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Poetry.

TRUE HEROISM.

BY GRANT P. ROBINSON.

Let others write of battles fought
On bloody, ghastly fields,
Where honor greets the man who wins,
And death the man who yields;
But I will write of him who fights
And vanquishes his sins,
Who struggles on through weary years,
Against himself, and wins.

He is a hero staunch and brave
Who fights an unseen foe,
And puts at last beneath his feet
His passion base and low;
Who stands erect in manhood's might,
Undaunted and undismayed—
The bravest men who drew a sword
In array or in raid.

It calls for something more than brawn
Or muscle to o'ercome
An enemy who marches not
With banner, plume, and drum—
A foe forever lurking nigh,
With silent, stealthy tread,
Forever near your board by day,
At night beside your bed.

All honor, then, to that brave heart,
Though poor or rich he be,
Who struggles with his baser part—
Who conquers and is free.
He may not wear a hero's crown,
Or fill a hero's grave;
But truth will place his name among
The bravest of the brave.

Miscellaneous.

A Very Singular Story.

My name is Rachel Althea Travers. It seems to me that in an account of this sort, it is better to state that at once, and then it avoids all worrying as to who that perpetually recurring "I" may be. They are unfortunate initials, as you may perhaps observe, and have led to my being apostrophized as "Rat" by an impertinent younger brother, who is, I am thankful to say, generally at school. We, that is, my mother, my two sisters, and myself, live in Bryanston Square. We have no country house, and consequently are in town a great part of the year, when I, for one, would sooner be anywhere else; not that that melancholy fact has anything to do with my story, except so far as it accounts for our being in London one nasty dark November, when some thing happened which was the remote cause of my writing this, the cause, in fact, of my having this to write. I had a headache; I think that perhaps, would have been a reason for not writing it, but I will explain in a minute what my headache had to do with it. It was the 15th, I think, and I was sitting in the drawing-room while my sister Agnes had her music lesson. I could speak German with tolerable fluency, having spent the last winter in Vienna with some friends, but Agnes hardly understood a single word. Herr Blume could, however, speak a little English, and they might, in reality, have got on very well, had it not been for the extreme excitability of the little man's temperament. In the event of a wrong chord, his conversation, though fluent, became totally incomprehensible, and of such a striking nature that Agnes, who was very nervous, had once gone into violent hysterics, occasioned by agonizing attempts to suppress her laughter. After that, my mother declared that I must always remain in the room to translate. It was a great bore being tied to one spot twice a week at exactly the same hour, and I heartily wished Agnes would learn German herself. Lessons had been talked of, but the idea had been given up.

"Rachel, dear, I don't think it's any use," my mother had said to me; "she hasn't the least talent for languages, and though the lessons may not be very expensive, yet you know, my dear child, all these things make a difference."

Poor dear mamma! I made the sacrifice with a better grace, knowing as I did how many of "all those things" she would gladly have had, but denied herself for our sakes.

And so it came to pass that that 15th of November found me at my usual post in a corner of the sofa, awaiting the arrival of Herr Blume. In he came, as the clock struk eleven, in the midst of a frantic rush on poor Agnes's part through an immense pile of music to find her piece. I think that put him out, for he stood watching her with an unnatural calmness, which I felt sure could only be the effect of almost superhuman efforts of self-control. He was a short, hay-colored man with spectacles, extraordinarily round eyes, and an immense quantity of distracted-looking hair, through which he was constantly running his fingers in a manner quite peculiar to himself. At last the piece was found, Agnes began to play, and I established myself more snugly in my corner. Alas! the peace which followed was but of short duration. A series of small disturbances began, the immediate cause of which was the piano: now the piano was a hired, and not particularly good. Under a successful course of our treatment it had arrived at a blissful state of indifference concerning the pedal, keeping up a perpetual rumble which sounded like mild thunder; This little peculiarity appeared to have the most irritating effect on the unfortunate music master, and once or twice he had given vent to his feelings by a violent castigation of the wretched instrument. This, however, as one may imagine, only tended to increase the evil, and matters had arrived at a crisis, when this morning my mother entered the room as he was engaged in inflicting upon us a succession of tremendous minor crashes that were truly terrible.

With a bound which would not have disgraced Leotard, he leaped from the music-stool and stood before her. After the usual compliments, he asked if it might be allowed to him "to make to madame one small representation?"

This little inquiry was accompanied by a smile intended to be insinuating, but which was simply sardonic.

My mother of course assured him that she would be most happy to listen to any suggestion; upon which he declared, running his fingers through his hair, that, though it inflicted upon him much sorrow, he felt it to be his duty to instruct her that the pedal was much disordered, and was very noxious to him. "For myself," he proceeded, with a grand heroism, "for myself, I care not a little bit, but for these young messes"—here he indicated with a theatrical flourish Agnes and myself—"it is a fatal story."

