

## CHAPTER XXII.

### THE SPIDER-WEB BROKEN.

Harry did not go back, to lead the "German," as he had been engaged to do. In fact, in his last apologies to Mrs. Follingsbee, he had excused himself on account of his partner's sudden indisposition,--thing which made no small buzz and commotion; though the missing gap, like all gaps great and little in human society, soon found somebody to step into it: and the dance went on just as gayly as if they had been there.

Meanwhile, there were in this good city of New York a couple of sleepless individuals, revolving many things uneasily during the night-watches, or at least that portion of the night-watches that remained after they reached home,--to wit, Mr. Harry Endicott and Miss Rose Ferguson.

What had taken place in that little scene between Lillie and Harry, the termination of which was seen by Rose? We are not going to give a minute description. The public has already been circumstantially instructed by such edifying books as "Cometh up as a Flower," and others of a like turn, in what manner and in what terms married women can abdicate the dignity of their sex, and degrade themselves so far as to offer their whole life, and their whole selves, to some

reluctant man, with too much remaining conscience or prudence to accept the sacrifice.

It was from some such wild, passionate utterances of Lillie that Harry felt a recoil of mingled conscience, fear, and that disgust which man feels when she, whom God made to be sought, degrades herself to seek. There is no edification and no propriety in highly colored and minute drawing of such scenes of temptation and degradation, though they are the stock and staple of some French novels, and more disgusting English ones made on their model. Harry felt in his own conscience that he had been acting a most unworthy part, that no advances on the part of Lillie could excuse his conduct; and his thoughts went back somewhat regretfully to the days long ago, when she was a fair, pretty, innocent girl, and he had loved her honestly and truly. Unperceived by himself, the character of Rose was exerting a powerful influence over him; and, when he met that look of pain and astonishment which he had seen in her large blue eyes the night before, it seemed to awaken many things within him. It is astonishing how blindly people sometimes go on as to the character of their own conduct, till suddenly, like a torch in a dark place, the light of another person's opinion is thrown in upon them, and they begin to judge themselves under the quickening influence of another person's moral magnetism. Then, indeed, it often happens that the graves give up their dead, and that there is a sort of interior resurrection and judgment.

Harry did not seem to be consciously thinking of Rose, and yet the undertone of all that night's uneasiness was a something that had been roused and quickened in him by his acquaintance with her. How he loathed himself for the last few weeks of his life! How he loathed that hot, lurid, murky atmosphere of flirtation and passion and French sentimentality in which he had been living!--atmosphere as hard to draw healthy breath in as the odor of wilting tuberose the day after a party.

Harry valued Rose's good opinion as he had never valued it before; and, as he thought of her in his restless tossings, she seemed to him something as pure, as wholesome, and strong as the air of his native New-England hills, as the sweet-brier and sweet-fern he used to love to gather when he was a boy. She seemed of a piece with all the good old ways of New England,--its household virtues, its conscientious sense of right, its exact moral boundaries; and he felt somehow as if she belonged, to that healthy portion of his life which he now looked back upon with something of regret.

Then, what would she think of him? They had been friends, he said to himself; they had passed over those boundaries of teasing unreality where most yoking gentlemen and young ladies are content to hold converse with each other, and had talked together reasonably and seriously, saying in some hours what they really thought and felt. And Rose had impressed him at times by her silence and reticence in certain connections, and on certain subjects, with a sense of

something hidden and veiled,--a reserved force that he longed still further to penetrate. But now, he said to himself, he must have fallen in her opinion. Why was she so cold, so almost haughty, in her treatment of him the night before? He felt in the atmosphere around her, and in the touch of her hand, that she was quivering like a galvanic battery with the suppressed force of some powerful emotion; and his own conscience dimly interpreted to him what it might be.

To say the truth, Rose was terribly aroused. And there was a great deal in her to be aroused, for she had a strong nature; and the whole force of womanhood in her had never received such a shock.

Whatever may be scoffingly said of the readiness of women to pull one another down, it is certain that the highest class of them have the feminine esprit de corps immensely strong. The humiliation of another woman seems to them their own humiliation; and man's lordly contempt for another woman seems like contempt of themselves.

The deepest feeling roused in Rose by the scenes which she saw last night was concern for the honor of womanhood; and her indignation at first did not strike where we are told woman's indignation does, on the woman, but on the man. Loving John Seymour as a brother from her childhood, feeling in the intimacy in which they had grown up as if their families had been one, the thoughts that had been forced upon her of his wife the night before had struck to her heart with the weight of a terrible affliction. She judged Lillie as a pure woman

generally judges another,--out of herself,--and could not and would not believe that the gross and base construction which had been put upon her conduct was the true one. She looked upon her as led astray by inordinate vanity, and the hopeless levity of an undeveloped, unreflecting habit of mind. She was indignant with Harry for the part that he had taken in the affair, and indignant and vexed with herself for the degree of freedom and intimacy which she had been suffering to grow up between him and herself. Her first impulse was to break it off altogether, and have nothing more to say to or do with him. She felt as if she would like to take the short course which young girls sometimes take out of the first serious mortification or trouble in their life, and run away from it altogether. She would have liked to have packed her trunk, taken her seat on board the cars, and gone home to Springdale the next day, and forgotten all about the whole of it; but then, what should she say to Mrs. Van Astrachan? what account could she give for the sudden breaking up of her visit?

