

By E. W. HORNING.

IT is prejudicial to the nicest girl in this unjust world to be asked in marriage too frequently. Things come out, and she gets the name of being a heartless flirt; her own sex add, that she cannot be a very nice girl. A flirt she is, of a surety, but why heartless, and why not a nice girl? So grave defects do not follow. The flirt who doesn't think she is one—the flirt with a set of sham principles and ideals, and a misleading veneer of soul—is heartless, if you like, and something worse. Now the girl who gets herself proposed to regularly once a week in the season is far less contemptible; she is not contemptible at all, for how could she know that you meant so much more than she did? She only knows a little too much to take your word for this.

A sweetly pretty and highly accomplished young girl, little Miss Anstruther came to know too much to dream of taking any man's word on this point. She was reputed to have refused more offers than a good girl ought to get; for what in the very beginning conferred a certain distinction upon her, made her notorious at a regrettably early stage of her career. The finger of feminine disapproval pointed at

her, presently, in an unmistakable way; and this is said—by women—to be a very bad sign. Men may not think so. Intensely particular ladies, in the pride of their complete respectability, tried to impress upon very young men in whom they were interested that Miss Anstruther was not at all a nice girl. But this had a disappointing effect upon the boys. And Miss Anstruther by no means confined herself to rejecting mere boys.

The moths that singed themselves at this flame were of every variety. They would have made a rare collection under glass, with pins through them; Miss Anstruther herself would have inspected them thus with the liveliest interest. Her detractors also could have enjoyed themselves at such an exhibition. But the more generous spirits among them—those who had been young and attractive too long ago to pretend to be either still—might have found there some slight excuse for Miss Anstruther. Of course, it was no excuse at all, but it was notable that almost every moth had some salient good point—something to “account for it” on *her* side, to some extent—say a twentieth part of the extent to which she had gone. Nearly all the moths had *something* to be said for them—

looks, intellect, a nice voice, an operatic moustache, or an aptitude for the informal recitation of engaging verses; their strong points, sorted out and fitted together, would have made a dazzling being—whom Miss Anstruther would have rejected as firmly and as finally as she had rejected his integral parts.

For there was no pleasing the girl. Apparently she did not mean to be pleased—in that way. She had neither wishes nor intentions, it became evident, beyond immediate flirtation of the most wilful description. Her depravity was shocking.

Her accomplishment was singing. She sang divinely. Also she had plenty of money; but the money alone was not at the bottom of many declarations; her voice was the more infatuating element of the two; and her "way" did more damage than either. She was not, indeed, aware what a "way" she had with her. It was a way of seeming desperately smitten, and a little unhappy about it; which is quite sufficient to make a man of tender years or acute conscientiousness "speak" on the spot. Thus many a proposal was as unexpected on her part as it was unpremeditated on his. He made a sudden fool of himself—heard some surprisingly sensible things from her frivolous lips—decided, upon reflection and inquiry, that these were her formula—and got over the whole thing in the most masterly fashion. This is where Miss Anstruther was so much more wholesome than the flirt who doesn't think she flirts: Miss Anstruther never rankled.