"It is only a hired piano, Herr Blume," said my mother, "and I think I really must change it; I know it is very bad."

"Ach!" he said, eagerly, "why does not one have her own splendid instrument? Madame will perhaps reflect this what I have said."

He then suddenly closed his lips, and with a pirouette and another bound seated himself again, commencing on the spot such an illustration of that little weakness on the part of the pedal of which he had spoken, that my poor mother fled the room. I remained, sorely against my will, but tried to find consolation in a pile of cushions. My head ached, I could not read, and I sat listlessly turning over a photograph book, until I suppose I must have gone off into a doze. I was suddenly roused by Herr Blume's voice, raised to a positive shriek: "Langsamer! langsamer, lang-sa-mer-re!" I got up, and rushed toward the piano; poor Agnes was as white a sheet, and Herr Blume's forehead stood great drops of perspiration.

"Slower, Agnes, slower; that is what Herr Blume means," I said. Poor child, she made one more effort, but her fingers trembled so that she could hardly strike a note, and the next moment she burst into tears.

There was nothing more to be done that morning by either of them, I plainly saw; as for him, he had been in a vile temper from the beginning.

"I am really very sory, Herr Blume," I said, as the door closed after her; "it was entirely my fault for not attending; you know my sister hardly understands a word of German."

"That, my fraulein, I know," he answered, with awful solemnity, "and I must, I fear, abandon her, if she cannot learn a little."

To be abandoned by him he seemed to think the most dreadful fate in life.

"My tempers," he continued, with excitement, "suffers, yes, suffers, through these trials."

He never had any to speak of, but I didn't tell him so, thinking he mightn't perhaps like it. For a few minutes we both remained silent, he standing in a Napoleonic attitude, with folded arms and knitted brows, glaring in a malignant manner at a cross in the carpet. I began nervously to consider whether it could possibly be that, owing to a strong anti-ritualistic feeling, our carpet might be displeasing to his eye. My apprehensions were, however, relieved when he proceeded to unfold his plans. There was, it seemed, a German lady of his acquaintance lodging in a street close by, who was anxious to give lessons; he could recommend her highly for her ability and accent, he added, and if my mother would permit Agnes to have a few lessons, he was sure her music would greatly benefit. Might he ask the lady to call on madame? he inquired; and so the end of it was, that it was arranged for her to come the next day at eleven o'clock.

"Of course you will manage it all, Rachel," my mother said in the evening. "I dare say she can't speak a word of English."

So she came. As I look back at it now, the whole thing seems so odd, as if all that followed were the consequence of a little headache on my part, and a little temper on Herr Blume's; all the merest chance; and yet it cannot be; we are all working out some vast design, subservient to one great master will; generally, upon tiniest threads of trifles hang the great joys and miseries of life.

A little after eleven the next morning a card was brought up, on which was written "Fraulein Dorn," and in a minute she was in the room. She was not the least like what I had expected. Most people form some idea as to any one they are going to meet, and I had formed mine; but I was entirely wrong; there was not a trace of that slovenliness of dress and manner of which I had seen so much in the Vaterland, even in the classes to which, I knew, by her name, she did not belong. On the contrary, everything about her was fresh and graceful, and there was a charming ease and grave courtesy in her manner which astonished me. Her face, even now that I know it under its many changes, is difficult to describe. *Clear* was the only word that came into my mind as I looked at her. A sweet oval face, clear and pale, with dark hazel eyes, somewhat round and deep set, looking out fearlessly, like shining stars. Her lips were excessively pretty, and gave color to a face which would perhaps otherwise have been too pale; not that dark color verging on purple which Lely has bestowed on some of his beauties, and which gives one the painful impression that they have been indulging in black currant jam, but a bright light red. It was not the first morning that I saw all the excellences of her face, but afterwards, when I grew to know her better.

There were lessons a week, and I used generally to join in them; she was very quiet at first, but gradually we began to get better friends, and she would talk about Germany, or England, or on any general subject in the most amusing and lively manner; but I could never by any means whatever lead her to speak of herself, her former life, her reasons for coming to England, nor say a word, in fact, that could afford any clew to her history. There was a mystery about her; of that I felt very sure. Now the unravelling of mysteries was considered rather my forte, so I felt on my honor, as it seemed, to penetrate it. There had been an eagerness about Herr Blume's manner which had struck me at the very outset of the affair, and, strange to say, once or twice during the lessons, I had been possessed by a stronger feeling that I had seen her before; yet the face was perfectly strange to me. The more I considered it, the more convinced I became that I must be laboring under some delusion, there was not a feature familiar to me. The lessons continued regularly until a little time before Christmas, when one morning she failed to make her appearance.

