



BETWEEN TWO SINS

CHAPTER I.

The Christmas Eve that brought happiness to so many thousands of homes brought to me nothing more than a long, uncomfortable journey and the novelty of a first situation; for I had traveled from London to the lake-country, and when I reached the station at Ulladale, my senses were numbed with cold and frost.

Evidently some mistake had been made as to the time for the train, for the carriage which I had expected would be sent to meet me had not yet arrived. The station was a small one, and there were few people about. The wind whistled dismally round the building. The open archway that led from the station to the road looked like a black yawning abyss. Anything was better than remaining there, so I resolved to fill up the time that I must wait in walking down the road that led to Ulladale. In the distance was the pretty town, the church-spires of which stood out tall and white. Just as I reached the end of the road, the moon came from behind the clouds and cast a silvery gleam over the snow-clothed scene, and then it was exceedingly beautiful.

I leaned over the stile to gaze at it. The moonlight kissed the white spires, the snow-covered meadows, the distant houses. From the bare hedges and the branches of the trees hung great icicles which glittered like diamonds. The red berries shone on the holly trees, the tall dark firs stood out in a martial array, the stars shone in the night sky.

Oh, beautiful Christmas Eve! Something stirred in my heart and brought tears to my eyes when the bells began to ring and the soft, sweet chiming of the happy houses that Christmas eve was shining on, of devoted husbands and wives, of devoted mothers, merry children home from school, of happy lovers, kindly friends. I looked up to the sky, and I prayed that Heaven would send some one to love me. Every one expects a gift at Christmas-time, and that was what I asked from Heaven. That was my prayer on Christmas eve, and my story will tell how it was granted.

I returned to the station, just as the hour was striking, and found that the carriage had arrived during my absence. The coachman touched his hat as I came up the platform. There was no other being in sight.

"The carriage for Mrs. Forster, from Ulladale," he said. And a few minutes later I was on my way to the Hall.

It seemed as though the stars were lighting me to a fresh life, as though the snow-fringed branches of the tall trees were beckoning to me. I felt a peculiar sensation in driving along through this silent country on Christmas Eve.

The moon shone out with a whiter, brighter light I saw that we were driving through a beautiful park. The water lying under the trees was completely frozen, the evergreens stood out distinct and clear, and the world glistened with the wind, as it stirred the great trees, sounded as though the very spirit of Christmas were abroad.

A sudden curve, the ripple of a fountain not yet frozen, the cry of a startled bird, the deep baying of a hound, and we were driving up a fine avenue of chestnut trees. The moon revealed a noble pile of buildings. I see the picture now as I saw it then. Ulladale was a large, handsome residence, built in the Italian style, with gilded porch and balcony, and statuary wings. A lawn sloped down to the very edge of the lake, and the park lay behind the house. No ruddy light shone from the windows; all was dark and gloomy. It struck me vaguely, as I stood outside, that the house held a secret. No answer came to the first ring; the second brought an old grey-haired man, who opened the door cautiously, it seemed to me. In the large entrance hall there were no evergreens, no wreaths, no mistletoe bushes, only gloom and deep shadows. A small lamp glimmered somewhere in the depths of the hall. I felt chilled.

"Miss Forster," said the butler, "my lady is expecting you. Will you step this way?"

He led the way to the library, where a fire burned in the grate and a lighted lamp stood on the table. As for my age of Christmas, I might as well have looked for roses in December.

"I will tell Lady Culmore that you are here," he said.

He went away, leaving me alone. What a silent house this was! No sound disturbed it, not even the opening or shutting of a door; and the silence appeared to grow more and more intense. It seemed as though an atmosphere of wrong-doing filled the house. I turned up the lamp. The light fell on handsome marble busts, on well-lined book-cases, on massive bronze ornaments, on a few choice pictures.

Presently the door opened, and the grey-haired butler announced "Lady Culmore." I heard the rustle of a silver dress; a faint odor, as of heliotrope, was wafted to me. As I saw her then I shall see her until I die. She came in with a quiet, graceful movement. Her dress was of rich ruby velvet, with fine lace around the white shoulders, and the rounded arms. Jewels flashed in her hair, on her neck, on her arms. She was beautiful as a queen, and if ever a woman's face told a story, her face did, and in it I saw passion, terrible

repression—the outcome of an unnatural life; I read wistfulness and fear. It was the loveliest, but the strangest face I had ever seen. One peculiarity of it was that, when she was not speaking or smiling, her lips became very pale.

