

MISS MINA AND THE GROOM

I.

I HEAR that the "shocking story of my conduct" was widely circulated at the ball, and that public opinion (among the ladies), in every part of the room, declared I had disgraced myself. But there was one dissentient voice in this chorus of general condemnation. You spoke, Madam, with all the authority of your wide celebrity and your high rank. You said: "I am personally a stranger to the young lady who is the subject of remark. If I venture to interfere, it is only to remind you that there are two sides to every question. May I ask if you have waited to pass sentence, until you have heard what the person accused has to say in her own defense?"

These just and generous words produced, if I am correctly informed, a dead silence. Not one of the women who had condemned me had heard me in my own defense. Not one of them ventured to answer you.

How I may stand in the opinions of such persons as these, is a matter of perfect indifference to me. My one anxiety is to show that I am not quite unworthy of your considerate interference in my favor. Will you honor me by reading what I have to say for myself in these pages?

I will pass as rapidly as I can over the subject of my family; and I will abstain (in deference to motives of gratitude and honor) from mentioning surnames in my narrative.

My father was the second son of an English nobleman. A German lady was his first wife, and my mother. Left a widower, he married for the second time; the new wife being of American birth. She took a stepmother's dislike to me--which, in some degree at least, I must own that I deserved.

When the newly married pair went to the United States they left me in England, by my own desire, to live under the protection of my uncle--a General in the army. This good man's marriage had been childless, and his wife (Lady Claudia) was, perhaps on that account, as kindly ready as her husband to receive me in the character of an adopted daughter. I may add here, that I bear my German mother's Christian name, Wilhelmina. All my friends, in the days when I had friends, used to shorten this to Mina. Be my friend so far, and call me Mina, too.

After these few words of introduction, will your patience bear with me, if I try to make you better acquainted with my uncle and aunt, and if I allude to circumstances connected with my new life which had, as I fear, some influence in altering my character for the worse?

II.

WHEN I think of the good General's fatherly kindness to me, I really despair of writing about him in terms that do justice to his nature. To own the truth, the tears get into my eyes, and the lines mingle in such confusion that I cannot read them myself. As for my relations with my aunt, I only tell the truth when I say that she performed her duties toward me without the slightest pretension, and in the most charming manner.

At nearly fifty years old, Lady Claudia was still admired, though she had lost the one attraction which distinguished her before my time--the attraction of a perfectly beautiful figure. With fine hair and expressive eyes, she was otherwise a plain woman. Her unassuming cleverness and her fascinating manners were the qualities no doubt which made her popular everywhere. We never quarreled. Not because I was always amiable, but because my aunt would not allow it. She managed me, as she managed her husband, with perfect tact. With certain occasional checks, she absolutely governed the General. There were eccentricities in his character which made him a man easily ruled by a clever woman. Deferring to his opinion, so far as appearances went, Lady Claudia generally contrived to get her own way in the end. Except when he was at his Club, happy in his gossip, his good dinners, and his whist, my excellent uncle lived under a despotism, in the happy delusion that he was master in his own house.

Prosperous and pleasant as it appeared on the surface, my life had its sad side for a young woman.

In the commonplace routine of our existence, as wealthy people in the upper rank, there was nothing to ripen the growth of any better capacities which may have been in my nature. Heartily as I loved and admired my uncle, he was neither of an age nor of a character to be the chosen depositary of my most secret thoughts, the friend of my inmost heart who could show me how to make the best and the most of my life. With friends and admirers in plenty, I had found no one who could hold this position toward me. In the midst of society I was, unconsciously, a lonely woman.

As I remember them, my hours of happiness were the hours when I took refuge in my music and my books. Out of the house, my one diversion, always welcome and always fresh, was riding. Without, any false modesty, I may mention that I had lovers as well as admirers; but not one of them produced an impression on my heart. In all that related to the tender

passion, as it is called, I was an undeveloped being. The influence that men have on women, because they are men, was really and truly a mystery to me. I was ashamed of my own coldness--I tried, honestly tried, to copy other girls; to feel my heart beating in the presence of the one chosen man. It was not to be done. When a man pressed my hand, I felt it in my rings, instead of my heart.

These confessions made, I have done with the past, and may now relate the events which my enemies, among the ladies, have described as presenting a shocking story.

III.

WE were in London for the season. One morning, I went out riding with my uncle, as usual, in Hyde Park.

The General's service in the army had been in a cavalry regiment--service distinguished by merits which justified his rapid rise to the high places in his profession. In the hunting-field, he was noted as one of the most daring and most accomplished riders in our county. He had always delighted in riding young and high-spirited horses; and the habit remained with him after he had quitted the active duties of his profession in later life. From first to last he had met with no accident worth remembering, until the unlucky morning when he went out with me.

His horse, a fiery chestnut, ran away with him, in that part of the Park-ride called Rotten Row. With the purpose of keeping clear of other riders, he spurred his runaway horse at the rail which divides the Row from the grassy inclosure at its side. The terrified animal swerved in taking the leap, and dashed him against a tree. He was dreadfully shaken and injured; but his strong constitution carried him through to recovery--with the serious drawback of an incurable lameness in one leg.

The doctors, on taking leave of their patient, united in warning him (at his age, and bearing in mind his weakened leg) to ride no more restive horses. "A quiet cob, General," they all suggested. My uncle was sorely mortified and offended. "If I am fit for nothing but a quiet cob," he said, bitterly, "I will ride no more." He kept his word. No one ever saw the General on horseback again.

Under these sad circumstances (and my aunt being no horsewoman), I had apparently no other choice than to give up riding also. But my kind-hearted uncle was not the man to let me be sacrificed to his own disappointment. His riding-groom had been one of his soldier-servants in the cavalry regiment--a quaint sour tempered old man, not at all the sort of person to attend on a young lady taking her riding-exercise alone. "We must find a smart fellow who can be trusted," said the General. "I shall inquire at the club."

For a week afterward, a succession of grooms, recommended by friends, applied for the vacant place.

The General found insurmountable objections to all of them. "I'll tell you what I have done," he announced one day, with the air of a man who had hit on a grand discovery; "I have advertised in the papers."

Lady Claudia looked up from her embroidery with the placid smile that was peculiar to her. "I don't quite like advertising for a servant," she said. "You are at the mercy of a stranger; you don't know that you are not engaging a drunkard or a thief."