Then, there was Harry going to call on her the next day! What ought she to say to him? On the whole, it was a delicate matter for a young girl of twenty to manage alone. How she longed to have the counsel of her sister or her mother! She thought of Mrs. Van Astrachan; but then, again, she did not wish to disturb that good lady's pleasant, confidential relations with Harry, and tell tales of him out of school: so, on the whole, she had a restless and uncomfortable night of it.

Mrs. Van Astrachan expressed her surprise at seeing Rose take her place at the breakfast-table the next morning. "Dear me!" she said, "I was just telling Jane to have some breakfast kept for you. I had no idea of seeing you down at this time."

"But," said Rose, "I gave out entirely, and came away only an hour after you did. The fact is, we country girls can't stand this sort of thing. I had such a terrible headache, and felt so tired and exhausted, that I got Mr. Endicott to bring me away before the 'German.'"

"Bless me!" said Mr. Van Astrachan; "why, you're not at all up to snuff! Why, Polly, you and I used to stick it out till daylight! didn't we?"

"Well, you see, Mr. Van Astrachan, I hadn't anybody like you to stick it out with," said Rose. "Perhaps that made the difference."

"Oh, well, now, I am sure there's our Harry! I am sure a girl must be difficult, if he doesn't suit her for a beau," said the good gentleman.

"Oh, Mr. Endicott is all well enough!" said Rose; "only, you observe, not precisely to me what you were to the lady you call Polly,--that's all."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Mr. Van Astrachan. "Well, to be sure, that does make a difference; but Harry's a nice fellow, nice fellow, Miss Rose: not many fellows like him, as I think."

"Yes, indeed," chimed in Mrs. Van Astrachan. "I haven't a son in the world that I think more of than I do of Harry; he has such a good heart."

Now, the fact was, this eulogistic strain that the worthy couple were very prone to fall into in speaking of Harry to Rose was this morning most especially annoying to her; and she turned the subject at once, by chattering so fluently, and with such minute details of description, about the arrangements of the rooms and the flowers and the lamps and the fountains and the cascades, and all the fairy-land wonders of the Follingsbee party, that the good pair found themselves constrained to be listeners during the rest of the time devoted to the morning meal.

It will be found that good young ladies, while of course they have all the innocence of the dove, do display upon emergencies a considerable share of the wisdom of the serpent. And on this same mother wit and wisdom, Rose called internally, when that day, about eleven o'clock, she was summoned to the library, to give Harry his audience.

Truth to say, she was in a state of excited womanhood vastly becoming to her general appearance, and entered the library with flushed cheeks

and head erect, like one prepared to stand for herself and for her sex.

Harry, however, wore a mortified, semi-penitential air, that, on the first glance, rather mollified her. Still, however, she was not sufficiently clement to give him the least assistance in opening the conversation, by the suggestions of any of those nice little oily nothings with which ladies, when in a gracious mood, can smooth the path for a difficult confession.

She sat very quietly, with her hands before her, while Harry walked tumultuously up and down the room.

"Miss Ferguson," he said at last, abruptly, "I know you are thinking ill of me."

Miss Ferguson did not reply.

"I had hoped," he said, "that there had been a little something more than mere acquaintance between us. I had hoped you looked upon me as a friend."

"I did, Mr. Endicott," said Rose.

"And you do not now?"



"I cannot say that," she said, after a pause; "but, Mr. Endicott, if we are friends, you must give me the liberty to speak plainly."

"That's exactly what I want you to do!" he said impetuously; "that is just what I wish."

"Allow me to ask, then, if you are an early friend and family connection of Mrs. John Seymour?"

"I was an early friend, and am somewhat of a family connection."

"That is, I understand there has been a ground in your past history for you to be on a footing of a certain family intimacy with Mrs. Seymour; in that case, Mr. Endicott, I think you ought to have considered yourself the guardian of her honor and reputation, and not allowed her to be compromised on your account."

The blood flushed into Harry's face; and he stood abashed and silent. Rose went on,--

"I was shocked, I was astonished, last night, because I could not help overhearing the most disagreeable, the most painful remarks on you and her,--remarks most unjust, I am quite sure, but for which I fear you have given too much reason!"

"Miss Ferguson," said Harry, stopping as he walked up and down, "I

confess I have been wrong and done wrong; but, if you knew all, you might see how I have been led into it. That woman has been the evil fate of my life. Years ago, when we were both young, I loved her as honestly as man could love a woman; and she professed to love me in return. But I was poor; and she would not marry me. She sent me off, yet she would not let me forget her. She would always write to me just enough to keep up hope and interest; and she knew for years that all my object in striving for fortune was to win her. At last, when a lucky stroke made me suddenly rich, and I came home to seek her, I found her married,--married, as she owns, without love,--married for wealth and ambition. I don't justify myself,--I don't pretend to; but when she met me with her old smiles and her old charms, and told me she loved me still, it roused the very devil in me. I wanted revenge. I wanted to humble her, and make her suffer all she had made me; and I didn't care what came of it."

