,—and the next moment the door closed, and she was left alone, with—her mother. No emotion moved her,—not a shadow of tenderness,—she only just wondered how she ever came to be born of such a curious-looking person! Mrs. May stared at her with round, unintelligent eyes like those of a codfish just landed.

“I have not the—the pleasure——” she began.

Diana advanced a step or two, holding out her hands. “Don’t you know me?” she

said, at once—"Mother?"

Mrs. May sidled feebly backwards like a round rickety table on casters, and nearly fell against the wall.

"Don't you know my voice?" went on Diana—"The voice you have heard talking to you for over forty years?—I am your daughter!—your own daughter, Diana! I am, indeed. I was not drowned though I let you all think I was!—I ran away because I was tired of my hum-drum life at home! I went abroad for a year and I have just come back. Oh, surely something will tell you I am your own child! A mother's instinct, you know!" And she laughed,—a little laugh of chilliest satire. "I have grown much younger, I know—I will tell you all about that and the strange way it was done!—but I'm really your Diana! Your dear drowned 'girl!'—I am waiting for you to put your arms round me and tell me how glad you are to have me back alive and well!"

Mrs. May backed closer up against the wall and thrust both her hands out in a defensive attitude. Her gooseberry eyes rolled in her head,—her small, pursy mouth opened as though gasping for air. Not a word did she utter till Diana made a swift, half-running step towards her,—when she suddenly emitted a shrill scream like a railway whistle—another and yet another. There was a scamper of feet outside,—then the door was thrown open and Mr. May and Miss Preston rushed in.

"What's the matter? What on earth is the matter?" they cried, simultaneously.

Mrs. May, cowering against the wall, pointed at her beautiful visitor.

"Take her away! Get hold of her!" she yelled. "Get hold of her quick! Send for the police! She's mad! Aa-aah! You've let a lunatic into the house! She's run away from some asylum! Lucy Preston, you ought to be ashamed of yourself to let her in. James, you're a fool! Aa-aah!" Another wild scream. "Look how she's staring at me! She says she's my daughter Diana—my daughter who was drowned last year! She's stark, raving mad! James, send for a doctor and a policeman to remove

her!—take care!—she may turn round and bite you!—you can never tell. Oh, dear, oh, dear! To think that with my weak heart, you should let a mad girl into the house! Oh, cruel, cruel! And to think she should imagine herself to be my daughter Diana!"

Diana drew herself up like a queen addressing her subjects.

"I am your daughter Diana!" she said—"Though how I came to be born of such people I cannot tell! For I have nothing in common with you. But I have told you the truth. I was not drowned on the Devon coast in that cove near Rose Lea as I led you to imagine—I was tired of my life with you and ran away. I have been in Switzerland for a year and have just come back. I thought it was my duty to show myself to you alive—but I want you as little as you want me. I will go. Good-bye!—Good-bye you, who were my mother!"

As she said this Mrs. May uttered another yell, and showed signs of collapsing on the floor. Miss Preston hurried to her assistance, while Mr. May, his knees shaking under him,—for he was an arrant coward,—ventured cautiously to approach the beautiful "escaped lunatic."

"There, there!" he murmured soothingly,—he had an idea that "there, there," was a panacea for all the emotions of the sex feminine—"Come!—now—er—come with me, like a good girl! Be reasonable and gentle!—I'll take care of you!—you know you are not allowed to go wandering about by yourself like this, with such strange ideas in your head!—Now come along quietly, and I'll see what I can do——"

Diana laughed merrily.

"Oh, Pa! Poor old Pa! Just the same Pa! Don't trouble yourself and don't look so frightened! I won't 'bite' you! My car is waiting and I have to be back at the hotel in time for dinner." And she stepped lightly along out of the drawing-room without one backward glance at the moaning Mrs. May, supported by Miss Preston, while James Polydore followed her, vaguely wondering whether her mention of a car in waiting might not be something like crazed Ophelia's call for "Come, my coach!"

Suddenly she said:

“Is Grace Laurie still with you?”

He stared, thoroughly taken aback.

“Grace Laurie? My wife’s maid? She married and went to Australia six months ago. How could you know her?”

“As your daughter Diana, I knew her, of course!” she replied. “Poor Grace! She was a kind girl! She would have recognised my voice, I’m sure. Is it possible you don’t?”

“I don’t, indeed!” answered “Pa” cautiously, while using his best efforts to get her out of the house—“Come, come! I’m very sorry for you,—you are evidently one of those ‘lost identity’ cases of which we so often hear—and you are far too pretty to be in such a sad condition of mind! You see, you don’t know yourself, and you don’t know what you’re talking about! My daughter Diana was not like you at all,—she was a middle-aged woman—Ah!—over forty——”

“So she was—so she is!” said Diana—“I’m over forty! But, Pa, why give yourself away? It makes you so old!”

She threw him such a smile, and such a glance of arrowy brilliancy that his head whirled.

“Poor child, poor child!” he mumbled, taking her daintily-gloved hand and patting it. “Far gone!—far gone, indeed! And so beautiful, too!—so very beautiful!” Here he kissed the hand he had grasped. “There, there! You are almost normal! Be quite good! Here we are at the door—now, are you sure you have a car? Shall I come with you?”

Diana drew her hand away from her father’s hold, and her laugh, silvery sweet, rang out in a little peal of mirth.

“No, Pa! Fond as you are of the ladies, you cannot make love to your own daughter!

The Prayer Book forbids! Besides, a mad girl is not fit for your little gallantries! You poor dear! One year has aged you rather badly! Aren't you a leetle old for Miss Preston?"

A quick flush overspread James Polydore's already rubicund countenance, and he blinked his eyes in a special "manner" which he was accustomed to use when feigning great moral rectitude. More than ever convinced that his visitor was insane, he continued to talk on in blandly soothing accents:

"Ah, I see your car? And no one with you? Dear, dear! I wish I could escort you to—to wherever you are going——"

"No, you don't—not just now!" said Diana, laughing. "You're too scared! But perhaps another time——"

She swung lightly away from him, and moved with her floating grace of step along the drive to the carriage gate, where the car waited. The driver jumped down and opened the door for her. She sprang in, while James Polydore, panting after her, caught the chauffeur by the coat-sleeve.

"I don't think this young lady knows where she is going," he said, confidentially. "Where did you find her?"

The chauffeur stared.

"She's at our hotel," he answered—"And I'm driving her back there."

Here Diana put her head out of the window,—her fair face radiant with smiles.

"You see, it's all right!" she said—"Don't bother about me! You know the——Hotel looking over the Park? Well, I'm there just now, but not for long?"

"No, I'm sure not for long!" thought the bewildered James Polydore. "You'll be put in a 'home' for mental cases if you haven't run away from one already!" And it was with a great sense of relief that he watched the chauffeur "winding up" and preparing to move off—the lunatic would have no chance to "bite" him, as his wife

had suggested! But how beautiful she was! For the life of him he could not forbear treating her to one of his “conquering” smiles.

“Good-bye, dear child!” he said. “Take care of yourself! Be quite good! I—I will come and see you at your—your hotel.”

Diana laughed again.

“I’m sure you will! Why, Pa dear, you won’t be able to keep away! The antique Mrs. Ross-Percival, whom you so much admire, is not ‘the’ only beautiful woman in London! Do remember that! Ta-ta!”

