GRANT ROBERT

A ROMANTIC YOUNG LADY

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Grant R.

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Содержание

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BOOK I.
INNOCENCE

I

My mother died in giving me birth. My father was a very rich man, a railway magnate, so called, absorbed in great business enterprises. Thus it happened that I was brought up between two fires, – my father's sister, Aunt Agnes; and my mother's sister, Aunt Helen.

Aunt Agnes was prim but cultivated. She wrote for reviews and wore eye-glasses, and her library table was habitually littered with pamphlets and tomes. On the other hand, Aunt Helen was a neat, dapper little woman, who lived in a gem of a house and delighted in bric-à-brac and entertaining. They were both spinsters. Each of them passed one evening in every week with me. On Tuesdays I dined with Aunt Agnes, and on Fridays with Aunt Helen. Thus I was alone only two evenings out of seven, for on Sundays my father did not go to the Club.

From the age of ten until I was fifteen I attended a private school. I proved ambitious and quick at my books. Aunt Helen was anxious that I should be well grounded in the modern languages, while Aunt Agnes wished me to pursue what she styled "serious" studies. In my efforts to please them both I broke down in health. My father was the first to observe my pallid cheeks, and at the advice of a physician I was taken away from school. For nearly a year I was idle, save that I read at random in my father's library. Then my aunts for once put their heads together and insisted upon my having a governess. They told my father that the next three years were the most important in my life, and that the best way to foster my health was to find some judicious person to be my companion.

Aunt Helen was in favor of one who had youth and good spirits, but Aunt Agnes thought it important that a governess should inspire respect. I was not consulted, and my father declined to arbitrate between them. In the end, the favorite of Aunt Agnes was installed, through the chance discovery that the other applicant had been at one time on the stage.

Miss Jenks was a kind but sober disciplinarian of fifty. I was her pupil until I was eighteen; and though I was none the less lonely because of her companionship, I am in her debt to-day for the pains she took to systematize my heterogeneous acquirements and teach me the evils of superficiality. Her views of life were autumnal in tint, and her laugh was never hearty. She rarely conversed with me at length; but if I made inquiries concerning any matter of knowledge, I was sure to find a book or pamphlet on my desk the next day, with slips marking the valuable pages. She kept me so steadily employed during the hours I was not in bed or in the fresh air that I had no time for novel-reading, – a pastime I had indulged in formerly to a considerable extent. I thrived physically under this regimen, but I became silent and grave. Miss Jenks seemed constantly on her guard against undue enthusiasm, and abetted by her example I inclined to introspection and over conscientiousness. I picked up pins, and went out of my way to kick orange-peel from the sidewalk, on principle.

But apart from, or rather concurrent with, this sobriety of character I was a dreamer in secret, and delighted to give the rein to fancy. I liked to picture myself in some of the romantic situations of which I had read, and to build castles for the future. But all these imaginations were of a realistic order, as distinguished from ghosts and fairies and other creations of that class. I was completely free from superstitions. It was not for luck that I picked up pins, but that they should not be wasted. In

like manner I never hesitated to let a horse-shoe lie in the road, to walk under a ladder, or be one of thirteen at table. And yet I was distinctly a dreamer. If it was in the way of lovers, my thoughts were entirely subjective. I knew no young men except the boys at dancing-school; and they as a rule avoided me, for I was shy, and for the present only moderately pretty. I think I tried in my day-dreams to form an ideal of what a lover's mental and moral attributes should be without ever endowing the abstraction with a head. I found a happiness in doing so much, – akin, I fancy, to that of the votary who kneels before a shrine of which the doors are closed. It was the consciousness of a great possible happiness that thrilled me, rather than any definite vision.

When Miss Jenks left us I was a well educated girl for my age. What I knew I knew thoroughly, and the wishes of both my aunts had been respected. Perhaps the most striking circumstances connected with my bringing up, however, were that at eighteen I had no idea I was the heiress to an enormous fortune, and that I could pass young men in the street without self-consciousness. Strangely, too, I had grown up without having formed an intimacy with any girls of my own age. I have never quite been able to decide whether the ability I thus acquired to think for and by myself was more valuable than the happiness that results from such friendships; yet I have never distinctly regretted not having made a confidant among my contemporaries.

II

Miss Jenks went away in October, and a few days later Aunt Helen broached the subject of preparations for the winter. I was to go into society; and she had taken upon her shoulders the burden of having me well-dressed and "presentable," as she called it. My clothes ordered from Paris were at her house, and she took even more pleasure than I in studying their effect when tried on, and in selecting from my mother's jewelry the most appropriate articles for my toilet. There were certain trinkets among them which she told me were all the rage; and she concluded with a homily that I was very fortunate to be able to have such expensive things to wear, and that many girls had to be content with two ball-dresses, or in some instances with one. I was glad to put myself entirely in her hands, for I felt that she knew about such matters. My own sensations were a mixture of timidity, bewilderment, and exultation.

One evening a short time previous to the beginning of the gay season my father turned to me and said, —

"There is something I wish to tell you, Virginia. I have recently made my will. With the exception of a few legacies for charitable uses and a bequest to each of your aunts, I have left everything to you. Very likely it may be a surprise to you to hear that you will be very rich. It is proper and right you should know it now, just as it was important you should remain in ignorance of the fact during childhood. I have requested hitherto your aunts and your governess to make no allusions to your future prospects. If I am not mistaken, you learn the truth from me for the first time."

He paused as if expecting an answer.

"Yes, it has never occurred to me to inquire about the future," said I. "I knew that we lived in comfort. Beyond that I have not thought on the subject."

"It is as I supposed," said my father. "Unless I see reason to alter the present distribution of my property, you will be one of the richest women in town. When you were a child, Virginia, I felt badly at times that you were not a boy; I wanted a son to inherit my name and fortune. But one day it occurred to me, that, though a daughter could not make money, she might learn to spend it as well as a son. The thought comforted me; for I have made all the money we can need for many generations to come, and my only desire is that when I am gone there shall be some one to use it as I would like. There is an idea, I know, that women are not fitted to comprehend the value of money, and that it is unwise to give them the control of large sums. However correct that may be, the tendency of all modern legislation shows that the world is in favor of their administering their own affairs. At any rate, I propose to make the experiment. Unless you convince me beforehand that I am mistaken, I shall leave you at my death the mistress of over three million dollars."

While I was trying to form a definite idea of so much wealth, my father rose, and going to a side-table took up a large tin box, on the top of which lay a plush-covered case and a pile of pamphlets.

"In this trunk," he said, "you will find one hundred thousand dollars in first-rate securities, registered in your name. I want you to learn, so far as is possible for a woman, the care of property. These newspapers and reports will help you somewhat. I shall be glad to answer all your questions, and will keep you supplied with the latest intelligence relating to your property; for I give you these stocks and bonds to use as you see fit. You will find a cheque-book and a bank-book inside. One must learn to appreciate the value of money in order to use it well. I would not advise you to change your investments at first without consulting me. You must expect to make mistakes at the outset, but I have great confidence in your good sense. I should have been afraid to make the experiment in the case of many girls."

These words of my father brought the tears to my eyes. He had been watching me after all, while I sometimes half fancied him oblivious of my existence. At the moment, I was too confused to do more than thank him and gather up in a dazed way the pamphlets he placed before me. He

put the little key that dangled from the tin box into the lock, and disclosed to me the parchment securities within.

"Carefully managed, that ought to yield you six per cent net," said he.

"But what am I to do with so much money every year?" I cried aghast.

My father laughed, and said: "That is for you to decide, Virginia. You will learn only too soon the part that money plays in the world," he added gravely. "Prepare yourself to be courted and flattered for its sake. Some people would say, 'Do not destroy her faith in human nature. She will learn the truth soon enough.' I believe that to be forewarned is to be forearmed. Good and true men are abundant, but there are unscrupulous and mercenary ones as well, who will woo you for the sake of your fortune and not because they love you.

"One word more," said he, without regard to the expression of pain that overspread my face at his last speech. "Do not be afraid to use your money. Avoid foolish extravagance, but learn to enjoy life and the blessings at your disposal. It used to be considered wrong by our forefathers to surround themselves with beautiful things, and any but the simplest comforts. Some people are of that opinion still, but I do not agree with them. Your own good sense will be the best criterion of what is unduly ostentatious; but never hesitate to have anything you may wish because you fear the verdict of others. In short, be independent, and think for yourself if you wish to be happy. Your Aunt Helen has undertaken the charge of your wardrobe; that is something of which I know nothing. I can tell when a young lady is well dressed, but I am not capable of selecting her dresses. Here, however," he said, taking the plush-covered case from the table, "is something that will make your toilet more complete."

I started with delight on raising the lid, to discover a superb necklace of the largest pearls. Under the impulse of the moment I flung my arms about my father's neck and kissed him. He seemed touched by my impetuosity, and stood for a moment with my head between his hands looking into my eyes.

"I believe you have in you the making of a noble woman, my dear," he said proudly. "You have your mother's sweet disposition, and also I think my fixity of purpose."

I lay awake that night for hours. It seemed to me that I had grown five years older in a single day, and I felt a new responsibility in living. My father's trust and generosity had stirred me deeply, and I made many a solemn vow not to prove unworthy of such confidence. But athwart the satisfaction these thoughts inspired, rose the recollection of what he had said regarding the insincerity of men. I had of course read in novels of fortune-hunters, but no suspicion of their existence within the pale of the polite society of which I was so soon to form a part had ever marred the rosy simplicity of my imagination. This was my first peep at the world's wickedness, and it shocked me to think that human nature could be so base.

