|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| XXXIIWhen Mr. Pontellier learned of his wife’s intention to abandon her home and take up her residence elsewhere, he immediately wrote her a letter of unqualified disapproval and remonstrance. She had given reasons which he was unwilling to acknowledge as adequate. He hoped she had not acted upon her rash impulse; and he begged her to consider first, foremost, and above all else, what people would say. He was not dreaming of scandal when he uttered this warning; that was a thing which would never have entered into his mind to consider in connection with his wife’s name or his own. He was simply thinking of his financial integrity. It might get noised about that the Pontelliers had met with reverses and were forced to conduct their menage on a humbler scale than heretofore. It might do incalculable mischief to his business prospects.But remembering Edna’s whimsical turn of mind of late, and foreseeing that she had immediately acted upon her impetuous determination, he grasped the situation with his usual promptness and handled it with his well-known business tact and cleverness.The same mail which brought. to Edna his letter of disapproval carried instructions—the most minute instructions—to a well-known architect concerning the remodeling of his home, changes which he had long contemplated, and which he desired carried forward during his temporary absence.Expert and reliable packers and movers were engaged to convey thefurniture, carpets, pictures —everything movable, in short—to places ofsecurity. And in an incredibly short time the Pontellier house was turnedover to the artisans. There was to be an addition—a small snuggery; therewas to be frescoing, and hardwood flooring was to be put into such roomsas had not yet been subjected to this improvement.Furthermore, in one of the daily papers appeared a brief notice to theeffect that Mr. and Mrs. Pontellier were contemplating a summer sojournabroad, and that their handsome residence on Esplanade Street was undergoing sumptuous alterations and would not be ready for occupancy until their return. Mr. Pontellier had saved appearances!Edna admired the skill of his maneuver, and avoided any occasion to balkhis intentions. When the situation as set forth by Mr. Pontellier was acceptedand taken for granted, she was apparently satisfied that it should be so.The pigeon house pleased her. It at once assumed the intimate character of a home, while she herself invested it with a charm which it reflected like a warm glow. There was with her a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual.Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations addedto her strength and expansion as an individual. She began to look with herown eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life. Nolonger was she content to “feed upon opinion” when her own soul hadinvited her.After a little while, a few days, in fact, Edna went up and spent a weekwith her children in Iberville. They were delicious February days, with allthe summer’s promise hovering in the air.How glad she was to see the children! She wept for very pleasure whenshe felt their little arms clasping her; their hard, ruddy cheeks pressedagainst her own glowing cheeks. She looked into their faces with hungryeyes that could not be satisfied with looking. And what stories they had totell their mother! About the pigs, the cows, the mules! About riding to the mill behind Gluglu; fishing back in the lake with their Uncle Jasper; picking pecans with Lidie’s little black brood and hauling chips in their express wagon. It was a thousand times more fun to haul real chips for old lame Susie’s real fire than to drag painted blocks along the banquette on Esplanade Street!She went with them herself to see the pigs and the cows, to look at thedarkies laying the cane, to thrash the pecan trees, and catch fish in theback lake. She lived with them a whole week long, giving them all ofherself, and gathering and filling herself with their young existence. Theylistened, breathless, when she told them the house in Esplanade Street wascrowded with workmen, hammering, nailing, sawing, and filling the placewith clatter. They wanted. to know where their bed was; what had beendone with their rocking-horse; and where did Joe sleep, and where hadEllen gone, and the cook? But, above all, they were fired with a desire tosee the little house around the block. Was there any place to play? Werethere any boys next door? Raoul, with pessimistic foreboding, was convinced that there were only girls next door. Where would they sleep, andwhere would papa sleep? She told them the fairies would fix it all right.The old Madame was charmed with Edna’s visit and showered all manner of delicate attentions upon her. She was delighted to know that theEsplanade Street house was in a dismantled condition. It gave her thepromise and pretext to keep the children indefinitely.It was with a wrench and a pang that Edna left her children. She carriedaway with her the sound of their voices and the touch of their cheeks. Allalong the journey homeward their presence lingered with her like the memory of a delicious song. But by the time she had regained the city the song no longer echoed in her soul. She was again alone.XXXIIIIt happened sometimes when Edna went to see Mademoiselle Reisz thatthe little musician was absent, giving a lesson or making some small necessary household purchase. The key was always left in a secret