

A Correspondence

By Netta Syrett

I

“ I THINK she is perfectly lovely,” Mrs. Yeo exclaimed, enthusiastically.

She made a slight indicative movement towards the far corner of the drawing-room, where the folds of a white dress and the feathery edges of a fan were just visible from her corner of the sofa.

“ Ah, I thought you would be surprised.”

Mrs. Lockyer spoke in the proprietary tone of one who has discovered some priceless treasure and for the first time displays it to the gaze of the multitude.

“ They are altogether an ideal couple, aren't they ? ” she continued. “ I always say *he* is quite ridiculously good-looking—*too* handsome for a mere man ! ”

“ They met in Rome, you say ? ”

“ Yes, quite lately ; only a few weeks ago, in fact, when the Armstrongs were travelling in Italy. He'd hardly known her a week before he proposed, and it's scarcely a fortnight now since the day they met—so her mother says. This is his last evening. He's going back to-morrow to Rome ; he has some work to finish there,

I understand

I understand. He's a sculptor, you know. Such a romantic occupation, isn't it?—and so *suitable*. He has such classical features himself—just like Apollo, or, well, *all* those Greeky-Roman people. To me he has the air of being the *least* little bit stand-off. What do you think? I daresay that's just my fancy though, for I hear he is quite charming, but alarmingly clever. He is more than ten years older than Miss Armstrong, they say, and *I* believe there's more difference than that even—don't you think so?" But Mrs. Yeo's gaze had turned in the direction of the white dress again.

"She is very lovely," she repeated, "but I don't think she seems quite happy."

The girl under discussion had risen from her seat and was standing at the corner of the mantelpiece, one hand resting on the low shelf. From where Mrs. Yeo was sitting she caught a glimpse of a very delicately tinted face; the light from a rose-shaded lamp above the girl's head fell softly on masses of rippling red-brown hair growing low on the forehead, and parted over the brows, Clytie fashion. Her long trailing gown fell in white folds to her feet.

Mrs. Yeo was young and imaginative. Her friend's information about the sculptor fiancé had doubtless something to do with the fancifulness of the notion, yet, as she looked at the girl, her mind was full of vague ideas of Galatea, the beautiful statue slowly awakening to this distressful life.

"Not happy?" echoed Mrs. Lockyer. "Oh, why not? She *ought* to be. It's a most desirable match in every way. Mr. Margrave is well connected and rich, I believe; and"—this in a slightly lower key—"between ourselves, the Armstrongs are not *particularly* well off. She's a very *quiet* girl, I think; not that I know much of her. She's so very young, you know, only just
out,

out, in fact. This is the first dinner they've given since her engagement, and——”

There was a sound of laughter and voices outside, and the usual little stir and flutter in the room as the men came in.

“Ah, he's speaking to her. How splendid they look together,” exclaimed Mrs. Yeo, who was taking more than her usual interest in the engagement. The girl looked up with a quick start as the door opened, and hastily withdrew her foot from the fender, as though she had been guilty of some impropriety. She straightened herself, and hurriedly smoothed her dress, while her hand tightened mechanically on the fan she was holding.

A close observer might have thought the movement almost a shrinking one, and in the little fleeting smile with which she greeted her lover's approach, there was perhaps as much nervousness as pleasure.

She looked very young when she raised her eyes, which were clear blue, and at first sight, singularly childlike. But their expression was puzzling; it almost seemed—and Mrs. Yeo was more interested than ever when she noticed this—as though a new nature was struggling in them tentatively, and in a half frightened way, for life and utterance. It was this uncertain air about the girl altogether, which Mrs. Yeo felt, and which appealed to her as pathetic. “She wants some one to be *very* kind to her just now,” thought the tender-hearted little lady, as she watched the girl's face.

The man lingered a few moments beside her, leaning over the back of her chair, but at the first soft notes of a song, he turned towards the piano, and in the girl's attitude there was a faint suggestion of relief, though her eyes followed him rather wistfully.

