CHAPTER 1.

"Esther, you will repent it some day! Pulcie Levesque is no mean rival, and Fercy is only a man!" "Just so, Herta, and being a man he

is strong enough to be trusted. "You think so?"

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"I am sure of it!" "I hope you may be right, dear; but If he should prove weak enough to be

"Then I should be strong enough to ferget him, Herta; but your tears are groundless. I know l'evey too well to

"Willful Queen Bether, you must have

The girl laughed as she got up, and beauty her elbow on the low, wide, mantelpiece. Queen Bether! In truth there was something queenly about this round limbed, frank eved English girlsomething fresh, and pure, and stately, tomething that was far beyond bounty. Her sister, Mrs. Hardinge, looking up of her, felt this in a vague sort of way, She herself was a handsome, placid

woman, with a splendid figure, which she draped to perfection, and a low, lazy voice which most men found charming. She had married early and well, to her two and her family's satisfaction. She was auxious that her favorite sieter should make an equally good and suitalde choice, but the girl was intractable. Settling herself in her chair, Mrs. Hardinge looked up at her now, and wond red a little that with such a fair face the girl had not done better for herself than she had. Even her chance such as it was she did not seem in-

was not needed, the fire was so bright and clear. Full in its warm glow stood Bother Durrant. She was dressed for dinner, and the low ent bodice and eding ing skirts showed her tall figure to the hest advantage. Women were, as a rule, a little undecided as to her claims to Men called her lovely. And so she was: a tall. handsome girl, as utterly mulike the nineteenth century drawing room belle as the Venus of Mile would be unlike one, if that exquisite piece of sculpture were endowed with life, "Queen Esther," her brother Dick had christened her long ngo, and the name had clung to her.

"Esther." Mrs. Hardinge said, presently, "I wish you had not chosen to wear at white dress to night. As you stand there con would do for a frontispiece to Wilkie Collins' Woman in White." "Hut it is not white, Herta." "It is not far from it. And you ared

"Poor me!" Esther laughed "Shall I ever please you. I wonder?" She swept across the room to the lardiniore and picked a deep red rose, with Its proffy fresh leaves about it. As she was fastoning it in the bosom of her dress the door beside her opened, and a

servant announced, "Mr. Stanlepe; Mr. Just the faintest tinge of color crept Into Esther Imreant's face. She turn ed and met the two men on the three-

Mrs. Hardinge, coming slowly forward. Watched her greeting of them enriously, "You are late, Hugh," she said to the older of the two; "we were beginning to desprir of seeing you to night,

It is Stanhopo's fault, Mrs. Hardinge, that we have been so unfortunate as to keep you waiting. He made us both late for the 5 10 down train."

Percy Stanhope his easer eyes on Esther Burant's face heard his friend's rejoinder without defending himpelf It had not been his fault wholly but just then he did not care to explain that to their heatres. He had thought for nothing but Bether Durcent's exquisite amiling face. How it had changed in the past few seconds! The tember eyes were like stars, and a pule pink came and went in the pure

Mrs. Hardinge, while she talked to Hogh Passing, was get keenly allee to the little telefour in which her sister to impor the principal attraction,

all will be a pity if she spulls it all," sio nes thinking, "Int she is so result" The dinner was a success, as Mrs. Herding's little dinners usually were, The master of the house was not presort the solden was at home; in fact, and his absence was hardly regretted by his handsome, low-voked wife, Perhaps he general as much, and resented it Postages he was as indifferent to ber he she was to him, Whatever the cause inicht he, dasper Hardinge was oftener to be found at his rooms in London than in his luxurious house in Kent,

As the little party left the dining rown Mrs. Unrdinge first with Mr. Cleming Percy Stanhope put his hami With you glad to have me back

"Very what Percyl" The close out blonds head bent lower even the dunky one.

