

CHAPTER XII

On the following Thursday Gertrude, Agatha, and Jane met for the first time since they had parted at Alton College. Agatha was the shyest of the three, and externally the least changed. She fancied herself very different from the Agatha of Alton; but it was her opinion of herself that had altered, not her person. Expecting to find a corresponding alteration in her friends, she had looked forward to the meeting with much doubt and little hope of its proving pleasant.

She was more anxious about Gertrude than about Jane, concerning whom, at a brief interview in London, she had already discovered that Lady Brandon's manner, mind, and speech were just what Miss Carpenter's had been. But, even from Agatha, Jane commanded more respect than before, having changed from an overgrown girl into a fine woman, and made a brilliant match in her first season, whilst many of her pretty, proud, and clever contemporaries, whom she had envied at school, were still unmarried, and were having their homes made uncomfortable by parents anxious to get rid of the burthen of supporting them, and to profit in purse or position by their marriages.

This was Gertrude's case. Like Agatha, she had thrown away her matrimonial opportunities. Proud of her rank and exclusiveness, she had resolved to have as little as possible to do with persons who did not share both with her. She began by repulsing the proffered acquaintance of many families of great wealth and fashion, who either did not know their grandparents or were ashamed of them. Having shut herself out of their circle, she was presented at court, and thenceforth accepted the invitations of those only who had, in her opinion, a right to the same honor. And she was far stricter on that point than the Lord Chamberlain, who had, she held, betrayed his trust by practically turning Leveller. She was well educated, refined in her manners and habits, skilled in etiquette to an extent irritating to the ignorant, and gifted with a delicate complexion, pearly teeth, and a face that would have been Grecian but for a slight upward tilt of the nose and traces of a square, heavy type in the jaw. Her father was a retired admiral, with sufficient influence to have had a sinecure made by a Conservative government expressly for the maintenance of his son pending alliance with some heiress. Yet Gertrude remained single, and the admiral, who had formerly spent more money than he could comfortably afford on her education, and was still doing so upon her state and personal adornment, was complaining so unpleasantly of her failure to get taken off his hands, that she could hardly bear to live at home, and was ready to marry any thoroughbred gentleman, however unsuitable his age or character, who would relieve her from her humiliating dependence. She was prepared to sacrifice her natural desire for youth, beauty, and virtue in a husband if she could escape from her parents on no easier terms, but she was resolved to die an old maid sooner than marry an upstart.

The difficulty in her way was pecuniary. The admiral was poor. He had not quite six thousand a year, and though he practiced the utmost economy in order to keep up the most expensive habits, he could not afford to give his daughter a dowry. Now the well born bachelors of her set, having more blue blood, but much less wealth, than they needed, admired her, paid her compliments, danced with her, but could not afford to marry her. Some of them even told her so, married rich daughters of tea merchants, iron founders, or successful stockbrokers, and then tried to make matches between her and their lowly born brothers-in-law.

So, when Gertrude met Lady Brandon, her lot was secretly wretched, and she was glad to accept an invitation to Brandon Beeches in order to escape for a while from the admiral's daily sarcasms on the marriage list in the "Times." The invitation was the more acceptable because Sir Charles was no mushroom noble, and, in the schooldays which Gertrude now remembered as the happiest of her life, she had acknowledged that Jane's family and connections were more aristocratic than those of any other student then at Alton, herself excepted. To Agatha, whose grandfather had amassed wealth as a proprietor of gasworks (novelties in his time), she had never offered her intimacy. Agatha had taken it by force, partly moral, partly physical. But the gasworks were never forgotten, and when Lady Brandon mentioned, as a piece of delightful news, that she had found out their old school companion, and had asked her to join them, Gertrude was not quite pleased. Yet, when they met, her eyes were the only wet ones there, for she was the least happy of the three, and, though she did not

know it, her spirit was somewhat broken. Agatha, she thought, had lost the bloom of girlhood, but was bolder, stronger, and cleverer than before. Agatha had, in fact, summoned all her self-possession to hide her shyness. She detected the emotion of Gertrude, who at the last moment did not try to conceal it. It would have been poured out freely in words, had Gertrude's social training taught her to express her feelings as well as it had accustomed her to dissemble them.