The car moved rapidly off, leaving James Polydore in a chaotic condition of mind. He was, of course, absolutely convinced that the girl who called herself his daughter Diana was the victim of a craze, but how or when she became thus obsessed was a mystery to him. He re-entered his house to struggle with the wordy reproaches of his better-half, and to talk the matter over privately with the “companion secretary,” Lucy Preston, whose attention he thought more safely assured by a tête-à-tête, which apparently obliged him to put his arm round her waist and indulge in sundry other agreeable endearments. But the exquisite beauty of the “escaped lunatic” haunted him, and he made up his mind to see her again at all costs, mad or sane, and make searching inquiries concerning her.

Diana herself, speeding back to her hotel, realised afresh the immensity of the solitude into which her new existence plunged her. Her own father and mother did not recognise her,—her most trusted friend, Sophy Lansing, refused to acknowledge her identity—well!—she was indeed “born again”—born of strange elements in which things human played no part, and she must needs accept the position. The saving grace of it all was that she felt no emotion,—neither sadness nor joy—neither fear nor shame;—she was, or she felt herself to be a strange personality apart from what is understood as human life, yet conscious of a life superior to that of humanity. If a ray of light hovering above a world of shadows could be imagined as

an entity, a being, such would most accurately have described her curious individuality.

That same evening her banker called upon her, bringing with him a pleasant motherly-looking lady whom he introduced as Mrs. Beresford, a widow, whose straitened circumstance made her very anxious to obtain some position of trust, with an adequate salary. Her agreeable and kindly manners, gentle voice, and undeniable good breeding impressed Diana at once in her favour,—and then and there a settlement between them was effected, much to the relief and satisfaction of the worthy banker, who, without any hesitation, said that he "could not rest till he felt sure Miss May was under good protection and care"—at which she laughed a little but expressed her gratitude as prettily as any "girl" might be expected to do. She invited him and her newly-engaged chaperone to dine with her, and they all three went down to the hotel dining-room together, where, of course, Diana's amazing beauty made her the observed of all observers. Especially did Captain the Honourable Reginald Cleeve, seated at a table with an alarmingly stout wife and two equally alarmingly plain daughters, stare openly and admiringly at the fair enchantress with the wonderful sea-blue eyes and dazzling complexion, and deeply did he ruminate in his mind as to how he could best approach her, and ask whether she happened to be any relative to the "Diana May" he had once known. He made an opportunity after dinner, when she passed through the lounge hall with her companions, and paused for a moment to look at the "Programme of Entertainments in London" displayed for the information of visitors.

"Pray excuse me!" he said—"I chanced to hear your name—may I ask——"

"Anything!" Diana answered, smiling, while Mrs. Beresford, already alert, came closer.

"I used to know," went on the Captain, becoming rather confused and hesitating—"a Miss Diana May—I wondered if you were any relative——?"

"Yes, indeed!" said Diana, cheerfully—"I am!—quite a near relative! Do come and see me to-morrow, will you? I have often heard of Captain Cleeve!—and his dear wife!—and his sweet girls! Yes!—do come! Mrs. Beresford and I will be so pleased!"

Here she took her new chaperone's arm and gave it a little suggestive squeeze, by way of assuring her that all was as it should be,—and with another bewildering smile, and a reiterated "Do come!" she passed on, with her banker (who had become a little stiff and standoffish at the approach of Captain Cleeve) and Mrs. Beresford, and so disappeared.

Cleeve tugged vexedly at his moustache.

"A 'near relative,' is she? Then she knows! Or—perhaps not! She's too young—not more than eighteen at most. And the old Diana must be quite forty-five! Hang it all!—this girl might be her daughter—but old Diana never married—just like some old maids 'faithful to a memory!'" He laughed. "By Jove! I remember now! She got drowned last year—old Diana did!—drowned somewhere in Devonshire. I read about it in the papers and thought what a jolly good thing! Poor old Diana! And this little beauty is a 'near relative,' is she? Well—well!—we'll see! To-morrow!"

But when to-morrow came, it brought him no elucidation of the mystery. Diana had left the hotel. The manageress explained that through Mrs. Beresford she had heard of a very charming furnished flat which she thought would suit her, and which she had suddenly decided to take, and she had gone to make the final arrangements.

"She left this note for you," said the manageress, handing Cleeve a letter. "She remembered she had asked you to call on her this afternoon."

He took the letter with a sudden qualm of "nerves." It was simple enough.

"Dear Captain Cleeve" (it ran),

"So sorry to put you off, but Mrs. Beresford and I are taking a flat and we shall be rather busy for the next few days, putting things in order. After that will you come

and see me at the above address?

“Yours sincerely, “Diana May.”

That was all,—but while reading it, Captain the Honourable’s head swam round and round as if he were revolving in a wheel. For though the letter purported to come from a “young” Diana, the handwriting—the painfully familiar handwriting—was that of the “old” Diana!

CHAPTER XXIV

Genius takes a century or more to become recognised,—but Beauty illumines this mortal scene as swiftly as a flash-light. Brief it may be, but none the less brilliant and blinding; and men who are for the most part themselves unintelligent and care next to nothing for intellectuality, go down like beaten curs under the spell of physical loveliness, when it is united to a dominating consciousness of charm. Consciousness of charm is a powerful magnet. A woman may be beautiful, but if she is of a nervous or retiring disposition and sits awkwardly in the background twiddling her thumbs she is never a success. She must know her own power, and, knowing it, must exercise it. “Old” Diana May had failed to learn this lesson in the days of her girlhood,—she had believed, with quite a touching filial faith, in the pious and excessively hypocritical twaddle her father talked, about the fascination of “modest, pretty girls, who were unconscious of their beauty”—with the result that she had seen him, with other men, avoid such “modest, pretty girls” altogether, and pay devoted court to immodest, “loud” and impertinent women, who asserted their “made-up” good looks with a frank boldness which “drew” the men on like a shoal of herrings in a net, and left the “modest, pretty girls” out in the cold. “Old” Diana had, by devotion to duty and constancy in love, missed all her chances,—but the “young” Diana, albeit “of mature years,” knew better now than to “miss” anything. She was mistress of her own situation, so completely that the hackneyed expression of “all London at her feet” for once proclaimed a literal truth. London is, on the

whole, very ready to have something to worship,—it is easily led into a “craze.” It is a sort of Caliban among cities,—a monster that capers in drink and curses in pain, having, as Shakespeare says of his uncouth creation: “A forward voice to speak well of his friend,” and a “backward voice to utter foul speeches and detract.” But for once London was unanimous in giving its verdict for Diana May as the most beautiful creature it had ever seen. Photographers, cinema-producers, dressmakers, tailors, jewellers besieged her; she was like the lady of the Breton legend, who lived at the top of a brazen tower, too smooth and polished for anyone to climb it, or for any ladder to be supported against it, and whose face at the window drove all beholders mad with longing for the unattainable. One society versifier made a spurt of fame for himself by describing her as “a maiden goddess moulded from a dream,” whereat other society versifiers were jealous, and made a little commotion in the press by way of advertisement. But Diana herself, the centre of all the stir, showed no sign of either knowing or appreciating the social excitement concerning her, and her complete indifference only made her more desirable in the eyes of her ever-increasing crowd of admirers.