"Or you may be deceived by a false character," I added on my side. I seldom ventured, at domestic consultations, on giving my opinion unasked--but the new groom represented a subject in which I felt a strong personal interest. In a certain sense, he was to be my groom.

"I'm much obliged to you both for warning me that I am so easy to deceive," the General remarked satirically. "Unfortunately, the mischief is done. Three men have answered my advertisement already. I expect them here tomorrow to be examined for the place."

Lady Claudia looked up from her embroidery again. "Are you going to see them yourself?" she asked softly. "I thought the steward--"

"I have hitherto considered myself a better judge of a groom than my steward," the General interposed. "However, don't be alarmed; I won't act on my own sole responsibility, after the hint you have given me. You and Mina shall lend me your valuable assistance, and discover whether they are thieves, drunkards, and what not, before I feel the smallest suspicion of it, myself."

IV.

WE naturally supposed that the General was joking. No. This was one of those rare occasions on which Lady Claudia's tact--infallible in matters of importance--proved to be at fault in a trifle. My uncle's self-esteem had been touched in a tender place; and he had resolved to make us feel it. The next morning a polite message came, requesting our presence in the library, to see the grooms. My aunt (always ready with her smile, but rarely tempted into laughing outright) did for once laugh heartily. "It is really too ridiculous!" she said. However, she pursued her policy of always yielding, in the first instance. We went together to the library.

The three grooms were received in the order in which they presented themselves for approval. Two of them bore the ineffaceable mark of the public-house so plainly written on their villainous faces, that even I could see it. My uncle ironically asked us to favor him with our opinions. Lady Claudia answered with her sweetest smile: "Pardon me, General--we are here to learn." The words were nothing; but the manner in which they were spoken was perfect. Few men could have resisted that gentle influence--and the General was not one of the few. He stroked his mustache, and returned to his petticoat government. The two grooms were dismissed.

The entry of the third and last man took me completely by surprise.

If the stranger's short coat and light trousers had not proclaimed his vocation in life, I should have taken it for granted that there had been some mistake, and that we were favored with a visit from a gentleman unknown. He was between dark and light in complexion, with frank clear blue eyes; quiet and intelligent, if appearances were to be trusted; easy in his movements; respectful in his manner, but perfectly free from servility. "I say!" the General blurted out, addressing my aunt confidentially, "he looks as if he would do, doesn't he?"

The appearance of the new man seemed to have had the same effect on Lady Claudia which it had produced on me. But she got over her first feeling of surprise sooner than I did. "You know best," she answered, with the air of a woman who declined to trouble herself by giving an opinion.

"Step forward, my man," said the General. The groom advanced from the door, bowed, and stopped at the foot of the table--my uncle sitting at the head, with my aunt and myself on either side of him. The inevitable

questions began.

"What is your name?"

"Michael Bloomfield."

"Your age?"

"Twenty-six."

My aunt's want of interest in the proceedings expressed itself by a little weary sigh. She leaned back resignedly in her chair.

The General went on with his questions: "What experience have you had as a groom?"

"I began learning my work, sir, before I was twelve years old."

"Yes! yes! I mean what private families have you served in?"

"Two, sir."

"How long have you been in your two situations?"

"Four years in the first; and three in the second."

The General looked agreeably surprised. "Seven years in only two situations is a good character in itself," he remarked. "Who are your references?"

The groom laid two papers on the table.

"I don't take written references," said the General.

"Be pleased to read my papers, sir," answered the groom.

My uncle looked sharply across the table. The groom sustained the look with respectful but unshaken composure. The General took up the papers, and seemed to be once more favorably impressed as he read them. "Personal references in each case if required in support of strong written recommendations from both his employers," he informed my aunt. "Copy the addresses, Mina. Very satisfactory, I must say. Don't you think so yourself?" he resumed, turning again to my aunt.

Lady Claudia replied by a courteous bend of her head. The General went on with his questions. They related to the management of horses; and they were answered to his complete satisfaction.

"Michael Bloomfield, you know your business," he said, "and you have a good character. Leave your address. When I have consulted your references, you shall hear from me."

The groom took out a blank card, and wrote his name and address on it. I looked over my uncle's shoulder when he received the card. Another surprise! The handwriting was simply irreproachable--the lines running perfectly straight, and every letter completely formed. As this perplexing person made his modest bow, and withdrew, the General, struck by an after-thought, called him back from the door.

"One thing more," said my uncle. "About friends and followers? I consider it my duty to my servants to allow them to see their relations; but I expect them to submit to certain conditions in return--"

"I beg your pardon, sir," the groom interposed. "I shall not give you any trouble on that score. I have no relations."

"No brothers or sisters?" asked the General.

"None, sir."

"Father and mother both dead?"

"I don't know, sir."

"You don't know! What does that mean?"

"I am telling you the plain truth, sir. I never heard who my father and mother were--and I don't expect to hear now."

He said those words with a bitter composure which impressed me painfully. Lady Claudia was far from feeling it as I did. Her languid interest in the engagement of the groom seemed to be completely exhausted--and that was all. She rose, in her easy graceful way, and looked out of the window at the courtyard and fountain, the house-dog in his kennel, and the box of flowers in the coachman's window.

In the meanwhile, the groom remained near the table, respectfully waiting

for his dismissal. The General spoke to him sharply, for the first time. I could see that my good uncle had noticed the cruel tone of that passing reference to the parents, and thought of it as I did.

"One word more, before you go," he said. "If I don't find you more mercifully inclined toward my horses than you seem to be toward your father and mother, you won't remain long in my service. You might have told me you had never heard who your parents were, without speaking as if you didn't care to hear."

"May I say a bold word, sir, in my own defense?"

He put the question very quietly, but, at the same time, so firmly that he even surprised my aunt. She looked round from the window--then turned back again, and stretched out her hand toward the curtain, intending, as I supposed, to alter the arrangement of it. The groom went on.

"May I ask, sir, why I should care about a father and mother who deserted me? Mind what you are about, my lady!" he cried--suddenly addressing my aunt. "There's a cat in the folds of that curtain; she might frighten you."

He had barely said the words before the housekeeper's large tabby cat, taking its noonday siesta in the looped-up fold of the curtain, leaped out and made for the door.

Lady Claudia was, naturally enough, a little perplexed by the man's discovery of an animal completely hidden in the curtain. She appeared to think that a person who was only a groom had taken a liberty in presuming to puzzle her. Like her husband, she spoke to Michael sharply.

