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A Novel.

BY

E. KATHARINE BATES.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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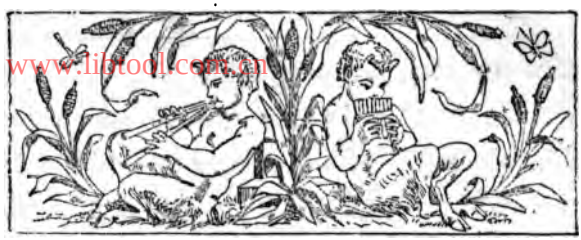


EGYPTIAN BONDS.

CHAPTER I.

WE are at Philæ again, now. . . . The beauty of the place has bewitched us, and we linger on day after day.

I think in our hearts we all rather dread the stir and bustle of Luxor, and the many questions and exclamations and expressions of sympathy that we shall receive on returning there.

A death 'on the Nile' is sufficiently

rare to excite more than a nine days' wonder in this dreamy monotonous river life, where every one seems posted up in the smallest details of his neighbours' business, north and south.

And then every stone about Luxor and Karnak is so full of memories of our poor little friend and her fatal energy. So we linger on as I have said, letting the peaceful beauty of Philæ sink deep into our hearts.

The only inducement to hurry on to Luxor has been removed by the consul's kind forethought. He has sent our letters as far as Assouan by one of the steamers, and we find that it will be our best plan to make up our English mail and despatch it direct to Cairo by the *Mehallah* on her return voyage.

So we have long, lazy days amongst the Philæ ruins, climbing the pylons every evening to see Oscar's 'faithful lover' bid

his mistress good-night across the changeful river.

O'Grady has inspired Rachel with his art enthusiasm, and a great deal of sketching and painting go on. Fred is generally with them, reading whilst they work.

His voice is clear and pleasant enough, but totally lacking in the sympathetic 'ring' that vibrates through Oscar's when his emotional nature is stirred.

One afternoon we are seated, as usual, in the inner court of the big temple. Elsa and the Squire have brought their letters here to write.

Oscar and Rachel have developed a sudden craze for hieroglyphics, and are copying long lines of them from the sculptured walls, whilst Fred, as usual, is offering to read aloud.

Ebers' 'Egyptian Princess' is lying just under his hand, but in an evil moment he takes up the 'Portuguese Sonnets' and

reads on through their glowing passion and touching beauty and tender despair, in a voice not entirely unappreciative, but calm, quiet, self-contained.

Oscar looks up at last, fidgety and impatient, as though some false note were jarring on his sensitive nerves. Rachel lifts her head at the same moment, and their eyes meet in one short glance of sympathy.

Then O'Grady says lightly:

'Won't you give us a little more of the "Egyptian Princess," Bathurst? I think she would suit our present prosaic pursuits better than Mrs. Browning.'

Fred answers rather dryly, ignoring Oscar and turning round to Rachel—some strange instinct of love tells him where he has failed:

'Of course, I will read anything you like, Rachel. I will leave the poetry, in future, to be interpreted to you through O'Grady. I don't profess to be able to

work up emotion to order, nor would I if I could. No, not even to please you, dear! That sort of thing always strikes me as so unreal. Of course, with an actor it is different, it is his trade; but for other people I think it is very weakening, almost untruthful, to waste emotional power in that way.'

Rachel looks up indignantly.

'My dear Fred! how can you talk in such a cold-blooded manner? How can you reason and argue beforehand as to how much feeling you shall allow yourself on given matters?'

'Rushing at your own conclusions, Rachel, as usual,' answers Fred, with a smile. 'Of course I am not referring to realities, but fiction; and I do think there is something unmanly in such displays of feeling for entirely unreal suffering. Emotional power of that sort does not seem to me grand or desirable in any way. In fact I should call it almost *disreputable*.'

Elsa joins in the discussion now for the first time.

'Surely, Fred, that is a little hard. It seems to me that no worthy emotion—from whatever source it springs—can be called "disreputable," *unless it fails as a motive-power when the time for action comes. Then*, of course, indulging in beautiful emotions is simply "drawing cheques" on our higher nature that we know will be dishonoured when they are presented.'

My wife's quiet good sense seems to have reached the true root of the matter.

Fred looks up eagerly:

'That is just what I mean, Mrs. Verschoyle. A man will weep over a touching bit of poetry, and then turn away from a real grief because it has disagreeable or prosaic surroundings.'

'Yes, Bathurst, but your matter-of-fact man is just as likely to do that, remember. It is such a mistake to imagine that a keen

sense of beauty hardens the heart. If you are hitting at me, old fellow, you don't know how much worse I should be without my emotional moments.—Besides,' adds Oscar, after a pause, 'when a man has the real soul of an artist, he *must* respond to every touch of beauty and joy and sadness about him. You might as well quarrel with a harp for vibrating when its strings are touched! And as for your idea that nobody should be affected except through the realities of life, why, my dear fellow, it's simply absurd!

'We may as well give up painting pictures and composing sonatas at once. What do *they* do but appeal to the emotional side of a man's nature? the "unreal" side, as you would call it! Have you never heard of cases where a noble picture or a glorious song has nerved a man to heroism when the chance came?

'Do you think, if he had shut his eyes

and ears and "saved up" his emotions, as you recommend, that he would have been more fit for the crisis when the time for action came?'

Fred looks rather aggrieved. 'You have utterly wandered from my point, O'Grady; I still think as I did upon that, although I cannot uphold my opinions or explain my exact meaning so fluently as you can.'

'I believe the fact is, we all mean the same thing at heart,' says Rachel, 'only we see different sides of the same truth; very few people can see two sides equally well.'

'It would be a sort of mental squinting if they could, Miss Poynter; as unnatural to our present constitution of mind, I suppose, as the physical affection is to the body.'

'Well, then, we must be content to use our neighbours' eyes occasionally, and take things now and then on trust,' answers Elsa, adding, with a laugh, 'I won't ask

you to take *this* statement on trust, but look at my watch! It is six o'clock, and we have lost our sunset after all.'

'Well, don't let us lose our dinner, anyway,' says the practical Squire; 'ten to one those lazy fellows in the boat are lounging about somewhere, and it will take another twenty minutes to find them. I wish we had brought Ibrahim with us to look after them.'

At length we tear ourselves away from our 'Enchanted Island' and face the Cataract again.

The descent is a far simpler and speedier affair than coming through it at first had been, and when we lie once more moored under the bank at Luxor, the last few weeks seem like a painful dream; everything looks so exactly the same.

Only deep in our hearts lies the memory of that lonely Nubian grave.

* * * * *

Fresh Dahabeeahs have come up the river and lie at intervals along the banks, whilst a big 'Cook's steamer,' full of English and American travellers, blocks us in on one side with her unwieldy bulwarks.

'What a bore those steamers are,' says Rachel, impatiently, as the 'confusion of tongues' and sounding laughter are borne towards us, little thinking how useful the despised steamer will soon turn out to be.

Oscar comes up to Rachel on deck.

'What have you done with Bathurst, Miss Poynter? I wanted him to go out with me for an hour before dinner.'

'He has gone off to the post-office, Mr. O'Grady, to see after all our letters; don't you expect any? We are all so excited, and you take things so quietly.'

'Oh yes, I dare say I shall have a few,' answers Oscar, with rather a conscious smile. 'That is a nuisance one cannot escape from, even up the Nile.'

'*Nuisance!* how ungrateful you are! Letters are one of my greatest pleasures. I can understand now all one hears of the arrival of the "Indian Post," and the despair that an empty "mail-day" brings.'

'And do you find that your English friends stand the crucial test of a 2½*d.* postage?' laughs Oscar.

'Yes, very fairly; but it is tiresome getting so many at the same time, and then perhaps a fortnight's silence. One hardly knows where to begin to read.'

'I have one safe rule, Miss Poynter; anything in a lady's handwriting is sure to keep, so I put it aside till the last—a sort of intellectual dessert, you know. French plums and bon-bons, to be eaten when the more substantial dishes have been discussed.'

'I wish your lady friends could hear you, Mr. O'Grady. You would not be troubled with many more "French plums," as you

call them, I should think. Is your female correspondence so *very* large?'

'Quite gigantic,' laughs Oscar, impervious to the intended sarcasm.

'It was great fun last Christmas, Miss Poynter. I had twenty Christmas cards from different fair friends one morning! To tell the truth, I had forgotten all about Christmas cards myself; I had been away "in the west" shooting, and came back to find this pile; so I just changed all the cards—sent No. 1 to No. 2, No. 2 to No. 3, and so on to the end of my score. Capital idea—was it not? Gave no trouble, and answered the purpose just as well.'

Rachel looks half-amused, half-indignant, but has no time to answer, for Fred steps on board at this moment, and we all rush up to him in eager expectation.

At least a dozen letters fall to Oscar's share, most of which he stuffs carelessly away in his pockets—the neat handwritings

and coloured envelopes show that his words were at least no idle boast, however conceited they might sound. But Oscar's conceit somehow is so entirely open and unaffected that it disarms any very severe criticism.

We all come in for our share of the correspondence, and I am buried deep in home-news and domestic details, when Fred looks up with a little cry of dismay.

'What is the matter, old fellow? anything wrong?' says Oscar, with ready sympathy.

'Not exactly wrong, but it is a great nuisance. I ought to be in Cairo at this moment. There is some hitch about a Power of Attorney I left with the lawyers at home, and those leases in St. Paul's Churchyard you know, Verschoyle, have fallen in. My mother and sisters have claims upon the property, and it has increased enormously in value the last twenty years.

'It must be re-let at once, and a proper valuation made of course of its present price in the market, or they will be losing income all this time. I can't make out what the hitch is exactly—one of poor old Bloxam's mare's-nests, probably! Still, it won't do to run any risks. I ought to be in Cairo to see what the next mail brings.'

'Most annoying for you, Fred,' says Elsa, sympathetically; 'but really you can do nothing at present. Of course we can start the first thing to-morrow, and make for Assioot as quickly as possible; there you can take the train straight on to Cairo. That will be a saving of a day or two; still there must be delay in any case. Perhaps the next mail will bring quite a satisfactory letter from Mr. Bloxam.'

'Thank you, Mrs. Verschoyle; you always see the bright side of things. It *is* annoying, and the worst part of the annoyance is that I shall spoil your pleasure so com-

pletely by hurrying you away from Luxor. There seems a fate against our staying here. I wonder how soon we can possibly reach Assioot?'

Rachel has been standing by, full of genuine sorrow for Fred's perplexities. As she turns towards him now, a sudden thought strikes her. How stupid we have all been not to think of it before!

'Why, Fred, of course you should go by the steamer! She is returning to Cairo, and only stopping here one night for some slight repair, Ibrahim was saying just now. This is Thursday evening; she is to be off at daybreak to-morrow, and in Cairo by mid-day on Monday. Nothing can take you so quickly as that.'

'Capital, Miss Poynter! You have more presence of mind than any of us. Don't you worry yourself, Bathurst; of course you have heaps to do—packing and so forth. I will go across at once and see if

there is a vacant cabin, and find out all about her sailing, and when you must go on board.'

Oscar speaks from the purest good-nature, but Fred looks up a little hurt. There cannot be two opinions as to its being the best possible course, but it will involve a sudden parting, very bitter to the poor fellow's faithful heart. Even then it struck me as an odd coincidence that *Rachel's* voice should have been the first to send him from us.

'Thanks, O'Grady! that will be very good of you. You are all in a great hurry to pack me off, though. It is a case of "speeding the parting guest" with a vengeance!' and poor Fred gives rather a sad laugh at his own joke.

Rachel looks up quickly.

'Oh, Fred, how can you be so unkind! I think it is horrible to divide our party in this way. You know we shall all miss

you. But surely, if the thing must be, it is better to face it, and arrange it all as comfortably as one can ?'

'Of course, dear. You are quite right. I am a cross old bear, I know ; but it's hard work saying "Good-bye," Rachel, and so suddenly, too !'

* * * * *

Oscar is already on board the steamer, making inquiries. Elsa and I go off quietly to our cabin, leaving 'the lovers' to themselves for a bit.

We all meet at dinner, and Oscar has brought back his news. The *Beherah* sails at 5 A.M. next morning. He has secured a cabin for Fred, roomy and comfortable ; but the latter must be on board by ten o'clock this evening to take possession.

Oscar keeps up all our spirits, but dinner is rather a sad meal nevertheless. There will be a second vacant seat now, and Rachel is unusually quiet and depressed.

As the evening passes on, she becomes so evidently *distraite* and unhappy, that even Oscar gives up the attempt to amuse her; and Fred, who is wretched enough, rouses himself to try and comfort her.

'My dear Rachel, don't look so intensely gloomy,' says Elsa, cheerfully. 'We shall all miss dear old Fred, but I quite expect to find him waiting to welcome us at "the Nil" on our return, and then we can compare notes of our experiences from to-night.'

'I do so hate breaking up a party, Elsa. Somehow people never seem to meet again quite in the same way. And we have been very happy, in spite of our one great sadness.'

'And we shall all be very happy together again in another two or three weeks, Rachel. See if I am not a true prophet! We will have some real "champagne du Nil" then to commemorate our meeting.

Now, Fred, I think we must be making a start;' and I put my hand cheerily on his shoulder.

I follow him into his cabin to see that all is ready. The portmanteau lies open, but ready packed. His Bible and O'Grady's hasty sketch of Rachel have a special corner to themselves on the top.

'All in, Fred? Shall I strap it down?'

'Yes, please, Charlie! Just wait one moment;' and he takes some faded bean blossoms out of a glass by the bedside, and dries the stalks hastily, then places them carefully inside his Bible. 'Rachel gave them to me,' he says simply, in answer to my look of surprise. 'My poor little girl! I don't need them to remind me of her, but I could not leave them here to be thrown away like common flowers that she had never touched.'

The words send a thrill of positive pain through me. My heart aches for the loyal,

faithful love that adores so simply, and, as far as any worthy return goes, so hopelessly!

It is not Rachel's fault, nor anybody's fault. The girl has depth and passion enough in her nature, God knows! only through some inexorable law of 'moral chemistry' the two natures can no more merge into each other and amalgamate than oil can mix with water. I am beginning to see it now, and the sudden light saddens and perplexes me.

But there is no time to think it over. Ibrahim is calling to us that the steamer's lights will be out if we do not come at once. And so we all go off in a body to see the last of Fred.

The steamer seems very noisy and rather dirty after our luxurious boat. The saloon is full of English and Americans, reading, playing draughts and chess, or writing home letters and 'journals.' A

long row of empty cups and saucers remain from the evening tea. Two pretty girls are dividing the attentions of a very young 'Oxonian,' whose sallies of wit are hailed by shouts of laughter. A stern old lady frowns disapproval from the pages of her journal; whilst a middle-aged gentleman, long past the halcyon days of mild flirtation, looks up impatiently at them from his *Weekly Times*.

It is all very hot and noisy and *unfreundlich*, as the Germans would say; so we get out of the saloon with a feeling of relief, and make our way to the deserted hurricane-deck.

Oscar's tact never deserts him. The Squire has said a kind 'Good-bye,' and gone home; and O'Grady follows his example, leaving us, a melancholy quartette, to our last words.

'Rachel darling, you will write to me from Assioot? Could you not write a

sort of journal-letter—just a little bit every day, even a few words—and then send it off as soon as you arrive? I shall be thinking of you all day long. I hope you will be very happy, dear. Charlie and Elsa will take every possible care of you, I know; and you and O'Grady get on so well together now! He will always be at hand to amuse and interest you—far better than your stupid old lover could ever do. But no one will ever love you so well, my darling. Remember that.'

Rachel clings to him for a moment in a sort of despairing abandonment of grief.

How little I guessed how deeply the girl's heart had been touched by that faithful love! Such gratitude may be the salvation of them both, after all.

'Don't go, Fred! Come back with us. Don't leave me. I cannot bear it! Charlie says he is sure you will be at Cairo when we return. It is such a *little* risk!

Why not run it—just for this once? Don't go away, Fred! stay with me.'

A deep joy thrills through Fred's voice, and makes his words unsteady as he answers her, tenderly removing her hands from his arm:

'God bless you, my darling! I don't deserve it. But I must go, Rachel. If only *my* interests were at stake, you know how gladly I would throw everything to the winds for the happiness of staying with you! But think of my mother and sisters, darling! Suppose they should suffer through my carelessness! You remember the glorious old song of Montrose:

> '"I could not love thee, dear, so well,
> Loved I not honour more"?

Don't tempt me, Rachel! Help me to be worthy of your love.'

Fred's voice quite breaks down at the last.

I give him a hearty grip, and then lead

poor weeping Rachel down below, as the bell rings to warn us off the steamer. She kisses us both silently at her cabin-door, saying gently:

'Elsa, would you look after papa, and see that he has his hot wine and water before going to bed? I think I won't come up again this evening—I am so tired!'

CHAPTER II.

ALL next day Rachel is quiet and sad, and spends a good deal of time in her own cabin, writing the promised 'journal-letter' to Fred, no doubt.

Oscar behaves beautifully; his quiet, unobtrusive sympathy is evidently appreciated by Rachel, who at first seemed inclined to shun his society, out of some fancied loyalty to Fred.

The latter, indeed, had expressed his hearty delight at leaving her with such a

bright, pleasant companion; but I suppose she thinks it a kind of silent atonement for hasty or impatient words in Fred's company, that she should refuse to laugh or be amused at anything in his absence.

All Rachel's moods are thorough and intense, so she now exaggerates her melancholy, self-reproachful regrets for Fred's departure.

Oscar shows by no word or sign that he has noticed the change in her manner. His own nature is as sympathetic to outside influences as a 'sensitive plant,' but his tact is simply perfect.

He speaks of Fred now and then very cordially and kindly, just sufficiently to avoid any appearance of shirking the subject, but not often enough to bring the sad, self-reproachful look in Rachel's dark eyes too much to the surface.

Then he interests her quietly in a thousand ways: one day it is a new book, the

next a new theory; another time he wants her advice about the foreground of a picture. He has got hold of Le Page Renouf's book on Hieroglyphics. 'Will Miss Poynter come over to Karnak quietly some afternoon to study it amongst the ruins?' or again, 'Will she give her advice about setting some of the Portuguese and Italian sonnets to music?' And so, having decoyed her to the piano, Oscar will dream away his beautiful fancies and lead her gently from the cares and worries of reality to the golden gates of poetry and romance.

* * * * *

Two or three nights after Fred's sudden departure, we are all sitting together in the drawing-room after dinner.

A sharp north wind is blowing, and no one feels inclined to face it upon deck.

The talk somehow falls upon mesmeric influences, and Oscar is abusing in

no measured terms the narrow-minded stupidity that laughs to scorn and holds up to ridicule everything 'not dreamed of' by its own feeble 'philosophy.'

The much-vexed question of table-turning and 'spiritual agencies' has been touched upon, of course.

Oscar takes a very sensible and moderate view of things; declares his entire scepticism as to the idea of *spirits* wasting their time in such utter childishness as rapping out a lady's age, or her possible chances of matrimony, through the medium of a 'five o'clock tea-table,' but takes his stand upon the point that there *is* some strange force inherent in our natures—not yet fully understood, and therefore impossible to control and utilise—by which mind may communicate with mind without the help of speech, and possibly influence matter through the medium of electricity.

'That is how I account for all these

apparently absurd details as to table-turning. It is weak and foolish to go on making bad jokes about people "pushing the table" with their "fingers or feet." Of course there are impostures about table-turning as about everything else; but I have been present dozens of times when I *know* every individual was an honest, sincere investigator, with no foregone conclusions on the subject, but simply desirous to witness the true working of the thing, not to play childish and stupid tricks by weak buffoonery. And the table *has* moved without muscular exertion on our parts, and has rapped out answers to our questions sometimes right, sometimes wrong; but the correctness or incorrectness of the answers seems to me comparatively unimportant. Given the admission that muscular force is *not* used, it seems to me quite as marvellous that a "spirit" should give a wrong answer as a

right one: the fact of spiritual communication at all is sufficient mystery to us at present—or would be, if I believed in it—as I tell you I *don't*.'

'Then how do you account for it, Mr. O'Grady, if you deny wilful imposture? Do you think people can move a heavy table *unconsciously*?'

'As I have said, Miss Poynter, I don't believe they do it through purely physical agencies at all. One has so little accurate knowledge of these matters, that it is presumption to attempt any sort of "explanation." But it is quite conceivable to my mind that through, first, unconscious cerebration, and then the passage of the electric current from the hands to the table, an idea or an answer is generated *unconsciously* in one brain, and conveyed to the others by the wood (charged with electricity) responding, as it were, to the originating power.'

'But then suppose several people are "unconsciously cerebrating," as you call it, at the same time?'

'Ah! well, then of course the one who has the most mesmeric influence, the strongest power of impressing his own mind upon other minds, will be the unconscious originator in that case.'