The singer was a slim girl, with a somewhat striking face,
and

and a cloud of dark wavy hair. She glanced up at Margrave with a smile of thanks, as he turned over a leaf for her, and when the song was ended he kept his place at her side. She did not move from the piano, but began to look over a pile of music as though searching for something.

There was a short silence.

"Cecily is lovelier than ever to-night," she observed, abruptly.

Margrave smiled and glanced in the direction she was looking.

"Yes," he assented. "That Greek dress of hers is quite an inspiration."

The girl—her name was Gretchen Verrol—bent to pick up a stray leaf before she replied. "Thank you ; don't trouble," she said ; then, "You are praising *me* unawares," she added.

"You designed it then ?"

"And more, I made it, with these my proper hands," with a little gesture.

"I honour you equally for your inventive and creative faculties," he returned laughingly.

After a moment, with a sudden change of tone, "Cecily is very fortunate in having you with her," he said. "You read with her, I think ? She is very young," and then he hesitated a little, "I have seen so little of her, and scarcely ever alone, but I fancy she needs——" he paused.

"She is beautiful enough to need nothing besides," Gretchen interrupted hastily. "Why don't you go and talk to her now ? She is by herself, and I'm not her governess quite, Mr. Margrave," she added.

A young man came up to the piano at the moment, and she held out a piece of music to him. "Here is a song I know you sing, Mr. Graham ! Shall I play it for you ?" she asked almost in the same breath.

Margrave

Margrave looked at her a moment with an expression which was at first perplexed, and also a trifle disconcerted before he obediently went back to Cecily.

II

Five years difference in the ages of two girls is not too much to admit the possibility of intimate friendship. Not that this was the term which could, with any appropriateness, describe the relation between Cecily and Gretchen Verrol, though they were constantly together, and though Gretchen, and all that she did, occupied, or at any rate till quite recently had occupied, nearly the whole of Cecily's mental horizon.

Gretchen Verrol was a distant cousin of Mrs. Armstrong, for whom circumstances had rendered it unavoidable to do something in the way of help.

Most fortunately, both for herself and for the Armstrongs, it happened that Gretchen was clever and accomplished—"the very companion we could have chosen for our dear Cecily," as her mother frequently observed. This being the case, matters were easily arranged, and for a year previous to Cecily's engagement, Miss Verrol had lived with the Armstrongs, "reading" with Cecily, helping her with her music, and generally "forming her taste," as Mrs. Armstrong again frequently, if somewhat vaguely, remarked.

Mrs. Armstrong was a slightly vague person altogether, but kindly-natured and easy-going. Her one positive emotion being admiration for her young cousin, who soon held a very important, if not the most important, position in the household.

Whether her engagement had done anything towards lessening the exalted opinion of Gretchen which Cecily shared with her mother was a doubtful question.

"Do

"Do you like that Miss Verrol?" some one asked her once rather dubiously, and Cecily looked at her interrogator in a startled, half-awed fashion.

"She is so clever, you know," she replied, irrelevantly as it seemed, glancing furtively behind her as she spoke.

Gretchen was still an object of as much wondering reverence to Cecily a year afterwards as she had been during the first week of their acquaintance, when Miss Verrol had already summed up her impressions of the latter, once and for all.

She practically knew Cecily, as she remarked to herself, after the first day, and at the end of the first week she proceeded to recapitulate and to get her by heart. An easy task! So easy that she had to sit and look at her with an air of critical wonder.

They were reading German. That is, Gretchen was. She had been pronouncing the words with great distinctness, and Cecily, with laborious effort after imitation, had made strange and weird sounds, unlike any language that was ever imagined, far less spoken. Presently Gretchen's voice stopped, and it was then that Cecily began to move restlessly, raising apprehensive eyes to those which her companion bent quietly upon her. The silence became a little oppressive; Cecily fidgeted, dropped her eyes, and began to pull the blotting-paper to pieces with nervous fingers. Gretchen laid a hand upon it, and quietly drew it away.

"It is no good for you to read this," said Miss Verrol at last, calmly.

"No," meekly assented Cecily.

"We've tried French—you don't seem to understand anything of that."

"No," she repeatedly hopelessly.

"Tell me—you don't really care for music, reading, poetry, pictures, do you?"

