

# The Mocking of the Gods

BY AMÉLIE RIVES (*Princess Troubetszkoy*)

I  
RUTH took off her riding-hat, tossed it on the bed, and rubbing her fingers two or three times across the red mark that it had left upon her forehead, sat down listlessly at the open window. A warm wind was bending the silver poplars just opposite; their shimmering reflection played over her face, making it seem even paler than before. She gazed straight into their swaying depths, until her eyes dazzled, and dark spots swam before them; then she closed her eyelids and remained quite still for some time. When she opened them again, her glance fell upon a hand-glass that lay on the table near her outstretched arm. She raised it with quiet deliberation, and looked close into its revealing depths. She spared herself nothing, and that terrible little confidante of women, which receives all and imparts all in equal silence, told her anew, detail by detail, what she had long known—that her beauty was no longer even on the wane, but had waned, gone out forever.

She looked exactly what she was—a woman of fifty-three who had been beautiful, who still had handsome features, whose rich hair was still abundant but entirely white, save for two broad streaks of golden sorrel that ran from the temples through its whole length.

It was not for these details that she was searching, however. In her deep intensity she brought the mirror so close to her face that it became suddenly dim with her breath. To her fantastically bitter mood it seemed as though a sort of gray blush had overspread its surface.

"It is ashamed—ashamed to show me what I am looking for," she said aloud; then, as if startled, she rose abruptly and thrust it from her, face down, among the other articles upon the table.

Just at this moment some one knocked at the door—a light, soft sound like the whisper of a knock. One could not have

imagined the sort of person who entered, from this knock of hers. She was taller than Ruth, but singularly like her, with a stately, imposing figure and the gilt-white hair of age. She was also dressed in white from head to foot. Even her slippers, with their old-fashioned, quilled-ribbon rosettes, were of pure white "Marseilles"; and fastening her hair, which was rolled back into a single great coil like Ruth's own, was a delicately carved ivory comb, the exact hue of the ears which it touched on either side.

"Pussy . . ." she said; then stopped, smiled, advanced a step or two, holding out her hand, on the open palm of which lay a little parcel, primly tied in tissue-paper and ribbon yellow with age.

"You know you persuaded me to wear one . . . and I thought . . . I felt . . . The truth is, dearie, I've the strongest feeling that this evening means a crisis in our lives."

Her voice had changed entirely as she uttered these last sentences, and, from being rather timid, had become firm, while full of emotion. As she ended, she slipped one arm about Ruth's shoulders and drew her close, kissing her pale cheek.

"You see . . . I have mine on," she continued. "And I want you to wear yours . . . Yes, yours! . . . They will both be yours some day, and I want the pleasure of seeing you wear it. . . Of seeing it with these same old eyes of mine, that may see . . . in His mercy. . . Yes, that may see. . . Ah, my brave, good, darling child! Think, think, just think what this meeting may mean to all of us, and forgive . . . forgive your silly old aunt!"

She broke down entirely at this point, and Ruth was obliged to hold her sob-shaken body with both arms. Could the kind soul have seen her niece's face, she would have been even more overcome. The bitterness of death seemed to con-

geal it. She looked fixedly over her aunt's bowed head, as though at some vague form, and the expression in her set, steady eyes seemed to say: "So it's you, is it? So you've come? . . . I know you. I am in mortal fear of you, but I shall not run from you."

After a little while she heard her own voice saying gently:

"That's all right, auntie dear. I know. . . . But hush now. Try to quiet yourself. They'll hear. They're just under the window." And as she spoke she pressed the still shaking form into an arm-chair towards which she had guided it while speaking.

"I know,—I think I know, dearest auntie," she repeated. "And I'll do just what you wish—that is—"

She had not time to add more before the other broke in quickly:

"No, no. You don't realize. . . Look. . . . Here it is." She sat up eagerly, not waiting to find her handkerchief, but smearing the tears from her eyes with her mittened thumb. "Here it is, dearie,—your great-grandfather's knee-buckle. You know you so often begged me. . . You told me how pretty it would look, and not out of place; and so this evening . . . for this evening, you know, I've put mine on my waistband. Look. . . And I want you to do the same. . . It seems like a sort of consecration,—as if . . ."

