VICTIMS OF CIRCE.
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CHAPTER I.

On landing at that lonely country station on the edge of a small straggling village, that had an embryonic look about it as if it had been prematurely born, and could never reach a full development, one looked instinctively round after some nineteenth-century signs and symptoms other than the railway line, and for the minute one's heart sank with a rush. Somehow, Arcadia in the flesh, as it were, right under one's nose, appeals but slightly to the modern mind, especially if this should happen to be a feminine one, and young—more or less. But the second glance round the corner dispelled at once all illusions of a life fitted to the needs of a simple primitive folk like the Arcadian. Fronting the station, a little to the right of it, a bold-faced public-house flaunted out its sign in one's very face; a red Presbyterian church, that
had planted itself on a hillock above the public-house, gazed down eternally on its hereditary foe out of its two badly-glazed eyes through a greenish and sickly medium; lower down the street was a mechanics' institute, one of the first growths in any Australian township; then came the school, and beyond it the English church, looking rather proud and high-stomachy, perched up on a hill—for all it was out of plumb, liable to come down at any minute, and with a cracked bell; but it had nevertheless a smack of arrogant aristocracy about it, that caused it to stink in the nostrils of the dissenting population.

Arcadia wasn't here, certainly, I thought, as I noted these several outcomes of Christian culture,—the public-house, the churches, and the schools,—and wondered, with tingling toes, if any one would come to meet me, or if I must try my chance of a buggy at the pub.

I went back to the platform and took a glance at my luggage. I was not altogether easy in my mind as to its safety. To the well-constituted British mind Australia is invariably connected either with sheep or convicts. If a rich Australian goes home and dispenses his coin as befits him, we give him the benefit of the doubt, and talk sheep; if he is not quite rich enough, or sticks to his gettings, we make a wild effort to find out what his father or his more remote ancestor was sent out for. Like many customs, this is foolish, and without foundation in fact or in reason; the man is probably as clean-bred as
ourselves, or a deal cleaner; but one can't outrage conventions, it is the correct thing to dig into the fellow's past unless he does his duty by our present. As I was counting my packages, I encountered the gaze of a large fat man in a greasy coat, with big glazed-leather eyes; he looked rapacious, and had loose lips. I involuntarily clutched a Gladstone,—I knew it contained a very decent necklet of sapphires, and I had just paid a heavy duty on it. Then I turned on him the virtuous but forbidding glance of a British matron; it was quite effective, he shuffled off with surprising speed. As it happened, he was only a parson out on the prowl, picking up gossip,—not an uncommon type in Australia. God help the Church!

I looked up and down the station, yawning, it was so dull and ugly, when suddenly I caught sight of the back of a small woman, right up at the other end of the platform. It was a curious and notable back, with a lot in it,—a sort of back that holds one's gaze, and makes one turn it over in one's mind. Presently it was joined by another back, a big, broad man's back. The two fell to talking with vigour, and the female back shrugged and swayed in a distinctly seductive style. She wore a Redfern gown—I could swear to the hang of that skirt. I was outrageous! My friends had said, 'Bring any rags you have,' and I had taken them at their word. I was in worse than rags—in things of two seasons ago; they were too bad for the voyage, but I thought they would just do for
the bush. To crown all, I wore a pair of snow-shoes over my boots—it was cold travelling, and there were no foot-warmers to be got,—and my dress was short.

It was most galling. There was this woman, with varnished boots that absolutely blazed in the sun; and her hat was Parisian, if ever back of hat was. 'I'll see the front of her,' I muttered, 'snow-shoes or not.'

I went hirpling up towards the pair with as haughty an air as I could get up under the circumstances. Just as I had got near enough to take in the length and breadth of the woman, she and her companion swung round simultaneously, and we stood face to face.

If I had met her on the Boulevards—stepping out of Debenham & Freebody's, or even in Fifth Avenue—I would have given her a full look, and as I passed on I would have held up my head with an air, and have given my fringe a twitch, she was as remarkable as that; and no man living would have passed her without making a détour to pass her again. But here, in the bush, where 'we went in our rags' (God forgive those girls!), she was a startling revelation, and sent of Satan to buffet the female flesh in undress—that is—

As for the man, he had a general all-right air; he was just a clean, wholesome-looking young fellow, a gentleman every inch of him, of a type that one is liable to drop on in any corner of the globe. His look of extreme youth was perhaps his most prominent characteristic.
But the woman! she looked artless and blooming, and her dimples might have been filched from a baby; but somehow I saw, in her swift, comprehensive, amused glance at me, that the girl in that young person was dead, or perhaps had never lived.

She was fresh to look at—fresh and dainty and soft; but there was a certain sweet mellowness in her glance,—of a sort that always staggers another woman, and puts her at a disadvantage,—a certain air of 'having gone the whole round of creation' and taken it all in, moreover, that is peculiarly trying, especially when one has lived and also 'experienced' in one's own humble line: under that glance I might have been still looking out at life from over the nursery blinds.

This look, I found later, was not habitual to her; and why she let our acquaintance begin by it, I never could find out. Some sudden incontrollable freak of diablerie I believe it must have been. When we had taken each other in, they went to the south of the platform, I to the north. Suddenly the sound of swift-rolling wheels caught my ear, and I looked over the fence eagerly. A big lumbering waggonette was thundering up the hill behind two powerful horses. I could just catch sight of two girls' heads crowded with brown deer-stalkers, and a middle-aged bonnet. Before I was half down the platform, my mother's old friend (whom I remembered quite well) and her two tall daughters were welcoming me, and apologising all at once. Then their eyes fell instinctively to criticising my turn-out, in an off-hand, good-humoured way, how-
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ever, that had no offence in it. Meanwhile the
dimples young person was waiting a few yards off
with well-bred ease for her turn; and when I was
sufficiently greeted the two girls went to her; and
somehow it hurt me to see Dimples bow and kiss
those fair young things, with that touch of lovely
staleness about them. I wondered if she would
kiss their mother, who I knew had always been noted
for her calm, serenely-contented dignity. She did it;
she grasped her hand with a little deferential, worship­
ful smile and bend that must have been supremely
flattering.

It told certainly. Mrs. Fleming invited her and the
man straight off to tea next day.

The drive to the house was pretty in a way, with
the low blue hills in the distance—and nearer, the dull
green-covered hills, curving half round the horizon
in monotonous, short, humpy surges. Queer hills
they were under the glamour of the sunshine and
the shade, which gave them colour, and varied the
monotony of their broken, blunted curves; when the
deep blue haze, that only an Australian atmosphere
seems able to produce in perfectness, was on them,
then those hills were lovely and bewildering, full of
mystery and delight. When the sun was off, and the
haze in the valleys had gone grey, then the same hills
were hideous, and it brought cold shivers down one's
spine so much as to look at them, they were so cold
and dead and unfinished. The life of these hills
always seemed to come from the outside,—from the
sun and the shade and the air,—never to throb in their own hearts. That day they were fine, however, and the fields, or paddocks, as they call them here, were pretty; and so was the little chattering stream that broke babbling over big stones, and went whirling on under a bridge that had had time to grow a little lichen, more then can be said for most Australian bridges. And the house, that was charming,—low and broad and generous, set on a terrace-like hill, with great verandahs and ample flower-beds and borders, and a wide stretched-out waste of orchard and kitchen garden flanked with big petosperum hedges.

Everything looked abundant about that house, and big and ungrudging, and that's a peculiarity of any amount of Australian country houses.

CHAPTER II.

DIRECTLY I got inside my room I made for my dress-trunk, and plunged down to the depths of it and brought out a tea-gown. It was one of Worth's. When I was fairly in it, I felt for the first time, since I stepped on to that solitary station, the divinity of my femininity. I could hold up my head now, and face the world. I had in a manner lost my reputation, all owing to a pair of snow-boots and a dippy skirt, and I put myself on my mettle to win it back. We had a merry tea that brilliant
spring day. I had so much to tell; and old Colonel
Carew was just the man to tell anything to, with
his fine, clear-cut, hale old face, and his twinkling,
observant glance, and his big laugh, and bigger
powers of catching a joke. I was just fresh from
England, and as arrogant and patronising as any of
my kind. I must have been vastly amusing to the
family circle that first day before I had found my
bearings. Worth did me a good turn, however,—only
for him they would have despised me, as I deserved.

The next day Miss Dimples and the man arrived,
and were presented to me. They were step-brother
and sister, I found. He was a Mr. Pomfret; she, a
Miss Ariell; and they certainly seemed wonderfully
attached to one another. The boy couldn't have
been a day over twenty-three; he had that slim,
callow look so attractive to some women of experience.
I felt much drawn to him, and I had arrived at that
stage when a woman can afford to be kind to young
men, with anticipatory pity for what is before them
in life. It comes after living and suffering oneself,—
when one feels secure of one's own ground, and can
be helpful. For all practical purposes, indeed, men
are no more than shadows to a woman in this phase
of her life.