This was practically an assertion, though put in the form of a question. Cecily felt compelled to reply.

"No," she acknowledged again, faintly.

Gretchen continued to look at her.

"It is very curious," she remarked critically, as though she had come upon a totally new species and was interested.

Cecily suddenly dropped her fair head upon her arms, and burst into tears.

Miss Verrol waited silently till the storm was passed. There was a glass opposite, and she looked across at it as the girl raised her tear-stained face.

"It doesn't matter," she said in the same critical tone. "You are pretty enough to make it of no consequence. You even look pretty when you cry. Now, *I* look hideous."

This was the first and only spoken allusion to Cecily's mental deficiencies that Gretchen ever made. The reading and music practising went on regularly as usual, and Cecily still persevered in her frantic attempts at the German accent. If there was the slightest trace of weariness in Gretchen's tone as she corrected her for the fourth or fifth time in one word, it was so faint as to be only just appreciable, and when at the end of the hour Cecily stole an apprehensive glance at her face, it was always calm and imperturbable.

"Now we will have the duet," was what she usually said as she closed the book. Indeed, her patience during the hours devoted to "mental culture" was altogether admirable, and if signs of Cecily's lack of intelligence had been otherwise wanting, they would have been supplied by the fact that, while humbly recognising the goodness and wisdom of Gretchen, and striving earnestly to be worthy of it, she would yet have found it a relief if the latter had *sometimes* lost her temper.

This

This absence of impatience or reproach paralysed her. Once when Gretchen had been called away in the middle of the duet, she sat vacantly staring at the keys for a moment.

All at once, with a sudden frantic movement, she half rose from her seat at the piano, a look of positive terror in her eyes.

"If only she would say something—*anything!* I can't *breathe* when she looks at me," she panted breathlessly.

When Gretchen came back she was patiently practising a bar over and over again.

"Try it once more, Cecily," Gretchen said, gazing straight before her out of the window. "It isn't right."

Mrs. Armstrong found her cousin really invaluable. She was as clever with her fingers as with her brains, and when Cecily began to go out, she not only designed, but also made most of her charming gowns for evening wear.

She always helped her to dress for dances—dressed her, in fact—for Cecily generally stood quite passive to have her hair arranged, her flowers fastened in, or the folds of her gown artistically draped.

On these occasions Gretchen never failed to praise her beauty openly and with an air of impartial criticism, and then Cecily winced and trembled a little, but said nothing.

"I have a comfortable home, but I earn my living," wrote Gretchen to a friend, when she had been with the Armstrongs about three months.

It was with real concern that a day or two after her daughter's engagement had been finally arranged Mrs. Armstrong learnt that Gretchen was thinking of leaving her.

"Cecily will be broken-hearted," she exclaimed plaintively; "and she won't be married just yet, you know. Besides, why should you go at all? I shall want you more than ever then."

But Gretchen was firm.

“As long as I could be really of use to you, with Cecily, I did not feel myself dependent,” she explained. “But now it will be different. No, Cousin Mary, that is only your kindness. I should not be happy in staying on.”

And Cousin Mary, though demurring, felt it selfish to stand in the way of the girl's prospects, especially as an acquaintance of hers, who was about to sail for New Zealand and wanted a governess, was overjoyed at securing such a charming person as Miss Verrol for her two girls.

“But I'm sure I don't know how to tell Cecily,” she lamented again and again. “I don't know how she'll take it.”

Cecily took it with a start, and an expression not easy to read.

“But she's such a strange girl,” complained her mother, who was not given to analysis of character to any great extent.

III

Gretchen's departure had been finally arranged only the day before Margrave's return to Rome. He could hardly hope to finish the work he was engaged upon very speedily ; it would probably be at least six months before he met Cecily again, and his complaint of having seen very little of her during his brief visit was by no means unfounded. It was difficult to tell how deeply the girl felt his absence. Perhaps her manner was even quieter and more subdued than usual, but that was the only noticeable difference in her behaviour. She very rarely mentioned his name.

