|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| XXVII“What is the matter with you?” asked Arobin that evening. “I never found you in such a happy mood.” Edna was tired by that time and was reclining on the lounge before the fire.“Don’t you know the weather prophet has told us we shall see the sun pretty soon?”“Well, that ought to be reason enough,” he acquiesced. “You wouldn’t give me another if I sat here all night imploring you.” He sat close to her on a low tabouret, and as he spoke his fingers lightly touched the hair that fell a little over her forehead. She liked the touch of his fingers through her hair and closed her eyes sensitively.“One of these days,” she said, “I’m going to pull myself together for a while and think—try to determine what character of a woman I am; for, candidly, I don’t know. By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex. But some way I can’t convince myself that I am. I must think about it.”“Don’t. What’s the use? Why should you bother thinking about it when I can tell you what manner of woman you are.” His fingers strayed occasionally down to her warm, smooth cheeks and firm chin, which was growing a little full and double.“Oh, yes! You will tell me that I am adorable; everything that is captivating. Spare yourself the effort.”“No; I shan’t tell you anything of the sort, though I shouldn’t be lying if I did.”“Do you know Mademoiselle Reisz?” she asked irrelevantly.“The pianist? I know her by sight. I’ve heard her play.”“She says queer things sometimes in a bantering way that you don’t notice at the time and you find yourself thinking about afterward.”“For instance?”“Well, for instance, when I left her to-day, she put her arms around me and felt my shoulder blades, to see if my wings were strong, she said. ‘The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth.’ “Whither would you soar?”“I’m not thinking of any extraordinary flights. I only half comprehend her.”“I’ve heard she’s partially demented,” said Arobin.“She seems to me wonderfully sane,” Edna replied.“I’m told she’s extremely disagreeable and unpleasant. Why have you introduced her at a moment when I desired to talk of you?”“Oh! talk of me if you like,” cried Edna, clasping her hands beneath her head; “but let me think of something else while you do.”“I’m jealous of your thoughts tonight. They’re making you a little kinder than usual; but some way I feel as if they were wandering, as if they were not here with me.” She only looked at him and smiled. His eyes were very near. He leaned upon the lounge with an arm extended across her, while the other hand still rested upon her hair. They continued silently to look into each other’s eyes. When he leaned forward and kissed her, she clasped his head, holding his lips to hers.It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire.XXVIIIEdna cried a little that night after Arobin left her. It was only one phase of the multitudinous emotions which had assailed her. There was with her an overwhelming feeling of irresponsibility. There was the shock of the unexpected and the unaccustomed. There was her husband’s reproach looking at her from the external things around her which he had provided for her external existence. There was Robert’s reproach making itself felt by a quicker, fiercer, more overpowering love, which had awakened within her toward him. Above all, there was understanding. She felt as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to took upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality. But among the conflicting sensations which assailed her, there was neither shame nor remorse. There was a dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her, because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips.XXIXWithout even waiting for an answer from her husband regarding his opinion or wishes in the matter, Edna hastened her preparations for quitting her home on Esplanade Street and moving into the little house around the block. A feverish anxiety attended her every action in that direction. There was no moment of deliberation, no interval of repose between the thought and its fulfillment. Early upon the morning following those hours passed in Arobin’s society, Edna set about securing her new abode and hurrying her arrangements for occupying it. Within the precincts of her home she felt like one who has entered and lingered within the portals of some forbidden temple in which a thousand muffled voices bade her begone.Whatever was her own in the house, everything which she had acquired aside from her husband’s bounty, she caused to be transported to the other house, supplying simple and meager deficiencies from her own resources.Arobin found her with rolled sleeves, working in company with the housemaid when he looked in during the afternoon. She was splendid and robust and had never appeared handsomer than in the old blue gown, with a red silk handkerchief knotted at random around her head to protect her hair from the dust. She was mounted upon a high stepladder, unhooking a picture from the wall when he entered. He had found the front door open and had followed his ring by walking in unceremoniously.