LIVING, THOUGH THE DATE BE OLD.

Florence Peacock in The Academy.

'Tis a gold box set with pearls
All around the quaint old lid;
And her eyes, 'mid sunny curls,
Partly seen, and partly hid,
Smiling, gaze into your face
With a dainty charm and grace.

Raise the lid: some words are there,
Graven deep into the gold—
Words that breathe a great despair,
Living, though the date be old.
"Seventeen ninety, sixth of May,
She died. God teach me how to pray.

I could tell her name and age,
Write the story of her life.
But why open that shut page?
She has rested long from strife,
And a hundred years have fled
Since the day that she lay dead.

Close the box—why linger here?
Sixty years ago he died,
Held no other woman dear,
Never wife was by his side;
Ended was life's golden day,
"Seventeen ninety, sixth of May."

A MATTER OF TASTE.

A CABINET STUDY.

BY F. ANSTEY.

It is, perhaps, a little singular that, upon an engagement becoming known, and being discussed by the friends and acquaintances of the persons principally concerned, by far the most usual tone of comment should be a sorrowing wonder. That particular alliance is generally the very last that anybody ever expected; "what made him choose her of all people?" and "what on earth she could see in him" are declared insoluble problems. It is confidently predicted that the engagement will never come to anything; or that, if such a marriage ever does take place, it is most unlikely to prove a success. Sometimes, in the case of female friends, this tone is even perceptible under their warmest felicitations, and through the smiling mask of compliment shine eyes moist with compassion of the most irritating quality. "So glad! so delighted! but why—why didn't you consult me?"—this complicated expression might be rendered—"I could have saved you from this—I was so pleased to hear of it!"

And yet, in the majority of cases, these unions are not found to turn out so very badly after all, and the misguided couple seem really to have gauged their own hearts, and their possibilities of happiness together, more accurately than the most clear-sighted of their acquaintances.

The announcement that Miss Ella Hylton had accepted Mr. George Chapman provoked the customary sensation and surprise in their respective sets, and perhaps with rather more justification than usual.

Miss Hylton had undeniably beauty of a spiritual and rather exalte type, and was generally understood to be highly cultivated. She had spent a year at Somerville, though she had gone down without trying for a place in either "Mods" or "Greats," thereby preserving, if not increasing, her reputation for superiority. She had lived all her life among cultured people; she was devoted to music, and regularly attended the Richter concerts, though she could seldom be induced to play in public; she had a feeling for art, though she neither painted nor drew; a love for literature strong enough to deter her from all amateur efforts in that direction. In art, music, and literature she was impatient of mediocrity; and, while she was as fond as most girls of the pleasures which upper middle-class society can offer, she reverenced intellect, and preferred the conversation of the plainest celebrity to the platitudes of the mere dancing-man, no matter how handsome of feature and perfect of step he might be.

George Chapman was certainly not a mere dancing-man, his waltzing being rather conscientious than dream-like, and he was only tolerably good-looking. On the other hand, he was not celebrated in any way, and even his mother and sisters had never considered him brilliant. He had been educated at Rugby, and Trinity, Cambridge, where he rowed a fairly good oar, on principle, and took a middle second in the Moral Science Tripos. Now he was in a solicitor's office, where he was receiving a good salary, and was valued as a steady, sensible young fellow, who could be thoroughly depended upon. He was fond of his profession, and had acquired a considerable knowledge of its details; apart from it he had no very decided tastes; he lived a quiet, regular life, and dined out and went to dances in moderation; his manner, though he was nearly twenty-six, was still rather boyishly blunt.

What there was in him that had found favor in Ella Hylton's fastidious eyes the narrator is not rash enough to attempt to particularize. But it may be suggested that the most unlikely people may possess their fairy rose and ring, which render them irresistible to at least one heart, if they only have faith to believe in, and luck to perceive their power.

So, early in the year, George had plucked up courage to propose to Miss Hylton, after meeting and secretly adoring her for some months past, and she, to the general astonishment, had accepted him.

He had a private income—not a large one—of his own, and had saved out of it. She was entitled, under her grandmother's will, to a sum which made her an heiress in a modest way, and thus there was no reason why the engagement should be a long one; and though no date had been definitely fixed for the marriage, it was understood that it should take place at some time before the end of the summer.

Soon after the engagement, however, an invalid aunt, with whom Ella had always been a great favorite, was ordered to the South of France, and implored her to go with her; to which Ella, who had a real affection for her relative, as well as a strong sense of duty, had consented.

This was a misfortune in one of two ways: it either curtailed that most necessary and most delightful period during which fiances discover one another's idiosyncrasies and weaknesses, or it made it necessary to postpone the marriage.

George naturally preferred the former as the more endurable evil, but Ella's letters from abroad began to hint more and more plainly at delay. Her aunt might remain on the Continent all the summer, and she could not possibly leave her: there was so much to be done after her return that could not be done in a hurry—they had not even begun to furnish the pretty little house on Campden Hill that was to be their new home; it would be better to wait till November, or even later.