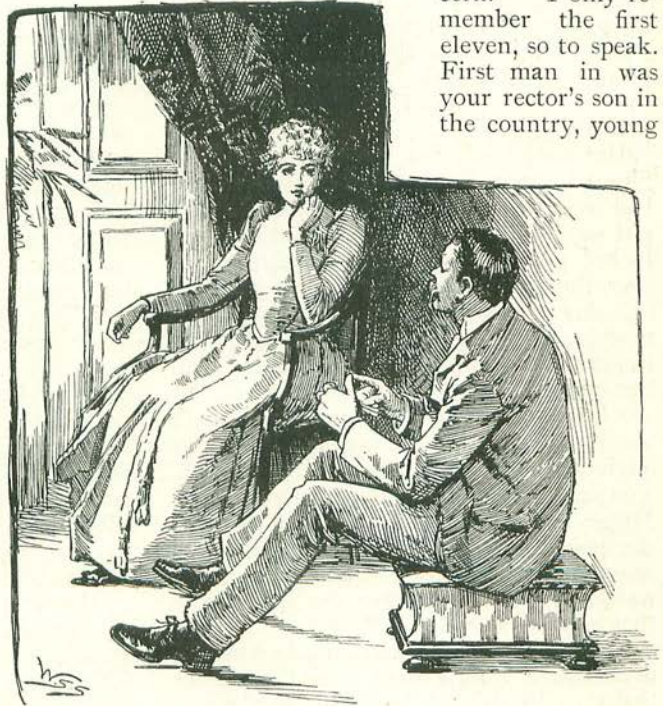
She had no mother to check her notorious propensity in its infancy, and no brother to bully her out of it in the end. Her father, an Honourable, but a man of intrinsic distinction as well, was queer enough to see no fault in her; but he was a busy man. She had, however, a kinsman, Lord Nunthorp, who used to talk to her like a brother on

the subject of her behaviour, only a little less heavily than brothers use. Nunthorp knew what he was talking about. He had once played at being in love with her himself. But that was in the days when his moustache looked as though he had forgotten to wash it off, and before Miss Anstruther came out. There had been no nonsense between them for years. They were the best and most intimate of friends.

"Another!" he would say, gazing gravely upon her as the most fascinating curiosity in the world, when she happened to be telling him about the very latest. "Let's see—*how* many's that?"

There came a day when she told Nunthorp she had lost count; and she really had. The day was at the fag-end of one season; he had been lunching at the Anstruthers' and Miss Anstruther had been singing to him.

"I'm afraid I can't assist you," said he, with amused concern. "I only remember the first eleven, so to speak. First man in was your rector's son in the country, young



"LET'S SEE—HOW MANY'S THAT?"

Miller, who was sent out to Australia on the spot. He *was* the first, wasn't he? Yes, I thought that was the order; and by Jove, Midge, how fond you were of that boy!"

"I was," said Miss Anstruther, glancing out of the window with a wistful look in her pretty eyes; but her kinsman said to himself that he remembered that wistful look—it went cheap.

"The next man in," said Nunthorp, who was an immense cricketer, "was *me!*"

"I like that!" said Miss Anstruther, taking her eyes from the window with rather a jerk, and smiling brightly. "You've left out Cousin Dick!"

"So I have; I beg Dick's pardon. It was very egotistical of me, but pardonable, for of course Dick never stood so high in the serene favour as I did. I came after Dick then, first wicket down, and since then—well, you say yourself that you've lost tally, but you must have bowled out a pretty numerous team by this time. My dear Midge," said Nunthorp, with a sudden access of paternal gravity, "don't you think it about time that somebody came in and carried his bat?"

"Don't talk nonsense!" said Miss Anstruther, briskly. She added, almost miserably: "I wish to goodness they wouldn't ask me! If only they wouldn't propose I should be all right. Why do they want to go and propose? It spoils everything."

Her tone and look were quite injured. She was more indignant than Nunthorp had ever seen her—except once—for the girl was of a most serene disposition. He looked at her kindly, and as admiringly as ever, though rather with the eye of a connoisseur; and he found she had still the most lovely, imperfect, uncommon, and fragrant little face he had ever seen in his life. He said candidly:

"I really don't blame them, and I don't see how you can. If you are to blame anybody, I'm afraid it must be yourself. You must give them some encouragement, Midge, or I don't think they'd all come to the point as they do. I never saw such sportsmen as they are! They walk in and walk out again one after the other, and they seem to like it—"

"I wish they did!" said Miss Anstruther, devoutly. "I only wish they'd show *me* that they liked it; I should have a better time then. They wouldn't keep making me miserable with their idiotic farewell letters. That's what they *all* do. Either they write and call me everything—rudely, politely, sarcastically, all ways—or they say their hearts are broken, and they haven't the faintest intention of getting over it—

in fact, they wouldn't get over it if they could. That's enough to make any person feel low, even if you know from experience what to expect. At one time I daren't look in the paper for fear of seeing their suicides; but I've only seen their weddings. They all seem to get over it pretty easily; and that doesn't make you think much better of yourself, you know. Of course I'm inconsistent!"