“Come down!” he said. “Do you want to kill yourself?” She greeted him with affected carelessness and appeared absorbed in her occupation. If he had expected to find her languishing, reproachful, or indulging in sentimental tears, he must have been greatly surprised.He was no doubt prepared for any emergency, ready for any one of the foregoing attitudes, just as he bent himself easily and naturally to the situation which confronted him.“Please come down,” he insisted, holding the ladder and looking up at her.“No,” she answered; “Ellen is afraid to mount the ladder. Joe is working over at the ‘pigeon house’—that’s the name Ellen gives it, because it’s so small and looks like a pigeon house—and someone has to do this.”Arobin pulled off his coat and expressed himself ready and willing to tempt fate in her place. Ellen brought him one of her dust-caps, and went into contortions of mirth, which she found it impossible to control, when she saw him put it on before the mirror as grotesquely as he could. Edna herself could not refrain from smiling when she fastened it at his request. So it was he who in turn mounted the ladder, unhooking pictures and curtains, and dislodging ornaments as Edna directed. When he had finished he took off his dust-cap and went out to wash his hands.Edna was sitting on the tabouret, idly brushing the tips of a feather duster along the carpet when he came in again.“Is there anything more you will let me do?” he asked.“That is all,” she answered. “Ellen can manage the rest.” She kept the young woman occupied in the drawing-room, unwilling to be left alone with Arobin.“What about the dinner?” he asked; “the grand event, the *coup d’etat*?”“It will be day after to-morrow. Why do you call it the `*coup d’etat*?’ Oh! it will be very fine; all my best of everything—crystal, silver and old, Sevres, flowers, music, and champagne to swim in. I’ll let Leonce pay the bills. I wonder what he’ll say when he sees the bills.“And you ask me why I call it a *coup d’etat*?” Arobin had put on his coat, and he stood before her and asked if his cravat was plumb. She told him it was, looking no higher than the tip of his collar.“When do you go to the `pigeon house?’—with all due acknowledgment to Ellen.”“Day after to-morrow, after the dinner. I shall sleep there.”“Ellen, will you very kindly get me a glass of water?” asked Arobin.“The dust in the curtains, if you will pardon me for hinting such a thing, has parched my throat to a crisp.”“While Ellen gets the water,” said Edna, rising, “I will say good-by and let you go. I must get rid of this grime, and I have a million things to do and think of.”“When shall I see you?” asked Arobin, seeking to detain her, the maid having left the room.“At the dinner, of course. You are invited.”“Not before?—not to-night or to-morrow morning or tomorrow noon or night? or the day after morning or noon? Can’t you see yourself, without my telling you, what an eternity it is?”He had followed her into the hall and to the foot of the stairway, looking up at her as she mounted with her face half turned to him.“Not an instant sooner,” she said. But she laughed and looked at him with eyes that at once gave him courage to wait and made it torture to wait.XXXThough Edna had spoken of the dinner as a very grand affair, it was in truth a very small affair and very select, in so much as the guests invited were few and were selected with discrimination. She had counted upon an even dozen seating themselves at her round mahogany board, forgetting for the moment that Madame Ratignolle was to the last degree *souffrante* and unpresentable, and not foreseeing that Madame Lebrun would send a thousand regrets at the last moment. So there were only ten, after all, which made a cozy, comfortable number.There were Mr. and Mrs. Merriman, a pretty, vivacious little woman in the thirties; her husband, a jovial fellow, something of a shallow-pate, who laughed a good deal at other people’s witticisms, and had thereby made himself extremely popular. Mrs. Highcamp had accompanied them.Of course, there was Alcee Arobin; and Mademoiselle Reisz had consented to come. Edna had sent her a fresh bunch of violets with black lace trimmings for her hair. Monsieur Ratignolle brought himself and his wife’s excuses. Victor Lebrun, who happened to be in the city, bent upon relaxation, had accepted with alacrity. There was a Miss Mayblunt, no longer in her teens, who looked at the world through lorgnettes and with the keenest interest. It was thought and said that she was intellectual; it was suspected of her that she wrote under a *nom de guerre*. She had come with a gentleman by the name of Gouvernail, connected with one of the