Harry spoke, trembling with emotion; and Rose felt almost terrified with the storm she had raised.

"O Mr. Endicott!" she said, "was this worthy of you? was there nothing better, higher, more manly than this poor revenge? You men are stronger than we: you have the world in your hands; you have a thousand resources where we have only one. And you ought to be stronger and nobler according to your advantages; you ought to rise superior to the temptations that beset a poor, weak, ill-educated woman, whom everybody has been flattering from her cradle, and whom

you, I dare say, have helped to flatter, turning her head with compliments, like all the rest of them. Come, now, is not there something in that?"

"Well, I suppose," said Harry, "that when Lillie and I were girl and boy together, I did flatter her, sincerely that is. Her beauty made a fool of me; and I helped make a fool of her."

"And I dare say," said Rose, "you told her that all she was made for was to be charming, and encouraged her to live the life of a butterfly or canary-bird. Did you ever try to strengthen her principles, to educate her mind, to make her strong? On the contrary, haven't you been bowing down and adoring her for being weak? It seems to me that Lillie is exactly the kind of woman that you men educate, by the way you look on women, and the way you treat them."

Harry sat in silence, ruminating.

"Now," said Rose, "it seems to me it's the most cowardly and unmanly thing in the world for men, with every advantage in their hands, with all the strength that their kind of education gives them, with all their opportunities,--a thousand to our one,--to hunt down these poor little silly women, whom society keeps stunted and dwarfed for their special amusement."

"Miss Ferguson, you are very severe," said Harry, his face flushing.

"Well," said Rose, "you have this advantage, Mr. Endicott: you know, if I am, the world will not be. Everybody will take your part; everybody will smile on you, and condemn her. That is generous, is it not? I think, after all, Noah Claypole isn't so very uncommon a picture of the way that your lordly sex turn round and cast all the blame on ours. You will never make me believe in a protracted flirtation between a gentleman and lady, where at least half the blame does not lie on his lordship's side. I always said that a woman had no need to have offers made her by a man she could not love, if she conducted herself properly; and I think the same is true in regard to men. But then, as I said before, you have the world on your side; nine persons out of ten see no possible harm in a man's taking every advantage of a woman, if she will let him."

"But I care more for the opinion of the tenth person than of the nine," said Harry; "I care more for what you think than any of them. Your words are severe; but I think they are just."

"O Mr. Endicott!" said Rose, "live for something higher than for what I think,--than for what any one thinks. Think how many glorious chances there are for a noble career for a young man with your fortune, with your leisure, with your influence! is it for you to waste life in this unworthy way? If I had your chances, I would try to do something worth doing."

Rose's face kindled with enthusiasm; and Harry looked at her with admiration.

"Tell me what I ought to do!" he said.

"I cannot tell you," said Rose; "but where there is a will there is a way: and, if you have the will, you will find the way. But, first, you must try and repair the mischief you have done to Lillie. By your own account of the matter, you have been encouraging and keeping up a sort of silly, romantic excitement in her. It is worse than silly; it is sinful. It is trifling with her best interests in this life and the life to come. And I think you must know that, if you had treated her like an honest, plain-spoken brother or cousin, without any trumpery of gallantry or sentiment, things would have never got to be as they are. You could have prevented all this; and you can put an end to it now."

"Honestly, I will try," said Harry. "I will begin, by confessing my faults like a good boy, and take the blame on myself where it belongs, and try to make Lillie see things like a good girl. But she is in bad surroundings; and, if I were her husband, I wouldn't let her stay there another day. There are no morals in that circle; it's all a perfect crush of decaying garbage."

"I think," said Rose, "that, if this thing goes no farther, it will gradually die out even in that circle; and, in the better circles of

New York, I trust it will not be heard of. Mrs. Van Astrachan and I will appear publicly with Lillie; and if she is seen with us, and at this house, it will be sufficient to contradict a dozen slanders. She has the noblest, kindest husband,--one of the best men and truest gentlemen I ever knew."

"I pity him then," said Harry.

"He is to be pitied," said Rose; "but his work is before him. This woman, such as she is, with all her faults, he has taken for better or for worse; and all true friends and good people, both his and hers, should help both sides to make the best of it."

"I should say," said Harry, "that there is in this no best side."

"I think you do Lillie injustice," said Rose. "There is, and must be, good in every one; and gradually the good in him will overcome the evil in her."

"Let us hope so," said Harry. "And now, Miss Ferguson, may I hope that you won't quite cross my name out of your good book? You'll be friends with me, won't you?"

"Oh, certainly!" said Rose, with a frank smile.

"Well, let's shake hands on that," said Harry, rising to go.

Rose gave him her hand, and the two parted in all amity.