'Yes, Mr. O'Grady; but you say the electric current has to flow from him to the table. If his mesmeric power or odic force, or whatever you are pleased to call it, *is the strongest present*, what does it matter about his influencing other minds? *His* mind is the real agent, according to you, acting directly upon the table.'

'Ah! no, Mrs. Verschoyle; not necessarily. Possibly his influence tells first upon the other minds and brings them unconsciously to his assistance, and the table moves through the combined electricity of all who are seated round it.'

'But, Mr. O'Grady, I want to tell you something that happened within my own experience to a brother of mine. I always held with you before, that some one idea was uppermost with the most powerful "medium" present, and so got rapped out of the table through electric influence; but this rather shook my theory. Some years ago, a brother of mine came home from India on leave, and spent three or four months in America, travelling about and seeing the country. It was before my marriage, and I was staying in the neighbourhood of Liverpool at the time. On his return, he was invited to join me there for a day or two before going up to London, and here our *séance* took place. A young man staying in the house—a very old friend of mine—was bitten with the table-turning mania, and we were always rapping out messages and answers to every sort of absurd question. My brother came

in one afternoon and found us at our usual amusement. He laughed the whole thing to scorn, of course; declared that we "pushed and kicked" the table, with the usual clever pleasantries of the "unbeliever," and declined at first to have anything to say to such "childish nonsense." At last we persuaded him to sit down. He asked a number of most puzzling questions as to the detail of his recent tour; matters of which I myself knew nothing, for his letters had been few and brief during his absence. "Where had he been on the afternoon of such a day, six or seven weeks ago?" "What fort had he gone over with a certain American colonel?" Or again, "Rap out the name of the gentleman who had taken him over the Washington arsenal on a given day?" and so on. He asked perhaps a dozen such questions, and the table answered with its usual reckless promptitude; sometimes

right, occasionally wrong. My brother gloated over the mistakes, and accounted for the happy hits by declaring that he must have told us about those special incidents, although he had forgotten the fact of having done so. We grew hotter and hotter in defence of our honesty, but all in vain. At last Edward said:

'"Well, I will give you one more chance; and I know the table will fail this time, simply because no one in England knows the answer to the question except myself. Ask what was the name of an Indian 'bearer' of mine who lived with me most faithfully and devotedly for twelve years, always returning to me after my absences in England; and then, at the end of that time, suddenly disappeared one morning and has never been heard of since. I *know* you never heard his name, Elsa, so there is a good test for you."

'We began the wearisome alphabet once

more. At the second letter my brother stopped us with the greatest glee :

'"Utterly wrong! You need not continue ; the second letter is quite wide of the mark. You cannot even shelter behind guessing. Fortunately it is neither the letter before nor after the correct one. I knew it must fail when any real test came ;" and he was getting up with a mixture of amusement and contempt.

'"Stop a minute, Captain Bruce," said my young Oxford friend, good-humouredly. "We may as well see what the poor table was going to say, even if it is all nonsense ;" and the name was rapped out patiently to the end.

'I saw my brother's face change as the alphabet went on. At last the table stopped, and refused to move again. It had rapped out "R á m d i n."

'"By Jove!" cried Edward, "that is the oddest thing I ever knew in my life. It

is the man's name, and that is the true Hindostanee way of spelling it. But I have always spelt it and thought of it according to the European way—'Rhamdeen;' so when the 'a' was rapped out second, I never even thought of this possible way of writing it, and concluded at once that the table was hopelessly wrong. Well, that *is* the queerest thing I ever knew! I don't half like it. I will never sit down to anything of the kind again."

'And he has kept his word. Now, Mr. O'Grady, how do you account for this? We two had never heard the name, and my brother, who *might* have exercised unconscious influence (even whilst wishing to prove the whole thing a cheat), was more surprised than any one when the answer came in the form it did.'

'My dear Mrs. Verschoyle, that is just what I have been trying to explain to Miss Poynter. Your story is very interesting, for

it furnishes me with an illustration from the life. The fact that such a Hindoo rendering of the name existed, was *known* to your brother, although the knowledge was not actively present to his mind at the time. Still, there it was, lying dormant in his memory. This, after all, is exactly what is meant by *unconscious* cerebration. Half the table-turning no doubt is done by *conscious* cerebration, where the answer is known to and consciously present with one mind, although the person in question uses no physical means of conveying it to others, and may not even be anxious to do so. But unconscious cerebration is, of course, infinitely more wonderful and mysterious. I am not surprised that your brother thought he was dealing with the black art. This solution did not happen to occur to him: perhaps in those days there was less talk about the unconscious working of the mind.'

I put in my oar now, really anxious to discover whether Oscar's curious mesmeric influence over people is consciously exercised or not.

'How about mesmerism, Oscar? I know some really clever people who positively deny the existence of such an agency at all, and declare it merely lives in the imaginations of weak-minded men and women.'

'It is waste of labour to attempt to argue with such people, Verschoyle. Perhaps they personally are not susceptible to mesmeric power. A blind man might be clever enough in other ways, but if he tried to convince me there were no stars in the heavens, simply because he could not see them himself, nor be affected by their light in any way—well, I should be sorry for the man—and change the subject! Mesmerism is a recognised power nowadays—even used medically by some men

very high up in our profession. I know of hospitals, more especially abroad, where it is utilised in all nervous disorders.'

'Have you ever tried to mesmerise anybody yourself, Oscar?'

'Oh dear yes,' is the ready answer; 'and I generally succeed, too. I have immense mesmeric power. I mesmerised a girl of nineteen the other day in a house where I was staying in England. I had never seen her before, and this was the first day we met. She told me afterwards I was the first man who had succeeded with her.

'I had great fun that time with another lady, by-the-bye. A stupid, starched old maid, who laughed the whole thing to scorn, and hinted darkly at "mesmeric flirtations," because this girl happened to be pretty and I would not allow the general public to be present until she was fairly in the mesmeric sleep. I carried off a nice

little younger sister to chaperon us and watch the process, and the old lady was furious.

'"Such nonsense!" I heard her mutter. "Mesmerism, indeed! If I had anything to say to those girls, I would take care they didn't go off for any such tomfoolery with a hare-brained young Irishman like that. I dare say he likes to make a pretty girl shut her eyes, and pretend she can't open them. I don't believe a word of it all!"

'The whole evening she affected to look upon it all as a stupid joke, got up between us three. When I brought the girl out of the sleep, and her consciousness came back slowly and dreamily, the old sceptic shrugged her skinny shoulders, and said with withering sarcasm:

'"Really, very well acted indeed!"

'I could not resist a little innocent revenge. I knew the old lady herself would

be a very "easy subject." One can generally tell that by looking at people. Well, next day, several of us happened to be in the neighbouring county town. The ladies had driven on, and I walked in later, and saw my enemy through the window of a linendraper's shop. Instantly an idea flashed through my mind. I would make her a convert to mesmeric power in spite of herself. So I remembered some trifling want and went in, seating myself close to her, and looking her steadily in the face as I spoke to her for a few minutes. The shopman brought my change, and I got up to leave the shop. As I went out I stood by her for a moment, then suddenly took her hand and placed it down gently on the counter.

'"Please wait here till I come back, Miss Price," I said, with extreme politeness. "I shall not be away very long. Perhaps you will allow me the pleasure of

walking home with you if the carriage has started before I return."

'It was only a mile from the house, and I knew the walk would do her no harm. I was out of the shop before she could indignantly refuse to wait for me, or give up the carriage for the sake of walking home with me. I found the carriage waiting at some other shop in the town, and told the ladies who were inside that Miss Price had not finished her shopping, and that they were not to wait for her, as I would escort her home. They looked a little surprised at my sudden devotion, but drove off when I assured them I was in earnest. I had several little commissions to perform, so a good half-hour passed before I found myself inside the draper's shop again. There was my friend, as I knew I should find her, with her hand placed on the counter as I had left it, the picture of perplexed dismay, feebly inventing fresh wants to

account to the shopman for her long visit.'

'Oh, Mr. O'Grady, what a shame! What did you say to defend yourself?'

'I did not defend myself at all, Miss Poynter. I said quite innocently:

'"Ah, here you are still, Miss Price! that is very kind of you to have waited for me. I am afraid I have been rather long; but there were a good many little things to get, and country shopkeepers are so slow. Let us come now at once, or it will be getting dark."'

'And did she come?'

'That she did—with hearty goodwill—such goodwill that I could not possibly keep pace with her. She declined my escort, after all; but I kept her counsel, and I think she felt a spark of grim gratitude towards me in consequence. Anyway, I never heard her discussing "mesmeric flirtation" again;' and Oscar gives a hearty

laugh over the reminiscence. Then he adds suddenly, turning to Rachel: 'Did any one every try to mesmerise you, Miss Poynter? You ought to be a good subject, I should think.'

'Now, Mr. O'Grady, you have not shown your usual penetration. I shall be as sceptical of your powers as your poor old lady was. I am a simply *hopeless* subject for mesmeric purposes. Several people have tried me in vain who were quite sure of success when they began. It was all to no purpose, though I was most honestly anxious to fall under the spell. One gentleman who tried me is considered, I believe, one of the strongest mesmerists in Europe. He and another man (an old friend of mine) had a bet of ten pounds upon the matter, and I was to have half the money if he succeeded. That went very much to my heart, I can assure you, for the Christmas bills were

coming in, and I was horribly in debt to papa at the time. It was all in vain; I sat with a guinea in the palm of my hand till my eyes smarted with the pain of looking at it. I shut my eyes like a lamb the moment he told me to do so. I "effaced my individual will-power," as he called it, as effectually as my ignorance of his exact meaning would allow. Then he said suddenly:

'"Now you can't open your eyes; I forbid you to do so!"

'It was a horrible moment! My poor five pounds! With a hard struggle honesty gained the day, and I opened my eyes on his disappointed face as easily as I can open them now. Then he tried making me stretch out my arm, with just the same result.

'"Now you cannot draw it back; you know you cannot! I defy you to draw it back, Miss Poynter."

'My arm fell by my side with the most aggravating denial of his words, and I disappeared to bed, covered with shame at my own inexorable obstinacy. I don't think that poor man ever quite forgave me for casting such a slur upon his skill, but it was not my fault I am sure. You are quite welcome to try your hand upon me, Mr. O'Grady, but it is only fair to tell you this beforehand.'

Oscar does not accept the invitation eagerly.

'I don't think I could mesmerise you to-night, Miss Poynter. I have no nerve-power left, just now. One must be in the mood. I might just put you into the sleep, perhaps, but I doubt even that, to-night; shall I try?'

'Yes, certainly, if you like,' says Rachel, with a smile of satisfied incredulity.

'Very well; all I ask is that you should not put your mind into a distinctly *antago-*

nistic frame. Don't try *to be mesmerised* or *not to be mesmerised* at first. Be simply passive. When I give you any command, you are of course at liberty to use your whole strength of mind in defying me—so long as you are sufficiently conscious to do so,' he adds, with a quiet smile.

Oscar goes to the sofa upon which Rachel is sitting, takes her two hands quietly in his, and looks steadily into her eyes for three or four minutes.

'Now, Miss Poynter, please shut your eyes. You must give in to me so far, but that is all I shall ask from you.'

Rachel instantly obeys, and sits quite silent for a few moments.

At first the lids quiver nervously, but soon they are perfectly at rest, so utterly still that it almost frightens me.

'Now, Miss Poynter, you may open your eyes if you *can*, but I command you not to do so. Struggle as hard as you like

for your own way,' and Oscar gives a smile as he utters the words.

Poor Rachel! It is painful to watch the quivering lids: one can see the eyeballs are struggling bravely to force them open, but in vain.

At last the girl gives up the attempt, and says in a half-scared voice:

'I *can't* open them, Mr. O'Grady. It is such a horrible feeling! What shall I do?'

'Don't be frightened, Miss Poynter! You are quite safe; I won't harm you in any way. If you are honestly satisfied that you *cannot* open them, give it up, and be quiet for a few minutes.'

He still holds her hands in his. By degrees, a curious, unconscious look comes over her face—a look of deep sleep, but a sleep of the mental faculties alone, for her muscles are in no way relaxed. It is the oddest sight to see her sitting there perfectly upright, as when she first sat

down, but evidently quite unconscious. Her face looks rather pale, but calm and peaceful.

Elsa takes fright, and whispers nervously:

'Mr. O'Grady, do take care! Suppose you cannot bring her out of it again! Can she hear us?'

Oscar has been making various 'passes' over her face. He turns round now, and speaks in a low tone.

'There is nothing to alarm you, Mrs. Verschoyle. She is utterly unconscious of you all. She cannot hear anything you say, but she will answer *me* if I speak directly to her;' and he tries the experiment, taking up a glass of water that stands near, and putting it carefully into her hands. 'I want you to drink this, Miss Poynter. It is champagne. Don't you see how it sparkles and froths up? It is dry champagne—you like dry champagne, I know.'

I observe that Oscar always illustrates by a sort of word-painting the idea he wishes to convey to her mind.

The girl takes the glass at once and carries it to her lips. Oscar watches to put it away again on the table.

'Yes, it is very good champagne,' she answers, in slow measured tones, still keeping her eyes fast shut.

Oscar takes up her hand again, and waves it gently to and fro with an undulating motion.

'Now you are on the sea, Miss Poynter! Don't you see the waves rising on either side? How they are dashing against the ship!'

Rachel gives a shiver and grasps Oscar's hand nervously.

'You frighten me; the waves are so high! They are going over our heads. We shall be drowned!' and an expression

of the most intense terror passes over her sleeping face.

'Oh, Mr. O'Grady, she is suffering,' says tender-hearted Elsa. 'Don't say any more to her. Do bring her out of it again!'

'One moment, Mrs. Verschoyle. She really is quite unconscious, and will remember nothing of it all when she wakes. I just want to show you that I can influence her physically, as well as mentally, whilst in this state;' and he gets up and walks over to the extreme end of the saloon, then says quietly: 'Come over here, to me, please, Miss Poynter; I want you.'

Rachel turns her head towards the part of the room where he stands, as if she were listening, then rises slowly from the sofa and makes her way, very quietly but surely, to the point whence the voice came. She walks with all the marvellous

precision of a somnambulist, avoiding ingeniously several chairs and other obstacles in the way, and stands before him at last, quite motionless and still.

'Thank you, Miss Poynter; now we will go back to the sofa;' and he leads her gently back, tells her to sit down again, and at once begins to make the 'reverse passes' over her face to bring her out of this strange, abnormal condition.

Consciousness comes back to her slowly, and apparently with some pain. She opens her eyes at last, and fixes them upon us with a dreamy, perplexed look.

'Where am I? Did I go to sleep? What is the matter?'

'Nothing the matter, Miss Poynter,' says Oscar, cheerfully; 'only you have been having a little nap! You are all right again now; wake up!' and he gives her a hand and makes her stand up.

Rachel obeys mechanically, but she seems half asleep still.

'What has happened? Something must have happened—did I faint?' and she stands quite still, with her hands hanging passively at her sides and a curious, fixed look in her eyes, which gaze at us without seeing us, apparently.

Oscar passes his hand rapidly in front of them once or twice.

'Come, come, Miss Poynter! why, you are half asleep still. Rouse up and think about something—anything you like. Where shall we go to-morrow? to Karnak or Thebes?'

But it is in vain to try and rouse her out of that strange, stony, far-away gaze.

At last he turns to Elsa and whispers gently:

'It is all right, Mrs. Verschoyle. There is nothing to be afraid of. She is quite conscious. It often takes a long time to

recover from a first sleep. Get her to bed, and she will be all right to-morrow.'

Elsa puts her hand on Rachel's shoulder, and leads her gently to the door.

Just as they are going out, the girl turns round and bursts into a flood of tears. The full consciousness has come back again now, with some painful recollection uppermost.

'He called me a fool, Elsa,' says the weeping girl, sobbing on my wife's shoulder; 'it's very, very hard to make a fool of me, and then *call* me a fool!'

Over and over again she repeats the same weary lament. Elsa and I try in vain to combat the idea. Again and again we assure her that we have been in the room the whole time, and that O'Grady never used such words—that he would never call *any* woman a fool, far less one he respected so much as Rachel.

We might as well have argued the matter with our Arab crew.

'But he *did* call me a fool, Elsa! How could I think so unless he did it? It was very, very unkind!' and poor Rachel's weak, pitiful sobs are as unlike her usual bright, strong self as anything that could be imagined.

We look in despair at last to O'Grady himself.

'What is to be done?'

'Don't argue about it any more with her, Mrs. Verschoyle. People often wake up with some such delusion. Tell her to-morrow it was all a mistake, and she will believe you. Get her to bed now as quickly as possible, or she may become hysterical. I would not have done it for the world if I had known how strongly it would affect her; you all assured me so earnestly that I should fail altogether.'

Yes, we cannot blame O'Grady, who is

unhappy enough at the result of the experiment.

Elsa gets Rachel into bed at last with some difficulty, then comes to me in despair.

'What shall I do, Charlie? she won't go to sleep. Her eyes are wide open, and she keeps worrying on, poor child, about Mr. O'Grady having called her a fool. And she talks such nonsense, too! I could hardly help laughing, although I am so frightened. I had to undress her and positively lift her into bed. She never made the smallest attempt to help herself, but submitted to me quite passively. What am I to do, Charlie? I cannot leave her like that! Will you go and ask Mr. O'Grady what is to be done?'

Oscar is waiting anxiously for Elsa's report, and agrees with us that a sleepless night will never do in Rachel's present excited state.

'Do you think if I positively assured her before you both that I never used those unfortunate words, it might satisfy her, Mrs. Verschoyle?'

Elsa grasps eagerly at the idea.

'Yes, indeed I think it might; anyway, I would be so glad for you to come and see her for a minute. She keeps on talking about you, and wanting to say good-night to you.'

Oscar comes at once, and goes up to the bed in the most simple, natural way, looking kindly at Rachel, who is lying there with wide-open, restless eyes.

'Miss Poynter, I am so grieved you should have taken such an idea into your head! I could not say such a thing to *any* lady; how could you imagine I thought anything so rude and stupid about *you*?'

Rachel's eyes are brimming with tears.

'Are you *sure* you did not say it, Mr. O'Grady? How could I dream it all?'

'I cannot explain to you *how* the notion came into your head, but this I can honestly assure you—people nearly always wake out of a first mesmeric sleep with some such delusion on the surface of their brains. Mr. and Mrs. Verschoyle were in the room the whole time. They know I never used such words; but won't you believe *me*, Miss Poynter?' and Oscar's voice is very low and dangerously tender, it seems to me, as he places his cool, firm hand gently on the girl's hot, flushed forehead.

By degrees the influence begins to tell upon her. She utters no word, but the eyes relax their stony gaze, then close entirely . . . and in a few minutes Rachel has fallen into a heavy, peaceful slumber. Then, and not till then, Oscar removes his hand, and turns round to Elsa, whispering:

'She is fast asleep now—you can safely leave her, Mrs. Verschoyle. She will not

wake till far into the morning, I am sure, and then probably will have forgotten all but the fact of our table-talk and my having told her to shut her eyes.'

* * * * *

Next day no Rachel appears at our 8.30 breakfast. Elsa says she went in about 7 a.m. and found her in a deep sleep, so came away again without waking her.

'I will take her a cup of tea presently, Charlie. It is better for her to sleep as long as she can—don't you think so, Mr. O'Grady?'

Before Oscar can answer, the door opens and Rachel herself appears. She looks a trifle paler than usual, perhaps, and her manner is very quiet as she kisses her father and Elsa, and gives me a cold little hand.

Oscar has risen at her entrance, and

stands waiting to shake hands with her as usual; but Rachel sits down quickly by my side, giving him only a little bow and a low 'Good-morning, Mr. O'Grady!'

She does not look vexed or annoyed at all, only very quiet and rather dreamy; but I notice that her eyes never once meet his—not even when she answers some direct question from him.

This seems to me natural. I fancy she remembers more of last night's proceedings than we imagine; and, although too generous and fair to visit them upon O'Grady's really innocent head, may very well be annoyed with *herself* for having allowed the experiment.

All day long she carefully avoids his society, when it is possible to do so without remark; and yet I cannot help noticing when they *are* together, that her eyes seem to be constantly, though unwillingly, drawn towards him.

For instance, if he is speaking to Elsa and I am talking to Rachel, I can see that my companion's attention is wandering: she answers my words with evident effort and lets the conversation drop as quickly as possible, whilst several times I have caught her eyes fixed on him when he has not seemed to be observing her.

There is something almost painful, too, in their expression on such occasions—a curious mixture of wounded pride, self-contempt and defiance, merging into the most tender, *womanly* look that I ever yet saw on Rachel's face.

Elsa is the best and most loving little wife in the world, but I know that I was not her first love, and I never saw that look on *her* face until after our marriage. Then it came one day—an expression of glorified surprise and deepest tenderness, as she looked at our poor little baby boy when he was first put into her arms.

What does it mean on Rachel's face? Does it herald forth some strange new birth in *her* soul? Are *her* feet resting at last before the golden gates of a 'woman's kingdom?'