"Do you remember Miss Wilson?" said Jane, as the three drove from the railway station to Brandon Beeches. "Do you remember Mrs. Miller and her cat? Do you remember the Recording Angel? Do you remember how I fell into the canal?"

These reminiscences lasted until they reached the house and went together to Agatha's room. Here Jane, having some orders to give in the household, had to leave them--reluctantly; for she was jealous lest Gertrude should get the start of her in the renewal of Agatha's affection. She even tried to take her rival away with her; but in vain. Gertrude would not budge.

"What a beautiful house and splendid place!" said Agatha when Jane was gone. "And what a nice fellow Sir Charles is! We used to laugh at Jane, but she can afford to laugh at the luckiest of us now. I always said she would blunder into the best of everything. Is it true that she married in her first season?"

"Yes. And Sir Charles is a man of great culture. I cannot understand it. Her size is really beyond everything, and her manners are bad."

"Hm!" said Agatha with a wise air. "There was always something about Jane that attracted men. And she is more knave than fool. But she is certainly a great ass."

Gertrude looked serious, to imply that she had grown out of the habit of using or listening to such language. Agatha, stimulated by this, continued:

"Here are you and I, who consider ourselves twice as presentable and conversable as she, two old maids." Gertrude winced, and Agatha hastened to add: "Why, as for you, you are perfectly lovely! And she has asked us down expressly to marry us."

"She would not presume--"

"Nonsense, my dear Gertrude. She thinks that we are a couple of fools who have mismanaged our own business, and that she, having managed so well for herself, can settle us in a jiffy. Come, did she not say to you, before I came, that it was time for me to be getting married?"

"Well, she did. But--"

"She said exactly the same thing to me about you when she invited me."

"I would leave her house this moment," said Gertrude, "if I thought she dared meddle in my affairs. What is it to her whether I am married or not?"

"Where have you been living all these years, if you do not know that the very first thing a woman wants to do when she has made a good match is to make ones for all her spinster friends. Jane does not mean any harm. She does it out of pure benevolence."

"I do not need Jane's benevolence."

"Neither do I; but it doesn't do any harm, and she is welcome to amuse herself by trotting out her male

acquaintances for my approval. Hush! Here she comes."

Gertrude subsided. She could not quarrel with Lady Brandon without leaving the house, and she could not leave the house without returning to her home. But she privately resolved to discourage the attentions of Erskine, suspecting that instead of being in love with her as he pretended, he had merely been recommended by Jane to marry her.

Chichester Erskine had made sketches in Palestine with Sir Charles, and had tramped with him through many European picture galleries. He was a young man of gentle birth, and had inherited fifteen hundred a year from his mother, the bulk of the family property being his elder brother's. Having no profession, and being fond of books and pictures, he had devoted himself to fine art, a pursuit which offered him on the cheapest terms a high opinion of the beauty and capacity of his own nature. He had published a tragedy entitled, "The Patriot Martyrs," with an etched frontispiece by Sir Charles, and an edition of it had been speedily disposed of in presentations to the friends of the artist and poet, and to the reviews and newspapers. Sir Charles had asked an eminent tragedian of his acquaintance to place the work on the stage and to enact one of the patriot martyrs. But the tragedian had objected that the other patriot martyrs had parts of equal importance to that proposed for him. Erskine had indignantly refused to cut these parts down or out, and so the project had fallen through.

Since then Erskine had been bent on writing another drama, without regard to the exigencies of the stage, but he had not yet begun it, in consequence of his inspiration coming upon him at inconvenient hours, chiefly late at night, when he had been drinking, and had leisure for sonnets only. The morning air and bicycle riding were fatal to the vein in which poetry struck him as being worth writing. In spite of the bicycle, however, the drama, which was to be entitled "Hypatia," was now in a fair way to be written, for the poet had met and fallen in love with Gertrude Lindsay, whose almost Grecian features, and some knowledge of the different calculua which she had acquired at Alton, helped him to believe that she was a fit model for his heroine.