There was a letter lying beside her plate on the breakfast table the morning after her lover's departure, and Gretchen, glancing across from her opposite seat, saw her quickly cover it with her hand,

hand, which she withdrew, a second after, in confusion. Her mother laughed.

“You are not going to read it now, then, Cecie?”

“No, mother,” she replied, flushing hotly.

An hour or two later, Gretchen opened the door of Cecily’s bedroom. She was pre-occupied, and entered without knocking; indeed, she had taken the dress she had come for out of the wardrobe, and was leaving the room before she noticed that Cecily was there.

The girl sat in the corner of the window seat, trying to turn her head so as to hide that she was crying—an open letter lay on her lap.

Gretchen started. Instinctively her hand groped for the back of a chair she was passing; then she drew it away, and straightened herself.

“What is the matter, Cecily?” she asked—her voice sounded a little strained, but it was calm enough. “You have not”—she paused—“there is no bad news?”

Cecily’s low sobs choked her voice. There was time for Gretchen to glance at her own face in the glass and to turn back to the light, before she replied.

“N—no,” she said at last; “but——” Gretchen crossed to her side.

“Won’t you tell me?” she asked. There was a little tremble in her tone now. Cecily heard it, and looked up gratefully. Gretchen seemed sorry.

“I don’t like to,” she murmured. “You’ll say—oh, it’s too silly!” Her voice broke again in a half sob.

“Never mind. Tell me.”

“Only that—only—because—because I shall have to answer it.”

The confession broke from Cecily's lips hesitatingly, and then she laid one arm hopelessly against the window frame, and hid her wet eyes against it.

Gretchen did not speak for a minute.

"The letter, you mean?" she asked at length, quietly. "Well—there is nothing so dreadful about that, is there?"

"Oh, yes, there is—yes, there *is*—for *me!*" wailed Cecily. "You may read it." She held out the letter, looking up at Gretchen despairingly. "You'll see. He asks what I thought of some of those statues in Rome—and—and the pictures. And—I didn't think anything. Oh, Gretchen! I know I'm very stupid—but—I had no thoughts about them, except—I wondered why they kept broken statues in such grand places. But I can't tell him that, can I? because people, clever people, think they are beautiful—without noses—or anything. And all that he says about the scenery—and you know what my spelling is like—and oh, Gretchen! Don't—don't smile like that!"

Cecily shrank back into the corner of the window seat, and covered her face with both hands. Perhaps she had never made such a long speech before—but Gretchen had seemed sorry.

There was quite a long silence. The crisp paper crackled as Miss Verrol turned the sheets; still Cecily did not look up.

"Well, do you want me to answer it for you?" The question was accompanied by a short laugh.

The girl's hands dropped from her face in a second, and her eyes sought Gretchen's inquiringly—incredulously.

"Gretchen—do you mean it? Would you? Not really?"

"Where is that silk gauze of yours?" asked Gretchen, crossing the room and stooping over a drawer.

"In that box," replied Cecily, sighing—the chance of relief was gone then.

You

"You see," pursued Gretchen, still turning over things in the drawer, "it's not quite the same thing as doing your exercises."

"No," agreed Cecily, despondently. Then brightening, "But, Gretchen—if you would—you are so clever. You know all about those statues—and the pictures—and the palaces. You could write about them." She paused breathlessly.

"Oh, yes," replied Miss Verrol carelessly. "I dare say I could—I was considered good at composition—at school. Our relative positions would be somewhat reversed, wouldn't they? I should have to bring these exercises to you, for correction and amendment, and—naturally you are so much better up in the subject."

Another pause.

"No, I really don't think I should dare to let you see my work. There would be so many faults."

She had found the scarf now, and was busy smoothing out its creases.

"You have crushed this dreadfully," she said, reproachfully.

"Oh, you don't think it's important enough to talk about," cried Cecily desperately; "but I can *never* do it alone. Can't you help me? I shouldn't want to see the letters you wrote, you know," she assured her eagerly. "So——"

Gretchen stopped short in the midst of shaking out the filmy folds.

"Not—you mean you would not want to see the letters I wrote to *your* lover?" she asked incredulously, fixing her eyes on the girl's face.