God forbid, is my hearty prayer. Somehow, I have always felt that Rachel could never pass through those gates without some bitter suffering!

Better—far better—for her never to catch a glimpse of their glory; for if the beautiful, cruel portals once swing back to let her in, she may come forth again a grander but never a happier woman.

And that Oscar, of all men, should be the one to lead her on to that enchanted ground! Who could have a more dangerous guide than Oscar, with his moody, fanciful, unreliable nature?

I put the bare idea of such a catastrophe away with angry impatience. I have not even thought of Fred, or how his

happiness would be affected in the matter.

All my anxieties have centred round Rachel herself. But it is impossible—monstrous! I won't let the wretched idea gain even a definite form by telling Elsa that it has ever passed through my brain.

Rachel is only excited by our talk last night and its unfortunate result.

No wonder she feels a little shy and uncomfortable at speaking to Oscar! Moreover she is probably worrying herself with some foolish idea of being always under his influence in future, and having to 'fetch and carry,' to write letters, or sing songs, at his sovereign pleasure!

I am determined to reassure her on this point, and speak to Oscar first, that I may have his opinion to back me up.

'O'Grady, it strikes me that Rachel seems very quiet to-day. Do you think that the effect of last night has worn off completely?'

Oscar tips back his chair to get another cigar out of the case, which is lying on the deck table, so I don't see his face for a moment. Perhaps it is only my suspicious fancy that seems to detect a shade of constraint in his voice, as he answers carelessly enough:

'Oh, you must expect that, Verschoyle! She will be all right to-morrow. You must remember there is considerable bodily exhaustion after that sort of sleep, and the reaction is most natural.'

'Then, when the effect has entirely worn off, she will be in exactly the same state as she was yesterday afternoon, for instance?'

'What do you mean by that?' says Oscar, meeting my look with one of

genuine surprise; 'what should have changed her?'

'Oh, nothing! It is a foolish fancy, no doubt, but I cannot help thinking she is worrying herself with the idea of having put herself under your influence in some special way, last night. One reads hundreds of stories, you know, about a man obliging people to write letters to him, or to take journeys at his pleasure, after having once got them under his direct mesmeric influence: I should like to know how far it is all true?'

Oscar gives a light laugh, and puts the cigar between his teeth again.

'Miss Poynter can make her mind easy on that score. No doubt some people do get that sort of influence over other minds, and perhaps if I mesmerised Miss Poynter constantly, it might be so in her case; but one isolated attempt of that kind is quite harmless, I can assure you! In

the cases you speak of, you will nearly always find that the mesmeric influence has been exerted for some time before such results are obtained.'

So I take an opportunity of saying to Rachel when we are alone:

'Rachel, I have been speaking to Mr. O'Grady about last night. He says you may make yourself perfectly happy; there is not the slightest fear of your getting under his influence in the future.'

Rachel looks up with an odd glance, half-melancholy, half-amused.

'That is really very kind of Mr. O'Grady, Charlie. Certainly, he has better judgment than most people when he *is* grave. I am glad he can reassure me so completely.'

The last words seem to have a tinge of satire. What does it all mean?

I am tired of worrying about it.

My foolish fancies will only help to

fulfil themselves. I will have a good, brisk walk, to hunt up 'arrow-heads' in the desert. The glorious desert air will blow all these silly fears away.

CHAPTER III.

BY next day, Oscar and Rachel seem to have got on to a more comfortable footing. She is strangely gentle and quiet still, but she speaks to him quite naturally now, and with no apparent embarrassment.

How glad I am that I kept my passing suspicions to myself, instead of making Elsa unhappy about them.

We spend a long, idle, dreamy day at Karnak; taking our lunch with us, and not returning till after sunset.

Oscar's manner to Rachel has a tender deference about it that seems to me a little unnecessary, but no doubt he is anxious to atone for any annoyance he may have caused her.

Coming home, Rachel and I happen to find ourselves alone together, far behind the others, for we have both made a bad bargain to-day in the way of donkeys.

Rachel does not speak for some minutes. We are too familiar with each other to talk for the sake of politeness, and she seems wrapped up in her own thoughts—pleasant enough thoughts too—judging by the smile that plays over her lips.

At length I say carelessly:

'Well, Rachel. Life isn't such a bad thing after all, is it, with this perfect sky? All your gloomy thoughts seem to have vanished.'

Rachel gives a happy little laugh.

'Yes, Charlie. What chameleons we

are, to be sure! I *was* so wretched that night, and you were so good to me! Nothing has changed now in one's outward surroundings, and yet to-day I feel as unreasonably happy as I was unreasonably miserable a few days ago. The Egyptian climate must have some strange, subtle charm about it. Do you know, looking back upon my whole life, I never remember before being, even for one hour, truly and entirely happy, perfectly content to live in the present moment without looking backwards or forwards. Everything in life before gave me the sort of feeling one has in smelling eau-de-Cologne, the feeling of never being able to get enough *scent* out of it to satisfy one. Don't you know what I mean? I think I should be a much happier woman if I lived always under such a glorious sky. Don't you remember Becky Sharpe saying she would have been such a good woman

if she had had £5000 a year? That is just what I feel, only I would give up the golden sovereigns for these golden rays!' and she points towards the glowing west, where the sun is sinking gently behind his amber flames.

Yes, it *is* a glorious climate; but the sun shone just as brightly, the sky looked just as blue, the palm trees were as green and beautiful a week or two ago, when Rachel sat listless and sad, and spoke of life as more melancholy than death.

Why is it? What does it mean? I ask myself again. The doubts and suspense in my own mind seem unbearable, and yet when the answer comes with such terrible distinctness, I look back to this ride and think how happy I must have been in my ignorance.

Just as we are sitting down to dinner, an interruption comes—a note for Mr. O'Grady, brought by the dragoman of a

neighbouring Dahabeeah which has been lying near us for the last few days. Oscar reads it hastily, with a clouded brow, then throws it across to me, saying shortly:

'What a confounded bore! What must I do, Verschoyle?'

'What is the matter, Mr. O'Grady?' says Elsa, looking up from her pigeons at Oscar's exclamations of dismay.

'Only those people in the *Fostat*, Mrs. Verschoyle—Sir Thomas and Lady Beecher—have written to ask me to join them, to go up to Assouan again and back to Cairo. It seems one of the daughters has had sunstroke—very slight, I fancy—but they are nervous and fidgety, and won't stir without a medical man, and there is not one to be had on the river.

'The Luxor doctor is laid up himself, poor man, and can attend to nobody just now. The old gentleman writes a most

beseeching letter, appeals to one's feelings of humanity, and so forth. I suppose it would be a splendid opening for one, professionally. I believe the old man is as rich as Crœsus, and might give me a push up the ladder if he chose; for they live in London, and seem to "know everybody there," at least so I gathered from a short talk to one of the girls yesterday when we met at Karnak—rather a pretty girl, by-the-bye! That is a faint drop of consolation in the bitter cup; but why on earth should this other girl insist on getting sunstroke just now?

'Of course it will be the only plain one of the three! Just like my luck! What am I to do, Verschoyle? I will leave it in your hands.'

I have been reading through the letter: it really is a very piteous appeal. Whether the girl is seriously ill or not, the father and mother at any rate are very unhappy

about her, and it seems a plain duty to relieve their anxieties if possible. Besides, is not this a providential solution of all my own worries?

So I say, with an odd mixture of relief and regret:

'I see nothing for it, O'Grady. Of course we shall all be very sorry to lose you, but I really think you ought to go.'

Rachel is just lifting a glass of wine to her lips; with a sudden crash it falls out of her hands, covering the table with broken glass and claret. I never knew Rachel do such a clumsy thing in my life before, and she looks vexed and annoyed with herself as she hurriedly collects the fragments and pours unlimited salt on the stains.

Oscar never looks towards her, but nothing has escaped him; for in the midst of our discussion he turns quietly to Ibrahim, saying:

'You had better give us another clean

napkin, Ibrahim; Miss Poynter has spilt her wine, you see.'

Oscar settles at last to 'sleep it over' before committing himself definitely, but goes to the *Fostat* meanwhile to see the invalid.

I go up on deck alone to have my usual smoke, leaving the Squire and Elsa and Rachel together.

How curiously our little party has been broken up! First Mrs. Wingfield's death —then Fred's sudden return to Cairo— now Oscar is leaving us just as unexpectedly!

We shall miss him terribly, of course; and yet deep-hidden in my heart is a sense of intense relief and thanksgiving for possible dangers averted! What short-sighted mortals we are at best!

Presently I hear voices below me on the lower deck. Oscar must have come back without my seeing him step on board, for

I recognise the peculiar saffron-coloured ulster he generally wears; besides, nothing would induce the Squire to sit out at this time of night.

There is another figure by his side—Elsa, I imagine; but this half-light is very deceptive, for the voice is unmistakably Rachel's, as I hear her say, quietly:

'Well, Mr. O'Grady, have you seen your patient? Is it all settled?'

'Yes, I have seen my patient, Miss Poynter, but nothing is definitely settled. I told them I must think it over for twelve hours, and send my answer to-morrow.

'It *is* the plain one,' he adds, in a voice of half-comic despair. 'I told you how it would be. What shall I do, Miss Poynter? go—or stay?'

'It is hardly a question of inclination, I suppose?' is Rachel's low answer, and there is a quiver in her tone. 'I suppose you

must go; what else can be done?' The voice has a curious, passionate ring about it as she speaks.

'Well,' says Oscar, slowly, 'I fancy it might be arranged. I have been to see Dr. McGregor at the hotel. He is getting on very well, and hopes to be out to-morrow. The girl is really not seriously ill; probably he will be quite able to look after her by the time we leave. Of course this would entail their giving up the Cataract, but I don't see that I am bound to ensure their seeing it.

'I suppose, professionally, it is a good chance for me! Miss Poynter, I leave my fate in your hands—you shall settle it for me. Shall I go or stay?'

So far, I have been a most innocent listener, never dreaming that a third person could be *de trop;* but Rachel's next words make me feel uncomfortable. Still, I am too deeply interested, for her sake, to

question whether I ought to hear more or not.

'How can I tell, Mr. O'Grady? Of course you must please yourself, if, as you say, there is no question of duty to be consulted. I suppose you ought to do what is best for you professionally.'

'Shall I stay, Miss Poynter? Do *you* care which way it is settled?'

The girl turns her head impatiently. The rising moon throws its cold, bright rays upon her face, and I see a strange look there; the pitiful, *hunted* look one sees in the eyes of a stag brought suddenly to bay.

'Of course I care, Mr. O'Grady; of course we all care.'

Oscar's voice grows lower and more passionate as he answers her with reckless impatience.

'I don't want to know what "you all" feel, Miss Poynter! I want to know what

you individually feel. Am I to go or stay? it all rests with you. Either I make arrangements with Dr. McGregor the first thing to-morrow morning, or I go over, "bag and baggage," to the *Fostat*. If I go at all, it had better be at once. "To be, or not to be," Miss Poynter?'

'I won't decide such a thing for you. It's no affair of mine,' says Rachel, passionately, with one last struggle for liberty.

'That means I am to go, then?'

There is dead silence for a moment.

The man's intense selfishness is driving me wild. Yet some strange fascination keeps me spell-bound. My whole energies are absorbed in the one burning desire to hear how it will end.

At last Rachel says in a measured, unnatural voice:

'What am I to say, Mr. O'Grady?'

'Call me once — only once — by my

Christian name! Say, *Stay, Oscar*, and your words shall be my law.'

Another dead silence . . . the suspense seems intolerable as I wait in breathless eagerness to catch her words. They come at length . . . distinct and low . . . shattering my last wild hope to the ground.

'*Oscar, stay!* . . . but you are very, *very* cruel!' and with a sudden jerk she has wrenched her hands from his, and leaves him standing there alone, with the glow of passionate excitement slowly fading out of his dark grey eyes.

In another five minutes he walks hastily to the farther end of the boat, and I make my escape, feeling very guilty and miserable.

* * * * *

Rachel has gone to bed, and the Squire and Elsa are keeping each other company

in the saloon. The former looks up as I enter.

'Well, we shall miss that young fellow, Charlie. He is really very amusing, though he talks a good deal of nonsense sometimes —does not know a good scarabeus when he sees it, for one thing! Still, I am sorry we are going to lose him.'

'I don't fancy it is quite settled yet, sir,' I say hurriedly, making my escape before any further questions can be asked.

Elsa's quick eyes have noticed something strange in my manner, and she makes an excuse to join me in our cabin.

'What is the matter, Charlie? Has anything happened?'

'Only this has happened, Elsa—that it was the worst day's work I ever did in my life, when I asked O'Grady to come here with us;' and I tell her briefly what has passed.

'I knew the man was as weak as water, and intensely selfish under all that apparent good-nature; but I thought he had *some* feelings of honour, some remnant of principle left. He must have thrown both to the winds (if, indeed, he ever knew what the words meant), to have gained such an influence over a proud woman like Rachel.'

Elsa takes a more lenient view of things.

'It is very, very sad, Charlie; but perhaps we are magnifying matters, after all. With another sort of girl one would not give it another thought. It might have been merely a little foolish flirtation on both sides; but Rachel is different. Besides, she has too much respect for Fred's honour to allow that sort of license to any man, even if she could condescend to it herself. I can't help being fond of Oscar, but he is very vain and fond of power, Charlie. Perhaps that unlucky mesmeris-

ing left him with a greater influence over Rachel than he would admit, and he could not resist the sudden temptation to exercise it. Then, too, it was a chance for a little "dramatic effect," and that is attacking Oscar on his very weakest side.'

'All sides are weak with him,' I say angrily.

Nevertheless, Elsa's calm good sense has comforted me a little. Her explanation of matters seems a reasonable one, knowing Oscar so well as I do. In any case, it was ungenerous; but with that sort of character *words* are apt to be more generous sometimes than actions, and I care for little else if only Rachel's peace of mind is left undisturbed. Still I trust, with all my heart, that ambition and love of novelty may gain the day, and carry him over to the Beecher camp.

Next day all such hopes are effectually dashed to the ground.

Rachel does not appear at the early breakfast, but sends a message to say she has a headache, and will only take a cup of hot tea and some dry toast.

Oscar has had some coffee already, Ibrahim says, and has gone on shore—'to see the Scotch doctor at the hotel, sir, I think,' is the dragoman's suggestion, in answer to my look of surprise, for O'Grady is not given to early rising at any time.

Presently I go off also for a stroll, and, coming back, join Oscar just as he is stepping on board. I give him a hasty nod, feeling, I must confess, very conscious and uncomfortable. Oscar's eyes meet mine with a look of the most serene composure.

'Good-morning, Verschoyle! I got the start of you, you see. I thought I should make you eat your words some day, on the score of my laziness. The fact is, I have

been thinking matters over, and I really cannot make up my mind to break up our pleasant party. I have just been to see Dr. McGregor, and he says he is quite competent to look after the "sun-stricken" Beecher; so I have arranged it all with old Beecher himself. He was awfully civil about it—full of regrets at losing the chance "of such a delightful companion," and so forth; but felt "that their disappointment must be a satisfaction to the est of my party," etc., etc. He is a jolly old fellow, and that second daughter has really the prettiest eyes in the world!' and Oscar steps quickly on to the boat, without apparently noticing the coldness and constraint of my manner.

His changeful face has its old grave, gently-deferential look as he goes up to Rachel a few minutes later. She has come up on deck, ready equipped for a walk; and I was just thinking it might be well to

ensure a half-hour alone with her, by offering to be her companion, when Oscar anticipates me.

'Good-morning, Miss Poynter! Congratulate me on having got my "reprieve," after all. The *Rameses* fly has escaped from the *Fostat* web, and Dr. McGregor is duly installed as "medical attendant" to the fair Beecher. I feel like a schoolboy who thinks he is going to be "kept in" some glorious summer's day, when the schoolmaster relents at the last moment, and sends him off to the cricket-field.' Then he adds more gravely: 'You are just going for a walk, I see. May I come with you?'

Rachel raises her eyes to his face. They have the dull, heavy look of a sleepless night about them, and the lids are a trifle swollen and red. It gives them the sort of expression I have seen in a 'Mater Dolorosa' by Sassoferrato. She looks at

him quite steadily for a moment, and then says, in a low, unshaken voice:

'Yes, Mr. O'Grady. I will come with you. I think we had better have a walk together.'

And so they go off towards the desert behind the village, leaving me in painful suspense as to the meaning of Rachel's quiet words.

Lately she has seemed so ill at ease when Oscar has spoken to her. Certainly, just now, there was no shadow of embarrassment in accepting his escort; but it struck me that her manner had not the self-possession of a woman speaking to a man who is merely her friend, but rather the *self-effacement* that we have all experienced when interests are at stake or questions involved of such vital importance that personal emotion is swallowed up by their mighty shadows.

I am too miserably restless to talk or

even read, and so sit smoking on, whilst Time goes by on leaden feet.

At last they return; Oscar seems to me tenderly triumphant as he leads her on board. Rachel's eyes are cast on the ground, and I cannot see her face. She lifts them for a moment as she passes by my chair. A great joy and a great sadness seem struggling for the mastery as she says, in a very low voice:

'Charlie, I want to speak to you and Elsa. May I come to your cabin for a few minutes?'

She passes on, and I turn round fiercely to O'Grady.

'What is the meaning of this, O'Grady? Where have your intolerable vanity and selfishness led you now? Can't you be content with fooling girls as weak and easily flattered as yourself? Is *nothing* sacred to you where your own personal gratification is concerned? I congratulate

you on your victory! It was a worthy triumph to sully a proud, noble soul with the taint of dishonour, to steal the poor man's one ewe lamb to add to your "exceeding many flocks and herds" of poor, weak women fools! But the triumph will be a short one. Make the most of it. When Rachel wakes up from this brief summer madness, you will only escape her hatred through gaining her withering contempt!'

Oscar flinches at my scornful words as if a stinging lash had been drawn across his face. Then he puts his hand on my shoulder with a quiet dignity—the dignity of self-restraint.

I know in my heart that my words, though hot and ill-considered, cannot be entirely undeserved; and yet the man manages to make me feel almost in the wrong, as he says very calmly:

'Verschoyle, I would not stand such

words from any other lips on earth but yours. You are angry and unjust because you cannot understand yet. I honour Miss Poynter from the bottom of my heart, and I love her better than any other woman in the world. And I know now that she loves me. Is it her fault, or mine? Let her tell you about it; I cannot. I am utterly unstrung and unnerved. It has all been as great a revelation to me as to you. But I swear to you, Verschoyle, by all I hold most sacred, that this is no trifling matter to me. I know all the terrible suffering it must entail on that good, honest fellow she is engaged to marry. If I could have foreseen this, I would have cut off my right hand sooner than have accepted your offer to join this boat. How could I foresee it? How could any one foresee it? How can you chain down thoughts and imprison sympathies? How can you prevent the union

of two souls that were made for one another? Hundreds of women have loved me before, I confess, and I have thought sometimes that I loved them in return. Now I see that my true "queen" was waiting for me all these years, to shine out upon me at last under this glorious Egyptian sky. All other episodes in my life seem pale and colourless now, aimless flirtations, mere playing with a power whose overwhelming strength I had never really tested. And what a glorious triumph, to have been the first to kindle the sacred flame of real love in such a heart! Those strong, deep natures hold such intense capacity for love. Bathurst *must* see the thing in this light! A good, honest fellow like that will admit at once that it has been no fault of mine. Surely he would not wish to cramp and confine such a soul as Rachel's within the iron bars of his own excellent but narrow-minded nature, when

the brilliant sunshine and warm, fresh air of mutual sympathy and mutual love are calling to her in accents that *will* be heard and answered!'

Certainly Oscar has the gift of fluent words, and his arguments sound specious enough. At first, his words, and still more his self-restraint, touched me with some feeling of remorse for my hard, stinging sentences. But as he goes on, rhapsodising about the 'marriage of souls' and imprisoned birds and Egyptian skies, a reaction comes on with me. How completely everything revolves round the 'O'Grady' centre in his life!

He has been the one to wake the dormant soul. She has been waiting for *his* magic touch through all these years of unsatisfied living. The beautiful idyl of his life is set in a framework of Egyptian sunshine and waving palms. He can speculate beforehand on the 'depth and

strength' of the love that has been laid at his feet. The whole surroundings are such as to satisfy his dramatic and artistic instincts to the very utmost.

All this passes through my mind like a flash of light, leaving a shadow in which I see poor Fred's patient, loyal love; not despised, indeed, but rejected, and the lonely days and cruel nights—all the more lonely, all the more cruel, for this short spell of happiness.

Oscar says truly enough, 'Who is to blame?' It is a difficult question to answer; but the *sadness* of it all overpowers me so completely that I have no patience with his poetical rhapsodies.