Once established in her flat with her chaperone, Mrs. Beresford, she lived the most curiously removed life from all the humanity that surged and seethed around her. The few appearances she made at operas, theatres, restaurants and the like were sufficient to lift her into the sphere of the recognised and triumphant “beauty” of the day. Coarse and vulgar seemed all the “faked” portraits of the half-nude sirens of stage and music-hall in the pictorial press, compared with the rare glimpses of the ethereal, almost divine loveliness which was never permitted to be copied by any painter or photographer. Once only did an eager camera-man press the button of his “snapshot” machine face to face with Diana as she came out of a flower-show,—she smiled kindly as she passed him and he thought himself in heaven. But when he came to develop his negative it was “fogged,” as though it had had the light in front of it instead of behind it, as photography demands. This accident was a complete

mystification, as he had been more than usually careful to take up a correct position. However, other photographers were just as unfortunate, and none were able to obtain so much as a faint impression of the fair features which dazzled every male beholder who gazed upon them. Artists, even the most renowned R.A.'s, were equally disappointed,—she, the unapproachable, the cold, yet enchanting "maiden goddess moulded from a dream" would not "sit" to any one of them,—would not have anything to do with them at all, in fact—and fled from them as though she were a Daphne pursued by many Apollos. A very short time sufficed to surround her with a crowd of adorers and would-be lovers, chief and most persistent among them being Captain the Honourable Reginald Cleeve, and—that antique Adonis, her father, James Polydore May. The worthy James had all his life been in the habit of forming opinions which were diametrically opposed to the opinions of everyone else,—and pursuing this course always to his own satisfaction, he had come to the conclusion that this "Diana May" who declared herself to be his daughter, was an artful demi-mondaine and adventuress with a "craze." He had frequently heard of people who imagined themselves to be the reincarnated embodiments of the dead. "Why, God bless my soul, I should think so!" he said to a man at the Club who rallied him about his openly expressed admiration for the "new beauty" who bore the same name as that of his "drowned" daughter—"I met a woman once who told me she was the reincarnation of Cleopatra! Now this girl, just because she happens to have my name, sticks to her idea, that she is my Diana——"

"You'd like her to be, wouldn't you?" chuckled his friend. "But if she takes you for her father——"

"She does—poor child, she does!" and James Polydore May sighed. "You would hardly believe it——"

"Why not?"—and the friend chuckled again—"You're quite old enough!"

With this unkind shot from a bent bow of malice he went off, leaving James

Polydore in an angry fume. For he—James—was not "old"—he assured himself—he was not old,—he would not be old! His wife was "old"—women age so quickly!—but he—why he was "in the prime of life;" all men over sixty are—in their own opinion. The beautiful Diana had ensnared him,—and his sensual soul being of gross quality, was sufficiently stimulated by her physical charm to make him eager to know all he could of her. She herself had not been in the least surprised when he found out her address and came to visit her. The presence of Mrs. Beresford rather disconcerted him,—that lady's quiet good sense, elegant manners and evident affection for the lovely "girl" she chaperoned, were a little astonishing to him. Such a woman could not be the keeper of a lunatic? Diana never entered into the matter of her relationship with James Polydore to Mrs. Beresford,—it entertained her more or less ironical humour to see her own father playing the ardent admirer, and whenever Mr. May called, as he often did, she always had some laughing remark to make about her "old relative," who was, she declared, "rather a bore." Mrs. Beresford was discreet enough to ask no questions, and so James Polydore came and went, getting no "forrader" with the fair one, notwithstanding all his efforts to make himself agreeable, and to dislodge from her mind the strange obsession which possessed it.

One day he went to see Sophy Lansing—never a favourite of his—and tried to find out what she thought of the "Diana May" whose name was now almost one to conjure with. But Sophy had little patience to bestow on him.

"An adventuress, of course!" she declared. "I am surprised you don't take the trouble to prosecute her for presuming to pass herself off as your daughter! And I'll tell you this much—Diana—your Diana—never was drowned!"

James Polydore's mouth opened,—he stared, wondering if he had heard aright.

"Never was drowned?" he echoed, feebly.

"No! Never was drowned!" repeated Sophy, firmly. "She ran away from you—and

no wonder! You were always a bore,—and she was always being reproached as an ‘old maid’ and ‘in the way.’ She slaved for you and her mother from morning till night and never had a kind word or a thank-you. I advised her to break away from the hum-drum life you made her lead, and on that morning when you thought her drowned, she came to me! Ah, you may stare! She did! She saw an advertisement in a French paper of a scientist in Geneva wanting a lady assistant to help him in his work, and she went there to try for the situation and got it. I rigged her out and lent her some money. She’s paid it all back, and for all I know she’s in Geneva still, though she’s under an agreement not to write to anyone or give her address. She’s been gone a year now.”

Mr. May’s dumpy form stiffened visibly.

“May I ask,” he said, pompously—“May I ask, Miss Lansing, why you have not thought proper to communicate these—these strange circumstances to me before?”

Sophy laughed.

“Because I promised Diana I wouldn’t,” she answered. “She knew and I knew that you and Mrs. May would be perfectly happy without her. She has taken her freedom, and I hope she’ll keep it!”

“Then—my daughter is—presumably—still alive?” he said. “And instead of dying, she has—well!—deserted us?”

“Exactly!” replied Sophy. “I would give you the name of the scientist for whom she is or was working, only I suppose you’d write and make trouble. When I had, as I thought, a letter from her the other day, saying she was returning to London, I got everything ready here to receive her—but when this artful girl turned up——”

“Oh, the girl came to see you, did she?” Mr. May mumbled. “The—the adventuress——?”

“Of course she did!—and actually brought me my watch-bracelet—one I had lent to Diana—as a sort of proof of identity. But of course nothing can make a woman of

forty a girl of eighteen!”

Mr. May put his hand to his bewildered head.

“No—no—of course not!—I—I must tell Mrs. May our daughter is alive—it will be a shock—of surprise——”

“No doubt!” said Sophy, sharply. “But she’s dead to you! Remember that! If I didn’t fear to make trouble for her I’d wire to her employer at Geneva about this pretender to her name—only it wouldn’t do any good, and I’d rather not interfere. And I advise you not to go dangling after the ‘new beauty,’ as she’s called—you really are too old for that sort of thing!”

Mr. May winced. Then he drew himself up with an effort at dignity.

“I shall endeavour to trace my daughter,” he said. “And I regret I cannot rely on your assistance, Miss Lansing! You have deceived us very greatly——”

“Twaddle!” interrupted Miss Lansing, defiantly. “You made Diana wretched—and she’d have gone on housekeeping for you till she had lost all pleasure in living,—now she’s got a good salary and a situation which is satisfactory, and I’ll never help you to drag her back to the old jog-trot of attending to your food and comfort. So there! As for this, ‘bogus’ Diana, the best thing you can do is to go and tell her you know all about it, and that she can’t take you in any more.”

“She’s the most beautiful thing ever seen!” he said, suddenly and with determination.

Sophy Lansing gave him an “all over” glance of utter contempt.

“What’s that to you if she is?” she demanded. “Will you never recognise your age? She might be your daughter—almost your granddaughter! And you want to make love to her? Bah!”

With a scornful sweep of her garments she left him, and he found his way out of the house more like a man in a dream than in a reality. He could hardly believe that

what she had told him was true—that Diana—his daughter Diana, was alive after all! He wondered what effect the news would have on his wife? After so much "mourning" and expressions of "terrible shock,"—the whole drowning business was turned into something of a comedy!

"Miss Lansing ought to be ashamed of herself!" he thought, indignantly. "A regular hypocrite! Why, she wrote a letter of sympathy and 'deep sorrow' for the loss of her 'darling Diana!' Disgraceful! And if the story is true and Diana has really run away from us, we should be perfectly justified in disowning her!"

Full of mingled anger and bewilderment he decided to go and see the "adventuress" known as Diana May and tell her all. She would not, he thought, pretend any longer to be his daughter if she knew that his daughter was living. He found her in the loveliest of "rest gowns," reclining on a sofa with a book in her hand,—she scarcely stirred from her attitude of perfect ease as he entered, except to turn her head round on her satin pillow and smile at him. Quite unnerved by that smile, he sat down beside her and taking her hand raised it to his lips.