The mere idea was alarming to George, and he remonstrated as far as he dared; but Ella remained firm, and he grew desperate.

He might have spared himself the trouble. About the middle of June, Ella's aunt, who of course had had to leave the Riviera, grew tired of travelling; and Ella, to George's intense satisfaction, returned to her mother's home in Linden Gardens, Notting Hill.

And now, when our story opens, George, who had managed to get away from office work two hours before his usual time, was hurrying toward Linden Gardens as fast as a hansom could take him, to see his betrothed for the first time after their long separation.

He was eager, naturally, and a little nervous. Would Ella still persist in her wish for delay? Or would he be able to persuade her that there were no obstacles in the way? He felt he had strong arguments on his side, if only—and here was the real seat of his anxiety—if only her objections were not raised from some other motive! She might have been trying to prepare him for a final rupture, and then—"Well," he concluded, with his customary good sense, "no use meeting trouble half-way; in five minutes I shall know for certain."

. . . . . .

At the same moment Mrs. Hylton and her daughter Flossie, a vivacious girl in the transitionary sixteen-year-old stage, were in the drawing-room at Linden Gardens. It was the ordinary double drawing-room of a London house, but everything in it was beautiful and harmonious; the eye was vaguely rested by the delicate and subdued color of walls and hangings; cabinets, antique Persian pottery, rare bits of china, all occupied the precise place in which their decorative value was most felt: it was a room, in short, marked by individuality and distinction.

Flossie was standing at the window, from which a glimpse could just be caught of fresh green foliage and the lodge-gates, with the bustle of the traffic in the High Street beyond; Mrs. Hylton was writing at a Flemish bureau in the corner.

"I suppose," said Flossie, meditatively, as she fingered a piece of old stained glass that was hanging in the window, "we shall have George here this afternoon."

Mrs. Hylton raised her head. She had a striking face, tinted a clear olive, with a high wave of silver hair crowning the forehead; her eyebrows were dark, and so were the brilliant eyes; the nose was aquiline, and the thin, well-cut mouth a little hard. She was a woman who had been much admired in her time, and who still retained a certain attraction, though some were apt to find her somewhat cold and unsympathetic. Her daughter Ella, for example, was always secretly a little in awe of her mother, who had no terrors for audacious, outspoken Flossie.

"If he comes, Flossie, he will be very welcome," she said; "but I hardly expect him yet. George is not likely to neglect his duties even for Ella."

Flossie pursed her mouth rather scornfully.

"Oh, George is immaculate!" she murmured.

"If he was, it would hardly be a reproach," said her mother, catching the word; "but, at all events, George has thoroughly good principles, and is sure to succeed in the world. I have every reason to be pleased."

"Every reason—ah, but are you pleased? Mother, dear, you know he's as dull as dull!"

"Ella does not find him so—and, Flossie, I don't like to hear you say such things, even in Ella's absence."

"Oh, I never abuse him to Ella—it wouldn't be any use. She's firmly convinced that he's perfection; at least she was she before she went away."

"Why, do you mean that she has altered? Have you seen any sign of it, Flossie?"

Mrs. Hylton made this inquiry sharply, but not as if such a circumstance would be altogether displeasing to her.

"Oh, no, only she hasn't seen him for so long, you know; perhaps, when she comes to look at him with fresh eyes, she'll notice things more. Ah, here is George just getting out of a hansom—so he has played truant for once. There's one thing I do think Ella might do—persuade him to shave off some of those straggly whiskers. I wonder why he never seems to get a hat or anything else like other people's?"

Presently George was announced. He was slightly above middle-height, broad-shouldered and fresh-colored; the obnoxious whiskers did, indeed, cover more of his cheeks than modern fashion prescribes for men of his age, and had evidently never known a razor. He wore a turn-down collar, and a necktie of a rather crude red; his clothes were neat and well-brushed, but not remarkable for their cut.

"Well, my dear George," said Mrs. Hylton, "we have seen very little of you while Ella has been away."

"I know," he said awkwardly; "I've had a lot of things to look after, in one way and another."

"What! after your work at the office was over?" cried Flossie, incredulously.

"Yes, after that; it's taken up my time a good deal."

"And so you couldn't spare any to call here—I see," said Flossie. "George," she added, with a sudden diversion, "I wonder you aren't afraid of catching cold; how can you go about in such absurdly thin boots as those?"

"These!" he said, inspecting them doubtfully. They were strong, sensible boots, with notched and projecting soles of ponderous thickness. "Why, what's the matter with them, Flossie, eh?—don't you think they're strong enough for walking in?"

"No, George; they're the very things for an afternoon dance, and quite a lot of couples could dance in them, you see; but for walking—ah! I'm afraid you sacrifice too much to appearances."

"I don't, really," George protested, in all good faith; "now do I, Mrs. Hylton?"

"Flossie is making fun of you, George; you mustn't mind her impertinence."

