

Irremediable

By Ella D'Arcy

A YOUNG man strolled along a country road one August evening after a long delicious day—a day of that blessed idleness the man of leisure never knows : one must be a bank clerk forty-nine weeks out of the fifty-two before one can really appreciate the exquisite enjoyment of doing nothing for twelve hours at a stretch. Willoughby had spent the morning lounging about a sunny rickyard ; then, when the heat grew unbearable, he had retreated to an orchard, where, lying on his back in the long cool grass, he had traced the pattern of the apple-leaves diapered above him upon the summer sky ; now that the heat of the day was over he had come to roam whither sweet fancy led him, to lean over gates, view the prospect and meditate upon the pleasures of a well-spent day. Five such days had already passed over his head, fifteen more remained to him. Then farewell to freedom and clean country air ! Back again to London and another year's toil.

He came to a gate on the right of the road. Behind it a foot-path meandered up over a glassy slope. The sheep nibbling on its summit cast long shadows down the hill almost to his feet. Road and field-path were equally new to him, but the latter offered greener attractions ; he vaulted lightly over the gate and had so

little idea he was taking thus the first step towards ruin that he began to whistle "White Wings" from pure joy of life.

The sheep stopped feeding and raised their heads to stare at him from pale-lashed eyes; first one and then another broke into a startled run, until there was a sudden woolly stampede of the entire flock. When Willoughby gained the ridge from which they had just scattered he came in sight of a woman sitting on a stile at the further end of the field. As he advanced towards her he saw that she was young and that she was not what is called "a lady"—of which he was glad: an earlier episode in his career having indissolubly associated in his mind ideas of feminine refinement with those of feminine treachery.

He thought it probable this girl would be willing to dispense with the formalities of an introduction and that he might venture with her on some pleasant foolish chat.

As she made no movement to let him pass he stood still, and, looking at her, began to smile.

She returned his gaze from unabashed dark eyes and then laughed, showing teeth white, sound, and smooth as split hazel-nuts.

"Do you wanter get over?" she remarked familiarly.

"I'm afraid I can't without disturbing you."

"Dontcher think you're much better where you are?" said the girl, on which Willoughby hazarded:

"You mean to say looking at you? Well, perhaps I am!"

The girl at this laughed again, but nevertheless dropped herself down into the further field; then, leaning her arms upon the cross-bar, she informed the young man: "No, I don't wanter spoil your walk. You were goin' p'raps ter Beacon Point? It's very pretty that wye."

"I was going nowhere in particular," he replied: "just exploring, so to speak. I'm a stranger in these parts."

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"How funny! Imer stranger here too. I only come down larse Friday to stye with a Naunter mine in Horton. Are you stying in Horton?"

Willoughby told her he was not in Orton, but at Povey Cross Farm out in the other direction.

"Oh, Mrs. Payne's, ain't it? I've heard aunt speak over. She takes summer boarders, don't chee? I egspec you come from London, heh?"

"And I expect you come from London too?" said Willoughby, recognising the familiar accent.

"You're as sharp as a needle," cried the girl with her unrestrained laugh; "so I do. I'm here for a hollerday 'cos I was so done up with the work and the hot weather. I don't look as though I'd bin ill, do I? But I was, though: for it was just stiffin' hot up in our workrooms all larse month, an' tailorin's awful hard work at the bester times."

Willoughby felt a sudden accession of interest in her. Like many intelligent young men, he had dabbled a little in Socialism and at one time had wandered among the dispossessed; but since then, had caught up and held loosely the new doctrine—It is a good and fitting thing that woman also should earn her bread by the sweat of her brow. Always in reference to the woman who, fifteen months before, had treated him ill, he had said to himself that even the breaking of stones in the road should be considered a more feminine employment than the breaking of hearts.

