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| XXIII  Edna’s father was in the city and had been with them several days. She  was not very warmly or deeply attached to him, but they had certain tastes in common, and when together they were companionable. His coming was in the nature of a welcome disturbance; it seemed to furnish a new direction for her emotions.  He had come to purchase a wedding gift for his daughter, Janet, and an  outfit for himself in which he might make a creditable appearance at her marriage. Mr. Pontellier had selected the bridal gift, as every one immediately connected with him always deferred to his taste in such matters. And his suggestions on the question of dress—which too often assumes the nature of a problem were of inestimable value to his father-in-law. But for the past few days the old gentleman had been upon Edna’s hands, and in his society she was becoming acquainted with a new set of sensations. He had been a colonel in the Confederate army, and still maintained, with the title, the military bearing which had always accompanied it. His hair and mustache were white and silky, emphasizing the rugged bronze of his face. He was tall and thin, and wore his coats padded, which gave a fictitious breadth and depth to his shoulders and chest. Edna and her father looked very distinguished together, and excited a good deal of notice during their perambulations. Upon his arrival she began by introducing him to her atelier and making a sketch of him. He took the whole matter very seriously. If her talent had been ten-fold greater than it was, it would not have surprised him, convinced as he was that he had bequeathed to all of his daughters the germs of a masterful capability, which only depended upon their own efforts to be directed toward successful achievement.  Before her pencil he sat rigid and unflinching, as he had faced the cannon’s mouth in days gone by. He resented the intrusion of the children, who gaped with wondering eyes at him, sitting so stiff up there in their mother’s bright atelier. When they drew near he motioned them away with an expressive action of the foot, loath to disturb the fixed lines of his countenance, his arms, or his rigid shoulders.  Edna, anxious to entertain him, invited Mademoiselle Reisz to meet  him, having promised him a treat in her piano playing; but Mademoiselle declined the invitation. So together they attended a soiree musicale at the Ratignolles’. Monsieur and Madame Ratignolle made much of the Colonel, installing him as the guest of honor and engaging him at once to dine with them the following Sunday, or any day which he might select. Madame coquetted with him in the most captivating and naive manner, with eyes, gestures, and a profusion of compliments, till the Colonel’s old head felt thirty years younger on his padded shoulders. Edna marveled, not comprehending. She herself was almost devoid of coquetry.  There were one or two men whom she observed at the soiree musicale;  but she would never have felt moved to any kittenish display to attract  their notice—to any feline or feminine wiles to express herself toward them. Their personality attracted her in an agreeable way. Her fancy selected them, and she was glad when a lull in the music gave them an opportunity to meet her and talk with her. Often on the street the glance of strange eyes had lingered in her memory, and sometimes had disturbed her.  Mr. Pontellier did not attend these soirees musicales. He considered  them bourgeois and found more diversion at the club. To Madame  Ratignolle he said the music dispensed at her soirees was too “heavy,” too far beyond his untrained comprehension. His excuse flattered her. But she disapproved of Mr. Pontellier’s club, and she was frank enough to tell Edna so.  “It’s a pity Mr. Pontellier doesn’t stay home more in the evenings. I  think you would be more—well, if you don’t mind my saying it—more  united, if he did.”  “Oh! dear no!” said Edna, with a blank look in her eyes. “What should  I do if he stayed home? We wouldn’t have anything to say to each other.”  She had not much of anything to say to her father, for that matter; but  he did not antagonize her. She discovered that he interested her, though  she realized that he might not interest her long; and for the first time in  her life she felt as if she were thoroughly acquainted with him. He kept  her busy serving him and ministering to his wants. It amused her to do so. She would not permit a servant or one of the children to do anything for him which she might do herself. Her husband noticed, and thought it was the expression of a deep filial attachment which he had never suspected.  The Colonel drank numerous “toddies” during the course of the day,  which left him, however, imperturbed. He was an expert at concocting strong drinks. He had even invented some, to which he had given fantastic names, and for whose manufacture he required diverse ingredients that it devolved upon Edna to procure for him.  