"What a gallant little Pa it is!" she observed, lazily. "I wonder what 'Ma' would say if she saw you!"

He put on an air of mild severity.

"My dear girl," he said. "I wish you would stop all this nonsense and be sensible! I have heard some news to-day which ought to put an end to your pretending to be what you are not. My daughter—my real daughter Diana—is alive."

Diana laughed.

"Of course! Very much so! I should not be here if she were not. Do I seem dead?"

He made a gesture of impatience.

"Tut, tut! If you will persist——"

"Naturally I will persist!" she said, sitting up on the sofa, her delicate laces falling

about her like a cloud and her fair head lifted like that of a pictured angel—"I am Diana! I suppose you've been seeing Sophy Lansing—she's the only living being who knows my story and even she doesn't recognise me now. But I can't help her obstinacy, or yours! I am Diana!"

"My daughter," said Mr. May, with emphasis—"is in Geneva——"

"Was," interrupted Diana. "And is—here!"

Mr. May gave a groan of utter despair.

"No use—no use!" he said. "One might as well argue with the wind as with one of these mentally obsessed persons! Perfectly hopeless!—hopeless——!"

Diana sprang off her sofa and stood erect, confronting him.

"See here!" she said—"When I lived at home with you, sacrificing all my time to you and my mother, and only thinking of my duty to you both, you found me 'in the way.' Why? Merely because I was growing old. You never thought there was any cruelty in despising me for a fault which seems common to all nature. You never cared to consider that you yourself were growing old!—no, for you still seek to play the juvenile and the amorous! What you men consider legitimate in your own sex, you judge ridiculous in ours. You look upon me as 'young'—when in very truth I am of the age of the same Diana whom as your daughter you wearied of—but youth has been given to my 'mature years' in a way which you in your ignorance of all science would never dream of. You, like most men, judge by outward appearances only. The physical, which is perishable, attracts you—and you have no belief in the spiritual, which is imperishable. But the spiritual wins!"

Mr. May sat winking and blinking under this outburst, which was to him entirely incomprehensible, though he was uncomfortably conscious of the radiance of eyes that played their glances upon him like beams from fiery stars.

"There, there!" he said at last, nervously,—resorting to his usual soothing formula—"You are overwrought—a little hysterical—a sudden access of this—this

unfortunate mistaken identity trouble. I will come back and talk to you another day——"

"Why should you come back?" she demanded. "What do you want of me?"

James Polydore was somewhat confused by this straight question. What indeed did he want of her? He was too much of a moral coward to formulate the answer, even to himself. She was beautiful, and he wanted to caress her beauty,—old as he was, he would have liked to kiss that exquisite mouth, curved like a rose-petal, and run his wrinkled fingers through the warm and lavish gold of the hair that waved over the white brow and small ears like rippling sunshine. He was afflicted by the disease of senile amourousness for all women—but for this one in particular he was ready and eager to go to all lengths of fatuous foolishness possible to an old man in love, if he could only have been sure she was not insane! While he stood hesitating, and twitching his eyelids in the peculiar "manner" he affected when he had thoughts to conceal, she answered her own question for him.

"You want to make love to me," she said. "As I have told you before, that can't be done. I am your daughter,—deny it as you may to the end, nothing can alter the fact. Do you remember the man I was engaged to?—Captain Cleeve?—the 'Honourable' Reginald Cleeve?"

At this he was fairly startled and he gave a gasp of astonishment.

"I remember the man my daughter was engaged to," he said. "His name was Cleeve. But he is married——"

"Very much so!" and Diana smiled. "But that doesn't prevent his making love to me—and I let him do it! You see, he's no relation!—and I don't consider his fat wife any more than he considered me when he married her and threw me over! But he's like you—he doesn't believe I'm the old Diana!"

"Of course not!" and Mr. May expanded his chest with a long breath of superior wisdom. "I should like to see him and talk to him about you and your sad condition

of mind——”

“No doubt you would, but you won’t,” said Diana calmly. “I have forbidden him to go near you for the present. He dare not ask any questions about me—till—till I have done with him!”

What a look there was in her eyes! James Polydore shrank under it as though it blinded him.

“Dare not? Done with him?” he echoed stupidly.

She laughed, quite sweetly.

“There, poor Pa, do go home! Pay your attentions to my mother’s companion, Miss Preston—if she really likes your endearments, why, then, ‘crabbed age and youth’ may live together! Poor mother! She never found out all your little ways!—some of them she discovered by chance—but I knew them all! What would you give to be as young as I am at your age! ‘Too late, too late!—ye cannot enter now!’” Her laughter rang out again,—then approaching him, she laid her hands lightly on his shoulders and kissed him. “There, that’s a true daughter’s kiss!—make the best of it, dear Pa! Go home and be a good, nice, moral old man!—sit on one side of the fireplace with Ma on the other, and settle down into Darby and Joan!—such a nice couple!—with a dash of Miss Preston between to keep up your spirits! And don’t come back here ever!—unless you accept the true position we occupy of father and daughter—father growing old, and daughter growing young!”

Standing in the centre of the room, with the soft ivory chiffon and lace of her “rest gown” trailing about her like the delicate cirri floating across a summer sky, she appeared like a vision of something altogether beyond mere woman, and as the little gross, sensual man who had been her father looked at her, a sudden unnameable terror overcame him. His limbs shook—his brain reeled,—within himself a frightened sense of something supernatural paralysed his will—and he made for the door like a man groping in the dark. She threw it open for him with a queenly

gesture of dismissal.

“Tell my mother,” she said, “that her daughter is truly alive, and that she has kissed you!—not as the ‘old’ but as the young Diana! Don’t forget!”

CHAPTER XXV

The chaotic condition of mind into which Mr. Polydore May found himself plunged by what to him was the inexplicable and crazy conduct of the inexplicable and crazy young woman who so obstinately maintained her right to consider herself his daughter, was nothing to the well-nigh raving state of Captain the Honourable Reginald Cleeve, who was faced with a still more intolerable position. He, when he had first called upon Diana as she had invited him to do, experienced something in the nature of a thunder-clap, when she explained, with much gracious, albeit cold composure, that she was his former betrothed whom he had “jilted” for a younger and wealthier woman. If he had been suddenly hypnotised by a remorseless conjurer, he could not have been more stricken into speechless and incredulous amazement. He sat in a chair opposite to his fair and smiling informant, staring helplessly, while she, having had tea brought in, prepared him a cup with hospitable ease and condescension.

“When you got the note I left for you at the hotel,” she said, “surely you recognised my handwriting?”

Still staring, he moistened his dry lips with his tongue and tried to speak.

“Your handwriting?” he stammered—“I—I thought it very like the handwriting of—of another Diana May I used to know——”

“Yes—another Diana May,” she said, bending her grave clear eyes upon him—“A Diana May whose life you ruthlessly spoiled,—whose trust in men and things you murdered—and why! Because you met a woman with more money, who was younger than I—I, who had aged through waiting patiently for you, as you had

asked me to do—because you thought that by the time you returned from India I should be what Society calls passée! And for such callous and selfish considerations as these you deliberately sacrificed my happiness! But I have been given a strange and unexpected vengeance!—look at your wife and look at me!—which now is the 'younger' of the two?"

He moved uneasily—there was something in her aspect that stabbed him as though with physical force and pain.

