

CHAPTER IX.

A CRISIS.

One of the shrewdest and most subtle modern French writers has given his views of womankind in the following passage:--

"There are few women who have not found themselves, at least once in their lives, in regard to some incontestable fact, faced down by precise, keen, searching inquiry,--one of those questions pitilessly put by their husbands, the very idea of which gives a slight chill, and the first word of which enters the heart like a stroke of a dagger. Hence comes the maxim, Every woman lies--obliging lies--venial lies--sublime lies--horrible lies--but always the obligation of lying.

"This obligation once admitted, must it not be a necessity to know how to lie well? In France, the women lie admirably. Our customs instruct them so well in imposture. And woman is so naively impertinent, so pretty, so graceful, so true, in her lying! They so well understand its usefulness in social life for avoiding those violent shocks which would destroy happiness,--it is like the cotton in which they pack their jewelry.

"Lying is to them the very foundation of language, and truth is only

the exception; they speak it, as they are virtuous, from caprice or for a purpose. According to their character, some women laugh when they lie, and some cry; some become grave, and others get angry. Having begun life by pretending perfect insensibility to that homage which flatters them most, they often finish by lying even to themselves. Who has not admired their apparent superiority and calm, at the moment when they were trembling for the mysterious treasures of their love? Who has not studied their ease and facility, their presence of mind in the midst of the most critical embarrassments of social life? There is nothing awkward about it; their deception flows as softly as the snow falls from heaven.

"Yet there are men that have the presumption to expect to get the better of the Parisian woman!--of the woman who possesses thirty-seven thousand ways of saying 'No,' and incommensurable variations in saying 'Yes.'"

This is a Frenchman's view of life in a country where women are trained more systematically for the mere purposes of attraction than in any other country, and where the pursuit of admiration and the excitement of winning lovers are represented by its authors as constituting the main staple of woman's existence. France, unfortunately, is becoming the great society-teacher of the world. What with French theatres, French operas, French novels, and the universal rush of American women for travel, France is becoming so powerful on American fashionable society, that the things said of the

Parisian woman begin in some cases to apply to some women in America.

Lillie was as precisely the woman here described as if she had been born and bred in Paris. She had all the thirty-seven thousand ways of saying "No," and the incommensurable variations in saying "Yes," as completely as the best French teaching could have given it. She possessed, and had used, all that graceful facility, in the story of herself that she had told John in the days of courtship. Her power over him was based on a dangerous foundation of unreality. Hence, during the first few weeks of her wedded life, came a critical scene, in which she was brought in collision with one of those "pitiless questions" our author speaks of.

Her wedding-presents, manifold and brilliant, had remained at home, in the charge of her mother, during the wedding-journey. One bright day, a few weeks after her arrival in Springdale, the boxes containing the treasures were landed there; and John, with all enthusiasm, busied himself with the work of unpacking these boxes, and drawing forth the treasures.

Now, it so happened that Lillie's maternal grandfather, a nice, pious old gentleman, had taken the occasion to make her the edifying and suggestive present of a large, elegantly bound family Bible.

The binding was unexceptionable; and Lillie assigned it a proper place of honor among her wedding-gear. Alas! she had not looked into it, nor

seen what dangers to her power were lodged between its leaves.

But John, who was curious in the matter of books, sat quietly down in a corner to examine it; and on the middle page, under the head "Family Record," he found, in a large, bold hand, the date of the birth of "Lillie Ellis" in figures of the most uncompromising plainness; and thence, with one flash of his well-trained arithmetical sense, came the perception that, instead of being twenty years old, she was in fact twenty-seven,--and that of course she had lied to him.

It was a horrid and a hard word for an American young man to have suggested in relation to his wife. If we may believe the French romancer, a Frenchman would simply have smiled in amusement on detecting this petty feminine ruse of his beloved. But American men are in the habit of expecting the truth from respectable women as a matter of course; and the want of it in the smallest degree strikes them as shocking. Only an Englishman or an American can understand the dreadful pain of that discovery to John.

The Anglo-Saxon race have, so to speak, a worship of truth; and they hate and abhor lying with an energy which leaves no power of tolerance.

