

AN EMPTY FRAME.

It was a simple pretty little frame, such as you may buy at any sale cheaply ; its ribbed wood, aspinalled white, with an inner frame of pale blue plush ; its one noticeable feature, that it was empty. And yet it stood on the middle of the bedroom mantel-board.

It was not a luxurious room, none of the furniture matched, it was a typical boarding-house bedroom.

Any one preserving the child habit of endowing inanimate objects with human attributes might fancy that the flickering flames of the fire took a pleasure in bringing into relief the bright bits in its dinginess. For they played over the silver-backed brushes, and the cut-glass perfume-bottles on the dressing-table ; flicked the bright beads on the toes of coquettish small shoes and the steel clasps of a travelling bag in the corner ; imparting a casual air of comfort, such as the touch of certain dainty women lends to a common room.

A woman enters, a woman wondrously soft and swift in all her movements. She seems to reach a place without your seeing how, no motion of elbow or knee betrays her. Her fingers glide swiftly down the buttons of her gown; in a second she has freed herself from its ensheathing, garment after garment falls from her until she stands almost free. She gets into night-dress and loose woollen dressing-gown, and slips her naked feet into fur-lined slippers with a movement that is somehow the expression of an intense nervous relief from a thrall. Everything she does is done so swiftly that you see the result rather than the working out of each action.

She sinks into a chair before the fire, and, clasping her hands behind her head, peers into the glowing embers. The firelight, lower than her face, touches it cruelly; picks out and accentuates as remorselessly as a rival woman the autographs past emotions have traced on its surface; deepens the hollows of her delicate thoughtful temples and the double furrow between her clever irregular eyebrows. Her face is more characteristic than beautiful. Nine men would pass it, the tenth sell his immortal

soul for it. The chin is strong, the curve of jaw determined; there is a little full place under the chin's sharp point. The eyes tell you little; they are keen and inquiring, and probe others' thoughts rather than reveal their own. The whole face is one of peculiar strength and self-reliance. The mouth is its contradiction—the passionate curve of the upper lip with its mobile corners, and the tender little under lip that shelters timidly beneath it, are encouraging promises against its strength.

The paleness of some strong feeling tinges her face, a slight trembling runs through her frame. Her inner soul-struggle is acting as a strong developing fluid upon a highly sensitised plate; anger, scorn, pity, contempt chase one another like shadows across her face. Her eyes rest upon the empty frame, and the plain white space becomes alive to her. Her mind's eye fills it with a picture it once held in its dainty embrace. A rare head amongst the rarest heads of men, with its crest of hair tossed back from the great brow, its proud poise and the impress of grand confident compelling genius that reveals itself one scarce knows how; with the brute possibility of an

untamed, natural man lurking about the mouth and powerful throat. She feels the subduing smile of eyes that never failed to make her weak as a child under their gaze, and tame as a hungry bird. She stretches out her hands with a pitiful little movement, and then, remembering, lets them drop and locks them until the knuckles stand out whitely. She shuts her eyes, and one tear after the other starts from beneath her lids, trickles down her cheeks, and drops with a splash into her lap. She does not sob, only cries quietly, and she sees, as if she held the letter in her hand, the words that decided her fate—

'You love me; I know it, you other half of me. You want me to complete your life as I you, you good, sweet woman. You slight, weak thing, with your strong will and your grand, great heart. You witch with a soul of clean white fire. I kiss your hands (such little hands! I never saw the like), slim child-hands, with a touch as cool and as soft as a snow-flake! You dear one, come to me, I want you, now, always. Be with me, work with me, share with me, live with me, my equal as a creature; above me as my queen

of women! I love you, I worship you, but you know my views. I cannot, I will not bind myself to you by any legal or religious tie. I must be free and unfettered to follow that which I believe right for me. If you come to me in all trust, I can and will give myself to you in all good faith, yours as much as you will, for ever! I will kneel to you. Why should I always desire to kneel to you? It is not that I stand in awe of you, or that I ever feel a need to kneel at all; but always to you, and to you alone. Come—I will crouch at your feet and swear myself to you,'—and she had replied 'No!' and in her loneliness of spirit married him who seemed to need her most out of those who admired her. . . .