She came to me with outstretched hands, but without a smile, without a gleam of welcome in her eyes. She was like a fair marble statue; yet what a depth of feeling lay in the dark blue eyes!

"You have had a long, cold journey."

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heart. There was a death-like stoniness within; the wind was whistling outside, the shadows were deepening and gathering around me. I took courage, opened the door, and found myself in a magnificent room; lofty and painted; there were fine pictures, a few rare statues, jardinières filled with costly exotics, luxurious furniture; altogether it was a most charming apartment. It was lighted by wax-tapers. Lady Culmore was seated before the ruddy fire.

"Come in, Miss Forster," she said. "You will be glad to have some tea, I am sure."

A cosy little table was drawn to the fire; a silver tea-service, with cups and saucers of Sevres china, was placed on it. I took a seat, and then Lady Culmore forgot all about me. She sat looking into the fire, holding in her white hand a fan of delicate feathers. Evidently she saw pictures in the fire which I could not see, she read stories there which I could not read.

After a short interval, a servant brought in a silver stand and kettle, and placed them on the table.

"Sir Rudolph is coming, my lady," she said.

I had thought her cold and without emotion, but I saw now that I had been mistaken. Her face changed. The peculiar pallor of the lips disappeared, the mask of stone fell; there was the flushed, passionate, beautiful face of a living, loving woman. I noticed that she placed one hand over her heart, as though she would still it, though she had never seen such pain, such passion, such intensity of longing in any human eyes as I read in hers.

Again the door opened, and Sir Rudolph entered. I forgot at first to look at him, in the wonder I felt at her. When the snake first fixes it would give a faint idea of the expression in hers; in them shone a gleam of love—unutterable, despairing love. But, when he spoke, I looked at him, and was not a model of manly beauty; but he had a face that, once seen, could never be forgotten. He was tall, with the erect figure, the broad shoulders, the muscular limbs that distinguish a true Englishman. The chief charms

of his face lay in his mouth and eyes. The mouth was tender, proud and firm, its graceful lines unhidden by the dark mustache. I could never describe the beauty, the power, and the pathos of his eyes. When they looked at me, they were kindly, clear and bright; when they fell on Lady Culmore's face, I read aversion and fear in them.

Sir Rudolph held out his hand and bade me welcome, but his eyes were fixed on the thousand times more kindly than Lady Culmore's had been. He said that he hoped I should not find it dull—that he spent his own time in reading, boating, fishing and rambling over the hills. And all the time he spoke his eyes were fixed on me with the look of a frightened bird.

We sat down, and if ever there was a study these two, husband and wife, presented one. I see the whole scene so plainly—the magnificent wax tapers, the glow of the fire as it fell on the pictures and statues, the bloom and fragrance of the hothouse flowers. I shall never forget how the firelight fell on the rich dress and jewels, the fair hair and beautiful face of Lady Culmore, and on the dark head and noble face of Sir Rudolph. Had she donned the rich robes and gems to please Sir Rudolph? If so, it was indeed labor in vain. After the first half-sneering look his eyes were carefully averted from her. I could see that plainly. It was not careless indifference; it was that he would not look at her. When he spoke to me his eyes met mine with a frank, open expression. If Lady Culmore addressed him, they were studiously fixed on anything but her.

As the evening proceeded, the wonder to me grew greater. When Sir Rudolph addressed his wife he seemed quite unconscious of the constraint and coldness that came into his voice, as she seemed quite unconscious of the pleading that came into hers. There was no attempt at conversation between them. I could not say that Sir Rudolph was wanting in civility or attention to the beautiful woman who looked at him with so passionate, entreating love-lit eyes; but he did only just what was useful—no more. There was more below the surface, unless I was greatly mistaken. I read shrinking aversion, something more than dislike—something that was painful in its passionate entreaty. Altogether I felt that I was in an atmosphere of mystery. The gloom of the house, the silence that reigned in the splendid rooms, the curious aspect of husband and wife, all confirmed the idea.

One little incident impressed me much. Lady Culmore wore a very handsome diamond bracelet, the gift of the setting of one of the stones was slightly damaged, and hurt her arm. She raised it suddenly, and I shall never forget the look that came over her husband.