"Did you see the cat?" she asked.

"No, my lady."

"Then how did you know the creature was in the curtain?"

For the first time since he had entered the room the groom looked a little confused.

"It's a sort of presumption for a man in my position to be subject to a nervous infirmity," he answered. "I am one of those persons (the weakness is not uncommon, as your ladyship is aware) who know by their own unpleasant sensations when a cat is in the room. It goes a little further than

that with me. The 'antipathy,' as the gentlefolks call it, tells me in what part of the room the cat is."

My aunt turned to her husband, without attempting to conceal that she took no sort of interest in the groom's antipathies.

"Haven't you done with the man yet?" she asked.

The General gave the groom his dismissal.

"You shall hear from me in three days' time. Good-morning."

Michael Bloomfield seemed to have noticed my aunt's ungracious manner. He looked at her for a moment with steady attention before he left the room.

V.

"You don't mean to engage that man?" said Lady Claudia as the door closed.

"Why not?" asked my uncle.

"I have taken a dislike to him."

This short answer was so entirely out of the character of my aunt that the General took her kindly by the hand, and said:

"I am afraid you are not well."

She irritably withdrew her hand.

"I don't feel well. It doesn't matter."

"It does matter, Claudia. What can I do for you?"

"Write to the man--" She paused and smiled contemptuously. "Imagine a groom with an antipathy to cats!" she said, turning to me. "I don't know what you think, Mina. I have a strong objection, myself, to servants who hold themselves above their position in life. Write," she resumed, addressing her husband, "and tell him to look for another place."

"What objection can I make to him?" the General asked, helplessly.

"Good heavens! can't you make an excuse? Say he is too young."

My uncle looked at me in expressive silence--walked slowly to the writing-table--and glanced at his wife, in the faint hope that she might change her mind. Their eyes met--and she seemed to recover the command of her temper. She put her hand caressingly on the General's shoulder.

"I remember the time," she said, softly, "when any caprice of mine was a command to you. Ah, I was younger then!"

The General's reception of this little advance was thoroughly characteristic of him. He first kissed Lady Claudia's hand, and then he wrote the letter. My aunt rewarded him by a look, and left the library.

"What the deuce is the matter with her?" my uncle said to me when we were alone. "Do you dislike the man, too?"

"Certainly not. As far as I can judge, he appears to be just the sort of person we want."

"And knows thoroughly well how to manage horses, my dear. What can be your aunt's objection to him?"

As the words passed his lips Lady Claudia opened the library door.

"I am so ashamed of myself," she said, sweetly. "At my age, I have been behaving like a spoiled child. How good you are to me, General! Let me try to make amends for my misconduct. Will you permit me?"

She took up the General's letter, without waiting for permission; tore it to pieces, smiling pleasantly all the while; and threw the fragments into the waste-paper basket. "As if you didn't know better than I do!" she said, kissing him on the forehead. "Engage the man by all means."

She left the room for the second time. For the second time my uncle looked at me in blank perplexity--and I looked back at him in the same condition of mind. The sound of the luncheon bell was equally a relief to both of us. Not a word more was spoken on the subject of the new groom. His references were verified; and he entered the General's service in three days' time.

VI.

ALWAYS careful in anything that concerned my welfare, no matter how trifling it might be, my uncle did not trust me alone with the new groom when he first entered our service. Two old friends of the General accompanied me at his special request, and reported the man to be perfectly competent and trustworthy. After that, Michael rode out with me alone; my friends among young ladies seldom caring to accompany me, when I abandoned the park for the quiet country roads on the north and west of London. Was it wrong in me to talk to him on these expeditions? It would surely have been treating a man like a brute never to take the smallest notice of him--especially as his conduct was uniformly respectful toward me. Not once, by word or look, did he presume on the position which my favor permitted him to occupy.

Ought I to blush when I confess (though he was only a groom) that he interested me?

In the first place, there was something romantic in the very blankness of the story of his life.

He had been left, in his infancy, in the stables of a gentleman living in Kent, near the highroad between Gravesend and Rochester. The same day, the stable-boy had met a woman running out of the yard, pursued by the dog. She was a stranger, and was not well-dressed. While the boy was protecting her by chaining the dog to his kennel, she was quick enough to place herself beyond the reach of pursuit.

The infant's clothing proved, on examination, to be of the finest linen. He was warmly wrapped in a beautiful shawl of some foreign manufacture, entirely unknown to all the persons present, including the master and mistress of the house. Among the folds of the shawl there was discovered an open letter, without date, signature, or address, which it was presumed the woman must have forgotten.

Like the shawl, the paper was of foreign manufacture. The handwriting presented a strongly marked character; and the composition plainly revealed the mistakes of a person imperfectly acquainted with the English language. The contents of the letter, after alluding to the means supplied for the support of the child, announced that the writer had committed the folly of inclosing a sum of a hundred pounds in a banknote, "to pay expenses." In a

postscript, an appointment was made for a meeting in six months' time, on the eastward side of London Bridge. The stable-boy's description of the woman who had passed him showed that she belonged to the lower class. To such a person a hundred pounds would be a fortune. She had, no doubt, abandoned the child, and made off with the money.

No trace of her was ever discovered. On the day of the appointment the police watched the eastward side of London Bridge without obtaining any result. Through the kindness of the gentleman in whose stable he had been found, the first ten years of the boy's life were passed under the protection of a charitable asylum. They gave him the name of one of the little inmates who had died; and they sent him out to service before he was eleven years old. He was harshly treated and ran away; wandered to some training-stables near Newmarket; attracted the favorable notice of the head-groom, was employed among the other boys, and liked the occupation. Growing up to manhood, he had taken service in private families as a groom. This was the story of twenty-six years of Michael's life.

But there was something in the man himself which attracted attention, and made one think of him in his absence.

I mean by this, that there was a spirit of resistance to his destiny in him, which is very rarely found in serving-men of his order. I remember accompanying the General "on one of his periodical visits of inspection to the stable." He was so well satisfied that he proposed extending his investigations to the groom's own room.

"If you don object, Michael?" he added, with his customary consideration for the self-respect of all persons in his employment. Michael's color rose a little; he looked at me. "I am afraid the young lady will not find my room quite so tidy as it ought to be," he said as he opened the door for us.

The only disorder in the groom's room was produced, to our surprise, by the groom's books and papers.