daily papers, of whom nothing special could be said, except that he was observant and seemed quiet and inoffensive. Edna herself made the tenth, and at half-past eight they seated themselves at table, Arobin and Monsieur Ratignolle on either side of their hostess.Mrs. Highcamp sat between Arobin and Victor Lebrun. Then came Mrs. Merriman, Mr. Gouvernail, Miss Mayblunt, Mr. Merriman, and Mademoiselle Reisz next to Monsieur Ratignolle. There was something extremely gorgeous about the appearance of the table, an effect of splendor conveyed by a cover of pale yellow satin under strips of lace-work. There were wax candles, in massive brass candelabra, burning softly under yellow silk shades; full, fragrant roses, yellow and red, abounded. There were silver and gold, as she had said there would be, and crystal which glittered like the gems which the women wore.The ordinary stiff dining chairs had been discarded for the occasion and replaced by the most commodious and luxurious which could be collected throughout the house. Mademoiselle Reisz, being exceedingly diminutive, was elevated upon cushions, as small children are sometimes hoisted at table upon bulky volumes.“Something new, Edna?” exclaimed Miss Mayblunt, with lorgnette directed toward a magnificent cluster of diamonds that sparkled, that almost sputtered, in Edna’s hair, just over the center of her forehead.“Quite new; `brand’ new, in fact; a present from my husband. It arrived this morning from New York. I may as well admit that this is my birthday, and that I am twenty-nine. In good time I expect you to drink my health. Meanwhile, I shall ask you to begin with this cocktail, composed—would you say ‘composed?’” with an appeal to Miss Mayblunt—”composed by my father in honor of Sister Janet’s wedding.”Before each guest stood a tiny glass that looked and sparkled like a garnet gem.“Then, all things considered,” spoke Arobin, “it might not be amiss to start out by drinking the Colonel’s health in the cocktail which he composed, on the birthday of the most charming of women—the daughter whom he invented.”Mr. Merriman’s laugh at this sally was such a genuine outburst and so contagious that it started the dinner with an agreeable swing that never slackened.Miss Mayblunt begged to be allowed to keep her cocktail untouched before her, just to look at. The color was marvelous! She could compare it to nothing she had ever seen, and the garnet lights which it emitted were unspeakably rare. She pronounced the Colonel an artist and stuck to it.Monsieur Ratignolle was prepared to take things seriously; the *mets*, the *entre-mets*, the service, the decorations, even the people. He looked up from his pompano and inquired of Arobin if he were related to the gentleman of that name who formed one of the firm of Laitner and Arobin,lawyers. The young man admitted that Laitner was a warm personal friend, who permitted Arobin’s name to decorate the firm’s letterheads and to appear upon a shingle that graced Perdido Street.“There are so many inquisitive people and institutions abounding,” said Arobin, “that one is really forced as a matter of convenience these days to assume the virtue of an occupation if he has it not.”Monsieur Ratignolle stared a little and turned to ask Mademoiselle Reisz if she considered the symphony concerts up to the standard which had been set the previous winter. Mademoiselle Reisz answered Monsieur Ratignolle in French, which Edna thought a little rude, under the circumstances, but characteristic. Mademoiselle had only disagreeable things to say of the symphony concerts, and insulting remarks to make of all the musicians of New Orleans, singly and collectively. All her interest seemed to be centered upon the delicacies placed before her.Mr. Merriman said that Mr. Arobin’s remark about inquisitive people reminded him of a man from Waco the other day at the St. Charles Hotel—but as Mr. Merriman’s stories were always lame and lacking point, his wife seldom permitted him to complete them. She interrupted him toask if he remembered the name of the author whose book she had bought the week before to send to a friend in Geneva. She was talking “books” with Mr. Gouvernail and trying to draw from him his opinion upon current literary topics. Her husband told the story of the Waco man privately to Miss Mayblunt, who pretended to be greatly amused and to think it extremely clever.Mrs. Highcamp hung with languid but unaffected interest upon the warm and impetuous volubility of her left-hand neighbor, Victor Lebrun. Her attention was never for a moment withdrawn from him after seating herself at table; and when he turned to Mrs. Merriman, who was prettier and more vivacious than Mrs. Highcamp, she waited with easy indifference for an opportunity to reclaim his attention. There was the occasional sound of music, of mandolins, sufficiently removed to be an agreeable accompaniment rather than an interruption to