It seems to me like admiring the beautiful hectic flush and brilliant, speaking eyes that are obtained through the ebbing of the life's blood within. So I say rather shortly:

'Well, O'Grady, you have made your

black *grey*; but I don't think even you will succeed in making it *white*. Soul sympathies are all very well, but it is a dangerous doctrine, and may land you further than you think. I suppose even you would hardly consider a woman justified in leaving her husband and children to go and live with a "sympathetic soul," although the husband were the most "soulless" being in the universe? A solemn promise is very binding, it seems to me, even where a page of the Prayer-book has not been read out. You will find it difficult to draw the line if you once admit that your "marriage of souls," as you call it, is to rank before honour and a woman's solemn word.'

'My dear Verschoyle, indeed you are quite mistaken! Rachel feels more deeply about it than even you could do. She is most anxious to fulfil her engagement with Bathurst, at any cost to herself. Poor

darling! she is overcome by remorse for having let her thoughts wander away from him for a moment, and wants me to promise never to see her again, and so forth. I have begged her to speak to you and Mrs. Verschoyle before making any such promise to her, and I do implore you to look upon things in a fair, unprejudiced way. She is ready to marry Bathurst to-morrow, but what would be the result? *She* can never be happy with him. I never thought she could, when I first saw them together; but now that she knows what real love means, the risks of course are ten thousand times greater. Then do you think even Bathurst himself would be made happy by such a marriage? Rachel is too honourable to conceal the truth from him. He seemed to me suspicious and jealous of her love before—natural enough, poor fellow! for he must have known that *his* hand could never learn to strike the

vibrating strings of her heart, and bring forth all the rich melodies of that glorious, passionate nature. But *now*——'

'My dear O'Grady,' I interpose, with a spice of conscious malice, 'no doubt your words are very wise, but if you could leave these poetical illustrations and descend to the prosaic level of my understanding, we might get on more quickly. Forgive the interruption.'

Oscar does not resent my words, but continues more quietly:

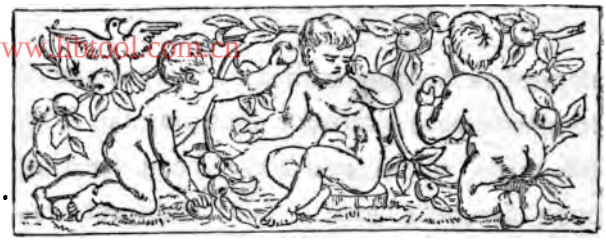
'I only mean, Verschoyle, that *now* such suspicions and jealousies must be increased tenfold; and therefore I don't see how even Bathurst's happiness would be secured by Rachel's sacrifice.'

'Fred Bathurst is the last man in the world to permit such a sacrifice, O'Grady. You know very little of the man's real character, if you imagine he would accept any woman's hand under such circum-

stances, or humbly gather up the crumbs of compassionate gratitude that may fall from the table where you have been feasting upon Rachel's love. No! Bathurst was content to accept little and give much, so long as he felt the little was all Rachel had to give. Now, according to your account, all this is changed. I had better speak to her before discussing the subject any further with you;' and I go off with a very sad heart to my cabin, where I find Elsa and Rachel already talking.

My wife is sitting on a low chair; Rachel is in her favourite attitude—on the ground, with her head on Elsa's lap.

The latter is stroking the pretty, dark hair and patting the puzzled, weary little head, as the girl lies there, worn out by the conflicting emotions of this new, strange experience, that must seem to her such a wonderful mixture of self-reproachful sadness and self-absorbing bliss.



CHAPTER IV.

THERE is nothing certainly in Rachel's mood to jar upon me; no joyous ring in her voice that Fred Bathurst's stanchest friend could possibly resent.

Love has been born at last in her heart, poor girl; but it comes, not as one of Heaven's choicest gifts, to be cherished with loving pride and tender joy, but rather as a great evil, an overwhelming, cruel snare, to be shrunk from with bitterest self-reproach and self-abasement.

'What shall I do, Charlie? what shall I do?' the poor child moans out pitifully, with her face still hidden on Elsa's lap. 'Why did Fred leave me? I begged him so hard to stay—then this horrible temptation might never have come to me—and now it will break his heart! Of course I shall marry him if he still wishes it,' she adds in a low, humble voice; 'but he must know first how treacherous my heart has been to him! If I had only known how it would be! If I could only have foreseen!'

Ah! how often have we all repeated that weary lament! And yet Fate drives on with relentless force, and we poor, blind, bandaged mortals are dragged along at her chariot-wheels, murmuring our feeble moans of sorrow and regret!

'If I had only known!' repeats poor Rachel, with a pitiful monotony of voice, a sort of dull, numbed despair. 'How could I tell? so many men have been pleasant

and kind and attentive to me before, and I never gave them another thought. Fred knew I was never in love with him, but he was more to me than all these other men, who passed over my life like shadows. And I did not even like Mr. O'Grady at first. His odd, restless moods jarred upon me so. I was so pleased to get over this feeling at last; and now it has only brought such misery. And Fred *trusted* me so! Why, Charlie, almost his last words to me were to say how pleased he felt "that Oscar and I had become friends!" How can I tell him how I have betrayed his trust? Oh, Charlie! if God would only let me die before we have to meet again!'

Even Elsa, with all her indulgence for O'Grady, cannot stand the sight of such agony.

I can hardly recognise my wife's usually gentle voice as she says, almost fiercely:

'How *dare* he bring all this upon her,

Charlie! It was most cowardly—most dishonourable! I wish we had never seen him!'

Rachel catches the words, and fires up at once in Oscar's defence.

'Elsa, never say that again. Don't make me more miserable than I am. It was not his fault; it was all mine. Oscar has that devoted manner to all women; it is part of his nature. How could he tell that I should be such a weak fool? How could any one tell?' she adds, with angry impatience. 'And there were no ties of honour to hold *him* back, as there were with me.'

Knowing all I do, it is hard to keep silent, much as I admire the girl's loyal championship. One word I cannot refrain from saying:

'Do you think, Rachel, there was *no* tie, no feeling of honour to hold him back from trifling with his friend's happiness—the

happiness of the man who had *trusted* him? Do you think that Oscar, with all his boasted experiences of women's hearts, did not *know* where he was drifting and letting you drift? I don't say that it was conscious villainy; but I think his inordinate vanity and insatiable love of power make him as utterly reckless sometimes as the most hardened villain could be!'

Rachel has risen now, and stands with flashing eyes—her small head thrown proudly back.

'I will not stay, Charlie, to hear you speak in that way of a man I love. Yes, I *do* love him—wicked as it is! You shall not speak of him or his conduct like that—at least not before me! You don't know—you cannot possibly understand. How can you dare to judge him? *I* have been weak and dishonourable about it all. It was no fault of his.'

How grand she looks—my poor, proud

Rachel!—as she stands there, telling her glorious falsehood with eyes that meet mine with an unflinching gaze, ready to challenge my indignant denial. I have no heart to give it, and she turns towards the door, saying more gently:

'It is useless for us to talk about it, Charlie. You and Elsa mean to be kind; but you don't understand, and I cannot bear to hear you speak of him like that.'

Her hand is on the door, but her lip quivers for a moment; then the pride and self-restraint give way, as she throws her arms suddenly round Elsa's neck, sobbing pitifully:

'Have patience with me, Elsa, for I am very, very miserable.'

Who could resist that sad appeal?

And so it comes to be tacitly understood that O'Grady is to be pardoned as usual, or at least not openly condemned.

But there are grave questions to be

considered. With all my affection for Fred and care for his happiness, I put away at once and for ever any idea of trying to restore matters to their old footing between him and Rachel.

Rachel herself sees the impossibility of this as soon as she is sufficiently composed to talk the matter over quietly.

It was only intense self-reproach and a burning desire to make any sort of atonement to Fred that could have blinded her about it for a moment.

How could any man, with the feelings of a man, accept a wife on such terms?

A passing flirtation might be forgiven to another sort of woman, but Rachel never once shuts her eyes to the fact that, rightly or wrongly, she has given O'Grady an amount and intensity of feeling that Fred has never roused, nor ever could rouse, in her soul.

How then is it to end between her and

Oscar? He professed a real and deep attachment in talking to me just now; but Oscar's impulsive, unreliable nature will make it very hard to deal with him. How can one find out 'the truth' from a man who cannot even rely upon his own moods for half an hour together?

What a horrible idea that Rachel's happiness should ever depend on such a weather-cock!

How still more horrible to risk his marrying her from any lower motive than love, or the nearest approach to love possible with that shallow nature! Oscar is an ambitious man, with all his poetical aspirations and generous impulses; and the Squire is rich, and can give Rachel a good portion if he chooses.

Then, again, what will the Squire himself say when the subject has to be broached to him? That unpleasant task will fall to my lot, no doubt! And the Squire is a

passionate old man when fairly roused, and has old-fashioned views about honour. It will be difficult even for O'Grady, with all his specious arguments, to make the bluff, honest old father see things from his standpoint.

As all these thoughts and perplexities crowd into my brain, I feel a sense of almost sickening regret for the safety and smoothness of Rachel's fate a few short weeks ago, before all these disturbing elements came in.

Well, it is no use dreaming over the past. The great question is, how to act in the present?

The first thing seems to be to get hold of O'Grady and have another serious talk with him, and try to discover his real feelings, after some definite fashion, before taking any further steps.

I know my friend too well to carry him off to any lonely ruins. Oscar's fatal sub-

jection to passing impressions of any kind would be too strong for him. Once rouse his artistic or literary instincts, and they might subdue even passion for the moment. If I take him to Karnak, he is quite capable of drawing my attention to some curious cartouche, or discoursing for half an hour on broken columns and light and shade, in the midst of our most serious conversation.

My temper won't stand that sort of thing this afternoon, and for Rachel's sake I am anxious to be as kind and gentle to him as possible; so I choose purposely one of the many lonely sandy paths into the distant desert.

Nothing can exceed Oscar's grave, serious comprehension of the matter. No one could behave better under the circumstances. He even listens without a shadow of resentment to my very strong denunciation of his culpable carelessness, but defends

himself at the end with a touch of really manly dignity.

'I know how vexed and annoyed you must feel, Verschoyle, and I don't wonder that you should say hard things to me; but I think you should remember that I have never trifled with Miss Poynter. It has been honest féeling on my part throughout. I love her as deeply as it is possible for me to love a woman. You seem to think that is not saying much?

'You say Bathurst is capable of much deeper devotion. Possibly. We don't make our own natures. I can only give her all that it is in me to give; but believe me, if I thought Rachel would be happier with any other man, I would go off to-night and you should never set eyes on me again! At least do me that justice;' and he looks at me with a really earnest, *true* look in his grey eyes.

Yes, I believe he would! Oscar is

generous enough if his impulses can only get into action before they have time to cool down.

I am bound to agree with him sadly that Rachel's happiness would not be secured by such a course. Whether her love will meet — *can* meet — any worthy return, is more than a question with me; but that she has given it to him with all the passionate intensity of her nature, is now beyond any doubt in my mind.

Oscar at once proposes speaking to the Squire himself, and it seems the most manly course after all.

'It is very good of you, Verschoyle, to have thought of taking such an unpleasant task on your shoulders, but I could not allow it for a moment. Of course *I* must bear any disagreeables that may arise. I am quite prepared for a very stormy interview, but I shall remember it is my darling's father, and you need not fear my losing

her father who said them, and that he had reason to feel angry and annoyed. Still, it was rather hard lines to say that "he had not expected to live to see the day when he should feel ashamed of his child." He has quieted down again now, poor old fellow! and I think I can trust him to be gentle to her. I think I succeeded at last in making him see that no one was really to blame in the matter. Then, of course, he fell back upon "wishing we had never met." Such a senseless sort of thing to wish. As if people could escape their fates by any amount of wishing!'

'Well, and did you come to any practical conclusion?' I say, anxious to find out all I can before Oscar becomes hopelessly entangled in the web of fate.

'He says he must speak to Rachel at once, and "ascertain whether I have represented her true feelings in the matter." Poor old fellow! He got awfully pompous

that sort of thing for granted: perhaps the less we talk about it the better. I can't imagine *why* Rachel took a fancy to you,' and I put my hand on his shoulder with a gesture that takes the sting out of my words. 'But it has all come about very sadly. Don't let us forget how heavily that poor fellow at Cairo must pay for all this! And remember that Rachel's heart is no light gift to amuse a man's idle moments. Her love should be a crown of glory to *any* man. Forgive my saying it, Oscar; but let it make you humble, not boastful.'

Oscar's responsive nature is touched at once. 'So it shall, Verschoyle, God helping me! Before I ever thought she would one day love me, those words of Steele's always came into my mind when I looked at her, "To love her was a liberal education;" and God knows I have enough to learn—in some ways!'

I am most anxious to bring about the interview between the Squire and Oscar whilst this serious, softened mood lasts, and so arrange to leave them alone together after dinner whilst Rachel joins us on deck, looking very white and anxious.

Nearly an hour has passed in futile endeavours to keep up some sort of conversation. Rachel's answers grow shorter and shorter, until at length they cease altogether, and we all three lapse into silence.

The suspense is becoming very trying, when we suddenly hear the saloon-door opened and Oscar's step on the deck-ladder.

He comes straight up to Rachel, and puts his hand gently on her shoulder.

'Your father wants to speak to you alone, dear. Can you come at once?'

Poor Rachel gets up, looking very pale and nervous, but does not utter a word as

Oscar takes her down to the saloon-door and leaves her there.

He comes back to us at once, and says, in answer to our anxious looks:

'Well, it is all over, and better than I had any right to expect; but I hope never, in all my life, to go through such an hour again.'

'Was he very angry about it all?' says Elsa, gently.

'Angry? Yes, I suppose he was. I am sure he will be in time. Just now he seems more amazed at my utter audacity in loving Rachel, and Rachel's extraordinary stupidity in caring for me;' and Oscar gives a laugh of conscious vanity, then continues more gravely:

'Of course he was very much surprised and shocked, and so forth. I did not care for his abusing me, but he said one or two things about Rachel that were hard to bear. I had to remember that it was

her father who said them, and that he had reason to feel angry and annoyed. Still, it was rather hard lines to say that "he had not expected to live to see the day when he should feel ashamed of his child." He has quieted down again now, poor old fellow! and I think I can trust him to be gentle to her. I think I succeeded at last in making him see that no one was really to blame in the matter. Then, of course, he fell back upon "wishing we had never met." Such a senseless sort of thing to wish. As if people could escape their fates by any amount of wishing!'

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about that. Then, of course, we had to speak about Bathurst;' and here Oscar's voice falters, and a look of real pain comes into his face. 'Of course *he* must be communicated with at once. I suppose he is still at Cairo, as we have not heard since that first letter announcing his arrival. The Squire wanted to write to him at once, but this seems to me abrupt and almost cruel. One cannot explain all that sort of thing by letter; so I suggested that it would be better for me to leave you all at Assioot, and go direct by train to Cairo. This will save several days by boat, and I can see Bathurst and talk matters over before you arrive. Of course it will be very painful for us both, but I think it is the kindest thing to do now.'

'And did he touch at all upon the possibility of a marriage between you and Rachel?'

'Very slightly—that was only natural.

His head just now is completely occupied with poor Bathurst's affairs, and the way in which all this will affect his happiness. He did just say casually that of course he could never dream of allowing his daughter to marry a man without some settled income. But it did not seem to me the time to go into those questions, so I let it pass.'

We see no more of Rachel to-night, nor do we ever hear what has passed between her and her father.

Next day, when they meet, her manner to him is perhaps a shade more tender, and his to her a trifle more gentle than usual—that is all. Perhaps they both feel there is something to be forgiven between them. *He* for the first hard thoughts and hard words about his life's idol, and *she* for the pain and trouble she is bringing on that honest old heart.

We are a very quiet party at breakfast;

a great constraint is over us all. It is marvellous how few subjects can be touched upon without some side-current of painful associations. If we speak of the chance of getting letters by the morning post, our thoughts naturally fly to Fred, and the possibilities of hearing from him, in his blissful ignorance of what has passed. We dare not refer to our return to Cairo, for it brings a look of such dumb misery into Rachel's dark eyes. We cannot talk over past experiences, for Fred has been connected with most of them, except during these latter days, when this thunder-cloud must have been gathering amongst us.

For once I bless Oscar's immovable composure and unwearying delight in hearing his own voice. Always ready to enlighten the world in general on any possible subject, he chooses, with happy tact, some metaphysical point that can touch no painful chord.

I don't think any of us follow him entirely—certainly not the Squire, who sits there silent and puzzled, giving Rachel a furtive glance now and then, in which sadness and tenderness seem struggling with each other. Rachel herself looks dreamy and wretched, her thoughts evidently a hundred miles away from any of us.

Elsa and I put in an occasional word for the sake of politeness, but Oscar talks on with happy ease, and does not seem to notice how little attention he is getting from us. I have no doubt it is all done from real tact and good-nature, and appreciate his efforts accordingly.

Ibrahim has become so accustomed now to our sudden freaks, that he only gives an acquiescent shrug when we tell him 'to get the boat ready to leave Luxor next morning.'

'Now we shall stop on our way at Keneh and Bellianeh to see the great

Denderah temple and Abydos,' he suggests, adding: 'Abydos is very beautiful, even after Thebes: full of painted figures —plenty for the lady and gentleman to copy in their books,' with a glance at Oscar and Rachel, who are standing near us.

Oscar looks up eagerly.

'Yes, Ibrahim; that will be splendid! I want to see the famous tablet, too, with the list of all the old Egyptian kings. How soon shall we be there?'

'Oh, Oscar,' says Rachel reproachfully, with a passionate ring of pain in her voice, 'how can you think of paintings or tablets just now? How can we look at the ruins, or take any pleasure in them? Do let us go on as quickly as possible, and see nothing this side of Assioot. It is not fair to hurry on Charlie and Elsa, I know; but, at any rate, *I* shall not land anywhere.'

Ibrahim looks at her with an amused smile.

'Ah, the young lady has a tender heart. She thinks of our poor absent gentleman, and wants to see him again. All in good time, lady. We shall not be so very long now, and the good God is looking after him.'

Poor Rachel turns impatiently away from the dragoman's kindly sympathy. He knows of the engagement, of course, and little thinks how his words are cutting his 'pretty young lady' to the heart.

The post has been delayed, and does not arrive till just before the second breakfast, when Ibrahim, who has been on shore, returns triumphantly with a letter for Rachel.

'From Cairo, mademoiselle. Ah, now we shall make a happy start, and perhaps see Abydos, after all.'

Rachel looks very pale as she holds out

her hand for the thick blue envelope, and then, with a quiet 'Thank you, Ibrahim,' retires to her own cabin to read it.

Breakfast is over before she comes in. I have come back to fetch a book, and Oscar is still loitering in the dining-room, when her cabin-door opens at last and she appears.

'No, thank you, Oscar. I won't have any lunch,' she says, as he is about to call to Ibrahim to send back the hot dishes.

Oscar does not argue the point with her, but silently pours out a glass of Marsala, as if she were a child, and holds it to her lips.

'Drink this, dear, and eat one biscuit, and I won't bother you any more. Then put on your hat, and come with me for a last sight of Karnak. The walk there will do you good, and I will tell Ibrahim to send a donkey in about half an hour to bring you back.'

Rachel obeys Oscar, as she always does nowadays. His quiet orders never seem to jar upon her, or to rouse the spirit of opposition that poor Fred's wishes so often awoke.

How strange it seems that Rachel's strong nature should submit so completely and cheerfully to a man so inferior to her in all moral qualities!

'Will he ever make her happy, Elsa?' I question sadly, as we watch them starting for their walk together.

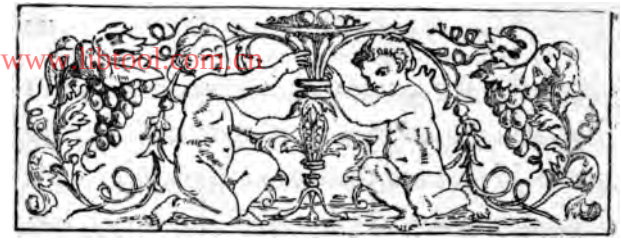
My wife looks very grave for a moment, then says more hopefully:

'We can only *trust* now, Charlie. Rachel loves the man—there is no doubt about that; and with a woman like Rachel, I think the end of love is *to love*, not *to be happy*.

'That sounds rather abstruse, Elsa.'

'Yes, I know. I don't know how I can make it clearer to a man. With a nature like

Rachel's, love, now that it has once come to her, will be so much stronger, so infinitely more important than what the world calls happiness, that I doubt if the latter has entered into her calculations at all. Poor child! it has brought her little enough happiness so far. If she and Oscar marry, she will have some intensely happy moments, and many very sorrowful ones; but I don't suppose now she would change this for any other lot on earth.'



CHAPTER V.

OSCAR tells me in the evening that Rachel has insisted upon writing a note to Fred that shall in some way prepare him for the former's return.