"The time has seemed so long to me my darling. I have chated like a lion to the there weeks. I have not lived the hour worth the living since I left you! Only think, litty, it will be three weeks to morrow since I was down

The girl's hand tightened on his sleeve; her heart throbbing warmly under the dainty rose gave a great bound of joy. This man was her idol; she loved him as the "good love Heaven." He was, in her eyes, the noblest, the truest, the best of men. To have won his love was the crown of her life, and she often wondered how she had deserved such

Mrs. Hardinge, discreetly blind and deat, swept on, and tall, Hugh Fleming walked solemnly beside her. He was, however, neither blind nor deaf. He could not eatch the exact words that were being whispered behind him, but he heard enough to make the rest easy

"Have you missed me?" Percy Stan-hope urged, holding his companion back as the drawing-room door swung open for an instant. "Tell me Etty."

His handsome face flushed, his blue eyes glowed. Dreadfully, Percy! Don't I always miss you when you are away from

"My bonny Esther! How could I live without you? Was ever a woman so loved as you?"

The girl smiled up at him, a raptursmile that had the shine of tears "Will it last, Percy?" "While my life lasts, sweetheart."

She swept him a low, laughing courtesy, and opened the drawing-room door sharply to find her sister buried among the cushions of her chair by the fire, and Hugh Fleming standing by one of the side-tables, examining a Sevres laque as if he had the genuine "china fever" strong on him. He was standing full in the light,

and, as she came up to him, she was quite startled by the rigid pallor of his face. They were old friends, these two, had been bon comrades for years, be fore, when Esther was a tiny child, in short frocks, and sashes, "Are you ill to-night, Hugh?"

asked, pausing beside him. "Ill? No! What a question!" "But you look so pale! De tell me; have you been hearing anything to trouble you?"

For an instant his keen eyes looked down into hers. Then he turned away "I have heard no news of any sort, good, bad, or indifferent, and I am as

well as the average human being ever "Bether!" Percy Stanhope called out. He was sitting on a low stool almost at Mrs. Hardinge's feet. He affected

these low sents and careless attitudes and somehow they became him. "It is true that Miss Levesque is coming here on a visit?" "Perfectly true. I expect her to mor-

"Is that the niece of old Durer Levesque. of Lombard street?" Hugh Fleming

"Yes," Esther replied. "Don't you remember her? She came home with me from school one summer, and you told Dick that you thought her a horribly ngly little thing."

"Did 1? I dare say. I had always "Oh, but you were wrong! She has grown beautiful." "Esther," Mrs. Hardinge said, "you

ere so easily impressed! Hugh may see no cause to change his opinion even Esther smiled at this covert warning, have given me yours!" and looked across at Percy, a very

ad and happy light in her eyes. She need have no fear, she thought; he would be true. "Beauty," Percy Stanhope said, ora-

cularly, "is not to be defined by more words or even opinions. It is beyond de-Hugh Fleming laughed and shrugged

"You are such a true priest of Venus. Percychat rour judgment passes alet without question."

Don't sneer, old fellow! No one will east that 'soft impeachment' upon you. As for me. I am proud of it, I'll allow 'La beaute du diable' is, in my eyes, the most potent charm.

A look, almost of disgust, crossed Hugh Floming's dark face. Esther saw it and her own colored hotly. Who was Hugh Firming, she thought, that he should dare, even by a look, to disparage her

"It is to be hoped that poor Dulcie will find others to admire her as warmly as Esther does,"Mrs. Hardinge said, softly, "It is almost beyond expectation, but it would be such a boon if she could only settle well."

"(th. Herta, how you talk! One would think, to hear you talk, that women were only born to get rich husbands,"

"Well, my dear, those who are not born to get them have the worst of it." Now, Mrs. Hardinge," Percy Stanhope laughed, "in the name of King Capid, I charge you with treason! What would younger sons of 'younger sons' like myself do if every pretty girl want-

ed a rich husband?" Exactly as they do now, I suppose, lank out for the pretty girls who do not know what is good for them," It was a rather biting speech! Even the soft cooing voice could not sweeten it; and there was quite a chill silence in

the room for a few minutes. Esther was the first to break it. "Pocause Dulcie has lost her money, Berta thinks her the most miserable of girls! I am sure Dulcie herself would

"that Durer Levesque was reported to be immensely rich, and I understood that he had adopted his niece."