"Of course you are," said Nunthorp, cordially. "I approve of you for it. I'd rather see you an old maid, Midge, than going through life in a groove. Consistency's a narrow groove for narrow minds! I can do better than this about consistency, Midge; I'm hot and strong on the subject. But you're not listening."

"Ah!" cried Miss Anstruther, who had not listened to a word, "they're driving me crazy, between them! There's Mr. Willimott, you know, who writes. Of course he had no business to speak to me. There were a hundred things against him at the time—even if I'd cared for him—though he's getting more successful now. Well, I do believe he's put me into every story he's written since it happened! I crop up in some magazine or other every month!"

"Into work the poet kneads them," murmured Nunthorp, who was not a professional cricketer. "Well, you needn't bother yourself about *him*. You've made the fellow. He now draws a heroine better than most men. It's a pity you don't take to writing, Midge, you'd draw your heroes better than women do as a rule; for don't you see that you must know more about us than we know about ourselves?"

"They wouldn't be much of heroes!" laughed the girl. "But I heartily wish I *did* write. Wouldn't I show up some people, that's all! It would give me something to do, too; it would keep me out of mischief, and really I'm sick of men and their ridiculous nonsense. And they all say the same thing. If only they wouldn't say anything at all! Why do they? You might tell me!"

Nunthorp put on his thinking-cap. "You see, you are quite pretty," said he.

"Thanks."

"Then you sing like an angel."

"Please don't! That's what *they* all say."

"Ah, the singing has a lot to do with it; you oughtn't to sing so well; you should cultivate less expression. And then—I'm afraid you like attention."

"Well, perhaps I do."

"And I'm sure it must be very hard *not* to be attentive to you," said Nunthorp, with a rather brutal impersonality; "for I should fancy you have a way—quite unconscious, mind—of giving your current admirer the idea that he's the only one who ever held the office!"

"Thanks," said she, with perfect good-humour; "that's a very pretty way of putting it."

"What, Midge?"

"That I'm a hopeless flirt—which is the root of the whole matter, I suppose!"

She burst out laughing, and he joined her. But there had been a pinch of pathos in her words, and he was weak enough to

chance of talking with her properly; but he was glad to find that he could meet her at a dance the next night.

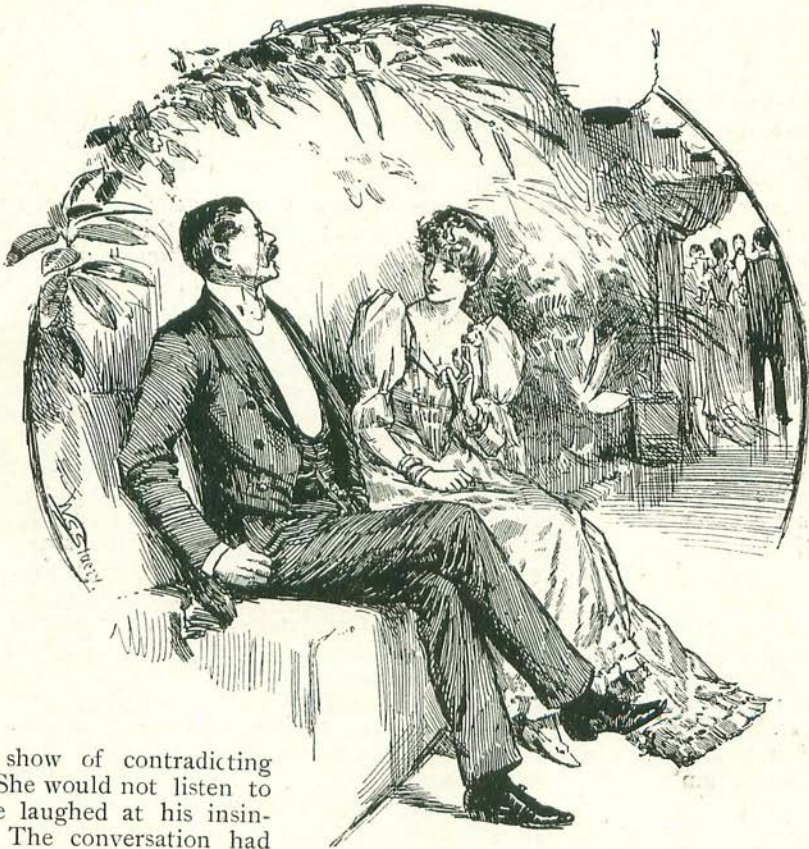
"Well, Midge!" he was able to say at last, as they sat out together at this dance.