"I see," said Ruth, hastily. She bent her head over the quivering hand and began to untie the little parcel, and she kept thinking as she did so: "It only needed this. . . This makes all complete;—this especial reminder of 'His great mercy' on this particular evening."

"It would have seemed almost blasphemous to me at any other time," Miss Mackenzie was whispering, her tears dried by her keen interest in her niece's action, "but now, . . . as I said . . ."

"Yes, yes, dear. As you said."

A large, very old-fashioned knee-buckle of paste set in silver, such as were worn by high dignitaries of the Church in Virginia about sixty years ago, lay among its yellow wrappings upon Ruth's palm.

"Yes, . . . your dear bishop-grandfather's knee-buckle," murmured the old lady, answering her swift look of sur-

prise. "I thought that for each of us to wear one this evening would—"

"Very well, dear, I will. It was sweet of you to think of it. Just let me change my habit."

When the two women went out upon the lawn a little later, Ruth was also in white, and on a broad silk ribbon at her waist shone the famous buckle. Her husband and his friend rose to meet them, and the latter, Walter Thurlow by name, wondered that he had not noticed before the perfect symmetry of her figure. Then he remembered that when he had first seen her that afternoon she was in her habit and loose covert-coat, and that her hat had also concealed the extraordinary hair which now rose thickly from her low, fine forehead. Such hair he had never imagined. It looked as though a broad brush dipped in gold dust had been drawn over masses of spun glass, leaving two brilliant bands across the curve of the head, and spiralling through the thick coils to their very ends. She held her head nobly, almost defiantly, as though somewhat conscious of its strange crown. Thurlow thought that above the pleasant smile with which she greeted him her eyes looked out rather coldly.

"A strange, very reserved nature," he told himself. Then he recalled her as he had seen her an hour ago, and was puzzled. She had been mounted on a powerful bay mare, leading her husband's horse by a lunging-rein; for he, Hugh Davidge, was completely blind. Both horses had been startled by a bit of paper blowing along the road, and he recalled the eager look of anxiety on her face. Her eyes had not been cold then, nor her voice, as she murmured low words of encouragement and explanation to her husband.

It had been delightful to watch the quiet power with which she calmed the startled animals, for she was a consummate horsewoman. There had been something infinitely pathetic also in the whole scene; in the way that the blind man's eyes turned instinctively toward the sound of that low voice,—his utter helplessness, athlete though he was,—and the woman's tender, protecting gestures.

Here, too, on this sunlit lawn, the difference in their ages struck him as appalling. Davidge was only forty, and

looked several years younger, with his thick brown curls, clean-shaven face, and eager smile. His movements, too, were almost boyishly impetuous,—the true expression of his high-strung, artistic nature chafing, though not bitterly, under the thrall of blindness.

Thurlow recalled, with a sense of personal pain, the way that she had looked upon her wedding-day fifteen years ago. Then that strange hair had been one splendid web of pure gold—the cheeks richly tinted, the lips full and red. Then, too, Davidge had not been blind.

"Is it possible?" he asked himself. "This grief has made her an old woman, while he . . . he seems to have grown younger under it."

In truth, there was a sort of repressed joyousness, a certain restless anticipation as of some happy event, that informed Davidge's whole manner. It showed itself now in the way in which he grasped his friend's arm, pulling him forward a pace or two, and shaking him slightly the while.

"We've got him, Ruth! We've got the 'famous man' at last! After fifteen years! . . . Just think of it! . . . The humbug! . . . And called himself my best friend at college!"

"She notices it, too,—and it pains her," continued Thurlow in his thought. "A strange woman. . . I doubt if one could ever know her well." Then he laughed and began to excuse himself, to join in gay reminiscences.

## II

The Davidges' had been a love match of the most ardent description, in spite of the difference in their ages. At that time she was a singularly beautiful woman of thirty-eight, and he a brilliant young painter of twenty-five. Friends and enemies, of course, predicted disaster, and it had come, but in a totally different shape from any that had been foretold. When he was just beginning to distinguish himself in the world of art, and chiefly as a remarkable colorist, sudden blindness had come upon him—blindness so total and of so unique a kind that the most celebrated oculists had in vain attempted even to give it a correct name. For many years their time had been spent in seeking out one famous

scientist after another, only to receive the same tragic answer: "We cannot give you any hope. We scarcely know more than yourselves. Perhaps with time . . . with further discoveries . . ."