Cecily blushed painfully.

"No," she hesitated. "Not if you'd rather not. I know it is easier to do everything—if—if people are not watching you. And you will do all the important part, about the statues, beauti-

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fully,

fully, Gretchen. The only thing I could do would be to—to send my love.” Her voice faltered. “Perhaps you wouldn’t mind always putting that in, at the end, after the other things, you know?”

“Yes. What am I to say?”

“Just say”—the colour flamed in her cheeks again—“I love you, Noel.” She turned her head away sharply, and looked out of the window.

Gretchen still stood beside her, motionless.

“Cecily,” she said at last, in a low voice, “think—do you *really* want me to do this? I won’t if you——”

“Yes,” she answered brokenly. “If I could do it myself, of course I—I would rather—but I *can’t*! And after all, it won’t matter so very much, will it, Gretchen?” She turned to her like a child, imploring to be reassured by some wise and grown-up person. “I shall *mean* all the things you say.”

“What about the handwriting?” asked Gretchen. Her voice sounded flat and wearied. “Has he seen yours?”

“No. I have never written to him. There has been no occasion, you see, and he doesn’t know yours.”

Miss Verrol went to the door. As she reached it, she paused with her hand on the lock.

“Remember, you wish it,” she said, turning her head over her shoulder to look at Cecily.

The girl rose from the window seat and came towards her. Her soft hair was all disordered, her cheeks were flushed, and her pretty blue eyes were still wet.

“Yes; you are very good to me, Gretchen,” she began timidly, putting out her arms. But Gretchen shrank away hastily. “Mind—you will crumple this again,” she said.

Thus

IV

Thus it happened that regularly every week a letter went to Rome, beginning, at Cecily's request (her own original contribution), "My dearest Noel," and ending with "your very loving Cecily." The girl who wrote the letters sat up far into the night. Not that she was writing all the time. She read and re-read sheets of close writing on thin foreign paper. Every time she came to an endearing word her colour came and went, and she drew in her breath quickly. To be accurate, the words of love were not many. The letters were perhaps a trifle wanting in colour for a lover. They were the letters of a clever, cultivated man, a little cold by nature. Perhaps *too* highly polished. But the reader did not criticise. She changed colour when she read "my love;" she smiled triumphantly when he said how it gratified him to know that in their tastes and feelings they were so fully in sympathy. He had not been quite sure of this, he wrote—she had been so silent, so shy—and he had had to learn from her letters that he should have a wife as clever as she was beautiful. Once when she read words to this effect, Gretchen crumpled the paper fiercely in her hand, and sprang to her feet. With a smile of self-mockery, she went to the glass and deliberately studied herself. It reflected a little thin figure, with large, glittering eyes, irregular features, and a mass of rough, wavy hair. A somewhat striking apparition—picturesque, perhaps. But beautiful? A vision of Cecily's stately white loveliness swam before her eyes, and she turned away impatiently.

But the letter must be answered, and she sat down to her weekly task—a torture which she would not now forego if Cecily begged it of her on her bended knees.

She

She knew that Cecily already repented of her request. Every time she handed Gretchen a letter from her lover, it was with a more reluctant action, a more wistful and appealing look.

She saw, but would not heed. Cecily had decided—the act was hers—let her abide by it!

In the meantime, every week she could write, with white lips and shaking hand, “I love you, Noel.” Had not Cecily herself wished it?

“Madness! Of course, I know that,” she thought; “but if I like to be mad just once before I go away to live out my dull, highly respectable life, who is there to hinder me? It’s an inexpensive luxury. She’ll tell him, of course, when they’re married—though there’ll be no occasion; he’ll find it out quickly enough.” She smiled scornfully. “But what does that matter? I shall be thousands of miles away by that time. I shall never know how he takes it, or what he thinks.” And then she sealed the letter.

Even then, though it was early morning, she sat a long time at the table, quite still, her face buried in her hands. When she looked up, it was drawn and haggard.

“And I’ve come to be a thing like this,” she whispered, with a slow self-scorn, “about a man who has forgotten my existence. And—I am Gretchen Verrol!”