"Rudolph," she said, "will you see to this bracelet for me?" And she looked at him with eyes so full of love that my wonder was that he did not embrace her on the spot and kiss the lovely glowing face.

She held out her beautifully rounded white arm to him, and showed him the little red mark caused by the broken glass. In doing so her hand touched him. It was noticeable, I believe, but I shall never forget the incident. It was over in a moment; but, while that moment lasted, the scene was terrible. His face changed, severe anger

flamed from his eyes. He shook the white snow from his coat as though it had been a snake. He cried in a voice so cold and hard that I recognized it with difficulty; and, shuddering, white, trembling, he stepped away from him.

"Rudolph," he said, "I hope you will make yourself as happy as you can."

He was gone before I had time to reply.

Lady Culmore stood quite still for a few moments. She tore the jewels from her hair, from her neck, from her arms, and dashed them upon the ground.

"This is horrible," she cried, "that he will not touch me? Oh, heaven, how hateful, so loathsome as that!"

Suddenly she remembered my presence, and looked at me with a wild, passionate despair that touched my very heart. I went to pick up the

beautiful gems strewn upon the ground. I laid them, a glittering, magnificent mass, on the table. She came up to them with a half-shamed gasp.

"How passionate I am, Miss Forster," she said. "What can you think of me?"

"I have had no time to think at all yet," I replied.

Then she walked to one of the large mirrors, and stood before it for some minutes in silence. "Was Forster, come here," she said, after she had looked long and earnestly at herself.

I went to her, and we stood side by side. She regarded me critically.

"You are beautiful," she said, slowly. "You are dark as the daughters of sunny Spain; all your eyes are like purple hearts—yes; but you are not so beautiful as I am." She turned to me fiercely and clutched my hands.

"Judge—tell me—do you not find a woman whom you could love?"

"Yes," I replied, quickly, half frightened by her strange manner.

"Look at my arm," she continued. "If any other man had been in this place, he would have kissed it; and he hung it from his neck."

I had no time to answer. The foot-steps came in to clear the table, and I went back to my room.

CHAPTER II.

What manner of house, what manner of people were these? What was wrong under this roof? What was the shadow which I had been told had been bright and happy? I could not bear the mystery and novelty had so excited and bewildered me that I could not rest, I could not sleep. Surely no one had ever spent a stranger Christmas Eve than this.

I drew aside the hangings. Ah, me, the snow, white world that lay outside, the beauty of the Christmas night-sky, the hoariness of the stars, the moon and golden stars! I could not bear the bells, although I knew they would chime until past midnight, and I knew how the music of them would rise and fall over the hills. I should have wept in sheer desperate pity for my own loneliness had it not been that my thoughts were so deeply engrossed with the mystery of Ulladale.

I went to sleep at last, thinking of the beautiful face of the wife, of the hoariness of the husband wondering what shadow, what sorrow lay between them.

Christmas morning dawned bright and beautiful. I drew near the window and looked out in wonder and delight. There lay the mere, known as Ulla Water, and the grounds of the estate sloped down to the very edge. It was a beautiful lake, on which in summer the water-lilies slept, green reeds and sedges grew on the banks, and in many places tall, green trees dipped into the water. There was almost every variety of tree in the grounds—copper-beech and silver-beech, stately oak and graceful lime, trembling aspen and spreading walnut, the pride of the place being a grand old cedar. In its mantle of snow it stood so strikingly against the sky, the scene was most striking. The robins were flying about in search of food, and the lazarus was in full flower. My heart and spirit rose. It could not be all misery in such a world as this, such a beautiful world, dimmed only by man and sin!

I went down-stairs, thinking that, if Christmas Eve were forgotten, surely, being Christmas, they would remember her Christmas Day! But again there was no recognition, no cheer, no laughter, no mistletoe, no cheery voice, no laughter, no Christmas greeting. The house was as silent in the morning sunshine as it had been on the previous night. Breakfast was served in the dining-room; but neither Sir Rudolph nor his wife came down to it. The old butler told me that Sir Rudolph's breakfast was served to him in his study, and that her ladyship took hers in her own room.

There was nothing to be done but to make the best of it, to take my breakfast in solitude and dream of the thousand happy homes where, on Christmas morning, the long-parted met again, and there was nothing but gladness and love; and while the sunshine does not desert me, I can tell the brief story of my life—how and why I came to Ulladale.