At first he had wished only for death, but little by little, with the divine patience of a wife who has also something of the mother in her, Ruth had won him from his despair; little by little, day by day, month by month, she had persuaded him to use those wonderful finger-tips, which are the blind man's eyes, in the art of sculpture, and at thirty-three he was as well known for his plastic work as he had once been for his rare coloring.

As for his love for her, it was neither more nor less than idolatry. He could scarcely bear her to be away from him for a moment. She sat with him in his studio, read to him, walked and rode with him, and this love of his kept, moreover, all the passionate ardor of its beginning. He was her lover, her worshipper. In some subtle way his blindness seemed to have descended like a cloud upon them, veiling immortal youth of feeling.

At the time when Walter Thurlow had met them so unexpectedly they were spending the summer with Miss Mackenzie at her old home, "The Mallows," in Albemarle County, Virginia. She was Ruth's aunt, but her devotion to both was equal, for they were distant cousins as well as husband and wife, and Miss Mackenzie had considered Hugh as a son ever since his boyhood, when he used to spend all his holidays at "The Mallows." Ruth was also her adopted daughter, and this dear old soul, this "maiden lady," as she insisted upon being called, lavished enough love upon the two to have amply provided for a family of ten. Her agitation over Thurlow's arrival will be partly explained by the fact that he was one of the most distinguished oculists of his day, and had just performed a successful operation upon a man long ago pronounced to be hopelessly blind.

This thought crossed Thurlow's mind as he watched Ruth's expression and the nervous excitement of his friend's manner. His heart contracted suddenly as though squeezed.

"Poor chap! . . . Poor chap! . . ." he said to himself. "But she . . . I don't understand her. . . . She seems to dis-



Half-tone plate engraved by W. H. Clark

"THE HUMBUG! . . . AND CALLED HIMSELF MY BEST FRIEND AT COLLEGE!"



like me . . . to be forcing herself to be civil . . . One would think . . ." He broke off, more at a loss than ever.

At the tea table a rather singular incident occurred. This tea table was charming, by-the-way, with its bare mahogany surface polished as only time and what Miss Mackenzie called "elbow-grease" can polish mahogany, with its antique silver tray of huge proportions, and cut-crystal bowls filled, the one with candied melon-rind and the other with red currants, that looked like heaps of jade and rubies; its old china plates, holding thinly shaven rolls of brown and white bread, already buttered; its great flagons of milk and iced tea; its mound of moss-roses in the centre. They had been talking of resemblances, and Davidge had asked Thurlow, suddenly,

"Don't you think that my wife looks very like her aunt?"

"Extraordinarily so," he had answered. "If it were not for the difference in their . . ." But his sentence was interrupted by the sharp sound of broken glass, and he had looked up to see Miss Mackenzie, her face scarlet, trying with trembling fingers to gather up the pieces of the pitcher which she had just let fall. He started to her aid, glancing at Mrs. Davidge as he did so. She was sitting like a statue, her eyes downcast, her lips blanched.

"Well, of all extraordinary households!" thought the young man. "Does the dear old lady think I'm going to make love to her? And the other, . . . what in the name of Heaven does she think?"

The rest of the evening was passed in pleasant if somewhat commonplace fashion on the old stone portico. Yet another thing was to happen, however, before Thurlow's curious impressions of that first day at "The Mallows" was complete. A room had been given him on the ground-floor in one of the wings, and as he undressed he walked to and fro, delighted with everything—the quaint solid wooden shutters that barred from the inside; the folding-screen of yellow glazed paper, on which were pasted silhouettes of gentlemen in knee-breeches and ladies in hoops; the old water-colors done with a fine camel's-hair brush; the little steps that were to help him into his mountainous bed; the brass candlestick

in which the candle moved up and down in a little groove, and which had been given him to light him down the winding corridor that led to this east wing.