"How many proposals since the summer?"

She gravely held up three fingers. Nunthorp laughed consumedly.

"Any more scalps?" he inquired.

This was an ancient pleasantry. It referred to the expensive presents with which some young men had paved their way to disappointment. It was a moot point between Miss Anstruther and her noble kinsman whether she had any right to retain these things. She considered she had every right, and declared that these



"SHE GRAVELY HELD UP THREE FINGERS."

make a show of contradicting them. She would not listen to him, she laughed at his insincerity. The conversation had broken down, and, as soon as he decently could, he went.

That was at the very end of a season; and Lord Nunthorp did not see his notorious relative again for some months. In the following February, however, he heard her sing at some evening party; he had no

presents were her only compensation for so many unpleasantnesses. He pretended to take higher ground in the matter. But it amused him a good deal to ask about her "scalps."

She told him what the new ones were.

"And I perceive *mine*—upon your wrist!" Nunthorp exclaimed, examining her bracelet; and he was genuinely tickled.

"Well!" said she, turning to him with the frankest eyes, "I'd quite forgotten *whose* it was—honestly I had!"

He was vastly amused. So his bracelet—she had absolutely forgotten that it was his—did not make her feel at all awkward. There was a healthy cynicism in the existing relations between these two.

She had nothing very new to tell him. Two out of the last three had proposed by letter. She confessed to being sick and tired of answering this kind of letter.

"I'll tell you what," said her kinsman, looking inspired, "you ought to have one printed! You could compose a very pretty one, with blanks for the name and date. It would save you a deal of time and trouble. You would have it printed in brown ink and rummy old type, don't you know, on rough paper with coarse edges. It would look charming. 'Dear Mr. Blank, of course I'm greatly flattered'—no, you'd say 'very'—of course I'm very flattered by your letter, but I must confess it astonished me. I thought we were to be such *friends*.' Really, Midge, it would be well worth your while!"

Miss Anstruther did not dislike the joke, from him; but when he added, "The pity is you didn't start it in the very beginning, with young Ted Miller"—she checked him instantly.

"Now don't you speak about *him*," she said, in a firm, quiet little way; but he appreciated the look that swept into her soft eyes no better than he had appreciated it six months before.

"Why not?" asked Nunthorp, merely amused.

"Because *he meant* it!"

Nunthorp wondered, but not seriously, whether that young fellow, who had gone in first, was to be the one, after all, to carry out his bat. And this way of putting it, in his own head, which was half full of cricket, carried him back to their last chat, and reminded him of a thing he had wanted to say to her for the last twenty-four hours.