The door opens and he comes in. He looks inquiringly at her, touches her hair half hesitatingly, and then stands with his hands thrust in his pockets and gnaws his moustache.

'Are you angry, little woman?'

'No' (very quietly), 'why should I be?'

She closes her eyes again, and after five minutes' silence he begins to undress. He does it very slowly, watching her perplexedly. When he has finished he stands with his

back to the fire, an unlovely object in sleeping suit.

'Would you like to read her letter?'

She shakes her head.

'I suppose I ought to have sent her back her letters before, you know. She hadn't heard I was married.'

'Yes,' she interjects, 'it would have been better to start with a clean bill; but why talk about it?'

He looks at her a while, then gets into bed and watches her from behind the pages of the *Field*. It seems unusually quiet. His watch, that he has left in his waistcoat pocket, thrown across the back of a chair, seems to fill the whole room with a nervous tick.

He tosses the paper on to the floor. She looks up as it falls, rises, turns off the gas-jet, sinks back into her old position, and stares into the fire. He gets up, goes over, and kneels down next her.

'I am awfully sorry you are put out, old girl. I saw you were when I answered you like that, but I couldn't help feeling a bit cut up, you know. She wrote such an awfully nice letter, you know, wished'—

'you all sorts of happiness (with a snap) and hopes you'll meet in a better world?'

He rises to his feet and stares at her in dumb amazement. How could she know? She smiles with a touch of malicious satisfaction, as she sees the effect of her chance shot.

'It's a pity, isn't it, that you both have to wait so long?'

He imagines he sees light, and blunders ahead like an honest man.

'I wouldn't have sent those things back now if I had thought you cared. By Jove, it never entered my head that you'd be jealous!'

'Jealous? (she is on her feet like a red white flash). I, jealous of her? (each word is emphasised). I couldn't be jealous of her, *Nur die Dummen sind bescheiden!* Why, the girl isn't fit to tie my shoe-strings!'

This is too much; he feels he must protest.

'You don't know her (feebly). She is an awfully nice girl!'

'Nice girl! I don't doubt it, and she will be an awfully nice woman, and under each and every circumstance of life she will behave like an awfully nice person. Jealous! Do you think I cried because I was jealous? Good

God, no! I cried because I was sorry, fearfully sorry for myself. She' (with a fine thin contempt) 'would have suited you better than I. Jealous! no, only sorry. Sorry because any nice average girl of her type, who would model her frocks out of the *Lady's Pictorial*, gush over that dear Mr. Irving, paint milking-stools, try poker work, or any other fashionable fad, would have done for you just as well. And I' (with a catch of voice) 'with a great man might have made a great woman—and now those who know and understand me' (bitterly) 'think of me as a great failure.'

She finishes wearily, the fire dies out of eyes and voice. She adds half aloud as if to herself:

'I don't think I quite realised this until I saw how you took that letter. I was watching your face as you read it, and the fact that you could put her on the same level, that if it had not been for a mistake, she would have suited you as well, made me realise, don't you see? that I should have done better for some one else!'

He is looking at her in utter bewilderment, and she smiles as she notes his expression; she touches his cheek gently and leans her head against his arm.

'There, it's all right, boy! Don't mind me, I have a bit of a complex nature; you couldn't understand me if you tried to; you'd better not try!'

She has slipped, whilst speaking, her warm bare foot out of her slipper, and is rubbing it gently over his chilled ones.

'You are cold, better go back to bed, I shall go too!'

She stands a moment quietly as he turns to obey, and then takes the frame, and kneeling down puts it gently into the hollowed red heart of the fire. It crackles crisply, and little tongues of flame shoot up, and she gets into bed by their light.

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When the fire has burnt out, and he is sleeping like a child with his curly head on her breast, she falls asleep too and dreams that she is sitting on a fiery globe rolling away into space. That her head is wedged in a huge frame, the top of her head touches its top, the sides its sides, and it keeps growing larger and larger and her head with it, until she seems to be sitting inside her own head, and the inside is one vast hollow.