I knew the number of the house, though I had never been to her lodging, so before luncheon I walked round to see after her. The door was opened to me by an untidy-looking maid, and as I advanced into the passage, loud, angry tones issued from a room on my right. There was no help for it but to proceed, and this I was doing when I was almost knocked down by a fat, dirty, angry woman coming hastily out of the room, her head turned round, still addressing some one within.

"And sure it's not my house as 'll hould ye, with yer fine clothes and yer fine airs, if it's not a civil tongue ye can keep in yer head!"

She flounced off, and I ventured a peep into the room. It was in a state of the utmost confusion; clothes were lying in every direction, on the tables, on the chairs; and boxes half packed stood about the floor.

On one of these, looking like Scipio amid the ruins of Carthage, sat the fraulein. Another woman, black eyed, with an angry red spot on either cheek, was busily packing a box. On seeing me the fraulein started up.

"Ach! I am so glad to see you," she said. "I must explain why I have not come to you. This woman, Therese has made her angry,—furious; poor Therese, she was foolish. The woman has said we leave the house, so I go instantly; but where to, that I know not."

This was wretched. I tried in vain make her tell me what Therese had said, thinking it most probable some misunderstanding which had arisen owing to their not understanding each other's language; but she evaded it, declaring, however, that it was impossible for her to remain.

I made up my mind on the spot, and rushed home to ask my mother to invite her to come to us until after Christmas.

"My dear Rachel, I really don't think I can adopt; she is quite a stranger; you know nothing, or next to nothing, about her. I think you had better give it up; no doubt she has friends in London."

Such were the arguments with which my dear mother attempted to dissuade me from my request; but I could not be dissuaded.

"Darling mamsey," I implored, caressing her, "just this once; you acknowledge that she is very nice; and indeed she has no friends, except Herr Blume and his wife, who live themselves in lodgings. You mustn't shut up your heart at Christmas time; just for a day or two," I entreated, giving her a hug, "until she can find a place to go to."

I knew she would not be able to hold out long.

"Well, Rachel," she said, "it's all upon your shoulders. You're a naughty, self-willed girl," she added, smiling, and shaking her head decreatingly, as I dashed off to bring back my beauty to Bryanston Square.

It was as I expected, they all fell in love with her; her sweet face, her high-bred, gentle manners, her charming grace; but most of all, she fascinated Bertie, that unpolished schoolboy whom we owned for a brother, and in so doing caused the benedictions of his sisters to rain down upon her head.

Never were there such peaceful Christmas holidays within the recollection of the "oldest inhabitant," and we trembled at the idea of losing our presiding genius. My mother, also, joined heartily in our entreaties for her to stay, for beside really liking her, it was impossible to overlook the immense advantages which accrued to us from her society. She could scarcely speak a word of English, but German, French, and Italian she seemed to be equally fluent in; and, wonder of wonders, Bertie, by New Year's Day, was positively beginning to talk French with, I won't say a good, but certainly a less extraordinary accent than when he came home.

This undisputed possession of the field was perfect bliss to him; he lionized her about London, taking her to all sorts of museums and places, which he professed to think it quite necessary that she should see.

In my own mind I felt sure it was for the pleasure, pure and simple, of having such a pretty person under his protection, and entirely dependent on him.

I think she liked him, and his boyish admiration. One evening, as she was talking, or rather gesticulating, to my mother—for their conversation was mostly carried on by signs—he gave me a nudge that would have been amply sufficient to awaken St. Paul's to attention.

"I say, Rachel, she is pretty," he said, in a low tone, "there's no mistake about that; you should see how all the fellows stare at her, and I don't believe she knows it, now," he added, in inquiring sort of voice, as if he weren't quite sure of the truth of his own statement.

"Don't you think so?" I asked, innocently.

"Well, I don't quite know how she can help it," he said meditatively; "when I took her to the Colosseum, the Guards were just passing, and you should have seen how they looked at her, and wished themselves in my shoes, I know; and I think they're pretty good judges," he said, in an approving tone.

So we went on very smoothly until New Year's Day, when she began to declare she must leave us. I promised to help her to find lodgings, if she would wait for a day or two longer.

The time of her visit had not been altogether unfruitful in affording me some insight into her history,—an insight obtained, however, more through my own observation than from any information vouchsafed by her.