The Celtic races have a certain sympathy with deception. They have a certain appreciation of the value of lying as a fine art, which has never been more skilfully shown than in the passage from De Balzac we

have quoted. The woman who is described by him as lying so sweetly and skilfully is represented as one of those women "qui ont je ne sais quoi de saint et de sacré, qui inspirent tant de respect que l'amour,"--"a woman who has an indescribable something of holiness and purity which inspires respect as well as love." It was no detraction from the character of Jesus, according to the estimate of Renan, to represent him as consenting to a benevolent fraud, and seeming to work miracles when he did not work them, by way of increasing his good influence over the multitude.

But John was the offspring of a generation of men for hundreds of years, who would any of them have gone to the stake rather than have told the smallest untruth; and for him who had been watched and guarded and catechised against this sin from his cradle, till he was as true and pure as a crystal rock, to have his faith shattered in the woman he loved, was a terrible thing.

As he read the fatal figures, a mist swam before his eyes,--a sort of faintness came over him. It seemed for a moment as if his very life was sinking down through his boots into the carpet. He threw down the book hastily, and, turning, stepped through an open window into the garden, and walked quickly off.

"Where in the world is John going?" said Lillie, running to the door, and calling after him in imperative tones.

"John, John, come back. I haven't done with you yet;" but John never turned his head.

"How very odd! what in the world is the matter with him?" she said to herself.

John was gone all the afternoon. He took a long, long walk, all by himself, and thought the matter over. He remembered that fresh, childlike, almost infantine face, that looked up into his with such a bewitching air of frankness and candor, as she professed to be telling all about herself and her history; and now which or what of it was true? It seemed as if he loathed her; and yet he couldn't help loving her, while he despised himself for doing it.

When he came home to supper, he was silent and morose. Lillie came running to meet him; but he threw her off, saying he was tired. She was frightened; she had never seen him look like that.

"John, what is the matter with you?" said Grace at the tea-table. "You are upsetting every thing, and don't drink your tea."

"Nothing--only--I have some troublesome business to settle," he said, getting up to go out again. "You needn't wait for me; I shall be out late."

"What can be the matter?"

Lillie, indeed, had not the remotest idea. Yet she remembered his jumping up suddenly, and throwing down the Bible; and mechanically she went to it, and opened it. She turned it over; and the record met her eye.

"Provoking!" she said. "Stupid old creature! must needs go and put that out in full." Lillie took a paper-folder, and cut the leaf out quite neatly; then folded and burned it.

She knew now what was the matter. John was angry at her; but she couldn't help wondering that he should be so angry. If he had laughed at her, teased her, taxed her with the trick, she would have understood what to do. But this terrible gloom, this awful commotion of the elements, frightened her.

She went to her room, saying that she had a headache, and would go to bed. But she did not. She took her French novel, and read till she heard him coming; and then she threw down her book, and began to cry. He came into the room, and saw her leaning like a little white snow-wreath over the table, sobbing as if her heart would break. To do her justice, Lillie's sobs were not affected. She was lonesome and thoroughly frightened; and, when she heard him coming, her nerves gave out. John's heart yearned towards her. His short-lived anger had burned out; and he was perfectly longing for a reconciliation. He felt as if he must have her to love, no matter what she was. He came up to

her, and stroked her hair. "O Lillie!" he said, "why couldn't you have told me the truth? What made you deceive me?"

"I was afraid you wouldn't like me if I did," said Lillie, in her sobs.

"O Lillie! I should have liked you, no matter how old you were,--only you should have told me the truth."

"I know it--I know it--oh, it was wrong of me!" and Lillie sobbed, and seemed in danger of falling into convulsions; and John's heart gave out. He gathered her in his arms. "I can't help loving you; and I can't live without you," he said, "be you what you may!"

Lillie's little heart beat with triumph under all her sobs: she had got him, and should hold him yet.

"There can be no confidence between husband and wife, Lillie," said John, gravely, "unless we are perfectly true with each other. Promise me, dear, that you will never deceive me again."

Lillie promised with ready fervor. "O John!" she said, "I never should have done so wrong if I had only come under your influence earlier. The fact is, I have been under the worst influences all my life. I never had anybody like you to guide me."

John may of course be excused for feeling that his flattering little penitent was more to him than ever; and as to Lillie, she gave a sigh of relief. That was over, "anyway;" and she had him not only safe, but more completely hers than before.

A generous man is entirely unnerved by a frank confession. If Lillie had said one word in defence, if she had raised the slightest shadow of an argument, John would have roused up all his moral principle to oppose her; but this poor little white water-sprite, dissolving in a rain of penitent tears, quite washed away all his anger and all his heroism.