He gave way therefore to a movement of friendliness for this working daughter of the people, and joined her on the other side of the stile in token of his approval. She, twisting round to face him, leaned now with her back against the bar, and the sunset fires lent a fleeting glory to her face. Perhaps she guessed how becoming the light was, for she took off her hat and let it touch to gold

gold the ends and fringes of her rough abundant hair. Thus and at this moment she made an agreeable picture, to which stood as background all the beautiful wooded Southshire view.

"You don't really mean to say you are a tailoress?" said Willoughby with a sort of eager compassion.

"I do, though! An' I've bin one ever since I was fourteen. Look at my fingers if you don't b'lieve me."

She put out her right hand, and he took hold of it, as he was expected to do. The finger-ends were frayed and blackened by needle-pricks, but the hand itself was plump, moist, and not unshapely. She meanwhile examined Willoughby's fingers enclosing hers.

"It's easy ter see you've never done no work!" she said, half admiring, half envious. "I s'pose you're a tip-top swell, ain't you?"

"Oh, yes! I'm a tremendous swell indeed!" said Willoughby ironically. He thought of his hundred and thirty pounds' salary; and he mentioned his position in the British and Colonial Banking house, without shedding much illumination on her mind; for she insisted:

"Well, anyhow, you're a gentleman. I've often wished I was a lady. It must be so nice ter wear fine clo'es an' never have ter do any work all day long."

Willoughby thought it innocent of the girl to say this; it reminded him of his own notion as a child—that kings and queens put on their crowns the first thing on rising in the morning. His cordiality rose another degree.

"If being a gentleman means having nothing to do," said he, smiling, "I can certainly lay no claim to the title. Life isn't all beer and skittles with me, any more than it is with you. Which is the better reason for enjoying the present moment, don't you think?"

think? Suppose, now, like a kind little girl, you were to show me the way to Beacon Point, which you say is so pretty?"

She required no further persuasion. As he walked beside her through the upland fields where the dusk was beginning to fall, and the white evening moths to emerge from their daytime hiding-places, she asked him many personal questions, most of which he thought fit to parry. Taking no offence thereat, she told him, instead, much concerning herself and her family. Thus he learned her name was Esther Stables, that she and her people lived Whitechapel way; that her father was seldom sober, and her mother always ill; and that the aunt with whom she was staying kept the post-office and general shop in Orton village. He learned, too, that Esther was discontented with life in general; that, though she hated being at home, she found the country dreadfully dull; and that, consequently, she was extremely glad to have made his acquaintance. But what he chiefly realised when they parted was that he had spent a couple of pleasant hours talking nonsense with a girl who was natural, simple-minded, and entirely free from that repellently protective atmosphere with which a woman of the "classes" so carefully surrounds herself. He and Esther had "made friends" with the ease and rapidity of children before they have learned the dread meaning of "etiquette," and they said good-night, not without some talk of meeting each other again.

Obliged to breakfast at a quarter to eight in town, Willoughby was always luxuriously late when in the country, where he took his meals also in leisurely fashion, often reading from a book propped up on the table before him. But the morning after his meeting with Esther Stables found him less disposed to read than usual. Her image obtruded itself upon the printed page, and at length

length grew so importunate he came to the conclusion the only way to lay it was to confront it with the girl herself.

Wanting some tobacco, he saw a good reason for going into Orton. Esther had told him he could get tobacco and everything else at her aunt's. He found the post-office to be one of the first houses in the widely spaced village-street. In front of the cottage was a small garden ablaze with old-fashioned flowers; and in a larger garden at one side were apple-trees, raspberry and currant bushes, and six thatched beehives on a bench. The bowed windows of the little shop were partly screened by sunblinds; nevertheless the lower panes still displayed a heterogeneous collection of goods—lemons, hanks of yarn, white linen buttons upon blue cards, sugar cones, churchwarden pipes, and tobacco jars. A letter-box opened its narrow mouth low down in one wall, and over the door swung the sign, "Stamps and money-order office," in black letters on white enamelled iron.