"You—you must certainly know you are talking nonsense!" he said at last, trying to pull himself together. "Yours is the queerest craze I ever heard of! Here are you, a beautiful young girl in the very dawn of womanhood, pretending to be a middle-aged spinster who was accidentally drowned last year off the coast of Devon! I don't know how you've come by the same name as hers—or why your handwriting should resemble hers,—it's mere coincidence, no doubt—but that you should actually declare yourself as one and the same identity with hers, is perfectly ridiculous! I don't deny that you seem to have got hold of the other Diana May's story—I was engaged to her, that's true—but I had to be away in India longer than was at first intended—seven years nearly. And seven years is a long time to keep faith with a woman who doesn't grow younger——"

"Doesn't grow younger—yes—I see!" echoed Diana, with an enigmatical smile. "And seven years is a long time for a woman to keep faith with a man under the same circumstances. You have not grown younger!"

He reddened. His personal vanity as "an officer and a gentleman" was far greater than that of any woman.

"If we live, we are bound to grow older——" he said.

"Sometimes," acquiesced Diana, pleasantly. "It is not always necessary. In my case, for example——"

Looking at the fair and youthful outline of her features, the sense of extreme

incongruity between what she actually was and what she resolutely avowed herself to be touched his innermost sense of humour, and he laughed outright.

"Of course you are playing!" he said—"Playing with yourself and me! You must be one of those queer psychists who imagine they are re-embodied spirits of the past—but I don't mind if that sort of thing really amuses you! Only I wonder you don't imagine yourself to be the reincarnation of some fairy princess—or even the Diana who was the goddess of the moon, rather than an ordinary spinster of the British middle-class, who, even in her best days, was nothing more than the usual type of pretty English girl."

"To whom you wrote a good deal of 'gush' in your time—" said Diana composedly—"which she was fool enough to believe. Do you remember this letter?"

From a quaint blue velvet bag hanging at her side by a silver chain, she drew a folded paper and handed it to him.

With eyes that grew hot and dim in giddy perplexity, he read his own writing:

"How I love you, my own sweet little Diana! You are to me the most adorable girl in the world, and if ever I do an unkind thing to you or wrong you in any way, may God punish me for a treacherous brute! My one desire in life is to make you happy."

His hand,—the massive, veiny hand of a man accustomed to "do himself well," trembled, and the paper shook between his fingers.

"Where did you get this?" he asked, unsteadily—"It—it was written quite a long time ago!"

"You sent it to me," replied Diana. "I returned all your other letters, but I kept that one,—and this."

Another note was drawn daintily out from the blue velvet bag, and she handed it to him with a smile.

Again his burning eyes travelled along his own familiar scrawl:

"I am quite sure you will understand that time has naturally worked changes in you as well as in myself, and I am obliged to confess that the feelings I had for you no longer exist. But you are a sensible woman, and you are old enough now to realise that we are better apart."

He lifted his head and tried to look at her. She met his shifting gaze with a clear and level splendour of regard that pierced his very soul with a subconscious sense of humiliation and conviction. Yet it was not possible for him to believe her story,—the whole suggestion was too fantastic and incredible. He gave her back the letters. She took them from his hand.

"Well!" she said, tentatively.

"Well!" he rejoined—then forced a difficult smile—"I wrote these things, certainly, but how you came by them I don't know. Though, after all, you might easily have met the other Diana May, and she might have given you her confidence——"

"And her lover's letters to keep?" said Diana, contemptuously. "So like her! Reginald Cleeve, you said just now that I was playing—playing with you and with myself. Believe me, I never was further from 'play' in my life! I'm in deadly earnest! I want——" She paused and laughed—then added: "I only want what I can have for the asking—you!"

He sprang up from his chair and came nearer to her, his face aglow with ardour. She motioned him back.

"Not yet!" she said,—and the seductive beauty of her face and form smote him as with a whip of steel—"It isn't love at first sight, you know, like that of Romeo and Juliet! We are old lovers! And you—you are married."

"What does that matter?" he said, defiantly. "No man considers himself bound nowadays by the matrimonial tie!"

"No?" she queried, sweetly. "I'm so glad to know that! It makes me doubly thankful that I never married you!"

He made a closer step to her side and caught both her hands in his.

“Do you still persist,” he said, “in your idea that you are the old Diana?—the woman I was engaged to?—you, a mere girl?”

She smiled most entrancingly up into the feverish eyes that searched her face.

“I still persist!” she answered—“I have always loved telling the truth, no matter how unpleasant! I am the ‘old’ Diana to whom you were engaged, and whom you heartlessly ‘threw over.’ Her, and no other!—as ‘old’ as ever in years though not in looks!”

His grasp of her tightened.

“Then in Heaven’s name have your own way, you beautiful crazed creature!” he said, passionately,—“If that is your obsession or fancy, stick to it, and come back to me!”

She loosened her hands,—he tried to hold them, but they seemed to melt from his clasp in the most curious and uncanny way like melting snow. Drawing herself apart, she stood looking at him.

“Come back to you!” she echoed—“I never left you! It was you who left me!—for no fault! And, now I suppose you would leave your wife,—also for no fault—except perhaps—” and she laughed lightly—“that of too much general weightiness! But she has given you children—are you not proud and happy to be ‘the father of a family’? Your daughters are certainly very plain,—but you must not go by outward appearances!”

Her lovely face dimpled with smiles—her brilliant eyes, full of a compelling magnetism, filled him with a kind of inward rage—he gave a gesture of mingled wrath and pain.

“You are quite unlike the old Diana,” he said, bitterly. “She was the gentlest of creatures,—she would never have mocked me!”

A rippling peal of laughter broke from her—laughter that was so cold and cutting that its very vibration on the air was like the tinkling of ice-drops on glass.

"True!" she said. "She was too gentle by half! She was meek and patient—devoted, submissive and loving—she believed in a man's truth, honour and chivalry! Yes—the poor 'old' Diana had feeling and emotions—but the 'young' Diana has none!"

The afternoon sunshine pouring through the window bathed her figure in a luminance so dazzling and made of her such a radiant vision of exquisite perfection that he was fairly dazzled, while the same uneasy sense of the "supernatural" troubled him as it had troubled Mr. James Polydore May.

"Well, if you will talk like this," he said, almost reproachfully—"I had better not trouble you with my company—you said you wanted me——"

"So I do!" she rejoined—"I want you very much!—but not just now! You can go—but come again soon! However I need not ask you—you are sure to come! And you need not tell your wife to call upon me—I will dispense with that formality! I prefer to ignore your 'family!' Au revoir!"

She stretched out her hand—a little, lovely hand like that of the marble Psyche—and hardly knowing what he did, he covered it with kisses. She smiled.

"There, that will do!" she said—"Another time——"

She gave him a look that shot like lightning from her eyes into his brain, and set it in a whirl.

"Diana!" He uttered the name as if it were a prayer.

"Another time!" she said, in a low, sweet tone—"And—quite soon! But—go now!"

He left her reluctantly, his mind disquieted and terrorised. Some potent force appeared to have laid hold of his entire being, drawing every nerve and muscle as if by a strong current of electricity. In a dim sort of way he was afraid,—but of what?

This he could not formulate to himself, but when he had gone out of her presence he was aware of a strange and paralysing weakness and tiredness,—sensations new to him, and—as he was a great coward where any sort of illness was concerned—alarming. And yet—such was the hold her beauty had on him, that he had made up his mind to possess it or die in the attempt. All the men he knew about town were infatuated with the mere glimpse of the loveliness which flashed upon them like the embodiment of light from another and fairer world, and there was not one among them who did not secretly indulge in the same hope as himself. But the craze or "obsession," or whatever it was that dominated her, as he thought, gave him a certain advantage over her other admirers. For if she really believed he had formerly been her lover, then surely there was something in her which would draw her to him through the mere fancy of such a possibility. Like all men who are largely endowed with complacent self-satisfaction, he was encased in a hide of conceit too thick to imagine that with the "obsession" (as he considered it) which she entertained, might also go the memory of his callous treatment of her in the past, entailing upon him a possible though indefinable danger.