'I cannot bear to think of his going on in his delusions about me, Charlie,' she says, when I speak to her on the subject as gently and tenderly as I can; 'it is better he should know at once how badly I have treated him. That in itself will make it easy for him to forget me, and

then he will be prepared, too, for seeing Oscar. It is better for them both, I am quite sure, so I shall post a note this evening before we leave. Poor fellow, he writes so happily! The lawyers have written to say it is all right about that business, and that he need not return for another two months. He says he is watching the days until we get back, but hopes we shall not hurry on his account, or lose any pleasure by the way. Poor old Fred! He was always so unselfish about things. And he talks of coming to Assioot to meet us, and returning with us in the boat! My letter will prevent his doing that, but just think what it will be to him! Oh, Charlie, how can I ever meet him again, after bringing such misery upon his life?' and the poor girl bursts into a fit of hysterical sobbing.

I can only send Oscar to her, hoping that he may be able to soothe and comfort

the sorrow that is so utterly beyond all my powers of consolation.

Oscar's own moods are a constant source of anxiety and annoyance to me. Sometimes he is in the wildest spirits, painting a future to be spent with Rachel in the most glowing colours. Then a reaction comes on. He shrinks from the interview with Fred, the uncertainty of his own prospects, the responsibilities of married life, the chances of possible poverty.

The Squire and he have had another confidential talk, and it seems that the old gentleman has spoken very plainly of his intentions with regard to Rachel. At his death, she must of course come in for a large share of his property, but until then the utmost that he intends to allow her is £500 a year.

'I have no idea of my daughter keeping any man in idleness,' is his testy answer

to Oscar's subtle suggestions as to the impossibility of beginning married life nowadays under £1000 a year at least. 'If Rachel brings a man £500 a year, she has a right to expect that he should make enough more to keep her in comfort, and if his love can't bear that test, or make him willing to sacrifice some extravagance and self-indulgence for her sake, they had better both leave it alone.'

Of course, Oscar protests there is nothing in the world his love is not capable of carrying him through, but privately he groans over the nocturnal cigar, and wishes 'the old man weren't so deuced hard upon a fellow.'

'Why, Verschoyle, you know how I adore that woman! I would do anything in the world for her—sweep a crossing or drive a cab, if that were the most lucrative business to be found—but a man must get

an opening first. Now, if I had only joined those old Beechers, the thing might have been done by this time. He would have got me a good start in London in no time, I am sure. What a fool I was!' and a look of vexation passes over his brow for a moment. It is gone almost before I have caught it, and the quicksilver nature has flowed into another channel. 'Never mind, old fellow; I'll make a name for myself, in spite of them all! I believe the Squire privately hopes to choke me off by all this. I will show him I can stick to a thing, when I have once set my mind upon it, more closely than he thinks. I never met any woman in my life who suited me so well as Rachel. I have known more beautiful women, and cleverer women, and women as loving and lovable, but never one who combined all three to such a degree as she does. It is worth while developing that sort of woman. I shall

make her write books when we are married; then I shall get to the top of the tree, have a run of luck perhaps like "Gull," next time some H.R.H. gets a convenient fever, and we shall dazzle the world as "Sir Oscar O'Grady, the distinguished medical man, and his beautiful and accomplished wife, the authoress of 'The Land of the Sphinx, or Sunbeams and Scarabei.'"'

In spite of such gleams of fun now and then, we have rather a gloomy voyage back to Assioot, and we are all more or less relieved, I think, to arrive there.

We get in late at night; the Cairo train leaves the first thing in the morning, so this is Oscar's last night with us.

We are all sitting on deck except the Squire, who is smoking down below before turning in for the night.

Oscar has been unusually quiet and grave, and Rachel looks more restful and

Ibrahim looks at her with an amused smile.

'Ah, the young lady has a tender heart. She thinks of our poor absent gentleman, and wants to see him again. All in good time, lady. We shall not be so very long now, and the good God is looking after him.'

Poor Rachel turns impatiently away from the dragoman's kindly sympathy. He knows of the engagement, of course, and little thinks how his words are cutting his 'pretty young lady' to the heart.

The post has been delayed, and does not arrive till just before the second breakfast, when Ibrahim, who has been on shore, returns triumphantly with a letter for Rachel.

'From Cairo, mademoiselle. Ah, now we shall make a happy start, and perhaps see Abydos, after all.'

Rachel looks very pale as she holds

her hand for the thick blue envelope, and then, with a quiet 'Thank you, Ibrahim,' retires to her own cabin to read it.

Breakfast is over before she comes in. I have come back to fetch a book, and Oscar is still loitering in the dining-room, when her cabin-door opens at last and she appears.

'No, thank you, Oscar. I won't have any lunch,' she says, as he is about to call to Ibrahim to send back the hot dishes.

Oscar does not argue the point with her, but silently pours out a glass of Marsala, as if she were a child, and holds it to her lips.

'Drink this, dear, and eat one biscuit, and I won't bother you any more. Then put on your hat, and come with me for a last sight of Karnak. The walk there will do you good, and I will tell Ibrahim to send a donkey in about half an hour to bring you back.'

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earth has the fellow gone, Ethel? Send him to me at once! Stupid brutes! never at hand when one wants them! Look here, Mohammed, why the devil can't you stop here instead of leaving me alone with these chattering black monkeys? They have charged me two hundred tariff piastres for luggage, and all our heavy boxes are left on the boat! Cheating rogues! Just tell them that I am an Englishman, and won't put up with any of their native nonsense! I'll expose the whole thing the moment I get back. I shall go to our consul the first thing to-morrow morning—he is a personal friend of mine—and tell him what they have made me pay. And where is that case of Marsala? "Kept it on board," did you—to make the sailors tipsy, I suppose, between this and Cairo? Don't stand there staring like ten thousand idiots! Just tell 'em what I have said.'

The old man has worked himself up into

a state of almost apoplectic fury; but, suddenly catching sight of us, he quiets down a bit and comes up cordially to shake hands, still murmuring his complaints against everything remotely connected with this 'God-forsaken' country.

The girls join us now, with their handsome, portly mother. A general chorus of delighted surprise greets Oscar's announcement that he also is returning by this train to Cairo.

The 'only plain one' looks pale and delicate still, but has nearly recovered her strength, Lady Beecher says, owing to Dr. McGregor's skilful treatment. 'Still, we are a little anxious about her, Mr. Verschoyle, and I think we have all had enough of the *Fostat* by this time. I want to get her under Dr. Grantham again at Cairo; so Sir Thomas thought it would be better to leave the boat here and let Mohammed take it back for us.'

She of the 'pretty eyes' gives Oscar a coquettish glance, and puts in her word now:

'Why, Mr. O'Grady, what can have torn you away from the charms of the *Rameses* and the beautiful Miss Poynter! I thought you were so very faithful! You would not even do the good Samaritan to us! Oh yes! of course I know it was quite disinterested! Everybody knows every one's affairs on the Nile! We are perfectly aware that the beautiful Miss Poynter is unattainable, and that the happy man has been recalled to Cairo by hard fate. I do believe you are taking this long journey to carry him the latest news of his ladye-love. How very touching!'

Oscar winces a little under the badinage, but is quite equal to the occasion.

'No, Miss Beecher; you are really doing me too much credit—for once!' he adds, with a look half saucy, half admiring,

as he turns round to answer the 'beauty of the family.' 'Urgent private affairs call me back, and have torn me from the bosom of my most delightful party. I hope, however, to find letters that will enable me to stay on till they return, and I shall be delighted to cheer poor Bathurst's solitude, I am sure. Meanwhile, may we be fellow-travellers ?'

If Oscar's dearest friend were dying, I don't believe he could resist making himself charming to the first pretty girl he met on leaving the house of mourning.

The beauty looks more than willing, but makes a feeble protest at first.

'Oh dear no, Mr. O'Grady! We should not think of taxing your politeness to such an extent! Four commonplace females against the combined charms of cigars and silent meditation over your "most delightful party"!'

Of course Oscar protests, and of course

'the pretty one' gives in, and my last sight of O'Grady is surrounded by an admiring female audience, whilst a merry contest goes on anent some spoils in the way of 'antiquities,' which they are vainly trying to hide from his unbelieving eyes.

Just as the train moves off, Oscar calls me up to the carriage-door and slips a twisted paper into my hands.

'I had no chance of saying good-bye to your wife in person, Verschoyle; will you give her my adieux?'

I suppose all is fair in love and war; but certainly the tiny note in my hand is addressed to Rachel, not Elsa.

She is awaiting my return with eager eyes; too proud to put their questions into words.

'Well, Rachel,' I say as cheerfully as I can, 'I saw him off safely. The Beechers were going by the same train, so they will

keep each other company. He asked me to give you this.'

Rachel puts the note eagerly into her pocket, then takes it out again, as though ashamed of acknowledging that she will not read it before me. A look, half amused, half disappointed, crosses her face for a moment, as she holds it up, saying with a little laugh:

'Oscar's first love-letter. You may read it, Charlie.'

Far down the half-sheet of thick, cream-laid notepaper—that Oscar always uses, in reckless contempt for extra postage—are scribbled three words:

'Good-bye, sweetheart! Good-bye!'

CHAPTER VI.

A WEEK later we are sitting on deck once more—a diminished party — a rather melancholy quartette—for the last hours of our Nile trip have arrived, and we shall all feel sorry to say good-bye to the old *Rameses*, and our faithful Ibrahim, and the monotonous river-life that has become so dear to us all.

Moreover, the return to Cairo will be anything rather than unmixed delight.

Of course we have not heard a word

from the Hôtel du Nil, for we left Assioot as soon as Oscar was fairly off.

Poor Rachel must be torn to pieces by conflicting emotions—a wild longing to see Oscar again, and a longing almost as intense, but infinitely more painful, to meet Fred, and hear her sentence from his lips, and crave his forgiveness for the past.

'Not for having given him up now, Elsa, but for ever allowing myself to become engaged to him. There lay my sin, after all. I *felt* that it was wrong; some instinct told me it could not be right to promise to marry any man unless I could give him some warmer feeling than poor dear Fred ever roused in my heart. And I crushed all that down and allowed myself to be over-persuaded. I had not the "courage of my opinions." It pained me to be looked upon as obstinate and heartless by such an old friend. *He* could not see things from my point of view, and so I

weakly gave in to his, when I should have been firm to my own convictions, though all the world were against me!

"Stand thou on *that* side, for on this am I."

That is what I ought to have said to Charlie—to papa—to Fred—to everybody about it. No one can judge for a woman's heart except herself. And I was weak and cowardly and impatient; and now all this misery has come through my fault!'

It is useless to try to comfort Rachel's self-reproaches by any shirking of the truth.

The only possible sedative to that honest, earnest nature lies in facing matters boldly and fighting them out; so I say gently:

'Yes, Rachel; it *was* a mistake, as you say: and the saddest part of nearly all mistakes lies in this, that others must pay for their consequences generally as well as ourselves. You have paid and will pay by many bitter hours of remorse, my poor child! And Fred must bear his share of

the burden too. That seems hard to you? You think all the suffering should fall on your shoulders? Yes, Rachel; but remember, the very sting of your suffering is the fact that you are wounding another heart so deeply.

'And who knows how much better and stronger Fred himself may be one day for having gone through all this pain! It sounds a hard doctrine just now, I know, and easy for an outsider to preach; but depend upon it, dear, when we look back upon our lives, *sins*, not *sorrows*, will have cast the darkest shadows on our path.'

This is our last serious talk together, for the Citadel Mosque is in sight again now; its graceful minarets shining like burnished gold under the fierce rays of the setting sun.

We have reached the Boulak port, our old starting-point. The handsome iron bridge of Kasr-en-Nil is just in front of us

now, as we sail gently in and come to a full stop at length just below it, to our right.

A small crowd of curious idlers stand on the bank above us, watching our Dahabeeah returning from her winter's cruise.

We look eagerly for possible friends amongst them. Not one! Yes! there is Fred, stepping hastily down the muddy bank with a look of warm welcome on his face.

Where is O'Grady? certainly not here. Perhaps it is better so. No doubt Oscar, with his usual kindly tact, has kept away sooner than risk a single fresh stab of pain to poor Fred by letting him witness the meeting with Rachel.

Fred looks much the same to our anxious eyes—a little older, perhaps—a trifle graver; but he was never very gay. His face has rather a haggard look—the look of a man who has gone through some great suffering,

either bodily or mental—but it is the face of a man who has looked at his trouble boldly and conquered it; conquered it so far, at least, that the world's ear will never catch a groan of pain.

My first glance tells me this, and tells me also that any open expression of sympathy would be an insult to that self-contained, quiet nature.

Rachel looks miserably nervous for a moment; then Fred, with a quiet 'Welcome back!' to us all, goes up at once to her and holds out his hand.

'How do you do, Rachel? You are a little later than I expected, after all. O'Grady is not here, but I have a letter for you from him. I will give it you as soon as we get to the hotel. I have a carriage here, Verschoyle, for the ladies and the luggage. I thought we two could walk back, but I dare say the Squire will prefer the drive.'

And so the ice is broken, and we all talk very fast about everything we care for least.

The rush and confusion, and arranging of luggage and stowing away of guns and hat-boxes and books, makes a very welcome diversion.

At length all is settled satisfactorily. Ibrahim will bring any extra boxes to the hotel in the evening. We have secured at least our personal luggage, and seen it safely into the carriage with Elsa and Rachel.

The Squire elects at the last moment to drive also; to my secret relief, for it is better to get over this first *tête-à-tête* with Fred as soon as possible.

The latter once more comes to the rescue by going at once to the heart of the subject.

'I know quite well, Verschoyle, all you feel and all you would say just now. Some

subjects are better left alone. I have only my own selfishness and obstinacy to thank for it all. I see now that I could never have made her happy. She was very patient with me; stupid fool that I have been, not to see things in their true light before! Please remember that no shadow of blame rests upon her in the matter. I would like you to say this to the Squire. I don't think I can talk to him about it myself—not just yet. But about Rachel's affairs, Verschoyle! They must always be dearer to me than anything on earth, though I can never be more than her friend now. *That*, I hope, she will always allow me to be. I wanted to speak to you about O'Grady;' and Fred's voice falters for a moment. 'I always liked him, and thought him very clever and fascinating; no wonder *she* preferred him to a stupid old slow-coach like me! And I think all the better of him now for having been able to win such a

woman's love. Of course he loves her very dearly—no man could help doing that—and I have no doubt he has taken the best course, after all, for their future interests; only I am afraid Rachel may feel a little hurt at not seeing him. Perhaps you could break it to her a little before I give her the note?'

'Break it to her, Bathurst! what do you mean? Is not O'Grady here? I thought his own good feeling had prevented his coming down with you—but surely he has not left Cairo!'

'Well, the fact of the matter is, those Beechers took a great fancy to him the day they spent together in the railway. And he was always riding and driving about with them here. It was very natural. Of course it was awkward for O'Grady to be much with me. I suppose he looked upon me as a sort of standing reproach, and Oscar "can't bear seeing pain,' as he told

me once,' and Fred's face has a rather sad smile upon it. 'All that was most natural, of course; and then it ended by Sir Thomas asking him to go on to Palestine with them by the last steamer. The daughter is still delicate, and they don't like attempting the Holy Land tour without a doctor at hand. O'Grady talked it over with me before he went. He seemed to think it would be foolish to miss such a chance *twice*, and I fancy he expects the old baronet may help him on in his profession afterwards.

'So no doubt it is all for the best. If you could just put it to Rachel in this light. I am so afraid she may fret or think him unkind. You see Rachel is so accustomed to my stupid, dog-like devotion. Of course, in Oscar's place, I should have waited to see her, but it was far more truly wise to accept the chance when it came. She must see this if *you* tell her,

Verschoyle. She thinks so much of your judgment.'

Poor Fred! His simple, unswerving loyalty touches me too deeply for words. I feel unreasonably vexed by O'Grady's wisdom. Yes, I suppose it *was* the wise thing to do. Only sometimes we love people better for their folly.

Later on in the evening, after table d'hôte (how strange and noisy it seems by-the-bye, compared with our quiet Dahabeeah dinners!), there is a tap at the door of our sitting-room, and Rachel's head appears.

'Are you and Elsa busy? May I come in for half an hour before going to bed?'

Of course we give her a hearty welcome, and Elsa says affectionately:

'So glad you have come, darling! Charlie and I could not bear the clatter of civilisation after our happy solitude.

We were getting quite melancholy over the memory of Ibrahim and the *Rameses*. Now you will cheer us up.'

Rachel shakes her head rather sadly.

'I am not fit company for any one who wants cheering, Elsa. I came here because I felt too miserable to go off to bed just at present. And I want to show you Oscar's letter. Fred has been telling me how sorry he was to go away before we came. Of course it is a terrible disappointment to me, and just now of all times when one wants a little sympathy so much. But I dare say it is better. It would have been very trying for all three of us to be here together, only in that case I fancy poor dear Fred would have gone away himself. Oscar is so seldom prudent; I think he *must* be fond of me to have grown so wise about his future;' and Rachel looks at us with a silent, touching entreaty to confirm her words.

It all seems to me so unutterably sad as I think of the wasted love in that poor fellow's heart downstairs; of this deep, clinging nature, pouring out all its treasures, perhaps so unworthily, catching at every thread that seems to bind that other strange, volatile heart more closely to her own! And then in my mind's eye I can see Oscar himself very much in love during idle, unoccupied moments of emotional meditation, but able to laugh and flirt and make himself generally charming in spite of the sad little drama that is being played out at our pretty Cairo hotel.

And so it comes that I say nothing in answer to those pleading eyes, but quietly take the proffered letter and read it.

'Hotel du Nil,
'March 14th.

'MY DARLING,

'Fred will tell you how it has come

about that I must tear myself away without another sight of your sweet eyes. Nothing but a deep conviction that this journey will pave the way to our coming together again very shortly, and *for ever*, could have drawn me from your side at such a moment. I know, darling, all you must be suffering just now for my sake. No words can describe how nobly Bathurst has behaved throughout it all. Sometimes I am overpowered by remorse when I look at him, and yet I know this is foolish. You could never have made *him* happy, dear, and you would only have made yourself miserable in the attempt. It was written that you and I should meet and love each other. Kismet! Kismet! as these Moslems would say.

'How this hotel reminds me of my first sight of you! Do you remember, darling, when you came into the garden and found me feeding the gold-fish? I have been

feeding them again to-day for the sake of old times. Two of them are dead since then; somehow nothing is ever quite the same when one comes back again! "Les jours se suivent, et ne se ressemblent pas."

'Now I must tell you how this grand move in my fortunes came about. The whole Beecher family succumbed to the charms of your devoted lover! I think it was the journey here that clenched matters. I was awfully miserable that day; my head was full of the parting with you, darling, and of the wretched meeting with Bathurst at the end of it. And when I am miserable, I don't mope like other people, I get simply reckless!

'I *did* flirt with those girls, and with the dear old mother too, for that matter! They *were* going to Shepheard's, but persuaded Beecher *père* to come here on finding out where I was coming. I saw a good deal

of them the next few days one way and another. I saw that Bathurst preferred being alone. No wonder! What could we have talked about whilst *you* were a tabooed subject between us?

'So I became as a shadow unto the Beechers. We did bazaars together, and rode donkeys, and went over the Boulak museum several times; and I enlightened their minds a little on the subject of mummy-cases. Upon my word, I would not have believed five human beings could spend three months on the Nile and "bring so little away with them," as the good people say. They hardly know an Egyptian king from a crocodile! And "the beauty" asked me quite gravely whether Aboo Simbel was built before or after the Great Pyramid! Quite too deplorable!

'Maud (the youngest) goes in for being a bit of a blue too, I imagine, because she

is neither beautiful nor delicate, so has no other claim to distinction in the family. She bores me to death with her damp "squeeze-paper" and crooked hieroglyphics, and was awfully indignant because I mistook one of her "owls" for a pig the other day, in some figures she had copied from the vocal Memnon!

'Well, to make a long story short, the whole family simply insisted upon my going to Palestine with them.

'My first impulse, of course, was an unconditional refusal. Then I remembered your father, darling, and how severe he was on the score of my making some effort to get on in my profession, "working for you before I could hope to win you." I know the old baronet can give me a hand if he likes, and so, on the whole, it seemed wiser and better to take this opportunity that had been offered to me *twice* within a

few weeks, even though it entails such a self-sacrifice.

'It almost drives me wild, dear, to think that within thirty-six hours of my leaving this dear old place, you will be sleeping within its walls again! I dare not trust myself to write about it. Well, dear, to proceed. Sir Thomas was most pressing and cordial in his pompous old way. Lady Beecher adopted the maternal tone. "She had learnt, even in these few days, to look upon me quite as a son" (so long as she doesn't look upon me as a possible *son-in-law*, I don't mind!). The "delicate one" had a relapse, with great ingenuity and presence of mind, and began to think she could never stand the fatigues and risk of Palestine when once out of Dr. Grantham's hands! The beauty sulked for one whole day because I did not close with the proposal at once, and there was a fresh overflow of hieroglyphics and piggish-owls on

the part of the *bas bleu*, with reproachful reminders that "she would have no one to sympathise with her intellectual tastes when they had once left Cairo."