My mother, Mabel Averil, came of a good old English family. When not very young she married Sir Rudolph, with her drawing-room and diamonds, and a large estate, and a young man, who was a very handsome young man, and a very handsome young man, and a very handsome young man.

"Lady Culmore," I said to her presently, "if you have a few minutes to spare, I should like to know what my duties are. Up to the present time I have not done anything for you."

able school in the Champs Elysees. He died suddenly of fever when I was four years old; and Mme. Dudevant, who was a kind-hearted woman, offered my mother a situation as English teacher in her school. My education was to be her recompense—and, truly, I received a first-class education. Had I been the daughter of a peeress instead of a poor English teacher, she could not have taken greater pains with me. On my life at the Parisian pension I need not dwell. My mother died when I was nearly eighteen, and after that I could never endure the place, it was so full of painful memories for me. Madame was very good; when I told her how unhappy I felt, she said the best thing would be for me to take a situation in England. She answered an advertisement for a young lady who spoke French, German and Italian, and was well acquainted with the literature of the three countries. It was essential that she should also be an excellent musician and a good singer. The salary proposed was most comfortable, and a comfortable, though exceedingly quiet home was offered.

"You will be very fortunate," said Madame Dudevant to me, "if you secure this."

Very fortunate indeed in a great many respects! The salary was one hundred per annum; the situation was that of companion to Lady Culmore, the wife of Sir Rudolph Culmore of Brooke, residing now at Ulladale, in Lancashire. Madame thought she had some reason for congratulating me, and I was only too delighted to have an opportunity of seeing England, the land I loved so dearly.

I landed on the twenty-third of December, the school and the gay sunny land of France. I was eighteen the same month. My experience of life was limited to that of a boarding school, and I lived very happy, never having lived with any. The only men I had seen were the masters who attended the school and the fathers and brothers of the boarders.

So, young and inexperienced, I was plunged into what I felt must be the very heart of a tragedy.

Mrs. Harper came to say that Lady Culmore was not very well, and would not be downstairs yet for some time, but that, if I liked, I could have the carriage and drive to Ulladale Church.

"Will no one else go to church, Mrs. Harper?" I asked.

"No one ever goes to church from here," she said sadly. "You will find this like very few other houses in the world, Miss Forster," and I felt that her words were true.

I told her how glad I should be to attend church. It was pleasant to think of going out into the sunshine amidst the holly and the snow.

Tears came to my eyes when I heard the chime of Christmas bells at last. There was no lack of evergreens in the church; the whole place seemed to be filled with them. Again I prayed heaven, for my Christmas gift—some one to love me. I thought much, as I knelt there; of the darkened household where no one went to church, and where they had forgotten Christmas Eve.

I drove home again when service was over, better and brighter for that my first visit to an English church; but, as I drew near Ulladale, the shadow fell over me again.

When I re-entered the house, I found that Sir Rudolph was out, and the butler told me that Lady Culmore wished to see me in her boudoir. The boudoir was a pretty little room leading from the drawing room and looking right over the mere. I went to her at once, feeling more curiosity than I cared to express. I found her very quiet, very sad, and pale. Evidently the terrible emotion of the pre-

vious evening had exhausted her. She wore a dress of purple velvet that set off her tall, graceful figure to the greatest advantage. There was the same deadly pallor on her face, the same curious expression of restraint, fear and longing in her eyes as there had been on the previous night. She held out her hand to me, half clinging to me, as I noticed afterward she clung to any one who was kind to her.

"You have been to church," she said, with a smile. "You found something like Christmas there?"

"A beautiful Christmas," I replied, "just as I had dreamed of it—all holly and laurel and mistletoe. And I love to hear the old Christmas carols."

"I have not been to church for so long. I almost forget what the services are like," she said.

"Do you not think it rather a pity not to go to church?" I ventured to ask. "It does not matter whether our trouble be of body or of mind, there is always comfort there."

"It would be useless for me," she said—"quite useless."

"But why?" I asked.

And her face paled as she answered: "If man can not forgive, how can Heaven forgive?"

"It is just the reverse," I answered. "It matters little about man forgiving. If Heaven forgives, but you—Oh, Lady Culmore, what a strange thing for you to say! What can you have found for such pardon to be required?"