I had seen but little of my Aunt Agnes during the autumn, perhaps because I more than half suspected she did not sympathize with the plans and preparations for my social education. I remembered some years before, at the time when the question of my attending dancing-school was being debated, to have heard her express disapproval of girls who frittered away their time and health in the pursuit of what she called "vain pleasures." I had not conversed with her on the subject, but I had obtained an intimation from her short and acrid manner on the one or two occasions when we had met of late that she was quite aware of what was going on, and condemned it unequivocally.

Although I knew that Aunt Agnes was very fond of me, and I in turn loved and respected her, she was apt to inspire me with awe even on ordinary occasions. Her character was as upright as her figure, which in defiance of the relaxed customs of the day was always arrayed against a straight-backed chair. Conventionalities of every sort were an abomination to her. Black silk was the full extent of her condescension in the matter of what she was pleased to call Babylonian attire, and she had no patience with the ordinary vanities of her sex.

She received me frostily when I went to visit her a few days after the conversation with my father, and suffered me to kiss both her cheeks in turn without evincing a sign of being mollified.

Remembering that she was fond of directness, I opened fire at once by observing that I was invited to a ball at Mrs. Dale's a week hence.

"All girls are fools," she answered abruptly, after a moment. I bowed my head submissively, and awaited the storm.

"I expected better things of you, Virginia," she continued. "I hoped you were too sensible to follow the herd, and waste the best years of your life in folly."

"Folly?" I echoed faintly.

"Yes, folly. What else is it but folly to sit up night after night, until the small hours of the morning, waltzing with brainless young men?"

"But, Aunty, my father wishes me to go into society."

"Pshaw! What does he know about balls and parties? He is under the thumb of your Aunt Helen. At your age he was working hard for his living, and learning to be of use in the world."

"But I have not to earn my living," said I.

"So much the worse for you. Humph! You have found that out, have you?"

I understood that she referred to what my father had told me. "Yes, I know my father is very rich. If I do not go to parties, how am I to learn anything about life?"

"Life! You are very simple, child, if you expect to learn what life is by dancing the German. The first thing we shall hear is, that you are engaged to some young dandy who is after your fortune. Then you will be snuffed out. You will become a fashionable simpleton, who goes to bed at four and gets up at noon. Life, indeed!"

This cruel insinuation, following so soon upon what I had lately heard, cut like a knife. I answered firmly, —

"My father has already warned me to be on my guard against insincere persons."

"Much good a warning would do, if you were to take it into your head to like anybody! Tell *me*! I may not understand girls" (this was a thrust at Aunt Helen), "but I know the dispositions of my own family. When a Harlan gets a fixed idea, it takes a deal of pounding to drive it out; and you're a Harlan, Virginia, if there ever was one."

This last reflection seemed to console her a little, or at least to suggest the futility of trying to alter my determination; for after speaking of other matters for a few moments she exclaimed, —

"Well! girls will be girls, I suppose, to the end of time," – and rising she went to an escritoire and took out a small parcel, which it was evident she had intended to present to me from the first. "There, Virginia, if you are bent on being frivolous, is a bit of old lace that your Aunt Helen, or anybody else, would have to hunt a long time to equal. You will find a locket inside which I wore when your father was married. I shall never use such frippery again, and you might as well have them now as when I am dead."

Knowing that she meant to be gracious, I thanked her warmly. But having doubts regarding her taste, I abstained from opening the package until I reached home. Then I found that the lace even surpassed in exquisiteness the estimate Aunt Agnes had put upon it. Aunt Helen was fairly envious, and spent the evening in wondering "where on earth" her rival could have come into possession of such a treasure.

But the locket – a cameo, bizarre, and out of the run of ordinary personal ornaments – excited her contempt.

"It is fit for a woman of forty, and would make you look like a guy, Virginia."

The idea of looking different from other people did not disturb me. Indeed, I had resolved to be thoroughly independent. So, on the evening of Mrs. Dale's ball, I announced my intention of wearing the locket, and of reserving my necklace of pearls for some more brilliant occasion. Aunt Helen, who supervised my toilet, was greatly distressed at my obstinacy. Nevertheless I left the house with it on. But at the last moment my courage failed me; I slipped it off and put it in my pocket, – thus making a courtesy to conventionality on the threshold of society.

III

My recollections of the first few parties I attended are confused. A great many young men were introduced to me, but I scarcely distinguished one from another. I was alternately dazed and dazzled by the attentions I received. There is no object in disguising the fact that I had become very handsome, and my brilliant financial prospects were of course well known.

My emotions were doubtless those of an average society belle, eager to drain the cup of pleasure to the dregs. I lived to dance, and cared little with whom I danced, provided he danced well. The mere physical satisfaction of waltzing, coupled with the glamor of a universal homage, contented me.

But this did not last long. I learned to make distinctions, and to generalize; and from this primary stage of development I began to entertain positive likes and dislikes.

It was not however until the winter was waning that Mr. Roger Dale occupied a different place in my thoughts from half-a-dozen others, although he had been polite to me from the time of my first ball at his mother's house. It would be difficult to say exactly what distinguished him from the rest of their admirers in the eyes of every girl with any pretensions to beauty or style; but he was undeniably considered at that time, in the circle of my acquaintance, as the most fascinating man in society. He was commonly spoken of as interesting, and there was a vague impression that he was lacking in constancy. It was not unnatural therefore that I should be flattered at his singling me out for assiduous attentions, especially when he possessed the art of letting me understand in a quiet, gentlemanly fashion, and without the aid of garish compliments, that I was the only girl in the room for whom he cared a straw. I did not believe him, but I was pleased, for that was the way in which I wished to be wooed by the one whom I wished to believe.

So in course of time I became willing to retire with him into conservatories and ante-rooms to avoid interruption. I was still fond of dancing, but I had recovered from the frenzy which blinded me to everything but the rapture of the moment. I liked to hear Mr. Dale talk, and without an affinity of ideas our intimacy must have died a natural death. But we found a common ground of sympathy in our revolt against the subserviency in modern life of romance to matter-of-fact considerations. He harped upon this string, and awoke a corresponding chord in my breast. His ideas were a correlation of the dreams of my girlhood. I felt that I was understood. There was such a thing as the love I had imagined; Mr. Dale had pondered over it, fathomed it, and could talk about it. Not that I considered myself in love with him, or him with me. We simply were friends, – that was all. But existence seemed nobler when illumined by his theories.

He declared that the Puritan fathers and their descendants lacked the power of expression. People were afraid to acknowledge they loved. The ardor that distinguished the passion of other races and made it beautiful was nowhere to be found, for if it ever dared to manifest itself the breath of ridicule wilted its growth. The expensive "floral offering" was more prized than the single dewy bud of the true lover, and the zeal and sentiment of chivalry had yielded to the blighting prose of a commercial age.

My Aunt Helen was the first of the family to comment on my intimacy with him.

"What does your friend Mr. Dale do?" she asked one day.

"Do?"

"Yes. I mean what is his business down town?"

"I don't know, Aunt Helen," I answered; and I spoke the truth. I had never thought to inquire.

"The Dale blood is not the very best in the world," she continued presently, with her head bent over her work almost as though soliloquizing. "As regards position they are well enough, but two of this young man's uncles were extremely dissipated, and I fancy that the father was not much to boast of. He died early, just after I was grown up. I remember him though. He was a handsome creature."

I listened with glowing cheeks, but made no response.

"They have very little to live on I imagine," she observed nearly five minutes later.

"Of whom are you speaking?" I inquired with dignity.

"The Dales, child, of course. It was generally supposed that Mrs. Dale was left very poorly off. I believe her husband's life was insured for something, and they own their house. Pussy always looks well dressed, but they must have to scrimp in other ways."

Pussy Dale was Roger's eldest sister, a girl of just my age. They were a family of five, four of whom were daughters.

"I don't see that their being poor is anything against them," I said a little hotly.

"No-o," replied Aunt Helen reflectively, "perhaps not. But I don't know what your father would say to him for a son-in-law."

"A son-in-law? You have no right to make such insinuations, Aunt Helen," I protested. "Mr. Dale and I are friends, and nothing more."

"I am glad to hear it, dear; for though I should try to reconcile myself to whomever you chose, believing that a girl is the best judge of what will contribute to her own happiness, I own frankly that I should be better pleased with some one whose antecedents were a little more creditable."

I gritted my teeth and sewed industriously in silence for the rest of the evening. I felt injured, without scarcely knowing why. Aunt Helen's accusations were vague at best. It was impossible for me to doubt Mr. Dale. But on the other hand the idea of our marriage was not a serious consideration. Still I felt annoyed and troubled, and I could not help thinking of what my father and Aunt Agnes had said by way of warning. But though I lay awake long that night I fell asleep at last, convinced that Roger Dale was the noblest and sincerest soul alive, and that to doubt him would be to wrong the sacred name of friendship.