When Doctor Mandelet dined with the Pontelliers on Thursday he  could discern in Mrs. Pontellier no trace of that morbid condition which her husband had reported to him. She was excited and in a manner radiant. She and her father had been to the race course, and their thoughts when they seated themselves at table were still occupied with the events of the afternoon, and their talk was still of the track. The Doctor had not kept pace with turf affairs. He had certain recollections of racing in what he called “the good old times” when the Lecompte stables flourished, and he drew upon this fund of memories so that he might not be left out and seem wholly devoid of the modern spirit. But he failed to impose upon the Colonel, and was even far from impressing him with this trumped-up knowledge of bygone days. Edna had staked her father on his last venture, with the most gratifying results to both of them. Besides, they had met some very charming people, according to the Colonel’s impressions. Mrs. Mortimer Merriman and Mrs. James Highcamp, who were there with Alcee Arobin, had joined them and had enlivened the hours in a fashion  that warmed him to think of.  Mr. Pontellier himself had no particular leaning toward horseracing,  and was even rather inclined to discourage it as a pastime, especially when he considered the fate of that blue-grass farm in Kentucky. He endeavored, in a general way, to express a particular disapproval, and only succeeded in arousing the ire and opposition of his father-in-law. A pretty dispute followed, in which Edna warmly espoused her father’s cause and the Doctor remained neutral.  He observed his hostess attentively from under his shaggy brows, and  noted a subtle change which had transformed her from the listless woman he had known into a being who, for the moment, seemed palpitant with the forces of life. Her speech was warm and energetic. There was no repression in her glance or gesture. She reminded him of some beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun.  The dinner was excellent. The claret was warm and the champagne was  cold, and under their beneficent influence the threatened unpleasantness melted and vanished with the fumes of the wine.  Mr. Pontellier warmed up and grew reminiscent. He told some amusing plantation experiences, recollections of old Iberville and his youth, when he hunted ‘possum in company with some friendly darky; thrashed the pecan trees, shot the grosbec, and roamed the woods and fields in mischievous idleness.  The Colonel, with little sense of humor and of the fitness of things,  related a somber episode of those dark and bitter days, in which he had  acted a conspicuous part and always formed a central figure. Nor was the Doctor happier in his selection, when he told the old, ever new and curious story of the waning of a woman’s love, seeking strange, new channels, only to return to its legitimate source after days of fierce unrest. It was one of the many little human documents which had been unfolded to him during his long career as a physician. The story did not seem especially to impress Edna. She had one of her own to tell, of a woman who paddled away with her lover one night in a pirogue and never came back. They were lost amid the Baratarian Islands, and no one ever heard of them or found trace of them from that day to this. It was a pure invention. She said that Madame Antoine had related it to her. That, also, was an invention. Perhaps it was a dream she had had. But every glowing word seemed real to those who listened. They could feel the hot breath of the Southern night; they could hear the long sweep of the pirogue through the glistening moonlit water, the beating of birds’ wings, rising startled from among the reeds in the salt-water pools; they could see the faces of the lovers, pale, close together, rapt in oblivious forgetfulness, drifting into the unknown.  The champagne was cold, and its subtle fumes played fantastic tricks  with Edna’s memory that night.  Outside, away from the glow of the fire and the soft lamplight, the  night was chill and murky. The Doctor doubled his old-fashioned cloak  across his breast as he strode home through the darkness. He knew his fellow-creatures better than most men; knew that inner life which so seldom unfolds itself to unanointed\* eyes. He was sorry he had accepted Pontellier’s invitation. He was growing old, and beginning to need rest and an imperturbed spirit. He did not want the secrets of other lives thrust upon him.  “I hope it isn’t Arobin,” he muttered to himself as he walked. “I hope to heaven it isn’t Alcee Arobin.”  XXIV  Edna and her father had a warm, and almost violent dispute upon the  subject of her refusal to attend her sister’s wedding. Mr. Pontellier declined to interfere, to interpose either his influence or his authority. He was following Doctor Mandelet’s advice, and letting her do as she liked. The Colonel reproached his daughter for her lack of filial kindness and respect, her want of sisterly affection and womanly consideration. His arguments were labored and unconvincing. He doubted if Janet would accept any excuse—forgetting that Edna had offered none. He doubted if Janet would ever speak to her again, and he was sure Margaret would not.  