As he blew out the light a whippoorwill began to call, so near that he thought it must be upon the window-sill. At first it seemed pleasant, very Virginian, like everything else about him. "My mother was a Virginian too," he told himself, with a sleepy sensation of pleasure and a sort of comradeship with the bird. After a while, however, the persistent, rhythmic sound began to grow annoying. He counted the notes—"Two hundred and one, two hundred and two, three, four—

"Confound the thing!" he suddenly broke off, and jumping up, or rather down, from his bed, went to the window, intending to frighten the persistent serenader away. Just as he had put his hand on the sill, a sound as of some one brushing through the grass startled him. The next moment a tall figure, all in white, the head uncovered, passed close by him on the lawn outside. He recognized her by that strange hair even in the starlight. It was Mrs. Davidge. She went up to a fringe-tree about ten feet from the window and began to rustle the branches softly with a long stick.

"Go away! go away!" she kept saying in a whisper; and presently, with a quhrr of indignant wings, the whippoorwill fled. She stood still for a moment, looking after it, and pressing back the hair from her forehead with a deep breath of relief.

"I'm all at sea," reflected Thurlow, as he climbed back upon his Alp-like resting-place. "I should never have called her a nervous woman."

### III

When the Davidges had met Thurlow on the old turnpike along which Thackeray and Dickens had travelled on their way to Richmond, he was going to "The Mallows" to spend a few hours only. But Davidge had so urged him, seconded by Miss Mackenzie and his wife, that it had ended in his promising to stop for at least a week.

His luggage had been sent for, his mail forwarded—everything, in fact, done for his comfort and ease of mind. It was

not until some time afterward that he recalled a certain lack of warmth in Mrs. Davidge's manner from the first. As has been said, Davidge and he had been old college chums, until his departure for Germany, where he had lived ever since. They were about the same age, but Thurlow was unmarried. He had never been what is called "in love." His profession absorbed all his vitality. And yet he was very human, affectionate, tender-hearted. He would have liked to lie down at night feeling the universe at peace, healed, and happy,—by his hand perhaps; that was only the more human. As the next day passed, he found himself more interested in observing Davidge than his wife. Something in the whole appearance of his blind, vividly blue eyes, their movements, their lustre, the way in which they turned swiftly toward any bright point of light, arrested his attention, filled him with thought,—with a certain thought that concentrated all his mind.

"Perhaps," he said to himself—"perhaps."

Great specialists had been mistaken before now. He even smiled at this last thought. Was he not himself a "great specialist"? But so serious were his ponderings, so weighty the conclusions to which he came, that on the third day of his visit to "The Mallows" he felt himself justified in speaking to Ruth about the matter. He even went to seek her in order to do so, and he never forgot the tepid, sickly-sweet odor that flowed about them while they talked.

She had been helping her aunt to preserve damsons in the old-time Virginia way—that is, by using a little charcoal-oven for boiling the kettle. He found her under a gnarled pear-tree, close by the thicket from which the damsons had been gathered. A little negro girl, in one faded red garment, was fanning the coals with a palm-leaf fan neatly bound with black. From the laundry near by came the smell of strong lye soapsuds and the scorched ironing-board. Ruth had on one of the big "grass" hats that Virginia farmers wear, her cheeks were burnt a dark pink, her blue gingham skirt pinned up under her white apron. She held in one hand a ladle full of purplish "scum," which she was just about to throw away, when the little negress darted up, crying:

"Don' tho it 'way, Miss Ruth! . . . Gi' it to we! . . . We'll make sally-bubbles wid it!"

"She means 'syllabub,'" Ruth had explained, smiling, and this smile had emboldened him to speak.

"Can I talk with you just a minute, Mrs. Davidge?" he asked, bluntly. She became grave at once, looked him straight in the eyes, and pulling down her turned-back sleeves, handed the ladle to the little dorky.

"Aunt Ruth!" she called, and Miss Mackenzie emerged from the laundry, also a little flushed, but anxious for the welfare of her preserves. She was only too willing to superintend for a while.

Ruth and Thurlow went a little apart under some old acacia-trees. She took off the uncouth hat and fanned herself with it while he spoke. At each word that he uttered she grew paler and paler, until her face was ghastly under those scorched patches of color.

"And you say . . . you mean . . . you mean you think it would be worth while,—that there would be no danger?" she at last managed to mutter in a hoarse voice. She did not look at him now.

Thurlow answered, firmly: "Yes. What I mean is this: we can but try. There will be no danger at all."

"Well, then . . ." She still looked away from him; he saw the folds of lawn at her throat move with its heavy beating.