When the ladies came downstairs they found their host and Erskine in the picture gallery, famous in the neighborhood for the sum it had cost Sir Charles. There was a new etching to be admired, and they were called on to observe what the baronet called its tones, and what Agatha would have called its degrees of smudginess. Sir Charles's attention often wandered from this work of art. He looked at his watch twice, and said to his wife:

"I have ordered them to be punctual with the luncheon."

"Oh, yes; it's all right," said Lady Brandon, who had given orders that luncheon was not to be served until the arrival of another gentleman. "Show Agatha the picture of the man in the--"

"Mr. Trefusis," said a servant.

Mr. Trefusis, still in snuff color, entered; coat unbuttoned and attention unconstrained; exasperatingly unconscious of any occasion for ceremony.

"Here you are at last," said Lady Brandon. "You know everybody, don't you?"

"How do you do?" said Sir Charles, offering his hand as a severe expression of his duty to his wife's guest, who took it cordially, nodded to Erskine, looked without recognition at Gertrude, whose frosty stillness repudiated Lady Brandon's implication that the stranger was acquainted with her, and turned to Agatha, to whom he bowed. She made no sign; she was paralyzed. Lady Brandon reddened with anger. Sir Charles noted his guest's reception with secret satisfaction, but shared the embarrassment which oppressed all present except Trefusis, who seemed quite indifferent and assured, and unconsciously produced an impression that the others had not been equal to the occasion, as indeed they had not.

"We were looking at some etchings when you came in," said Sir Charles, hastening to break the silence. "Do you care for such things?" And he handed him a proof.

Trefusis looked at it as if he had never seen such a thing before and did not quite know what to make of it. "All these scratches seem to me to have no meaning," he said dubiously.

Sir Charles stole a contemptuous smile and significant glance at Erskine. He, seized already with an instinctive antipathy to Trefusis, said emphatically:

"There is not one of those scratches that has not a meaning."

"That one, for instance, like the limb of a daddy-long-legs. What does that mean?"

Erskine hesitated a moment; recovered himself; and said: "Obviously enough--to me at least--it indicates the marking of the roadway."

"Not a bit of it," said Trefusis. "There never was such a mark as that on a road. It may be a very bad attempt at a briar, but briars don't straggle into the middle of roads frequented as that one seems to be--judging by those overdone ruts." He put the etching away, showing no disposition to look further into the portfolio, and remarked, "The only art that interests me is photography."

Erskine and Sir Charles again exchanged glances, and the former said:

"Photography is not an art in the sense in which I understand the term. It is a process."

"And a much less troublesome and more perfect process than that," said Trefusis, pointing to the etching. "The artists are sticking to the old barbarous, difficult, and imperfect processes of etching and portrait painting merely to keep up the value of their monopoly of the required skill. They have left the new, more complexly organized, and more perfect, yet simple and beautiful method of photography in the hands of tradesmen, sneering at it publicly and resorting to its aid surreptitiously. The result is that the tradesmen are becoming better artists than they, and naturally so; for where, as in photography, the drawing counts for nothing, the thought and judgment count for everything; whereas in the etching and daubing processes, where great manual skill is needed to produce anything that the eye can endure, the execution counts for more than the thought, and if a fellow only fit to carry bricks up a ladder or the like has ambition and perseverance enough to train his hand and push into the van, you cannot afford to put him back into his proper place, because thoroughly trained hands are so scarce. Consider the proof of this that you have in literature. Our books are manually the work of printers and papermakers; you may cut an author's hand off and he is as good an author as before. What is the result? There is more imagination in any number of a penny journal than in half-a-dozen of the Royal Academy rooms in the season. No author can live by his work and be as empty-headed as an average successful painter. Again, consider our implements of music--our pianofortes, for example. Nobody but an acrobat will voluntarily spend years at such a difficult mechanical puzzle as the keyboard, and so we have to take our impressions of Beethoven's sonatas from acrobats who vie with each other in the rapidity of their prestos, or the staying power of their left wrists. Thoughtful men will not spend their lives acquiring sleight-of-hand. Invent a piano which will respond as delicately to the turning of a handle as our present ones do to the pressure of the fingers, and the acrobats will be driven back to their carpets and trapezes, because the sole faculty necessary to the executant musician will be the musical faculty, and no other will enable him to obtain a hearing."