"Oh, is that all? Do you know, I really thought for the moment that she meant they were too small for me! You like getting a rise out of me, Flossie, don't you?" and he laughed with such genuine and good-natured amusement that the young lady felt somehow a little small, and almost ashamed, although it took the form of suppressed irritation.

"He really ought not to come here in such things," she said to herself; "and I don't believe that even now he sees what I meant."

Just at this point Ella came in, with the least touch of shyness, perhaps, at meeting him before witnesses after so long an absence, but she only looked the more charming in consequence; and demure as her greeting was, her pretty eyes had a sparkle of pleasure that scattered all George Chapman's fears to the winds. Even Flossie felt instinctively that straggly whiskered, red-necktied, thick-booted George had lost none of his divinity for Ella.

They did not seem to have much to say to one another, notwithstanding; possibly because Ella was called upon to dispense the tea which had just been brought in. George sat nursing the hat which Flossie found so objectionable, while he balanced a teacup with the anxious eye of a juggler out of practice, and the conversation flagged. At last, under pretence of renewing his tea, most of which he had squandered on a Persian rug, he crossed to Ella.

"I say," he suggested, "don't you think you could come out for a little while? I've such a lot to tell you, and—and I want you to go somewhere with me."

Mrs. Hylton made no objection, beyond stipulating that Ella must not be allowed to tire herself after her journey; and so a few minutes later Miss Hylton came down in her pretty summer hat and light jacket, and she and George were allowed to set out.

Once outside the house, he drew a long breath of mingled relief and pleasure.

"By Jove, Ella, I am glad to get you back again! I say, how jolly you do look in that hat! Now, do you know where I'm going to take you?"

"It will be quietest in the Gardens," said Ella.

"Ah, but that's not where you're going now," he said, with a delicious assumption of authority; "you're coming with me to see a certain house on Campden Hill you may have heard of."

"That will be delightful—I do want to see our dear little house again very much. And, George, we will go carefully over all the rooms, and settle what can be done with each of them—then we can begin directly, we haven't too much time."

"Perhaps," he said with a conscious laugh, "it won't take so much time as you think."

"Oh, but it must—to do it properly. And while I've been away, I've had some splendid ideas for some of the rooms. I've planned them out so beautifully. You know that delightful little room at the back?—the one I said should be your own den, with the windows all festooned with creepers, and looking out on the garden; well——"

"Take my advice," he said, "and don't make any plans till you see it. And as for plans, those furnishing fellows do all that—they don't care to be bothered with plans."

"They will have to carry out ours, though. I shall love settling how it is all to be—it will be such fun."

"You wouldn't call it fun if you knew what it was like, I can tell you."

"But I do know. Mother and I rearranged most of the rooms at home only last year—so you see I have some experience. And what experience can you have had, if you please?"

Ella had a mental vision, as she spoke, of the house in Dawson Place where George lived with his mother and sisters—a house in which furniture and everything else were commonplace and bourgeois to the last degree, and where nothing could have been altered since his boyhood; indeed she had often secretly pitied him for having to live in such surroundings, and admired the filial patience that had made him endure them so long.

"I've had my share, Ella, and I should be very sorry for you to have all the worry and bother I've been through over it!"

"But when, George? how? I don't understand."

"Ah, that's my secret," he said, provokingly; "and you know, Ella, if we began furnishing now, it would take no end of a time, with all these wonderful plans of yours, and—and I couldn't stand having to wait till next November for you—I couldn't do it!"

"Mother thinks the marriage need not be put off now," said Ella simply, "and we shall have six weeks till then; the house can be quite ready for us by the time we want it."

"Six weeks!" he said impatiently, "what's six weeks? You've no idea what these chaps are, Ella! And then there are all your own things to get, and they would take up most of your time. No, we should have had to put it off, whatever you may say. And that would mean another separation—for of course you would go away in August, and I should have to stay in town; the office wouldn't give me my fortnight twice over—honeymoon or no honeymoon."

Ella looked completely puzzled. "But what are you trying to prove now, George?"

"I was only showing you that, even though you have come back earlier, we couldn't possibly have got ready in time, if I hadn't—" But here he stopped. "No, I want that to be a surprise to you, Ella; you'll see presently," he added.

Ella's delicate brows contracted.

"I like to be prepared for my surprises, please, George. Tell me now."

They had turned up one of the quiet streets leading to the hill; they were so near the house that George thought he might abandon further mystery, not to mention that he was only too anxious to reveal his secret.

"Well, then, Ella, if you must have it," he said triumphantly, "the house is very nearly ready now. What do you think of that?"

"Do you mean that—that it is furnished, George?"

"Papered, painted, decorated, furnished—everything, from top to bottom! I thought that would surprise you, Ella!"

"I think," she answered slowly, "you might have told me you were doing it."

"What, before it was all done? That would have spoilt it all, dear. I should have written, though, if you hadn't been coming home so soon. And now it's finished, I must say it looks uncommonly jolly. I'm sure you'll be pleased with it—it looks quite a different place."

She tried to smile.

"And did you do it all yourself, George?"