'How could I resist such combined eloquence? This is all chaff, darling, of course! You know why I have thought it best to take this step.

'We sail from Port Said for Jaffa by the "Messagerie" Saturday night, going from here to Ismailia by train to-morrow, and thence by the post-boat on the canal to Port Said. I don't think it will be safe to chance a letter to Jaffa, as we shall push on at once to Jerusalem. Write to the "Hôtel Damascus" there. How curious the Three Graces will be if they see your handwriting! I have had to undergo much chaff on the score of the "beautiful Miss Poynter" already. Fortunately they don't know that your engagement with Bathurst is broken off.

'By the way, I have a fancy about *our* engagement, darling. I won't ask you to wear any outward sign of it at present. I know you would not do so whilst poor dear Fred is with you. It would be too cruel. And I shall never give you a ring, but some day, "when I have worked for you and won you," my darling, I will ask you to wear a plain gold soldered band, high up on your arm like an Egyptian princess, and we will have "Rameses" engraved upon it. What do you say? Will you stoop to chains and fetters, my beautiful princess? Yes, I think you will, for such golden links are forged by Love himself.

'Good-bye, my darling. God bless you, Rachel! I am leaving you now with all my life before me. My future, my prospects, my whole career, a blank sheet at present. Will you help me, dear, to make the writing on that blank page as worthy

as it may be brilliant? You can do so, if you will.

'Ever—*as* ever,

'OSCAR.'

A nice letter; yes, certainly, a good letter—especially the few grave sentences at the last.

To wish that Oscar were less full of himself, less open to the flattery of these foolish girls, more alive to the sadness he has left behind him—all this would be simply to wish that Oscar were not himself.

We must take him and make the best of him, I suppose, for Rachel's sake.

Fortunately for us all, Cairo is very gay just now. The pilgrims have returned from Mecca, and the streets are decked out with coloured flags. The roads, near the English church, are lined with swings, merry-go-rounds, and wooden booths full

of toys and sweetmeats of every description, looking very much like an English country fair.

The open ground close by is entirely covered over by bright-coloured tents of various hues, ornamented in stars and stripes and crescents. Some of these tents are large enough to accommodate a hundred people or more, and are really gorgeously furnished with velvet and satin couches, and beautiful soft Turkey carpets. Others of course are more unpretending, but all have done their best to do honour to this spring 'Feast of the Prophet.'

The evening after our return, we make up a party with some other friends, who have also come back from the Nile, to walk through the curiously crowded scene by night. The tents are lighted up inside and out by graceful cords of swinging lanterns; the crowd sways here and there in constant, restless motion; gipsies and

fortune-tellers are driving a good business, apparently.

The swings and merry-go-rounds are full of swarthy, merry faces, shouting and laughing as joyfully as their little white brothers and sisters in England.

The sweet-shops, with their sugary wares cut in the most ingenious patterns, as cocks, hens, horses and crocodiles, are crowded by grown-up children as well as the *bonâ-fide* ones; and even old men and women are putting down some portion of copper piastre for a bundle of the dearly-loved sugar-cane, which disappears like magic between their dazzling white teeth.

The crowd grows denser and denser as we push our way with great difficulty through the seething masses. Fred is taking care of Elsa, and Rachel has thrown in her lot with me.

We have left the Squire, fortunately, in the tent of a hospitable Arab gentleman,

who will look after him with a dignified courtesy superior to all accidents of language.

We force our way into one tent, and watch the crowded scene for a moment in silence. It is full of 'the Faithful,' who are sitting on their heels in true Arab fashion, swaying to and fro with unwearied, monotonous movement, chanting sentences from the Koran.

The heat is overpowering, and they have fasted all day, but they never seem to tire. Yes! there is one being carried out at last by two friends, who force a passage through the hot, unwholesome atmosphere to the purer air beyond. He is in a dead faint, I can see. Perhaps he has fasted longer or prayed more fervently than the rest, but no one seems disturbed by the incident.

One or two just turn round for a moment, as he is carried past, then resume

their monotonous chant again with the same unwearied energy. Rachel looks white and tired.

'Let us get out of this, Charlie! I feel as if I should faint away myself in another minute;' and so we turn round and fight our way to the edge of the crowd again.

Rachel's hand clasps my arm with a heavy pressure. What can I do for her?

If she faints in this crowd, it will be almost impossible to carry her away, for we are literally wedged in just now. We must have wandered to the edge of the road, too, for there is a sudden stir amongst the crowd, a scream of terror from the women, as the clatter of horses' hoofs is heard, and a big carriage and pair drives *through* us.

The running Syces come on in front, howling and gesticulating in vain. A moment ago, it seemed impossible to have driven a wheelbarrow through the closely-

packed heads and legs. How in the world can they make room for a *carriage?* Heaven only knows how it is done.

The masses surge and sway around us and against us. Rachel's arm is torn from mine more than once in the horrible confusion, but she behaves like a heroine.

'All right, Charlie; don't be frightened. I am close by. I can get hold of your arm again in a minute. One wave has sent me here, the next will take me back again. I am not a bit frightened!'

True enough, in another moment the swaying crowd has pushed me within reach again. There is no time to lose. The carriage, in some miraculous fashion, has got into the midst of us, and the coachman is reining up the terrified horses for a moment.

'Now for it, Rachel! Have you got the pluck? We must make a push for it under the horses' heads.'

Rachel gives my hand a little squeeze

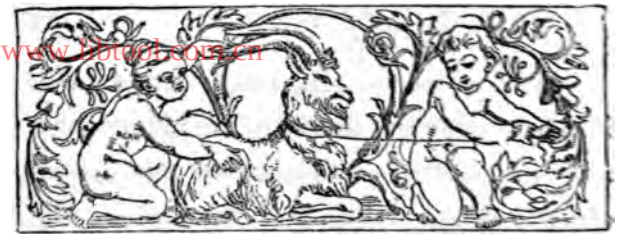
of ready consent, and we have pushed our way straight in front of the carriage, before the frightened crowd have time to close round it again. One more struggle, and we are on the high-road, breathless but thankful.

'That was a nasty five minutes, Charlie! but it has effectually cured my attempt at fainting,' says Rachel, with rather a shaky laugh. 'If we could only find the others! and I wonder where in the world papa's tent has disappeared? I think it must be straight across the enclosure, but I have been so whirled and pushed about that I have not an idea where we are. It is as bad as being "turned round three times" at blind-man's buff.'

We walk on for a few minutes, and then, where the crowd looks a trifle thinner, make another dash into it, intending to bear straight across for the tents on the other side.

To our great delight, I hear Elsa's voice in the darkness, close to me apparently; and in another moment we are triumphantly dragged into the tent, where the Squire is placidly smoking his narghileh with his courteous but silent host.

All the rest of our party drift in here, by degrees, to shelter, and a great deal of bowing and salaaming is gone through on both sides, as we take the vacant chairs that have been kept for us, and accept most gratefully the tiny cups of fragrant Turkish coffee that greet our arrival.



CHAPTER VII.

WE have seen the grand procession of the pilgrims in their green turbans, as they ride through the Mooskee, following the sacred carpet, which is carried under a gorgeous canopy of gold and crimson velvet, on the top of a richly-bedecked camel. The 'holy man' who goes to Mecca and back every year, nodding his head all the time like a Chinese mandarin, has nodded past us, followed by another 'holy man' with shaggy grey locks and a remarkable development of chest

and shoulders. His peculiar fancy seems to be to ride perfectly naked from head to waist, but 'clothed like a Christian' from this point.

It is a tedious procession after a bit. Pilgrims and soldiers get mixed up together in a long, unbroken line, as they wind up the crowded, irregular street below us, and disappear, in turn, round some projecting angle.

I think there is a general feeling amongst us that we have seen enough of 'the Faithful' by the time we get back to the friendly shelter of the 'Nil,' and are discussing our excellent food there in peace. But Ibrahim won't hear of our missing the *crême de la crême*, the grandest sight of all —the 'Doseh.' Come to Cairo in March, and not see the Doseh? And an expressive shrug shows us what our dragoman will think of the 'mad English,' if we are obstinate.

In vain we declare that it is a 'disgusting,' 'barbarous' custom, not to be countenanced by our civilised British eyes.

'Still it is the custom here, and it is very curious. Your ladies will be interested, sir. They cannot go back to England and not see the Doseh! Two or three years more, perhaps, they do away with it altogether! Then you shall be sorry you have not seen it.'

And so Ibrahim carries his point.

No one likes to rebel against this last act of tyranny, now that our days are so few, and we shall so soon have seen the last of his smiling black face.

Then it turns out that nobody knows exactly when this final act in the Feast is to take place.

How truly Egyptian! One says: 'It will be, without doubt, on Thursday afternoon.' Another declares, with equal decision, that it is deferred until Saturday at

three o'clock. Again, an official is discovered who knows an Egyptian gentleman, who was with the Khedive himself at ten o'clock this morning, and heard his Highness say, definitely, that it would be on the Friday, as usual.

And so it turns out eventually, in spite of all these conflicting opinions; but of course it is utterly impossible to find out at what hour the ghastly procession will start.

Most people seem to agree that it won't be *before* twelve o'clock, and Ibrahim says the best plan will be to hire a carriage to be on the spot near the tents, and for him to keep a place for us there from early morning, whilst we take our lunch comfortably at the hotel, and come down as soon as possible afterwards.

It is the very hottest day we have had yet, and this the hottest hour in the day; for it is just one o'clock as we make our

weary way, at length, through the close, double and treble line of carriages, to the one Ibrahim has selected for us. He has managed to keep a capital place for ours in the first rank, and we sink down on the cushions with a feeling of unspeakable relief. The sun's rays are simply scorching; but, at least, we shall be left here to scorch in peace!

Elsa has wisely brought her umbrella; but Rachel's sunshade, although it would do good service under an English sun, is almost useless here.

The Squire has an umbrella also; but we two men can manage with pith hats and puggaries.

Rachel won't hear of sharing Elsa's umbrella; and, indeed, it would be difficult to arrange in our closely-packed, shaky old vehicle, for Rachel is mounted on the box, by Ibrahim's advice, and Elsa on the front seat inside.

My attention is diverted for a few minutes by watching the curious, credulous faces of the waiting crowd; when I look around again, Fred has disappeared!

'I can't imagine where he went, Charlie,' is Elsa's answer to my inquiry. 'Perhaps he is looking for a better place to see it from; but I don't think we shall improve upon this, and I should be afraid of getting down on to the ground after your experiences with Rachel the other evening.'

Another quarter of an hour passes; still no procession, and still no Fred!

At length the latter comes up, hot and flushed, holding Rachel's umbrella in his hand. He has quietly made his way to the hotel and back, a good mile and more, under this blazing sun. Really, it seems to me, in the overwhelming heat of the moment, an action almost worthy of a V.C.!

Rachel's face looks hotter than ever as she turns round to thank him.

'Oh, Fred, how very, very good of you! Why *did* you toil through such a sun for me? You were always too good to me,' she adds in a lower voice, with a little sigh.

There is no time for more words. A sudden thrill of excitement proclaims that at last *something* is going to happen.

Far, far in the dim distance, I catch a glimpse of moving banners. The procession is really winding round towards us at last.

As I look towards the far horizon at that moving line, the shouts and screams close by grow louder and fiercer.

Elsa clutches my hand.

'Oh, look, Charlie! They are throwing down the poor wretches already, who are to be ridden over!'

True enough. In five minutes the

crowd has been pressed back on either side, to form a passage about six feet wide.

One after another the wretched fanatics are seized by their friends, or throw themselves down, side by side, across the road, in a tight, unbroken line. They seem to be packed as close as sardines.

'That is all the better,' explains Ibrahim. 'If they were very loose, they would be killed. It divides the pressure.'

The heat must be stifling for them, lying down there beneath the crowding masses!

So it seems, for numbers of men are fanning them with their ragged blue cotton garments, striving to give them at least enough air to prevent suffocation.

Two men, who have been thrown down with the rest, are picked up and carried off, writhing in epilepsy. Their places are instantly filled by others, only too eager to

achieve this crowning act of faith. It is a ghastly sight.

At length the procession is moving on towards us, over the living bodies at our feet.

I don't think, in all my life, I ever pitied any one much more than the poor old heavy sheikh whose duty it is to ride over those gasping human forms.

His face is quite awful in its livid horror, as he comes slowly on, supported on each side by men who pick their way carefully between the heads and legs of the prostrate crowd. One can see at a glance that he has been heavily drugged to enable him to go through the ghastly ceremony.

Even the big white Arab horse appeals to one's sympathies as the cruel hoofs go down, with the instinctive shrinking from injuring any form of human life that the noble animals always show.

It is over at last! The uninjured get

up, the others are dragged away by their friends; the crowd disperses; the carriages are turned round, and we drive home under the blazing, sweltering heat of the fiercest sun I ever yet encountered.

'Rachel, may I prescribe for you, as O'Grady is not here?' says Fred, as we get inside the delightful shelter of the 'Nil.' 'I would recommend you two ladies to go and lie down at once, put wet cloths on your heads, and keep quite quiet. That will prevent any chance of sunstroke. I will send the English papers up to your rooms by Ibrahim, and some strong coffee.' And Fred goes off for his lonely smoke, unselfish and helpful as usual.

* * * * *

Three days later, we are all standing on board *La Reine Margot*, bound for Marseilles.

Fred does not come with us. We

talked it all over, he and I, the last night in Cairo, and then he confessed to me what a sore trial these last days had been to his loyal, faithful heart.

'I thought it was kinder to stay on, Verschoyle. Rachel has such a tender heart. It would have grieved her to think I was suffering so deeply. It seemed better just to bear it all quietly, and let her think the wound was not so deep, after all. Don't let her ever blame herself about it, poor darling! Promise me this, Verschoyle. I was a presumptuous fool ever to think that I could make her happy. And you will let me know sometimes how things go on? I hope O'Grady will be able to get to her before long. It is very hard to be separated from people when one loves them very dearly.'

And so it comes about that we standing all together, for the last t[ime] board the 'Messagerie' stea[mer]

Fred goes to Naples by the 'Rubattino' line to-morrow, and so home through Italy.

'I had better fight it out alone, Charlie,' is his quiet answer to my regrets about his lonely journey. 'I am not good company for any one just now. By-and-by I will come and see you and Mrs. Verschoyle again, when *she* is not there. I cannot bear to see her again just yet.'

The bell has rung to warn 'outsiders' to be off. The dear old Squire has given Fred a tearful good-bye, and hurried off to bury himself in his own cabin.

We four are standing together alone in the saloon below. Every one is chattering out his or her last farewells in the noisy confusion.

Fred presses my hand and Elsa's silently. His face is very pale and still. He turns round at last to Rachel, who is standing near the door, and kisses her

gently on the forehead. It seems almost like a kiss from the other world.

'Good-bye, Rachel darling! forgive my calling you so once more—for the last time. I don't think even Oscar would mind. Rachel, never believe—never let any one persuade you—that I regret the past. No other woman can ever reign in my heart as you have done; but I shall thank God every day of my life for having let me know you and love you. Don't let my shadow ever come between you and your happiness. I shall not be unhappy, dear—not when this first sharp pain is over. My life would have been poor and empty and wretched enough if I had never seen you. Now it must always be rich and full for your dear sake, though I can never call any other woman my wife. Don't fret dear. It is all for the best, somehow. You will be very happy. Oscar will be very good and tender to you.'

'God made man in His own image.' Alas! how we have blurred and spotted that fair creation by our sins and passions!

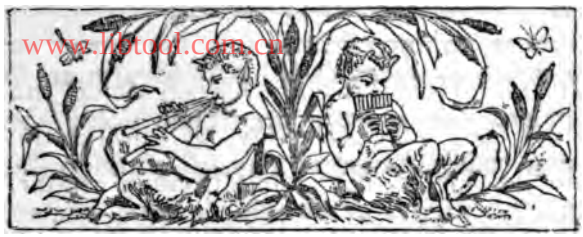
And yet, for a moment, the godlike reasserts its sway, and Fred's whole face is glorified 'as the face of an angel' by its sublime self-abnegation, as he turns round to us, and says in husky tones:

'Be good to her. Don't let her fret about it. Tell her all I have said to you when I am gone.'

One more fervent 'God bless you!' and he has hurried up on deck; and when I follow, leaving Rachel to sob out her sorrow in Elsa's arms, his boat has become already a tiny speck on the distant waves, and the true, loyal heart is fighting out its bitter pain alone.

Alone? ah, surely not! The great Father 'is not far from each one of us.' Only in these dark hours we stretch out hopeless, clinging hands, and send forth

dumb moans of tearless agony, and it seems as if no hand were held out with answering touch—no ear were open to our piteous cry for help.



CHAPTER VIII.

WE linger through the 'sunny south,' dreading the cold, sharp welcome of an English spring; and so April and May have passed by, and it is late on in the month of June when we four stand side by side at the Charing Cross railway station, waiting to 'claim our luggage,' with the odd mixture of regret and relief that most people have experienced on returning from a winter abroad.

The busy London officials, who turn over our boxes and search out our contraband

corners so mercilessly, put us almost to shame. Here have they been doing the same thing, day after day, all through the muddy, foggy, detestable London winter, whilst we have been basking in our sunshine and lazy ease.

We drive through the crowded streets, and the same feeling oppresses one. It is quite early still, and only the busy portion of the London world is astir; the butterflies of the London season are resting their pretty, bright wings, whilst the outside world gets warmed and aired, ready to receive and admire them when they fly forth again, brilliant and radiant as ever.

But the grubs and working bees are astir, eager and keen to begin another day. The shops are being 'dressed' with the unflagging diligence of London shopkeepers. The omnibuses are crowded with 'city men' going off to their daily work. The news-boys are plying their

morning trade with harsh, piercing shrieks that distract and deafen our poor sea-sick heads and ears. Even the inevitable organ-grinder looks 'like work,' and has no suggestion of holiday-making about him as he grinds out a melancholy *adagio* of 'The Two Obadiahs.'

How busy they all are! And they have all been doing the same things every day at the same hour, whilst we were lounging about on the *Rameses*, or walking in sunny, dusty Luxor, or sketching palm-trees and Nubian costumes; our keenest interest, a bargain for 'antiquities;' our highest ambition, to find an arrow-head flint or a piece of coloured pottery!

How strange it seems to come back to a world where 'scarabei' and 'bats'-wings' are no longer necessary to the interest and development of the human race! How little they would think *here* of our most treasured 'swindles,' as Oscar used to call

them! What would any one of these keen business-men care to hear that 'we have just come back from Egypt?'

'Ah, indeed,' he might say, 'making a fine mess of things out there, I suppose? If I had had a loose thousand or two, I should have been inclined to put it on a few months back—too late now; might have made a nice little haul, though, if one had had the spare cash just in the nick of time.'

What does *he* care for hawk-headed gods or cat-headed goddesses? for cartouches or hieroglyphics? donkeys or Dahabeeahs?

'Too busy for that sort of dilettante nonsense!'

And then, even amongst our own friends, we shall not find much more sympathy. By some inscrutable law of compensation, the people who, either from necessity or laziness, have braved the horrors of an

English winter, instead of cheating it as we have done, seem clothed with a bright warm mantle of self-satisfaction and self-appreciation, that renders them perhaps impervious to British damp and British fogs.

No one would admit it in so many words; but we are perfectly aware that we shall be looked upon with a sort of pitying toleration, as weak-minded people who have shirked their glorious privilege of enduring five or six months of the most dreary, gloomy winter climate in the world.

So we come back, feeling rather like truant schoolboys who sneak into the busy schoolroom and find their friends too diligent and occupied to listen to any whispered hints of the 'speckled trout,' or 'glorious swim,' or 'splendid canter' that may have rewarded the unlawful holiday.

At Paddington comes another parting. The Squire has consented to let Rachel come home with us to Gloucestershire for a bit, whilst he, as usual, has his quiet, old-fashioned 'London season,' seeing his friends, going about from one 'old fogey' club to another, dropping in at Tattersall's now and then to see if there is 'anything worth picking up,' and so forth.

Rachel always encourages him to pay these annual visits *en garçon*.

'Papa likes having his old friends to himself. If I am there, he has to take me about, and cannot go to his club in the evening, you see, Charlie, and that spoils his holiday; so we always "do our season" separately, and compare notes at the end. Aunt Fan likes me to be with her in Clarges Street, so I go up at the same time, and the dear old father prowls about and comes to us whenever he feels dull.'

This year, however, Rachel has no heart

for London gaieties, and has herself proposed coming to us instead.

Oscar has written several times since we left Alexandria. Sometimes a gap of two or three weeks comes, and Rachel looks pale and anxious; but we know the difficulties of regular communication in Palestine, and cannot wonder at the silence.

The Beechers have prolonged their tour there till far on into May, going from Baalbek to Palmyra at the last, and Oscar has sent Rachel brilliant, sketchy notes of his travels so far. The 'girls' are mentioned from time to time in these epistles. They all seem to have fallen victims to his charms, including the mother; but *ça va sans dire* in the O'Grady annals whenever the female world is mentioned, and Oscar's *heart* seems faithful to Rachel.