The interior of the shop was cool and dark. A second glass-door at the back permitted Willoughby to see into a small sitting-room, and out again through a low and square-paned window to the sunny landscape beyond. Silhouetted against the light were the heads of two women: the rough young head of yesterday's Esther, the lean outline and bugled cap of Esther's aunt.

It was the latter who at the jingling of the door-bell rose from her work and came forward to serve the customer; but the girl, with much mute meaning in her eyes and a finger laid upon her smiling mouth, followed behind. Her aunt heard her footfall. "What do you want here, Esther?" she said with thin disapproval; "get back to your sewing."

Esther gave the young man a signal seen only by him and slipped out into the side-garden, where he found her when his purchases

purchases were made. She leaned over the privet-hedge to intercept him as he passed.

"Aunt's an awful ole maid," she remarked apologetically; "I b'lieve she'd never let me say a word to enny one if she could help it."

"So you got home all right last night?" Willoughby inquired; "what did your aunt say to you?"

"Oh, she arst me where I'd been, and I tolder a lotter lies!" Then, with woman's intuition, perceiving that this speech jarred, Esther made haste to add, "She's so dreadful hard on me! I dursn't tell her I'd been with a gentleman or she'd never have let me out alone again."

"And at present I suppose you'll be found somewhere about that same stile every evening?" said Willoughby foolishly, for he really did not much care whether he met her again or not. Now he was actually in her company he was surprised at himself for having given her a whole morning's thought; yet the eagerness of her answer flattered him, too.

"To-night I can't come, worse luck! It's Thursday, and the shops here close of a Thursday at five. I'll havter keep aunt company. But to-morrer?—I can be there to-morrer. You'll come, say?"

"Esther!" cried a vexed voice, and the precise, right-minded aunt emerged through the row of raspberry-bushes; "whatever are you thinking about, delayin' the gentleman in this fashion?" She was full of rustic and official civility for "the gentleman," but indignant with her niece. "I don't want none of your London manners down here," Willoughby heard her say as she marched the girl off.

He himself was not sorry to be released from Esther's too friendly eyes, and he spent an agreeable evening over a book, and this time managed to forget her completely.

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Though he remembered her first thing next morning, it was to smile wisely and determine he would not meet her again. Yet by dinner-time the day seemed long ; why, after all, should he not meet her ? By tea-time prudence triumphed anew—no, he would not go. Then he drank his tea hastily and set off for the stile.

Esther was waiting for him. Expectation had given an additional colour to her cheeks, and her red-brown hair showed here and there a beautiful glint of gold. He could not help admiring the vigorous way in which it waved and twisted, or the little curls which grew at the nape of her neck, tight and close as those of a young lamb's fleece. Her neck here was admirable, too, in its smooth creaminess ; and when her eyes lighted up with such evident pleasure at his coming, how avoid the conviction she was a good and nice girl after all ?

He proposed they should go down into the little copse on the right, where they would be less disturbed by the occasional passer-by. Here, seated on a felled tree-trunk, Willoughby began that bantering silly meaningless form of conversation known among the "classes" as flirting. He had but the wish to make himself agreeable, and to while away the time. Esther, however, misunderstood him.

Willoughby's hand lay palm downwards on his knee, and she noticing a ring which he wore on his little finger, took hold of it.

"What a funny ring!" she said ; "let's look?"

To disembarass himself of her touch he pulled the ring off and gave it her to examine.

"What's that ugly dark green stone?" she asked.

"It's called a sardonyx."

"What's it for?" she said, turning it about.

"It's a signet ring, to seal letters with."

"An'

"An' there's a sorter king's head scratched on it, an' some writin' too, only I can't make it out?"

"It isn't the head of a king, although it wears a crown," Willoughby explained, "but the head and bust of a Saracen against whom my ancestor of many hundred years ago went to fight in the Holy Land. And the words cut round it are the motto of our house, 'Vertue vaunceth,' which means virtue prevails."

Willoughby may have displayed some slight accession of dignity in giving this bit of family history, for Esther fell into uncontrolled laughter, at which he was much displeased. And when the girl made as though she would put the ring on her own finger, asking, "Shall I keep it?" he coloured up with sudden annoyance.