"All this is the most natural thing in the world," he argued to himself; but something in her air, in her way of taking it, baffled him, even annoyed him.

"She ought to be beside herself with joy at the bare hope," he thought. "She ought to look at me . . . to ask questions . . . the strange woman!"

She did neither, however. After waiting a moment she merely said in a low tone, "I suppose you have told him?"

"No," he said; "I wanted to speak to you first."

"Thank you," she answered, absently. Then, as if remembering something, "Thank you," she added, in a louder voice. She even began to move away from him, then turned suddenly and came back, still without meeting his eyes. "When will you tell him?" she asked.

He stammered in his astonishment.

"But you . . . but you . . . It's you who . . ."

"I would rather you would tell him to-morrow morning," she went on, calmly. "If you told him now, it would keep him awake all night. And, if you would be so kind, I would like you to tell my aunt, too. It would be very kind of you. . . At any time."

Before he could reply she had gone back to the preserving-kettle, and taking the great ladle again into her hands, was carefully skimming the purplish froth from its surface.

A few hours later, as they were all sitting together under the silver poplars on the lawn, he noticed a little ring, very antique, that Miss Mackenzie wore on her finger. As he bent forward, admiring it, the old lady, pleased with his interest, took it off and handed it to him to examine more closely. It was of different shades of hair woven together and set in chased gold. As he talked he slipped it upon his own finger, which it fitted perfectly.

"Just see!" cried Miss Mackenzie. "It fits him! But then he has those wonderful hands of . . . of . . ."

She broke off, confused, and Thurlow glanced up. Ruth's eyes were fixed upon his hands with a look of such loathing, of such hostile repulsion, that involuntarily he drew off the ring and hastened to return it to her aunt, at the same time thrusting his hands into his pockets. After a few moments he rose and strolled away to the river-side. He stood looking down at the water as it quivered by him without seeing it.

"My God!" he said, aloud, finally, "*she doesn't want it!*"

#### IV

Nothing could have been more touching than the way in which Davidge and Miss Mackenzie received Thurlow's statement, qualified as it was by all the scientist's doubt of himself, of results. Had it not been for his Anglo-Saxon blood he could have taken them both in his arms and wept over them, so full of genuine human pathos was the whole situation: these two so evidently looked upon him as a ministering god; he knew himself to be so mere an atom, so absolutely another like themselves.

Meanwhile Ruth's manner remained unchanged; the same stilly evenness of voice and look and gesture; the same reserve. Her eyes did not again betray her. No slightest action of hers gave the least clew to her real state of mind; but the human side of him asserted itself strongly. He grew to dislike her, with an active dislike that made him silent in her presence, that kept him from voluntarily looking at her.

He had been at "The Mallows" four days before Davidge suggested that he should visit his studio. This was a large building of glass and rubble, situated near the little river, with a clump of Lombardy poplars rising stiffly at one end. The smell of clay and moist cloths pervaded it. On the shelves lining the walls were the usual collection of plaster casts, both antique and taken from Davidge's own work. The poplar leaves cast a tremulous, greenish light across these pale images, causing them seemingly to smile, to frown, to wink, with various expressions as of ghostly life.

It was evidently a workshop where the master worked hard, with no thought of guests or pretty decorations; but upon a rough wooden table there was a great bowl of eglantine, quite fresh, its pungent, woody scent mingling with that of the damp clay.

Davidge went straight to it, and thrust his face into the cool leaves. "She never forgets," he said, as if to himself; and then turning, went with equal certainty to the stand upon which was his latest piece of work, swathed in its wet, discolored bandages. He had insisted upon his wife coming with them, and she walked a little behind him as he went toward it. She was very pale to-day. Her forehead showed haggard, upright lines in the side-light; her hair seemed to drag back from the temples, slightly lifting the ends of her long eyebrows. Thurlow thought that she looked ill. It was only yesterday that he had spoken of his plans about the restoration of his friend's eyesight. The others had talked of almost nothing else ever since; she only had been silent, save when forced to give assent or dissent to certain particulars; and always she had kept that deathly pallor, as of some secret disease that was consuming her inch by inch.

Now, as she followed her husband, as he put his hand on the swathed form upon the stand, a flood of color welled painfully over her throat and face. It was as if he had touched and hurt her, instead of touching the clay form.