It was one day in Christmas week, I think, she was going to the pantomime, or something of the sort with mamma, Agnes, and Bertie. She was sitting with her opera cloak on, talking to Bertie, before they went, when I came into the room; her back was turned to the door. As I looked at her, suddenly, like a flash of light, a host of recollections forced themselves into my mind. I was no longer in our own drawing room, but in a well-known salon in Vienna, blazing with light, listening to Mademoiselle de Mursk. The figure which was before me now was before me then, a few rows in front of us. The cloak in itself was peculiar,—white, with a very beautiful border of blue and silver,—that perhaps helped my memory; but as the light shone on the crisp, golden hair, I wondered at my own stupidity; yes, there could hardly be any mistake, I thought, as I remembered a letter which I had received some time before from my friend in Vienna.

"Look, Rachel, look!" she had whispered to that night, "there is the great beauty, Countess Arnheim."

Where? I asked, trying to look in every direction at once, for I had heard a great deal about her, but had not seen her.

"There, to the left; don't you see? Ah! what a pity! she has turned her head."

I could not help laughing at her disappointed tone; she was always so eager that I should see all I wished.

"Never mind," I said, "she will be sure to turn it back again;" but she didn't; never during the whole time that we both sat there, though we were not more than two yards from the place she sat, did she turn once, so that I could even see her profile; just the pretty outline of her cheek, and the mass of crisp, rippling, golden hair was vouchsafed to us. Of her companion we saw quite enough, a dark, handsome woman, and a middle-aged, keen-eyed officer, who sat on either side of her. After the concert was over, in the little excitement of securing a droschky, I thought no more of her. This evening, however, she was brought forcibly to my mind, as I entered the drawing-room, by the outline of Fraulein Dorn's face, and the white and blue cloak.

Not till after they were gone did I produce my writing-case, and, settling myself in a comfortable arm-chair before the fire proceed to dive into its recesses after my Vienna letters."

I flished out four or five from its capacious pockets, but the right one did not make its appearance, and I was just beginning to echo my poor mother's wish, that I were more tidy and methodical, when I made a good haul and brought up the letter I was in search of; it began,—

"Kothener Strasse 19, Wien-May.

"DEAREST RACHEL,—

"My letter, you see, is dated from our old quarters. We have taken these rooms again, for though not so large as the others, they are much cleaner, and I think more comfortable. It makes me quite melancholy to go into your room. Char has it now. We all miss you dreadfully; it takes away half the pleasure of things, having no one to talk them over with, though really in these days of excitement there is no time for reflection; one simply has to keep one's mouth open to swallow the next new thing. There seems not to be the slightest doubt now about Leopold. I believe Count Bismarck has intended there should be war from the first. Talking about offering them an indemnity for Holstein! offering a fiddlestick! It's a very bad business altogether, it seems to me, and it serves them right, of course, the same people will say, for having joined in it; but why Prussia should come off so much the best I can't see. Gen. Lobetska came in this morning, and he thinks he will have to go the day after to-morrow. There was a report that two Austrian regiments had crossed the Saxon frontier, but that has been contradicted. You can imagine the chronic state of excitement in which we are kept by all sorts of contradictory rumors. The troops here seem confident enough of victory. By the by, young Siegelheim came in yesterday for a minute; his high spirits were quite funny and infectious; he had just gone home on leave, but had been recalled by telegram. The officers seem all delighted with the prospect of war; they only look at the bright side; for my part, I think it is very awful. And I *cannot* understand how they can rid themselves of the thought that, though the campaign may be a successful one, yet to some among them, perhaps to many, it will in all human probability bring death; and who these some will be it is the question I cannot help asking myself; which are the ones who are walking these well-known streets for the last time; looking for the last time upon the old familiar faces, who will in a few weeks, perhaps in a few days, his father removed from us than thousands of miles could remove them, wrapt in that sleep, upon which no roar of cannon, no shout of friend or foe, ever can break. I confess to me it seems very terrible. I suppose it is a woman's view of the case; but I mustn't write any more of this sort of stuff, or I shall make you dismal. I dare say you don't feel particularly lively now, but you shall have any news that we hear, especially of that regiment to whose uniform you used to be rather partial. There, how horridly I have made you blush, only as there's nobody but me in the room it does n't matter. Oh! there is one piece of scandal for you, which has, however, made less noise than if it had happened at any other time, for which I suspect the parties concerned are very thankful. Do you remember your seeing, or rather not seeing, the young Countess Arnheim at a concert? Well, she has actually gone off, and no one knows where to; but to begin at the right end of the story, for, as I happened to be an eye-witness, I can vouch for my version being the correct one. We were at a ball at the Nessel-roders, and she was there; she was looking most exquisite, I thought, though some people in the room said she looked not what she had been. Her husband was there too, of course, but I didn't see him go to her once the whole evening, though she was surrounded by a good many gentlemen; there was one man, a Frenchman, in the Austrian service, who never left her. His attentions, I certainly thought, were rather marked, but I didn't see any return on her side. You know that room off the hall at the Nesselrodes, where one takes off one's things. Well, we happened to be there, putting on our cloaks; I was ready to go, and was standing at the door, talking to Herr von Langen. The countess was standing in the hall, waiting for her husband, I think, laughing and talking with a few gentlemen. All at once the count strode out of one of the dancing rooms, and up to her. She was so placed under the lamps that I could see her face perfectly, and part of his; she glanced up in his face with a smiling look of inquiry in her beautiful eyes, which was answered by a fierce scowl and a muttered oath. Of course there was a breathless silence; no one knew what to say; no one ever does on such occasions.