"It was only my fun!" said Esther hastily, and gave him the ring back, but his cordiality was gone. He felt no inclination to renew the idle-word pastime, said it was time to go back, and, swinging his cane vexedly, struck off the heads of the flowers and the weeds as he went. Esther walked by his side in complete silence, a phenomenon of which he presently became conscious. He felt rather ashamed of having shown temper.

"Well, here's your way home," said he with an effort at friendliness. "Good-bye, we've had a nice evening anyhow. It was pleasant down there in the woods, eh?"

He was astonished to see her eyes soften with tears, and to hear the real emotion in her voice as she answered, "It was just heaven down there with you until you turned so funny-like. What had I done to make you cross? Say you forgive me, do!"

"Silly child!" said Willoughby, completely mollified, "I'm not the least angry. There! good-bye!" and like a fool he kissed her.

He anathematised his folly in the white light of next morning,
and,

and, remembering the kiss he had given her, repented it very sincerely. He had an uncomfortable suspicion she had not received it in the same spirit in which it had been bestowed, but, attaching more serious meaning to it, would build expectations thereon which must be left unfulfilled. It were best indeed not to meet her again ; for he acknowledged to himself that, though he only half liked, and even slightly feared, her, there was a certain attraction about her—was it in her dark unflinching eyes or in her very red lips ?—which might lead him into greater follies still.

Thus it came about that for two successive evenings Esther waited for him in vain, and on the third evening he said to himself with a grudging relief that by this time she had probably transferred her affections to some one else.

It was Saturday, the second Saturday since he left town. He spent the day about the farm, contemplated the pigs, inspected the feeding of the stock, and assisted at the afternoon milking. Then at evening, with a refilled pipe, he went for a long lean over the west gate, while he traced fantastic pictures and wove romances in the glories of the sunset clouds.

He watched the colours glow from gold to scarlet, change to crimson, sink at last to sad purple reefs and isles, when the sudden consciousness of some one being near him made him turn round. There stood Esther, and her eyes were full of eagerness and anger.

“Why have you never been to the stile again ?” she asked him. “You promised to come faithful, and you never came. Why have you not kept your promise ? Why ?—why ?” she persisted, stamping her foot because Willoughby remained silent.

What could he say ! Tell her she had no business to follow him like this ; or own, what was, unfortunately, the truth, he was just a little glad to see her ?

“P’raps

"P'raps you don't care to see me?" she said. "Well, why did you kiss me, then?"

Why, indeed! thought Willoughby, marvelling at his own idiocy, and yet—such is the inconsistency of man—not wholly without the desire to kiss her again. And while he looked at her she suddenly flung herself down on the hedge-bank at his feet and burst into tears. She did not cover up her face, but simply pressed one cheek down upon the grass while the water poured from her eyes with astonishing abundance. Willoughby saw the dry earth turn dark and moist as it drank the tears in. This, his first experience of Esther's powers of weeping, distressed him horribly; never in his life before had he seen any one weep like that; he should not have believed such a thing possible, and he was alarmed, too, lest she should be noticed from the house. He opened the gate; "Esther!" he begged, "don't cry. Come out here, like a dear girl, and let us talk sensibly."

Because she stumbled, unable to see her way through wet eyes, he gave her his hand, and they found themselves in a field of corn, walking along the narrow grass-path that skirted it, in the shadow of the hedgerow.

"What is there to cry about because you have not seen me for two days?" he began; "why, Esther, we are only strangers, after all. When we have been at home a week or two we shall scarcely remember each other's names."

Esther sobbed at intervals, but her tears had ceased. "It's fine for you to talk of home," she said to this. "You've got something that is a home, I s'pose? But me! my home's like hell, with nothing but quarrellin' and cursin', and father who beats us whether sober or drunk. Yes!" she repeated shrewdly, seeing the lively disgust on Willoughby's face, "he beat me, all ill as I was, jus' before I come away. I could show you the bruises on

my

my arms still. And now to go back there after knowin' you! It'll be worse than ever. I can't endure it and I won't! I'll put an end to it or myself somehow, I swear!"