As for their admiration, that is quite another matter.
That is a woman's right,—one of the essences essen-
tial to her well-being and development, and she has
every right to receive as much as she can hold of the
thing. Indeed, to go so far as to compel its giving
out; it is hers by Divine right, and she is in duty bound to collect it.

So as Clive Pomfret's eyes appealed to me, and as I saw directly he was as weak as a reed, I made up my mind to be his friend; and indeed I had him deep down in a good hot discussion that had a slight flavour of ethics in it—boys like that sort of thing—before he knew what he was about, and we were already bons camarades, when suddenly the step-sister swooped softly down and scattered us.

'Clive,' she said, with an artless glance out of her big blue eyes,—were they blue, by the way, or grey, or green? I never found out, no more did any one else,—'they want you for tennis, dear, and I'll take care of Mrs. Vallings.'

We were on a garden-seat in the shadow of a Norfolk pine watching the players, and she sat down beside me in Mr. Pomfret's place. I looked pleased—I couldn't well look any other way—and prepared to find out her age,—a much harder matter than I imagined, it altered so. She was sometimes sixty and sometimes sixteen; she was never a girl all the same,—there was an unsound look of age and experience in that person that belied her soft girlish exterior, and baffled me.

She had an alluringly musical voice, and she spoke with much gesture.

It was a perfect day, cool and fresh and sparkling, with the sunlight embracing and glorifying all things, even the ugly gums, and yet with a touch of the frost
in it that kept it clear and clean. Down in the scattered orchard the almond trees were shedding their vesture of pale pink, and the cherry plums were budding out in dazzling white, and the wattle bloom shone like yellow gold through the olive of the gums, lovely to look at, till the enraptured wretch takes out his sketching-pad and colour-box, and dips about among his yellows to catch their bloomy gold. Then he finds them—well—diabolical!—it is a slight term to describe the artist's sensations; but I have scruples, a woman is so handicapped in this matter of adequate expression.

I felt rather bewildered that afternoon. The amazing amount of sunshine had something to do with this, I fancy—it always does stagger a newcomer. Of course one finds sunshine in other places,—in Southern France, in parts of Spain, and in Italy,—but Australian sunlight is quite original, and only flourishes in Australia. It is young and rampant and bumptious, and it is rather cruel, with the cruelty of young untried things. Then it is inexorable, and can neither pity nor revere,—and the only time it knows tenderness is when it hovers on the threshold of the horizon on its road back to the old lands. Ah, but it is magnificent in the pride of its youth!

One wonders sometimes if it will mellow and soften as time goes on, and history is made in this wonderful boundless land; and hearts break, and the wind catches the tune of human sobbing, and holds it.

The land is so young to civilisation yet, so young
and debonair, that the sun and the air, the winds and the waters, forget how old and sad and terrible the world is.

Besides being bewildered, I was consumed with curiosity. This person was intelligent; I would question her. All my talk with the Carews was of the old world and old friends. I could get nothing in at all of the new. It is curious how these Australians cling to the mother-land.

'Tell me of those people,' I said. 'Who is that girl there playing with your brother, and that young man? he doesn't look as if a young country bred him; he looks as if he had just emerged from a provincial town at home, and out of a narrow circle, and came home to his tea always whether he would or not; he has a coerced air.'

'How funny you should guess!' She laughed gaily. I liked the laugh, it really did ring true. 'That young man comes from a large family who live near here, and they used to live in England near some very microscopical, yet so very select little town. They number about thirteen in all, and'—she cried, with a little dramatic gesture—'never sinned, not one of them, properly, in all their lives; they are super-excellent, so wonderful! They have been brought up between two straight rigid lines, and they have never, not any of them, gone outside of them for any purpose whatever. They read nothing more modern than Thackeray in English and Racine in French; and even in that their mother has scored out pages!'
They wouldn't look at French modern paintings, and on principle the entire family only lives to protest against modern morals. They always use the best brand of words and thoughts, I even believe their dreams have an ethical basis and a theological bias, and they are such a devoted family; they have little family ways, and little family quotations, and select high-class little jokes of a literary turn. Ah, they are charming and so naïve! But you see they cannot naturally judge by comparison, and they are just a little—ah, they are my dear friends! I am a wretch, and should not say it—ah, but they are.'—

'Intolerable, I should say,' I remarked frankly.

Where did this young person get her little French turns and twists and modes of speech from, I should like to know? Her shrugs were got on French soil, I felt quite convinced.

'Ah, Mrs. Vallings, I would never have said that,' she cried, the artlessness coming to the surface at a gush.

'She is afraid of herself,' I thought shrewdly. 'Highly as these people entertain her, she daren't let it all out.'

'Of course you wouldn't,' I answered placidly. 'You are of the neighbourhood; I am a stranger, and quite free to speak my mind. But how, then, do these provincial people get on here—with those delicious Carew girls, for instance?'

'Ah, you see, they are gentle-people, and up here the society is limited.'
'I see; they would have no show in Melbourne, just like England. Is nothing different? I came expecting to find simplicity and the free life of primitive times, and I find not a whit less convention and complexity, only in rather a more miniature, and therefore, perhaps, a more galling way than at home.'

'Yes, in some ways,' she cried, in an agitated way I couldn't account for, giving her hands a sort of wring. I looked at her on seeing this queer squeeze, and her eyes had tears in them, or at any rate some form of moisture, however it was produced.

'Upon my word,' I muttered, and waited. I felt I was about to hear something, so I waited in silence, and watched the Carews in their flannel frocks and red sailor hats, as pretty and statelily chic a pair as you would meet in a long day's march, and the immaculate young man, and Mr. Pomfret, who was for the moment talking rather absently to one of the Carew girls. He never looked quite at his ease, and from time to time his eyes strayed towards our seat and rested on Miss Ariell; she drew those glances, too, they didn't come altogether of themselves. I found this out by noting the queer incomprehensible way she looked at him sometimes for seconds at a stretch, then her gaze caught his, and with a start always on his side.

'Remarkable,' I thought, 'between step-brother and sister.'

At last she broke the silence with a gentle soughing
sort of sigh. I wonder how she learnt the trick—it was most effective.

'Yes, there are conventions here. Think! The country has been getting civilised now for more than a hundred years. Of course, conventions have had time to find a firm foothold, and the soil suits them, as you will soon know. Australian conventionalism, however, differs from English. It is not so consistent; it is stiffer, to look at, in some ways, and wants careful manipulation. But if one once gets the knack of that, it is quite an elastic, compressible thing, and gives to the touch like anything. One only needs courage to be charming. We all know that, all over the world. But charm judiciously applied can do anything in Australia. Ah, it is funny, this Australian rule of conduct. Ah, very,' she repeated, with a soft laugh that went well with the veiled mockery in her eyes. 'They think it is unbending, so straight, that the English article is nothing to it. But, dear Mrs. Vallings, it is really only rigid in spots, so to speak; and in the country, when it is dull, and nothing "on," before this wild, short, wonderful season of theirs gallops in, the conventions grow quite complaisant, and will put up with quite strange things,—so long, that is, as they are of foreign manufacture, and bring a new sensation; no home-grown vagary is tolerated. Now in England that never is. The duller the place and the people, the straighter and stiffer the sense of "conduit" grows. It spreads all over some people, I think, like a thin coat
of enamel, warranted to crack nowhere, and to be quite impervious to exceptions. Do you not agree with me, Mrs. Vallings? You are not conventional, neither am I.

But I looked quiet and dignified, and as correct as my nature would allow. I made no reply. I had no notion of being claimed as a kindred spirit by this piece of artless impudence.

'Ah, but the people here are so good—so good!' she cried, completely altering her voice and manner, which with one dexterous twist gave one a distinct impression of suppressed tears. 'They have taken me into their circle,—and oh, so warmly, so full-heartedly! Ah, they are good!' she murmured.

I wondered what she was driving at, but I gave her her head and let her go her own gait; I was in no hurry. Her gestures and changes of voice amused me and kept up my interest, they looked so natural; and yet kept me wondering all the time how or where she collected and assimilated them. They had never grown up with her, I was quite confident.

'They are good, I am sure,' I said calmly; 'but it doesn't strike me that the fact of their taking you up is any particular proof of their goodness. Why shouldn't they?'

She threw up her little hands; they were pretty, plump little hands, but cruel.

'Mrs. Vallings, I am an actress.'

'Well?'