Cheap editions of the English poets, translations of Latin and Greek classics, handbooks for teaching French and German "without a master," carefully written "exercises" in both languages, manuals of shorthand, with more "exercises" in that art, were scattered over the table, round the central object of a reading-lamp, which spoke plainly of studies by night. "Why, what is all this?" cried the General. "Are you going to leave me, Michael, and set up a school?" Michael answered in sad, submissive tones. "I try to improve myself, sir--though I sometimes lose heart and hope." "Hope of

what?" asked my uncle. "Are you not content to be a servant? Must you rise in the world, as the saying is?" The groom shrank a little at that abrupt question. "If I had relations to care for me and help me along the hard ways of life," he said, "I might be satisfied, sir, to remain as I am. As it is, I have no one to think about but myself--and I am foolish enough sometimes to look beyond myself."

So far, I had kept silence; but I could no longer resist giving him a word of encouragement--his confession was so sadly and so patiently made. "You speak too harshly of yourself," I said; "the best and greatest men have begun like you by looking beyond themselves." For a moment our eyes met. I admired the poor lonely fellow trying so modestly and so bravely to teach himself--and I did not care to conceal it. He was the first to look away; some suppressed emotion turned him deadly pale. Was I the cause of it? I felt myself tremble as that bold question came into my mind. The General, with one sharp glance at me, diverted the talk (not very delicately, as I thought) to the misfortune of Michael's birth.

"I have heard of your being deserted in your infancy by some woman unknown," he said. "What has become of the things you were wrapped in, and the letter that was found on you? They might lead to a discovery, one of these days." The groom smiled. "The last master I served thought of it as you do, Sir. He was so good as to write to the gentleman who was first burdened with the care of me--and the things were sent to me in return."

He took up an unlocked leather bag, which opened by touching a brass knob, and showed us the shawl, the linen (sadly faded by time) and the letter. We were puzzled by the shawl. My uncle, who had served in the East, thought it looked like a very rare kind of Persian work. We examined with interest the letter, and the fine linen. When Michael quietly remarked, as we handed them back to him, "They keep the secret, you see," we could only look at each other, and own there was nothing more to be said.

VII.

THAT night, lying awake thinking, I made my first discovery of a great change that had come over me. I felt like a new woman.

Never yet had my life been so enjoyable to me as it was now. I was conscious of a delicious lightness of heart. The simplest things pleased me; I was ready to be kind to everybody, and to admire everything. Even the familiar scenery of my rides in the park developed beauties which I had never noticed before. The enchantments of music affected me to tears. I was absolutely in love with my dogs and my birds--and, as for my maid, I bewildered the girl with presents, and gave her holidays almost before she could ask for them. In a bodily sense, I felt an extraordinary accession of strength and activity. I romped with the dear old General, and actually kissed Lady Claudia, one morning, instead of letting her kiss me as usual. My friends noticed my new outburst of gayety and spirit--and wondered what had produced it. I can honestly say that I wondered too! Only on that wakeful night which followed our visit to Michael's room did I arrive at something like a clear understanding of myself. The next morning completed the process of enlightenment. I went out riding as usual. The instant when Michael put his hand under my foot as I sprang into the saddle, his touch flew all over me like a flame. I knew who had made a new woman of me from that moment.

As to describing the first sense of confusion that overwhelmed me, even if I were a practiced writer I should be incapable of doing it. I pulled down my veil, and rode on in a sort of trance. Fortunately for me, our house looked on the park, and I had only to cross the road. Otherwise I should have met with some accident if I had ridden through the streets. To this day, I don't know where I rode. The horse went his own way quietly--and the groom followed me.

The groom! Is there any human creature so free from the hateful and anti-Christian pride of rank as a woman who loves with all her heart and soul, for the first time in her life? I only tell the truth (in however unfavorable a light it may place me) when I declare that my confusion was entirely due to the discovery that I was in love. I was not ashamed of myself for being in love with the groom. I had given my heart to the man. What did the accident of his position matter? Put money into his pocket and a title before his name--by another accident: in speech, manners, and attainments, he would be a gentleman worthy of his wealth and worthy of his rank.

Even the natural dread of what my relations and friends might say, if they discovered my secret, seemed to be a sensation so unworthy of me and of him, that I looked round, and called to him to speak to me, and asked him questions about himself which kept him riding nearly side by side with me. Ah, how I enjoyed the gentle deference and respect of his manner as he answered me! He was hardly bold enough to raise his eyes to mine, when I looked at him. Absorbed in the Paradise of my own making, I rode on slowly, and was only aware that friends had passed and had recognized me, by seeing him touch his hat. I looked round and discovered the women smiling ironically as they rode by. That one circumstance roused me rudely from my dream. I let Michael fall back again to his proper place, and quickened my horse's pace; angry with myself, angry with the world in general, then suddenly changing, and being fool enough and child enough to feel ready to cry. How long these varying moods lasted, I don't know. On returning, I slipped off my horse without waiting for Michael to help me, and ran into the house without even wishing him "Good-day."

VIII.

AFTER taking off my riding-habit, and cooling my hot face with eau-de-cologne and water, I went down to the room which we called the morning-room. The piano there was my favorite instrument and I had the idea of trying what music would do toward helping me to compose myself.

As I sat down before the piano, I heard the opening of the door of the breakfast-room (separated from me by a curtained archway), and the voice of Lady Claudia asking if Michael had returned to the stable. On the servant's reply in the affirmative, she desired that he might be sent to her immediately.

No doubt, I ought either to have left the morning-room, or to have let my aunt know of my presence there. I did neither the one nor the other. Her first dislike of Michael had, to all appearance, subsided. She had once or twice actually taken opportunities of speaking to him kindly. I believed this was due to the caprice of the moment. The tone of her voice too suggested, on this occasion, that she had some spiteful object in view, in sending for him. I knew it was unworthy of me--and yet, I deliberately waited to hear what passed between them.

Lady Claudia began.

"You were out riding to-day with Miss Mina?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Turn to the light. I wish to see people when I speak to them. You were observed by some friends of mine; your conduct excited remark. Do you know your business as a lady's groom?"

"I have had seven years' experience, my lady."

"Your business is to ride at a certain distance behind your mistress. Has your experience taught you that?"

"Yes, my lady."

"You were not riding behind Miss Mina--your horse was almost side by side with hers. Do you deny it?"