hiding-place in the entry, which Edna knew. If Mademoiselle happened to beaway, Edna would usually enter and wait for her return.When she knocked at Mademoiselle Reisz’s door one afternoon there was no response; so unlocking the door, as usual, she entered and found the apartment deserted, as she had expected. Her day had been quite filled up, and it was for a rest, for a refuge, and to talk about Robert, that she sought out her friend.She had worked at her canvas—a young Italian character study—all themorning, completing the work without the model; but there had been many interruptions, some incident to her modest housekeeping, and others of a social nature.Madame Ratignolle had dragged herself over, avoiding the too publicthoroughfares, she said. She complained that Edna had neglected her muchof late. Besides, she was consumed with curiosity to see the little houseand the manner in which it was conducted. She wanted to hear all aboutthe dinner party; Monsieur Ratignolle had left so early. What had happened after he left? The champagne and grapes which Edna sent over were too delicious. She had so little appetite; they had refreshed and toned her stomach. Where on earth was she going to put Mr. Pontellier in that little house, and the boys? And then she made Edna promise to go to her when her hour of trial overtook her.“At any time—any time of the day or night, dear,” Edna assured her.Before leaving Madame Ratignolle said: “In some way you seem to me like a child, Edna. You seem to act without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life. That is the reason I want to say you mustn’t mind if I advise you to be a little careful while you are living here alone. Why don’t you have someone come and stay with you? Wouldn’t Mademoiselle Reisz come?”“No; she wouldn’t wish to come, and I shouldn’t want her always with me.”“Well, the reason—you know how evil-minded the world is—someone was talking of Alcee Arobin visiting you. Of course, it wouldn’t matter if Mr. Arobin had not such a dreadful reputation. Monsieur Ratignolle was telling me that his attentions alone are considered enough to ruin a woman s name.”“Does he boast of his successes?” asked Edna, indifferently, squinting at her picture.“No, I think not. I believe he is a decent fellow as far as that goes. But his character is so well known among the men. I shan’t be able to come back and see you; it was very, very imprudent to-day.”“Mind the step!” cried Edna.“Don’t neglect me,” entreated Madame Ratignolle; “and don’t mind what I said about Arobin or having someone to stay with you.“Of course not,” Edna laughed. “You may say anything you like to me.” They kissed each other good-by. Madame Ratignolle had not far togo, and Edna stood on the porch a while watching her walk down thestreet.Then in the afternoon Mrs. Merriman and Mrs. Highcamp had made their “party call.” Edna felt that they might have dispensed with the formality. They had also come to invite her to play vingt-et-un one evening at Mrs. Merriman’s. She was asked to go early, to dinner, and Mr. Merriman or Mr. Arobin would take her home. Edna accepted in a half-hearted way.She sometimes felt very tired of Mrs. Highcamp and Mrs. Merriman. Late in the afternoon she sought refuge with Mademoiselle Reisz, and stayed there alone, waiting for her, feeling a kind of repose invade her with the very atmosphere of the shabby, unpretentious little room.Edna sat at the window, which looked out over the house-tops and across the river. The window frame was filled with pots of flowers, and she sat and picked the dry leaves from a rose geranium. The day was warm, and the breeze which blew from the river was very pleasant. She removed her hat and laid it on the piano. She went on picking the leaves and digging around the plants with her hat pin. Once she thought she heard Mademoiselle Reisz approaching. But it was a young black girl, who came in, bringing a small bundle of laundry, which she deposited in the adjoining room, and went away.Edna seated herself at the piano, and softly picked out with one hand the bars of a piece of music which lay open before her. A half-hour went by. There was the occasional sound of people going and coming in the lower hall. She was growing interested in her occupation of picking out the aria, when there was a second rap at the door. She vaguely wondered what these people did when they found Mademoiselle’s door locked.“Come in,” she called, turning her face toward the door. And this time it was Robert Lebrun who presented himself. She attempted to rise; she could not have done so without betraying the agitation which mastered her at sight of him, so she fell back upon the stool, only exclaiming, “Why, Robert!”He came and clasped her hand, seemingly without knowing what he was saying or doing.“Mrs. Pontellier! How do you happen—oh! how well you look! Is Ma-demoiselle Reisz not here? I never expected to see you.”“When did you come back?” asked Edna in an unsteady voice, wipingher face with her handkerchief. She seemed ill at ease on the piano stool,and he begged her to take the chair by the window. She did so, mechanically, while he seated himself on the stool.“I returned day before yesterday,” he answered, while he leaned his armon the keys, bringing forth a crash of discordant sound.“Day before yesterday!” she repeated, aloud; and went on thinking toherself, “day before yesterday,” in a sort of an uncomprehending way. Shehad pictured him seeking her at the very first hour, and he had lived underthe same sky since day before yesterday; while only by accident had he stumbled upon her. Mademoiselle must have lied when she said, “Poor fool, he loves you.”