"Well, no, not exactly. I flatter myself I know how to see that the work's properly done, and all that, but there are some things I don't pretend to be much of a hand at, so I got certain ladies to give me some wrinkles."

Ella felt relieved. She was disappointed, it is true—hurt, even, at having been deprived of any voice in the matter. She had been looking forward so much to carrying out her pet schemes, to enjoying her friends' admiration of the wonders wrought by her artistic invention. And she had never thought of George, somehow, as likely to have any strikingly original ideas on the subject of decoration, although she liked him none the less for that.

But it was something that he had had the good sense to take her mother and Flossie into his confidence; she knew she could trust them to preserve him from any serious mistakes.

"You see," said George, half apologetically, "I would ever so much rather have waited till you came back, only I couldn't tell when that would be. I really couldn't help myself. You're sure you don't mind about it? If you only knew how I worked over it, rushing about from one place to another as soon as I culd get away from the office, picking up bits of furniture here and there, standing over those beggars of painters and keeping 'em at it, and working out estimates, and seeing foremen and managers and all kinds of chaps. I used to get home dead tired of an evening, but I didn't mind that; I felt it was all bringing you nearer to me, darling, and that made everything a pleasure."

There was such honest affection in his look and voice, he had so evidently intended to please her, and had been in such manifest dread of any further separation from her, that she was completely disarmed.

"Dear George," she said gently, "I am so sorry you took all the trouble on yourself; it was very, very good of you to care so much, and I know I shall be delighted with the house."

"Well," said George, "I'm not much afraid about that, because I expect our tastes are pretty much the same in most things."

They were by this time at the house, and George, after a little fumbling with his as yet unfamiliar latch-key, threw open the door with a flourish, and said—

"There you are, little woman! Walk in, and you'll see what you shall see!"

No sooner was Ella inside the hall than her heart sank.

"Looks neat and nice, doesn't it?" said George, cheerfully. "You'd almost take that paper for real marble, wouldn't you? See how well they've done those veins. I like this yellowish color better than green, don't you? It looks so cool in summer. That's a good strong hall-lamp—not what you call High Art, exactly—but gives a rattling good light, and that's the main thing. Here, I'll light it up for you. Confound it! They haven't turned the gas on yet—however, there's too much sunshine for it to show if they had. This linoleum is a capital thing—you might scrub as long as you liked and you'd never get that pattern out!"

"No," Ella agreed, with a tragic little smile; "it—it looks as if it would last."

"Last? I should think so! And here's a hat-stand—you could almost swear it was carved wood of some sort, but it is only cast-iron painted; indestructible, you see. They told me it was the latest design—wonderful how cheaply they turn them out, isn't it?"

"I thought you said you were helped?"

"Oh, I didn't want any help here—this is only the passage, you know!"

Yes, it was only the passage—and yet she had been picturing such a charming entrance, with a draped arch, a graceful lamp, a fresh bright paper, a small buffet of genuine old oak, and so on. She suppressed a sigh as she passed on. After all, so long as the rooms themselves were all right, it did not so very much matter—and she knew that her mother's taste could be trusted.

But on the threshold of the dining-room she stopped aghast.

II.

The walls of the dining-room had been distempered a particularly hideous drab; the curtains were mustard-yellow; the carpet was a dull brown; the mottled marble mantelpiece, for which Ella had been intending to substitute one in walnut-wood with tiles, still shone in slabs of petrified brawn; there was a huge mahogany sideboard, of a kind she had only seen in old-fashioned hotels.

"Comfortable, eh?" remarked George; "lots of wear in those curtains!"

Unhappily there was, as Ella was only too well aware.

"You did this room yourself too, then, George?" she managed to say, without betraying herself by her voice.

"Yes, I chose everything here. You see, Ella, we shall only use this room for meals."

"Only for meals, yes," she acquiesced with a shudder; "but—George, surely you said mother had helped you with the rooms?"

"What, your mother? No, Ella, her notions are rather too grand for me—it was Jessie and Carrie I meant. Just come and see what they've made of my den."

Ella followed; the window—which had commanded such a cheerful outlook into one of the pretty gardens, with a pink thorn, a laburnum tree or two, and some sycamores, which still flourish fresh and fair on Campden Hill—was obscured now by some detestable contrivance in transparent paper imitating stained glass.

"That was the girls' notion," said George, following the direction of her eyes; "they fixed it all themselves. It was their present to me—pretty of them to think of it, wasn't it? I call it an immense improvement, and you see it's stuck on with some patent cement-varnish, so it can't rub off. You get the effect better if you stand here—now see how well the colors come out in the sun!"

If only they would come out!—but what could she do but stand and admire hypocritically? Her eyes, in spite of herself, seemed drawn to that bright-hued sham, intersected by black lines intended to represent leading; of the room itself she only saw vaguely that it was not unworthy of the window.

"Nothing to what they've done with the drawing-room!" said innocent George, beaming. "Come along, darling, you'll scarcely know the place!"