"Yes, he did adopt her, but that failure of Fenton's has rained him almost, Dulcie will not have a farthing now, "Ah," Percy Stanhope said with a shrug, "now I understand! I had not heard of old Durer's ill-fortune! You may well say poor Duicie, Mrs. Hardinge," "She is poor, utterly, hopelessly poor," that lady repeated, placidly. "She talked of going out as a governess, but fisther would not hear of that. She comes to us instead for a time. It will be very trying for me to have two young women to chaperone, but Esther

is so wilful one must give her her way." Hugh Fleming, looking down at Esther, felt her heart throb; somehow this tall, beautiful girl, with her "talking eyes," had quite a knack of disturb

A little while afterward, when Mrs. Mardinge and Hugh were deep in a same of cards, Esther stole away to one game of cards, Esther stole away to one of the bay windows, to which retreat d'ercy was not long in following her. The heavy curtains swept down to the floor, making the tiny cushioned alcore into a miniature room. Esther had sunk down upon the wide window seat, and with her head against the frame, was leeking out into the night. It was quiet, and little mean of distress—"I am half-famished, Etty."

"Poor girl! I'll drive you home as fast as I can."

Laughing and talking, the two went along the platform, and down the stone ateps to the road below, where a boy was holding the ponies' heads.

chill, star-light. The level grass before the window was white with hoar frost; the trim privet hedge at the bottom of the lawn looked like a solid wall; beyond

it was a dense, gray mist.

"For all small mercies make us thankful." Percy ejaculated slipping down on one knee beside her, and laying his head against her arm. "I did think those two could never settle down comfortably to

"It was your own little game' that was troubling you, not theirs, I fancy,"
the girl laughed, flushing warmly at the
touch of those crisp yellow locks.
"Wise Esther, you are right!"

As he knelt beside her the rose in her bosom almost brushed his lips. He put out his arms and gathered her to him "I am like the dove Noah sent out,

Etty; I have come back to my refuge weary with wandering."
"You are a dreadfully ill-behaved dove! Look how you are crushing my He laughed, and pressed his lips

against her arm, just where the plain gold armiet she wore made a dimple in the warm, soft flesh.
"I shall behave worse still if you look at me like that."

"How am I looking?"

"As no one in all the wide world but Esther Durrant could look." "Do you know, Percy!"-pushing him back a little, her two hands on his shoulders, the faintest rose-color coming and going in her cheeks, almost with every breath, "Berta has been telling me that you are sure to fall in love with

The last few words came slowly, almest as if it hurt her to say them-"Esther! What does the woman

"Oh, don't be angry, Percy! She meant nothing unkind, I am certain. She is always like that, doubtful and cautious. And you are fond of beautiful women, you know"-this with a wistful look "I am fond of one beautiful woman, my darling, and of one only! What are all the houris to me now? I have you. He laid his cheek against hers, holding her tightly in his strong arms, He had told her the simple truth. He did love her-passionately, almost fiercely-

as it was in his nature to love. He had leved other women before her, but never quite with the same love. Just as she herself was different from those other women, the love he offered her was different from that which he had given to "And you were actually getting jest-

ous," he whispered, tenderly. "You did not wait for cause. You took my faithlessness quite for granted." "I did not. It was Berta."

"I have nothing to do with your sister. Jasper Hardinge must cultivate her organ of faith, if she has one. It is your doubting that grieves me; and you did doubt, so don't deny it. How shall I punish you for it?" By proving me to have been wrong!"

He looked fondly into the beautiful face lying against his arm. "Esther you don't know how I love

you. You have no more idea of the strength of my love than a Laplander could have of the heat of the tropics. You are more like a beautiful white statue than a woman. I sometimes wonder if you have a heart."

"I have not," she answered, "unless" hiding her cheek against him-"you

which Hugh Fleming heard plainly and the sound made him drop his cards in a heap under Mrs. Hardinge's eyes. much to her secret amusement. "You have had that, my dearest, a year or more," Percy rejoined. "Do you

remember Mrs. Crote's croquet party?" "Of course"-with a laugh-"and poor Ada Wright's dismay when she sent her ball across Lord Payneton's gonty feet. How that poor girl suffered at her mother's hand for that!"

