

THE CORAL RING.

"There is no time of life in which young girls are so thoroughly selfish as from fifteen to twenty," said Edward Ashton, deliberately, as he laid down a book he had been reading, and leaned over the centre table.

"You insulting fellow!" replied a tall, brilliant-looking creature, who was lounging on an ottoman hard by, over one of Dickens's last works.

"Truth, coz, for all that," said the gentleman, with the air of one who means to provoke a discussion.

"Now, Edward, this is just one of your wholesale declarations, for nothing only to get me into a dispute with you, you know," replied the lady. "On your conscience, now, (if you have one,) is it not so?"

"My conscience feels quite easy, cousin, in subscribing to that sentiment as my confession of faith," replied the gentleman, with provoking sang froid.

"Pshaw! it's one of your fusty old bachelor notions. See what comes, now, of your living to your time of life without a wife--disrespect for the sex, and all that. Really, cousin, your symptoms are getting alarming."

"Nay, now, Cousin Florence," said Edward, "you are a girl of moderately good sense, with all your nonsense. Now don't you (I know you do) think just so too?"

"Think just so too!--do you hear the creature?" replied Florence. "No, sir; you can speak for yourself in this matter, but I beg leave to enter my protest when you speak for me too."

"Well, now, where is there, coz, among all our circle, a young girl that has any sort of purpose or object in life, to speak of, except to make herself as interesting and agreeable as possible? to be admired, and to pass her time in as amusing a way as she can? Where will you find one between fifteen and twenty that has any serious regard for the improvement and best welfare of those with whom she is connected at all, or that modifies her conduct, in the least, with reference to it? Now, cousin, in very serious earnest, you have about as much real character, as much earnestness and depth of feeling, and as much good sense, when one can get at it, as any young lady of them all; and yet, on your conscience, can you say that you live with any sort of reference to any body's good, or to any thing but your own amusement and gratification?"

"What a shocking adjuration!" replied the lady; "prefaced, too, by a three-story compliment. Well, being so adjured, I must think to the best of my ability. And now, seriously and soberly, I don't see as I am selfish. I do all that I have any occasion to do for any body. You know that we have servants to do every thing that is necessary about the

house, so that there is no occasion for my making any display of housewifery excellence. And I wait on mamma if she has a headache, and hand papa his slippers and newspaper, and find Uncle John's spectacles for him twenty times a day, (no small matter, that,) and then----"

"But, after all, what is the object and purpose of your life?"

"Why, I haven't any. I don't see how I can have any--that is, as I am made. Now, you know, I've none of the fussing, baby-tending, herb-tea-making recommendations of Aunt Sally, and divers others of the class commonly called useful. Indeed, to tell the truth, I think useful persons are commonly rather fussy and stupid. They are just like the boneset, and hoarhound, and catnip--very necessary to be raised in a garden, but not in the least ornamental."

"And you charming young ladies, who philosophize in kid slippers and French dresses, are the tulips and roses--very charming, and delightful, and sweet, but fit for nothing on earth but parlor ornaments."

"Well, parlor ornaments are good in their way," said the young lady, coloring, and looking a little vexed.

"So you give up the point, then," said the gentleman, "that you girls are good for--just to amuse yourselves, amuse others, look pretty, and be agreeable."

"Well, and if we behave well to our parents, and are amiable in the family--I don't know--and yet," said Florence, sighing, "I have often had a sort of vague idea of something higher that we might become; yet, really, what more than this is expected of us? what else can we do?"

"I used to read in old-fashioned novels about ladies visiting the sick and the poor," replied Edward. "You remember Coelebs in Search of a Wife?"

"Yes, truly; that is to say, I remember the story part of it, and the love scenes; but as for all those everlasting conversations of Dr. Barlow, Mr. Stanley, and nobody knows who else, I skipped those, of course. But really, this visiting and tending the poor, and all that, seems very well in a story, where the lady goes into a picturesque cottage, half overgrown with honeysuckle, and finds an emaciated, but still beautiful woman propped up by pillows. But come to the downright matter of fact of poking about in all these vile, dirty alleys, and entering little dark rooms, amid troops of grinning children, and smelling codfish and onions, and nobody knows what--dear me, my benevolence always evaporates before I get through. I'd rather pay anybody five dollars a day to do it for me than do it myself. The fact is, that I have neither fancy nor nerves for this kind of thing."