"'Leopold,' she half whispered, 'his anything happened?' She had sprung forward eagerly, and laid her hand upon his arm. His face worked frightfully as she gazed up into into it with beseeching eyes, but he turned it from her. 'Happened!' he said, in a loud, harsh voice, shaking her off roughly, 'no, nothing particular. By Heaven, no nothing to you; I, fool that I have been, have found it more.'

"'For God's sake, Leopold, come away,' she whispered in an agony. She thought him mad or drunk, I believe. He did not shake her off this time, but taking both her slender white wrists in his iron grasp, he held her at half arm's length; and then, before those men, looking straight into her face, he said most cruel things to her. I don't know how she bore it—it was cruel, horrible; if I had been one of those men, I think, whether it were right or wrong, I must have struck him down. It took less time, far less, than it has taken me to write it. I could not tear myself away from watching them; but I sincerely trust it may never be my lot to witness such a scene again.

"Poor thing! her eyelids never drooped; she looked into his dark, angry eyes, with a half-amazed, half imploring look. I think she had a dim sense of how very awful it was before these people; but that was all swallowed up in the agony and astonishment his words caused. When he had finished speaking, he dashed her hands away and strode off, leaving her standing there, a broken lily, but turned again after he had gone two steps. 'Monsieur,' he said, looking at the French officer, 'I recommend this lady to your protection.' His whole countenance was convulsed with passion and deadly pale. That woke her up: her face quivered as with a sudden flash of anguish, and she turned to a young beardless officer who had been standing good-naturedly trying to shield her from the many pitiless, prying eyes; 'Will you be kind enough to take me to my carriage?' He could not look at her, but gave her his arm, and took her away almost tenderly. He was a merry, rough boy, and I dare say they had had many a laugh together; but I don't think either of them laughed then. She would have walked straight out into the cold, bitter night in her ball dress, had he not stopped her and her servant to wrap her up in her furs. That was all I saw of it, and it was indeed quite enough; but the day we heard she had gone, as I quite expected. I most certainly would have gone too in her place, and I am sure you would; but I am writing you the most unconscionable letter; that is the way when I sit down to write to you; I intend just to write one sheet, and I scribble on and on till two o'clock sometimes. I am glad Aunt Margaret doesn't examine the candles! If she ever should, I will tell her that I find Vienna candles delicious eating, and can't resist the temptation. Best love to your mamma and the girls from all of us; they're all fast asleep, but of course they would send it if they were in possession of their faculties. Good-night, dearest. I must go too by-by.

"Ever your

"STEPHANIE."

It was a long letter, but I read it all through, and, when it was finished, laid it in my lap and sat gazing into the fire, and musing over those eventful days in which she wrote. How different now to then! Things were changed in Vienna. What was then but conjecture had become sad reality. All had taken place with such fearful suddenness as made it almost impossible to realize. I sat over the fire and tried to imagine it all, and re-read more recent letters, in none of which, however, was the Countess Arnheim's name mentioned. There was no doubt the truth of my own surmises; it seemed almost impossible that she should have come to England in that manner, and remained quietly for such a length of time; she the petted Vienna beauty, giving lessons in England and living in London lodgings! No, it was hardly credible, but there were sounds and sights which occurred to me by copying out a small portion of that letter, and putting it in some place where it would fall into her hands, at a time when I should have an opportunity of watching her, I did not doubt but that I might read in her face the truth.

And I did copy it, translating it into French, and one night, and that night her name was mentioned; but when it was done, I put it by, and delayed to use it.