“Day before yesterday,” she repeated, breaking off a spray ofMademoiselle’s geranium; “then if you had not met me here to-day youwouldn’t—when—that is, didn’t you mean to come and see me?”“Of course, I should have gone to see you. There have been so manythings—” he turned the leaves of Mademoiselle’s music nervously. “I startedin at once yesterday with the old firm. After all there is as much chance forme here as there was there—that is, I might find it profitable some day.The Mexicans were not very congenial.”So he had come back because the Mexicans were not congenial; because business was as profitable here as there; because of any reason, and not because he cared to be near her. She remembered the day she sat on the floor, turning the pages of his letter, seeking the reason which was left untold.She had not noticed how he looked—only feeling his presence; but sheturned deliberately and observed him. After all, he had been absent but afew months and was not changed. His hair—the color of hers—wavedback from his temples in the same way as before. His skin was not moreburned than it had been at Grand Isle. She found in his eyes, when helooked at her for one silent moment, the same tender caress, with an addedwarmth and entreaty which had not been there before the same glancewhich had penetrated to the sleeping places of her soul and awakenedthem.A hundred times Edna had pictured Robert’s return, and imagined theirfirst meeting. It was usually at her home, whither he had sought her out atonce. She always fancied him expressing or betraying in some way his lovefor her. And here, the reality was that they sat ten feet apart, she at thewindow, crushing geranium leaves in her hand and smelling them, hetwirling around on the piano stool, saying:“I was very much surprised to hear of Mr. Pontellier’s absence; it’s a won-der Mademoiselle Reisz did not tell me; and your moving—mother told meyesterday. I should think you would have gone to New York with him, or toIberville with the children, rather than be bothered here with housekeeping.And you are going abroad, too, I hear. We shan’t have you at Grand Isle nextsummer; it won’t seem—do you see much of Mademoiselle Reisz? She oftenspoke of you in the few letters she wrote.”“Do you remember that you promised to write to me when you went away?” A flush overspread his whole face.“I couldn’t believe that my letters would be of any interest to you.”“That is an excuse; it isn’t the truth.” Edna reached for her hat on the piano. She adjusted it, sticking the hat pin through the heavy coil of hair with some deliberation.“Are you not going to wait for Mademoiselle Reisz?” asked Robert.“No; I have found when she is absent this long, she is liable not to comeback till late.” She drew on her gloves, and Robert picked up his hat.“Won’t you wait for her?” asked Edna.“Not if you think she will not be back till late,” adding, as if suddenly aware of some discourtesy in his speech, “and I should miss the pleasure ofwalking home with you.” Edna locked the door and put the key back in its hiding-place.They went together, picking their way across muddy streets and sidewalks encumbered with the cheap display of small tradesmen. Part of the distance they rode in the car, and after disembarking, passed the Pontellier mansion, which looked broken and half torn asunder. Robert had never known the house and looked at it with interest.“I never knew you in your home,” he remarked.“I am glad you did not.”“Why?” She did not answer. They went on around the corner, and it seemed as if her dreams were coming true after all, when he followed her into the little house.“You must stay and dine with me, Robert. You see I am all alone, and it is so long since I have seen you. There is so much I want to ask you.”She took off her hat and gloves. He stood irresolute, making some excuse about his mother who expected him; he even muttered something about an engagement. She struck a match and lit the lamp on the table; it was growing dusk. When he saw her face in the lamplight, looking pained, with all the soft lines gone out of it, he threw his hat aside and seated himself.“Oh! you know I want to stay if you will let me!” he exclaimed. All the softness came back. She laughed and went and put her hand on his shoulder.“This is the first moment you have seemed like the old Robert. I’ll go tell Celestine.” She hurried away to tell Celestine to set an extra place. She even sent her off in search of some added delicacy which she had not thought of for herself. And she recommended great care in dripping the coffee and having the omelet done to a proper turn.When she reentered, Robert was turning over magazines, sketches, andthings that lay upon the table in great disorder. He picked up a photograph, and exclaimed:“Alcee Arobin! What on earth is his picture doing here?”“I tried to make a sketch of his head one day,” answered Edna, “and hethought the photograph might help me. It was at the other house. I thoughtit had been left there. I must have packed it up with my drawing materials.”“I should think you would give it back to him if you have finished with it.”“Oh! I have a great many such photographs. I never think of returning them. They don’t amount to anything.” Robert kept on looking at the picture.