"No, my lady."

"You behaved with the greatest impropriety--you were seen talking to Miss Mina. Do you deny that?"

"No, my lady."

"Leave the room. No! come back. Have you any excuse to make?"

"None, my lady."

"Your insolence is intolerable! I shall speak to the General."

The sound of the closing door followed.

I knew now what the smiles meant on the false faces of those women-friends of mine who had met me in the park. An ordinary man, in Michael's place, would have mentioned my own encouragement of him as a sufficient excuse. He, with the inbred delicacy and reticence of a gentleman, had taken all the blame on himself. Indignant and ashamed, I advanced to the breakfast-room, bent on instantly justifying him. Drawing aside the curtain, I was startled by a sound as of a person sobbing. I cautiously looked in. Lady Claudia was prostrate on the sofa, hiding her face in her hands, in a passion of tears.

I withdrew, completely bewildered. The extraordinary contradictions in my aunt's conduct were not at an end yet. Later in the day, I went to my uncle, resolved to set Michael right in his estimation, and to leave him to speak to Lady Claudia. The General was in the lowest spirits; he shook his head ominously the moment I mentioned the groom's name. "I dare say the man meant no harm--but the thing has been observed. I can't have you made the subject of scandal, Mina. My wife makes a point of it--Michael must go.

"You don't mean to say that she has insisted on your sending Michael away?"

Before he could answer me, a footman appeared with a message. "My lady wishes to see you, sir."

The General rose directly. My curiosity had got, by this time, beyond all restraint. I was actually indelicate enough to ask if I might go with him! He stared at me, as well he might. I persisted; I said I particularly wished to see

Lady Claudia. My uncle's punctilious good breeding still resisted me. "Your aunt may wish to speak to me in private," he said. "Wait a moment, and I will send for you."

I was incapable of waiting: my obstinacy was something superhuman. The bare idea that Michael might lose his place, through my fault, made me desperate, I suppose. "I won't trouble you to send for me," I persisted; "I will go with you at once as far as the door, and wait to hear if I may come in." The footman was still present, holding the door open; the General gave way. I kept so close behind him that my aunt saw me as her husband entered the room. "Come in, Mina," she said, speaking and looking like the charming Lady Claudia of everyday life. Was this the woman whom I had seen crying her heart out on the sofa hardly an hour ago?

"On second thoughts," she continued, turning to the General, "I fear I may have been a little hasty. Pardon me for troubling you about it again--have you spoken to Michael yet? No? Then let us err on the side of kindness; let us look over his misconduct this time."

My uncle was evidently relieved. I seized the opportunity of making my confession, and taking the whole blame on myself. Lady Claudia stopped me with the perfect grace of which she was mistress.

"My good child, don't distress yourself! don't make mountains out of molehills!" She patted me on the cheek with two plump white fingers which felt deadly cold. "I was not always prudent, Mina, when I was your age. Besides, your curiosity is naturally excited about a servant who is--what shall I call him?--a foundling."

She paused and fixed her eyes on me attentively. "What did he tell you?" she asked. "Is it a very romantic story?"

The General began to fidget in his chair. If I had kept my attention on him, I should have seen in his face a warning to me to be silent. But my interest at the moment was absorbed in my aunt. Encouraged by her amiable reception, I was not merely unsuspecting of the trap that she had set for me--I was actually foolish enough to think that I could improve Michael's position in her estimation (remember that I was in love with him!) by telling his story exactly as I have already told it in these pages. I spoke with fervor. Will you believe it?--her humor positively changed again! She flew into a passion with me for the first time in her life.

"Lies!" she cried. "Impudent lies on the face of them--invented to appeal to

your interest. How dare you repeat them? General! if Mina had not brought it on herself, this man's audacity would justify you in instantly dismissing him. Don't you agree with me?"

The General's sense of fair play roused him for once into openly opposing his wife.

"You are completely mistaken," he said. "Mina and I have both had the shawl and the letter in our hands--and (what was there besides?)--ah, yes, the very linen the child was wrapped in."

What there was in those words to check Lady Claudia's anger in its full flow I was quite unable to understand. If her husband had put a pistol to her head, he could hardly have silenced her more effectually. She did not appear to be frightened, or ashamed of her outbreak of rage--she sat vacant and speechless, with her eyes on the General and her hands crossed on her lap. After waiting a moment (wondering as I did what it meant) my uncle rose with his customary resignation and left her. I followed him. He was unusually silent and thoughtful; not a word passed between us. I afterward discovered that he was beginning to fear, poor man, that his wife's mind must be affected in some way, and was meditating a consultation with the physician who helped us in cases of need.

As for myself, I was either too stupid or too innocent to feel any positive forewarning of the truth, so far. After luncheon, while I was alone in the conservatory, my maid came to me from Michael, asking if I had any commands for him in the afternoon. I thought this rather odd; but it occurred to me that he might want some hours to himself. I made the inquiry.

To my astonishment, the maid announced that Lady Claudia had employed Michael to go on an errand for her. The nature of the errand was to take a letter to her bookseller, and to bring back the books which she had ordered. With three idle footmen in the house, whose business it was to perform such service as this, why had she taken the groom away from his work? The question obtained such complete possession of my mind that I actually summoned courage enough to go to my aunt. I said I had thought of driving out in my pony-carriage that afternoon, and I asked if she objected to sending one of the three indoor servants for her books in Michael's place.

She received me with a strange hard stare, and answered with obstinate self-possession: "I wish Michael to go!" No explanation followed. With reason or without it, agreeable to me or not agreeable to me, she wished Michael to

go.

I begged her pardon for interfering, and replied that I would give up the idea of driving on that day. She made no further remark. I left the room, determining to watch her. There is no defense for my conduct; it was mean and unbecoming, no doubt. I was drawn on, by some force in me which I could not even attempt to resist. Indeed, indeed I am not a mean person by nature!

At first, I thought of speaking to Michael; not with any special motive, but simply because I felt drawn toward him as the guide and helper in whom my heart trusted at this crisis in my life. A little consideration, however, suggested to me that I might be seen speaking to him, and might so do him an injury. While I was still hesitating, the thought came to me that my aunt's motive for sending him to her bookseller might be to get him out of her way.

Out of her way in the house? No: his place was not in the house. Out of her way in the stable? The next instant, the idea flashed across my mind of watching the stable door.