"Do you remember my telling you," said he, "when I last had the privilege of lecturing you, that you sang iniquitously well? Then I feel it a duty to tell you that your singing is now worse than ever—in this respect. No wonder you have

had three fresh troubles; I consider it very little, with your style of singing. Your songs have much to answer for; I said so then, I can swear to it now. Your voice is heavenly, of course; but why pronounce your words so distinctly? I'm sure it isn't at all fashionable. And why strive to make sense of your sounds? I really don't think it's good form to do so. And it's distinctly dangerous. It didn't happen to matter last night, because the rooms were so crowded; but if you sing to one or two as you sing to one or two hundred, I don't wonder at them, I really don't. You sing as if you meant every word of the drivel—I believe you humbug yourself into *half* meaning it, while you're singing!"

"I believe I do," Miss Anstruther replied, with characteristic candour. "You've no idea how much better it makes you sing, to put a little heart into it. But I never thought of this: perhaps I had better give up singing!"

"I'll tell you, when my turn comes round again," said he, leading her back to the ballroom. "I'll think of nothing else meanwhile."

He did not dance; he was not a dancing man; but he did think of something else meanwhile. He thought of a young fellow with a pale face, darkly accoutred, with whom Miss Anstruther seemed to be dancing a great deal. Lord Nunthorp hated dancing, and he had only come here to sit out a couple of dances with his amusing relative. He had to wait a good time between them; he spent it in watching her; and *she* spent it in dancing with the pale, dark boy—all but one waltz, during which Nunthorp removed his attention from the bow to its latest string, who, for the time being, looked miserable.

"Who," he asked her, as they managed to get possession of their former corner in the conservatory, "is your dark-haired, pale-faced friend?"

"Well," whispered Miss Anstruther, with grave concern, "I'm very much afraid that he is what *you* would call the next man in!"

"Good heaven!" ejaculated Nunthorp, for once aghast. "Do you mean to say he is going to propose to you?"

"I feel it coming; I know the symptoms only too well," she replied, in cold blood.

"Then perhaps you're going to make a different answer at last?"

"My *dear* man!" said Lord Nunthorp's

sisiterly little connection ; and her tone was that of a person rather cruelly misjudged.

The noble kinsman held his tongue for several seconds. Man of the world as he was, he looked utterly scandalised. Here, in this fair, frail, beautiful form, lay a depth of cynicism which he could not equal personally—which he could not fathom in another, and that other a quite young girl.

"Midge," he said at last, with sincere solemnity, "you horrify me! You've often told me the kind of thing, but this is the first time I've seen you with a fly actually in the web: for I don't think I myself counted, after all. That boy is helplessly in love with you! And you were smiling upon him as though you liked him too!"

Nunthorp was touched tremulously upon the arm. "Was I?" the girl asked him, in a frightened voice. "Was I looking—like that?"

"I think you were," said Nunthorp, frankly. "And now you calmly scoff at the bare notion of accepting him! You make my blood run cold, Midge! I think you can have no heart!"

"Do you think that?" she asked, strenuously, as though he had struck her.

"No, no; you know I don't; only after seeing you look at him like that —"