"Well, granting, then, that you can do nothing for your fellow-creatures unless you are to do it in the most genteel, comfortable, and picturesque manner possible, is there not a great field for a woman like

you, Florence, in your influence over your associates? With your talents for conversation, your tact, and self-possession, and ladylike gift of saying any thing you choose, are you not responsible, in some wise, for the influence you exert over those by whom you are surrounded?"

"I never thought of that," replied Florence.

"Now, you remember the remarks that Mr. Fortesque made the other evening on the religious services at church?"

"Yes, I do; and I thought then he was too bad."

"And I do not suppose there was one of you ladies in the room that did not think so too; but yet the matter was all passed over with smiles, and with not a single insinuation that he had said any thing unpleasing or disagreeable."

"Well, what could we do? One does not want to be rude, you know."

"Do! Could you not, Florence, you who have always taken the lead in society, and who have been noted for always being able to say and do what you please--could you not have shown him that those remarks were unpleasing to you, as decidedly as you certainly would have done if they had related to the character of your father or brother? To my mind, a woman of true moral feeling should consider herself as much insulted when her religion is treated with contempt as if the contempt were shown

to herself. Do you not know the power which is given to you women to awe and restrain us in your presence, and to guard the sacredness of things which you treat as holy? Believe me, Florence, that Fortesque, infidel as he is, would reverence a woman with whom he dared not trifle on sacred subjects."

Florence rose from her seat with a heightened color, her dark eyes brightening through tears.

"I am sure what you say is just, cousin, and yet I have never thought of it before. I will--I am determined to begin, after this, to live with some better purpose than I have done."

"And let me tell you, Florence, in starting a new course, as in learning to walk, taking the first step is every thing. Now, I have a first step to propose to you."

"Well, cousin----"

"Well, you know, I suppose, that among your train of adorers you number Colonel Elliot?"

Florence smiled.

"And perhaps you do not know, what is certainly true, that, among the most discerning and cool part of his friends, Elliot is considered as a

lost man."

"Good Heavens! Edward, what do you mean?"

"Simply this: that with all his brilliant talents, his amiable and generous feelings, and his success in society, Elliot has not self-control enough to prevent his becoming confirmed in intemperate habits."

"I never dreamed of this," replied Florence. "I knew that he was spirited and free, fond of society, and excitable; but never suspected any thing beyond."

"Elliot has tact enough never to appear in ladies' society when he is not in a fit state for it," replied Edward; "but yet it is so."

"But is he really so bad?"

"He stands just on the verge, Florence; just where a word fitly spoken might turn him. He is a noble creature, full of all sorts of fine impulses and feelings; the only son of a mother who dotes on him, the idolized brother of sisters who love him as you love your brother, Florence; and he stands where a word, a look--so they be of the right kind--might save him."

"And why, then, do you not speak to him?" said Florence.

"Because I am not the best person, Florence. There is another who can do it better; one whom he admires, who stands in a position which would forbid his feeling angry; a person, cousin, whom I have heard in gayer moments say that she knew how to say any thing she pleased without offending any body."

"O Edward!" said Florence, coloring; "do not bring up my foolish speeches against me, and do not speak as if I ought to interfere in this matter, for indeed I cannot do it. I never could in the world, I am certain I could not."

"And so," said Edward, "you, whom I have heard say so many things which no one else could say, or dared to say--you, who have gone on with your laughing assurance in your own powers of pleasing, shrink from trying that power when a noble and generous heart might be saved by it. You have been willing to venture a great deal for the sake of amusing yourself and winning admiration; but you dare not say a word for any high or noble purpose. Do you not see how you confirm what I said of the selfishness of you women?"

"But you must remember, Edward, this is a matter of great delicacy."

"That word delicacy is a charming cover-all in all these cases, Florence. Now, here is a fine, noble-spirited young man, away from his mother and sisters, away from any family friend who might care for him,

tempted, betrayed, almost to ruin, and a few words from you, said as a woman knows how to say them, might be his salvation. But you will coldly look on and see him go to destruction, because you have too much delicacy to make the effort--like the man that would not help his neighbor out of the water because he had never had the honor of an introduction."