This conversation took place in March; but in the next two months Mr. Dale was so much at our house that I was not surprised when my father asked one evening the same question put to me by Aunt Helen. Our intimacy had continued without further developments, except a constantly increasing devotion on his part and a corresponding pleasure in his society on my own. I did not make my infatuation conspicuous by walking with him in the streets, but otherwise I did not attempt to disguise the partiality I felt for him. Had I mixed more with other girls before entering society I might have been less guileless. But as it was, I never thought of tempering by coquetry the satisfaction visible in my face whenever Mr. Dale appeared.

This time I was prepared with an answer to the question concerning his occupation down town: —

"He is in the wool business, and doing very well."

"A wool broker?"

"I think so."

"Humph!"

My father walked up and down the room a few times. "I have already cautioned you, Virginia, against false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing."

He was jocose doubtless so as to pass the matter off lightly, and to spare my feelings. But I chose to be offended, and answered haughtily, —

"I don't understand what you mean."

He stood still and looked directly at me. "Simply this, Virginia: I trust you are too sensible to throw yourself away on a man who is not worthy of you."

"You do Mr. Dale a great injustice," I replied, with an assumption of dignity; "and me too." Whereupon I swept out of the room.

I flung myself upon my bed and burst into tears. These remarks of my father and aunt were straws, but they showed me how the wind was likely to blow. Those upon whom I had a right to rely for sympathy were ready to desert me first of all. It was cruel and unkind. Had I asked to be allowed to marry Mr. Dale? Had either of us ever hinted at the subject? Never! And yet my father was the first

to cast suspicions and make insinuations, for I understood his unjust taunt. Sheep's clothing, indeed! Detraction was the surest way to make me love him; for if there was any one under the sun whose sentiments were noble and unselfish, whose motives were manly and disinterested, I believed it was Roger Dale. Why had my father spoken in such high terms of my good sense only six months ago if he thought it necessary to caution me again to-day? I felt bitter and wronged.

Just then my glance chanced to fall on the tin box in which were the securities my father had given me in the autumn, and I blushed as I reflected that except to deposit the dividends that were sent to me I had done nothing toward understanding the care of my property. I had used the cheque-book to give a little money in charity and to pay some bills, but the pile of financial pamphlets lay on the shelf of my desk still unread. I had not had time to devote myself to them, or rather the time had slipped away before I realized it.

There was some ground after all for my father's reproof. It was possible that my neglect and apparent disregard of his wishes had led him to speak severely of Mr. Dale. The thought comforted me and brought sleep to my eyes. I rose early, and spent an hour before breakfast in reading the Annual Report of one of the Railway Companies in which I held stock; and I went downstairs with a confused mind, but with a sense of awakened virtue. I was cheerful and animated at table, and asked several questions concerning mortgage bonds and sinking funds that brought a pleasant expression to my father's face.

The reason why I felt so buoyant was not merely the light-heartedness of repentance. My romantic spirit had conceived a scheme for convincing my father that he had unjustly sneered at Mr. Dale's business capacity. I was resolved to consult him as to my investments, and I felt sure that the profits accruing from his sage advice would plead his cause more eloquently than any words of mine. Let but my father perceive my admirer's sterling qualities, and I knew that he would be eager to make amends for his injustice by pushing him forward in business. The idea took strong possession of me, for ever since hearing Aunt Helen speak of Mr. Dale's lack of means I had been eager at heart to assist him. I would gladly have asked him to put my money into some commercial venture, and have insisted upon his keeping a portion of the gains; but to that I felt he would never consent.

And yet I did not believe that I was in love with Roger Dale. The thought never occurred to me. I was ready to have our relations continue indefinitely as they were. But I was not able to regard the hostility of my family without impatience that added a spice of martyrdom to my interviews with him. The very fact that others thought ill made it all the more incumbent upon me to be steadfast and undoubting.

IV

Before I had an opportunity to broach the question of investments to Mr. Dale, Aunt Agnes added her quota to my sense of wrong. One evening when she came to dinner I divined, from the intense rigidity of her posture at table, that she was offended with me. To tell the truth, I felt a trifle guilty. My visits to her during the winter had been spasmodic and hurried. What was worse, so greatly was I carried away by my social success, that whenever we did meet I prattled on about fashionable frivolities regardless of her frown. But though I was conscious of not standing in her good graces, I felt tolerably secure from comments on the score of Mr. Dale, for the reason that as she never went anywhere she would know nothing of my intimacy with him unless Aunt Helen or my father were to make her a confidant; and this I did not think likely. Therefore, when she introduced the subject while we were alone together in the drawing-room after dinner, I was a little disconcerted.

"Who is this Mr. Gale whose name I see connected with yours?" she asked severely.

"With mine?"

"Yes, with yours. Don't beat about the bush! You know perfectly well whom I mean."

"Excuse me, Aunt Agnes, there is no Mr. Gale among my acquaintance. I know a Mr. Dale."

She frowned, and began to fumble in her pocket. "The principle is the same whether it is Gale or Dale or Tompkins. I never expected to learn of my niece's engagement from the public press. I am confident the notice said 'Gale.' Ah! I thought so. Plain as the nose on your face," she added, producing from her porte-monnaie a newspaper cutting and reading aloud: "'It is rumored that the engagement of the beautiful and accomplished daughter of Augustus Harlan, the Railway Magnate, to Mr. Roger Gale of this city will soon be announced.'"

"It is not true, Aunt Agnes," I cried indignantly. Needless to say I was startled at this bit of information, coming too as it did from such an unexpected source. My aunt's knowledge of it seemed fully as remarkable to me as the fact of the publication.

"I trust not," she replied with emphasis. "I did not seriously suppose my own niece so far lost to all sense of propriety as to take such a step unbeknown to me. But it seems to me, Virginia, you must have been behaving in a, to say the least, very peculiar manner, to get your name into the newspapers. Where there is so much smoke there is apt to be a little fire. Who is this Mr. Gale?"

"His name is Dale, Aunt Agnes."

"Well, Dale then. You won't put me off by quibbling. If you want your father to know of it, you are taking just the course to make me tell him."

"My father knows all there is to know. Mr. Dale is a friend of mine and comes to the house by permission. There is no possibility of an engagement between us."

"An engagement! I should hope not. Do you consider yourself qualified to enter upon the cares and responsibilities of married life?"

"I have already said that I have no intention of getting married."

"Getting married! Why, the child is crazy. You talk of matrimony as if it were as simple a proceeding as changing your dress or going to a party."

"Some people would appear to find it so," I answered, goaded to impertinence.

But Aunt Agnes apparently did not perceive my innuendo. "I dare say," said she with asperity. "That is because there are so many fools in the world."

We sat in silence for some minutes. My aunt was so much excited that I could see her hands tremble as she put the obnoxious cutting back into her porte-monnaie. All of a sudden she looked at me over her glasses and said, —

"I am willing to give you one more chance, Virginia."

I waited for her to continue.

"If you choose to take advantage of it, well and good. If not, you must go your own ways. I am not going to make my life a burden over you any longer. If you prefer to be giddy and foolish, let those take the responsibility who have encouraged you to become so. No one shall blame me."

"You know, Aunt Agnes, I wish to be nothing of the sort."

"Very well, then. I propose to pass the summer in Europe, and it strikes me as an excellent opportunity for you to cut adrift from the objectionable associations you have formed during the past few months. With a fresh start, and surroundings calculated to inspire in you a desire for self-improvement, it will not be too late to hope for better things. I have every confidence in the natural stability of your character if you are once put upon the right track. I blame your advisers more than I blame you."

I listened to her words with some disquietude. I had never crossed the Atlantic, and at any ordinary time would have jumped at the chance. But I had already other plans in store for the summer that I did not feel prepared to relinquish, even for the pleasure of a trip to Europe.

"It is very kind of you to think of me," I said.

"No, it isn't. It's only natural," she answered shortly. "You are my brother's child, and let alone any affection I may have for you, it is my duty to save you from harm if I can."

"Who else is going?" I asked out of sheer cowardice; for I had already made up my mind to decline the invitation.

"Who else? Nobody. If a woman at my age has not learned to travel without an escort, it is time she did. I suppose that's what you're driving at. Well, what do you say? Go, or remain at home as you like. Only I shall regard it as a choice once and for all."

"Aunt Agnes," I answered with an endeavor to express in my tone and manner the affection and gratitude I felt, "I thank you with all my heart for your kindness. Whatever you may say, it *was* extremely kind of you to offer to take me abroad with you, and I wish I could go."

"What is there to prevent your going?" she inquired sharply.

I hesitated an instant, and then boldly spoke the truth, though I knew it would operate like a two-edged sword: —

"I have already promised to spend the summer at Tinker's Reach with Aunt Helen, and she would be disappointed if I failed her at the last moment, for all her plans are made on that understanding."

"Ah! That is it," she replied with bitter calmness. "Very well, I disclaim all further responsibility. You act with your eyes open, and must take the consequences."

There was so much pain and concern in her expression that for an instant I hesitated, and thought of changing my mind. I went to her and knelt down beside her chair.

"Aunt Agnes, you must not talk so. I love you as dearly as I love Aunt Helen; and if I had not promised to spend the summer with her I should be delighted to go with you. Do not repulse me. I have so few relatives to care for me, and I shall be very unhappy if you go away angry."

But she refused to be mollified. She did not scold me, and she coldly suffered me to embrace her at parting; but her air was more grim than I had ever seen it, and I was conscious of having wounded her deeply.