I had recently gone through the actress craze, and
had met them at every decent house. I was certainly not crushed by the information.

'Ah, but I am not a great creature, with a world-known name. I am only a poor little one, who hopes and waits—waits, perhaps, for years' (the artless tap was quite turned on now)—'and then—I ran away—engaged as I was, too. My people were old-fashioned; the stage for them was the threshold of hell—and I was so young—so young—not so much in years, perhaps,' she cried (I think she noticed an uncontrollable flash of intelligence in my eyes), 'as in experience. I was brought up with my sister in a Parisian convent school' ('Ah,' thought I, 'that's where you learnt your little ways!') 'under such strict supervision; and afterwards I lived for my dying sister, and never went out. She died—and then—I could not live then. I must have change and excitement—I could get neither in our narrow, refined circle. I knew I could act. I felt it tingling in every vein' (she threw out her arms with a dramatic fling) —'I had to go—I was a wicked girl. Ah, I went to London—away from the man I loved. He was a Captain Panton in the 7th Hussars' (she hid nothing, this young person). 'Ah, look at his picture,' she continued, extricating it from inside her dress.

He looked quite a decent creature, with nothing to distinguish him from hundreds of his kind. I wondered with an inward grin if he were a stage lover.

Fresh suspicions always kept cropping up in my
mind as this woman spoke; why, I couldn't tell. She looked and spoke (bar the theatrical turn) and seemed straight, and yet I felt it borne in on me that she was not. I felt she was laughing all the time in her sleeve at the whole batch of us, myself, of course, included. I felt it quite distinctly, and yet it amused me to laugh with her.

'Ah, Mrs. Vallings, he was noble and good; and oh, how he loved me!'

'But you did not break with him, surely—you will marry him one day?'

'Some day, perhaps. I have offered him his freedom, but he will not take it from my hands; he is too good, too true. You see I must not go home—I cannot stand the climate. My lungs are organically wrong—yes; that is what the doctors say. There is a great big hole just here,' she explained, planting her hand on a part of her form that I always used to consider covered the heart; at least, I am quite certain that was where the ambulance lecturer put it. However, Miss Ariell seemed quite confident as to the site of the cavity, and no doubt she knew best. 'No, I cannot live at home; and Everard, poor fellow, he must stick to his regiment—he may not come into his property for years. Ah, parting is sad, sad!' She stopped to sigh and pose a little. 'And such a parting as ours! Who knows if ever we shall meet again!'

'Oh, perhaps he'll come into the property sooner than you think, and your lung will heal up, and you'll
be quite happy again,' I said cheerfully. 'Meanwhile, you seem happy with your step-brother, who is certainly most devoted to you.'

'Ah, Clive. Yes, we are devoted. My father married his mother, so we are much of an age.' ('Good gracious!' I mentally ejaculated.) 'We have been brought up together, and we are more to each other than many a full brother and sister. When my health drove me off the stage, he came to take care of me. We have bought a little house and place, and live up there among the hills. You will come and see us—lunch with us—with the girls on Monday?' she asked, in a pleading way.

'Certainly; I should like to very much; but isn't it lonely? Don't you both get very tired of it?'

What possible motive could induce this young woman to live up among these hills and these dull woods with a step-brother, and no possibility, so far as one could see, of doing a stroke of mischief? As to the hole in her lung, her outward appearance quite belied the possibility of anything of the kind.

With these thoughts besetting me, I looked at her. She was in the very act of finishing a long and a most remarkable smile at the eldest of the good young people with baggy-kneed trousers. Was I dreaming or bewitched? I rubbed my eyes involuntarily, and looked again; her expression was infantile, and the young man had his back turned to us.
‘Tired of it? No; we are such friends, Clive and I. We have such a community of interests and hopes. Ah, he is a dear boy! We are never idle, and we never have ennui.’

‘What well-constituted minds you must have. I should die of it,’ I said dryly. ‘I like my brothers very well. On the whole, I think we are a fairly united family; but to put up with one from year's end to year's end up there in those dismal hills—gur-r!—it would be the death of me. You certainly are a devoted sister and brother.’

I finished laughing and looking at her. She got pink, and the corner of her mouth gave one vicious droop, then it pulled itself together and spoke gaily,—

‘Yes; I suppose we are peculiarly devoted. Many things have combined to draw us close. Some day I—I will tell you; I can’t now,’ she said, with a small break in her voice. ‘Ah, not here—in this sunlight—before these girls, untouched by sorrow.’

I wondered if she acted as well on the stage as off. I found later she didn’t—not by a long chalk. She was a most painful stick as soon as she touched the boards. Society drama was her métier.

Just then Clive came up. I saw him throw one quick uneasy glance on her, then he stretched himself down on the grass and began to talk.

He was a nice fellow, and full of a soft, gentle sort of fun; and without any doubt his eyes were entrancing, and they seemed strangely occupied with his
step-sister. I felt sorry to see it. I wondered what his prospects were, and if he were worthy of one of those tall, fresh Carews, with their frank, off-hand ways, and their curious mixture of shrewdness and innocence. They had, both of those girls, ten times the *nous* and grasp of that gentle mother of theirs; they could get to the bottom of a thing in the most direct and rapid way, while she never yet fathomed the ghost of a mystery without her husband’s direct interference. Then those two were strong—strong and true. One of them might help this fellow—wanting in grit—to his manhood.

I was thinking vaguely on this subject—formulating a match in my idle brain—in the way of women who have done with that sort of thing for themselves. When I looked down on the boy, I caught his eyes turned on his step-sister with the pleading of love in them; it was love, honest man’s love, sure enough, if ever I saw the thing, and I may remark I know all about it quite well.

My match was nipped in the bud. I felt dazed. I went over to talk to the young man at whom she had smiled that long queer smile. He was standing watching her with a savage eye.

He was a good fellow when one dived down in him, but the surface was aggressively self-righteous and seemingly moral. He was the sort of young man of whom one felt instinctively that a downright good slip would be the salvation. As I watched his savage glances that day and her soft ones, and divers other
signs and symptoms, I felt quite a vicious sort of satisfaction, and almost felt as if she would do a good work in taking the young man in hand. She certainly seemed capable of being a liberal education to him or to any other man.

CHAPTER III.

The next week we spent playing tennis at each other's houses, and drinking tea, and having little women's picnics—all the men but Clive being about their various businesses.

We amused ourselves quite well, however. Miss Ariell was a constant contradiction.

By this time I knew all that was to be known of her life, down to the minutest particular. I had heard the tragedy from the first scene to the last. It was a small domestic one, founded on a wicked captain, and built up of a wonderful assortment of shattered hopes and blighted hearts and rapid consumption,—the pretty variety with pink spots and preternatural brilliancy of eye, which the young woman and Clive stood by with heroic tenderness until the end.

It was quite a pleasure to think of the round, soft creature, with those dimples, and a becoming shade of sadness in those baby eyes, floating round in a
white apron,—she made quite a telling point of this in her narration,—and with a porcelain basin of broth in her hand to nourish the dying sister, who by the way appeared to have had a huge capacity for the liquid,—one was forced to wonder if so much can have been very good for her;—but then, as we all know, consumptive patients do have morbid appetites.

We learnt to know Captain Panton quite intimately in those days. The mention of this gentleman, however, seemed rather to upset Clive.

Two or three times, about this time, I noticed the two Carews coming back with flushed cheeks from conversation with Miss Ariell, and somehow it struck me as strange; why, I couldn't have said, for they were given to getting red—those two.

Miss Ariell certainly made good times for herself, and got a deal more than her fair share of attention, especially from the old colonel; indeed, she converted that fine old man into a species of domestic slave, and I saw it with an inward snort. She would send him on odd errands in an artless, deprecating way—for her slippers, or her handkerchief, or any of the dainty trifles she never moved without; and she always made him put on her spurs, or alter them whether they needed alteration or not, when she rode.

One day I went into the dining-room softly and suddenly, meaning no espionage, but my shoes were light, and I always do move noiselessly;—thanks to my heredity, I couldn't clatter if I tried,—and I found Miss
Ariell with her little arched foot poised on a stool, and Colonel Carew lacing her varnished boot.

Now this may have been infantine on the young person's part, but on the old man's it was undignified. The woman in me rose in protest against the situation.

I sat down placidly by the table and looked out of the window.

Nothing is so effective as quiet, silent, unobtrusive virtue, with plenty of staying power in it. I had not sat for more than three minutes, gazing out absently at the fading cherry blooms, before the guilty wicked red of the aged sinner had risen to the colonel's brow, and the twinkles had died in his kindly eyes. He doggedly finished up the lacing to the top, not skipping a hole, and winding the lace twice round the little ankle, and he chatted gaily all the time; and if he hadn't, I should have despised him to my dying day.