Edna was glad to be rid of her father when he finally took himself off  with his wedding garments and his bridal gifts, with his padded shoulders, his Bible reading, his “toddies” and ponderous oaths.  Mr. Pontellier followed him closely. He meant to stop at the wedding  on his way to New York and endeavor by every means which money and love could devise to atone somewhat for Edna’s incomprehensible action.  “You are too lenient, too lenient by far, Leonce,” asserted the Colonel.  “Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and  hard; the only way to manage a wife. Take my word for it.”  The Colonel was perhaps unaware that he had coerced his own wife  into her grave. Mr. Pontellier had a vague suspicion of it which he thought it needless to mention at that late day.  Edna was not so consciously gratified at her husband’s leaving home as  she had been over the departure of her father. As the day approached  when he was to leave her for a comparatively long stay, she grew melting and affectionate, remembering his many acts of consideration and his repeated expressions of an ardent attachment. She was solicitous about his health and his welfare. She bustled around, looking after his clothing, thinking about heavy underwear, quite as Madame Ratignolle would have done under similar circumstances. She cried when he went away, calling him her dear, good friend, and she was quite certain she would grow lonely before very long and go to join him in New York.  But after all, a radiant peace settled upon her when she at last found  herself alone. Even the children were gone. Old Madame Pontellier had  come herself and carried them off to Iberville with their quadroon. The  old madame did not venture to say she was afraid they would be neglected during Leonce’s absence; she hardly ventured to think so. She was hungry for them—even a little fierce in her attachment. She did not want them to be wholly “children of the pavement,” she always said when begging to have them for a space. She wished them to know the country, with its streams, its fields, its woods, its freedom, so delicious to the young. She wished them to taste something of the life their father had lived and known and loved when he, too, was a little child.  When Edna was at last alone, she breathed a big, genuine sigh of relief.  A feeling that was unfamiliar but very delicious came over her. She walked all through the house, from one room to another, as if inspecting it for the first time. She tried the various chairs and lounges, as if she had never sat and reclined upon them before. And she perambulated around the outside of the house, investigating, looking to see if windows and shutters were secure and in order. The flowers were like new acquaintances; she approached them in a familiar spirit, and made herself at home among them. The garden walks were damp, and Edna called to the maid to bring out her rubber sandals. And there she stayed, and stooped, digging around the plants, trimming, picking dead, dry leaves. The children’s little dog came out, interfering, getting in her way. She scolded him, laughed at him, played with him. The garden smelled so good and looked so pretty in the afternoon sunlight. Edna plucked all the bright flowers she could find, and went into the house with them, she and the little dog.  Even the kitchen assumed a sudden interesting character which she had  never before perceived. She went in to give directions to the cook, to say that the butcher would have to bring much less meat, that they would require only half their usual quantity of bread, of milk and groceries. She told the cook that she herself would be greatly occupied during Mr Pontellier’s absence, and she begged her to take all thought and responsibility of the larder upon her own shoulders.  That night Edna dined alone. The candelabra, with a few candies in the  center of the table, gave all the light she needed. Outside the circle of light in which she sat, the large dining-room looked solemn and shadowy. The cook, placed upon her mettle, served a delicious repast—a luscious tenderloin broiled a point. The wine tasted good; the marron glace seemed to be just what she wanted. It was so pleasant, too, to dine in a comfortable *peignoir*.  She thought a little sentimentally about Leonce and the children, and  wondered what they were doing. As she gave a dainty scrap or two to the doggie, she talked intimately to him about Etienne and Raoul. He was beside himself with astonishment and delight over these companionable advances, and showed his appreciation by his little quick, snappy barks and a lively agitation.  Then Edna sat in the library after dinner and read Emerson until she  grew sleepy. She realized that she had neglected her reading, and determined to start anew upon a course of improving studies, now that her time was completely her own to do with as she liked.  After a refreshing bath, Edna went to bed. And as she snuggled comfortably beneath the eiderdown a sense of restfulness invaded her, such as she had not known before.  