the conversation. Outside the soft, monotonous splash of a fountain could be heard; the sound penetrated into the room with the heavy odor of jessamine that came through the open windows.The golden shimmer of Edna’s satin gown spread in rich folds on either side of her. There was a soft fall of lace encircling her shoulders. It was the color of her skin, without the glow, the myriad living tints that one may sometimes discover in vibrant flesh. There was something in her attitude, in her whole appearance when she leaned her head against the high-backed chair and spread her arms, which suggested the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone.But as she sat there amid her guests, she felt the old ennui overtaking her; the hopelessness which so often assailed her, which came upon her like an obsession, like something extraneous, independent of volition. It was something which announced itself; a chill breath that seemed to issue from some vast cavern wherein discords waited. There came over her the acute longing which always summoned into her spiritual vision the presence of the beloved one, overpowering her at once with a sense of the unattainable.The moments glided on, while a feeling of good fellowship passed around the circle like a mystic cord, holding and binding these people together with jest and laughter. Monsieur Ratignolle was the first to break the pleasant charm. At ten o’clock he excused himself. Madame Ratignolle was waiting for him at home. She was *bien souffrante*, and she was filled with vague dread, which only her husband’s presence could allay.Mademoiselle Reisz arose with Monsieur Ratignolle, who offered to escort her to the car. She had eaten well; she had tasted the good, rich wines, and they must have turned her head, for she bowed pleasantly to all as she withdrew from table. She kissed Edna upon the shoulder, and whispered: “*Bonne nuit, ma reine; soyez sage*.” She had been a little bewildered upon rising, or rather, descending from her cushions, and Monsieur Ratignolle gallantly took her arm and led her away.Mrs. Highcamp was weaving a garland of roses, yellow and red. When she had finished the garland, she laid it lightly upon Victor’s black curls. He was reclining far back in the luxurious chair, holding a glass of champagne to the light.As if a magician’s wand had touched him, the garland of roses transformed him into a vision of Oriental beauty. His cheeks were the color of crushed grapes, and his dusky eyes glowed with a languishing fire.“*Sapristi*!” exclaimed Arobin.But Mrs. Highcamp had one more touch to add to the picture. She took from the back of her chair a white silken scarf, with which she had covered her shoulders in the early part of the evening. She draped it across the boy in graceful folds, and in a way to conceal his black, conventional evening dress. He did not seem to mind what she did to him, only smiled,showing a faint gleam of white teeth, while he continued to gaze with narrowing eyes at the light through his glass of champagne.“Oh! to be able to paint in color rather than in words!” exclaimed Miss Mayblunt, losing herself in a rhapsodic dream as she looked at him,“`There was a graven image of Desire Painted with red blood on a ground of gold.’” murmured Gouvernail, under his breath.The effect of the wine upon Victor was to change his accustomed volubility into silence. He seemed to have abandoned himself to a reverie, and to be seeing pleasing visions in the amber bead.“Sing,” entreated Mrs. Highcamp. “Won’t you sing to us?”“Let him alone,” said Arobin.“He’s posing,” offered Mr. Merriman; “let him have it out.”“I believe he’s paralyzed,” laughed Mrs. Merriman. And leaning over the youth’s chair, she took the glass from his hand and held it to his lips. He sipped the wine slowly, and when he had drained the glass she laid it upon the table and wiped his lips with her little filmy handkerchief.“Yes, I’ll sing for you,” he said, turning in his chair toward Mrs. Highcamp. He clasped his hands behind his head and looking up at the ceiling began to hum a little, trying his voice like a musician tuning an instrument. Then, looking at Edna, he began to sing:“Ah! *si tu savais*!”“Stop!” she cried, “don’t sing that. I don’t want you to sing it,” and she laid her glass so impetuously and blindly upon the table as to shatter it against a carafe. The wine spilled over Arobin’s legs and some of it trickled down upon Mrs. Highcamp’s black gauze gown. Victor had lost all idea of courtesy, or else he thought his hostess was not in earnest, for he laughed and went on:“Ah! *si tu savais**Ce que tes yeux me disent*”—“Oh! you mustn’t! you mustn’t,” exclaimed Edna, and pushing back herchair she got up, and going behind him placed her hand over his mouth.He kissed the soft palm that pressed upon his lips.