But when his task was done he slipped out like a shot, and went over to the garden to his wife, who was superintending the potting out of some rare plants, and he pottered about after her all the rest of that day.

As for Miss Ariell, she nodded her pretty laughing head at me with the merriest air of insouciance, and hated me a good deal more than before.

That very evening, after I went to my room, I heard a rustling in the passage, then a whispering, followed by a quick, soft knock on my door. I opened it, and
found the two girls waiting in pretty soft white silk wrappers, and with their fair hair loose on their shoulders, the wonderful gold tips of it gleaming and sparkling in the soft light as if jewels had got entangled in the gold.

The girls snuggled down into two low basket-chairs, with big leaf-green cushions, the loveliest background to those golden veils of theirs, and seemed inclined to sleep.

The night was chilly, and a small bright fire burned on my big hearth, and we all drew ourselves close to it.

I put away my book, and watched the girls and the fire alternately.

There was something very attractive in their quaint wise old ways in conjunction with those fair young faces, and their sudden flashes of dignity, and the queenly airs they could assume on occasions, contrasting with their innocent girlish vanity and perennial pleasure in dress. Then the amazing untidiness of their ways and their reckless boyish habit of slang. Every turn and twist of them, however, was natural and unpremeditated.

I wondered when the silence would be broken by something definite.

We just mentioned the beauty of the night in a vague way, and with a passing remark on the croaking of the frogs and the chirping of the crickets; but as these sounds were always with them as soon as night fell, they were scarcely of sufficient import
to bring those girls into my room at that time of night.

'Mrs. Vallings,' said Nancy at last, in her soft banana-fed voice, with the soupçon of twang, 'what do you think of Miss Ariell?'

'Yes, that's just what we want to know!' put in Mab, sitting up among her cushions, and twirling the golden tip of a great length of hair.

'I think she's a very charming person, and one I never dreamed of meeting in his part of the world.'

'I wish she had kept out of it—at least out of our corner of it,' said Nancy.

'So do I,' echoed the other.

I took a rapid glance at them.

'Why?'

'Why?—why?—I don't know exactly. Because she's not like other girls, that's why, partly. It isn't that she's more original,' said Nancy, in a quick way. 'She's not; but she's different.'

I looked at the girls. Nancy was sitting bent forward, watching the flames. Mab had straightened herself, and her sunny head, turned to red-gold in the fire-shine, was thrown back, and on both their faces there was a look of haughty, hurt maidenhood.

'It's the stories,' they both broke out together,—'they somehow make us feel uncomfortable.'

I am not in the very least a mawkish woman, but I went over then and there and kissed those girls, one after the other, on their white, pure foreheads.

'The wretch!' said, in a voice of smothered rage,
'Did you tell your mother, Nancy?'
'I told her one the other day, and she said she could see no harm in it. She said she would ask father; and that she considered Miss Ariell a sincerely religious girl, and incapable of any evil thought. She feared Ouida had been corrupting my mind. I read *Two Little Wooden Shoes* while I was staying at Aunt Grace's, and mother was vexed. I didn't know, or I shouldn't.'
'Miss Ariell has got our mother and father too,' said Mab. 'Haven't you noticed her little worshipful ways, and how she gazes up in my mother's face as if she was a Madonna or something, and runs to get her things. And she hides things in her eyes from mother that she shows us, I can tell you,' said the girl, nodding wisely; 'and then she discourses by the hour of us—the most idiotic things you ever imagined, she says. Oh, I heard her one day. Any one would have sworn we were a brace of angels. Mother swallowed every word of it, though, and Miss Ariell cried the whole time—she can cry like anything when she likes.'
'And religion,' cried Nancy,—'she's wonderful on that; and mother is so true and straight herself, she believes every mortal thing. We don't, I can tell you. Oh, we know too much. As for my father, he's bewitched; and the worst is, we don't quite know how she manages him. She does, though, like anything. He fetches and carries for her as if he was a boy; and yet one can't see how she gets
him to do it. Catch him flying round like that for us! I believe it's a little in the way she drops her eyes and softens her voice whenever he's in her neighbourhood. He told mother that she's a charming creature, and a "most desirable person for us to form our manners on."

"Ugh!" threw in Mab.

"The other day, when we abused her a little, mother said quite severely, "Your father, my dears, knows the world, and he approves her." Now—he may. But do you know, Mrs. Vallings, that Mab and I think the world father knows was dead and buried long ago, and that quite a new world has grown up since, and that he'd flounder about rather if he happened to plunge into it now. I don't think father is the man to fathom Miss Ariell," she concluded solemnly.

"There's another thing I don't like about her," began Mab breathlessly, before I had time to put in a word, "she can talk religion to mother like a book, but she can be terribly blasphemous to us directly mother's out of sight. Now, I don't like religion thrust down one's throat, and I'm not fond of too much church, neither is Nancy—it doesn't seem to agree with us in quantities; but I do think a little light religion helps a girl," she explained quaintly, crossing her bare feet. "It makes good seem better and evil uglier, and helps her to keep her feet down on the earth, and walk along it squarely and fairly the path she has to go, instead of kicking over the
traces and landing you in a hole,' she concluded, with conviction.

"No, we don't like blasphemy," chimed in Nancy. 'It's bad form in a man, and—well—its downright disgusting in a woman.'

'I don't think,' I said, after a pause, 'that Miss Ariell will tell you any more of these stories, or again blaspheme in your presence. I'll go and have a talk with her'—I spoke cheerily and lightly; feeling the evil would slip off from these clean souls, and leave no trace, it seemed better to make no comment.

Both the girls suddenly blushed from their chins to where the soft gold line touched the white of their brows.

"We thought that too,—we tried to stop her,—but she is so persistent. We talk slang, you know—frightfully,' stammered Nancy, 'and—and we do queer things at times, and—and she said she was certain we weren't half as simple as we posed for, and that we knew—oh, lots of things.'

'Yes, that's what she said,' murmured Mab.

A sudden conviction came to me. 'I believe she thought it too, the fool!' I muttered half-aloud. It is possible to misinterpret some Australian girls—it has been done by wiser than Miss Ariell, and will be again, till the land and the people in it mellow; but these girls—a heart must be very foul or very false before it would do them this wrong.
'Look,' I said, 'both of you, don't worry about Miss Ariell. She is probably neither worse nor better than many other women. She is only very silly, and lets herself think foolishness and speak it. She hears things, and knows things, and instead of sifting out the evil and sticking to the good, which is sure to be there too, mind you—riddling the contents of her mind, as it were, from time to time. (See what wonderfully good fires we get from riddled ashes. An allusion an Australian girl can understand with good housewifery in her blood. That's where you have the pull over English girls, my dears.) Now, Miss Ariell stores up all this rubbish, and her fires get clogged with the dust and the dirt of it till they can no longer send up a pure, clear flame to heaven, and the smoke of them smirches herself and others; but it makes her own throat smart worst of all, for she can't get away from it. Children, you don't know how easily that happens to women, or the infinite pity of it.'

Nancy caught my hand and held it against her smooth, shell-pink cheek. 'I believe you know a million times more things than she does, Mrs. Vallings. Your eyes look so deep and so full of things, often, and your mouth—it looks strong, as if you had learnt a great deal, and—as if it hurt you—hurt you—frightfully.'

'Yes, you do look like that sometimes, Nancy and I think,' said Mab, in a soft, breathless sort of fright.

'My little girls, wherever it is the lot of a woman
to "know things," as you say, it—well—it hurts—it does hurt frightfully.’

Nancy’s eyes filled with tears; but I didn’t concern myself with them, I was thinking of myself. I seemed to stand at the bar there, before these two fresh young creatures, to whom the taste of the tree of life was still a sweet mystery. I felt ashamed before these girls. I—I forsooth—proud of my experience for all it hurt—proud of it—oh, the petty pride—and of the cut of my gowns. I, who knew, and had seen. I—careless in my speech, too—picking up as I went little silly flippant phrases and terms of expression—nothing of harm in them, but light—unfitting.

If you want to punish a woman of the world,—not an evil or a befouled one, but just a woman bent on the vanities and trifles and follies of a worldly life,—put her, just for a little half-hour in the evening, when the heart is soft and the trappings stripped from her soul, under the straight gaze of two sweet, pure, proud young maidens, and you may be quite sure your punishment will follow.

Whether they understand the woman or whether they don’t, that doesn’t matter a rap: she understands herself for the minute, that’s quite sufficient.

‘You must go to bed, children,’ I said. I fancy I spoke a little faintly, from the girls’ faces.

‘Sit down,’ said Nancy, ‘you’re so white.’