XXV  When the weather was dark and cloudy Edna could not work. She needed the sun to mellow and temper her mood to the sticking point. She had reached a stage when she seemed to be no longer feeling her way, working, when in the humor, with sureness and ease. And being devoid of ambition, and striving not toward accomplishment, she drew satisfaction from the work in itself.  On rainy or melancholy days Edna went out and sought the society of  the friends she had made at Grand Isle. Or else she stayed indoors and  nursed a mood with which she was becoming too familiar for her own  comfort and peace of mind. It was not despair; but it seemed to her as if  life were passing by, leaving its promise broken and unfulfilled. Yet there were other days when she listened, was led on and deceived by fresh promises which her youth held out to her.  She went again to the races, and again. Alcee Arobin and Mrs. Highcamp called for her one bright afternoon in Arobin’s drag. Mrs. Highcamp was a worldly but unaffected, intelligent, slim, tall blonde woman in the forties, with an indifferent manner and blue eyes that stared. She had a daughter who served her as a pretext for cultivating the society of young men of fashion. Alcee Arobin was one of them. He was a familiar figure at the race course, the opera, the fashionable clubs. There was a perpetual smile in his eyes, which seldom failed to awaken a corresponding cheerfulness in any one who looked into them and listened to his good-humored voice.  His manner was quiet, and at times a little insolent. He possessed a good figure, a pleasing face, not overburdened with depth of thought or feeling; and his dress was that of the conventional man of fashion.  He admired Edna extravagantly, after meeting her at the races with her  father. He had met her before on other occasions, but she had seemed to him unapproachable until that day. It was at his instigation that Mrs.  Highcamp called to ask her to go with them to the Jockey Club to witness the turf event of the season.  There were possibly a few track men out there who knew the racehorse as well as Edna, but there was certainly none who knew it better. She sat between her two companions as one having authority to speak. She laughed at Arobin’s pretensions, and deplored Mrs. Highcamp’s ignorance. The racehorse was a friend and intimate associate of her childhood. The atmosphere of the stables and the breath of the blue grass paddock revived in her memory and lingered in her nostrils. She did not perceive that she was talking like her father as the sleek geldings ambled in review before them. She played for very high stakes, and fortune favored her. The fever of the game flamed in her cheeks and eves, and it got into her blood and into her brain like an intoxicant. People turned their heads to look at her, and more than one lent an attentive car to her utterances, hoping thereby to secure the elusive but ever-desired “tip.” Arobin caught the contagion of excitement which drew him to Edna like a magnet. Mrs. Highcamp  remained, as usual, unmoved, with her indifferent stare and uplifted eyebrows.  Edna stayed and dined with Mrs. Highcamp upon being urged to do  so. Arobin also remained and sent away his drag.  The dinner was quiet and uninteresting, save for the cheerful efforts of  Arobin to enliven things. Mrs. Highcamp deplored the absence of her  daughter from the races, and tried to convey to her what she had missed  by going to the “Dante reading” instead of joining them. The girl held a  geranium leaf up to her nose and said nothing, but looked knowing and  noncommittal. Mr. Highcamp was a plain, bald-headed man, who only  talked under compulsion. He was unresponsive. Mrs. Highcamp was full of delicate courtesy and consideration toward her husband. She addressed most of her conversation to him at table. They sat in the library after dinner and read the evening papers together under the droplight; while the younger people went into the drawing-room nearby and talked. Miss Highcamp played some selections from Grieg upon the piano. She seemed to have apprehended all of the composer’s coldness and none of his poetry. While Edna listened she could not help wondering if she had lost her taste for music.  When the time came for her to go home, Mr. Highcamp grunted a  lame offer to escort her, looking down at his slippered feet with tactless  concern. It was Arobin who took her home. The car ride was long, and it was late when they reached Esplanade Street. Arobin asked permission to enter for a second to light his cigarette—his match safe was empty. He filled his match safe but did not light his cigarette until he left her, after she had expressed her willingness to go to the races with him again.  Edna was neither tired nor sleepy. She was hungry again, for the  Highcamp dinner, though of excellent quality, had lacked abundance. She rummaged in the larder and brought forth a slice of Gruyere and some crackers. She opened a bottle of beer which she found in the icebox. Edna felt extremely restless and excited. She vacantly hummed a fantastic tune as she poked at the wood embers on the hearth and munched a cracker.  