Perhaps it is needless to say that Mr. Dale was at the bottom of my decision. A few weeks previous I had confided to him that Aunt Helen had invited me to spend the summer with her at her new cottage at Tinker's Reach. He assured me that there were few more charming spots, that it was a favorite resort of his own, and that he himself proposed to pass his vacation there. Naturally, I felt bound to a certain extent after this to go to Tinker's Reach. Indeed, I was eagerly looking forward to a continuance of our friendship under such happy auspices.

When I had spoken to Mr. Dale regarding his business he replied, as I have already stated, that it was "wool." But I noticed he was brief, and his manner did not encourage me to ask further questions, I ascribed his reserve to modesty, or the proper reluctance some people have to talk of private affairs

that in no way concern the interrogator. This impression was heightened by the investigations which I quietly made in regard to the point, feeling that though I could not admit the possibility of a doubt even in regard to his business sagacity, it was well to have evidence with which to rebut the insinuations of my family. Every one of the young men whom I questioned regarding Mr. Dale's prospects assured me that he was doing very well, and attended his office daily.

This was pleasant tidings, and encouraged me to speak to him of the matter I had at heart. With all my tendency to romance and indifference to the opinion of others, I realized that it must be delicately handled. I must not seem to offer a gift or to place him under an obligation. Accordingly, one day shortly before we left town, I explained to him the condition of my affairs; how my father had settled a sum upon me with the request that I should manage it intelligently, with a view to having the control of larger amounts later. I said further that I was anxious to learn, and to acquit myself with credit; and that it had struck me as a brilliant scheme to double my property (I fixed upon this as a reasonable estimate) by some investment. He listened to my words with close attention, and as he made no comment at this point I said: —

"You are down town, Mr. Dale, and must necessarily understand business matters. I come to you for advice. I want you to tell me what to buy. I will give you the money, and when you think it time to sell I will authorize you to do so. You see I am not entirely ignorant myself."

Roger Dale gave a short laugh, and made no response for a moment. "It wouldn't do," he said at last, shaking his head. "What would your father say if he heard of it? He doesn't have any too high an opinion of me already, I fancy."

"But, Mr. Dale, that would be the very way to prove to him that you are a practical business man. If my father were to take you into his confidence he could push you ahead very fast, I know. I will show him the profits of your investments, and bestow the credit where it belongs."

The idea seemed to amuse him, for he laughed again. "You seem to forget, Miss Harlan, that instead of profits you might lose it all."

"That would be impossible. I have too much confidence in your judgment to fear any such result," I answered sweetly, led away by the eagerness I felt to obtain his consent to the project.

He gave me a swift sidelong glance that made me tremble and set my heart fluttering, though I did not know why.

"Besides," I said speaking fast and feverishly, "the money is mine. I have a right to do what I please with it."

There was a pause, and then he said with the same glance, only longer and intenser than before: "Miss Harlan, I cannot accept such a responsibility unless you give it to me forever."

I was stunned. I had brought this upon myself I could see plainly, now that it was too late. My undignified, unfeminine conduct stood out before me the moment he had spoken, in all its mortifying nakedness. He had mistaken my meaning, but it was I who was to blame for the error. Humiliated and confused, I was at a loss for words; but a reply was necessary.

"You have misunderstood me entirely, Mr. Dale. Let us change the subject, if you please," I said with dignity.

Fortunately some one came in just at this moment, and Mr. Dale shortly rose to go. But he dared in taking leave to look at me again in the manner I have described, and in spite of my will and desire my eyes fell as they encountered his.

We did not meet again, much to my relief, before I left town. I was in an harassing state of mind, and happiness alternated in my thoughts with despair. For a terrible secret had dawned upon me, – terrible, because I foresaw the painful consequences which would result therefrom. I loved Roger Dale. It was useless to disguise it longer from myself. His words had made the truth manifest, and that which I fancied friendship was become a mutual passion. Any mortification I may have felt at having unwittingly prompted the speech that had filled my heart with joy was nullified by the consciousness that I was beloved.

But the thought of braving the opposition of my family distressed me beyond measure, as it must needs distress any conscientious girl in a similar position. My instincts told me that it was vain to hope that they would relent. Their objections were baseless, but none the less I knew that they would prove insuperable. I found myself face to face with a dilemma fraught with unhappiness whichever way I should solve it. What was there to allege against Mr. Dale? Nothing. He was poor. But what of that? My father had money enough for us both. Why need he mar by cruel suspicions and prejudices this great joy of my life? I remember to have wondered sometimes that girls could marry contrary to the consent of their parents, but it seemed to me now that no one could sacrifice an attachment as strong as mine to blind authority without doing wrong to the eternal principles of love and honor. I vowed in secret that if Roger Dale should prove as true to me as I would be to him, nothing should keep us apart.

V

Tinker's Reach, as most people know, is a very popular summer resort on the Atlantic sea-coast. It possesses the advantages both of the ocean and the country. There are beautiful drives in its vicinity variegated by mountain peaks, ponds almost large enough to be classed as lakes, and extensive woods where one – or more readily two – may be lost with ease. On the other hand the harbor is adapted to all sorts of craft, from the two hundred ton yacht to the bark canoe; and for those who prefer looking at the waves to riding over them, there are superb rocks to sit upon and clamber over, which abound in eyries for the retiring and caves for the curious. Altogether it is a delightful place.

It takes its name, not as might be supposed from one of the aborigines, but from a small variety of mackerel known to fishermen as "tinkers," which used to be seined off the main head-land in large quantities. Originally a primitive settlement, fashionable patronage had dotted the shore with large hotels and showy villas, which at this period were less numerous than at present.

Soon after my arrival I received a note from Mr. Dale announcing that he would be able to get away from the city by the end of the week. The receipt of this missive thrilled me with joy; but I felt that proper sentiments obliged me to tell my Aunt Helen. It would scarcely be honorable to carry on an affair of which she disapproved, while enjoying her hospitality and under her protection. Besides, I was not without hopes of winning her over to my side. She had always been the one to whom I had gone for sympathy, and her desertion in this case made me feel sadly the need of an ally. So I said to her one evening, —

"Mr. Dale will be here early next week."

Aunt Helen shifted uneasily in her chair. "I don't know what your father would say to that. He disapproves of your intimacy with Mr. Dale."

"I know it, Aunt Helen. He is prejudiced against him."

"Mr. Dale is certainly a very constant young man," she replied.

My heart gave a bound. Her remarks before had been rather in the form of criticisms than regular objections. I laid down my work with the resolve to throw myself on her mercy.

"Aunt Helen, why is it that all of you are so opposed to Mr. Dale?"

"Opposed! Well, dear, I should hardly call it that," said my aunt. "Your father has an idea, I believe, that Mr. Dale is mercenary in his views. What foundation for it he may have I do not know. As for myself, I cannot say I am opposed, for I scarcely know the young man."

"My father is very unjust," I said with tears in my eyes.

"It may be, dear. Very likely he would own himself that it was merely an impression; but it is only right that he should watch over your interests carefully."

"Is it watching over my interests to cast suspicion on the motives of one of my best friends?"

"It will all come right in the end, dear."

"He is noble and high-minded. No one shall say anything against him in my presence," I cried fiercely.

My aunt smoothed out the lap of her dress reflectively. "You are quite justified in standing up for your friend, Virginia. No one can blame you for that. I have no doubt this young Dale is all you describe him to be. Only," she added, with an apologetic cough, "be discreet. Some persons, perhaps, would wish to be better informed before ceasing to feel uneasy. I believe, though, in trusting to a girl's own instinct in these matters: it rarely goes astray. If my parents had followed that course, I might have been more happy."

She raised her handkerchief to her eyes to stay a tear, and with an impulse of gratitude and pity I went to her and kissed her.

"Yes," she murmured, acknowledging my sympathy with a pressure of the hand, "when I was just about your age there was a young man who was very fond of me, and I liked him. He wished to marry me."

"And your father objected to him?"

"He thought we were too young. He insisted upon our waiting until we had more money. So we did, and he fell into bad habits, and – and we drifted apart. It is a long story."

"Oh, Aunt Helen, I am very sorry."

"Thank you, dear. I should never have told you except to show that I could sympathize with you. Only, as I have said, be discreet. It is a serious responsibility for me to assume. I hope you will take no decisive steps without consulting your father. Kiss me, Virginia."

We embraced with fervor, and I was sure that I had gained an ally.

Mr. Dale arrived on the expected day and was kindly welcomed by my aunt, who asked him to stay to tea. It was a superb evening, and he proposed that we should go out on the water as was the custom at Tinker's Reach.

He had been an accomplished oar in College, and a dozen strokes sent the light boat skimming beyond the bevy of similar craft by which we were surrounded. The sea was calm as a mill-pond, and the moon was at the full. I lay back with my face turned to the heavens and my fingers trailing in the cool water. Mr. Dale rowed on until the lights on shore seemed mere specks, and we could just perceive the gentle roll of the Atlantic swell. He rested on his oars and listened. The voices of the others were lost in the distance, and only the tinkle of a banjo wafted from afar broke the night's tranquillity. The water was alive with phosphorescence that sparkled like gems around the blades.

We had neither of us spoken since starting. I know not what were his thoughts, but mine were full of happiness. I felt sure, – sure of his love, and sure that he should have mine for the asking. And yet, so perfect was my peace, that I hoped he would postpone the words that were to make us still nearer to each other. We had talked so much of love and of its rapture and unselfishness earlier in our acquaintance, that now it was come to us silence seemed the most fitting commentary.