The best bedrooms, my room included, were all in front of the house. I went up to my maid's room, which looked on the courtyard; ready with my excuse, if she happened to be there. She was not there. I placed myself at the window, in full view of the stable opposite.

An interval elapsed--long or short, I cannot say which; I was too much excited to look at my watch. All I know is that I discovered her! She crossed the yard, after waiting to make sure that no one was there to see her; and she entered the stable by the door which led to that part of the building occupied by Michael. This time I looked at my watch.

Forty minutes passed before I saw her again. And then, instead of appearing at the door, she showed herself at the window of Michael's room; throwing it wide open. I concealed myself behind the window curtain, just in time to escape discovery, as she looked up at the house. She next appeared in the yard, hurrying back. I waited a while, trying to compose myself in case I met any one on the stairs. There was little danger of a meeting at that hour. The General was at his club; the servants were at their tea. I reached my own room without being seen by any one, and locked myself in.

What had my aunt been doing for forty minutes in Michael's room? And why had she opened the window?

I spare you my reflections on these perplexing questions. A convenient headache saved me from the ordeal of meeting Lady Claudia at the dinner-table. I passed a restless and miserable night; conscious that I had found my way blindly, as it were, to some terrible secret which might have its influence on my whole future life, and not knowing what to think, or what to do next. Even then, I shrank instinctively from speaking to my uncle. This was not wonderful. But I felt afraid to speak to Michael--and that perplexed and alarmed me. Consideration for Lady Claudia was certainly not the motive that kept me silent, after what I had seen.

The next morning my pale face abundantly justified the assertion that I was still ill.

My aunt, always doing her maternal duty toward me, came herself to inquire after my health before I was out of my room. So certain was she of not having been observed on the previous day--or so prodigious was her power of controlling herself--that she actually advised me to go out riding before lunch, and try what the fresh air and the exercise would do to relieve me! Feeling that I must end in speaking to Michael, it struck me that this would be the one safe way of consulting him in private. I accepted her advice, and had another approving pat on the cheek from her plump white fingers. They no longer struck cold on my skin; the customary vital warmth had returned to them. Her ladyship's mind had recovered its tranquillity.

IX.

I LEFT the house for my morning ride.

Michael was not in his customary spirits. With some difficulty, I induced him to tell me the reason. He had decided on giving notice to leave his situation in the General's employment. As soon as I could command myself, I asked what had happened to justify this incomprehensible proceeding on his part. He silently offered me a letter. It was written by the master whom he had served before he came to us; and it announced that an employment as secretary was offered to him, in the house of a gentleman who was "interested in his creditable efforts to improve his position in the world."

What it cost me to preserve the outward appearance of composure as I handed back the letter, I am ashamed to tell. I spoke to him with some bitterness. "Your wishes are gratified," I said; "I don't wonder that you are eager to leave your place." He reined back his horse and repeated my words. "Eager to leave my place? I am heart-broken at leaving it." I was reckless enough to ask why. His head sank. "I daren't tell you," he said. I went on from one imprudence to another. "What are you afraid of?" I asked. He suddenly looked up at me. His eyes answered: "You."

Is it possible to fathom the folly of a woman in love? Can any sensible person imagine the enormous importance which the veriest trifles assume in her poor little mind? I was perfectly satisfied--even perfectly happy, after that one look. I rode on briskly for a minute or two--then the forgotten scene at the stable recurred to my memory. I resumed a foot-pace and beckoned to him to speak to me.

"Lady Claudia's bookseller lives in the City, doesn't he?" I began.

"Yes, miss."

"Did you walk both ways?"

"Yes."

"You must have felt tired when you got back?"

"I hardly remember what I felt when I got back--I was met by a surprise."

"May I ask what it was?"

"Certainly, miss. Do you remember a black bag of mine?"

"Perfectly."

"When I returned from the City I found the bag open; and the things I kept in it--the shawl, the linen, and the letter--"

"Gone?"

"Gone."

My heart gave one great leap in me, and broke into vehement throbbings, which made it impossible for me to say a word more. I reined up my horse, and fixed my eyes on Michael. He was startled; he asked if I felt faint. I could only sign to him that I was waiting to hear more.

"My own belief," he proceeded, "is that some person burned the things in my absence, and opened the window to prevent any suspicion being excited by the smell. I am certain I shut the window before I left my room. When I closed it on my return, the fresh air had not entirely removed the smell of burning; and, what is more, I found a heap of ashes in the grate. As to the person who has done me this injury, and why it has been done, those are mysteries beyond my fathoming--I beg your pardon, miss--I am sure you are not well. Might I advise you to return to the house?"

I accepted his advice and turned back.

In the tumult of horror and amazement that filled my mind, I could still feel a faint triumph stirring in me through it all, when I saw how alarmed and how anxious he was about me. Nothing more passed between us on the way back. Confronted by the dreadful discovery that I had now made, I was silent and helpless. Of the guilty persons concerned in the concealment of the birth, and in the desertion of the infant, my nobly-born, highly-bred, irreproachable aunt now stood revealed before me as one! An older woman than I might have been hard put to it to preserve her presence of mind, in such a position as mine. Instinct, not reason, served me in my sore need. Instinct, not reason, kept me passively and stupidly silent when I got back to the house. "We will talk about it to-morrow," was all I could say to Michael, when he gently lifted me from my horse.

I excused myself from appearing at the luncheon-table; and I drew down the

blinds in my sitting-room, so that my face might not betray me when Lady Claudia's maternal duty brought her upstairs to make inquiries. The same excuse served in both cases--my ride had failed to relieve me of my headache. My aunt's brief visit led to one result which is worth mentioning. The indescribable horror of her that I felt forced the conviction on my mind that we two could live no longer under the same roof. While I was still trying to face this alternative with the needful composure, my uncle presented himself, in some anxiety about my continued illness. I should certainly have burst out crying, when the kind and dear old man condoled with me, if he had not brought news with him which turned back all my thoughts on myself and my aunt. Michael had shown the General his letter and had given notice to leave. Lady Claudia was present at the time. To her husband's amazement, she abruptly interfered with a personal request to Michael to think better of it, and to remain in his place!

"I should not have troubled you, my dear, on this unpleasant subject," said my uncle, "if Michael had not told me that you were aware of the circumstances under which he feels it his duty to leave us. After your aunt's interference (quite incomprehensible to me), the man hardly knows what to do. Being your groom, he begs me to ask if there is any impropriety in his leaving the difficulty to your decision. I tell you of his request, Mina; but I strongly advise you to decline taking any responsibility on yourself."