They were imprudent words, and had I stopped to think, I should not have uttered them; but she did not take them amiss. I saw a faint motion of her hands, as though she would have said something, and then she turned away.

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We sat down, and if ever there was a study these two, husband and wife, presented one. I see the whole scene so plainly—the magnificent wax tapers, the glow of the fire as it fell on the pictures and statues, the bloom and fragrance of the hothouse flowers. I shall never forget how the firelight fell on the rich dress and jewels, the fair hair and beautiful face of Lady Culmore, and on the dark head and noble face of Sir Rudolph. Had she donned the rich robes and gems to please Sir Rudolph? If so, it was indeed labor in vain. After the first half-sneering look his eyes were carefully averted from her. I could see that plainly. It was not careless indifference; it was that he would not look at her. When he spoke to me his eyes met mine with a frank, open expression. If Lady Culmore addressed him, they were studiously fixed on anything but her.

As the evening proceeded, the wonder to me grew greater. When Sir Rudolph addressed his wife he seemed quite unconscious of the constraint and coldness that came into his voice, as she seemed quite unconscious of the pleading that came into hers. There was no attempt at conversation between them. I could not say that Sir Rudolph was wanting in civility or attention to the beautiful woman who looked at him with so passionate, entreating love-lit eyes; but he did only just what was useful—no more. There was more below the surface, unless I was greatly mistaken. I read shrinking aversion, something more than dislike—something that was painful in its passionate entreaty. Altogether I felt that I was in an atmosphere of mystery. The gloom of the house, the silence that reigned in the splendid rooms, the curious aspect of husband and wife, all confirmed the idea.

One little incident impressed me much. Lady Culmore wore a very handsome diamond bracelet, the gift of the setting of one of the stones was slightly damaged, and hurt her arm. She raised it suddenly, and I shall never forget the look that came over her husband.

"Rudolph," she said, "will you see to this bracelet for me?" And she looked at him with eyes so full of love that my wonder was that he did not embrace her on the spot and kiss the lovely glowing face.

She held out her beautifully rounded white arm to him, and showed him the little red mark caused by the broken glass. In doing so her hand touched him. It was noticeable, I believe, but I shall never forget the incident. It was over in a moment; but, while that moment lasted, the scene was terrible. His face changed, severe anger

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able school in the Champs Elysees. He died suddenly of fever when I was four years old; and Mme. Dudevant, who was a kind-hearted woman, offered my mother a situation as English teacher in her school. My education was to be her recompense—and, truly, I received a first-class education. Had I been the daughter of a peeress instead of a poor English teacher, she could not have taken greater pains with me. On my life at the Parisian pension I need not dwell. My mother died when I was nearly eighteen, and after that I could never endure the place, it was so full of painful memories for me. Madame was very good; when I told her how unhappy I felt, she said the best thing would be for me to take a situation in England. She answered an advertisement for a young lady who spoke French, German and Italian, and was well acquainted with the literature of the three countries. It was essential that she should also be an excellent musician and a good singer. The salary proposed was most comfortable, and a comfortable, though exceedingly quiet home was offered.

"You will be very fortunate," said Madame Dudevant to me, "if you secure this."

Very fortunate indeed in a great many respects! The salary was one hundred per annum; the situation was that of companion to Lady Culmore, the wife of Sir Rudolph Culmore of Brooke, residing now at Ulladale, in Lancashire. Madame thought she had some reason for congratulating me, and I was only too delighted to have an opportunity of seeing England, the land I loved so dearly.

I landed on the twenty-third of December, the school and the gay sunny land of France. I was eighteen the same month. My experience of life was limited to that of a boarding school, and I lived very happy, never having lived with any. The only men I had seen were the masters who attended the school and the fathers and brothers of the boarders.

So, young and inexperienced, I was plunged into what I felt must be the very heart of a tragedy.

Mrs. Harper came to say that Lady Culmore was not very well, and would not be downstairs yet for some time, but that, if I liked, I could have the carriage and drive to Ulladale Church.

"Will no one else go to church, Mrs. Harper?" I asked.

"No one ever goes to church from here," she said sadly. "You will find this like very few other houses in the world, Miss Forster," and I felt that her words were true.

I told her how glad I should be to attend church. It was pleasant to think of going out into the sunshine amidst the holly and the snow.