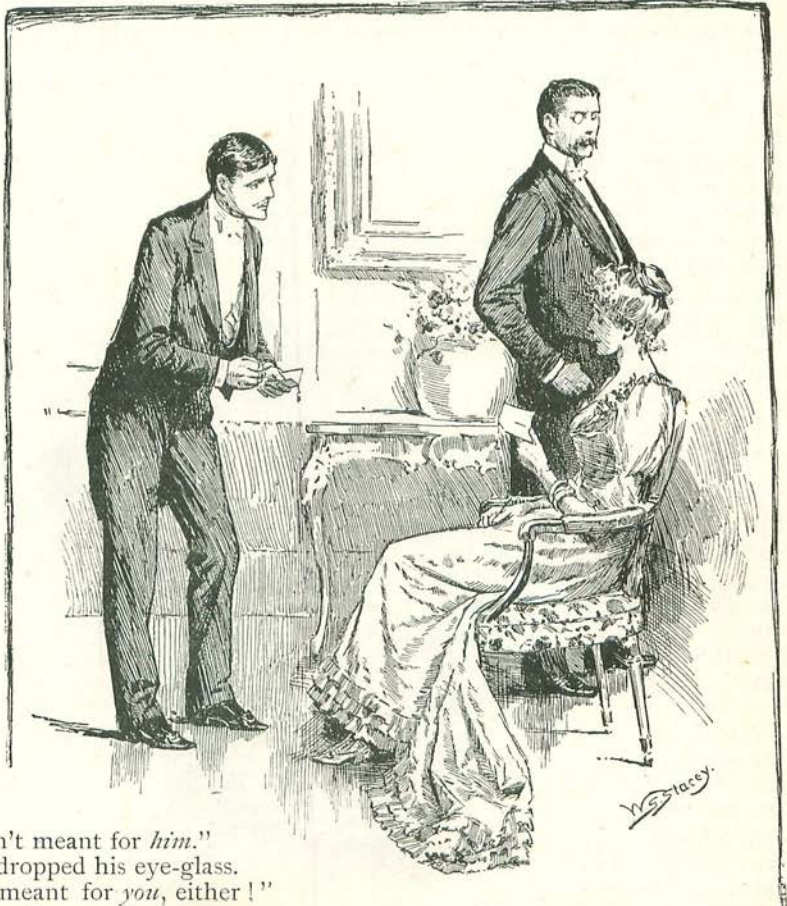
"Honestly, I didn't know I was looking in any particular way." Miss Anstruther added in a lowered, softened voice: "If I was—well, it wasn't meant for *him*."

Lord Nunthorp dropped his eye-glass.

"And it wasn't meant for *you*, either!" she superadded, smartly enough.

Lord Nunthorp breathed again, and ventured to recommend an immediate snub, in the pale boy's case.

When he had led her back to her chaperone, he felt easier on her account than he had been for a long time. It was obvious to him that the biter was bit at last. The right man was evidently in view, though he was not there at the dance—which was hard on the white-faced youth. Perhaps she was not the right girl for the right man—perhaps he refused to be attracted by her. That would be odd, but not impossible; and a girl who had refused to fall in love with every man who had ever fallen in love with her, was the likeliest girl in the world to care for some man who cared nothing for her—primarily to *make* him care. That is a woman, through and through, reflected Lord Nunthorp, out of the recesses of a *recherché* experience. But Midge would most certainly make him care:



"BUT I'VE GOT IT DOWN."

she was fascinating enough to capture any man—except himself—if she seriously tried: and he sincerely hoped she was going to try, to succeed, and to live happily ever after. For Nunthorp had now quite a paternal affection for the girl, and he wished her well, from the depths of his man-of-the-world's prematurely grey heart. But he did not like a little scene, with her in it, which he witnessed just before he quitted that party.

"My dance!" said a boy's confident, excited voice, just behind him; and the voice of Miss Anstruther replied, in the coldest of tones, that he "must have made a mistake, for it was not his dance at all."

"But I've got it down," the boy pleaded, as yet only amazed; his face was like marble as Nunthorp watched him; Miss Anstruther was also slightly pale.

"She's doing her duty, for once," thought Nunthorp, to whom the pathos of the incident lay in its utter conventionality. "But she plays a cruel game!"

"You've got it down?" said Miss Anstruther, very clearly, examining her card with ostentatious care. "Excuse me, but there is really some mistake; I haven't got your name down for anything else!"

For an instant, Nunthorp held himself in readiness for a scene: he half expected to see the boy, whose white face was now on fire, snatch the card from her, expose her infamy, tear up the card and throw the pieces in her face. His face looked like it for a single instant, and Nunthorp was prepared to protect him if he did it. But the boy went away without a word.

Nunthorp met the girl's eyes with his. He knew she was looking for his approval: he knew she had earned it, by preventing one poor

fellow from going the whole humbling length, and he was glad to think that she had taken his advice: but the glance he gave her was very grim. He could not help it. He went away feeling quite unlike himself.