And Ella, reduced to a condition of stony stupor, followed to the drawing-room. She did not know the place indeed. It was a quaintly shaped irregular room, with French windows opening upon the garden on one side and a deep bow-window on another. When she had last seen it, the walls were covered with a paper so pleasing in tone and design that she had almost decided to retain it. The paper was gone, and in its place a gaudy, semi-Chinese pattern of unknown birds, flying and perching on sprawling branches laden with impossible flowers. And then the furniture—the "elegant drawing-room suit" in brilliant plush and shining satin, the cheap cabinets, and the ready-made black and gilt overmantel, with its panels of swans, hawthorn blossoms and landscapes sketchily daubed on dead gold—surely it had all been transferred bodily from the stage of some carelessly mounted farcical comedy!

Ella's horrified gaze gradually took in other features: the China monkeys swinging on cords, the porcelain parrots hanging in great brass rings, huge misshapen terra-cotta jars and pots, dead grass in bloated drain-pipes, tambourines beribboned and painted with kittens and robins, enormous wooden sabots, gilded Japanese fans, a woolly white rug and a bright Kidderminster carpet.

"Oh, George!" burst involuntarily from her lips.

"I knew you'd be pleased," he said, complacently; "but I mustn't take all the credit myself. It was like this, you see. I felt all right about the other rooms, but the drawing-room—that's your room, and I was awfully afraid of not having it exactly as it ought to be. So I went to the girls, and I said, 'You know all about these things—just make it what you think Ella will like, and then we can't go wrong.' We had that Grosvenor Gallery paper down first of all. 'Choose something bright and cheerful,' I said, and I don't think they've chosen badly. Then the pottery and china and all that—those are the girls' present to you, with their best love."

"It's very good of them," said poor Ella, on the verge of tears.

"Oh, they think a lot of you! They were rather nervous about doing anything at first, for fear you mightn't like it; but I told them they needn't be afraid. 'What I like, Ella will like,' I said, and I must say no one could wish to see a prettier drawing-room than they've turned it into—they've a good deal of taste, those two girls."

Ella stood there in a kind of dreary dream. What had happened to the world since she came into this house? What was this change in her? She was afraid to speak, lest the intense rebellious anger she felt should gain the mastery. Was it she that had these wicked thoughts of George—poor, kind, unsuspecting, loving George? She felt a little faint, for the windows were closed and the room stuffy with the odor of the new furniture and the atmosphere of the workshop; everything here seemed to her commonplace and repulsive.

"How about those plans of yours now, Ella, eh?" cried George.

This was too much—her over-tried patience broke down.

"George!" she cried impulsively, and her voice sounded hoarse and strange to her own ear, "George, I must speak—I must tell you——" and then she checked herself.

She must keep command of herself, or she could not, without utter loss of dignity, find the words that were to sting him into a sense of what he had done and allowed to be done. Before she could go on, George had drawn her to him, and was patting her shoulder tenderly.

"I know, dear little girl," he said, "I know; don't try to tell me anything. I'm so awfully glad you're pleased; but all the money and pains in the world wouldn't make the place good enough for my Ella."

She released herself with a little cry of impotent despair. How could she say the sharp, cruel speeches that were struggling to reach her tongue now? It was no use; she was a coward, she simply had not the courage to undeceive him here, on the very first day of the reunion, too.

"You haven't been upstairs yet," said George, dropping sentiment abruptly. "Shall we go up?"

Ella assented submissively, much as even this cost her, but it was better, she reflected, to get it over and know the very worst. However, she was spared this ordeal for the present. As they returned to the hall, they found themselves suddenly face to face with a dingy man, whose face was surrounded by a fringe of black whiskers, and crowned by a shock of fluey hair.

"Who on earth are you?" demanded George, as the man rose from the kitchen stairs.

"No offence, sir and lady. Peagrum, that's my name, fust shop round the corner as you go into Silver-st., plumber and sanitry hengineer, gasfittin' and hartistic decorating, bell-anging in all its branches. I received instructions from Mr. Jones that I was to look into a little matter o' leakage in the back kitchen sink, also to see what taps, if hany, required seein' to, and gen'lly to put things straight like. So I come round, 'aving the keys, just to cast a heye over them, as I may term it, preliminry to beginning work in the course of a week or so, as soon as I'm at libity to attend to it pussonally."

"Oh, the landlord sent you? All right, then."

"Correct, sir," said the plumber, affably; "while I've been 'ere, I took the freedom of going all over this little 'ouse, and a nice cosy little 'ouse you've made of it, for such a house as it is. You've done it up very tysty, very tysty you've done this little 'ouse up, and I've some claim to speak, seein' as how I've had the decoration throughout of a many 'ouse in my time, likewise mansions. You ain't been too ambitious, which is the error most parties falls into with small 'ouses; now the parties as 'ad the place before you, by the name o' Rummles—well, I dessay they satisfied theirselves, but the 'ouse never looked right, not to my taste, it didn't."

"George get rid of this person," said Ella, under her breath, in French.

Unfortunately, George's acquaintance with that tongue was about on a par with the plumber's, and he remained passive.