But he had made up his mind to speak at once.

"Virginia, I have brought you out here where we are alone, and where only Nature can interrupt us, to tell you that I adore you. Let the inconstant moon and twinkling stars laugh as they please. I know that true love exists, for my soul is full of it at this moment. Speak, dearest, and make me happy forever."

In the fulness of my transport at his ardent words, it seemed to me that heaven was come down to earth. My dreams had promised no such blessedness as this. Faintly and softly I murmured, —

"Roger, you know that I love you with all my heart."

"My darling!"

"My beloved!

Is there an hour to compare in unqualified happiness with that in which a woman of impulsive nature, ignorant of the world and blindly trusting, whispers the confidences of her innocent bosom in the ear of her accepted lover? Roger and I, alternately silent with bliss or overflowing with the rapture of the heart's language, strolled arm in arm along the moonlit shores far into the night.

Only one incident marred our content. "Virginia," said Roger suddenly, "what will your father say?"

My father! I had never thought of him. So absorbing had been the consciousness that Roger Dale loved me and I returned his love, that every other consideration was blotted from my mind.

"Not to-night. We will not talk of that to-night. Let me be happy while I can," I cried, pressing his arm with feverish fondness.

"He dislikes me then? I was sure of it," he said quietly, but there was a scowl on his face.

"He does not know you, Roger. But I will make him give his consent. He cannot refuse me anything."

We walked on in silence. I felt stirred and rebellious. "Dearest," said I, in a low tone of determination, "I will be true to you whatever happens."

He stooped his head and kissed me. "If you are as constant to me, sweet Virginia, as I shall be to you, nothing can separate us."

Oh, joyous words! Were they not the very same with which I had fortified my courage scarcely a month ago?

We parted just after midnight. My aunt was sitting up for me, and I burst into the room in great excitement.

"Oh, Aunt Helen, I am engaged, I am engaged! I am so happy!"

"My darling child!"

We wept in each other's arms.

"He is so noble, Aunty; so good and kind!"

"God grant he may continue so!" she said, stroking my hair.

I gave a vent to my ecstasy in talk. While I rattled on she sat drying her eyes and looking at me with a half fond, half uneasy expression. Now and again she sobbed hysterically. At last she exclaimed, "What will your father say?"

"We will think of that to-morrow," I said. "I mean to be perfectly happy to-night."

"You will have to write to him of course."

"We have decided on nothing yet."

"Oh, Virginia, I am all in a flutter. What *will* he say? He is sure to blame me, and Heaven knows I acted for what seemed to me the best."

"It *was* the best, dear Aunt Helen. Can't you see how happy I am? When Roger and I are married, you shall come and live with us always, and have the best room in the house; for if it hadn't been for you I might never have known what it is to be loved by the noblest man in the world."

It was a long time before I fell asleep. I was aroused in the morning by a knock at my door. It was Aunt Helen.

"Let me in," she said mysteriously.

"Well?" said I when I had risen and admitted her, "what is it? What has happened?"

"Your father has just arrived. He is downstairs."

"Father?"

"Yes. He knows nothing of course. I have scarcely slept a wink all night, Virginia. I feel dreadfully nervous. What *will* he say?"

I got back into bed and drew the clothes up to my chin in an affectation of composure. But I was overwhelmed by the news. His opposition seemed a much more serious consideration than when regarded by moonlight. A visit from him at any other time would not have been a surprise, for he had said he should run down to Tinker's Reach at his first leisure moment.

My aunt stood at the foot of the bed, watching my face and expecting me to speak.

"What do you mean to do about it?" she asked.

"Tell him," I replied.

"I suppose you might put it off until you return to town, especially if you would make up your mind to see very little of Mr. Dale in the mean time."

"No. It is best to have it over and done with. I want it settled now and forever." I felt my courage hardening.

"Well, Heaven bless you, child!" she said, kissing me. "You must admit, Virginia, that I have warned you all along that your father was opposed to Mr. Dale."

"It is not your fault in any way, Aunt Helen. I shall tell him so."

She left me, and I dressed deliberately. There was evidently no escape from the situation. But upon one point I was perfectly decided: nothing should induce me to give up Roger. I was ready to postpone our wedding for the present, or to humor my father's objections in any reasonable way. But

renounce him, never! Having arrived at this determination I went downstairs. My father was eating his breakfast, and I waited until he was comfortably settled with a cigar on the sofa, before making my confession. Aunt Helen had taken the precaution to absent herself from the room. I began bravely: —

"Father, there is something I wish to tell you that interests me very deeply."

He removed the cigar, and looked at me inquiringly. I saw he did not suspect the truth.

"I am engaged to be married to Mr. Roger Dale. You must not be angry, father," I continued hastily. "You cannot help liking him when you know him better. He is worthy of me in every way."

I ventured to look at him; he was smoking with quick, nervous puffs that betokened great excitement.

"Bah!" he cried presently. "Bah! what a fool I have been! I might have known it would end in some such way as this. No girl ever had a better opportunity than you, and yet you are ready to sacrifice everything for the sake of a fellow who is no more fit to be your husband than the veriest beggar in the street. You have disappointed me terribly, Virginia. I believed you to be sensible and clever; but the admission you have just made proves you to be little short of a goose. Bah! you couldn't have chosen worse. A dissipated, mercenary good-for-nothing!"

"You must not speak in that way of Roger, father. I cannot sit here and let him be abused. Scold me as much as you please, but don't say anything against him. You do not understand him."

"Understand him, indeed! It is you who do not understand him. I never expected that a daughter of mine would fall in love with a barber's block."

This was too much for my endurance. "You are unjust," I cried with, flashing eyes. "It is too late to talk so. We love each other, and if my own father repulses me we must go elsewhere for a blessing."

I have an idea that I looked like a queen of tragedy as I stood and braved him thus, for he gazed at me with a sort of astonishment, and made a movement as if to deter me from leaving the room. Just then, as fortune willed, the door was thrown open, and the servant ushered in Roger Dale.

He looked from the one to the other of us, and his cheeks reddened.

"So, sir," exclaimed my father, "you have come to claim your bride! You will have to reckon with me first; and I warn you that you will need stronger arguments than any I have ever heard in your favor, to convince me that you are the proper man to marry my daughter. Virginia, you may leave us. I will send for you when I wish for you. This gentleman and I are capable of settling this matter together."

I saw that my father was in a rage that would not brook resistance. But my own blood was boiling. Roger stood pale but seemingly unabashed, gazing at me as if he waited for me to speak. I addressed him: —

"Whatever my father may say to you, Roger, do not forget that I have promised to be your wife." With this speech I left the room.

VI

I went to my room and bolted the door. Presently Aunt Helen knocked, but I declined to let her in. I felt grievously wronged. My father had trampled upon the most sacred sentiments of my soul. He had spurned and insulted the man I loved. What proofs had he of the charges he had brought? Dissipation! It could not be. I surely would have discovered this long ago if it had been true. Mercenary! Could he be called mercenary whom a high sense of honor had forbidden to assist me in the investment of my property? Good for nothing! Ah, my father did not know the noble impulses that underlay Roger Dale's unostentatious manner!

I do not know how long it was before Aunt Helen knocked a second time, and said that my father had sent for me. It was probably not more than half an hour, but it had seemed to me an eternity. I was waiting for the summons, with the box containing my securities beside me; and with this in my hands I confronted my father once more in the parlor.

He was no longer visibly angry. Both he and Roger were smoking, and sitting at ease as I entered. I took a chair close by my lover's side, and looked at him fondly. He returned my glance, but there was a shadow of annoyance in his expression that made me feel uneasy. It brought to my mind his face as I had noticed it the previous evening, when he spoke of my father's prejudice against him.

At last my father saw fit to begin. He spoke in a deliberate, business-like tone, free from passion. "I have sent for you, Virginia, to repeat to you what I have already said to Mr. Dale. Once and for all, I will never give my consent to your marriage. I am utterly and radically opposed to it. I have been from the first, as you are aware. If you ask for my reasons, I do not consider this gentleman fitted to be my son-in-law. He has on his own admission no means to support a wife; he has no ambition or desire to excel, and I know from positive evidence that his habits are by no means exemplary."

He paused, and I glanced anxiously at Roger; but his eyes were fixed on the floor, and he sat drumming gently on the table with the fingers of one hand.

"If you persevere in this piece of folly contrary to my expressed wishes, you do it, Virginia, at your own peril, for I warn you that my resolution is fixed and cannot be shaken. Do not hope, either of you, by nursing the affair along to overcome my objections later. That is a favorite resort of young people in novels; but if fathers in real life are so weak in general, I shall prove an exception. As you know, Virginia, the part of a tyrannical parent is the last I ever expected to be called upon to play. I have allowed you every indulgence, and trusted you to an extent that I am beginning to believe was unwise. But I will not waste time in words; my resolution is perfectly explicit. My will is made in your favor. If I should die to-day, you would be mistress of all my property. Unless you promise me not to marry this man, I shall alter it to-morrow, and neither of you shall ever receive one cent from me during my lifetime or at my decease. This sounds like a threat, but it is only intended to show to the fullest extent in my power how fatal to your happiness I consider this union would be. I can say no more than this. I cannot prevent you from marrying Mr. Dale if you are bent upon it. There are no laws to punish foolish women or mercenary men; but you must take the consequences. What you have in that box," he continued, nodding towards me, "is all you will ever receive at my hands. If I am not mistaken, this young gentleman would play ducks-and-drakes with that in a very short time. I have said my say, and now you can suit yourselves."