"Not one thousandth part as much as I have suffered at yours ever since. You won my heart that day, Etty, and I half believe you did it on purpose." "And what if I did? You could not call it dishonest; for"-rising at the

scurd of chairs moving in the outer reem- exchange is no robbery, you

CHAPTER II.

It was on a wild, wintry day in Murch that Dulcie Levesque first saw The Elms. The gentlemen were out riding. Mrs. Hardinge had gone to see a friend and had not returned, and Esther herself drove the pony carriage to the station for Dulcie.

The Elms stood back from the road; it was a long, rambling, many-windowed house, but with nothing very pretty about it unless one admired the ingenuity of the architect, who had crowded in windows where one never thought of looking for them. There were two entrances, one at the end of an alley of limes, which led away, by a curve, to the paddock; and the front or grand entrance with its wide, shallow steps, and a huge door, which looked too heavy to be opened. Far in the distance rose green hills, and all between lay an open verdant country.

The station was fully three miles away. Esther whipped up her ponies smartly, as she saw the smoke of the coming train curling faint and blue in the distance. She was just in time-The carriage-doors were being opened as she sprang up the steps onto the platform. In another moment she had seen Dulcie. She was looking out of a carriage window, evidently in search of some one to meet her.

At sight of Esther she gave a smile of relief, and stood back to allow a gentleman behind her to get out. He prused to help her and her wraps onto the platform, then with a bow he turned and walked out of the station.

Tears of delight were in Esther Durrant's eyes as she held out, both hands in welcome to her favorite.

"It is good to see you again," she said, looking down into the small face that dimpled and flushed all over at the warmth of her welcome. cold journey you must have had, and"with a long, critical glance—"How well you are looking!"

"It was dreadfully cold, and oh"-

veling companion stood on the side h, talking to a smart groom in livery, stepped back to make way for the girls as they came down, and then Esther Durrant saw his face clearly the first time. She did not know im; he was a stranger to her. He alking to a groom of Lord Harvey's,

so perhaps he was a visitor at Abbey-lands. They were always having visi-tors there since Lord Harvey's return, "What a handsome face!" she thought, as she just lifted her eyes to it in pass-

"Do you know who he is?" Dulcie asked, as they took their places, and Esther gathered up the reins for a "No, I never saw him before. A visi-

tor at Lord Harvey's, perhaps.' "Is that some place near?" "Yes. Near and 'yet so far,' " Esther said, with a smile. "It is two miles, if you count by miles, from our place: but, for any communication there is between

of the Blue Nile." "How is that? Are they so grand?" "Yes, and so exclusive. Lady Harvey one of the proudest women in Eng-

us, it might as well be on the banks

They were going briskly along be tween the bare hedges, and past little patches of wooded land, and tiny ponds that looked dark and sullen in the cold March light. Here and there the huge black arms of a mill whirled round to the lash of the high wind, a grotesque blot against the sky. The trees were leafless. the fields bare ,and little heaps of dust and leaves went wheeling and tossing along the dry rough road. This dust troubled Dulcie horribly. It made her cheeks tingle and her eyes smart.

Esther laughed at her comical expres-"What a luxurious little thing you are, Dulcie! Don't you know that a peck of March dust is worth a king's

"So I have heard. but I should prefer the ransom if I had my choice. Oh, Etty"-with a little sigh of longing-"it is good to be rich."

'Perhaps so! I never was rich, so I can't say, and I never shall be, I sup-"No! But you are so content. De you remember what old Croix said of you

at school? 'Mademoisele est charmante, charmante, mais tranquille!" "Poor old Croix! 1 often wonder what has become of him! How we tensed him, to be sure!"