She wanted something to happen—something, anything; she did not  know what. She regretted that she had not made Arobin stay a half hour  to talk over the horses with her. She counted the money she had won. But there was nothing else to do, so she went to bed, and tossed there for hours in a sort of monotonous agitation.  In the middle of the night she remembered that she had forgotten to  write her regular letter to her husband; and she decided to do so next day and tell him about her afternoon at the Jockey Club. She lay wide awake composing a letter which was nothing like the one which she wrote next day. When the maid awoke her in the morning Edna was dreaming of Mr. Highcamp playing the piano at the entrance of a music store on Canal Street, while his wife was saying to Alcee Arobin, as they boarded an Esplanade Streetcar:  “What a pity that so much talent has been neglected! but I must go.”  When, a few days later, Alcee Arobin again called for Edna in his drag,  Mrs. Highcamp was not with him. He said they would pick her up. But as that lady had not been apprised of his intention of picking her up, she was not at home. The daughter was just leaving the house to attend the meeting of a branch Folk Lore Society and regretted that she could not accompany them. Arobin appeared nonplused, and asked Edna if there were anyone else she cared to ask.  She did not deem it worthwhile to go in search of any of the fashion-  able acquaintances from whom she had withdrawn herself. She thought of Madame Ratignolle, but knew that her fair friend did not leave the  house, except to take a languid walk around the block with her husband  after nightfall. Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed at such a request from Edna. Madame Lebrun might have enjoyed the outing, but for some reason Edna did not want her. So they went alone, she and Arobin.  The afternoon was intensely interesting to her. The excitement came  back upon her like a remittent fever. Her talk grew familiar and confidential. It was no labor to become intimate with Arobin. His manner invited easy confidence. The preliminary stage of becoming acquainted was one which he always endeavored to ignore when a pretty and engaging woman was concerned.  He stayed and dined with Edna. He stayed and sat beside the wood fire.  They laughed and talked; and before it was time to go he was telling her how different life might have been if he had known her years before. With ingenuous frankness he spoke of what a wicked, ill-disciplined boy he had been, and impulsively drew up his cuff to exhibit upon his wrist the scar from a saber cut which he had received in a duel outside of Paris when he was nineteen. She touched his hand as she scanned the red cicatrice on the inside of his white wrist. A quick impulse that was somewhat spasmodic impelled her fingers to close in a sort of clutch upon his hand. He felt the pressure of her pointed nails in the flesh of his palm.  She arose hastily and walked toward the mantel.  “The sight of a wound or scar always agitates and sickens me,” she said. “I shouldn’t have looked at it.”  “I beg your pardon,” he entreated, following her; “it never occurred to  me that it might be repulsive.”  He stood close to her, and the effrontery in his eyes repelled the old,  vanishing self in her, yet drew all her awakening sensuousness. He saw  enough in her face to impel him to take her hand and hold it while he said his lingering good night.  “Will you go to the races again?” he asked.  “No,” she said. “I’ve had enough of the races. I don’t want to lose all the money I’ve won, and I’ve got to work when the weather is bright, instead of—”  “Yes; work; to be sure. You promised to show me your work. What  morning may I come up to your atelier? To-morrow?”  “No!”  “Day after?”  “No, no.”  “Oh, please don’t refuse me! I know something of such things. I might  help you with a stray suggestion or two.”  “No. Good night. Why don’t you go after you have said good night? I  don’t like you,” she went on in a high, excited pitch, attempting to draw away her hand. She felt that her words lacked dignity and sincerity, and she knew that he felt it.  “I’m sorry you don’t like me. I’m sorry I offended you. How have I  offended you? What have I done? Can’t you forgive me?” And he bent and pressed his lips upon her hand as if he wished never more to withdraw them.  “Mr. Arobin,” she complained, “I’m greatly upset by the excitement of  the afternoon; I’m not myself. My manner must have misled you in some way. I wish you to go, please.” She spoke in a monotonous, dull tone. He took his hat from the table, and stood with eyes turned from her, looking into the dying fire. For a moment or two he kept an impressive silence.  “Your manner has not misled me, Mrs. Pontellier,” he said finally. “My  own emotions have done that. I couldn’t help it. When I’m near you, how could I help it? Don’t think anything of it, don’t bother, please. You see, I go when you command me. If you wish me to stay away, I shall do so. If you let me come back, I—oh! you will let me come back?”  He cast one appealing glance at her, to which she made no response.  Alcee Arobin’s manner was so genuine that it often deceived even himself.  