One day we were talking of Christian names, and she then told me, for the first time, that hers was Valerie, and asked me to call her by it. Another time she showed me a little book, with "Valerie" printed in it, and something over the name scratched out, which I felt sure must have been a coronet. I longed to know; and yet though I often thought of putting her to the test which I had devised, my heart failed me. Why should I seek to penetrate her mystery, and lay bare to the bitter secrets of her heart? So I forebore and waited. However it was not destined that she should go from us as she had come. On the 3d of January my mother came down to breakfast with rather a troubled face, and after I had read my own letters, she passed one to me to read, without a word. It was from my Aunt Honora, a sister of my mother's, whose husband had a house in one of the hunting counties.

"Dear Margaret," it began, "I am in great distress. The house is full of men, and only one lady besides myself,—young Mrs. Charteris. Do, I beseech you, come to me the first day you can. They are trooping in and out all day at hunting, and some of them don't even play billiards. Francis says I ought to do something to amuse them, but what can I do? It is so miserable. Bring all the girls, and your German friend and Bertie. I entreat you not to refuse. Francis wishes this more than I can write at present, and let me know when I am to send to meet you. Your affectionate sister,

HONORA C. HERRIES."

This was the letter, written in a scrambling, uncertain sort of hand, which my mother gave me. I had scarcely finished it, when Bertie said, from the other side of the table, "Which the row, Rat' shy it across;" so I shield it across, as he called it, and the young gentleman was pleased to express his highest approval of the plan.

"Be alive, now, girls, and pack up; the weather 'll break, you'll see, and then I shall get some hunting out of the old rascal."

He settled on the spot, I believe, the horse he intended to ride. Alas! for human proposals. All the world knows that there was no hunting for those first weeks of January. But it wasn't for his amusement that my mother determined to go. With tears in her eyes she reread the letter when we were alone in her room, whither she had called me after breakfast to consult about it.

"Poor Honora! poor Honora!" she murmured. "Yes, my dear, I think we must go; there will probably be but little pleasure to any of us, but I think it is right. I can leave Agnes in Eaton Square with your uncle."

As I looked at the feeble, shaky writing, I, too, ejaculated from my heart, "Poor Honora!" She had married a man who had discovered her weakness, and had been a very tyrant to her. It seemed as if he had all but stamped out her identity. It was not from age that her letters were ill-formed and trembling; I hardly think she had any handwriting in particular. So a note was despatched to say we would come on the Monday. We might have managed to go before, but after some consultation it was fixed for that day.

"Impossible! I cannot spend Sunday there," my mother had said, decidedly; and even Bertie, I think, was glad when it was settled that we should spend that quietly at home.

For myself, I did not much care whether we stayed or went. I had not much hopes of the party likely to be assembled at Cheddington. The only two people I was sure of meeting were men whom I particularly disliked; but then it was also possible that some of the others might be very pleasant; as for Sir Francis Herries himself, he could be as agreeable or disagreeable as he liked,—under the present circumstances it was not unreasonable to hope that he would be at least civil. From him, that was sufficient. After a great deal of persuasion, we succeeded in making Fraulein Dorn promise to accompany us; and Monday afternoon saw us all at the station, where the carriage from Cheddington was to meet us.

Long before we got to the end of our drive, the windows were so frozen that we could see nothing of the park or house; and we were all heartily glad to find ourselves in the wide, old-fashioned hall, where the fine oak carving, seen by the light of the blazing fire, for the winter twilight had set in, called forth Valerie's warm admiration.

There were a great many hats about, and as we followed the servant up the stairs, I could hear the sharp crack of the billiard balls. It was quite a procession, and in spite of her earnest invitation, I think we rather overwhelmed my aunt when we invaded her sitting-room.

She was looking the same as she had always looked to me,—a faded, worn-out picture, fragile and helpless, with traces of a beauty not dimmed by age, but by unhappiness. She stretched out her hands kindly to us all, however, kissing us, and welcoming Fraulein Dorn.

"Margaret," she said to my mother, sitting down immediately again in her low chair by the fire, "you must take it quite into your hands, the entertainment of the young people," and she tried to smile, a weary, withered smile.

"I give you free leave to do exactly as you like. There are the Hobarts; I thought of asking them before, but I was afraid their mother would object to their coming."

Mr. Hobart was the rector, and had a very nice wife and two pretty daughters.