“No, no, I won’t, Mrs. Pontellier. I didn’t know you meant it,” lookingup at her with caressing eyes. The touch of his lips was like a pleasing stingto her hand. She lifted the garland of roses from his head and flung itacross the room.“Come, Victor; you’ve posed long enough. Give Mrs. Highcamp herscarf.”Mrs. Highcamp undraped the scarf from about him with her own hands.Miss Mayblunt and Mr. Gouvernail suddenly conceived the notion that itwas time to say good night. And Mr. and Mrs. Merriman wondered howit could be so late.Before parting from Victor, Mrs. Highcamp invited him to call uponher daughter, who she knew would be charmed to meet him and talkFrench and sing French songs with him. Victor expressed his desire andintention to call upon Miss Highcamp at the first opportunity which presented itself. He asked if Arobin were going his way. Arobin was not.The mandolin players had long since stolen away. A profound stillnesshad fallen upon the broad, beautiful street. The voices of Edna’s disbanding guests jarred like a discordant note upon the quiet harmony of the night.XXXI“Well?” questioned Arobin, who had remained with Edna after the others had departed.“Well,” she reiterated, and stood up, stretching her arms, and feelingthe need to relax her muscles after having been so long seated.“What next?” he asked.“The servants are all gone. They left when the musicians did. I havedismissed them. The house has to be closed and locked, and I shall trotaround to the pigeon house, and shall send Celestine over in the morningto straighten things up.”He looked around and began to turn out some of the lights.“What about upstairs?” he inquired.“I think it is all right; but there may be a window or two unlatched. Wehad better look; you might take a candle and see. And bring me my wrapand hat on the foot of the bed in the middle room.”He went up with the light, and Edna began closing doors and windows.She hated to shut in the smoke and the fumes of the wine. Arobin foundher cape and hat, which he brought down and helped her to put on.When everything was secured and the lights put out, they left throughthe front door, Arobin locking it and taking the key, which he carried forEdna. He helped her down the steps.“Will you have a spray of jessamine?” he asked, breaking off a few blossoms as he passed.“No; I don’t want anything.”She seemed disheartened and had nothing to say. She took his arm, which he offered her, holding up the weight of her satin train with the other hand. She looked down, noticing the black line of his leg moving in and out so close to her against the yellow shimmer of her gown. There was the whistle of a railway train somewhere in the distance, and the midnight bells were ringing. They met no one in their short walk.The “pigeon house” stood behind a locked gate, and a shallow parterrethat had been somewhat neglected. There was a small front porch, uponwhich a long window and the front door opened. The door opened directly into the parlor; there was no side entry. Back in the yard was a room for servants, in which old Celestine had been ensconced.Edna had left a lamp burning low upon the table. She had succeeded inmaking the room look habitable and homelike. There were some bookson the table and a lounge near at hand. On the floor was a fresh matting,covered with a rug or two; and on the walls hung a few tasteful pictures.But the room was filled with flowers. These were a surprise to her. Arobinhad sent them and had had Celestine distribute them during Edna’s absence. Her bedroom was adjoining, and across a small passage were the diningroom and kitchen.Edna seated herself with every appearance of discomfort.“Are you tired?” he asked.“Yes, and chilled, and miserable. I feel as if I had been wound up to acertain pitch—too tight—and something inside of me had snapped.” Sherested her head against the table upon her bare arm.“You want to rest,” he said, “and to be quiet. I’ll go; I’ll leave you and letyou rest.”“Yes,” she replied.He stood up beside her and smoothed her hair with his soft, magnetic hand. His touch conveyed to her a certain physical comfort. She could have fallen quietly asleep there if he had continued to pass his hand over her hair. He brushed the hair upward from the nape of her neck.“I hope you will feel better and happier in the morning,” he said. “You have tried to do too much in the past few days. The dinner was the last straw; you might have dispensed with it.”“Yes,” she admitted; “it was stupid.”“No, it was delightful; but it has worn you out.” His hand had strayed to her beautiful shoulders, and he could feel the response of her flesh to his touch. He seated himself beside her and kissed her lightly upon the shoulder.“I thought you were going away,” she said, in an uneven voice.“I am, after I have said good night.”“Good night,” she murmured.He did not answer, except to continue to caress her. He did not say good night until she had become supple to his gentle, seductive entreaties. | *Si . . . disent*: if you knew/ What your eyes are telling me  |