"But, Edward, consider how peculiarly fastidious Elliot is--how jealous of any attempt to restrain and guide him."

"And just for that reason it is that men of his acquaintance cannot do any thing with him. But what are you women made with so much tact and power of charming for, if it is not to do these very things that we cannot do? It is a delicate matter--true; and has not Heaven given to you a fine touch and a fine eye for just such delicate matters? Have you not seen, a thousand times, that what might be resented as an impertinent interference on the part of a man, comes to us as a flattering expression of interest from the lips of a woman?"

"Well, but, cousin, what would you have me do? How would you have me do it?" said Florence, earnestly.

"You know that Fashion, which makes so many wrong turns, and so many absurd ones, has at last made one good one, and it is now a fashionable thing to sign the temperance pledge. Elliot himself would be glad to do it, but he foolishly committed himself against it in the outset, and now

feels bound to stand to his opinion. He has, too, been rather rudely assailed by some of the apostles of the new state of things, who did not understand the peculiar points of his character; in short, I am afraid that he will feel bound to go to destruction for the sake of supporting his own opinion. Now, if I should undertake with him, he might shoot me; but I hardly think there is any thing of the sort to be apprehended in your case. Just try your enchantments; you have bewitched wise men into doing foolish things before now; try, now, if you can't bewitch a foolish man into doing a wise thing."

Florence smiled archly, but instantly grew more thoughtful.

"Well, cousin," she said, "I will try. Though you are liberal in your ascriptions of power, yet I can put the matter to the test of experiment."

* * * * *

Florence Elmore was, at the time we speak of, in her twentieth year. Born of one of the wealthiest families in ----, highly educated and accomplished, idolized by her parents and brothers, she had entered the world as one born to command. With much native nobleness and magnanimity of character, with warm and impulsive feelings, and a capability of every thing high or great, she had hitherto lived solely for her own amusement, and looked on the whole brilliant circle by which she was surrounded, with all its various actors, as something got up for her

special diversion. The idea of influencing any one, for better or worse, by any thing she ever said or did, had never occurred to her. The crowd of admirers of the other sex, who, as a matter of course, were always about her, she regarded as so many sources of diversion; but the idea of feeling any sympathy with them as human beings, or of making use of her power over them for their improvement, was one that had never entered her head.

Edward Ashton was an old bachelor cousin of Florence's, who, having earned the title of oddity, in general society, availed himself of it to exercise a turn for telling the truth to the various young ladies of his acquaintance, especially to his fair cousin Florence. We remark, by the by, that these privileged truth tellers are quite a necessary of life to young ladies in the full tide of society, and we really think it would be worth while for every dozen of them to unite to keep a person of this kind on a salary, for the benefit of the whole. However, that is nothing to our present purpose; we must return to our fair heroine, whom we left, at the close of the last conversation, standing in deep revery, by the window.

"It's more than half true," she said to herself--"more than half. Here am I, twenty years old, and never have thought of any thing, never done any thing, except to amuse and gratify myself; no purpose, no object; nothing high, nothing dignified, nothing worth living for! Only a parlor ornament--heigh ho! Well, I really do believe I could do something with this Elliot; and yet how dare I try?"

Now, my good readers, if you are anticipating a love story, we must hasten to put in our disclaimer; you are quite mistaken in the case. Our fair, brilliant heroine was, at this time of speaking, as heart-whole as the diamond on her bosom, which reflected the light in too many sparkling rays ever to absorb it. She had, to be sure, half in earnest, half in jest, maintained a bantering, platonic sort of friendship with George Elliot. She had danced, ridden, sung, and sketched with him; but so had she with twenty other young men; and as to coming to any thing tender with such a quick, brilliant, restless creature, Elliot would as soon have undertaken to sentimentalize over a glass of soda water. No; there was decidedly no love in the case.

"What a curious ring that is!" said Elliot to her, a day or two after, as they were reading together.

"It is a knight's ring," said she, playfully, as she drew it off and pointed to a coral cross set in the gold, "a ring of the red-cross knights. Come, now, I've a great mind to bind you to my service with it."

"Do, lady fair," said Elliot, stretching out his hand for the ring.