I answered mechanically, accepting my uncle's suggestion, while my thoughts were wholly absorbed in this last of the many extraordinary proceedings on Lady Claudia's part since Michael had entered the house. There are limits--out of books and plays--to the innocence of a young unmarried woman. After what I had just heard the doubts which had thus far perplexed me were suddenly and completely cleared up. I said to my secret self: "She has some human feeling left. If her son goes away, she knows that they may never meet again!"

From the moment when my mind emerged from the darkness, I recovered the use of such intelligence and courage as I naturally possessed. From this point, you will find that, right or wrong, I saw my way before me, and took it.

To say that I felt for the General with my whole heart, is merely to own that I could be commonly grateful. I sat on his knee, and laid my cheek against his cheek, and thanked him for his long, long years of kindness to me. He stopped me in his simple generous way. "Why, Mina, you talk as if you were going to leave us!" I started up, and went to the window, opening it and complaining of the heat, and so concealing from him that he had unconsciously anticipated the event that was indeed to come. When I

returned to my chair, he helped me to recover myself by alluding once more to his wife. He feared that her health was in some way impaired. In the time when they had first met, she was subject to nervous maladies, having their origin in a "calamity" which was never mentioned by either of them in later days. She might possibly be suffering again, from some other form of nervous derangement, and he seriously thought of persuading her to send for medical advice.

Under ordinary circumstances, this vague reference to a "calamity" would not have excited any special interest in me. But my mind was now in a state of morbid suspicion. I had not heard how long my uncle and aunt had been married; but I remembered that Michael had described himself as being twenty-six years old. Bearing these circumstances in mind, it struck me that I might be acting wisely (in Michael's interest) if I persuaded the General to speak further of what had happened, at the time when he met the woman whom an evil destiny had bestowed on him for a wife. Nothing but the consideration of serving the man I loved would have reconciled me to making my own secret use of the recollections which my uncle might innocently confide to me. As it was, I thought the means would, in this case, be for once justified by the end. Before we part, I have little doubt that you will think so too.

I found it an easier task than I had anticipated to turn the talk back again to the days when the General had seen Lady Claudia for the first time. He was proud of the circumstances under which he had won his wife. Ah, how my heart ached for him as I saw his eyes sparkle, and the color mount in his fine rugged face!

This is the substance of what I heard from him. I tell it briefly, because it is still painful to me to tell it at all.

My uncle had met Lady Claudia at her father's country house. She had then reappeared in society, after a period of seclusion, passed partly in England, partly on the Continent. Before the date of her retirement, she had been engaged to marry a French nobleman, equally illustrious by his birth and by his diplomatic services in the East. Within a few weeks of the wedding-day, he was drowned by the wreck of his yacht. This was the calamity to which my uncle had referred.

Lady Claudia's mind was so seriously affected by the dreadful event, that the doctors refused to answer for the consequences, unless she was at once placed in the strictest retirement. Her mother, and a French maid devotedly attached to her, were the only persons whom it was considered safe for the

young lady to see, until time and care had in some degree composed her. Her return to her friends and admirers, after the necessary interval of seclusion, was naturally a subject of sincere rejoicing among the guests assembled in her father's house. My uncle's interest in Lady Claudia soon developed into love. They were equals in rank, and well suited to each other in age. The parents raised no obstacles; but they did not conceal from their guest that the disaster which had befallen their daughter was but too likely to disincline her to receive his addresses, or any man's addresses, favorably. To their surprise, they proved to be wrong. The young lady was touched by the simplicity and the delicacy with which her lover urged his suit. She had lived among worldly people. This was a man whose devotion she could believe to be sincere. They were married.

Had no unusual circumstances occurred? Had nothing happened which the General had forgotten? Nothing.

X.

IT is surely needless that I should stop here, to draw the plain inferences from the events just related.

Any person who remembers that the shawl in which the infant was wrapped came from those Eastern regions which were associated with the French nobleman's diplomatic services--also, that the faults of composition in the letter found on the child were exactly the faults likely to have been committed by the French maid--any person who follows these traces can find his way to the truth as I found mine.

Returning for a moment to the hopes which I had formed of being of some service to Michael, I have only to say that they were at once destroyed, when I heard of the death by drowning of the man to whom the evidence pointed as his father. The prospect looked equally barren when I thought of the miserable mother. That she should openly acknowledge her son in her position was perhaps not to be expected of any woman. Had she courage enough, or, in plainer words, heart enough to acknowledge him privately?

I called to mind again some of the apparent caprices and contradictions in Lady Claudia's conduct, on the memorable day when Michael had presented himself to fill the vacant place. Look back with me to the record of what she said and did on that occasion, by the light of your present knowledge, and you will see that his likeness to his father must have struck her when he entered the room, and that his statement of his age must have correctly described the age of her son. Recall the actions that followed, after she had been exhausted by her first successful efforts at self-control--the withdrawal to the window to conceal her face; the clutch at the curtain when she felt herself sinking; the harshness of manner under which she concealed her emotions when she ventured to speak to him; the reiterated inconsistencies and vacillations of conduct that followed, all alike due to the protest of Nature, desperately resisted to the last--and say if I did her injustice when I believed her to be incapable of running the smallest risk of discovery at the prompting of maternal love.

There remained, then, only Michael to think of. I remember how he had spoken of the unknown parents whom he neither expected nor cared to discover. Still, I could not reconcile it to my conscience to accept a chance outbreak of temper as my sufficient justification for keeping him in ignorance of a discovery which so nearly concerned him. It seemed at least

to be my duty to make myself acquainted with the true state of his feelings, before I decided to bear the burden of silence with me to my grave.

What I felt it my duty to do in this serious matter, I determined to do at once. Besides, let me honestly own that I felt lonely and desolate, oppressed by the critical situation in which I was placed, and eager for the relief that it would be to me only to hear the sound of Michael's voice. I sent my maid to say that I wished to speak to him immediately. The crisis was already hanging over my head. That one act brought it down.

XI.

He came in, and stood modestly waiting at the door.