'These pretty women,' he writes, 'are only a sort of "milky way"—pretty and

twinkling, but cloudy and indistinct, whilst my beautiful planet, my true "Venus," shines bright and clear above me, only so far away—so far away, my darling!'

They will soon meet again now; the Beechers are to be in England by the end of the month, coming home by Athens, Constantinople, and the Danube. Certainly Oscar's lines have fallen in pleasant places this year! How much he has seen since we sat together in the Cairo garden just six months ago, and talked over our winter's cruise!

I have written a note to him in Rachel's last letter, to say that both Elsa and I will give him a warm welcome if he likes to come to Dursley to meet her on his return to England.

A few days after our return comes a note of ecstatic delight and gratitude from him—delight at the thought of seeing Rachel again; gratitude to Elsa

and me for 'having planned such a charming meeting for them.'

'To tell the truth, dear old fellow, I was rather quaking in my shoes at the thought of meeting the old Squire again under his own respectable British roof. Most estimable old gentleman, I am sure—I have the highest possible respect for him—but not exactly the sort of "sympathetic soul" that our stage of courtship calls for; rather too much of the "stern parent" and typical "heavy father" about him for that, poor old boy!

'Of course you won't say all this to Rachel. She would resent the smallest criticism of her father's words or manners. I would not hurt her feelings for the world. But you know very well, Verschoyle, what I mean, and what *life* would mean just now under the patriarchal Poynter pine trees! I hope they *are* pines, by-the-bye, for the sake of the alliteration.

The old gentleman bored me horribly one day, I know, with a description of the length, breadth, and age of his Leicestershire avenue, and I *think* he said pines. Imagine talking poetry to my beautiful Rachel in the evening after being bullied and worried by the old Squire over our claret about my "prospects" and "intentions," and all the disgusting details of household economy!

'I believe he is quite capable of asking me if I have duly considered the subject of house linen, and how much money must be set aside for the purchase of china and glass!

'Just imagine quoting Tennyson to a woman after dinner when her father had been thrusting dish-cloths and dusters under one's eyes half an hour before. It would have been too ghastly.

'Now, thanks to your goodness and Mrs. Verschoyle's, all these possible

horrors will be averted. We shall be as happy as the day is long. I am rabid, ravenous for a sight of you all! We arrived in London last night; the Beechers are quite wretched about my leaving them, after our jolly tour together. To-morrow night I have promised to dine and go to the theatre with an old friend of mine who has just brought out a new play. It's an old engagement, and I cannot possibly get out of it, but Thursday will see me at your station, without fail.

'I won't stop longer in London—no, not even to dry the Beecher tears at losing me.

'Kiss my darling Rachel for me. I have no time for even a scribble to her to-day. The "beauty" is clamouring to be taken to the "Row;" the "plain one" comes, of course, to chaperon us.

'Yours ever,

'OSCAR.

'P.S. By the way, I never could understand before why Providence made plain women. Just hit it off now. They are "nature's chaperons," of course, to relieve guard when married women are fagged out or unattainable.'

Thursday afternoon arrives, and I drive Rachel down in the dog-cart to meet Oscar's train. It is a little behind time, owing to some excursion trains to South Wales, and Rachel walks up and down, looking very pretty, but painfully nervous and impatient.

'What can have happened, Charlie?' she says, as we go out of the waiting-room for the twentieth time to watch for the thin grey line of smoke behind the railway bridge; 'how odd that the train should be so late just to-day, of all other days! If he does not come in five minutes I shall walk home and let you stay with the

dog-cart. It's horrid waiting about like this.'

How often have I seen meetings between Rachel and Fred Bathurst in past years, and how entirely self-possessed and cheerfully kind she always was, in answer to the suppressed eagerness of his greeting.

And now this faulty, restless boy, with his sulphur-coloured ulster and irreproachable coats and bright, confident smiles, has power to rouse all this nervous, tremulous passion in Rachel's dark blue eyes.

I can see that the girl is really suffering from suspense and excitement, in spite of her light words, and am just about to fall in with her idea of walking on and leaving me to wait for Oscar alone, when the station-bell rings, and in another minute the grey line of smoke appears on the dim horizon, as O'Grady's train comes throbbing and gasping into the station.

'There he is! looking taller and darker than ever, in a suit of 'summer tweed;' the 'last thing out,' no doubt, for Oscar is a genius of the dandy order, and thinks a great deal about his clothes, as I have discovered ere now.

He grasps my hand very warmly.

'That's right, old fellow; I thought you would be down. How's your wife—and Rachel? She hasn't come, of course? Awfully hot and dusty coming down from town! Thanks, if you will just keep an eye on those umbrellas and the hat-box, I'll look up my portmanteau. That guard is awfully spoony on me; he stowed it away somewhere safe. Always tip those fellows; it saves a lot of trouble in the end. Ah! that's right—thank you very much indeed,' with a look of courteous gratitude to the guard who stands smiling by, after pulling out the trunk with his own august hands.

The train groans and grunts, and at length whistles itself away out of the quiet little station again, and I turn round to look for Rachel.

She has disappeared from the platform. She is not in the waiting-room. Where can she be?

As we come up to the dog-cart the groom touches his hat to me.

'If you please, sir, Miss Poynter says you are not to wait for her. She has walked on, and says you will pick her up on the road.'

'Did Rachel come down, Verschoyle? How jolly of her! Ah! there she is!' as a turn in the pretty country road shows us the trim little figure, the white summer dress, the carelessly-twisted black lace round the throat, and the coquettish little black hat.

She has picked a bunch of wild roses and fastened them to the black lace round

her throat, the only bright spot of colour in the whole costume; and she looks very bonny as we drive up, standing there with a gleam in her eyes of sparkling delight, mingled with a half-saucy defiance of this strange, shy mood that has been creeping upon her.

Oscar jumps down at once, and I drive on, mercifully remembering similar passages in my own past experience.

'You had better walk back with Rachel, Oscar. I will tell Elsa you are coming.'

So I don't witness the meeting. It must have been a very quiet one, however; for, with all my consideration for them, I cannot blind the lynx-eyed groom or improve upon the tantalising construction of a dog-cart, which leaves him sitting on the back-seat with an undisturbed view of the lovers, until the first friendly corner is turned.

They come home at last, having certainly

made the most of the mile and a half between us and the station.

I must confess that Rachel and Oscar are a very pleasant pair of lovers to have in a country house.

They don't look upon the whole outside world as irritating and superfluous, or make one feel that one's presence is simply tolerated as a sacrifice to conventional prejudice. Oscar is one of those men who always 'require an audience,' and I fancy would give up a good deal of private love-making in order to secure it; whilst Rachel seems perfectly content to sit by in silence, watching and listening, with a look of very loving admiration on her pretty, earnest face.

All the old arguments that went on so freely between them at first have completely ceased.

Formerly Rachel was the first to detect a weak spot in Oscar's armour, an exag-

geration of facts in his oracular statements, or the real hollowness of some specious argument, and show it up with laughing malice.

Oscar is a genius, no doubt, but all the same he talks a good deal of nonsense sometimes, and tries to palm off 'vacant chaff' for grain very often; as less-gifted people are wont to do when they have sufficient charm of manner to defy criticism.

Rachel's clear head and wise eyes are the last to succumb, as a rule, to such petty social frauds; but now she sits with her large, dark eyes wide open, drinking in Oscar's brilliant but often shallow remarks, as if another Solomon had come amongst us.

She may be very happy in her silent adoration, but certainly she does not show to the best advantage.

No one seeing her now for the first

time would believe how clever and brilliant she can be when quite at her ease.

It almost provokes me sometimes to hear Oscar holding forth in his usual reckless fashion, laying down the law, 'developing Rachel's mind,' on matters where she is at least as much at home as himself, whilst Rachel accepts all this intellectual 'patronising' with lamb-like meekness, and looks more like a stupid, shy schoolgirl than an intelligent capable woman.

People 'in love' are never at their best, perhaps—so far as social success goes—but yet Oscar is as self-possessed, as completely master of the position, as he was when first we met and discussed symphonies and sunsets in the Hôtel du Nil.

Then I try to reassure myself by remembering that a like cause may affect two temperaments very differently; but yet the old French proverb will keep on repeating itself in my ears: '*Il y a toujours*

l'un qui baise et l'un qui tend la joue.' My poor Rachel! which part is she playing in the cynical old adage?

No lover can be more devoted, more tender than Oscar.

They spend long mornings on the sunny lawn, or loitering through the pretty, summer lanes, and Oscar tells me one day, in comparing his love for Rachel with former infatuations:

'She is the only woman, Verschoyle, who never bored me for one single instant. I have thought I loved other women very much, until cruel fate condemned us to a *tête-à-tête* of unusual length, and then the spell was always broken. I don't know another woman in the world who could bear the crucial test of a country walk as Rachel does.'

Yes, he is very fond of her. I have no doubt of that; not even when we go to the inevitable country garden-parties, and

Oscar strikes up a red-hot flirtation with some pink-cheeked, country 'beauty.'

'Rachel understands me thoroughly,' he says, in answer to some half-laughing remark of mine about the license he expects and receives from her on this score. 'She knows I love her better than any other woman in the world; but to tell me I must not flirt with a pretty woman when I meet one, would be quite absurd. You might as well light a cigar and then expect it not to smoke. It's *only* smoke, old fellow, after all; and Rachel knows that quite well. I can no more help flirting when I get a chance, than I can help drinking champagne when I hear the familiar "pop," and see it sparkling and frothing up in my glass. And you see, I have such a happily-constituted mind, that if the real old dry "Sillery" isn't to be had, I can make myself very happy with fairly good "gooseberry."

'That little girl I have been devoting myself to all the afternoon isn't much to look at—bad chin, and such painfully big feet; they look simply awful in those lawn-tennis shoes—but then she has nice brown eyes, and looks quite pretty when she blushes. She is the only woman here with the smallest pretensions to good looks, and that High Church young curate is furious with me for cutting him out so completely. There is a whole Athanasian Creed compressed into his two eyes, when he turns them upon us. There is always something to be grateful for, if one only looks for it.'

With which pious reflection Oscar goes back to his lawn-tennis, leaving me with my usual mixture of amused vexation, the general effect of his careless words on my anxious heart.

And so the days pass on, and Rachel's visit is drawing to an end. The Squire is getting anxious to return to his shorthorns

and harvest-fields, and Rachel will not let him go back to an empty house. Oscar is to escort her home, and spend a few days with them before returning to Ireland to look after his affairs there, previous to settling down in London.

So far I have carefully abstained from any talk with him as to the future; but this last evening, as we are smoking together on the lawn, after Rachel and Elsa have gone to bed, I determine to broach the subject.

'Well, Oscar, we shall be very sorry to lose you and Rachel to-morrow; the home will seem quite forlorn, although Rachel has not added much to the liveliness of it lately. How very quiet she has become! I am sure she is quite happy, but I fancy she frets a good deal inwardly about poor Bathurst's disappointment. It will be better for every one when you are both married. This waiting-time is very trying,

of course. Have you any plans for the future? Is there any chance of the Beechers giving you a lift at all?'

Oscar's brow looks rather gloomy. I have touched upon an unwelcome subject at last. He is quite capable of some heroic deed in the generous impulse of the moment; but to be plunged from the warm, balmy air of congenial courtship into the cold, chilly atmosphere of matrimonial realities is evidently a severe shock to the artistic nerves.

'No; I don't think old Beecher will do much for me. He is one of those men who talk a good deal of their unbounded influence with this or that swell; but when it comes to getting them to do anything for you practically, there are always unfortunate "circumstances" which prevent their being able to exercise the influence in your favour just at that particular moment. You know the sort of man I mean? No;

I am afraid the Beecher is a broken reed, after all. But I don't regret the journey. Capital thing for a man to get such a chance of seeing the world! I would not have missed Petra, and Baalbek, and Palmyra, for anything. But about this business. The fact is, Verschoyle, I don't see my way a bit. I would not say a word about it to Rachel. She is such a loving darling, and I cannot bear to give her pain. But, upon my word, I am sometimes tempted to wish we had never met! What is to be the end of it all? That old man is so deuced obstinate. It would be the easiest thing in the world for him to start us with a thousand a year. Why, she must cost him fully that now, one way and another. He would never miss it, and of course it can only be a matter of time with me. I *must* make my mark in the world some day, if I can only get a good start. He knows that Rachel loves

me. If he is so devoted to her, why not do what would really make her happy? Of course I don't expect him to do it out of love for me. I know quite well that I don't come up to his ideal of a son-in-law in any one way; but then, you see, Rachel has taken it into her dear little head to love me; and that is the real point, after all.'

'True enough, O'Grady; but, at the same time, I must honestly confess that I think the Squire is perfectly justified in his decision. Five hundred a year seems to me a very fair allowance under the circumstances, even to a rich man's daughter. He is a proud old man in his way, and would not brook the idea of making his daughter a mark for any possible fortune hunter.'

'That is, in fact, a deliberate insult to my love for her.'

'Not at all, O'Grady. That is

unreasonable. You have *talked* to him enough about your love; now he gives you the chance of *proving* it. How can you blame him for setting a high value on a girl like Rachel, putting aside even the fact that she is his own daughter? Surely he may be excused for thinking that any man, blessed with such a woman's love, ought to be willing to make some little exertion to secure it to himself.'

'But I *am* willing—more than willing; only, unfortunately, wishing won't coin sovereigns or create interest.'

'No, Oscar; but hard work will. It is absurd to try and make me believe that a man with your manners and address, and general abilities, would have any real difficulty in making, at any rate, two hundred or three hundred a year, if you choose to set your mind to it. And if Rachel is content to begin married life with you on a small income, after all the luxuries to which

she has been accustomed, I think you might take the risk also.'

'Live in London on seven hundred or eight hundred pounds a year! Absolute beggary, my dear fellow, I assure you. Do you think I could drag a woman I love, as I love Rachel, down to such penury? Just imagine, too, how it would destroy the beauty and poetry of our lives, to scrape sixpences together, and triumph mutually over economical washing bills. No; that would indeed be selfish on my part.'

'Do you think it would be more selfish than letting things go on in their present unsatisfactory, unsettled condition? I don't know about destroying the poetry of life, as you call it. The true poetry of life seems to me to lie in loving a good woman honestly and sincerely, and working hard to make her as happy as you possibly can. Believe me, there is more real poetry

this than in writing a dozen sonnets, whilst you sip your "Marcobrunner" in selfish luxury, or light your cigars with unpaid tailors' bills.'

The moment the words are out of my mouth I regret them; but Oscar has a generous temper, although he can fire up for a trifle at times.

I never saw him hard upon a man in a good, honest fit of indignation; and he understands, I suppose, that my affection for Rachel makes my words more bitter than usual.

'That is rather hard upon a fellow, Verschoyle. Even truth can be nasty, now and then. Besides, you don't understand my difficulties. There are old family complications in my case—mortgages to pay off, and so forth, before I can start free. No fault of mine, I can assure you. The burden has been left on my shoulders by others, who are dead now, and whom I

love too well to blame even in my thoughts.'

'But, my dear O'Grady, have you ever set yourself honestly to face matters?'

'No, old fellow; I hate "facing" things. They always stare me out of countenance, I find.'

'No, Oscar, I won't laugh. This is too serious a matter to joke over. Remember that Rachel's happiness is at stake, as well as your own.'

'I do remember it, God knows.' And Oscar is grave again in a moment. 'But what is to be done? I have a mortgage at the present moment of fifteen hundred pounds on some land of mine in Ireland. If I could pay that off, we might start fair, at any rate; and then I think I should cu this medical business, and take to literar work. I believe I should make a bett thing of it, cutting up people's books i

good slashing review, than cutting off their arms and legs, after all.'

'But it seems a pity to give up your profession, now that you have spent some years, at least, studying for it, just when you might be reaping the profits of your outlay of time and money.'

'Ah, well!' It won't have been lost time altogether. My education has always been pretty comprehensive. I never could work in a groove at any time, and, as far as the "specialist" part of my studies goes, no doubt the knowledge of medicine will come in usefully enough some day. I have no present practice, and nothing, therefore, to sacrifice in taking up another line. I have thought over it a good deal lately, and I do really believe a literary career will be the best chance for me, after all. I know a good many literary men in London, who can "work the oracle" for me, if they like; and people have a way of

"liking" to do things for me—except old Beecher; but he is a pompous old muff, after all. Far better to make a name for myself in the world of letters than to be hoisted up the medical ladder by him, even if he could have done it, which I doubt very much, in spite of all his talk.'

* * * *

This new idea has taken a firm hold, for the time at least, on Oscar's sanguine, Celtic mind; and he goes off next day, with Rachel under his charge, brilliant and beaming and hopeful, as usual.

CHAPTER IX.

NEARLY eighteen months have passed away since then, and the Dursley woods have lost their bright warm autumn tints, and the trees stand up cold and bare against the dull November sky, when I drive down to the station once more to meet Rachel's train. She is coming alone this time.

It makes my heart ache to think how completely alone she is in the world now, poor girl! For the dear old Squire has hunted his last fox, sold his last shorthorn,

gathered in his last harvest, and is peacefully sleeping now in the little country churchyard, until time shall have ripened the crops for that other great harvest of which we read.

Rachel loved her father very tenderly, and mourns him all the more deeply, perhaps, for the one cloud that came between their perfect happiness and confidence in each other—her engagement to O'Grady.

We have not seen Rachel (except for those few sad hours at her father's funeral) since she and Oscar left us that bright July day, and travelled to Leicestershire together.

She was never a good correspondent, so we can make but vague guesses as to how matters now stand between them.

The old Squire spent a few days with us last autumn for pheasant shooting, and seemed annoyed and impatient about it

all; speaking in no measured terms of Oscar's flighty, extravagant, unsettled mode of life. Since then, there has been almost total silence on the subject.

It is now three months and more since that honest old heart was laid to rest.

The beautiful Hall is to be sold, and Rachel has been living for the last two months with 'Aunt Fan' in Clarges Street.

The Squire always did things after his own fashion, with little respect for the world's opinion, and his will has proved a striking example of this.

'Aunt Fan's' husband—Mr. Carruthers—and I have been named as the two executors, and the will is dated barely a year before the Squire's death, and therefore since Rachel's engagement to Oscar.

Not the most distant reference is made to O'Grady, or his position with regard to

Rachel; but the money is left on this wise. A great part of the Squire's property was entailed and goes to the next heir, a nephew in the army, who is just now in India. The Leicestershire property, which was not in the entail, is to be sold, and the money invested for Rachel's benefit. Other 'moneys' also are to go to her, her mother's small fortune amongst the rest, and she is to have entire control over the income arising from this capital (about £40,000 in all) *until her marriage.*

Then, a new disposition of the money is enforced, and the will has been so carefully worded that it is impossible to find any loophole of escape from its conditions. In the event of Rachel's marriage, she will be entitled to the interest on £12,000 (her mother's fortune), but even this is so tied up that her husband cannot touch the capital without the consent of the trustees to her marriage settlement.

The remainder of the money—both capital and interest—will, under such a contingency, be entirely out of her control, and accumulate for the benefit of her children. If she become a widow, childless or otherwise, she will be entitled at once to the interest on the whole £40,000, burdened of course with certain reservations in the event of being left with children.

Further conditions are made with regard to the possibility of a second marriage, and failing children altogether, the money will eventually—upon Rachel's death—go to the Carruthers family; so that in no case will Rachel's husband benefit personally by her money, except to the extent of the £12,000 above mentioned, which (coming to her through her mother's marriage settlement) she has absolute power to will away upon her death, although certain re-

dark and hazy and mysterious as his most cherished pictures are wont to display!

I could only trust that here also there might be harmonies of tone and colour only to be discerned by some more truly artistic eyes and ears than mine.

The only immediate result of our talk was to plunge him into fresh extravagance on the score of champagne, as he clasped his long, much-beringed fingers to his head, 'pulled himself' mentally 'together' for a moment, and then, with a sudden relapse into his usual light, reckless mood, said cheerfully:

'I can't stand talking about it, Verschoyle, that's a fact! I feel too much! All my nerve-power is gone out of me even in these few minutes. Let's have a bottle of fiz, old fellow; they have some capital dry Heidsieck here. That man over there knows my "brand" exactly. Look here, waiter! Just bring us a bottle

of that extra dry Heidsieck. You know the sort I mean, and put it into ice for me, at once.'

And so the evening came to an end, and I drove off in my hansom, feeling as usual, that of all fascinating, lovable, provoking, unreliable men in the world, Oscar O'Grady might carry off the palm.

* * * * *

But poor Rachel is coming down from town now, and waiting all this time in her clinging crape dress and jacket, to be welcomed and driven home by me. She looks very pale and sad and gentle, as I go up to her and take the heavy travelling-rug from her hands.