"I don't think they mind short notices," said my aunt, passing her thin, white hand wearily across her forehead; "you can ask them to dinner to morrow night if you like." And in this way was the power passed over to my mother, but in truth, in my aunt's hands it was only nominal. For years she had been the mistress of her own house but in name, letting her authority slip away from her through sheer weariness and want of energy. She had married, fifteen years before, a man for whom she was in every way unfitted—a man whom she was neither loved nor respected. She had truly received her punishment; but I think also that there was another side to the question. I think that, wretched as might be her lot, she had inflicted a yet deeper, a more unpardonable injury upon him than upon herself. Possessed of talents of a certain brilliancy, yet weak and easily led, with a woman of a strong and upright character for his wife, under whose influence he would necessarily to a certain extent have been brought, he might have attained to better things. I believe there are many men of this sort; I believe that there are some, even among those who sit in high places, upon whom the daily, hourly, life-long influence of a sympathizing wife has wrought very powerfully. Of the master and mistress of Cheddington one scarce knew which to pity most. For weeks he would leave her, going to Paris with a friend, a Mr. Sartoris, the owner of a large estate in Devonshire, but who spent his time mostly abroad, except during the hunting season, when he was generally at Cheddington,—a man who had not set foot on his own land for years.

My aunt used sometimes to plead for a house in London, but on this point Sir Francis was inexorable; pleading and complaining she would drag on until she at last, half from the listlessness of a broken spirit, half from real suffering, faded away into the weak, helpless woman she was at this time. Once she had sought with an amazing courage or a childish imprudence, I know not which to call it, to persuade him to take her to Paris. "She was tired of the life," she urged. "Her health in London was denied to her, she would at least like to see a little of the world,—that Parisian world to which he was always going."

He looked at her with a gloomy sneer. "See the world, madam? See the devil!" he answered, and strode out of the room. And I think he was about right. Miserable, lonely, desolate as Cheddington might be, it was better, yes, a thousand times better for her than Paris,—with him. Not that he would have ever consented to take her had she even expressed her willingness to look upon that personage to whom he had thought fit to allude. It was childish in her to ask it, but it was the last time.

"I shall never ask him again, my dear," she said, with plaintive querulousness, to my mother, "never."

As I had expected, he was civil enough to us all this visit, and when the skating began, was very anxious about the ponds, that they should be well flooded at night, and that everything should be arranged exactly as we liked. We had on the whole a delightful week. There were some very pleasant men besides my two horrors, Mr. Sartoris and Lord Cosmo Fox, who, strange to say, though they didn't generally agree about things, both seemed very much smitten with Valerie. After all, however, it was not strange that she and Mr. Sartoris should be a good deal together; for, with the exception of Sir Francis, he was the only man in the house, I think, who spoke any foreign language with sufficient fluency to be able to talk to her. As for Lord Cosmo, he was quite dull enough; not dull of any other but his mother tongue could that great scion of nobility utter; it was mute admiration on his part, confined to paying her clumsy attentions. I did hear him one day talking broken English to her, thinking, I suppose, that style better suited to her infantine capacity.

But in spite of Lord Cosmo and Mr. Sartoris, and other little annoyances inseparable from Cheddington, it was a very pleasant visit, and we all enjoyed it the more from having expected something so different. The first day or two that the ice was really good, the female portion of the community assembled to hunting, and some of them don't even play billiards. Francis says I ought to do something to amuse them, but what can I do? It is so miserable. Bring all the girls, and your German friend and Bertie. I entreat you not to refuse. Francis wishes this more than I can write at present, and let me know when I am to send to meet you. Your affectionate sister,

HONORA C. HERRIES."

This was the letter, written in a scrambling, uncertain sort of hand, which my mother gave me. I had scarcely finished it, when Bertie said, from the other side of the table, "Which the row, Rat' shy it across;" so I shield it across, as he called it, and the young gentleman was pleased to express his highest approval of the plan.

"Be alive, now, girls, and pack up; the weather 'll break, you 'll see, and then I shall get some hunting out of the old rascal."

He settled on the spot, I believe, the horse he intended to ride. Alas! for human proposals. All the world knows that there was no hunting for those first weeks of January. But it wasn't for his amusement that my mother determined to go. With tears in her eyes she reread the letter when we were alone in her room, whither she had called me after breakfast to consult about it.

"Poor Honora! poor Honora!" she murmured. "Yes, my dear, I think we must go; there will probably be but little pleasure to any of us, but I think it is right. I can leave Agnes in Eaton Square with your uncle."

As I looked at the feeble, shaky writing, I, too, ejaculated from my heart, "Poor Honora!" She had married a man who had discovered her weakness, and had been a very tyrant to her. It seemed as if he had all but stamped out her identity. It was not from age that her letters were ill-formed and trembling; I hardly think she had any handwriting in particular. So a note was despatched to say we would come on the Monday. We might have managed to go before, but after some consultation it was fixed for that day.

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"It's certainly not done in the usual way," I answered.

"Well, no; but Bertie is so dreadfully rude; I wish you would speak to him." Here there were strong symptoms of tears. "He said just now, before Mr. Mountjoy, 'My eye, Poll! what a fuzz your wig is in!' He is so vulgar; and you know I hate his calling me Poll."