I had listened to his words with a constantly increasing indignation that overshadowed the remorse I felt at having disappointed his hopes. So incensed was I at his aspersions of Roger that I almost laughed when he spoke of disinheriting me. But the taunt that Roger was courting me for my money was most galling of all, by very force of reiteration. I started to my feet once more with a defiant air.

"It is not true. You misjudge Mr. Dale cruelly. To show you, father, how free our love is from the base and paltry motives you impute, and that we do not need your help, see there!"

I rushed through the open window which led to the piazza, and before either my father or Roger divined my intention, hurled with all my might the box of securities over the railing into the sea beneath. It opened just before reaching the water, and the contents were submerged by the seething surf.

I re-entered the parlor with a triumphant air. Roger's face wore a half-scared look as he began to realize what I had done.

"Mad girl!" cried my father with a sneer. "Mr. Dale will not thank you for that, I fancy. You have, however, done me an infinite service." He turned and left the room.

When he was gone, exhausted and unnerved I buried my face on Roger's shoulder and sobbed bitterly. He tried to soothe me, and finally induced me to sit down. He sat beside me, holding my hand and urging me to calm myself. At last I turned to him and said with a sudden transport of new happiness, and smiling through my tears, —

"I promised to remain true to you, Roger, and I have."

"Yes, dear, I know. When you are a little more composed, we will talk the matter over seriously."

There was something in his tone that chilled me; he was so calm, and I so carried away by excitement.

"Do not think of my father's words," I said. "Forget them. I shall be perfectly happy so long as you love me."

"He will never relent," he answered gloomily. "He is known down town as a man who makes up his mind once for all time."

"I would rather disobey my father than be false to you," I responded firmly.

"Yes. But how are we to live?" he asked, rising from the sofa and promenading the room nervously, with his hands in his pockets.

"Live?" I echoed.

"Unfortunately we should have to eat and drink, like everybody else. It was a pity," he continued reflectively, "that you flung that money overboard; we might have been very comfortable with that."

"Yes," I replied in a dazed sort of way.

"Was it the whole?" He stood looking at me with his head on one side.

"The whole of what?"

"Was all the property your father gave you in that box?"

"Certainly: I wonder you ask, Roger."

He walked up and down a few times and then took a seat beside me.

"Let us look at this matter in a common-sense way, Virginia. Heaven knows I love you, and that I am as romantic in my feelings as any one could desire. But suppose we were to marry without your father's consent, what would be the result? We should starve. To speak frankly, I find it difficult enough to make both ends meet as a single man. You are used to every luxury and comfort, and have not been accustomed to economize. Do not misunderstand me, Virginia," he continued, speaking quickly, struck perhaps by my expression, which if my emotions were adequately reflected therein must have made him uneasy. "I know that you are capable of any sacrifice; it is I who am unwilling to permit you to give up your fortune and your family for my sake. If there were any chance of your father's relenting, if I thought there was a possibility that time would make a difference in his views, I would not speak so. But as it is, I see no alternative for us but an unsuccessful struggle with poverty, that would end in unhappiness. It breaks my heart to come to this conclusion, but justice to you, as well as common-sense, will not let me suffer you to commit a folly which after the glamour of the moment was over, you would regret."

It was the manner even more than the matter of his speech that stabbed me to the heart. Had he spoken less calmly and deliberately, I might have believed that he shrank from accepting my self-sacrifice, and have regarded his dampening words as a mere cloak for his own generosity. But his

unconcerned and dispassionate air left no doubt in my mind that it was he who was unwilling to face the romantic but desperate circumstances in which my father's decree had placed us. Instinct told me that he in whose constancy and in whose devotion to ideality I had believed with all the ardor and trust of which I was capable, was false, and ready to subordinate a love like ours to temporal considerations.

Yet with the persistence of one who clutches at any semblance of hope however slender, I refused to believe the truth without further evidence.

"I should not be a burden to you, Roger. People can live on much less than they suppose. We could both work, I as well as you."

He shrugged his shoulders, and taking both my hands in his looked into my face with a trivial smile, so little in accord with the intensity of my feelings that I almost shrieked with pain.

"Do you think I would allow my dear girl to demean herself in any such way as that? No, no! Love in a cottage is a delightful theory, but put into practice it becomes terribly disappointing."

I drew away my hands from him and sat for some moments in silence.

"I think it is best that our engagement should come to an end," I said presently.

He made a sigh of resignation. "That is for you to decide. It rests with you, of course."

"I agree with you that it would be very foolish of us to marry without my father's consent, Mr. Dale."

He drew himself up a little, and looked at me as if hurt. "Are you angry with me, Virginia?"

"Angry? Why should I be angry?"

"Then why call me Mr. Dale?"

"Because," I answered quietly and firmly, though I felt my anger rising, "unless you are to be my husband, you must be Mr. Dale."

"Can we not be friends?" he asked in a dejected tone.

"We can never be anything else," I answered with some ambiguity; and I rose and rang the bell.

The servant entered. "Tell Mr. Harlan, please, that I would like to speak to him."

"I think we are acting for the best," he said, after an awkward pause.

"I am sure we are, Mr. Dale." It was undignified, it may be, to betray my feelings, but my love was too strong to die without a murmur.

My father looked inquiringly at us as he entered. His face seemed to me almost haggard.

I said at once, "Father, we have made up our minds that you are right. It would be madness in us to marry without your consent. The credit of our decision belongs to Mr. Dale. He has proved to me that our engagement should come to an end."

My father turned toward him with a scornful smile, appreciating, I think, the gentle sarcasm of my words. But I doubt if Roger did, for he added immediately, —

"Yes, sir; I cannot consent to the sacrifice your daughter is prepared to make."

"I am glad that she as well as you have come to your senses, and I thank you for making the only amends possible for having endeavored to enter my family contrary to my desire, by teaching my daughter her duty. I have no doubt that we shall both be very grateful to you in the future."

This time Roger perceived that he was being laughed at, for his cheeks flushed. But he recovered his composure, and looking at me, said, —

"I trust I may continue to come to see you as usual."

I trembled all over at his words, but I controlled myself, and answered, —

"If you wish."

After a few moments of awkward hesitancy he left us.

When I knew that he was really gone, I could restrain myself no longer. Sinking into a chair, I covered my face with my hands and burst into a flood of tears. "Oh, father, he has deceived me! He has broken my heart!"

BOOK II.
SOPHISTICATION

I

In the bitterness of my humiliation and distress at the perfidy of Roger Dale I came near running away from home. My youthful imaginations, as I have already mentioned, were of a realistic order, and it had been a favorite scheme with me to become a shop-girl. So when this sorrow overwhelmed me, I thought seriously of going out into the world to seek my fortune in some such capacity. It was only my father's kindness during those dreadful first days that deterred me from carrying out some romantic plan of escape. I felt sore and mortified, and ready to take any steps that would separate me from my old surroundings.

Aunt Helen did her best to comfort me, but I was in no frame of mind to talk it all over, which was, I knew, her main idea of solace, – that and frequent offers of tempting food. On the other hand, my father made no allusion to the wretched incident during the fortnight he remained at Tinker's Reach. He treated me exactly as if nothing had happened, except that every morning after breakfast he proposed a walk through the woods or up the mountain. Indifferent to everything as I was at the moment, I had a consciousness that this exercise was beneficial to me, and I was grateful at heart. Anything was better than harping over and over again on the same string the story of my wrongs. Walking interrupted this in a measure, though during the long tramps which I had with my father we rarely talked, and I usually in monosyllables. In this manner we explored the outlying country within a radius of twenty miles, and when night came I was so fatigued that I was apt to sleep, and consequently was spared the pale cheeks and dull eyes that for the most part afflict those who have undergone an experience similar to mine.

One of the reasons why I did not run away from home was my lack of funds. I was penniless, for all my money was with the securities I threw into the sea. I was inclined, however, to congratulate myself upon this extravagant proceeding, for the reason that had I acted less impulsively I might not have detected Roger's selfishness until it was too late. But when just before my father went away he handed me a roll of bank-bills, the color rose to my cheeks, and I began to reflect upon the enormity of my offence. He told me that he had ordered a saddle-horse to be sent to me from town, which he hoped I would use regularly, and that in the autumn he proposed to take me with him on a journey to California.

I listened in silence; but I rode the horse, and found him just the companion I required. He could not talk, and yet was sufficiently spirited to prevent me from self-absorption. My father also sent me a box of books, which embraced a variety of literature. Although there were some light and amusing sketches among them, novels of sentiment and poetry had been excluded. On the other hand he had picked out the latest and most authoritative publications relating to history, science, biography, and travel, by which I soon found myself engrossed and diverted. I read voluminously, and when this supply was exhausted I wrote home for more.

This was my interest during the remainder of the summer, and when autumn came I was conscious of having undergone a mental change. Whereas I was formerly trusting, credulous, and optimistic, at least toward all except myself, I was become suspicious even of the seal of sincerity, weighed words, and applied the scalpel of analysis to others' motives as well as to my own.