The next morning, Lillie, all fresh in a ravishing toilet, with field-daisies in her hair, was in a condition to laugh gently at John for his emotion of yesterday. She triumphed softly, not too obviously, in her power. He couldn't do without her,--do what she might,--that was plain.

"Now, John," she said, "don't you think we poor women are judged rather hardly? Men, you know, tell all sorts of lies to carry on their great politics and their ambition, and nobody thinks it so dreadful of them"

"I do--I should," interposed John.

"Oh, well! you--you are an exception. It is not one man in a hundred

that is so good as you are. Now, we women have only one poor little ambition,--to be pretty, to please you men; and, as soon as you know we are getting old, you don't like us. And can you think it's so very shocking if we don't come square up to the dreadful truth about our age? Youth and beauty is all there is to us, you know."

"O Lillie! don't say so," said John, who felt the necessity of being instructive, and of improving the occasion to elevate the moral tone of his little elf. "Goodness lasts, my dear, when beauty fades."

"Oh, nonsense! Now, John, don't talk humbug. I'd like to see you following goodness when beauty is gone. I've known lots of plain old maids that were perfect saints and angels; and yet men crowded and jostled by them to get the pretty sinners. I dare say now," she added, with a bewitching look over her shoulder at him, "you'd rather have me than Miss Almira Carraway,--hadn't you, now?"

And Lillie put her white arm round his neck, and her downy cheek to his, and said archly, "Come, now, confess."

Then John told her that she was a bad, naughty girl; and she laughed; and, on the whole, the pair were more hilarious and loving than usual.

But yet, when John was away at his office, he thought of it again, and found there was still a sore spot in his heart.

She had cheated him once; would she cheat him again? And she could cheat so prettily, so serenely, and with such a candid face, it was a dangerous talent.

No: she wasn't like his mother, he thought with a sigh. The "je ne sais quoi de saint et de sacré," which had so captivated his imagination, did not cover the saintly and sacred nature; it was a mere outward purity of complexion and outline. And then Grace,--she must not be left to find out what he knew about Lillie. He had told Grace that she was only twenty,--told it on her authority; and now must he become an accomplice? If called on to speak of his wife's age, must he accommodate the truth to her story, or must he palter and evade? Here was another brick laid on the wall of separation between his sister and himself. It was rising daily. Here was another subject on which he could never speak frankly with Grace; for he must defend Lillie,--every impulse of his heart rushed to protect her.

But it is a terrible truth, and one that it will not hurt any of us to bear in mind, that our judgments of our friends are involuntary.

We may long with all our hearts to confide; we may be fascinated, entangled, and wish to be blinded; but blind we cannot be. The friend that has lied to us once, we may long to believe; but we cannot. Nay, more; it is the worse for us, if, in our desire to hold the dear deceiver in our hearts, we begin to chip and hammer on the great foundations of right and honor, and to say within ourselves, "After

all, why be so particular?" Then, when we have searched about for all the reasons and apologies and extenuations for wrong-doing, are we sure that in our human weakness we shall not be pulling down the moral barriers in ourselves? The habit of excusing evil, and finding apologies, and wishing to stand with one who stands on a lower moral plane, is not a wholesome one for the soul.

As fate would have it, the very next day after this little scene, who should walk into the parlor where Lillie, John, and Grace were sitting, but that terror of American democracy, the census-taker. Armed with the whole power of the republic, this official steps with elegant ease into the most sacred privacies of the family. Flutterings and denials are in vain. Bridget and Katy and Anne, no less than Seraphina and Isabella, must give up the critical secrets of their lives.

John took the paper into the kitchen. Honest old Bridget gave in her age with effrontery as "twinty-five." Anne giggled and flounced, and declared on her word she didn't know,--they could put it down as they liked. "But, Anne, you must tell, or you may be sent to jail, you know."

Anne giggled still harder, and tossed her head: "Then it's to jail I'll have to go; for I don't know."

"Dear me," said Lillie, with an air of edifying candor, "what a fuss

they make! Set down my age 'twenty-seven,' John," she added.

Grace started, and looked at John; he met her eye, and blushed to the roots of his hair.

"Why, what's the matter?" said Lillie, "are you embarrassed at telling your age?"

"Oh, nothing!" said John, writing down the numbers hastily; and then, finding a sudden occasion to give directions in the garden, he darted out. "It's so silly to be ashamed of our age!" said Lillie, as the census-taker withdrew.

"Of course," said Grace; and she had the humanity never to allude to the subject with her brother.