"Oh, he died!" Dulcie Levesque returned, indifferently. "See!" Esther said, after a pause, drawing up her ponies by the side of the

hedge. "That is Abbeylands?" She rose and pointed with her whip across the fields to a house that stood on a slight eminence fronting the south, with the red glint of the March sunshine on all its windows a huge, ir regular block of buildings, turret shaped as to the center, branching out into lerg, lofty, stone-fronted wings, and the sweet things he had ever said to with that halo of old days about it so me since I knew him, and the exact dear to English hearts.

"The Harveys had lived there for ages. A fine place, is it not?" Dulcie was using her eyes industrious ly, and she, too, thought it "a fine

"No wonder Lord Harvey is proud," Dulcie answered. "I should be proud, too, if I owned a home like that. I only wish I did."

wee creature." Esther said, turning to smile on the smallfigure beside her. muffled from chin to toes in a traveling ulster of pearl-gray freize. "You don't suppose that you would be a shade happier in a big house like that than you might be in a small one."

Dulcie leaned back, and smoothed the hair out of her eyes. It was a trick she had, and there was something quaint and childish in the action. Soft curling rings of hair they were that crept from under the brim of her plush hat, and lay lovingly on the round, wide, white

"You don't understand," she said: "you are so different from me, and from every one else, I think." "Am 1? Then that accounts for our friendship, doesn't it? 'Contrasts are the best matches,' they say."

They passed a few more barren fields, then drove through a bit of rough, thoroughly Kentish lane, with high banks on either side, where snow drops, pale and golden primrose, were hiding. and presently came to the wide, low gates of The Elms-

"What a funny house!" Dulcie eried. springing down, and shivering a little under all her wraps, for the sunshine had died out by then, and the wind was rising keener and stronger. "It seems all windows, And oh, Etty, what a splendid old elm!"

That is quite a famous tree, Dulcie; I must introduce you to it presently. But come, hurry in now. Have you fergotten that you are hungry?" "No that I have not. It is a

very pleasant want, I can assure you." When Mrs. Hardinge came home, she found the two girls in Esther's room, lounging back in low chairs befere the fire, and talking as girls only can when they have known each other for years and have been parted for a white. A rosy light from the west came in through the wide window, and mingled with the red glow of the fire.

Esther was in her usual morningdress of dark gray, brightened with scarlet. Dulcie Levesque had taken off her traveling-dress, and wore a buff crahmere dressing-gown, handsomely braided and quilted with soft, warm-colored silk. She had let her hair down, and it lay about her neck and face in little, crisp baby curls. One felt tempted to run one's fingers through them, they were so shining and so dainty. Her slippered feet were on the fender; one cheek was pressed against the cushion of her chair so that the other caught the light-such as it was-full on its rounded curves.

Mrs. Hardinge swept into the room in her rich furs, and at sight of her Esther got up, and Dulcie half rose, a trifle

Esther half feared that her sister would not welcome her friend as heartily as she could wish. But it pleased Mrs. And so indeed she had; for, if the

ipot, which stood on droll carved lers. "We'll have a cosy tea up here by ourselves, and then we can dress for dinner in comfort, Berta."

"Very well. Save a cup for me. I'll be back shortly." When the mistress of the house had departed, Dulcie settled herself among her cushions with a little air of relief. "What a wonderfully fine woman your sister is, Etty. She has the carriage Esther smiled, and went on with her

"I think myself she is very handsome." "She is not a bit like you, though." "No"-with a laugh. "Of course, I know that; I am not nearly so good-

"You are a great deal better-looking, in my opinion.

"But you don't count, Dulcie! You see you are fonder of me than of Berta." "Yes, a vast deal," was the frank rejoinder. Meanwhile Esther had made ready her little feast, and they sat and sipped her tea in luxurious warmth and

The light had quite died out of the sky now. The bare gaunt arms of a beech that showed through the windowpares assumed a spectral shape in the gleom. Somewhere, in the cold without doors, a colony of rooks were cawing loudly; and the wind could be heard howling across the country. The darkness outside, and the wind and the cold, only made the cozy room seem cozier. the hot fire more welcome.

"Esther," Dulcie said presently, laying her cup down, and looking across at her friend with a smile in her eyes "what about this lover of yours? Is it quite true that you are engaged?" "I believe so."