The company were somewhat overcome by this unexpected lecture. Sir Charles, feeling that such views bore adversely on him, and were somehow iconoclastic and low-lived, was about to make a peevish retort, when Erskine forestalled him by asking Trefusis what idea he had formed of the future of the arts. He replied promptly. "Photography perfected in its recently discovered power of reproducing color as well as form!

Historical pictures replaced by photographs of tableaux vivants formed and arranged by trained actors and artists, and used chiefly for the instruction of children. Nine-tenths of painting as we understand it at present extinguished by the competition of these photographs, and the remaining tenth only holding its own against them by dint of extraordinary excellence! Our mistuned and unplayable organs and pianofortes replaced by harmonious instruments, as manageable as barrel organs! Works of fiction superseded by interesting company and conversation, and made obsolete by the human mind outgrowing the childishness that delights in the tales told by grownup children such as novelists and their like! An end to the silly confusion, under the one name of Art, of the tomfoolery and make-believe of our play-hours with the higher methods of teaching men to know themselves! Every artist an amateur, and a consequent return to the healthy old disposition to look on every man who makes art a means of money-getting as a vagabond not to be entertained as an equal by honest men!"

"In which case artists will starve, and there will be no more art."

"Sir," said Trefusis, excited by the word, "I, as a Socialist, can tell you that starvation is now impossible, except where, as in England, masterless men are forcibly prevented from producing the food they need. And you, as an artist, can tell me that at present great artists invariably do starve, except when they are kept alive by charity, private fortune, or some drudgery which hinders them in the pursuit of their vocation."

"Oh!" said Erskine. "Then Socialists have some little sympathy with artists after all."

"I fear," said Trefusis, repressing himself and speaking quietly again, "that when a Socialist hears of a hundred pounds paid for a drawing which Andrea del Sarto was glad to sell for tenpence, his heart is not wrung with pity for the artist's imaginary loss as that of a modern capitalist is. Yet that is the only way nowadays of enlisting sympathy for the old masters. Frightful disability, to be out of the reach of the dearest market when you want to sell your drawings! But," he added, giving himself a shake, and turning round gaily, "I did not come here to talk shop. So--pending the deluge--let us enjoy ourselves after our manner."

"No," said Jane. "Please go on about Art. It's such a relief to hear anyone talking sensibly about it. I hate etching. It makes your eyes sore--at least the acid gets into Sir Charles's, and the difference between the first and second states is nothing but imagination, except that the last state is worse than the--here's luncheon!"

They went downstairs then. Trefusis sat between Agatha and Lady Brandon, to whom he addressed all his conversation. They chatted without much interruption from the business of the table; for Jane, despite her amplitude, had a small appetite, and was fearful of growing fat; whilst Trefusis was systematically abstemious. Sir Charles was unusually silent. He was afraid to talk about art, lest he should be contradicted by Trefusis, who, he already felt, cared less and perhaps knew more about it than he. Having previously commented to Agatha on the beauty of the ripening spring, and inquired whether her journey had fatigued her, he had said as much as he could think of at a first meeting. For her part, she was intent on Trefusis, who, though he must know, she thought, that they were all hostile to him except Jane, seemed as confident now as when he had befooled her long ago. That thought set her teeth on edge. She did not doubt the sincerity of her antipathy to him even when she detected herself in the act of protesting inwardly that she was not glad to meet him again, and that she would not speak to him. Gertrude, meanwhile, was giving short answers to Erskine and listening to Trefusis. She had gathered from the domestic squabbles of the last few days that Lady Brandon, against her husband's will, had invited a notorious demagogue, the rich son of a successful cotton-spinner, to visit the Beeches. She had made up her mind to snub any such man. But on recognizing the long-forgotten Smilash, she had been astonished, and had not known what to do. So, to avoid doing anything improper, she had stood stilly silent and done nothing, as the custom of English ladies in such cases is. Subsequently, his unconscious self-assertion had wrought with her as with the others, and her intention of snubbing him had faded into the limbo of projects abandoned without trial. Erskine alone was free from the influence of the intruder. He wished himself elsewhere; but beside Gertrude the presence or absence of any other person troubled him very little.