"Listen," began Davidge, in his lovable, gay voice—"listen, Walter; I'm going to give you a real proof of friendship. This is the love of my life, or, rather, the work of my life. No one has ever seen it but Ruth—not even that blessed old aunt of ours. But I want you . . . Well, you shall judge for yourself. . . ." And with deft touches he began unwinding the wet cloths.

Suddenly, as though impelled by some force she could not resist, Ruth moved—started from a trance, as it were, seizing with both hands her husband's arm.

"No, . . . no, . . . You must not. . . You must not. . . No!" she said, in a thick, broken voice. "No, I tell you!" And she held his arm, her breast heaving, her throat contracting visibly in her effort to control herself. . . For a moment the blind eyes were turned on her almost with expression in their wide gaze, so great was his evident surprise; then his whole face quivered and broke suddenly like water under a touch.

"Of course, dearest, of course. . . I ought to have known," he hastened to assure her. "I ought to have understood. . ." He took her hand and held it in both his own while continuing to speak, now addressing Thurlow: "It was to be just for us two. . . My idea of her, you know. As I told you, no one else has seen it. And perhaps. . . Very likely. . ." He broke off, his brows contracting as at a painful thought. "The truth is," he went on, in a quieter way, "she's probably flattered me, this dear thing here: she spoils me so. I can't tell, but probably the likeness is wretched, and she doesn't want me to give myself away to you. That's it! I've hit it, I know. Come, Ruth, be honest! Don't deny that's your chief reason. After all. . ." He lifted his hand from hers suddenly and rested it upon her thick hair. "Who am I—who is any man that he should try to put sunlight into clay? No, don't mind, Ruth. We oughtn't to mind him, Walter, you know, after all that's happened these last days. He's like

one of us. . . Besides"—here his voice grew gay again, half teasing,—“why shouldn't an artist comment on his wife's beauty? Lord, how she hates it, dear thing! She never did think herself a beauty, but I'll put it to you, Walter, as a cool man of science,—leaving out the deplorable mouth and chin, etc., did you ever see such coloring in your life? Could you match me this hair, even in memory? Sometimes”—his voice dropped—"when I touch this living gold, as I do now. . . sometimes, yes, I seem to see."

And during all this speech, during those unutterable moments in which Thurlow felt as though mentally impaled, some awful fascination glued his eyes to the face beneath the hair, . . . a face which seemed to be dead and yet alive, like some mask in a nightmare, upon which the sweat stood in fine beads, in which the eyes were more like those of one blind than the eyes of the man beside her. And those steady eyes were fixed upon his, compelling, holding them, as though they said, "You see a soul stark naked. . . a soul stark naked." While at the same time the smell of the clay became the smell of fresh-dug graves,—in his throat, in his nostrils,—stifling, sickening him.

He did not remember how they parted, whether they spoke; how he came to be walking alone by the river, very fast, pressing through the dense undergrowth of birch and willow, not heeding the path, only walking, walking.

"My God! what a horrible thing! . . . My God! what a horrible thing!" he kept saying over and over in time to his own footsteps. Bits of Scripture, of nonsense rhymes, of music-hall ditties—odds and ends from Heaven knows where crowded higgledy-piggledy into his mind:

"He maketh the blind to see. . ."

"There was an old man who said how

Shall I 'scape from this terrible cow. . .?"

"Eyes is to the blind. . ." "Rise up in dee cha'yot, early in dee mawnin'. . ." Then again:

"My God! what a horrible thing! . . ."

All at once he sank down on the matted river-grass, dropping his head into his hands. But his thoughts whirled on more tumultuously than ever.





HE SANK DOWN ON THE MATTED RIVER-GRASS

"I must go away. . . No. I can't go away now. I cannot see her again. . . I will have to see her. But I cannot. You must. You will have to. You will have to go back and speak to her and look at her and be near her—near that woman whose naked soul you have shamelessly gazed at. You ass. You dolt. You worse than blind leader of the blind. You fool who have taken it upon you to play God and crush two lives in your hand like empty shells!"