"But, my poor Esther, how can I help it, what can I do?" said Willoughby. He was greatly moved, full of wrath with her father, with all the world which makes women suffer. He had suffered himself at the hands of a woman, and severely, but this, instead of hardening his heart, had only rendered it the more supple. And yet he had a vivid perception of the peril in which he stood. An interior voice urged him to break away, to seek safety in flight even at the cost of appearing cruel or ridiculous; so, coming to a point in the field where an elm-bole jutted out across the path, he saw with relief he could now withdraw his hand from the girl's, since they must walk singly to skirt round it.

Esther took a step in advance, stopped and suddenly turned to face him; she held out her two hands and her face was very near his own.

"Don't you care for me one little bit?" she said wistfully, and surely sudden madness fell upon him. For he kissed her again, he kissed her many times, and pushed all thoughts of the consequences far from him.

But some of these consequences already called loudly to him as he and Esther reached the last gate on the road to Orton.

"You know I have only £130 a year?" he told her: "it's no very brilliant prospect for you to marry me on that."

For he had actually offered her marriage, although such conduct to the mediocre man must appear incredible or at least uncalled for. But to Willoughby it seemed the only course possible. How else justify his kisses, rescue her from her father's brutality, or bring back the smiles to her face?

As for Esther, sudden exultation had leaped in her heart;
then

then ere fifty seconds were gone by, she was certain she would never have consented to anything less.

"O! I'me used to managin'," she told him confidently, and mentally resolved to buy herself, so soon as she was married, a black feather boa, such as she had coveted last winter.

Willoughby spent the remaining days of his holiday in thinking out and planning with Esther the details of his return to London and her own, the secrecy to be observed, the necessary legal steps to be taken, and the quiet suburb in which they would set up housekeeping. And, so successfully did he carry out his arrangements, that within five weeks from the day on which he had first met Esther Stables he and she came out one morning from a church in Highbury husband and wife. It was a mellow September day, the streets were filled with sunshine, and Willoughby, in reckless high spirits, imagined he saw a reflection of his own gaiety on the indifferent faces of the passers-by. There being no one else to perform the office he congratulated himself very warmly, and Esther's frequent laughter filled in the pauses of the day.

Three months later Willoughby was dining with a friend, and the hour-hand of the clock nearing ten the host no longer resisted the guest's growing anxiety to be gone. He arose and exchanged with him good wishes and good-byes.

"Marriage is evidently a most successful institution," said he, half jesting, half sincere; "you almost make me inclined to go and get married myself. Confess now your thoughts have been at home the whole evening?"

Willoughby thus addressed turned red to the roots of his hair, but did not deny the soft impeachment.

The other laughed. "And very commendable they should be," he continued, "since you are scarcely, so to speak, out of your honeymoon."

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With a social smile on his lips Willoughby calculated a moment before replying, "I have been married exactly three months and three days ;" then, after a few words respecting their next meeting, the two shook hands and parted, the young host to finish the evening with books and pipe, the young husband to set out on a twenty minutes' walk to his home.

It was a cold clear December night following a day of rain. A touch of frost in the air had dried the pavements, and Willoughby's footfall ringing upon the stones re-echoed down the empty suburban street. Above his head was a dark remote sky thickly powdered with stars, and as he turned westward Alpherat hung for a moment "*comme le point sur un i*," over the slender spire of St. John's. But he was insensible to the worlds about him ; he was absorbed in his own thoughts, and these, as his friend had surmised, were entirely with his wife. For Esther's face was always before his eyes, her voice was always in his ears, she filled the universe for him ; yet only four months ago he had never seen her, had never heard her name. This was the curious part of it—here in December he found himself the husband of a girl who was completely dependent upon him not only for food, clothes, and lodging, but for her present happiness, her whole future life ; and last July he had been scarcely more than a boy himself, with no greater care on his mind than the pleasant difficulty of deciding where he should spend his annual three weeks' holiday.