She, meanwhile, after he had gone, sat down to think. A long mirror facing her gave her the reflection of her own exquisite face and figure—but her expression for the moment was cold and stern, as that of some avenging goddess. She looked at her hands—the hands her traitor lover had kissed—and opening a quaint jar of perfume on the table beside her, she dashed some of its contents over their delicate whiteness.

"For he has soiled them!" she said—"They are outraged by his touch!"

A deep scorn gathered in her eyes like growing darkness.

"Why should I trouble myself with any vengeance upon him?" she asked herself inwardly. "A mere lump of sensuality!—a man who considers no principle save that of his own pleasure, and has no tenderness or memory for me as the 'old' spinster whom he thought (and still thinks) was drowned in Devon!—what is he to me but an

utterly contemptible atom!—and yet—the only sentiment I seem to be capable of now is hate!—undying hate, the antithesis of the once undying love I bore him! The revolt of my soul against him is like a revolt of light against darkness! Is he not punished enough by the gross and commonplace domestic life he has made for himself! No!—not enough!—not enough to hurt him!"

She drew a long breath, conscious of the power which filled her body and spirit,—a power which now for the first time seemed to herself terrific. She knew there was pent up within her a lightning force which was swift to attract and equally swift to destroy.

"Those old Greek stories of gods and goddesses whose unveiled glory slew the mortals who dared to doubt them were quite true prophecies," she thought—"only they did not penetrate far enough into the myth to discover the real scientific truth of how the mortal could put on immortality. Not even now, though the fusion and transmutation of elements every day discloses more and more marvels of Nature, they have not tested the possibilities of change which science may bring about in the composition of human bodies—that is for the future to discover and determine."

At that moment Mrs. Beresford entered the room with a telegram.

"For you, Diana," she said. "It has just come."

Opening it, Diana read the message it brought.

"Professor Chauvet has died suddenly. Has left you his sole heiress. Please meet me in Paris as soon as possible to settle business. Your presence necessary. Reply Hôtel Windsor.—Dimitrius."

The paper dropped from her hands. She had forgotten Professor Chauvet altogether! The crusty yet kindly old Professor who had asked her to marry him—she had actually forgotten him! And now—he was dead! She sat amazed and stricken, till the gentle voice of Mrs. Beresford roused her.

"Anything wrong, my dear?"

“Oh, no!—yet—yes!—perhaps a little! A friend has died suddenly—very suddenly—and he has made me his heiress.”

Mrs. Beresford smiled a little.

“Well, isn’t that good news?”

For the first time since her “awakening” under the fiery ordeal of Dimitrius’s experiment, she experienced a painful thrill of real “feeling.”

“No—I am sorry,” she said. “I thought I should never feel sorry for anything—but I forgot and neglected this friend—and perhaps—if I had remembered, he might not have died.”

A beautiful softness and tenderness filled her eyes, and Mrs. Beresford thought she had never seen or imagined any creature half so lovely as she looked.

“We must go to Paris,” she said. “We can easily start to-morrow. I will answer this wire—and then write.”

She pencilled a brief reply:

“Deeply grieved. Will come as soon as possible.—Diana.”

—and ringing the bell, bade the servant who answered the summons take it to the telegraph office and send it off without delay.

“Yes—I am very sorry!” she said again to Mrs. Beresford—“I reproach myself for needless cruelty.”

Mrs. Beresford, mild-eyed and grey-haired, looked at her half timidly, half affectionately.

“I’m afraid, my dear, you are cruel!—just a little!” she said. “You make havoc in so many hearts!—and you do not seem to care!”

Diana shrugged her shoulders.

“Why should I care?” she retorted. “The havoc you speak of, is merely the selfish desire of men to possess what seems to them attractive—it goes no deeper!”

Then, noting Mrs. Beresford's rather pained expression, she smiled. "I seem hard, don't I? But I have had experience——"

"You? My dear, you are so young!" and her kindly chaperone took her hand and patted it soothingly. "When you are older you will think very differently! When you love someone——"

"When I love!"—and the beautiful eyes shone glorious as light-beams—"Ah, then! Why then—'the sun will grow cold, and the leaves of the Judgment Book will most certainly be unrolled!'"

That night she came to a sudden resolve to put away all her formerly cherished ideas of revenging herself on Reginald Cleeve. Standing before her mirror she saw her own beauty transfigured into a yet finer delicacy when this determination became crystallized, as it were, in her consciousness.

"What is my positive mind?" she asked herself. "It is a pole of attraction, which has through the forces of air, fire and water learned to polarise atoms into beautiful forms. It organises itself; but it is also a centre which radiates power over a world of visible effects. So that if I choose I can vitalise or devitalise other forms. In this way I could inflict punishment on the traitor who spoiled my former life—but I live another life, now, in which he has no part. This being so, why should I descend to pulverise base clay with pure fire? He will meet his punishment now without any further effort of mine, beyond that which I demand of justice!"

She raised her hand appealingly, as though she were a priestess invoking a deity,—then, turning to her writing-table, she penned the following lines:

"To Reginald Cleeve.

"I am summoned unexpectedly to Paris on business,—and the chances are that I shall not see you again. All that I have told you is absolutely true, no matter how much you may disbelieve the story. I am the woman you once pretended to love, and whose life you spoiled,—and I am the woman whom you love now, or (to put it

roughly) whom you desire, but whose life you can never spoil again. ‘Out of sight, out of mind’—and when you read this, it is probable I shall have gone away, which is a good thing for your peace, and—safety. You have a wife,—you are the ‘father of a family’—be content with the domestic happiness you have chosen, and fulfil the responsibilities you have accepted. Good-bye!—and think of me no more except as the ‘old’

“Diana.”

Now when this letter reached Captain the Honourable Reginald Cleeve at his club, to which it was addressed, and where he had dined on the evening of the day it was posted, which was the next but one to the day of his interview with Diana, it was brought to him in the smoking-room, and as his eyes ran over it he uttered an involuntary oath of such force that even men inured to violent language looked up, amused and inquisitive.

“What’s up?” asked an acquaintance seated near him.

“Oh, nothing! A dun!” he answered,—then, calming down, he lit a cigar. After a few puffs at it he took up a newspaper—read a paragraph or two—then laid it down.

“By the way,” he said, to the man who had spoken—“the famous beauty—Diana May—is off to Paris.”

These words created a certain stir in the smoking-room. Several men looked up.

“Oh, well! All lovely women go to Paris for their clothes!”

“Pardon!” said a dark-visaged young man, coming forward from a corner where he had been writing a letter, and speaking with a foreign accent—“Did I hear you mention a lady’s name—Diana May?”

Cleeve glanced him over with military frigidity.

“I did mention that name—yes.”

“Excuse me!—I am a stranger in London, and a friend has made me an honorary

member of this club for a short time—I knew a Miss Diana May in Geneva—permit me——” And he proffered his visiting-card, on which was inscribed:

“Marchese Luigi Farnese.”

“I met Miss May,” he continued, “at the house of a very distinguished Russian scientist, Dr. Féodor Dimitrius. She had come from England on a visit to his mother, so I was informed. But I had an idea at the time that she had arrived in answer to an advertisement he had put in the Paris newspapers for a lady assistant,—of course I may have been wrong. She was a very bright, rather clever middle-aged person——”

“The Miss May I spoke of just now,” interpolated Cleeve, “is quite a young girl—not more than eighteen or nineteen.”