After making him take a chair, I began by saying that I had received his message, and that, acting on my uncle's advice, I must abstain from interfering in the question of his leaving, or not leaving, his place. Having in this way established a reason for sending for him, I alluded next to the loss that he had sustained, and asked if he had any prospect of finding out the person who had entered his room in his absence. On his reply in the negative, I spoke of the serious results to him of the act of destruction that had been committed. "Your last chance of discovering your parents," I said, "has been cruelly destroyed."

He smiled sadly. "You know already, miss, that I never expected to discover them."

I ventured a little nearer to the object I had in view.

"Do you never think of your mother?" I asked. "At your age, she might be still living. Can you give up all hope of finding her, without feeling your heart ache?"

"If I have done her wrong, in believing that she deserted me," he answered, "the heart-ache is but a poor way of expressing the remorse that I should feel."

I ventured nearer still.

"Even if you were right," I began--"even if she did desert you--"

He interrupted me sternly. "I would not cross the street to see her," he said. "A woman who deserts her child is a monster. Forgive me for speaking so, miss! When I see good mothers and their children it maddens me when I think of what my childhood was."

Hearing these words, and watching him attentively while he spoke, I could see that my silence would be a mercy, not a crime. I hastened to speak of other things.

"If you decide to leave us," I said, "when shall you go?"

His eyes softened instantly. Little by little the color faded out of his face as he answered me.

"The General kindly said, when I spoke of leaving my place--" His voice faltered, and he paused to steady it. "My master," he resumed, "said that I need not keep my new employer waiting by staying for the customary month, provided--provided you were willing to dispense with my services."

So far, I had succeeded in controlling myself. At that reply I felt my resolution failing me. I saw how he suffered; I saw how manfully he struggled to conceal it.

"I am not willing," I said. "I am sorry--very, very sorry to lose you. But I will do anything that is for your good. I can say no more."

He rose suddenly, as if to leave the room; mastered himself; stood for a moment silently looking at me--then looked away again, and said his parting words.

"If I succeed, Miss Mina, in my new employment--if I get on to higher things--is it--is it presuming too much, to ask if I might, some day--perhaps when you are out riding alone--if I might speak to you--only to ask if you are well and happy--"

He could say no more. I saw the tears in his eyes; saw him shaken by the convulsive breathings which break from men in the rare moments when they cry. He forced it back even then. He bowed to me--oh, God, he bowed to me, as if he were only my servant! as if he were too far below me to take my hand, even at that moment! I could have endured anything else; I believe I could still have restrained myself under any other circumstances. It matters little now; my confession must be made, whatever you may think of me. I flew to him like a frenzied creature--I threw my arms round his neck--I said to him, "Oh, Michael, don't you know that I love you?" And then I laid my head on his breast, and held him to me, and said no more.

In that moment of silence, the door of the room was opened. I started, and looked up. Lady Claudia was standing on the threshold.

I saw in her face that she had been listening--she must have followed him when he was on his way to my room. That conviction steadied me. I took his hand in mine, and stood side by side with him, waiting for her to speak first. She looked at Michael, not at me. She advanced a step or two, and

addressed him in these words:

"It is just possible that you have some sense of decency left. Leave the room."

That deliberate insult was all that I wanted to make me completely mistress of myself. I told Michael to wait a moment, and opened my writing desk. I wrote on an envelope the address in London of a faithful old servant, who had attended my mother in her last moments. I gave it to Michael. "Call there to-morrow morning," I said. "You will find me waiting for you."

He looked at Lady Claudia, evidently unwilling to leave me alone with her. "Fear nothing," I said; "I am old enough to take care of myself. I have only a word to say to this lady before I leave the house." With that, I took his arm, and walked with him to the door, and said good-by almost as composedly as if we had been husband and wife already.

Lady Claudia's eyes followed me as I shut the door again and crossed the room to a second door which led into my bed-chamber. She suddenly stepped up to me, just as I was entering the room, and laid her hand on my arm.

"What do I see in your face?" she asked as much of herself as of me--with her eyes fixed in keen inquiry on mine.

"You shall know directly," I answered. "Let me get my bonnet and cloak first."

"Do you mean to leave the house?"

"I do."

She rang the bell. I quietly dressed myself, to go out.

The servant answered the bell, as I returned to the sitting-room.

"Tell your master I wish to see him instantly," said Lady Claudia.

"My master has gone out, my lady."

"To his club?"

"I believe so, my lady."

"I will send you with a letter to him. Come back when I ring again." She turned to me as the man withdrew. "Do you refuse to stay here until the General returns?"

"I shall be happy to see the General, if you will inclose my address in your letter to him."

Replying in those terms, I wrote the address for the second time. Lady Claudia knew perfectly well, when I gave it to her, that I was going to a respectable house kept by a woman who had nursed me when I was a child.

"One last question," she said. "Am I to tell the General that it is your intention to marry your groom?"

Her tone stung me into making an answer which I regretted the moment it had passed my lips.

"You can put it more plainly, if you like," I said. "You can tell the General that it is my intention to marry your son."

She was near the door, on the point of leaving me. As I spoke, she turned with a ghastly stare of horror--felt about her with her hands as if she was groping in darkness--and dropped on the floor.

I instantly summoned help. The women-servants carried her to my bed. While they were restoring her to herself, I wrote a few lines telling the miserable woman how I had discovered her secret.

"Your husband's tranquillity," I added, "is as precious to me as my own. As for your son, you know what he thinks of the mother who deserted him. Your secret is safe in my keeping--safe from your husband, safe from your son, to the end of my life."

I sealed up those words, and gave them to her when she had come to herself again. I never heard from her in reply. I have never seen her from that time to this. She knows she can trust me.

And what did my good uncle say, when we next met? I would rather report what he did, when he had got the better of his first feelings of anger and surprise on hearing of my contemplated marriage. He consented to receive us on our wedding-day; and he gave my husband the appointment which places us both in an independent position for life.

But he had his misgivings. He checked me when I tried to thank him.

"Come back in a year's time," he said. "I will wait to be thanked till the experience of your married life tells me that I have deserved it."

The year passed; and the General received the honest expression of my gratitude. He smiled and kissed me; but there was something in his face which suggested that he was not quite satisfied yet.

"Do you believe that I have spoken sincerely?" I asked.

"I firmly believe it," he answered--and there he stopped.

A wiser woman would have taken the hint and dropped the subject. My folly persisted in putting another question:

"Tell me, uncle. Haven't I proved that I was right when I married my groom?"

"No, my dear. You have only proved that you are a lucky woman!"