V

As time went on, drawing nearer to the expiration of the three months before her cousin’s departure, Mrs. Armstrong’s lamentations became more and more frequent.

“Cecily, poor child, feels it dreadfully,” she repeated. “She
is

is really getting quite thin, and I think she looks ill, though her father says it's like my fidgetiness! But I don't care; she shall take a tonic in spite of what he says. I don't like the look of her at all sometimes. She has such a—I hardly know how to explain what I mean—such a curious, frightened expression. Have you noticed it? You know, Gretchen" (confidentially), "in spite of a mother's natural feelings, and all that, I shall be glad to have her married. For my part, I don't approve of long engagements, but her father is so obstinate. The child feels unsettled, so of course she's miserable. I expect she misses Noel too, don't you? But she says so little, I hardly know *what* to think."

There was no doubt that Cecily was growing thin. Her eyes were unnaturally large and bright; they had a wistful, troubled look, and lately she had taken to starting nervously when any one spoke suddenly to her. Her mother talked of taking her away somewhere for change of air, as soon as Miss Verrol had gone.

"And I hope the voyage will do you good, too," she added, looking at Gretchen critically. "Do you know you are looking quite ill? Bless these young people, there's always something the matter with them now. I'm sure there never used to be, in *my* young days."

The last day at the Armstrongs, after all her boxes were ready, Gretchen spent in paying farewell calls.

It was quite late in the afternoon before, the last good-bye said, and the last polite good wish for her happiness expressed, she found herself once more in front of the house she was so soon to leave. It was some moments before the door was opened in answer to her ring, and she stood on the top of the flight of steps and looked drearily up and down the street. It was a wet night—the pavements were all shining with rain, the gas lamps were reflected waveringly in the puddles on the road. Only one person was in
sight

sight—a girl in a long shiny waterproof, picking her way carefully through the mud from one pavement to the other. The rain dripped steadily, drearily from the square portico overhead.

Gretchen shivered as she looked.

The door was opened and she stepped into the dazzle of the brightly lighted hall, and began to take off her wet cloak. When the bright mist cleared, she saw that there was a portmanteau on the oak chest against the wall; a bundle of rugs lay beside it; from the drawing-room came a distant murmur of voices.

“Has any one come, then, Price?” asked Gretchen, stopping at the last button of her waterproof.

“Yes, miss; Mr. Margrave. He came unexpected, about two hours ago. I don’t know why James hasn’t taken up his things, I’m sure. I’ve told him to, times enough.” Gretchen put her cloak into the maid’s hands and turned to the stairs.

“Will you have some tea, miss?”

“No, thank you,” she answered quietly.

Upstairs, the door of Cecily’s room stood half-open. She was dressed for dinner already, and she stood before the fire, the tips of her fingers touching the mantelpiece, her forehead resting upon them.

Gretchen hesitated a moment, then went in. “This is a delightful surprise for you, Cecily, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Cecily starting. She had raised her head quickly when she heard Gretchen’s step, but she did not turn round.

Gretchen stood looking at her with an indescribable expression.

“Why did he come?” she asked after a moment.

“He has been working too hard. The doctor said he was to rest a little, and take a holiday. So he made up his mind suddenly to come and see us. He wrote, but the letter hasn’t
come

come yet. We got a telegram just after you went out, about half-an-hour before he came."

Something in her voice, though she had not listened to what she said, struck Gretchen as strange.

In spite of herself. "You don't seem very glad, Cecily? You don't speak quite in the style of the orthodox engaged young lady," she said, laughing a little as she drew nearer the fire.

"I am *not* engaged," murmured Cecily.

"*What!*" Gretchen put her hand on the corner of the mantelpiece to steady herself. "What are you saying? What do you mean?"

Cecily turned a pair of frightened eyes towards her. Gretchen was going to be angry. "I—I have broken it off," she whispered in a scared way.

"Since when?"

"Since he came here this afternoon."

Gretchen broke into a shrill laugh. "What a charming reception!" she cried.

Then she recovered herself. "Tell me about it!" she exclaimed peremptorily.