“It seems to me—do you think his head worth drawing? Is he a friend of Mr. Pontellier’s? You never said you knew him.”“He isn’t a friend of Mr. Pontellier’s; he’s a friend of mine. I always knewhim—that is, it is only of late that I know him pretty well. But I’d rather talk about you and know what you have been seeing and doing and feeling out there in Mexico.” Robert threw aside the picture.“I’ve been seeing the waves and the white beach of Grand Isle; the quiet,grassy street of the Cheniere; the old fort at Grande Terre. I’ve been workinglike a machine and feeling like a lost soul. There was nothing interesting.”She leaned her head upon her hand to shade her eyes from the light.“And what have you been seeing and doing and feeling all these days?”he asked.“I’ve been seeing the waves and the white beach of Grand Isle; the quiet,grassy street of the Cheniere Caminada; the old sunny fort at Grande Terre. I’ve been working with a little more comprehension than a machine, and still feeling like a lost soul. There was nothing interesting.”“Mrs. Pontellier, you are cruel,” he said, with feeling, closing his eyes and resting his head back in his chair. They remained in silence till old Celestine announced dinner.XXXIVThe dining-room was very small. Edna’s round mahogany would havealmost filled it. As it was there was but a step or two from the little table tothe kitchen, to the mantel, the small buffet, and the side door that openedout on the narrow brick-paved yard.A certain degree of ceremony settled upon them with the announcement of dinner. There was no return to personalities. Robert related incidents of his sojourn in Mexico, and Edna talked of events likely to interest him, which had occurred during his absence. The dinner was of ordinary quality, except for the few delicacies which she had sent out to purchase.Old Celestine, with a bandana tignon twisted about her head, hobbled in and out, taking a personal interest in everything; and she lingered occasionally to talk patois with Robert, whom she had known as a boy.He went out to a neighboring cigar stand to purchase cigarette papers, and when he came back he found that Celestine had served the black coffee in the parlor.“Perhaps I shouldn’t have come back,” he said. “When you are tired of me, tell me to go.”“You never tire me. You must have forgotten the hours and hours at Grand Isle in which we grew accustomed to each other and used to being together.”“I have forgotten nothing at Grand Isle,” he said, not looking at her, but rolling a cigarette. His tobacco pouch, which he laid upon the table, was a fantastic, embroidered silk affair, evidently the handiwork of a woman.“You used to carry your tobacco in a rubber pouch,” said Edna, pickingup the pouch and examining the needlework.“Yes; it was lost.”“Where did you buy this one? In Mexico?”“It was given to me by a Vera Cruz girl; they are very generous,” he replied, striking a match and lighting his cigarette.“They are very handsome, I suppose, those Mexican women; very picturesque, with their black eyes and their lace scarfs.”“Some are; others are hideous. just as you find women everywhere.”“What was she like—the one who gave you the pouch? You must haveknown her very well.”“She was very ordinary. She wasn’t of the slightest importance. I knew her well enough.”“Did you visit at her house? Was it interesting? I should like to know and hear about the people you met, and the impressions they made on you.”“There are some people who leave impressions not so lasting as the imprint of an oar upon the water.”“Was she such a one?”“It would be ungenerous for me to admit that she was of that order and kind.” He thrust the pouch back in his pocket, as if to put away the subject with the trifle which had brought it up.Arobin dropped in with a message from Mrs. Merriman, to say that thecard party was postponed on account of the illness of one of her children.“How do you do, Arobin?” said Robert, rising from the obscurity.“Oh! Lebrun. To be sure! I heard yesterday you were back. How did they treat you down in Mexique?”“Fairly well.”“But not well enough to keep you there. Stunning girls, though, in Mexico. I thought I should never get away from Vera Cruz when I was down there a couple of years ago.”“Did they embroider slippers and tobacco pouches and hat-bands and things for you?” asked Edna.“Oh! my! no! I didn’t get so deep in their regard. I fear they made moreimpression on me than I made on them.”“You were less fortunate than Robert, then.”“I am always less fortunate than Robert. Has he been imparting tender confidences?”“I’ve been imposing myself long enough,” said Robert, rising, and shaking hands with Edna. “Please convey my regards to Mr. Pontellier when you write.”He shook hands with Arobin and went away.“Fine fellow, that Lebrun,” said Arobin when Robert had gone. “I never heard you speak of him.”“I knew him last summer at Grand Isle,” she replied. “Here is that photograph of yours. Don’t you want it?”“What do I want with it? Throw it away.” She threw it back on the table.“I’m not going to Mrs. Merriman’s,” she said. “If you see her, tell her so.But perhaps I had better write. I think I shall write now, and say that I amsorry her child is sick and tell her not to count on me.”“It would be a good scheme,” acquiesced Arobin. “I don’t blame you; stupid lot!”Edna opened the blotter, and having procured paper and pen, began to write the note. Arobin lit a cigar and read the evening paper, which he had in his pocket.“What is the date?” she asked. He told her.