'Thank you, dear old fellow! This feels more like *home* than anything has done for the last three months;' and the dark blue eyes are full of tears, as she turns to me with a shadow of her former bright smile. 'Aunt Fan is very good and kind, and the

girls mean to do all they can for me, I am sure, but this is the only "coming home" left to me now, after all!'

In the evening we have so many sad memories to talk over together, so much to hear about the Squire's last illness, that Rachel had neither time nor heart to speak of when Elsa and I went over for the funeral! And so the hours slip by, and Oscar's name has never once been mentioned by any of us, not even when Rachel has touched casually upon her present life in London.

'Of course I have not gone out at all. I have seen no one,' is her quiet answer to any remarks I have made, hoping she might mention him.

There is nothing to guide me to any conclusion until she herself chooses to speak openly on the subject. This she does at length, very quietly and gently, but not till the next evening, when some remark

has been made by Elsa with reference to Rachel's life in Clarges Street.

'Of course, dear, Charlie and I felt it would not be right to tempt you away from your father's only sister, and it must be a great comfort to her to have you—even for a time. I suppose, now, Oscar will be very anxious for your marriage to take place as soon as your first deep mourning is over? I am sure, darling, in this case, no one could think him heartless for urging it.'

Rachel looks up quietly from her crewel-work.

'I wanted to tell you and Charlie about that, Elsa, but I did not know how to begin; now you have made it easy for me. I have released Oscar from his engagement. We shall never be more than friends now; not even that, I am afraid, for a long time. He would wish it, but I don't think it is possible.'

'But why, Rachel? I don't understand. Surely there can be no obstacle now to your marriage! Oscar must be making something in London, and I know you too well to think for a moment that you are afraid of forfeiting your present income by marrying him.'

'No, Charlie,' she answers, with rather a sad smile; 'I think the fear of forfeiting anything by our marriage affects Oscar more than me. He is fond of me, but he is an ambitious man, in spite of his recklessness; and sometimes I have thought he was afraid of compromising his future. Don't misunderstand me; I don't for a moment mean that he is mercenary—not in the general acceptation of the word.

'If my £500 a year could procure unlimited comforts — good dinners, dry champagne, cigars, well-cut coats, and so forth—Oscar would be perfectly willing, I am sure, to marry upon it at once!

'But I can see that he dreads the responsibilities and sacrifices that our marriage would entail, and so it is better that I should face things and set him free.

'I have never doubted his love for me—*so far as it goes;* but it is not the sort of love that would stand the test of self-sacrifice in daily life. I have been very blind and foolish all along, but it is better to wake up now than to go on dreaming all my life, or to marry him and then live to see him regret our marriage.

'If I were drowning, I am sure Oscar would jump into the water and save me at the risk of his own life most cheerfully; but he could never stand the small daily sacrifices that our marriage would entail—the driving about in cabs when others have their broughams—a last year's coat instead of the newest pattern every season—a bottle of claret, sometimes, where he would now drink champagne, and so forth

It sounds very mean and ignoble, weighed in the balance against love and sympathy, of course; but so it is. And, in spite of it all, I still maintain that he *has* great possibilities in his nature, poor old fellow!

'Only I see now that Oscar's heroism will lie, if at all, in some one distinct deed of unselfishness or generosity. He has no genius for the self-denials of every-day, humdrum married life; and it is far better that he should never risk them.'

Rachel's voice has been very low, but quite steady all through, and she speaks of Oscar's characteristics almost as calmly as Elsa herself might do.

Cupid's bandage is off her eyes at last, surely; and I conclude, too hastily, that she has plucked out the arrows also, leaving a little wound no doubt, but a wound that must soon heal in such a wise, clear-seeing heart.

'My poor Rachel! It must have been

a great worry and grief to you, especially coming as it did, when you had this other heavy sorrow to bear; but I am sure it is all for the best. You know how fond I am of Oscar, personally; but I never could understand how you, with your clear head and good judgment, could ever for one moment look upon him in the light of a suitable husband.'

Rachel gives a little laugh—more like her old, merry self than I have heard for a long time.

'Dear old Charlie! I never looked upon Oscar as a "*suitable* husband" at all. I only loved him, and knew that to be with him and help him on in any possible way would be the brightest lot the world could hold for me after I had once met him.

'I knew his faults and his whole character just as clearly then as I do now. That is not what I meant by saying I had been blind and foolish. My folly lay in thinking

that my love and companionship could make up to him for his champagne and cigars. That was my mistake. Ah dear! all my life seems one great mistake sometimes!

'First I made Fred's life miserable through my own stupidity and want of moral courage; then I hugged to my stupid, presumptuous heart the hope that now, at last, I had found my mission—to live for Oscar and *love him into* being his own best, brightest self. I had such glorious visions of all we were going to be to each other, and now my Spanish castle is in ruins, and the ground is strewed with boxes of Havannahs, coats and ulsters from Poole and Benjamin, cases of dry champagne! *These* have blown up the pretty, fairy building, and driven back the female missionary!' and Rachel gives rather a cynical laugh at her own 'folly,' as she calls it.

'But you don't mean to say that Oscar *wished* to be released from his engagement to you, Rachel! With all his faults, I thought at least his love for you was sincere.'

'So it was, Charlie; so it is still, I believe—so far as it goes. That means, I am honestly convinced, as far as Oscar's love for any woman will ever go.

'*Oscar* wish to be released from our engagement? Oh dear no! He reproached me very much about it all. Oscar would never wish to be released from any engagement to a woman who loved him and made much of him, so long as he was not called upon to redeem his word. Poor dear Oscar! I don't want to be hard upon him. I love him still, as I shall always love him, so long as my heart beats at all and leaves me free to love anybody; but I do not now even wish to be his wife. It is not wounded pride. Of course it has

been a little hard upon me after being so spoilt, and taking it as a matter of course that men should care for me and be ready to make any sacrifice to secure me. But pride cannot wound very deeply where a woman really loves. Perfect love casts out pride as well as fear, depend upon it. I would marry Oscar to-morrow if I knew it could work him the smallest real good; but I see clearly now that I am powerless.

'My love can only serve to feed his vanity and make life pleasanter. It will never be a motive-power to make him work. It is only a soft cushion for idle moments: not a firm hand to grasp his in loving, helpful sympathy.

'I thought over all this very seriously before I wrote to him, and I am sure I have acted for the best. Life is very, very sad just now. I miss my darling father more than words can say, and I miss Oscar's bright, loving words and looks so

much, that sometimes the dead, dull yearning for them leaves a sense of sheer physical pain. And as for the *heart*-sickness—ah well! I would rather not speak of that.'

Rachel never again touches upon her feelings with regard to Oscar during the rest of her visit. She doesn't seem to shrink at all from speaking of him, however; on the contrary, his name constantly comes up in talking of the dear old Egyptian days.

'Ah yes, Charlie; that is the bit of old wall Oscar admired so much at Philæ,' she will say, quite naturally, when we are looking over her sketch-book together; or, 'Do you remember how Oscar abused that black boy when he wouldn't sit still for me?' 'Ah, there is the old woman he declared had fallen so deeply in love with him at Assouan, when we went through the bazaar, and she followed us to the

boat,' and so on. The 'Do you remember?' generally begins with a smile and ends with something very like a tear; but Rachel's tears are very near the surface just now at all times, for she is nervous and unstrung by the sad nursing of the last few months.

She is more gentle, more humble, more tender than I have ever known her; but no one could by any possibility look upon her as a 'love-lorn maid.'

She has drifted through life hitherto, bright and beautiful and unattainable. Now she has faced the realities of life for the first time—faced them and accepted them bravely.

For the first time, her own heart has been touched. For the first time, her weapons have fallen powerless by her side—not, indeed, powerless to *attract*, but powerless to work her special will—powerless to influence as she had hoped to in-

fluence. The charm has failed, for the first time, just when her whole heart was staked on its success!

A more shallow, less truthful nature would have gone on deluding itself and others about Oscar's loving protestations and real affection for her; but to Rachel this is simply impossible. Once brought face to face with the truth, she can no more help acknowledging and acting upon it than an apple can help falling to the ground when a strong arm has shaken it from the bough.

And this recognition of things *as they are* (not as she would wish them to be) has given Rachel a quiet dignity, very different to the half-coquettish sway she used to exercise over her willing slaves. To say that the girl has ceased to take interest in life would be untrue; I never knew her take so keen an interest in her surroundings, either intellectually or practically, be-

fore; but it is the interest of a complete outsider in the game of life, and this strikes one as sad and unnatural with such a passionate, capable, intense nature as hers.

It is as though some child, who had danced the most merrily, sung the most cheerily, played with more intense enjoyment than any of the other children, were suddenly, through some one false move, put out of the game, and left to look on with bright, earnest eyes and quick sympathetic cries of joy and sorrow, but no further *personal* share in the stir and movement around her.

Elsa and I notice this very much when men come to the house. Formerly, Rachel could no more resist a dash of harmless coquetry in her intercourse with the male world in general, than the sun can help shining. Now she is as bright and charming as ever—in one way, more piquant perhaps,

because so entirely free from any shadow of self-consciousness; but it is the brightness and charm that any married woman might indulge in, without fear of censure from the most severe critic.

There is not the faintest spark of that subtle flattery which tells a man that the fascination is being exercised for his personal and special benefit. The most conceited coxcomb could not extract the smallest 'encouragement' from Rachel's manner nowadays. And this reacts in the oddest way upon the men themselves.

In old days, Rachel's visits were a very mixed pleasure. There were always broken hearts when she departed, and wounds in various stages of healing, to be bound up by Elsa's sympathetic hands. This time every one is 'charmed,' as usual; but no one falls violently, hopelessly in love with her, and Rachel does not seem in any way to resent the fact.

'I suppose I am getting very old, Charlie,' she says one day, when two or three young men, who have ridden over for afternoon tea, have taken their departure; 'but somehow men seem to bore one so nowadays. Perhaps one is outgrowing them. They seem to have become very dull and uninteresting "Now all men beside are to me like shadows,"' she hums below her breath; then, with a little sigh: 'Poor dear Oscar! No one could ever feel that about *him*, at any rate. Charlie, why have some people such a marvellous power of impressing you with their *individuality?* Don't you know what I mean? You are always seeing with their eyes, and hearing with their ears, and wondering how such and such things will affect them, and feeling their joys and sorrows as acutely as you feel your own; whilst others, far more worthy perhaps, infinitely more deserving, are almost indifferent to

one. It is a tiresome, aggravating world in some ways.'

Christmas is coming on apace, and with it Rachel's visit draws to a close. Elsa and I are to spend it, as usual, in Yorkshire, my wife's old home; but we make a little plan to have a few days in London first, to break the parting with Rachel, who is to come with us to Garland's Hotel, Pall Mall, during our stay in town.

Elsa declares she must have a sight of the winter pictures and the Christmas shops; but our real object is to avoid a lonely return for Rachel to Aunt Fan's hospitable but rather uncongenial home.

So it comes about that, a few days before Christmas, we three are standing before the darkening shadows of one of the 'old masters,' just thinking that the gathering twilight will soon send us home, when Elsa utters a sudden cry of pleased surprise, and turns round to shake hands with Fred

Bathurst. The friendly darkness keeps Rachel's face in shadow, but her voice sounds very clear and steady as she answers his warm greeting.

Of course we carry him home to dinner. It is a long time since we four met, and although none of us would have liked to risk such a meeting even now, still I think both Rachel and Fred are glad that it should have come about accidentally.

I make an opportunity of telling Bathurst that her engagement with Oscar is broken off, but there is no time for any comments on my news; and Fred's manner to her at dinner is just what it was during those last days in Cairo, tenderly deferential, but with the tenderness and deference that a man shows towards a woman who can never be more to him than she now is, no matter how intense his admiration or even love for her may be.

When we are sitting over our wine

alone, Fred asks me at once about Rachel's engagement and how it has come to an end. I tell him the whole truth as kindly and gently as I can, not attempting to conceal that Rachel's feelings have undergone no change, but that doubts and distrust as to its being for Oscar's real good and happiness have influenced her in severing the ties between them.

Fred looks very much pained and grieved.

'What a noble woman wasted, Verschoyle! She was far too good for him. She was too good for me—I knew that well enough; but, at least, I was not such a fool as to underrate her value. It was left for a genius to make that blunder.'

Those are the only hard words that Fred ever allows to escape his lips touching O'Grady. Something urges me to say at length:

'Do you know, Bathurst, I think some-

times that all this may have been for the best, after all. Rachel has suffered horribly, I can see; but it has developed her, and made her a grander woman than she would ever have been without it. Now, at least, she will have learnt the value of true, constant, reliable love. Why not try your chance again some day, when the first sharp pain of this is over with her?'

Fred shakes his head gravely.

'No, Verschoyle, that can never be.'

'You mean that you are too proud to accept a woman's hand now, because she withdrew it from you once and gave a more passionate love to some other man?'

Fred looks up with unfeigned surprise.

'God forbid, Verschoyle! My love would be unworthy indeed, if it could stoop to such ignoble thoughts. I never

consulted my own feelings where Rachel was concerned, and I shall never do so as long as I live. That is no virtue with me. It is a simple necessity. But I could never make her happy now. She has felt too keenly my inability to do so in the old days. Nothing but pain and disappointment could ever come to her through any mad, selfish impulse of mine to try and put matters on the old footing again. No; if Oscar and she are never to marry, God grant that her heart may be opened one day to some other love, as faithful as mine, and far better able to satisfy her! I see now that I could never have done this, in spite of my foolish, presumptuous hopes. I woke up from that dream in Cairo. It can never hold me again in its delirious, deceitful grasp; but I shall love her all my life long, and I shall never give any other woman the chance of being her rival in my heart.'

Fred speaks with a quiet, self-contained force, that shows me how well he has thought over the subject in all its possible bearings.

Many men have been admired for their constancy to an unfortunate love, when it merely means that no other woman *has as yet* crossed their path whom they like well enough to promote to the office of comforter. The moment such a one appears, the inconsolable lover—it may be even of many years' standing—will console himself, and end by thinking that he never loved any one so well as his wife after all. No doubt it is well that it should be so; but Fred is made of different stuff to this. His very quietness carries conviction to my mind that it will be with him as he says. And I know now, with an absolute certainty, that he and Rachel can never come together again so long as they live.

And yet what a wealth of love the one has lavished upon the other!

* * * * *

The evening passes quietly but cheerfully, on the whole. Rachel and Fred are far more at ease with each other now than they were in the days when she was bound to him. Presently some reference is made to the *Rameses*, and our musical evenings on board.

'Do you ever sing now, Rachel?' says Fred, gently.

'I don't think I have ever sung since the night I sang for you, Fred; the night you climbed up the Korosko hill—do you remember?'

Fred's face shows that he remembers only too vividly every detail of that strange, sad, happy time. Rachel goes on nervously, catching that one brief look of deepest pain:

'Shall I sing something for you now, for the sake of "auld lang syne"?' and before we can answer, she has thrown down her work and gone across the room to the piano.

The words are sad and uncommon, as Rachel's songs so often are. Next day she gives Elsa a copy of them.

'Is it true, O Christ in heaven,
That the highest suffer most?
That the strongest wander farthest,
And more hopelessly are lost?
That the mark of rank in nature
Is capacity for pain?
And the anguish of the singer
Makes the sweetness of the strain?

'Is it true, O Christ in heaven,
That, whichever way we go,
Walls of darkness must surround us,
Things we would, but cannot know?
That the infinite must bound us,
Like a temple veil unrent,
Whilst the finite ever wearies,
So that none's therein content?

'Is it true, O Christ in heaven,
That the fulness yet to come
Is so glorious and so perfect
That to know would strike us dumb?
That if even for a moment
We could pierce beyond the sky,
With these poor, dim eyes of mortals,
We should just see God and die?'

Fred thanks her very quietly when she ceases, and almost immediately gets up to take his leave.

Somehow we cannot sit down and talk again as before, after those stirring, beautiful words, and inwardly I think we are all relieved to say good-night to each other.

The next day is our last in town, and, after shopping and sight-seeing all day long, we determine to spend a quiet evening and resist the temptations of the winter opera. Elsa plucks up courage to say a few words to Rachel about her immediate future, and the latter responds very warmly

to our sympathy; but when my wife hints very gently at the possibility of the Clarges Street home being only a temporary one, Rachel says with a cheerful kind of sadness, more touching than any tears:

'Oh, I should not think of inflicting myself upon poor Aunt Fan indefinitely! She has her own girls to look after and think about. Just at first it is better for me to be there. By-and-by I think I shall write and ask my poor cousin, Susan Travers, to come and live with me. You know the story of her unhappy marriage? She is separated now from her husband, and has to provide for her three children entirely out of her own small income. She would enjoy the London life immensely. She is so bright and pretty still, in spite of all her troubles. Then the children could come to us for the holidays, and altogether it would be a great relief and help to her; and I am very fond of her.'

'But if you marry, Rachel?'

'Ah, that is such a big "if," Elsa! I won't make any protestations, like the broken-hearted heroines in a three-volume novel; but I cannot see that it is at all likely. Do you remember Alphonse Karr's pretty, fanciful philosophy? I think it is in his "Voyage autour de mon Jardin." He says you should plant as many *flowers* as possible in that garden of the soul which is cherished by the heart's sunshine and watered by its tears; as many flowers, as bright, as beautiful, as various as possible. The sun may scorch and wither them, the autumn rains may beat them down, the cruel frosts may kill them; but Spring, he says, brings another crop, as bright, as beautiful, as easily replaced as those that went before. But, he adds, *never plant a tree*, lest, if it once be torn up by the roots, no flowers should ever blossom over that barren place again.

'It is very true! Well, you see I did not listen to his teaching. I planted my tree, or rather it sprang up in the night, like Jonah's gourd—only I think my tree must have been an aloe, that blossoms only once in a lifetime; and then if a careless hand plucks the poor, pretty flower and throws it aside, instead of putting it in water to brighten and expand—well, then, of course it withers, and is no good to anybody. Now don't let us talk any more sentiment this last evening;' and Rachel dashes into questions about our Yorkshire visit, and carefully avoids any further reference to her own affairs.

Next day we drive her back with us to Clarges Street, before going on ourselves to King's Cross.

Mrs. Carruthers is paying visits, not knowing at what time we should arrive. Rachel's own maid appears to welcome her, and a solemn butler ushers us into the

pretty little London boudoir where tea is left ready for us.

We have only time for a very hasty cup, and then Elsa and Rachel have a tearful adieu, whilst I hurry downstairs, with a man's usual impatience of farewell words where any deep feeling lies beneath them.

Elsa is in the hall, making vain attempts to disguise her weeping eyes from the dignified butler by searching for imaginary parcels with a most flagrant assumption of indifference, when the boudoir-door opens and Rachel runs to the head of the stairs.

'Charlie—Elsa! I have just remembered—it is the twenty-second of December! Do you remember what we were doing this day two years ago? Just starting off in the dear old *Rameses* from Cairo!'

She does not wait for an answer; know-

ing, as well as we do, all the memories that date must hold for us.

The last parcels are put in; the solemn butler stands at the door with an expression of chastened pity for people who drive even to railway stations in a common cab! The cab-door is slammed to, and off we rattle on our weary way.

'Ah, that ill-fated Egyptian tour, Elsa! Sometimes I wish we had never left England that winter. If we had only gone by ourselves, or even with Oscar and poor Mrs. Wingfield, instead of persuading the dear old Squire to bring Rachel out.'

'Don't fret about it, dear,' says my wise little wife. 'No one can ever foresee these things. Besides, if this had not happened, the same result would have come about in some other way, depend upon it, Charlie. Rachel is a far grander woman than she could ever have been had

she married Fred. Now that I see how her nature has strengthened and developed under the influence of this real love in her life, I can understand how all that *must* have forced its way at last, and Fred's hand evidently was not the one to bring it out. Fancy if she had married Fred, and that *then* these wonderful possibilities in her nature, these intense emotions, had come to her, when they must have brought not only sorrow, but sin! Ten thousand times better that things should be as they are!'

'That may be true, Elsa, but still it does seem to me such a pitiful thing that Rachel of all women, with her keen, intense sympathies and warm loving heart, should be shut out from a "woman's kingdom" of happy married life and clinging children's kisses.'

'Not necessarily shut out, Charlie; one

cannot tell. She will never marry either Fred or Oscar now, I feel sure; but some day she might find a love more reliable than Oscar's, more sympathetic than poor dear Fred's could ever have been, in spite of all his devotion. Rachel will never love so passionately again, of course, but I should have no fears now for her future if she ever found a man who could understand and make allowances for her as well as love and admire her. She has loved once herself to the utmost limits of her nature. Life can hold no such risks for her now as it might have done a year or two ago. She has had trouble enough lately, poor darling! God grant there may be some peaceful future in store for her yet; but all that lies "behind the veil!—behind the veil!"'

'God grant it, indeed!' I re-echo, with a choking feeling in my throat, as I think of poor Rachel's sad blue eyes and tearful

smile when we left her in that dreary London house.

My readers! will you not hope so too?

THE END.

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