‘We’ve tired you,’ cried Mab; ‘and, do you know, I can’t feel a bit sorry. I came in—Nancy did too—
feeling — ugh! — dirty. Now I feel quite white-
minded again.'

'Your knowing things is such a comfortable sort of help,' added Nancy. 'Good-night—O dear, I am sleepy! Mab, come on!'

Little fools! I wonder if they will ever know the intensity of 'comfortable help' their last words brought me; how they helped me to gather up the shreds of my self-respect and to huddle my nakedness up in them. They may some day, and be grateful they spoke them, when they are as old as I am, and 'know' and have 'been hurt'—frightfully.

CHAPTER IV.

The next morning I made a solitary pilgrimage to Miss Ariell's eyrie, and was struck by the way by many curious little arrangements in her ménage, which the conclusion of this story will sufficiently elucidate.

We had an understanding. I used the gentlest and keenest and most deadly of women's weapons, and I gained my point. In future the Carew girls need fear neither stories not blasphemy.

We parted friends, however, and Clive walked to the foot of the hill with me. What a well-bred, weak fellow he was. I would have given anything if I could
have carried him right away with me and saved him,—from what I did not quite understand myself, and yet from something that invariably brought creeps to my spine whenever I thought of it. I know she told him just how far to go, and that he daren't go a foot farther for the life of him. When he arrived at his limit, he pulled up and muttered something like 'cow'—what that animal could possibly want at this hour of day I couldn't conceive; however, I accepted the excuse, and dismissed my poor escort with a warm grasp of his long nerveless hand,—a feminine hand, that no manual work could brown or make sinewy.

That afternoon we called on the Flemings. There was a queer little commotion as we deposited our umbrellas and a fern basket in the passage. When we got into the drawing-room, Mrs. Fleming had draped an old white cashmere about her, and was posing in the prim old lady-like way of a past age, and the girls were grouped round her, with a book or work on each lap; and every one looked big with colossal thought. One felt directly one was addressing no common flesh and blood article, but the very best book persons; and after a minute or two in that suggestive room, one began oneself to experience a sensation of cramp and half-suffocation, as if one were getting gradually pressed together and shut in between two cloth covers.

I no longer marvelled at the young men, but I quailed as I thought of the first outbreak of nature
in the poor docked beings, and of its crushing, upheaving results to themselves and to their saintly relations. 'God help the whole lot together!' I mentally ejaculated, making one gasping effort to shed my book state and get back my comfortable carnal mind. It was in vain. I collapsed again directly, and just listened machine-like to Mrs. Fleming, who poured out upon me in a gentle stream a huge amount of information concerning books, the domestic animals, and her two sons. The eldest of them, Vandeleur,—'always a family name;' in point of family, as in all other points, the Flemings excelled,—seems to have been strictly virtuous, even in his long-clothes days; as far as one could judge, he had never done any one wrong thing. And, upon my word, he must have been a good fellow in spite of it all, for he supported, he and his equally excellent brother between them, the mother and that tribe of young women, and pandered extensively to each of their several tastes,—and eleven individual tastes in one family comes expensive, as any family-man will tell you.

Directly we got out of sight of the house, we all set with a simultaneous sort of relieved chuckle to running, to get our limbs free again. Then we sat down on a stump, and aired our random thoughts with keen relish; it was so delicious to throw off the mental and physical bandages, and to expand again and feel human. But on these two wretched male creatures with all their natural young instincts guarded and held in check and accounted as nought by a kind of
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foolish ignorant women who knew not what they did, poor souls, it was horrible to think of! Between our gay bursts of laughter I could have gone the length of crying for those boys.

I didn't get over that visit till I had thrown myself in careless abandonment on the big white bed in my room, and had drunk deep draughts of the fragrant Indian tea the girls brought me.

The next day I had to go down to town, to stay for a few days with some friends I had made on the voyage.

One evening we went to the theatre—to the beautiful Princess'. The piece was a melodrama, with too much colour and light and cheap sentiment. It didn't interest me, or perhaps I wasn't in the humour to be interested—I was bored. It was my doom to be placed between two as vapid young men as ever God put breath into. I tried to amuse myself with the people, and spent some interested time looking round, taking in the men and the girls and the dresses.

Taking them all round, the girls of Australia make a far finer show to the eye of a stranger than the men; even in the matter of head shape they can give them points and win. This may, of course, be a merciful dispensation, the future of a nation resting so largely in its women; but one feels sorry to see it all the same, and one wonders where all the grit, and the courage, and the adventure, and marvellous strength and patience and self-sacrifice of the mag-
nificent old pioneers of this nation have vanished to. They don’t reappear in the sons, seemingly. Could these qualities have worn themselves threadbare, from the very force and strength and vigour of them, in one generation—fail, as it were, through their own greatness? It is to be hoped not. Perhaps these young limp men, bumptious enough, too, with the twang rather spoiling the virility of their voices, hold more of the quality of their ancestors than their appearance would suggest; perhaps, after all, they can throw forward quite their fair share of strength and grit and straightness into the ages. They’ll have enough to do, poor souls, with the climate, and the evils bred of it all against them, and their pockets full of money.

We had good seats, right in front of the dress circle, and could get a fair view of the whole house. In the box to my right I had noticed for some time a lovely sea-green frock, and the tip of a white shoulder that shrugged from time to time; and now and again I caught sight of the side of a man’s brown head stooping towards the shoulder. When the curtain fell at the end of the first act, the light fell full on to the box, and suddenly the head belonging to the shoulder bent forward, and I saw Miss Ariell. I could not help it, I craned my neck round, like any schoolgirl, to find out by what name the dark head called itself,—it was shades too brown for Clive,—but it had retreated into the gloom. I couldn’t get a glimpse of it.

‘Do you care to come out; it’s melting hot?’ demanded one of my young men affably. The other,
hoarsely muttering 'cigars,' had fled the instant the curtain began to fall, and was no doubt at that very moment absorbing some liquid or another. It is amazing how much of that sort of thing they can do in this fiery climate, and yet retain whatever reason and liver Heaven has been pleased to bestow on them.

'No—yes,' I said, rather at random. It ended in my going, and boring my young friend a good deal. I could only manage to give him and his platitudes—which, to do him justice, he produced with marvellous ease and much good nature—just an atom of ear, the remainder, with all my eyes, had their work cut out for them in listening and looking for Miss Ariell and the brown head. I found them at last away in a corner, whispering. I could see the young woman distinctly, but nothing of the man but a dress coat and the flash of white linen.

'Do let us walk up and down,' I said, 'I am so tired of sitting.' The poor young man reached out his arm obediently, and we took a turn towards the brown head and the little black one which were close together in the shade of the wall. Ah, but I saw the profile plainly—unmistakably! I took care to let no chance likeness mislead me. It was—it was Vandeleur Fleming. 'Good gracious!' I ejaculated, in a choked sort of way, I fancy, for my escort stopped and looked concernedly at me.

'Can I get you an ice or anything,—'tis a hot night for the time of year,—I'm sure you're thirsty?'

'No, I'm not,' I said, laughing; 'but I have no doubt
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you are. Leave me with Mr. Chaloner, and go, get an ice or—something.'

I saw these two twice after that,—once at the theatre again, and once having coffee at Gunsler's. What a changed creature Vandeleur looked,—his own mother wouldn't have known him in his well-cut clothes and his general man-of-the-world air,—he was no better to look at than any ordinary decent everyday sinner. Seemingly the liberal education had set in. Now, what in the world was I to do?

It was certainly not my province to drop down on the boy, and bring him nolens volens home to his mother. As to attacking Miss Ariell on the subject, she would have laughed in my face.

And yet—and yet, though in my heart of hearts I felt there was a necessity for this experience, that from the queer conditions of his life it must come, yet my heart bled for the boy. Bubbling over with foolish, frank, fond delight, he looked like a baby out on the spree,—and so inordinately vain of it too, and of himself. I would have helped him, but I had to decide to let things go; he must 'fare like his peers,' and find the level of his strength. His false armour of sunny self-satisfied righteousness would soon enough prove its impotence and display its flaws, and presently the scales would fall from his eyes and he would see clear. As for his retribution, that was assured when his mother would get to know—she would be sure to, sooner or later, in this little place where nothing is hid. Then any known plan of tor-
ment ever offered to the public must be a fool to the torments this boy would endure. Heaven knows he would be thankful enough at the end of it all to 'range' himself and to return to the present paths of righteousness!

Ah, it was inevitable; but I felt sorry all the same, and perplexed.

I went back on Saturday, and was tired, and hardly fresh enough even to look at the evening paper.