Just outside, in the street, someone brushed past him, sobbing an oath. And Lord Nunthorp became himself again; for the person was Miss Anstruther's last victim.

"That's all right," he muttered; "not a broken heart—only broken pride. That's all that's breakable, after all, and it will mend!" He walked home rather pleased with Midge, as he called her, for having done her duty, no matter how late, in at least *one* case. He was vexed with himself for having been stupid about it at the moment. But it delighted him to think that most likely this would be the last case—of the kind. For Lord Nunthorp took always the most good-natured interest in his conspicuous cousin (or whatever she was), with whom he had once played at love himself.

How plain it was to the world that Miss Anstruther was motherless! No mother would have allowed her to behave as she did. With a mother, she would have married one of the many, whether she loved him or not. Her father, whose time was much taken up, was so blind as to see no harm in her. The only people she had to remonstrate with her were her married sisters. One of these had been Miss Anstruther's chaperone at this dance, where she sat out twice with her kinsman, Lord Nunthorp, and broke a silly youth's pride. This sister ventured to remonstrate—but very



"SHE HAD FOUND A LETTER ON THE MANTELPIECE."

gently—when they got home, in the small hours of the February morning.

Miss Anstruther had been silent and subdued during the drive home. She was considerably ashamed of herself. She was more ashamed of having ill-treated the white-faced boy over that dance—now that it was done—than she would have been to reject him after encouragement; use had blunted her feelings to this sort of sin; but the wrong of breaking cold-bloodedly an engagement to dance was altogether out of harmony with her character and her practices. She was notorious for leading men on to certain humiliation; she was celebrated for the punctilio with which she kept her word in the smallest matter. She had injured the good reputation in snapping the backbone of the bad one; and she did not feel at all pleased with Lord Nunthorp, who had said or implied one thing, and then stared its opposite. She had cheered up, however, on her arrival at the house: she had found a letter for herself, with three bright blue stamps in the corner, stuck up on the mantelpiece. Her hand had closed eagerly over this letter before the lamp was turned up. She was twisting it between her fingers, under her shawl, while her sister reproved her, not too seriously, for her treatment of that boy.

"I know it," she answered, rather dolefully; "I know well enough what a flirt I am! I have never denied it in my life, not

even to *them*. But I really never mean them to go so far. And—and I don't think I'm so heartless as I make myself out to be!"

Her sister gazed at her fondly. Her own family, at all events, loved and believed in Miss Anstruther, and held that her faults were on the surface. The sister now saw in the sweet, flushed face the look that Lord Nunthorp had seen (and underestimated) more than once.

"Is there someone you care for after all, Midge dear?" she asked softly.

"There may have been someone all the time," the young girl whispered, her eyelids fallen, her hand squeezing the letter under her shawl.

"Is it—is it Ted Miller?"

Midge looked up into her sister's eyes. Her lip was quivering. She was a girl who seldom cried—her detractors would have told you why. She controlled herself before speaking now.

"It was the most hopeless affair of them all," she said simply; "but—but he was the only one who really meant it!"

His letter was against her bosom.

The married sister's eyes had filled. "You write to each other still, don't you, Midge?"

"Yes—as friends. Good night, Helen!"

"Good night, darling Midge; forgive me for speaking!" Helen whispered, kissing her eyes.

"Forgive you? You've said nothing to what I deserve!"

The girl was running up to her room two steps at a time. Ted Miller's letter was pressed tight to her heart.



"IS IT—IS IT TED MILLER?"

Ted Miller had been four years in Australia. He had written to her regularly, the whole time, as her friend; and she had written fairly regularly to him, as his. His was the one refusal in which she had not been a free agent; she had been but seventeen at the time. There was love between them when they parted; there was never a word of it in their letters. He wrote and told her all that he was doing; he was roughing it in the wilderness; he was not making his fortune; he never spoke of coming home. She wrote and told him—nearly all.