The plumber now proceeded to put down his mechanic's straw bag upon the hall table, which he did with great care, as if it were of priceless stuff, and contained fragile articles. Having done this, he posed himself with one elbow resting on the post of the staircase, like a grimy statue of Shakespeare.

"Ah," he said, shaking his touzled head, "this ain't the first time I've been 'ere in my puffessional capacity, not by a long way. Not by a long way, it aint. Mr. Rummles, him as I mentioned to you afore, and a nice pleasant-spoken gentleman he was, too. In the tea-trade. Mr. Rummles, he allus sent round for me whenever there was hany odd jobs as wanted doin', and in course I was allus pleased to get 'em, be they hodd or hotherwise."

"Er—exactly," said George, as soon as he could put in a word, "but you see, this lady and I——"

The plumber, however, did not abandon his position, and seemed determined that they should hear him.

"I know, sir; I see how things were with you with 'art a glance, but afore we go any further, it's right you should know 'oo I am, and all about me. Jest 'ear what I'm goin' to tell yer, for it's somethink out of the common way, though Gospel truth. It's a melinkly reflection for a man in my station in life, but——" (and here he lowered his voice to a solemn pitch) "I've never set foot inside of this 'ere 'ouse without somethink 'appens more or less immejit. Ah, it's true, though. Seems almost like as if I brought a fatality in along o' me. Don't you interrupt; you wait till I'm done, and see if I'm talking at random or without facks to support me. Well, fust time as ever I was sent for 'ere was in regard to drains, as they couldn't flush satisfactory. I did my work and come away. Not three weeks arter, Miss Rummles, the heldest gell, was took ill with typhoid. Never the same young lady again, nor yet she never won't be neither, not if she lives to be a nundered. 'Nothing very hodd about that,' says you. Wait a bit. Next time it was the kitching copper as had got all furred up like. I tinkered that up to rights, and come away. Well, afore I'd even made out my account, that identical copper blew up and scalded the cook dreadful. 'Coppers will play these games,' you sez—all right, then. But you let me finish. Third time, there was a flaw in one of the gas-brackets in the spare room. I soddered it up and I come away. Soon arterwards, a day or two, as it might be, Mrs. Rummles 'ad 'er mar a-stayin' with her, and the old lady slep in that very room—and was laid up weeks. 'Curus,' says I, when I come to 'ear of it, 'very curus!' and it set me a-thinkin'. Last time but one, 'ere—lemme see—that was a bell-'anging job, I think—no, I'm wrong, it was drains agen; so it were—drains it was agen. And the next thing I 'eard was that Mrs. Rummles was a-layin' at Death's door with the diffthery. The last time—ah, I recklet well, I was called in to see if somethink wasn't wrong with the ballcock in the top cistin. I see there was somethink, and I come away as usual. That day week, old Mr. Rummles was took with a fit on the floor in the back droring-room, which broke up the 'ouse! Now, I think, as fair-minded and unprejudiced parties, you'll agree with me that there was somethink more 'n hordinary conside-ency in all that. I declare to you," avowed the plumber, with a gloomy relish and a candor that was possibly beg-otten of beer, "I declare to you there's times when I do honestly believe as I carry a curse along with me, whenever I visits this 'ere particular 'ouse; and, though it's agen my own hinterests, I deem it on'y my dooty, as a honest man, to mention it."

Under any other circumstances, the plumber's compliments on her taste and his lugubrious assumption of the character of Destroying Angel would have sorely tried, if not completely upset, Ella's gravity; as it was, she was too wretched to have more than a passing and quite unappreciative sense of his absurdity. George, having the quality of mind which makes jokes more readily than sees them, took him quite seriously.

"Well," he answered, solemnly, "I hope you won't bring us bad luck, at all events."

"I 'ope so, sir, I'm sure. I 'ope so. It will not be by any desire on my part, more partikkler when you're just settin' up 'ousekeepin' with your good lady 'ere. But there's no tellin' in these matters. That's where it is, you see—there's no tellin'. And, arter all my experience, with the best intentions in the world, I can't go and guarantee to you as nothink won't come of it. I wish I could, but, as a honest man, I can't. If it's to be," moralized this fatalistic plumber, "it is to be, and that's all about it, and no hefforts on my part or yours won't make hany difference, will they, sir?"

"Well, well," said George, plainly ill at ease; "that will do, my f. end. Now, Ella, what do you say—shall we go upstairs?"

"Not now," she gasped, let us go away . . . Oh, George, take me outside, please!"

"Dash that confounded fool of a plumber," said George irritably, when they were in the street again; "wonder if he thinks I'm going to employ him after that—not that it isn't all bosh, of course . . . Why, Ella, you're not tired, are you?"

"I—I think I am a little . . . Do you mind if we drive home?"

Ella was very silent during this short drive. When they reached Linden Gardens, she said:

"I think we must say good-by here, George. I feel as if I am going to have a headache."