There was no one in my compartment but a horrid old man in one corner, who snored and snuffled and thrust out a hideous puce under-lip in a rhythmic regular sort of way that struck one as predictive of fits. I felt ready to choke him. People with such habits should reserve their compartments.

The man attracted me all the same, and my eyes would turn and turn again to that awful lip. I nearly prayed for some one to come in and break the spell.

When we got to a small station about five miles from Melbourne, to my delight and astonishment and surprise, who should throw open my carriage door and jump in but Vandeleur Fleming!

He still wore the worldly air; but he blushed furiously as he took my hand, and he seemed to find a difficulty in regaining his normal colour.

Then he plunged boldly into politics. I never could quite get to the bottom of Victorian politics. I hardly know, indeed, if they have a bottom. But that day I listened to them quite placidly. They relieved my young friend, and kept my eyes and thoughts off the lip.
As we were within two stations of our destination, Vandeleur pulled up suddenly, dropped politics as if they had stung him, and looked at me with two shy pleading eyes.

' Mrs. Vallings,' he whispered, with a side-glance at the lip, 'might I ask you not to mention—ahem—to my mother or—my sister and the—Carews that you saw us—Miss Ariell and myself—at the theatre? My people, you see,' he explained, with blazing cheeks, 'are so very—so—out of the world, as it were, so inexperienced, you see. They might misunderstand—you know—naturally—you see—but they might—might—in fact—blame—that charming girl. She, of course, though just as good and as innocent'—

'Good gracious!' I thought, 'the boy is even a bigger goose than I thought. What on earth is one to do? This alters matters.'

'But she has been differently brought up, and her stage life, you know, has—has—so to speak—enfranchised her.'

That word seemed to relieve him,—it was more like the family,—and he may have been feeling a little lost and aloof from it.

'You will comprehend me, I feel assured, Mrs. Vallings,' he went on, with a much bolder front and no stuttering. 'You know—ahem—that we MEN OF THE WORLD' (I gasped softly) 'do things every day—that—women—ahem—women such as my dear mother and sisters might misconstrue. Not—not that for a minute,' he resumed hurriedly, the hot
blood rushing up again and flooding his face, 'I mean to imply that I would not as much as suffer one hair of Miss Ariell's head—Mrs. Vallings,' he cried, his voice thick with confused feeling,—' she's as safe in my hands—as—as she would be in yours,' he burst out. Then he muttered something. I think it was, 'God be my witness.' I wish the solemnity of the thing hadn't got so mixed up with the intense funniness of it, the incongruity gave one a hysterical sort of feel.

'My dear boy,' I cried, quite on the spur of the moment,—Vandeleur Fleming was the last young man in the world one would treat boyishly, for all his foolishness,—' it is certainly no business of mine to acquaint your family or the Carews with any affair of yours'—I paused and thought a minute, he was so young, so self-assured, so superior, so supremely idiotic; he certainly was years past his puppy days and his milk teeth, but Miss Ariell was the last person in the world to train him to the new diet. She would give him a moral dyspepsia that would last him his lifetime. All the mother in me came to the rescue. I would make one effort; but it was an ill thing to meddle in, and I always feel I did it badly. I began lamely.

'I am years older than you, Mr. Fleming. I have been about in the world, girl and woman, this many a year. We women pick up a good deal as we go, and we have what you great, strong, knowledgeable creatures havenot' (that fetched him), 'we have intuition
or instinct, and somehow I don't think Miss Ariell would ever quite suit you. To begin with, she's older—

'Only ten months,' he broke in. 'I'm twenty-three, and she's a little over twenty-four.'

(She was thirty-five, if she was a day.)

'Indeed, that may be in years, but you see a woman's life makes such a difference,—experiences with us go for more than years,—and Miss Ariell has lived her life, I should think, more than most girls; and, as you yourself said, her life has been so different from yours.'

'I said from that of my mother and of my sisters,' he remarked, with extreme dignity, and with an expressive pull-up to his shirt collar. 'The lives of young men, Mrs. Vallings, are, I take it—ahem—pretty much the same all the world over. Melbourne, I assure you, is behind no city of its size in the old world.'

'Oh, indeed, I never meant to imply it was,' I said humbly. 'I only feared that perhaps a girl like Miss Ariell, so used to the admiration of men, so used to constant excitement, might hardly be the wife to make you happy. Pray excuse me, I know this interference is an impertinence.'

'No,' he muttered; 'most kind, I am sure.'

'It is kindly meant, but it is an impertinence all the same, and you think it is. But if an intuition once gets a good hold on a woman, and if it tells her any one younger than herself is in danger, there's no knowing the length she will go in obedience to this obstinate instinct to save him—or try to.'
'Danger? What do you mean,' he demanded sternly, quite ignoring the man with the lip, who was quite wide-awake, and taking us in at his leisure.

'I am perfectly convinced of the purity and honesty of your intentions,' I continued boldly enough, but I quaked inwardly, the boy was so wofully in earnest, 'but I am not by any means so assured of Miss Ariell. I fear she may lead you to do things you will regret later.'

'Ah, Mrs. Vallings,' he said sorrowfully, 'how is it the very best and noblest of your sex can so misunderstand their peers—their peers?' he repeated emphatically. 'Miss Ariell is as good a girl as ever drew breath. God bless her!'

I felt choky. I could have kissed the boy that minute; and then he turned ridiculous all at once.

'And even if there were danger, as you say, even if your hints had a germ of truth in them, and there were danger for me,' he raised his voice and stiffened himself, 'Mrs. Vallings, put my knowledge of the world aside, and even my common sense, do you think I have no religion?'

He raised himself proudly on his seat, crossed his hands on his knees, and glared at me.

We were just steaming into our station, where our assembled families and friends were standing in close converse, waiting to receive us. As I was collecting my packages, Miss Ariell came up to look for hers. She looked as artless as ever, and gave a start of surprise at sight of me.
'Ah,' she cried, 'dear Mrs. Vallings, how did I miss seeing you? I was in that horrid ladies' carriage, and nearly stifled. A great fat wheezy baby had bronchitis, and we couldn't open an inch of window. If I had only known—Mr. Vandeleur, were you there too?—Oh!'

Mr. Vandeleur got scarlet, and turned a suspicious glance on me; but I couldn't wait to see it out, as the girls were calling, and the horses becoming restive.

CHAPTER V.

We did nothing worth speaking of for the next few weeks. It was the dull time, before the season when we were all to run down to town, and we just lounged along life in easy, restful bliss. The only thing that interested us very especially, was the growingly warm friendship between the Flemings and Miss Ariell, and the wretchedly dismal appearance of Vandeleur—which became visible to the naked eye about ten days after my return from town, and increased daily. I pondered on these things, and held my peace. There was one other thing that astonished us, it was the strange and morbid desire for solitude the step-brother suddenly evinced, and the bitter gruffness of his manner, whenever he came across any of his kind:
I would have given a lot to help either of the two unhappy boys. I liked them both in their different ways honestly and heartily, and I think they liked me. Vandeleur's glare soon changed to a look of rather pathetic trustful appeal that troubled my heart sorely, and made me curse my impotence to help him. Things had gone too far now, no human interference would alter matters one jot; he himself must pull himself up, or else—(there is an awful deal of truth in it)—'Better sin the whole sin, sure that God observes.'

Poor Vanny! I think even then he was losing his fresh first lovely young faith in the woman, and for her sake in all women.

It was a stupid everyday little tragedy, with excruciatingly funny points in it. And yet it brought a lump into my throat every time I brooded over it, which it seems to me I did a good deal in those days. The step-brother's condition troubled me nearly as much, and had the additional discomposing quality of mystery. Why he should lose flesh and forget his manners was a constant worrying puzzle to me, and gave me many wakeful nights. Indeed, I always will think that that horrid attack of neuralgia I had just then, was due solely to my restless, driving anxiety to get to the bottom of this boy's state of mind, which was enough to haunt any woman with a heart in her,—that and those horrid dusky shadows under his melting innocent blue eyes, and those queer, sudden, inexplicable sweeps of pain over that debonair young face.
There was nothing the least ridiculous in this boy's pain; no speck or tincture of sin in it either, as any fool could see,—which made matters worse. I would have given my right hand,—although I have a remarkably good touch on several instruments; but, upon my word, I would have given it, and willingly—to have saved the youth in that boy's face; and yet one couldn't move fate for him by so much as a finger's breadth.

Once I had brought myself to the point of deciding to beard Miss Ariell in her own den, and to possess myself of the situation by violence. I went so far as to put on my best hat and my smartest jacket, and to sally forth in her direction; but when I got to the bottom of the hill qualms came upon me, and I sat down to reflect. Perhaps it was cowardly, perhaps it was wise, who knows? but I turned back and took off my things again—and came down to tea. I felt it borne in upon me with crushing conviction, that I should gain nothing by the step, and that she would score off me finely. And so the river flowed on towards the great sea, and I did not so much as try to stem its current by one thrown pebble.