But this cynical phase did not last long, and gave way in turn to a much more serious view of life than I had hitherto taken. The trip which I made to California with my father did much to promote this. We were absent from home eight weeks, and we visited all the principal cities and saw

the chief sights of the West. My father was assiduous in his kindness. He took pains to explain to me the immense value and importance of the wool and the wheat and the cattle and the ore which were the staple products of the States and Territories through which we passed. He showed me on the map the immense net-work of railways by means of which these industries, if not consumed at home, were carried to the seaboard either of the Atlantic or the Pacific, and made profitable to the producer by exportation to foreign lands. He tried to interest me in such commercial and economic questions, so that, as he said, I need not like most women remain in entire ignorance regarding the vital interests of the world. Although I was still stolid and indifferent in manner, I listened attentively to his instructions and appreciated the service he was doing me.

One evening shortly after our return, Aunt Helen said to me, with a prefatory cough which was apt to be a sign that she regarded the topic to be broached as delicate, —

"Virginia, it is time for you to be thinking about your party dresses. Of course it is too late now to send to Paris; but I fancy it is possible to get tolerable things here, if one is ready to pay a little more."

"I shall not require party dresses. I am not going anywhere this winter," I answered quietly.

As I have just intimated, Aunt Helen was somewhat apprehensive regarding my plans, owing to a few hints which I had let fall at Tinker's Reach. She had suggested my sending an order to Paris about a fortnight subsequent to my last interview with Mr. Dale, but I declined emphatically to do so. It was evident, however, from her expression that my resolve was a source of surprise and dismay to her.

"Not go anywhere? Why, people will think you are ill."

"My looks will belie that, Aunt Helen."

"It will seem so odd and peculiar. A girl always enjoys her second winter more than the first. Just when you have come to know everybody too! I hope you will reconsider this, dear. You had better order the dresses at any rate," she continued; "you might want to go when the time comes, and then it would be too late."

I shook my head decisively: "I am sorry to disappoint you, but my mind is made up."

Aunt Helen coughed again. "You are not disappointing *me*; it is only on your own account that I feel badly. You will make a great mistake, Virginia. Of course, dear, you have passed through a very unpleasant experience, which I am all the more able to appreciate from having had, as you are aware, sorrows of a similar kind. But painful as such experiences are for those called upon to undergo them, they are, I regret to say, far from uncommon; and if a young person who has suffered a disappointment were to turn his or her back on all entertainments, what, pray, would become of society?"

"Society will get along very well without me," I answered.

Aunt Helen knitted rapidly in silence, and the color mounted to her cheeks.

"You will make a great mistake, Virginia," she repeated, – "a great mistake. No young lady of your age can afford to make herself conspicuous by acting differently from other people. Do you wish to be called eccentric and peculiar?"

"I don't much care," said I with a spice of wickedness. "It might be rather attractive, I should think, to be different from everybody else."

"I can imagine who has been putting such ideas into your head. In my opinion one strong-minded woman in the family is quite enough," she said with a toss of her head.

I knew that she referred to Aunt Agnes, who had returned from Europe a few weeks before; therefore I said, —

"I have not exchanged a word with anybody on the subject."

"What *is* the reason, then, that you persist in being so contrary?" she exclaimed in a thoroughly worried tone, laying down her work on her lap.

"Because I have awakened to the fact that the little circle in which we move does not constitute the world," I answered, rather nettled by her solicitude. "I live as completely hedged about by conventions as the sleeping Beauty by the growth of a hundred years."

She opened her eyes in amazement. "All women in every circle except the very lowest are hedged about by conventions," she replied severely. "What is it you wish to do?"

"I don't know that I wish to do anything. I am waiting for something to suggest itself."

"Does your father know of this?" she asked.

"Of what?"

"Of your intention to give up society."

"I have not thought it important enough to mention it to him."

"Important enough? I shall feel it my duty to inform him. We shall hear next that you have gone on the stage, or done something equally extraordinary."

"What do you mean?" I inquired with a wondering laugh.

"I have merely taken you at your own words. You have expressed dissatisfaction with the circle in which you live, and wish to try another. The only place where people are thoroughly unconventional is on the stage."

It was useless to discuss the matter further. Aunt Helen was not to be brought to look at it from my point of view, and I was resolute in my determination. I wished to meet and know a different set of people from those of the fashionable world. My ideas on the subject were vague. I had spoken the truth in saying that I was waiting for something to suggest itself.

There were of course plenty of earnest and interesting people, if one knew how to discover them. Naturally I often thought of Aunt Agnes, but pride interdicted me from applying to her. I felt that she had, to quote her own words, once for all made overtures to me, which I had declined, and that I could not bear the humiliation of going to her and confessing my ingratitude. When she came to spend the evening with us just after her return from Europe, her first remark to me had been: "Well, a pretty mess you and your Aunt Helen have made of it!" Beyond this she made no allusion to what had occurred, but she answered all my questions regarding her travels with the curtness of one who mistrusts the interest of the questioner.

However, as we had not met since, I felt in duty bound to pay my respects to her, and accordingly dropped in one day about luncheon time. She was not alone; and her visitor, who was a young woman some five years my senior, stopped short in her animated conversation as I entered, and swept down upon me with a wealth of facial expression in response to my Aunt's guttural —

"My niece!"

"This is too pleasant, Miss Harlan. I have heard about you so often, and wished to meet you. Now that we are acquainted, I do hope we shall be friends."

"This is Miss Kingsley, Virginia. You will not do amiss to follow in her footsteps," said Aunt Agnes, by way of setting me down where she considered I belonged, for I had not so far mortified the flesh as to alter my street costumes. As a consequence I was the pink of neatness in a new bonnet which contrasted itself already in my mind with the over-trimmed attire of my aunt's guest. I noticed that Miss Kingsley looked me over from head to foot with a sweeping glance as she spoke.

But I felt humble-minded, and disposed to seize any straw that might help me to realize my desire for new acquaintances. So I smiled sweetly, as though undisturbed by my aunt's severity, and greeted Miss Kingsley with more effusion than it was my wont to display toward strangers.

"I have heard that Miss Virginia Harlan is very clever," she said, opening and shutting her eyes in rapid succession, which I soon found was usual with her when she wished to be gracious, and which had much the effect of heat lightning on the beholder. "Weren't you at Tinker's Reach last summer?" she continued.

"She was," answered Aunt Agnes in a stern tone.

"Then you will be able to tell me if it is Mr. Dobbs or Dobson of Philadelphia, who is engaged to our Miss Bentley. I wrote it Dobbs, as seeming rather more distinguished. I agree with Mr. Spence that monosyllables are the most sympathetic."

"I am very sorry to say his name is Dobson," I answered.

Miss Kingsley sighed. "What a pity! Mere accuracy and art come so often into collision that it is difficult at times for us artists to do justice to both. I expended much thought on that item."

I felt greatly puzzled. It was evident she took it for granted that I knew who she was. But Aunt Agnes in attempting to enlighten me made my confusion all the greater.

"I presume, Virginia, that you are aware that Miss Kingsley is 'Alpha'?"

"'Alpha'?" I faltered.

"You must certainly have often read her column in the 'Sunday Mercury'?"

I looked embarrassed, for I never had. But the source of the item which had appeared about me in that newspaper was now apparent.

Miss Kingsley blushed, and giggled convulsively. "No offence. Quite natural, I'm sure. You have much better things to do than to read my articles, Miss Virginia. I only thought you might have happened to read Mr. Spence's 'Sonnet to Alpha' in our last issue."

I was obliged to admit that I had not; and feeling that it was as well to make a clean breast of my ignorance, I acknowledged that I had never heard of Mr. Spence.

Miss Kingsley gave a little gasp, and looked amused.

"Virginia! I am astonished," exclaimed Aunt Agnes. "Your father gave me to understand that you had been spending a portion of the summer in self-improvement. Mr. Spence is one of the most original thinkers in the community. I cannot believe it possible that you have never heard of him."

"Perhaps Miss Virginia may have read some of his poems or philosophy without knowing the author," suggested Miss Kingsley. "You must surely have heard of his 'Essay on the Economy of Speech,' which in my opinion is the most sympathetic thing he has done."

"One of the most valuable contributions to the literature of pure thought that we have had in many years," said Aunt Agnes.

I shook my head.

"Permit me," said Miss Kingsley, fumbling in a little reticule on her lap and taking therefrom one of several cards, which she handed to me.

"This is a schedule of his new course of lectures on Moderation. He regards moderation as the most valuable virtue of our civilization, and is devoting his life to the promulgation of its importance."

The printed card read as follows: —

LECTURES

HAWTHORNE ROOMS

SIX SUCCESSIVE SATURDAYS,

BEGINNING DECEMBER THE TWENTY-EIGHTH

BY CHARLES LIVERSAGE SPENCE

MODERATION

December 28. General View of the Subject

January 4. Tension and Torpor of the Nerves

" 11. The Economy of Speech

" 18. The Use and Abuse of Raiment

" 25. Overeating and Undereating

February 1. Exuberance and Poverty in the Soul

"They must be very interesting," said I. It was something at any rate to get a peep into the charmèd circle, even if I were too illiterate to share its membership; and I was eager to know more of the poet-philosopher, as I rightly judged him to be from Miss Kingsley's words.

"They are eminently suggestive," said she.

"You know him well I suppose."

"Mr. Spence? Yes. If I may say so," she simpered, with a rapid movement of her eyes, "your aunt and I were among the first to find him out."

"Is he young?"