He opened and shut his right hand, that true surgeon's hand, with its narrow, supple palm, its long, nervous, pliant fingers tapering from the second phalange. He stared down at it, much as that poor woman had once stared, and it seemed to him for an instant as though he were really she,—that this hand, in which he had often felt such an almost childish pride, were loathsome, smeared with blood, a regular butcher's hand. . . He started to his feet and began to walk onward again, faster than before. What to do? When? What to say? How to say it? It was of no use. His thoughts were a hopeless tangle of mere shreds. He came to no conclusion. His one longing was to get away, without being seen, without saying farewell to any one. . . And this was impossible, and yet this was all that he could think of.

"Oh, it's damnable, damnable!" he said, aloud. "The whole thing is an accursed shame!"

"Yes," repeated a low, clear voice close beside him, "it is damnable, and it is an accursed shame."

## V

He sprang around, to find himself face to face with Ruth Davidge, who stood looking at him calmly, even compassionately.

"That is why I have come to speak with you about it," she went on. "You have borne a great deal to-day, and I have borne a great deal for fifteen years,—almost everything that a woman can bear, I think . . . except a child," she ended, with a smile so shocking that Thurlow turned away his head. He was trembling slightly; she was as quiet as her low voice.

"No—don't turn away. Don't be afraid of me. I have come to help you, not to

make scenes. I am not hysterical, but I feel that I can help you; so why should I let shame keep me back? Souls have their modesty as well as bodies. You have seen mine stripped before you to-day. You will have to look at it again, because I can help you only in that way. Do you understand? I mean, of course, do you understand that I am going to try to help you? You could not understand the rest until I've explained; even then perhaps you won't be able to. People have always thought me strange—every one but—Hugh." Again she smiled, and, still smiling, added, "And afterwards perhaps even he will think me 'strange.'"

Thurlow literally could not speak. She looked about her and then said:

"Let us walk on a little to the right. There is an old cherry-tree that has fallen there, near the water. It will make a nice seat, and no one will interrupt us."

She went ahead, looking, with her beautiful victorious gait, as though she had just discovered joy's hiding-place, and were on her way thither. It was indeed a charming spot to which she had led him. The old tree had fallen in such a way that half its roots still nourished it, and the branches among which they placed themselves were thick with leaves and young fruit already beginning to turn a faint waxen scarlet. Overhead an ash spread its tent of foliage, set here and there with flowerlike gleams of sky.

For some moments after they were seated Ruth said nothing, just remained very still, her hands resting, palm upward, one within the other, upon her knee, her gaze following the flow of the little stream.

At last, without moving, she lifted her eyes and fixed them upon his. They were remarkable eyes, of a clear, greenish hazel, with clusters of small dark red spots near the pupils. Thurlow recalled a description of the eyes of William Rufus that he had read when a boy, and those same eyes seemed now to be regarding him with a look of tranquil hatred. Never had he imagined a look of such frank and at the same time such implacable hostility. When she spoke the sweet composure of her voice startled him so that he blushed.

"Mr. Thurlow," she said, "you dislike me very much, and I think I have hated you from the first moment I saw you. No, I am not going to be melodramatic. You will see that for yourself after I've talked to you for a few moments. I am simply going to tell you the truth—to try to, that is. It's a very hard thing to do even when one tries. After what happened in the studio just now, you can imagine that my—well, say dislike for you, hasn't lessened. No . . . please don't. Why should you say anything? It wasn't your fault. You were put in almost as hateful a position as I was. . . And yet . . . Yes, it's true. A woman never forgives a man for having seen her worst weakness, even by accident. To be found out in a crime . . . that would be bearable. . . But the other . . . something that smacks of the ridiculous. . . I believe most people are glad when a person who knows something ludicrous about them dies. And it's not your fault, either, that I . . . dislike you. You are a good man; yes, you are good, even noble—one feels that. But it is strange, strange how little that has to do with one's liking or disliking people—nothing at all. Now I am not good. No; I ask you not to interrupt me. I know that I am not, but I didn't know it fully until I met you. Just let me go on speaking, please, and you will understand. When I first saw you, from the very moment I looked at you, I felt how it was going to be, how it must be. And I hated, hated you. I knew everything that was going to happen. Yes, even what happened just now in the studio. I knew I was to be spared nothing, and when I realized how I could feel, how it was in me to feel, I hated myself more than I hated you. I fought with myself. I tried my best. I struggled—how I did struggle! It was no use. When I thought of the humiliation before me, of my happiness all broken, ground into powder, into the dirt, of how it would come through you—when those thoughts came to me I used to kill you in imagination. I used to say over and over: 'Let him fall dead—let him fall dead. Here,—now—before it happens.' Do you remember the night I drove the whippoorwill away near your window? Well, I knew you were there, watching me. And I came there,