The girls and I and Mrs. Carew were sitting one day on the verandah,—I think we were a little tired of one another that afternoon. The girls had a giggling fit on, about a visitor in the neighbourhood, a young fellow who struck me as being rather on the road to hydrocephalic idiocy, from the shape of his head and other symptoms. Perhaps, however, I was a little
prejudiced, as I had heard him a few evenings before
confiding in a young freckled person, with large salt-
cellars in her neck, 'That Mrs. Vallings wasn't half
a bad sort, hang it, but mossy, distinctly mossy.'
Now, no woman of any pretensions to attractiveness
likes to hear such things said of her, especially if she
feels quite young still, and often looks it, moreover.
But from a girl's point of view, no doubt, he had some
attractions. He was great at tennis—had a fine
moustache—a beautiful clean pair of legs—and quite
£15,000 a year in the best station property.

Mrs. Carew was not interesting either; she was
talking of her youth in general, and the size of her
waist in particular—it was less than eighteen inches
with no squeezing. I wonder how it is that all
exhumed waists are of that slender make—and all
due to nature.

The girls were still giggling; Mrs. Carew had left
waists, and was on the religion of her youth, which
appears to have been of a still better brand than the
waists; and I—upon my word, I believe I was yawn-
ing, and dying for tea,—when a door out of the
drawing-room was flung open in rather an agitated
way, and the colonel appeared among us, puffing and
very red in the face. He 'hanged' and 'damned' a chair
or two, and at last settled down in a big basket one, with
a cushion a shade paler red than his face, and began
to fan himself with a big palm fan. I watched him,
wondering what on earth made him so piping hot,
the day was as cool and fresh as a daisy. He stirred
about and creaked his chair in a queer uneasy way, and rubbed his brow in a perturbed style, that made me suspect his heat was more of the spirit than of the flesh. Then he once more ‘damned’ softly, and ‘ahemed,’ and looked at the girls in an unpleasant way.

‘Isn't it tea-time, Henny?’ he demanded at last, with a sternness quite out of proportion to the occasion. That Indian cook is a nuisance, and never boils the water. Can't you girls go and see about it? Let's have a decent cup of tea for once.’

I laughed softly at the foolishness of men.

‘Run away, children,’ said Mrs. Carew placidly.

‘Why didn’t you send them away, Henny? The tea is always excellent, I believe, Florence.’

He thought the girls wouldn't have a suspicion there was anything at all in the wind but tea.

‘Shall I go too?’ I asked, standing up.

‘No, no, my dear Florence; no reason at all you should. I am, I must confess, rather upset. My dear,’ he continued, turning to his wife, ‘did you ever suspect anything wrong with regard to Miss Ariell?’

‘No, indeed, I did not. I like her and her step-brother particularly.’

‘I have just been speaking to young Swallow,—he's staying at the Rockes,—and, upon my word, if all or even a part of what he says is true, we've been let in. Let in—in a most disgraceful and unaccountable manner.’

‘Good gracious!’ said Mrs. Carew, and her hands fell limply on her lap. ‘How?’
The colonel lowered his voice, and looked round carefully. 'She's married—married hard and fast—to a fellow, an actor fellow, called Sprague; and he's found her out, by Jove, and intends to claim her. A nice scandal for the girls!'

'But the step-brother?'

'My dear,' he replied, glancing at her with some natural scorn; 'he's no more her step-brother than I am.'

Mrs. Carew started and exclaimed. I did neither, I did not even wonder; I felt as if I had known it quite well all along. And yet just as surely as I knew and had known all along that the woman was guilty, so surely was I convinced of the innocence of Clive Pomfret; and yet I hadn't a vestige of fact to bring in proof of it, it was a mere theory; nevertheless I would risk ridicule and air it, this baseless theory of mine.

'I am certain, as certain as I sit here,' I said, with an air of the surest reasonableness, 'that the boy Clive is as innocent as a baby all through.'

'Good heavens, Florence!' they cried it out at me simultaneously, and the colonel lifted himself on his chair with both hands and surveyed me with strong dissatisfaction.

'Look here,' I said, with rather a feeble grin, 'how much will you bet?'

'My dear,' murmured Mrs. Carew.

'That “cup” has upset me,' I explained, laughing.
‘Never mind, Florence,’ said the colonel, sinking down again, and looking less like a wild beast, ‘I’ll bet you anything you like—though the boy may be weak—that he must have known the position of affairs. It is ridiculous to suppose otherwise; and the idea of a man, a gentleman of birth and breeding, bringing a person of that character into my house—among my girls—why, it’s outrageous—it’s damnable! Pray excuse me. It’s too much for a man,—one must swear.’

He jumped up and walked furiously to and fro in front of us, stamping from time to time. It did look worse than bad, one couldn’t wonder at the old man’s wrath, and yet I could have staked my life the boy was as much entrapped as we were.

‘They may have been married: how was he to know of the Sprague creature?’ I pleaded weakly.

‘Married!—a likely story. Why didn’t they say so if they were. Step-brother and sister, indeed!’

‘She may have had her full and sufficient reasons. That arrangement was of her making, I know.’

‘You have a huge opinion of your sex’s rascality, it seems to me.’

‘Not at all; but I have the very smallest opinion of a man’s sense under certain conditions.’

‘The fellow had plenty of brains. On everyday matters he was all there; and he was a very fairly read fellow.’

‘The very wisest of you creatures are just wax in the hands of a woman with her head screwed on the
right way, and with no conscience: any man can be fooled, given certain circumstances.'

'Look here, my dear,' remarked Colonel Carew, with some asperity, 'generalities are the refuge of the reasonless: where are your proofs?'

'I haven't the ghost of one. But do faces go for nothing?'

'Not a damn,' muttered the old man.

'Yes, but they do,' I persisted idiotically; 'and I put it to you, as a Christian man, if it is in the remotest degree possible that a boy with that face could bring a woman in Miss Ariell's supposed relation to himself in among a lot of innocent ignorant girls. It is beyond the bounds of possibility, I persist. Why, a man steeped to the neck in vice wouldn't do it, not to say Clive Pomfret. He may have lied and helped in a deception,—he must have,—but it isn't in him to do that.'

'Whether it's in him or not, he did it, that's enough for me,' snarled the colonel. 'Good God! to think of it,' he muttered, drumming on his chair elbow; 'a nice story for the club. We've been let in—let in in a most disgraceful and scandalous fashion! And to think of me, a man of my age and experience of the world,' cried the colonel,—his red turning to a dangerous purple,—'being let in by a chit of a child and that woman, who really seemed quite straight. You thought so, my dear,' he stammered, turning rather pathetically to his wife. 'It's outrageous!'

'Here are the girls,' whispered Mrs. Carew. 'We
will have tea now, and we can talk it over to-night, dear;' she said kindly, looking up at the outraged man of the world.

We did talk it over. The girls were bundled off to their rooms at nine o'clock, to their infinite and most just disgust, bubbling over with reasonable curiosity as they were. Then we set to and talked till eleven, and to not the slightest purpose. During the talk I got into trouble myself. I was simple enough to betray my slight previous knowledge of affairs, and the conclusions I had arrived at; and the colonel didn't like it—it hurt his sense of manly superiority. It struck him that somehow I had scored off him.

'Most unwise of you, my dear, most injudicious. These matters should never be dealt with by women, with their very beautiful and natural ignorance of the world. You should have come to me at once, and all this most deplorable scandal might have been averted.'

I wondered how, considering the circumstances; but I thought it just as well to be silent. I saw a glint in Mrs. Carew's eye that told me that her belief in her husband's immaculate world knowledge had received a severe shock; and I knew he would hear all about it before he got a wink of sleep that night, so I could afford to be magnanimous with an easy mind. Once or twice, as we were talking, I fancied I heard a light step on the verandah, but, as no one else remarked it, concluded I must have been mistaken.
CHAPTER VI.

When I had taken down my hair for the night, and changed my dress for a loose white wrapper, I threw up my window and looked out, in a way I have had ever since the days of my childhood. It was a perfect night, cool and crisp and silent, with the moonlight pouring itself down in great waves of silver whiteness over mountain and plain. The moon does certainly know how to shine in these southern lands, and in no other land than Australia does it so completely transform the whole aspect of nature. Australia simply loses its individuality under the moon's rays; it drops its raw crudity of youth, and grows strong and great and grand with the strength and greatness and grandeur of virility, not with the cock-sure bumptiousness of precocity.