Cecily glanced round the room despairingly, then at Gretchen, who had taken a low chair by the fire and was waiting with a pale face and that patient air she knew so well. There was no escape. "May I shut the door?" she said meekly crossing the room, her white dress trailing, a tall stately figure in spite of her girlishness.

She came back to her place, but did not speak.

"Well?" said Gretchen.

"I don't know what you want me to tell you."

"Why you broke it off."

There was another long pause, then Cecily began to speak low and rapidly.

"I shall

"I shall never make you understand," she cried hopelessly. "I didn't mean to do it, to-day. I—I didn't even know that I had made up my mind to do it at all—till just as I was going into the drawing-room to see him. Then I seemed to see that it was all no use." Her voice sank to a whisper; she was trembling from head to foot.

"You musn't cry. You have to go down, remember," Gretchen observed in even tones.

Cecily drew herself up, "What more shall I tell you?" she cried passionately.

Gretchen had never heard this tone from her before; it startled her. She too rose, and they stood facing one another.

"Why do you ask me?" panted Cecily. "You know—but if you like I will tell you. I don't mind now. Nothing matters now. I knew almost from the first that I could not marry him. He is so clever. And I—every moment I was afraid he would ask me something I didn't know. I didn't understand the way he talked. I didn't understand half of what he said to me. I should *never* have understood it;" she wailed, "I was always afraid when he came to talk to me, and yet when he was away——" She checked herself. All the passion had died out of her tone now. "If I hadn't known it before, his letters would have shown me. Oh, I did very wrong in asking you to write, Gretchen. I knew it, the first time he answered *your* letter, and praised what he thought I'd said."

Gretchen suddenly caught her breath. "You never——" she began.

"No, I was afraid to ask you not to go on with it when you'd been so kind, and taken so much trouble," Cecily said. "I see myself very plainly to-night. Just as though I was some one else—I see that besides—other things—I am a coward."

Gretchen

Gretchen was silent.

"He would not listen at first." It seemed that having begun her confession she *must* speak now, though the words came falteringly from her trembling lips. "He said he didn't understand—he said there was no reason—I was playing with him. He spoke of my letters." She paused.

"Well?" gasped Gretchen breathlessly.

"Then I thought at any rate I would not deceive him any longer—it was no good—so I told him you wrote them. . . . Gretchen!—*don't!* you—you frighten me!" she whispered hoarsely.

Gretchen had seized her by the wrist. Her eyes were burning in a face as white as death; they seemed to scorch the girl cowering down before her.

"*You little fool!*" she exclaimed, her hands dropping heavily at her sides. Each word stung like the sharp point of an icicle.

Cecily staggered back as though she had been struck.

It was out at last! This was what Gretchen had been feeling about her every minute for a whole year. The words expressed her whole attitude towards her; it was what Cecily had all the time dumbly wished, yet dreaded to hear her say. It was almost a relief—but she was dazed and confused—she did not yet understand what had forced the words, what had impelled Gretchen, at last, to give her spoken verdict. She still gazed at her bewildered, hopeless.

"What did he think of me?" inquired Gretchen mockingly. Her tone was so careless and airy that Cecily half doubted for the moment whether she could have said those words in *that voice* a second before—then she looked again at her face, and knew that her ears had not deceived her.

She stood for a second with parted lips, and then a great fear crept up into her eyes, as she covered her face with both hands.

"Forgive

"Forgive me, Gretchen!" she murmured. "You—you—know how stupid I am."

It seemed a long time before Gretchen spoke. "I shall not come down to-night," she answered calmly. "It might complicate matters perhaps. Say I have a headache, please. I shall arrange to go by the first train to-morrow. If you think you can invent any reason for this to Cousin Mary, it might be just as well. If not—it doesn't matter much."

Cecily stood motionless till the door had opened, closed again, and the room was empty.

Then with a helpless movement, she sank down on the floor before the fire, her fair head buried in the cushions of the easy chair, to stifle her sobs.

"I can't think about Gretchen. I can't think about any one but him," she whispered to herself brokenly. "What shall I do? I didn't make myself. It isn't fair. I should have been wretched if I'd ever been his wife. He would have been ashamed of me. And yet—yet!"