The girl's face flushed so hotly as she said it that the smile deepened perceptibly in Dulcie's eyes. "Well, tell me all about him, dear." "Oh, there is nothing to tell, Dulcie! I-really-" stammering.

"You are in love with him, I hope. "Of course-" with a little stare of surprise and a hotter blush than ever. Then there must be 'heaps' to tell. How did it come about? Who is he-or rather, what is he? And is he goodlooking, really, or only 'nice'?"

Esther laughed and held up her hands. "What a shower of questions! I declare I had forgotten what the first one was before you had got to the last of "Oh, then, I'll begin again! How-"

"No, no!"-in meck dismay. "It would take me a week to answer them all. You will see him to-night, and then you can form your own epinion of him." "Oh, yea." coolly: "I should do that, of course, no matter what you said about him beforehand! But you really are very uncommunicative, Etty. I came quite prepared to hear a wonder.ulstory, equal to Juliet's and the immortal Laura's, and there you sit as dumb as a stone. If it were my case now, I should have told you, by this time, half

words in which he asked me to marry "Oh, no, you would not, Dulcie: that is, if you loved him really. I could not talk about Percy like that to any one." "Oh!"-with a keen, quizzical side

kok, and a little droll smile. Then Esther rose, and going to a little fancy-box on the dressing table, she took from it a large silver locket attach

"That is his likeness," she said, softly, eaming back to the hearth, and laying the locket open on her friend's hand. As Dulcie leaned forward to examine it, Esther slipped down on the rug at had changed at sight of that pictured face, in its plain silver setting, till Esther half wondered if her own eyes were not playing her some trick. It could not be she thought, that Dulcie's face had really looked like that. It was some shadow of the firelight that

had deceived her eyes for an instant. Surprise-dismay-anguish swept over the piquant, blooming face, which the red light showed out so plainly. The bloom all died out of it; the arch look faded. In their place came a stony pallor, a rigid look that was woeful. At last she looked up, and caught Esther's surprise1 eyes watching her.

She smiled wanly, and held up her hand, as if to shield her face from the fire-glow. "ile is good-looking Etty. I don't think I ever saw a handsomer fare." "But he is better than that," Esther answered, with fond, shy pride in her lover. "He is so noble and faithful, and-and-tender, Dulcie!"

Dulcie shivered a little. "Is he, my darling? I am very glad. He could hardly be too good for Queen Esther"-softly smoothing the fair cheek so close to her own. And then, leughing a little harshly-"I only hope he is not a veritable King Ahasuerus to your Esther! He did not have another queen before you, did he, Etty?"

"I don't understand you." "You remember-don't you?-that King Ahasuerus had put away one wife because she had a will of her own before ever he took unto himself the fair Jewish maiden!" "Percy never had a wife.

"No"-with a mocking laugh; "but ! may have had a sweetheart, Ettv." "I think not. I am sure not!"-a little coldly, rising and putting her locket carefully back into its case.

Dulcie answered nothing to that. She seemed suddenly to have grown quite chilly, for she crouched forward nearer the fire, with her elbows on her knees, and her chin buried in her little pink paims. Once or twice she closed her eyes as if they smarted, and it even seemed as if there were a kind of moisture on the long fringes. But that could scarcely have been, for Dulcie had often boasted that she had cried as little in her life as "if she had been a boy." Presently Mrs. Hardinge came back for her tea. The gas was lighted, and

the talk went on again briskly; but never once was Esther's lover men-Dulcie's boxes had been taken iuto Esther's room, and the two girls dressed together. Mrs. Hardinge—her own toilet made came back to superintend theirs,

quiet as usual but critical. are determined I shall not lack to-night, Berta." What is

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"What dress must I put on to-night,
Berta?" Esther asked turning round—a
gleaning white vision, bare-armed and
bare-shouldered—from the glass.
"Your blue cashmere, I think, and I'll
lead you my ruby fan; it will go nicely

of all descriptions ceatly and promptly done at "The Warder" office.

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