Here the tears really began to come; and, though I could hardly help laughing, I managed to console her.

Mrs. Charteris had induced her, it appeared, to accept the services of her maid; and the effect, I must own, was startling. Poor, dear Mary! Mr. Mountjoy and she were rather good friends even then,—they are something more now; but it took all my powers of persuasion to make her believe he would never think of it again. He had laughed, it seemed, and that had tempted Bertie to go on. We danced in the evening; the Hobarts and two girls who were staying with them came, and so we mustered eight dancing ladies. One of the Hobarts' friends was very intimate with Mrs. Charteris, it appeared. They rushed into each other's arms, and there was a great deal of "What an age it is since we met!" and all that sort of thing. And a minute or two afterwards I heard the married lady inquire solicitously of the other, "Now, my dear, tell me all you've been doing; what was your last smite?" I moved away, thinking the conversation—which was, however, carried on in a loud tone—too select for common ears. But I was destined to be annoyed that night. In trying to get into the dancing-room during the evening, I was hindered by the legs of a young man, who, with the help of the legs of another young man, was laudably endeavoring to block up the doorway, instead of dancing. They were both strangers; and I was just debating whether I should ask them to let me pass, or wait till the waltz was finished, when their conversation attracted me.

My mother was at the piano, playing for dancing that night, and they were talking, it seems, of her.

"And that's the mother," drawled one.

"By Jove!" said the other, putting up his eye-glass with an air of languid interest "what a thrashing the old lady is givin' the piano!"

The young idiot! I could have thrashed him; if he had ever tried half so much to give other people pleasure as my dear mother, he would have been a better-behaved young man. As it was, I think I gave him a mental thrashing, for, just as the other was in the middle of his answer—"Great strength of muscle there; couldn't do it if I tried; quite envy the old woman 'pon honor!"

I asked to pass; and the waltz just then coming to an end, I crossed straight over to my mother, so that there should be no mistake, and then I looked at them. They were certainly flabbergasted—I will say that for them. But that wasn't all I was to go through that evening. Once, when I went up to Anthea, she attacked me on the subject of Valerie's dress.

"My dear, how very much your friend is dressed!" she said. "Don't you think it's rather odd for a person who professes to give lessons? Why, my dear," continued my aunt, seeing I made no answer, "that lace on her gown is magnificent!—quite magnificent!" she reiterated, waxing plaintively eloquent; "it must have cost I don't know how much."

Old lace was rather a failing of the poor thing's; and I don't think she would have objected to seeing that in question transferred to her own wardrobe.

"Is it such good lace, aunt?" I said, for want of anything better.

"My dear Rachel?"—this was with a spark of feeble indignation—"you don't mean to say you are so ignorant as not to know lace like that when you see it?"

She then closed her eyes, laid her head back, as if the exertion had been too much for, and relapsed again into the plaintive.

"She's your friend, Rachel: I only hope it's all right. Margaret says you know very little of her. With men of such a high position here as Lord Cosmo, one must be careful, you know."

"Good heavens!" I ejaculated to myself.

"O aunt! don't be afraid; it's all right," I answered, though I could scarcely restrain my bitter laughter. Good heavens! Lord Cosmo! the idea of Valerie corrupting Lord Cosmo! It was really too good. I felt as if I must impart the idea to some one, and for once I felt inclined to make a confidant of my sisters. Anthea had been powerful to make confidences on such a subject. He of all others would enjoy the joke. The petted, high-born Austrian beauty not considered fit society for the middle-headed, boorish Englishman! I felt very wrathful at first, but calmed down soon. After all, my poor aunt, with her narrow notions, knew nothing; she was good, and I knew all, which just made the difference perhaps, though I went to bed that night with a strong desire to be possessed of a great broom with which I might sweep all the Lord Cosmos and such-like things out of society in general.

The next day all was bustle; there were a good many people coming to dinner and more in the evening for *tableaux*, which were evidently expected to a success. Part of the afternoon I helped in the dining room, where all was confusion, the curtains being put up, while some of the party were altering and arranging dresses and rehearsing scenes. At last I grew quite tired with the noise and bustle, and wonder of wonders, I felt inclined to see what sort of such chaos, I went away to my own room and sat at my window looking out over the park. I felt miserable; not from any real cause, but the nameless feeling that the setting sun gives one, shining through purple trees on a winter afternoon; it almost seems as if hope were leaving the world in that blaze of crimson and orange and purple. It was almost dark when, to my surprise, I heard the crunch of wheels, and the next minute saw the Cheddington carriage going towards the stables. No one had been out that afternoon, of that I was certain. Some one must have come from the station, but I knew of no one coming.

I went