"How are the Janseniuses?" said Trefusis, suddenly turning to Agatha.

"They are quite well, thank you," she said in measured tones.

"I met John Jansenius in the city lately. You know Jansenius?" he added parenthetically to Sir Charles. "Cotman's bank--the last Cotman died out of the firm before we were born. The Chairman of the Transcanadian Railway Company."

"I know the name. I am seldom in the city."

"Naturally," assented Trefusis; "for who would sadden himself by pushing his way through a crowd of such slaves, if he could help it? I mean slaves of Mammon, of course. To run the gauntlet of their faces in Cornhill is enough to discourage a thoughtful man for hours. Well, Jansenius, being high in the court of Mammon, is looking out for a good post in the household for his son. Jansenius, by-the-bye is Miss Wylie's guardian and the father of my late wife."

Agatha felt inclined to deny this; but, as it was true, she had to forbear. Resolved to show that the relations between her family and Trefusis were not cordial ones, she asked deliberately, "Did Mr. Jansenius speak to you?"

Gertrude looked up, as if she thought this scarcely ladylike.

"Yes," said Trefusis. "We are the best friends in the world--as good as possible, at any rate. He wanted me to subscribe to a fund for relieving the poor at the east end of London by assisting them to emigrate."

"I presume you subscribed liberally," said Erskine. "It was an opportunity of doing some practical good."

"I did not," said Trefusis, grinning at the sarcasm. "This Transcanadian Railway Company, having got a great deal of spare land from the Canadian government for nothing, thought it would be a good idea to settle British workmen on it and screw rent out of them. Plenty of British workmen, supplanted in their employment by machinery, or cheap foreign labor, or one thing or another, were quite willing to go; but as they couldn't afford to pay their passages to Canada, the Company appealed to the benevolent to pay for them by subscription, as the change would improve their miserable condition. I did not see why I should pay to provide a rich company with tenant farmers, and I told Jansenius so. He remarked that when money and not talk was required, the workmen of England soon found out who were their real friends."

"I know nothing about these questions," said Sir Charles, with an air of conclusiveness; "but I see no objection to emigration" The fact is," said Trefusis, "the idea of emigration is a dangerous one for us. Familiarize the workman with it, and some day he may come to see what a capital thing it would be to pack off me, and you, with the peerage, and the whole tribe of unprofitable proprietors such as we are, to St. Helena; making us a handsome present of the island by way of indemnity! We are such a restless, unhappy lot, that I doubt whether it would not prove a good thing for us too. The workmen would lose nothing but the contemplation of our elegant persons, exquisite manners, and refined tastes. They might provide against that loss by picking out a few of us to keep for ornament's sake. No nation with a sense of beauty would banish Lady Brandon, or Miss Lindsay, or Miss Wylie."

"Such nonsense!" said Jane.