Tears came to my eyes when I heard the chime of Christmas bells at last. There was no lack of evergreens in the church; the whole place seemed to be filled with them. Again I prayed heaven, for my Christmas gift—some one to love me. I thought much, as I knelt there; of the darkened household where no one went to church, and where they had forgotten Christmas Eve.

I drove home again when service was over, better and brighter for that my first visit to an English church; but, as I drew near Ulladale, the shadow fell over me again.

When I re-entered the house, I found that Sir Rudolph was out, and the butler told me that Lady Culmore wished to see me in her boudoir. The boudoir was a pretty little room leading from the drawing room and looking right over the mere. I went to her at once, feeling more curiosity than I cared to express. I found her very quiet, very sad, and pale. Evidently the terrible emotion of the pre-

vious evening had exhausted her. She wore a dress of purple velvet that set off her tall, graceful figure to the greatest advantage. There was the same deadly pallor on her face, the same curious expression of restraint, fear and longing in her eyes as there had been on the previous night. She held out her hand to me, half clinging to me, as I noticed afterward she clung to any one who was kind to her.

"You have been to church," she said, with a smile. "You found something like Christmas there?"

"A beautiful Christmas," I replied, "just as I had dreamed of it—all holly and laurel and mistletoe. And I love to hear the old Christmas carols."

"I have not been to church for so long. I almost forget what the services are like," she said.

"Do you not think it rather a pity not to go to church?" I ventured to ask. "It does not matter whether our trouble be of body or of mind, there is always comfort there."

"It would be useless for me," she said—"quite useless."

"But why?" I asked.

And her face paled as she answered: "If man can not forgive, how can Heaven forgive?"

"It is just the reverse," I answered. "It matters little about man forgiving. If Heaven forgives, but you—Oh, Lady Culmore, what a strange thing for you to say! What can you have found for such pardon to be required?"

They were imprudent words, and had I stopped to think, I should not have uttered them; but she did not take them amiss. I saw a faint motion of her hands, as though she would have said something, and then she turned away.

"Lady Culmore," I said to her presently, "if you have a few minutes to spare, I should like to know what my duties are. Up to the present time I have not done anything for you."

again the door opened, and Sir Rudolph entered.

of his face lay in his mouth and eyes. The mouth was tender, proud and firm, its graceful lines unhidden by the dark mustache. I could never describe the beauty, the power, and the pathos of his eyes. When they looked at me, they were kindly, clear and bright; when they fell on Lady Culmore's face, I read aversion and fear in them.

Sir Rudolph held out his hand and bade me welcome, but his eyes were fixed on the thousand times more kindly than Lady Culmore's had been. He said that he hoped I should not find it dull—that he spent his own time in reading, boating, fishing and rambling over the hills. And all the time he spoke his eyes were fixed on me with the look of a frightened bird.

We sat down, and if ever there was a study these two, husband and wife, presented one. I see the whole scene so plainly—the magnificent wax tapers, the glow of the fire as it fell on the pictures and statues, the bloom and fragrance of the hothouse flowers. I shall never forget how the firelight fell on the rich dress and jewels, the fair hair and beautiful face of Lady Culmore, and on the dark head and noble face of Sir Rudolph. Had she donned the rich robes and gems to please Sir Rudolph? If so, it was indeed labor in vain. After the first half-sneering look his eyes were carefully averted from her. I could see that plainly. It was not careless indifference; it was that he would not look at her. When he spoke to me his eyes met mine with a frank, open expression. If Lady Culmore addressed him, they were studiously fixed on anything but her.

As the evening proceeded, the wonder to me grew greater. When Sir Rudolph addressed his wife he seemed quite unconscious of the constraint and coldness that came into his voice, as she seemed quite unconscious of the pleading that came into hers. There was no attempt at conversation between them. I could not say that Sir Rudolph was wanting in civility or attention to the beautiful woman who looked at him with so passionate, entreating love-lit eyes; but he did only just what was useful—no more. There was more below the surface, unless I was greatly mistaken. I read shrinking aversion, something more than dislike—something that was painful in its passionate entreaty. Altogether I felt that I was in an atmosphere of mystery. The gloom of the house, the silence that reigned in the splendid rooms, the curious aspect of husband and wife, all confirmed the idea.

One little incident impressed me much. Lady Culmore wore a very handsome diamond bracelet, the gift of the setting of one of the stones was slightly damaged, and hurt her arm. She raised it suddenly, and I shall never forget the look that came over her husband.