“Will you mail this for me when you go out?”“Certainly.” He read to her little bits out of the newspaper, while shestraightened things on the table.“What do you want to do?” he asked, throwing aside the paper. “Do you want to go out for a walk or a drive or anything? It would be a fine night to drive.”“No; I don’t want to do anything but just be quiet. You go away and amuse yourself. Don’t stay.”“I’ll go away if I must; but I shan’t amuse myself. You know that I onlylive when I am near you.”He stood up to bid her good night.“Is that one of the things you always say to women?”“I have said it before, but I don’t think I ever came so near meaning it,”he answered with a smile. There were no warm lights in her eyes; only adreamy, absent look.“Good night. I adore you. Sleep well,” he said, and he kissed her hand and went away.She stayed alone in a kind of reverie—a sort of stupor. Step by step she lived over every instant of the time she had been with Robert after he had entered Mademoiselle Reisz’s door. She recalled his words, his looks. How few and meager they had been for her hungry heart! A vision—a transcendently seductive vision of a Mexican girl arose before her. She writhed with a jealous pang. She wondered when he would come back. He had not said he would come back. She had been with him, had heard his voice and touched his hand. But some way he had seemed nearer to her off there in Mexico.XXXVThe morning was full of sunlight and hope. Edna could see before herno denial—only the promise of excessive joy. She lay in bed awake, withbright eyes full of speculation. “He loves you, poor fool.” If she could butget that conviction firmly fixed in her mind, what mattered about therest? She felt she had been childish and unwise the night before in givingherself over to despondency. She recapitulated the motives which no doubtexplained Robert’s reserve. They were not insurmountable; they would not hold if he really loved her; they could not hold against her own passion, which he must come to realize in time. She pictured him going to his business that morning. She even saw how he was dressed; how he walkeddown one street, and turned the corner of another; saw him bending overhis desk, talking to people who entered the office, going to his lunch, andperhaps watching for her on the street. He would come to her in theafternoon or evening, sit and roll his cigarette, talk a little, and go away ashe had done the night before. But how delicious it would be to have himthere with her! She would have no regrets, nor seek to penetrate his reserveif he still chose to wear it.Edna ate her breakfast only half dressed. The maid brought her a deliciously printed scrawl from Raoul, expressing his love, asking her to send him some bonbons, and telling her they had found that morning ten tiny white pigs all lying in a row beside Lidie’s big white pig.A letter also came from her husband, saying he hoped to be back early in March, and then they would get ready for that journey abroad which he had promised her so long, which he felt now fully able to afford; he felt able to travel as people should, without any thought of small economies—thanks to his recent speculations in Wall Street.Much to her surprise she received a note from Arobin, written at midnight from the club. It was to say good morning to her, to hope she had slept well, to assure her of his devotion, which he trusted she in some faintest manner returned.All these letters were pleasing to her. She answered the children in acheerful frame of mind, promising them bonbons, and congratulating them upon their happy find of the little pigs.She answered her husband with friendly evasiveness, —not with any fixed design to mislead him, only because all sense of reality had gone out of her life; she had abandoned herself to Fate and awaited the consequences with indifference. To Arobin’s note she made no reply. She put it under Celestine’s stove-lid.Edna worked several hours with much spirit. She saw no one but a picture dealer, who asked her if it were true that she was going abroad to study in Paris. She said possibly she might, and he negotiated with her for some Parisian studies to reach him in time for the holiday trade in December.Robert did not come that day. She was keenly disappointed. He did not come the following day, nor the next. Each morning she awoke with hope, and each night she was a prey to despondency. She was tempted to seek him out. But far from yielding to the impulse, she avoided any occasion which might throw her in his way. She did not go to Mademoiselle Reisz’s nor pass by Madame Lebrun’s, as she might have done if he had still been in Mexico.When Arobin, one night, urged her to drive with him, she went—out to the lake, on the Shell Road. His horses were full of mettle, and even a little unmanageable. She liked the rapid gait at which they spun along, and the quick, sharp sound of the horses’ hoofs on the hard road. They did not stop anywhere to eat or to drink. Arobin was not needlessly imprudent. But they ate and they drank when they regained Edna’s little dining-room—which was comparatively early in the evening.It was late when he left her. It was getting to be more than a passing whim with Arobin to see her and be with her. He had detected the latent sensuality, which unfolded under his delicate sense of her nature’s requirements like a torpid, torrid, sensitive blossom.There was no despondency when she fell asleep that night; nor was there hope when she awoke in the morning. |  |