"You would hardly believe how much I have spent in sending workmen out of the country against my own view of the country's interest," continued Trefusis, addressing Erskine. "When I make a convert among the working classes, the first thing he does is to make a speech somewhere declaring his new convictions. His employer immediately discharges him--'gives him the sack' is the technical phrase. The sack is the sword of

the capitalist, and hunger keeps it sharp for him. His shield is the law, made for the purpose by his own class. Thus equipped, he gives the worst of it to my poor convert, who comes ruined to me for assistance. As I cannot afford to pension him for life, I get rid of him by assisting him to emigrate. Sometimes he prospers and repays me; sometimes I hear no more of him; sometimes he comes back with his habits unsettled. One man whom I sent to America made his fortune, but he was not a social democrat; he was a clerk who had embezzled, and who applied to me for assistance under the impression that I considered it rather meritorious to rob the till of a capitalist."

"He was a practical Socialist, in fact," said Erskine.

"On the contrary, he was a somewhat too grasping Individualist. Howbeit, I enabled him to make good his defalcation--in the city they consider a defalcation made good when the money is replaced--and to go to New York. I recommended him not to go there; but he knew better than I, for he made a fortune by speculating with money that existed only in the imagination of those with whom he dealt. He never repaid me; he is probably far too good a man of business to pay money that cannot be extracted from him by an appeal to the law or to his commercial credit. Mr. Erskine," added Trefusis, lowering his voice, and turning to the poet, "you are wrong to take part with hucksters and money-hunters against your own nature, even though the attack upon them is led by a man who prefers photography to etching."

"But I assure you--You quite mistake me," said Erskine, taken aback. "I--"

He stopped, looked to Sir Charles for support, and then said airily: "I don't doubt that you are quite right. I hate business and men of business; and as to social questions, I have only one article of belief, which is, that the sole refiner of human nature is fine art."

"Whereas I believe that the sole refiner of art is human nature. Art rises when men rise, and grovels when men grovel. What is your opinion?"

"I agree with you in many ways," replied Sir Charles nervously; for a lack of interest in his fellow-creatures, and an excess of interest in himself, had prevented him from obtaining that power of dealing with social questions which, he felt, a baronet ought to possess, and he was consequently afraid to differ from anyone who alluded to them with confidence. "If you take an interest in art, I believe I can show you a few things worth seeing."

"Thank you. In return I will some day show you a remarkable collection of photographs I possess; many of them taken by me. I venture to think they will teach you something."

"No doubt," said Sir Charles. "Shall we return to the gallery? I have a few treasures there that photography is not likely to surpass for some time yet."

"Let's go through the conservatory," said Jane. "Don't you like flowers, Mr. Smi--I never can remember your proper name."

"Extremely," said Trefusis.

They rose and went out into a long hothouse. Here Lady Brandon, finding Erskine at her side, and Sir Charles before her with Gertrude, looked round for Trefusis, with whom she intended to enjoy a trifling flirtation under cover of showing him the flowers. He was out of sight; but she heard his footsteps in the passage on the opposite side of the greenhouse. Agatha was also invisible. Jane, not daring to rearrange their procession lest her design should become obvious, had to walk on with Erskine.

Agatha had turned unintentionally into the opposite alley to that which the others had chosen. When she saw

what she had done, and found herself virtually alone with Trefusis, who had followed her, she blamed him for it, and was about to retrace her steps when he said coolly:

"Were you shocked when you heard of Henrietta's sudden death?"

Agatha struggled with herself for a moment, and then said in a suppressed voice: "How dare you speak to me?"

"Why not?" said he, astonished.

"I am not going to enter into a discussion with you. You know what I mean very well."

"You mean that you are offended with me; that is plain enough. But when I part with a young lady on good terms, and after a lapse of years, during which we neither meet nor correspond, she asks me how I dare speak to her, I am naturally startled."

"We did not part on good terms."

Trefusis stretched his eyebrows, as if to stretch his memory. "If not," he said, "I have forgotten it, on my honor. When did we part, and what happened? It cannot have been anything very serious, or I should remember it."

His forgetfulness wounded Agatha. "No doubt you are well accustomed to--" She checked herself, and made a successful snatch at her normal manner with gentlemen. "I scarcely remember what it was, now that I begin to think. Some trifle, I suppose. Do you like orchids?"