As I stood looking out, slipping involuntarily back to wander among the graves of old dead hopes and slain follies, that died hard in those old days, when life was so full and death so bitter, I was just preparing for myself a miserable and rather a mawkish quart-d'heure, when again I heard a little rustle, and the furtive tread of slippered feet, and I put my head out of the window to hear more distinctly.

My room was in a block of bed-rooms quite isolated from the house, and it had a separate verandah of its own; but it never struck me to be frightened. I think I was in too excited and absorbed a state concerning
man and selfish natures to take proper notice of outer events.

I listened again, in rather a half-hearted way, and the tread came nearer, and I could distinguish a black-clothed figure advancing swiftly and softly. When it saw me, it raised a white warning hand—a woman's, from the size of it. I had no further time for speculation; the walk changed to a quick noiseless run, and the figure stopped before my window, threw down its cloak, and displayed to my astonished sight Miss Ariell in full dinner dress. 'Let me into your room, quick!' she whispered, with a soft chuckling laugh.

I moved aside mechanically, in a whirl of passive, silent, indignant amazement. I could not have got out a word for the life of me. When she got in, she pulled down the window and drew the blind, then she ran to the door and noiselessly turned the key in it, then she sat down in my most comfortable chair. I saw her pause to select it—oh, the cool audacity of that person! And then she broke out in a long bubble of laughter that shook her from head to heel with its low soft intensity, and she looked at me out of those two untranslatable eyes of hers. I no longer wondered at men, or blamed them for any depth of foolishness. I believe I was in love with her myself that minute, she looked so radiant and so lovely, and, in the dim lamp-light, so young; and the little mocking devil in her laugh only increased her charm a thousandfold.

'Ah, I know you know all about it,' she cried softly.
That duffer Clarence Swallow has it all over the place, just for mere spite. If you knew the love—and the sort of love—he made to me; but there was nothing either to like or to laugh at in the creature. I had to squash him at once. Look here; I'm going away by the first train to-morrow with my husband—yes, my husband. I'm married to him all right, and he's not half a bad sort, but you see he's an actor, and makes me work; and I can tell you an actor's life is a good sight harder than a stone-breaker's or a daily governess's; and, besides, the fellow's as jealous as a boy. I thought I'd take a holiday and give him one. But he didn't like it in all its points. Poor fellow, he makes his life a toil watching me! Isn't it idiotic? and such woful waste of time, too; as if a woman won't go her own way in spite of the watching of fifty men. Now this last affair was pure kindness on my part. I met Clive Pomfret on the Tasmanian boat, and I simply had to take care of the child. Mrs. Vallings, that boy's the greatest fool, and the straightest, honestest fool, I ever met in my life. Nothing would do him but to marry me!—marry me! Heavens!—and we went on a honeymoon, all quite correct. But for reasons of my own—I won't tell you them, they're too many and too complex—we were step-brother and sister; and we came up here—here, into this little hotbed of second-hand pigmy conventions—Oh, oh, oh!' she cried, shaking and gurgling—'and you saw how I was treated. You were the only mortal soul that suspected me, Mrs. Vallings. Why? do tell me,'
I looked at her indignantly. She gave another little laugh, and went on.

'It was the hugest joke. The boy's innocence—and the little coterie here, and its enthusiastic reception of me, and that wonderful Fleming family'—

'Yes, and poor Vandeleur,' I broke in angrily.

'Oh, that fool! I'm sorry for the other, very, though I assure you I have done my duty by him, for I've been disillusioning him like anything the last fortnight. But that Vanny—oh, that self-satisfied, virtuous ninny!—I'm not a rap sorry for him. Bless you, it'll be the making of him. I came here to-night partly about the creature. You never asked me, by the way, why I came, although you looked daggers, and bloody ones. Well, no matter, I suppose you can't, from your different make, see the joke in it all. I do.'

'Joke!' I could hardly speak for choking disgust.

'Joke! yes. Ah, you don't know anything about the spirit of acting on a person! I had quite a frenzy of it on me, playing half-a-dozen games at the same time, and mystifying the most intensely respectable and conventional audience in the whole length and breadth of the continent. Joke! it was a dozen jokes, and good ones, rolled into one.'

'Please continue,' I said, with much dignity. 'You informed me you came on Mr. Vandeleur's account.'

She laughed, and glanced from head to foot of me. I would have given a great deal to throw her out of the window. That was impossible; besides, I wanted to hear if in any way I could help either of these boys.
'How young you do look, to be sure,' she laughed insolently,—'in some lights, that is.'

I tried to freeze her with a look; but where was the use? she laughed again with her soft gurgling ripple.

'Oh, Van,' she went on lazily. 'Well, I had mapped out such a lark. Van and I were to be married tomorrow at 11.30 A.M. He has the licence this minute. I daresay it's under his pillow. O Lord!'—she collapsed again into a noiseless fit of mirth.

'You appear to have taken to him. He swears by you, anyway. You might meet him at the 11.30 A.M. train, and let him into the secret. My husband and I are going by the mail to-morrow at 2 P.M.'

'And Clive?'

'Oh, he ran up to town by the evening train on business I invented for him. When he comes back, I'll be on the high seas. You'll have your hands full with those two boys, Mrs. Vallings. How providential you should turn up just in the nick of time! Quite a direct interposition, I should say!'

'Have you no compunction at all, Miss Ariell; are you altogether heartless?'

She was perfectly silent for a few minutes; and gradually such a change came over the face of the woman as I never in my wildest imaginings could have thought possible. The mask of laughing, sardonic, devilish mirth dropped from her, taking all the sparkle and colour and light and youth with it, and a new face looked out at me—a terrible face, old and grey and wicked and sad, with the sadness
of death and with the corruption of the grave on it. I shuddered and covered my face.

‘Ah, you may well hide your face,’ she hissed out at me—her voice had altered with her face. ‘Do you know, woman, that I was once as good and as ignorant—as ignorant, mark you—as those two yellow-haired girls over there in the house? They’re giggling there this minute like two babies,—I heard them as I waited for you,—and I was as innocent as these. Well, I came to grief, by no fault of mine, through sheer idiocy, and then men took me for a shuttle-cock, and played their fill with me; and now my time is come, and I am having my revenge. That’s the whole story.’

‘Why do you choose boys to carry out your revenge on? That seems to me a poor mean game.’

‘On the principle of an eye for an eye, youth for youth. How old was I when they began their game with me? But I assure you I have an atom of heart still. It is wonderful, too, considering all things; but I suppose a woman’s heart is never killed outright, God help her! I’m sorry for Clive; no one knows how good the fellow is, and will be. Look after him. Send him home, Mrs. Vallings; the boy must have home life and good women about him to keep him straight. Melbourne will be the ruin of him. Send him home when he is fit to go. As for Vanny, that’s all calf-love. He’ll be all right, bless you!’

She stood up and threw out her white rounded arms with a gesture of utter weariness. I could have pitied her, but for her conduct towards those girls.
‘What devil made you tell those girls the things you did?’ I demanded.

A flash of the old mocking malice crossed her face.

‘What devil? The same old serpent, I suppose. There’s been no special devil created for me, that I’m aware of—more’s the pity! You think me a beast, of course,’ she said suddenly—‘all bad.’

‘No, I don’t,’ I made impetuous answer. There was a worn, weary look on her face, and her hands dropped listlessly,—somehow she touched me; and good does get so intricately entangled in evil sometimes. ‘No; I think there’s a little sound bit in your heart still. Can’t you give it a chance to spread?’

‘No, I can’t; it’s too late, too late. Well, good-bye; we’ll not see one another again. You’ve depressed me. I couldn’t laugh now as I did when I came into the room, to save my life. Bah! the joke tastes flat. But I’m really obliged to you for these two wet eyes. Look after the boys, both of them. Good-bye!’

She opened the window and crept softly out.

‘God help you!’ I cried, as she was stepping off the verandah. ‘Won’t you try?’

‘Can’t be done,’ she called back, with her mocking laugh. ‘Thanks all the same.’

I saw her walk away under the brilliant moonlight into a dense clump of wattle, then she had gone out of my sight for ever.

Next day I went to the railway station at Spencer Street and met Vandeleur Fleming. I did my best for the boy, but it was a very poor and inefficient
best. His suffering was as real and intense as if he
had not had a ridiculous strain in him. As I foresaw,
he found a very complete retribution in the bosom of
his righteous family.

As for Clive, I have never been able to think of
that boy's sorrow, much less speak of it. I have been
the sole gainer in the whole miserable transaction,
having come out of it the richer by two steadfast friends,
who have done much to bring back the old fresh
sweetness of life, and who make up to me for many
past hopes and banished illusions. I see in those
fair girls what I might have been, and pray God to
keep them unspotted from the world.