Presently she rose wearily; she poured out water and bathed her eyes, and then arranged her hair carefully before the glass.

In a few minutes, except that she was terribly pale, all traces of violent grief had vanished.

Yet to herself she looked so strange that she shuddered to see her own reflection in the glass, there was something about it that was so changed.

When she turned away, it seemed as though a mask had fallen upon a trembling living face. The gong sounded, and she went quietly downstairs; it was not till the next morning that her mother knew that the engagement was at an end.

* * * * *

Mrs. Yeo had come up to town from her country house, on her

her usual spring visit, which was always devoted to shopping and incidental frivolities. She was at the theatre with her husband one evening. The house was full, and between the acts she leant forward on the red velvet cushion before her seat in the dress circle and inspected the stalls with a view to seeing how the hair was being worn this season, and whether the sleeves in the new dinner-dress she had ordered were *too* outrageous. The buzz of talk and the tuneful wail of the violins fell pleasantly on her ears, as she scanned the rows of backs for a possible acquaintance.

"There's a beautiful woman. In the second box—look," her husband turned to her to say, lowering his glasses. "Do you see? In white—next to a good-looking fellow with a priggish nose."

"Why, it's Mrs. Margrave!" she exclaimed in surprise, after a moment's scrutiny. "Yes, isn't she *lovely*? And—yes, that wretched woman's there too," she added with a change of tone.

"Mrs. Margrave?" he repeated.

"Yes. You know, Jim. Cecily Armstrong. We dined at the Armstrongs' once, two or three years ago, don't you remember? I thought her beautiful then. Fancy seeing her here to-night. It must be quite two years since we met her. I wonder if she would recognise me?"

"She married that fellow, then? I had some idea it was all off?"

"So it was for a time. There was some mysterious fuss, don't you remember? But Mrs. Armstrong worked it. Cecily always did what she was told. I don't believe the poor child was even consulted. Look!" she broke off to exclaim indignantly. "He isn't paying her the smallest attention. He talks all the time to that horrid Miss Verrol. I *always* disliked her."

Mrs. Margrave was leaning back listlessly in her chair. Her fan

fan lay upon her lap. She was apparently gazing straight before her, though her masses of rippling hair partly concealed her face from the Yeos.

“Who is she?”

“Why, you remember. That Miss Verrol who used to be Cecily’s companion.”

“I thought she went to America, or New Zealand, or somewhere?”

“So she did, but Lady Fairfield had to come home when her father died, you know, and she brought Miss Verrol with her. I believe she’s living in town with them now as governess, or secretary, or something; but she’s always at the Margraves’, I hear.” Mrs. Yeo gave vent to an untranslatable little exclamation of disgust.

“But why?” asked her husband. He alluded to the ejaculation.

“My dear Jim! Can’t you *see*? Look at them!”

The lights were lowered at the moment, and the curtain rose on the last act.

When it was over, and Mrs. Yeo had collected her wraps, she turned to glance once more at the Margraves’ box, but it was empty.

Down in the brightly lighted vestibule, however, when at length they reached it, she saw Cecily again.

She was standing a little out of the crush, beside one of the great doors. Her husband was wrapping a white cloak round Miss Verrol. She said something to him, with an upward glance as he did so, and they both laughed. Cecily, who stood patiently waiting at her side, shivered a little at the moment, yet Mrs. Yeo fancied she did not feel the cold. As she passed her in the doorway, their eyes met.

For a moment there was no recognition in the long wistful gaze which Cecily unconsciously fixed upon her ; then, all at once, she bent her head and smiled.

The crowd swept them apart, and in a few minutes Mrs. Yeo was being whirled towards the Métropole in a hansom.

“ You’re very quiet,” her husband remarked presently. “ Didn’t you enjoy the play ? ”

She put her hand on his, impulsively, and, as she turned to him, he saw there were tears in her eyes.

“ You didn’t notice her face, Jim, as we passed ? I did. I shall never forget it. Poor girl ! Poor child ! ”