"They have nothing to do with our affairs at present. You are not in earnest about the orchids, and you are trying to run away from a mistake instead of clearing it up. That is a short-sighted policy, always."

Agatha grew alarmed, for she felt his old influence over her returning. "I do not wish to speak of it," she said firmly.

Her firmness was lost on him. "I do not even know what it means yet," he said, "and I want to know, for I believe there is some misunderstanding between us, and it is the trick of your sex to perpetuate misunderstandings by forbidding all allusions to them. Perhaps, leaving Lyvern so hastily, I forgot to fulfil some promise, or to say farewell, or something of that sort. But do you know how suddenly I was called away? I got a telegram to say that Henrietta was dying, and I had only time to change my clothes--you remember my disguise--and catch the express. And, after all, she was dead when I arrived."

"I know that," said Agatha uneasily. "Please say no more about it."

"Not if it distresses you. Just let me hope that you did not suppose I blamed you for your share in the matter or that I told the Janseniuses of it. I did not. Yes, I like orchids. A plant that can subsist on a scrap of board is an instance of natural econ--"

"YOU blame ME!" cried Agatha. "I *never told the Janseniuses*. What would they have thought of you if I had?"

"Far worse of you than of me, however unjustly. You were the immediate cause of the tragedy; I only the remote one. Jansenius is not far-seeing when his feelings are touched. Few men are."

"I don't understand you in the least. What tragedy do you mean?"

"Henrietta's death. I call it a tragedy conventionally. Seriously, of course, it was commonplace enough."

Agatha stopped and faced him. "What do you mean by what you said just now? You said that I was the immediate cause of the tragedy, and you say that you were talking of Henrietta's--of Henrietta. I had nothing to do with her illness."

Trefusis looked at her as if considering whether he would go any further. Then, watching her with the curiosity of a vivisector, he said: "Strange to say, Agatha," (she shrank proudly at the word), "Henrietta might have been alive now but for you. I am very glad she is not; so you need not reproach yourself on my account. She died of a journey she made to Lyvern in great excitement and distress, and in intensely cold weather. You caused her to make that journey by writing her a letter which made her jealous."

"Do you mean to accuse me--"

"No; stop!" he said hastily, the vivisectioning spirit in him exorcised by her shaking voice; "I accuse you of nothing. Why do you not speak honestly to me when you are at your ease? If you confess your real thoughts only under torture, who can resist the temptation to torture you? One must charge you with homicide to make you speak of anything but orchids."

But Agatha had drawn the new inference from the old facts, and would not be talked out of repudiating it. "It was not my fault," she said. "It was yours--altogether yours."

"Altogether," he assented, relieved to find her indignant instead of remorseful.

She was not to be soothed by a verbal acquiescence. "Your behavior was most unmanly, and I told you so, and you could not deny it. You pretended that you--You pretended to have feelings--You tried to make me believe that Oh, I am a fool to talk to you; you know perfectly well what I mean."

"Perfectly. I tried to make you believe that I was in love with you. How do you know I was not?"

She disdained to answer; but as he waited calmly she said, "You had no right to be."

"That does not prove that I was not. Come, Agatha, you pretended to like me when you did not care two straws about me. You confessed as much in that fatal letter, which I have somewhere at home. It has a great rent right across it, and the mark of her heel; she must have stamped on it in her rage, poor girl! So that I can show your own hand for the very deception you accused me--without proof--of having practiced on you."

"You are clever, and can twist things. What pleasure does it give you to make me miserable?"

"Ha!" he exclaimed, in an abrupt, sardonic laugh. "I don't know; you bewitch me, I think."

Agatha made no reply, but walked on quickly to the end of the conservatory, where the others were waiting for them.

"Where have you been, and what have you been doing all this time?" said Jane, as Trefusis came up, hurrying after Agatha. "I don't know what you call it, but I call it perfectly disgraceful!"

Sir Charles reddened at his wife's bad taste, and Trefusis replied gravely: "We have been admiring the orchids, and talking about them. Miss Wylie takes an interest in them."