A pleasant fire was burning in her room. She lit the candles, and sat down just as she was, in her very extravagant ball-dress, to read his present letter. She felt, as always in opening a letter from Ted, that she was going to open a window and let in a cool current of fragrant, fresh air upon an unhealthy, heavy atmosphere; and she noticed, what she had not noticed before, through hiding the letter before the lamp was turned up, that its superscription was not in Ted's hand; the bright blue stamps of New South Wales were really all she had looked at before. She now tore open the envelope with strange misgivings; and the letter turned out to be from the squatter's wife on Ted Miller's station, telling how a buck-jumper had broken Ted Miller's back; and how, before his death, which ensued in a matter of hours, he had directed her to write to his family, and also—but separately—to "his greatest friend."

The fire dulled down, the candles shortened, and in their light Miss Anstruther sat in her dazzling ball-dress, her face as grey as its satin sheen. Her rounded arms were more florid than her face. She moaned a little to herself—she could not cry.

At last she stirred herself. Her limbs were stiff. As she crossed the room, she saw herself from head to foot in her pier-glass—with all her grace of form and motion dead and stiff within her dress. She saw herself thus, but at the time with senseless eyes; the sight first came back to her when she next used that mirror. She was going to a certain drawer; she unlocked it, and drew it out bodily; she carried it to the table where the candles were slowly burning down. The drawer was filled with Miller's letters.

"His greatest friend!" They had been merely friends from the day they parted. He had nothing. Out there he had found fortune but a little less inaccessible than at

home; he had written her no words of love, for how could there be any hope for them? She had plenty of money, but that was all the more reason why he must have some. His letters were not vulgarised by a single passionate, or sentimental, or high-flown passage. They were the letters of an honest friend; they were the letters of a good soldier—on the losing side, but fighting, not talking about fighting—talking, indeed, of quite other matters. And because these letters had been just what they were, Ted Miller himself had been to a frivolous girl, through frivolous years, what no one else had ever been—not even himself as she had known him best. Their friendship had been pure and strong and strengthening; their love idealised by improbability, and further by not being discussed, and yet further by being written "friendship." His tone to her had been: "Enjoy yourself. I want to hear you're having a good time. I am—there's nothing like work." She had answered, very truthfully, that she was doing so; and now he knew how! That was the bitterest thought: that the new knowledge was now his, and she, in his eyes, just what she had been in the eyes of the throng!

She sat down and read all his letters. The pure breath of heaven rose from every leaf. They did not touch her yet: her heart was numb. But the tones that had once come to her ears from every written word came no longer—the voice was silenced. She returned the letters to the drawer. She would keep them till her death.

And yet—would he like that?

She sat very still, trying to answer this question. The candles went out, but a leaden light had crept into the room through the blinds. She thought that he saw her, that he had seen her for weeks, that she had been grieving him the whole time, that she might please him now. There had been nothing morbid in Miller. He was the one man she had known who would wish her *not* to keep his letters.

She rose resolutely from her chair, and with difficulty rekindled her fire; it ruined her elaborate dress, but she was glad never to wear this one again. It did not seem to her that she was about to do anything cruel or unnatural. She was going to do violence to her own feelings only. It would please the strong soul of Miller that she was not going to keep his letters, to read them in her better moods, and less

and less as the years went on. For her own part, she felt she would like to have them a little longer. It was a subtle sense of sacrifice for Miller's sake—her first—which nerved her to burn his letters. Overstrung as she was, she burnt them every one, and without a tear.

A half-leaf happened to escape. She picked it out of the fender when the rest were burnt black, and her heart was

beginning to ache for what she had done. She took it to the window, and read on the crisp, scorched paper the ordinary end of an ordinary letter—the end of all was, as ever: "Yours always, E. M."

Without a moment's warning, her tears rattled upon the hot paper; she pressed it passionately to her lips; she flung herself upon the bed in a paroxysm of helpless agony.