But it is events, not months or years, which age. Willoughby, who was only twenty-six, remembered his youth as a sometime companion irrevocably lost to him ; its vague, delightful hopes were now crystallised into definite ties, and its happy irresponsibility displaced by a sense of care inseparable perhaps from the most fortunate of marriages.

As he reached the street in which he lodged his pace involuntarily

tarily slackened. While still some distance off his eye sought out and distinguished the windows of the room in which Esther awaited him. Through the broken slats of the Venetian blinds he could see the yellow gaslight within. The parlour beneath was in darkness; his landlady had evidently gone to bed, there being no light over the hall door either. In some apprehension he consulted his watch under the last street-lamp he passed, to find comfort in assuring himself it was only ten minutes after ten. He let himself in with his latch-key, hung up his hat and overcoat by the sense of touch, and, groping his way upstairs, opened the door of the first floor sitting-room.

At the table in the centre of the room sat his wife, leaning upon her elbows, her two hands thrust up into her ruffled hair; spread out before her was a crumpled yesterday's newspaper, and so interested was she to all appearance in its contents that she neither spoke nor looked up as Willoughby entered. Around her were the still uncleared tokens of her last meal: tea-slops, bread-crumbs, and an eggshell crushed to fragments upon a plate, which was one of those trifles that set Willoughby's teeth on edge—whenever his wife ate an egg she persisted in turning the egg-cup upside down upon the tablecloth, and pounding the shell to pieces in her plate with her spoon.

The room was repulsive in its disorder. The one lighted burner of the gaselier, turned too high, hissed up into a long tongue of flame. The fire smoked feebly under a newly administered shovelful of "slack," and a heap of ashes and cinders littered the grate. A pair of walking boots, caked in dry mud, lay on the hearthrug just where they had been thrown off. On the mantelpiece, amidst a dozen other articles which had no business there, was a bedroom-candlestick; and every single article of furniture stood crookedly out of its place.

Willoughby

Willoughby took in the whole intolerable picture, and yet spoke with kindness. "Well, Esther! I'm not so late, after all. I hope you did not feel the time dull by yourself?" Then he explained the reason of his absence. He had met a friend he had not seen for a couple of years, who had insisted on taking him home to dine.

His wife gave no sign of having heard him; she kept her eyes rivetted on the paper before her.

"You received my wire, of course," Willoughby went on, "and did not wait?"

Now she crushed the newspaper up with a passionate movement, and threw it from her. She raised her head, showing cheeks blazing with anger, and dark, sullen, unflinching eyes.

"I did wyte then!" she cried. "I wyted till near eight before I got your old telegraph! I s'pose that's what you call the manners of a 'gentleman,' to keep your wife mewed up here, while you go gallivantin' off with your fine friends?"

Whenever Esther was angry, which was often, she taunted Willoughby with being "a gentleman," although this was the precise point about him which at other times found most favour in her eyes. But to-night she was envenomed by the idea he had been enjoying himself without her, stung by fear lest he should have been in company with some other woman.

Willoughby, hearing the taunt, resigned himself to the inevitable. Nothing that he could do might now avert the breaking storm, all his words would only be twisted into fresh griefs. But sad experience had taught him that to take refuge in silence was more fatal still. When Esther was in such a mood as this it was best to supply the fire with fuel, that, through the very violence of the conflagration, it might the sooner burn itself out.

So he said what soothing things he could, and Esther caught them up, disfigured them, and flung them back at him with
scorn.

scorn. She reproached him with no longer caring for her ; she vituperated the conduct of his family in never taking the smallest notice of her marriage ; and she detailed the insolence of the landlady, who had told her that morning she pitied " poor Mr. Willoughby," and had refused to go out and buy herrings for Esther's early dinner.