"You poor little girl," he said, looking rather crestfallen, for he had been counting upon going in, and being invited to remain for dinner. "It's been rather too much for you, going over the house, and all that—or was it that beastly plumber with his rigmaroles?"

"It wasn't the plumber," she said hurriedly, as the door was opened. "And good-by, George."

"How easily girls do get tired out!" thought George, as he walked homeward. "A little pleasant excitement like this—and she seems quite upset. She was delighted with the house, though, that's one thing; and I mustn't forget to tell the girls how touched she was by their presents. What a darling she is!—how happy we shall be together!"

III.

Once safely at home, Ella hastened upstairs to her own room, where, if the truth must be told, she employed the half-hour before dinner in unintermitting sobbing, into which temper largely entered. "He has spoiled it all for me! How could he—oh, how could he!" ran the burden of her moan. At the dinner-table, however, though pale and silent, she had recovered composure.

"A pleasant walk, Ella?" inquired her mother, with rather formal interest.

"Yes, very," replied Ella, trusting she would not be questioned further.

"I believe I know where you went!" cried indiscreet Flossie; "you went to look at your new house—now, didn't you? Ah! I thought so. I suppose you have quite made up your minds how you mean to do the rooms?"

"Quite.

"We might go round to all the best places to-morrow," said Mrs. Hylton, "and see some papers and hangings. There were some lovely designs in Blank's windows the other day."

"And, Ella," added Flossie, "I've been out with Andrews after school several times to Tottenham Court Road, and Wardour-st, and Oxford-st.—oh, everywhere, hunting up old furniture, and I can show you where they have some beautiful things—no shams, but really good."

"You know, Ella," said Mrs. Hylton, observing that she did not answer, "I want you to have a pretty house, and you and George must order exactly what you like, but I think you will find I may be some help to you in choosing."

"Thank you, mother," said Ella, without any animation; "I—I don't think we shall want much."

"You will want all that young people in your position do want, I suppose," said Mrs. Hylton a little impatiently; "and of course you understand that the bills are to be my affair."

"Thank you, mother, murmured Ella again.

She did not feel able to tell them just yet how this had all been forestalled—she felt that she would infallibly break down if she tried.

"You seem a little overdone to-night, my dear," said her mother frigidly. She was naturally hurt at the very ineffusive way in which her good offices had been met.

"I have such a dreadful headache," pleaded Ella. "I—I think I overtired myself this afternoon!"

"Then you were very foolish, after travelling all yesterday as you did. I don't wonder that George was ashamed to come in. You had better go to bed early, and I will send Andrews in to you with some of my sleeping mixture."

Ella was glad enough to obey, though the draught took some time to operate; she felt as if no happiness or peace of mind were possible for her till George had been persuaded to undo his work. Surely he could not refuse when he knew that her mother was prepared to do everything for them at her own expense!

And here it began to dawn upon her what this would entail: George's words came back to her as if she heard them actually spoken. Did he not say that the house had been furnished out of his savings? What was she asking him to do? To dismantle it entirely; to humiliate himself by going round to all the people he had dealt with, asking them as a favor to take back their goods; or else he must sell them as best he could for a fraction of their cost. Who was to refund him all he had so uselessly spent? Could she ask her mother to do so? Would he even consent to such an arrangement if it was proposed?

Then his sisters—how could she avoid offending them irreparably, perhaps involving George in a quarrel with his family, if she were to carry her point? As she realized for the first time the inevitable consequences of success, she asked herself in despair what she ought to do, where her plain duty lay?

Did she love George, or was it all delusion? Was he less to her than mere superfluities, the fringe of life?

She did love him, in spite of any passing disloyalty of thought. She felt his sterling worth and goodness, even his weaknesses had something lovable in them for her. And he had been planning, spending, working all this time to give her pleasure, and was this his reward? She had been within an ace of letting him see the cruel ingratitude that was in her heart! "What a selfish wretch I have been!" she thought; "but I won't be—no, I won't! George shall not be snubbed, hurt, estranged from his family on my account!" No, she would suffer, she alone—and in silence. Never by a word would she betray to him the pain his well-intentioned action cost her—not even to her mother and Flossie would she permit herself to utter the least complaint, lest they should insist upon opening George's eyes.

So, having arrived at this heroic resolve, in which she found a touch of the sublime that almost consoled her, the tears dried on her cheeks, and Ella fell asleep at last.

Some readers, no doubt—though possibly few of our heroine's sex—will smile scornfully at this crumpled rose-leaf agony, this tempest in a Dresden teacup, and the writer is not concerned to deny that the situation has its ludicrous side.

But for a girl brought up as Ella Hylton had been, in an artistic milieu, her eyes insensibly trained to love all that was beautiful in color and form, to be sensitive to ugliness and vulgarity, it was a very real and bitter struggle, a hard-won victory, to come to such a decision as she formed. Life, Heaven knows, contains worse trials and deeper tragedies than this, but at least Ella's happy life had as yet known no harder.