close beside your room, because something drew me. I thought, 'If I could only kill him quietly and slip back to my room, no one would ever suspect me.' I laid awake all night thinking of it, and I came back several times. I prayed that you would go away or die. It may seem strange to you that I pray, but I do, sometimes; and sometimes I believe in a God, and sometimes I don't. Sometimes I think of Him as a great bully who plays with us, and laughs, laughs . . ."

She paused a moment and stared up at the sky with a look of bold insolence.

"When I was quite a little thing," she continued, in a reflective, half-dreamy tone, "I tried to arrange things for myself. I used to read the Bible a great deal, and one day I came across the words, 'God repented Him that He had made man.' This seemed to let in a wonderful light. I could never believe that He required the blood of His Son before He would forgive the world, and these words seemed to explain everything to me. I thought that since God repented, He must have done something to repent of; so, in that case, He was not perfect. And I made out a belief for myself. I believed that He saw what a cruel thing He had done when He made man so wicked and full of suffering, and that in order to forgive Himself, and be forgiven by men, He must also become a man for a time and share their pain and misery, and in that way He would expiate His fault in having created them, and become 'perfect through suffering.' *That* God I could love. . . And I did love Him for a long time. Then afterwards, when He made Hugh blind—" She broke off,—recommencing the next moment, however: "And now, when He is about to give him back his sight . . ."

Thurlow would have forfeited half his reputation to escape those deadly eyes. A cold sweat broke out upon his forehead. He moved slightly, tried to speak. With inexorable calmness she went on:

"But you must have understood something of what I mean, there in the studio, when he spoke of my . . . beauty, of this golden hair of mine. Something, not all, perhaps. I am going to explain quite clearly—that is, unless you have guessed. But no; I will explain.

"It is like this. He thinks me beauti-

ful, he thinks of me as he last saw me, because I have taken advantage of his blindness, because for fifteen years I have posed as being a second Ninon de l'Enclos. And I have been helped in this by that dear, good, orthodox aunt of mine. . . Yes, she has helped me bravely . . . fibbed by silence and equivocation, out of sheer love for us both, all the while that she felt it to be a sin. And because of our sin, as I suppose you would call it, he has been happy and 'in love' with me; and I . . . I have been happy too, all these years—until you came—"

"For God's sake . . ." Thurlow managed to utter.

"God has nothing to do with it," she said, composedly. "There is such a thing as Fate. It had to be. Only"—here she rose and stood looking down at him, a sudden flame in her cheeks and those

curious eyes of hers—"only I want to warn you—in spite of seeming dramatic, I must warn you—that I might do you harm . . . if a good chance offered and he would never suspect. I am not all bad, you see. I came here to warn you of that, and also to beg you to go on,—to do all that is in your power for him."

"But afterward," groaned Thurlow,—  
"afterward . . . for you both . . ."

She turned from him in silence, but he could not endure it. He sprang to his feet and stood full in her way. "It is not necessary. . . It can't be! . . . It will be hell,—hell for you both . . ."

"Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it," she quoted, slowly; and as he gazed at her, half stupefied, she smiled once more, and holding him with her compelling eyes, stepped past him, and so out of sight among the willows.

[TO BE CONCLUDED.]

## Poverty

BY S. E. KISER

THE people call him rich: his lands  
Stretch very far and very wide;  
They call him rich, yet there he stands  
Ill-clad and bent and hollow-eyed.

The people call him rich: his gold  
Is piled in many a yellow heap,  
But he is all alone and old,  
And when he dies no one will weep.

They call him rich, but where he dwells  
The floors are bare, the walls are bleak:  
They call him rich; he buys and sells,  
But no fond fingers stroke his cheek.

They call him rich: he does not know  
The happiness of standing where  
Sweet winds across the meadows blow  
And toss the verdant billows there.

They call him rich, but he is blind  
To beauties of the earth and sky:  
Distrustful of all humankind,  
They call him rich—I know not why.