"Know, then," said she, "if you take this pledge, that you must obey whatever commands I lay upon you in its name."

"I swear!" said Elliot, in the mock heroic, and placed the ring on his finger.

An evening or two after, Elliot attended Florence to a party at Mrs. B.'s. Every thing was gay and brilliant, and there was no lack either of wit or wine. Elliot was standing in a little alcove, spread with refreshments, with a glass of wine in his hand. "I forbid it; the cup is poisoned!" said a voice in his ear. He turned quickly, and Florence was at his side. Every one was busy, with laughing and talking, around, and nobody saw the sudden start and flush that these words produced, as Elliot looked earnestly in the lady's face. She smiled, and pointed playfully to the ring; but after all, there was in her face an expression of agitation and interest which she could not repress, and Elliot felt, however playful the manner, that she was in earnest; and as she glided away in the crowd, he stood with his arms folded, and his eyes fixed on the spot where she disappeared.

"Is it possible that I am suspected--that there are things said of me as if I were in danger?" were the first thoughts that flashed through his mind. How strange that a man may appear doomed, given up, and lost, to the eye of every looker on, before he begins to suspect himself! This was the first time that any defined apprehension of loss of character had occurred to Elliot, and he was startled as if from a dream.

"What the deuse is the matter with you, Elliot? You look as solemn as a hearse!" said a young man near by.

"Has Miss Elmore cut you?" said another.

"Come, man, have a glass," said a third.

"Let him alone--he's bewitched," said a fourth. "I saw the spell laid on him. None of us can say but our turn may come next."

An hour later, that evening, Florence was talking with her usual spirit to a group who were collected around her, when, suddenly looking up, she saw Elliot, standing in an abstracted manner, at one of the windows that looked out into the balcony.

"He is offended, I dare say," she thought; "but what do I care? For once in my life I have tried to do a right thing--a good thing. I have risked giving offence for less than this, many a time." Still, Florence could not but feel tremulous, when, a few moments after, Elliot approached her and offered his arm for a promenade. They walked up and down the room, she talking volubly, and he answering yes and no, till at length, as if by accident, he drew her into the balcony which overhung the garden. The moon was shining brightly, and every thing without, in its placid quietness, contrasted strangely with the busy, hurrying scene within.

"Miss Elmore," said Elliot, abruptly, "may I ask you, sincerely, had you any design in a remark you made to me in the early part of the evening?"

Florence paused, and though habitually the most practised and self-possessed of women, the color actually receded from her cheek, as she answered,--

"Yes, Mr. Elliot; I must confess that I had."

"And is it possible, then, that you have heard any thing?"

"I have heard, Mr. Elliot, that which makes me tremble for you, and for those whose life, I know, is bound up in you; and, tell me, were it well or friendly in me to know that such things were said, that such danger existed, and not to warn you of it?"

Elliot stood for a few moments in silence.

"Have I offended? Have I taken too great a liberty?" said Florence, gently.

Hitherto Elliot had only seen in Florence the self-possessed, assured, light-hearted woman of fashion; but there was a reality and depth of feeling in the few words she had spoken to him, in this interview, that opened to him entirely a new view in her character.

"No, Miss Elmore," replied he, earnestly, after some pause; "I may be pained, offended I cannot be. To tell the truth, I have been thoughtless, excited, dazzled; my spirits, naturally buoyant, have

carried me, often, too far; and lately I have painfully suspected my own powers of resistance. I have really felt that I needed help, but have been too proud to confess, even to myself, that I needed it. You, Miss Elmore, have done what, perhaps, no one else could have done. I am overwhelmed with gratitude, and I shall bless you for it to the latest day of my life. I am ready to pledge myself to any thing you may ask on this subject."

"Then," said Florence, "do not shrink from doing what is safe, and necessary, and right for you to do, because you have once said you would not do it. You understand me."

"Precisely," replied Elliot: "and you shall be obeyed."

It was not more than a week before the news was circulated that even George Elliot had signed the pledge of temperance. There was much wondering at this sudden turn among those who had known his utter repugnance to any measure of the kind, and the extent to which he had yielded to temptation; but few knew how fine and delicate had been the touch to which his pride had yielded.