And so far she must be given the credit of having conquered. Resolution is, no doubt, half the battle. Unfortunately, Ella's resolution, though she hardly perceived this at present, could not be effected by one isolated and final act, but by a long chain of daily and hourly forbearances, the first break in which would undo all that had gone before.

How she bore the test we are going to see.

She woke the next morning to a sense that her life had somehow lost its savor; the exaltation of her resolve over night had evaporated and left her spirits flat and dead; but she came down nevertheless determined to be stanch and true to George under all provocations.

"Have you and George decided when you would like your wedding to be?" asked her mother after breakfast, "because we ought to have the invitations printed very soon."

"Not yet," faltered Ella, and the words might have passed either as an answer or an appeal.

"I think it should be some time before the end of next month, or people will be going out of town."

"I suppose so," was the reply, so listlessly given that Mrs. Hylton glanced keenly at her daughter.

"What do you feel about it yourself, Ella?"

"I?—oh!—I—I've no feeling. Perhaps if we waited . . . No, it doesn't matter; . . . let it be when you and George wish, mother, please."

Mrs. Hylton gave a sharp, annoyed little laugh. "Really, my dear, if you can't get up any more interest in it than that, I think it would certainly be wiser to wait!"

It was more than indifference that Ella felt—a wild aversion to beginning the new life that but lately had seemed so mysteriously sweet and strange; she was frightened by it, ashamed of it, but she could not help herself. She made no answer, nor did Mrs. Hylton again refer to the subject.

But Ella's worst tribulations had yet to come. That afternoon, as she and her mother and Flossie were sitting in the drawing-room, "Mrs. and the Misses Chapman" were announced. Evidently they had deemed it incumbent on them to pay a state visit as soon as possible after Ella's return. Ella returned their effusive greetings as dutifully as she could; she had never succeeded in cultivating a very lively affection for them—to-day she found them barely endurable.

Mrs. Chapman was a stout, dewlapped old lady, with dull eyes and pachydermatous folds in her face. She had a husky voice and a funereal manner. Jessie, her eldest daughter, was not altogether uncomely in a commonplace way; she was dark-haired, high-colored, loud-voiced, generally sprightly and voluble, and overpowering. She was in such a hurry to speak that her words tripped one another up, and she had a meaningless and, to Ella, highly irritating little laugh. Carrie was plain and colorless, content to admire and echo her sister.

After some conversation on Ella's Continental experiences, Jessie suddenly, as Ella's uneasy instinct foresaw, turned to Mrs. Hylton.

"Of course Ella told you what a surprise she had at Campden Hill yesterday? Weren't you electrified?"

"No doubt I should have been," said Mrs. Hylton, who detested Jessie, "only Ella did not think fit to mention it."

"Oh, I wonder at that! I hope I wasn't going to betray the secrets of the prison-house?" (Jessie was fond of using stock phrases to give lightness and sparkle to her conversation) "Ella, the idea of your keeping it all to yourself, you sly puss! But tell me—would you ever have believed Tumps this sisters called George 'Tumps' could be capable of such independent behavior?"

"No," said Ella, "indeed I never should!"

"Ha, ha! nor should we! You would have screamed to see him fussing about. Wasn't he killing over it, Carrie?"

"Oh, he was, Jessie!"

"My son," explained Mrs. Chapman to Mrs. Hylton, "is so wonderfully energetic and practical. I have never known him fail to carry through anything he has once undertaken—he inherits that from his poor dear father."

"I don't quite gather what your brother George has been doing, even now?" said Mrs. Hylton to Jessie.

"Oh, but my lips are sealed. Wild horses shan't drag any more from me! Don't be afraid, Ella, I won't spoil sport!"

"There is no sport to spoil," said Ella. "Mother, it is only that—that George has furnished the house while I have been away."

"Really!" said Mrs. Hylton, politely, "that is energetic of him, indeed!"

"Poor dear Tumps came home so proud of your approval!" said Jessie to Ella; "and we were awfully relieved to find you didn't think we'd made the house quite too dreadful—weren't we, Carrie?"

"Yes, indeed, Jessie."

"Of course," observed the latter young lady, "it's always so hard to hit upon another person's taste exactly, especially in furnishing."

"Impossible, I should have thought," from Mrs. Hylton.

"I hope Ella is of a different opinion. What do you say, dearest?"

"Oh," cried Ella hastily, with splendid mendacity, "I—I liked it very much, and—and it was so much too kind of you and Carrie . . . I've never thanked you for—for all the things you gave me!"

"Oh, those! they aren't worth thanking for—just a few little artistic odds and ends; they set off a room, you know—give it a finish."

"Young people nowadays," croaked old Mrs. Chapman, lugubriously, in Mrs. Hylton's courteously inclined ear, "think so much of luxury and ornament. I'm sure when I married my dear husband we——"

"Now, mater, dear, you really mustn't!" interrupted the irrepressible Jessie. "Mrs. Hylton is on our side, you know. She likes pretty things about her, don't you Mrs. Hylton? And talking of that, Ella, I hope you thought our Glyco-vitrine decoration a success? We were perfectly surprised