"Rudolph," she said, "will you see to this bracelet for me?" And she looked at him with eyes so full of love that my wonder was that he did not embrace her on the spot and kiss the lovely glowing face.

She held out her beautifully rounded white arm to him, and showed him the little red mark caused by the broken glass. In doing so her hand touched him. It was noticeable, I believe, but I shall never forget the incident. It was over in a moment; but, while that moment lasted, the scene was terrible. His face changed, severe anger

flamed from his eyes. He shook the white snow from his coat as though it had been a snake. He cried in a voice so cold and hard that I recognized it with difficulty; and, shuddering, white, trembling, he stepped away from him.

"Rudolph," he said, "I hope you will make yourself as happy as you can."

He was gone before I had time to reply.

Lady Culmore stood quite still for a few moments. She tore the jewels from her hair, from her neck, from her arms, and dashed them upon the ground.

"This is horrible," she cried, "that he will not touch me? Oh, heaven, how hateful, so loathsome as that!"

Suddenly she remembered my presence, and looked at me with a wild, passionate despair that touched my very heart. I went to pick up the

beautiful gems strewn upon the ground. I laid them, a glittering, magnificent mass, on the table. She came up to them with a half-shamed gasp.

"How passionate I am, Miss Forster," she said. "What can you think of me?"

"I have had no time to think at all yet," I replied.

Then she walked to one of the large mirrors, and stood before it for some minutes in silence. "Was Forster, come here," she said, after she had looked long and earnestly at herself.

I went to her, and we stood side by side. She regarded me critically.

"You are beautiful," she said, slowly. "You are dark as the daughters of sunny Spain; all your eyes are like purple hearts—yes; but you are not so beautiful as I am." She turned to me fiercely and clutched my hands.

"Judge—tell me—do you not find a woman whom you could love?"

"Yes," I replied, quickly, half frightened by her strange manner.

"Look at my arm," she continued. "If any other man had been in this place, he would have kissed it; and he hung it from his neck."

I had no time to answer. The foot-steps came in to clear the table, and I went back to my room.

CHAPTER II.

What manner of house, what manner of people were these? What was wrong under this roof? What was the shadow which I had been told had been bright and happy? I could not bear the mystery and novelty had so excited and bewildered me that I could not rest, I could not sleep. Surely no one had ever spent a stranger Christmas Eve than this.

I drew aside the hangings. Ah, me, the snow, white world that lay outside, the beauty of the Christmas night-sky, the hoariness of the stars, the moon and golden stars! I could not bear the bells, although I knew they would chime until past midnight, and I knew how the music of them would rise and fall over the hills. I should have wept in sheer desperate pity for my own loneliness had it not been that my thoughts were so deeply engrossed with the mystery of Ulladale.

I went to sleep at last, thinking of the beautiful face of the wife, of the hoariness of the husband wondering what shadow, what sorrow lay between them.

Christmas morning dawned bright and beautiful. I drew near the window and looked out in wonder and delight. There lay the mere, known as Ulla Water, and the grounds of the estate sloped down to the very edge. It was a beautiful lake, on which in summer the water-lilies slept, green reeds and sedges grew on the banks, and in many places tall, green trees dipped into the water. There was almost every variety of tree in the grounds—copper-beech and silver-beech, stately oak and graceful lime, trembling aspen and spreading walnut, the pride of the place being a grand old cedar. In its mantle of snow it stood so strikingly against the sky, the scene was most striking. The robins were flying about in search of food, and the lazarus was in full flower. My heart and spirit rose. It could not be all misery in such a world as this, such a beautiful world, dimmed only by man and sin!

I went down-stairs, thinking that, if Christmas Eve were forgotten, surely, being Christmas, they would remember her Christmas Day! But again there was no recognition, no cheer, no laughter, no mistletoe, no cheery voice, no laughter, no Christmas greeting. The house was as silent in the morning sunshine as it had been on the previous night. Breakfast was served in the dining-room; but neither Sir Rudolph nor his wife came down to it. The old butler told me that Sir Rudolph's breakfast was served to him in his study, and that her ladyship took hers in her own room.

There was nothing to be done but to make the best of it, to take my breakfast in solitude and dream of the thousand happy homes where, on Christmas morning, the long-parted met again, and