Every affront or grievance, real or imaginary, since the dayshe and Willoughby had first met, she poured forth with a fluency due to frequent repetition, for, with the exception of to-day's added injuries, Willoughby had heard the whole litany many times before.

While she raged and he looked at her, he remembered he had once thought her pretty. He had seen beauty in her rough brown hair, her strong colouring, her full red mouth. He fell into musing . . . a woman may lack beauty, he told himself, and yet be loved. . . .

Meantime Esther reached white heats of passion, and the strain could no longer be sustained. She broke into sobs and began to shed tears with the facility peculiar to her. In a moment her face was all wet with the big drops which rolled down her cheeks faster and faster and fell with audible splashes on to the table, on to her lap, on to the floor. To this tearful abundance, formerly a surprising spectacle, Willoughby was now acclimatised ; but the remnant of chivalrous feeling not yet extinguished in his bosom forbade him to sit stolidly by while a woman wept, without seeking to console her. As on previous occasions, his peace-overtures were eventually accepted. Esther's tears gradually ceased to flow, she began to exhibit a sort of compunction, she wished to be forgiven, and, with the kiss of reconciliation, passed into a phase of demonstrative affection perhaps more trying to Willoughby's patience than all that had preceded it. " You don't

love me ?" she questioned, "I'm sure you don't love me ?" she reiterated ; and he asseverated that he loved her until he loathed himself. Then at last, only half satisfied, but wearied out with vexation—possibly, too, with a movement of pity at the sight of his haggard face—she consented to leave him ; only what was he going to do ? she asked suspiciously : write those rubbishing stories of his ? Well, he must promise not to stay up more than half an hour at the latest—only until he had smoked one pipe !

Willoughby promised, as he would have promised anything on earth to secure to himself a half-hour's peace and solitude. Esther groped for her slippers, which were kicked off under the table ; scratched four or five matches along the box and threw them away before she succeeded in lighting her candle ; set it down again to contemplate her tear-swollen reflection in the chimney-glass, and burst out laughing.

"What a fright I do look, to be sure !" she remarked complacently, and again thrust her two hands up through her disordered curls. Then, holding the candle at such an angle that the grease ran over on to the carpet, she gave Willoughby another vehement kiss and trailed out of the room with an ineffectual attempt to close the door behind her.

Willoughby got up to shut it himself, and wondered why it was that Esther never did any one mortal thing efficiently or well. Good God ! how irritable he felt ! It was impossible to write. He must find an outlet for his impatience, rend or mend something. He began to straighten the room, but a wave of disgust came over him before the task was fairly commenced. What was the use ? To-morrow all would be bad as ever. What was the use of doing anything ? He sat down by the table and leaned his head upon his hands.

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The past came back to him in pictures : his boyhood's past first of all. He saw again the old home, every inch of which was familiar to him as his own name ; he reconstructed in his thought all the old well-known furniture, and replaced it precisely as it had stood long ago. He passed again a childish finger over the rough surface of the faded Utrecht velvet chairs, and smelled again the strong fragrance of the white lilac-tree, blowing in through the open parlour-window. He savoured anew the pleasant mental atmosphere produced by the dainty neatness of cultured women, the companionship of a few good pictures, of a few good books. Yet this home had been broken up years ago, the dear familiar things had been scattered far and wide, never to find themselves under the same roof again ; and from those near relatives who still remained to him he lived now hopelessly estranged.

Then came the past of his first love-dream, when he worshipped at the feet of Nora Beresford, and, with the wholeheartedness of the true fanatic, clothed his idol with every imaginable attribute of virtue and tenderness. To this day there remained a secret shrine in his heart wherein the Lady of his young ideal was still enthroned, although it was long since he had come to perceive she had nothing whatever in common with the Nora of reality. For the real Nora he had no longer any sentiment : she had passed altogether out of his life and thoughts ; and yet, so permanent is all influence, whether good or evil, that the effect she wrought upon his character remained. He recognised to-night that her treatment of him in the past did not count for nothing among the various factors which had determined his fate.