“Oh, then!”—and Farnese made a profoundly apologetic bow—“it cannot be the same. The lady I met was—ah!—thirty-five or so—perhaps forty. She left Geneva very suddenly, and I have been trying to trace her ever since.”

“May I ask why?” inquired Cleeve.

“Certainly! I have for long been interested in the scientific investigations of Dr. Dimitrius—he is a very mysterious person, and I fancied he might be trying some experiment on this lady, Miss May. She gave me no idea of such a thing—she was quite a normal, cheerful person,—still I had my suspicions and I was curious about it. She went with him and his mother to winter at Davos Platz—I was unable to follow them there, as I had a pressure of business—but I heard from a friend that Miss May was the ‘belle’ of the season. This rather surprised me, as she was not young enough to be a ‘belle’ unless”—here he paused, and uttered the next words with singular emphasis—“Dimitrius had made her so.”

Cleeve uttered a sharp exclamation and then checked himself.

“This is not an age of fairy tales,” he said curtly.

"No—it is not, but it is an age of science, in which fairy tales are realised," rejoined Farnese. "But pray excuse me!—I am detaining you—you could not by chance give me the address of this young lady you speak of?—the Miss Diana May you know?"

"I do not consider myself entitled to do so," answered Cleeve, coldly, "without her consent."

Farnese bowed.

"I entirely understand! If you should see her, you will, perhaps, do me the kindness to mention my name and ask if she has ever heard it before?"

"I will certainly do that," agreed Cleeve,—whereupon they parted, Captain the Honourable with his mind in a giddy whirl, and his passions at fever heat. Come what would he must see Diana before she went to Paris! He must ask her about this Dimitrius,—for the story he had just heard seemed to hang together with her own fantastic "obsession!" But no!—ten thousand times no!—it was not, it could not be possible that the "old" Diana could thus have been miraculously transformed! Even Science must have its limits! He glanced at his watch. It was past nine o'clock,—very late for a call—yet he would risk it. Taking a cab, he was driven with all speed to Diana's flat,—the servant who opened the door to him looked at him in surprise.

"Miss May and Mrs. Beresford have gone to Paris," she said. "They left this evening by the night boat train."

He retreated, baffled and inwardly furious. For one moment he was recklessly moved to follow them across Channel next morning—then he remembered, with rather an angry shock, that he was "the father of a family." Convention stepped in and held up a warning finger.

"No—it wouldn't do," he ruminated, vexedly. "She"—here he alluded to his fat wife—"she would make the devil's own row, and I have enough of her sulks as it is. I'd better do nothing,—and just wait my chance. But—that exquisite Diana! What is

she? I must know! I must be off with the ‘old’ love, before I’m on with the new! But is she the ‘old’? That’s the puzzle. Is she the ‘old,’ or a young Diana?” This was a question which was destined never to be answered, so far as he was concerned. Diana had gone from him,—gone in that swift, irrecoverable way which happens when one soul, advancing onward to higher planes of power, is compelled to leave another of grosser make (even though that other were lover or friend) to wallow in the styes of sensual and material life. She, clothed in her vesture of fire and light, as radiant as any spirit of legendary lore, was as far removed from the clay man of low desires as the highest star from the deepest earth. And though he did not know this, and never would have been able, had he known, to realise the forceful vitality of her existence, the same strange sense of physical weakness, tiredness and general incapacity which had before alarmed him came upon him now with such overwhelming weight that he could hardly drag his limbs across the fashionable square in which his own house was situated. A great helplessness possessed him,—and a thought, bitter as wormwood and sharp as flame, flashed through his brain: “I am getting old!” It was a thought he always put away from him—but just now it bore down upon him with a kind of thunderous gloom. Yes—he was “getting old,”—he, who had more or less contemptuously considered the “age” of the woman he had callously thrown over sufficient cause for the rupture,—he, too, was likely to be left out in the cold by the hurrying tide of warmer, quicker, youthful life. The vision of the radiant eyes, the exquisite features, the rose-leaf skin, and the supple, graceful form of the marvellous Diana who so persistently declared herself to be his former betrothed, floated before him in tempting, tantalising beauty,—and as he opened his own house-door with his latch-key to enter that abode of domestic bliss where his unwieldy wife talked commonplaces all day long and bored him to death, he uttered something like a groan.

“Whatever her fancy or craze may be,” he said, “she is young! Young and perfectly beautiful! It is I who am old!”

EPILOGUE

It was night in Paris,—a heavy night, laden with the almost tropical heat and languor common to the end of an unusually warm summer. The street-lamps twinkled dimly through vapour which seemed to ooze upwards from the ground, like smoke from the fissures of a volcano, and men walked along listlessly with heads uncovered to the faint and doubtful breeze, some few occasionally pausing to glance at the sky, the aspect of which was curiously divided between stars and clouds, brilliancy and blackness. From the southern side of the horizon a sombre mass of purple grey shadows crept slowly and stealthily onward, blotting out by gradual degrees the silvery glittering of Orion and drawing a nun-like veil over the full-orbed beauty of the moon, while at long intervals a faint roll of thunder suggested the possibility of an approaching storm. But the greater part of the visible heavens remained fair and calm, some of the larger planets sparkling lustrously with strange, flashing fire-gleams of sapphire and gold, and seeming to palpitate like immense jewels swung pendant in the vast blue dome of air.

In the spacious marble court of a certain great house in the Avenue Bois de Boulogne, the oppressive sultriness of the night was tempered by the delicious coolness of a fountain in full play which flung a quivering column of snow-white against the darkness and tinkled its falling drops into a bronze basin below with a musical softness as of far-distant sleigh-bells. The court itself was gracefully built after Athenian models,—its slender Ionic columns supported a domed roof which by daylight would have shown an exquisite sculptured design, but which now was too dimly perceived for even its height to be guessed. Beyond the enclosure stretched the vague outline of a garden which adjoined the Bois, and here there were tall trees and drooping branches that moved mysteriously now and then, as though touched by an invisible finger-tip. Within each corner of the court great marble vases stood, brimming over with growing blossoms,—pale light streaming from an open window or door in the house shed a gleam on some statue of a god or goddess half hidden

among flowers,—and here in this cool quietness of stately and beautiful surroundings sat, or rather reclined, Diana, on a cushioned bench, her head turned towards her sole companion, Féodor Dimitrius. He sat in a lounge chair opposite to her, and his dark and brilliant eyes studied her fair features with wistful gravity.

"I think I have told you all," he said, speaking in slow, soft tones. "Poor Chauvet's death was sudden, but from his written instructions I fancy he was not unprepared. He has no relatives,—and he must have found great consolation in making his will in your favour. For he cared very greatly for you,—he told me he had asked you to marry him."

Diana moved a little restlessly. As she did so a rosy flash glittered from a great jewel she wore round her neck,—the famous "Eye of Rajuna," whose tragic history she had heard from Chauvet himself.

"Yes," she answered—"That is true. But—I forgot!"

"You forgot?" he echoed, wonderingly. "You forgot a proposal of marriage? And yet—when you came to me first in Geneva you thought love was enough for everything,—your heart was hungry for love——"

"When I had a heart—yes!" she said. "But now I have none. And I do not hunger for what does not exist! I am sorry I forgot the kind Professor. But I did,—completely! And that he should have left me all he possessed is almost a punishment!"

"You should not regard it as such," he answered. "It is hardly your fault if you forgot. Your thoughts are, perhaps, elsewhere?" He paused,—but she said nothing. "As I have told you," he went on, "Chauvet has left you an ample fortune, together with this house and all it contains—its unique library, its pictures and curios, to say nothing of his famous collection of jewels, worth many thousands of pounds—and as everything is in perfect order you will have no trouble. Personally, I had no idea he was such a wealthy man."