"Just thirty. He celebrated his birthday only a fortnight ago. It was on that occasion that his 'Sonnet to Alpha' first saw the light."

"Is he good-looking?" I inquired somewhat ill advisedly, for Aunt Agnes made a gesture of impatience.

"His face is intellectual rather than handsome," answered Miss Kingsley. "Its expression is very striking and versatile. Fine, piercing eyes and waving hair, which he wears long. An intense individuality. But I should scarcely call him beautiful; interesting and highly sympathetic in appearance seems to me a more accurate description."

"If you mean by 'good-looking' to inquire if he is a fop, Virginia, you had better be undeceived on that score at once," said Aunt Agnes, with a toss of her head. "I don't suppose Mr. Spence has ever danced the German in his life."

"He is very particular about late hours," said Miss Kingsley; "that is a part of his system. He believes in moderation in all things, sleep as well as the contrary. He almost invariably retires before eleven, but he rises after eight hours of rest. He considers either more or less as deleterious to health. I am inclined to think though, if Miss Harlan will excuse my correcting her," she continued turning to Aunt Agnes, "that he has once or twice in his life danced the German; for he has told me that in order to develop his theory intelligently he has been obliged to study extremes. The happy mean cannot of course be estimated so intelligently by one who is without personal experience of the overmuch or undermuch he reprobates. Those are his own phrases for expressing excess or undue limitation, and to me they seem exquisite specimens of nomenclature. But as I was saying, Mr. Spence has in the course of his investigations sampled, if I may so speak, almost every sensation or series of sensations to which human nature is susceptible. For instance, he once spent the night in a tomb, so as to experience what he has so exquisitely styled in a poem on the subject 'the extremity of doleful comprehension.' You were alluding to the lines only yesterday, Miss Harlan."

"They are Miltonic in their grim power," said Aunt Agnes.

"Then again, he lived upon dog and horse during the time of the Commune at Paris. He says it was worth the experience of an ordinary lifetime as illustrating the crucial test of discomfort. So in like manner he has experienced the extremes of luxury and pleasure. I have been given to understand that he even felt it his duty to intoxicate himself upon one occasion, in order to be able to demolish more conclusively the arguments of either form of intemperance; for he considers total abstinence as almost, if not quite, on a level with over indulgence. One's instinct of course shrinks at first from the idea of a deliberate clouding of the senses being ever pardonable, but the more one examines the matter the more innocent does it appear; and I freely admit that I have come to regard an offence against morals committed in the interest of science as not only excusable, but in some cases a positive duty."

"But," said Aunt Agnes, taking up the thread of her previous remark for my further edification, "however Mr. Spence may have conducted himself in the past for the sake of discipline, his habits to-day are essentially sober and serious."

"Oh, dear, yes!" exclaimed Miss Kingsley; "he is intensely in earnest, and discountenances all mere vanities of life. And yet, withal, it is his aim to pursue the happy mean. He believes in rational amusements, and is very sympathetic in congenial society. If you have no pleasanter engagement for next Wednesday evening, Miss Virginia, I shall be charmed to have you take tea with me at my rooms in the Studio Building. I expect Mr. Spence and one or two other friends to be present."

"With great pleasure," I answered; and I felt quite elated by the invitation. My ambition to form new associations was about to be realized apparently.

"I have hopes that Mr. Spence will consent to illustrate his theory of the Economy of Speech on that evening," continued Miss Kingsley. "As yet the science is in embryo, and naturally but a very small number of people are sufficiently familiar with the practical details of the theory to make it advisable to adopt it in general conversation. But with sympathetic friends he may feel disposed to make the experiment."

"You are extremely fortunate, Virginia," said Aunt Agnes, with emphasis.

"I should try in vain to be worthy of such an opportunity; but I am very much obliged to you, Miss Kingsley," I answered humbly.

"You will soon learn," she said, rising to go. "I am so glad to have had the pleasure of meeting you at last. I have alluded to you in my column on one or two occasions, but this is the first time I have had the gratification of seeing you in person. Perhaps you can tell me," she continued, still holding my hand, "whether there is any truth in the reported engagement of our Miss Leonard to Mr. Clarence Butterfield. And if you happen to know who are to be the bridesmaids at the wedding of Miss Newton, of Philadelphia, to our Mr. Lester, I shall consider it very friendly of you to tell me."

This made me feel very uncomfortable, for I could not decide on the spur of the moment whether it would be more charitable to my friends to tell the truth, or to remain silent and let their affairs be garbled.

"I want to put in something," she urged, noticing my hesitation. "I shall either contradict or confirm the report of the engagement in our next issue. Of course, artistically it makes little difference to me which; but it is much more satisfactory to the immediate friends to have an item correct, – just as the friends of a person who sits for a portrait prefer to have the likeness speaking, whereas to the painter it is much more important whether the *tout ensemble* is a work of art. To obtain a portrait one can always have recourse to the photographer; and so to insure mere accuracy in a social jotting, it is easy to pay for it as an advertisement. But artists stand upon a different footing. Am I clear? And I trust that you agree with me. It will do just as well on Wednesday; and if you should hear any other items of interest in my line, please note them. You have no idea of the competition I have to encounter. Some artists go so far as to invent their material, but it is not considered strictly professional. Well, I must run along. Don't forget, Wednesday at eight," and Miss Kingsley whisked out of the room, leaving me in a dazed condition.

The collection of social gossip was apparently her regular business, which she not only was ready to acknowledge, but gloried in, – just as a merchant might take pride in his bargains, or a lawyer in his arguments. There was a certain savor of self-reliance and proprietorship in her use of the word "our," by which it was evident to me, though I was sadly puzzled at first, that she distinguished Bostonians from those who lived elsewhere. But horrified as I was by the general idea of such a calling, I could not help feeling amused, and even rather admired Miss Kingsley's independence and enterprising spirit. She was a shade vulgar to be sure, but in my present frame of mind I was disposed to rank intellectual superiority above mere refinement of manner. I believed that Miss Kingsley, although but a few years older than myself, could put me to the blush in the matter of literary attainments and general information.

Aunt Agnes was plainly of that opinion, for she aroused me from my reflections by the remark, —

"A rare opportunity is afforded you, Virginia, for mental discipline. I can see that Miss Kingsley has taken a fancy to you. She is not a person who goes off at a tangent. She must have discerned capabilities for culture in you, or she would never have invited you to one of her entertainments. To you, who are accustomed to society fine speeches that mean nothing, it will probably occur that she is asking you on my account. Nothing of the sort. There is not an ounce of affectation in her. She has asked you because she wants you; and I can only add that if you neglect after this to seek improvement, you will be guilty of a deliberate sacrifice of talents for which there can be no excuse. Yes, talents. There is no use in mincing matters; you have talents. I have always thought so, which is the reason why I have taken so much trouble to keep you from evil courses. Your father has given me to understand that you have begun to listen to the voice of experience. I tried to save you from experience by counsel, but you scoffed at my words. You have providentially had your eyes opened before it was too late. You have suffered, and I do not wish to add to your mortification by reproach. Let by-gones be by-gones, and I trust to hear no more of Mr. Gale and his associates."

"Dale, Aunt Agnes," I said firmly.

She shrugged her shoulders impatiently. "What difference does it make whether it is Dale or Gale? You heard what Miss Kingsley said just now about the unimportance of accuracy in trivial matters. You knew perfectly well whom I meant. Let me caution you again, Virginia, against an undue estimate of ceremony and form. It is the spirit that is of value, not the mere letter. Especially should you bear this in mind in the society of such people as you will meet on Wednesday evening. The world is a large place, and only in the circle in which you have been brought up is excessive regard paid to insignificant details. Sensible people have other things to think about."

"Does Mr. Spence belong to Boston?" I asked, anxious to find out all I could about the celebrity.

But this remark was not more happy than the last Aunt Agnes pursed up her lips and said, —

"If you mean, was he born in Beacon Street, no, he was not. Dreadful as it may seem to you, I know nothing of either his father or his mother. But you will learn when you are a little wiser, that genius in order to be recognized and admired is not obliged to produce parents."

"You misunderstood me, Aunt Agnes. I merely wished to know if he were a foreigner or not."

"He has lived everywhere I believe, and is cosmopolitan, as all great men are. He is one of the few characters really worth knowing in our community. His philosophic and hygienic thoughts surpass his poetry in worth, in the opinion of the best judges."

"And Miss Kingsley, – does she write at all?"

"Certainly. Did she not tell you that she is the compiler of the weekly column of fashionable items in the 'Sunday Mercury'?"

"Yes," said I, "but that is scarcely literature."

Aunt Agnes did not answer for a moment. "You have judged hastily, and consequently have misjudged. If you were to ask me whether I think Miss Kingsley's present occupation is proportionate to her abilities, I should answer 'no.' She would herself admit that it was hack-work, – though, mind you, even hack-work can be redeemed by an artistic spirit, as she has so adequately explained to you. All young women have not independent fortunes, and such as are without means are obliged to take whatever they can find to do in the line of their professions. I agree with your implication that society items do not constitute literature, but they are stepping stones to higher things. Which is the more creditable, pray, to collect and chronicle the social customs of the age in which you live, foolish as they may be, or to be one of the giddy and frivolous creatures whose doings are thus compiled as a warning to posterity, or to excite its jeers? The one is work, earnest though humble; the other, a sheer dissipation of the energies of life."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.