Now the past of only last year returned, and, strangely enough, this seemed farther removed from him than all the rest. He had been particularly strong, well and happy this time last year. Nora was dismissed from his mind, and he had thrown all his energies
into

into his work. His tastes were sane and simple, and his dingy, furnished rooms had become through habit very pleasant to him. In being his own they were invested with a greater charm than another man's castle. Here he had smoked and studied, here he had made many a glorious voyage into the land of books. Many a home-coming, too, rose up before him out of the dark ungenial streets to a clean blazing fire, a neatly laid cloth, an evening of ideal enjoyment ; many a summer twilight when he mused at the open window, plunging his gaze deep into the recesses of his neighbour's lime-tree, where the unseen sparrows chattered with such unflagging gaiety.

He had always been given to much day-dreaming, and it was in the silence of his rooms of an evening that he turned his phantasmal adventures into stories for the magazines ; here had come to him many an editorial refusal, but, here, too, he had received the news of his first unexpected success. All his happiest memories were embalmed in those shabby, badly furnished rooms.

Now all was changed. Now might there be no longer any soft indulgence of the hour's mood. His rooms and everything he owned belonged now to Esther, too. She had objected to most of his photographs, and had removed them. She hated books, and were he ever so ill-advised as to open one in her presence, she immediately began to talk, no matter how silent or how sullen her previous mood had been. If he read aloud to her she either yawned despairingly, or was tickled into laughter where there was no reasonable cause. At first, Willoughby had tried to educate her and had gone hopefully to the task. It is so natural to think you may make what you will of the woman who loves you. But Esther had no wish to improve. She evinced all the self-satisfaction of an illiterate mind. To her husband's gentle admonitions she replied with brevity that she thought her way quite

quite as good as his ; or, if he didn't approve of her pronunciation, he might do the other thing, she was too old to go to school again. He gave up the attempt, and, with humiliation at his previous fauity, perceived that it was folly to expect a few weeks of his companionship could alter or pull up the impressions of years, or rather of generations.

Yet here he paused to admit a curious thing : it was not only Esther's bad habits which vexed him, but habits quite unblame-worthy in themselves, and which he never would have noticed in another, irritated him in her. He disliked her manner of standing, of walking, of sitting in a chair, of folding her hands. Like a lover he was conscious of her proximity without seeing her. Like a lover, too, his eyes followed her every movement, his ear noted every change in her voice. But, then, instead of being charmed by everything as the lover is, everything jarred upon him.

What was the meaning of this ? To-night the anomaly pressed upon him : he reviewed his position. Here was he quite a young man, just twenty-six years of age, married to Esther, and bound to live with her so long as life should last—twenty, forty, perhaps fifty years more. Every day of those years to be spent in her society ; he and she face to face, soul to soul ; they two alone amid all the whirling, busy, indifferent world. So near together in semblance, in truth so far apart as regards all that makes life dear.

Willoughby groaned. From the woman he did not love, whom he had never loved, he might not again go free ; so much he recognised. The feeling he had once entertained for Esther, strange compound of mistaken chivalry and flattered vanity, was long since extinct ; but what, then, was the sentiment with which she inspired him ? For he was not indifferent to her—no, never for one instant could he persuade himself he was indifferent, never for one instant could he banish her from his thoughts. His mind's eye followed

her

her during his hours of absence as pertinaciously as his bodily eye dwelt upon her actual presence. She was the principal object of the universe to him, the centre around which his wheel of life revolved with an appalling fidelity.

What did it mean? What could it mean? he asked himself with anguish.

And the sweat broke out upon his forehead and his hands grew cold, for on a sudden the truth lay there like a written word upon the tablecloth before him. This woman, whom he had taken to himself for better for worse, inspired him with a passion—intense indeed, all-masterful, soul-subduing as Love itself—. . . But when he understood the terror of his Hatred, he laid his head upon his arms and wept, not facile tears like Esther's, but tears wrung out from his agonising, unavailing regret.