She was still silent, looking at him more or less critically. He felt her eyes upon him,

and some impulse stung him into sudden fervour.

“You look indifferent,” he said, “and no doubt you are indifferent. Your nature now admits of no emotion. But, so far as you are woman, your circumstances are little changed. You are as you were when you first became my ‘subject’—‘of mature years, and alone in the world without claims on your time or your affections.’ Is it not so?”

A faint, mysterious smile lifted the corners of her lovely mouth.

“It is so!” she answered.

“You are alone in the world,—alone, alone, alone!” he repeated with a kind of fierce intensity. “Alone!—for I know that neither your father nor your mother recognise you. Am I right or wrong?”

Still smiling, she bent her head.

“Right, of course!” she murmured, with delicate irony. “How could you be wrong!”

“Your own familiar friend will have none of you,” he went on, with almost angry emphasis. “To the world you once knew, you are dead! The man who was your lover—the man who, as you told me, spoilt your life and on whom you seek to be revenged——”

She lifted one hand with an interrupting gesture.

“That is finished,” she said. “I seek vengeance no longer. No man is worth it! Besides, I am avenged.”

She half rose from her reclining attitude, and he waited for her next word.

“I am avenged!” she went on, in thrilling accents—“And in a way that satisfies me. My lover that was,—never a true lover at best,—is my lover still—but with such limitations as are torture to a man whose only sense of love is—Desire! My beauty fills him with longing,—the thought of me ravages his soul and body—it occupies every thought and every dream!—and with this passion comes the consciousness of

age. Age!—the great breakdown!—the end of all for him!—I have willed that he shall feel its numbing approach each day,—that he shall know the time is near when his step shall fail, his sight grow dim,—when the rush of youthful life shall pass him by and leave him desolate. Yes!—I am avenged!—he is ‘old enough now to realise that we are better apart!’”

Her eyes glowed like stars,—her whole face was radiant. Dimitrius gazed at her almost sternly.

“You are pitiless!” he said.

She laughed.

“As he was,—yes!”

And rising to her full height, she stood up like a queen. She wore a robe of dull amber stuff interwoven with threads of gold,—a small circlet of diamonds glittered in her hair, and Chauvet’s historic Eastern jewel, the “Eye of Rajuna,” flamed like fire on her white neck.

“Féodor Dimitrius,” she said,—and her voice had such a marvellously sweet intonation that he felt it penetrate through every nerve—“You say, and you say rightly, that ‘so far as I am woman’—my circumstances are not changed from what they were when I first came to you in Geneva. But only ‘so far as I am woman.’ Now—how do you know I am woman at all?”

He lifted himself in his chair, gripping both arms of it with clenched nervous hands. His dark eyes flashed a piercing inquiry into hers.

“What do you mean?” he half whispered. “What—what would you make me believe?”

She smiled.

“Oh, marvellous man of science!” she exclaimed—“Must I teach you your own discovery? You, who have studied and mastered the fusion of light and air with

elemental forces and the invisible whirl of electrons with perpetually changing forms, must I, your subject, explain to you what you have done? You have wrested a marvellous secret from Nature—you can unmake and remake the human body, freeing it from all gross substance, as a sculptor can mould and unmould a statue,—and do you not see that you have made of me a new creature, no longer of mere mortal clay, but of an ethereal matter which has never walked on earth before?—and with which earth has nothing in common? What have such as I to do with such base trifles as human vengeance or love?"

He sprang up and approached her.

"Diana," he said slowly—"If this is true,—and may God be the arbiter!—one thing in your former circumstances is altered—you are not 'without claims on your time and your affections.' I claim both! I have made you as you are!—you are mine!"

She smiled proudly and retreated a step or two.

"I am no more yours," she said, "than are the elements of which your science has composed the new and youthful vesture of my unchanging Soul! I admit no claim. When I served you as your 'subject,' you were ready to sacrifice my life to your ambition; now when you are witness to the triumph of your 'experiment,' you would grasp what you consider as your lawful prize. Self!—all Self! But I have a Self as well—and it is a Self independent of all save its own elements."

He caught her hands suddenly.

"Love is in all elements," he said. "There would be no world, no universe without love!"

Her eyes met his as steadily as stars.

"There is no such thing as Love in all mankind!" she said. "The race is cruel, destructive, murderous. What men call love is merely sex-attraction—such as is common to all the animal world. Children are to be born in order that man may be perpetuated. Why, one cannot imagine! His civilisations perish—he himself is the

merest grain of dust in the universe,—unless he learns to subdue his passions and progresses to a higher order of being on this earth, which he never will. All things truly are possible, save man's own voluntary uplifting. And without this uplifting there is no such thing as Love."

He still held her hands.

"May I not endeavour to reach this height?" he asked, and his voice shook a little. "Have patience with me, Diana! You have beauty, wealth, youth——"

She interrupted him.

"You forget! 'Mature years' are in my brain and heart,—I am not really young."

"You are," he rejoined—"Younger than you can as yet realise. You see your own outward appearance, but you have had no time yet to test your inward emotions——"

"I have none!" she said.

He dropped her hands.

"Not even an angel's attribute—mercy?"

A faint sigh stirred her bosom where the great "Eye of Rajuna" shone like a red star.

"Perhaps!——" she said—"I do not know—it may be possible!"

To-day in Paris one of the loveliest women in the world holds undisputed sway as a reigning beauty. The "old," now the "young" Diana is the envy of her sex and the despair of men. Years pass over her and leave no change in her fair face or radiant eyes,—a creature of light and magnetic force, she lives for the most part the life of a student and recluse, and any entertaining of society in her house is rare, though the men of learning and science who were friends of Professor Chauvet are always welcomed by their adorable hostess, who to them has become a centre of something like worship. So far as she herself is concerned, she is untouched by either admiration or flattery. Each day finds her further removed from the temporary joys

and sorrows of humanity, and more enwrapt in a strange world of unknown experience to which she seems to belong. She is happy, because she has forgotten all that might have made her otherwise. She feels neither love nor hate: and Féodor Dimitrius, now alone in the world, his mother having passed away suddenly in her sleep, wanders near her, watchfully, but more or less aimlessly, knowing that his beautiful "experiment" has out-mastered him, and that in the mysterious force wherewith his science has endowed her, she has gone beyond his power. His "claim" upon her lessens day by day, rendering him helpless to contend with what he imagined he had himself created. The Marchese Farnese, catching a passing glimpse of her in Paris, became so filled with amazement that he spread all sorts of rumours respecting her real "age" and the "magic art" of Dimitrius, none of which were believed, of course, but which added to the mystery surrounding her—though she herself never condescended to notice them. To this day she holds herself apart and invisible to all save those whom she personally chooses to receive. No man can boast of any favour at her hands,—not even Dimitrius. And,—as was said at the beginning of this veracious narrative—there is no end for Diana May. She lives as the light lives,—fair and emotionless,—as all may live who master the secret of living,—a secret which, though now apparently impregnable, shall yield itself to those, who, before very long, will grasp the Flaming Sword and "take and eat of the fruit of the Tree of Life." The Sword turns every way—but the blossom is behind the blade. And in this Great Effort neither the love of man nor the love of woman have any part, nor any propagation of an imperfect race,—for those who would reach the goal must relinquish all save the realisation of that "new heaven and new earth" of splendid and lasting youth and vitality when "old things are passed away."

THE END

Transcriber's Notes

A number of typographical errors were corrected silently.

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE YOUNG DIANA: AN EXPERIMENT OF THE FUTURE ***

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