Edna did not care or think whether it were genuine or not. When she  was alone she looked mechanically at the back of her hand which he had kissed so warmly. Then she leaned her head down on the mantelpiece. She felt somewhat like a woman who in a moment of passion is betrayed into an act of infidelity and realizes the significance of the act without being wholly awakened from its glamour. The thought was passing vaguely through her mind, “What would he think?”  She did not mean her husband; she was thinking of Robert Lebrun.  Her husband seemed to her now like a person whom she had married  without love as an excuse.  She lit a candle and went up to her room. Alcee Arobin was absolutely  nothing to her. Yet his presence, his manners, the warmth of his glances, and above all the touch of his lips upon her hand had acted like a narcotic upon her. She slept a languorous sleep, interwoven with vanishing dreams.  XXVI  Alcee Arobin wrote Edna an elaborate note of apology, palpitant with sincerity. It embarrassed her; for in a cooler, quieter moment it appeared to her, absurd that she should have taken his action so seriously, so dramatically. She felt sure that the significance of the whole occurrence had lain in her own self-consciousness. If she ignored his note it would give undue importance to a trivial affair. If she replied to it in a serious spirit it would still leave in his mind  the impression that she had in a susceptible moment yielded to his influence.  After all, it was no great matter to have one’s hand kissed. She was provoked at his having written the apology. She answered in as light and bantering a spirit as she fancied it deserved, and said she would be glad to have him look in upon her at work whenever he felt the inclination and his business gave him the opportunity.  He responded at once by presenting himself at her home with all his  disarming naivete. And then there was scarcely a day which followed that she did not see him or was not reminded of him. He was prolific in pretexts. His attitude became one of good-humored subservience and tacit adoration. He was ready at all times to submit to her moods, which were as often kind as they were cold. She grew accustomed to him. They became intimate and friendly by imperceptible degrees, and then by leaps.  He sometimes talked in a way that astonished her at first and brought the crimson into her face; in a way that pleased her at last, appealing to the animalism that stirred impatiently within her.  There was nothing which so quieted the turmoil of Edna’s senses as a  visit to Mademoiselle Reisz. It was then, in the presence of that personality which was offensive to her, that the woman, by her divine art, seemed to reach Edna’s spirit and set it free.  It was misty, with heavy, lowering atmosphere, one afternoon, when  Edna climbed the stairs to the pianist’s apartments under the roof. Her  clothes were dripping with moisture. She felt chilled and pinched as she entered the room. Mademoiselle was poking at a rusty stove that smoked a little and warmed the room indifferently. She was endeavoring to heat a pot of chocolate on the stove. The room looked cheerless and dingy to Edna as she entered. A bust of Beethoven, covered with a hood of dust, scowled at her from the mantelpiece.  “Ah! here comes the sunlight!” exclaimed Mademoiselle, rising from  her knees before the stove. “Now it will be warm and bright enough; I can let the fire alone.”  She closed the stove door with a bang, and approaching, assisted in  removing Edna’s dripping mackintosh.  “You are cold; you look miserable. The chocolate will soon be hot. But  would you rather have a taste of brandy? I have scarcely touched the bottle which you brought me for my cold.” A piece of red flannel was wrapped around Mademoiselle’s throat; a stiff neck compelled her to hold her head on one side.  “I will take some brandy,” said Edna, shivering as she removed her gloves and overshoes. She drank the liquor from the glass as a man would have done.  Then flinging herself upon the uncomfortable sofa she said, “Mademoiselle, I am going to move away from my house on Esplanade Street.”  “Ah!” ejaculated the musician, neither surprised nor especially interested. Nothing ever seemed to astonish her very much. She was endeavoring to adjust the bunch of violets which had become loose from its fastening in her hair. Edna drew her down upon the sofa, and taking a pin from her own hair, secured the shabby artificial flowers in their accustomed place.  “Aren’t you astonished?”  “Passably. Where are you going? to New York? to Iberville? to your  father in Mississippi? where?”  “Just two steps away,” laughed Edna, “in a little four-room house around the corner. It looks so cozy, so inviting and restful, whenever I pass by; and it’s for rent. I’m tired looking after that big house. It never seemed like mine, anyway—like home. It’s too much trouble. I have to keep too many servants. I am tired bothering with them.”  “That is not your true reason, *ma belle*. There is no use in telling me  lies. I don’t know your reason, but you have not told me the truth.”  Edna did not protest or endeavor to justify herself.  “The house, the money that provides for it, are not mine. Isn’t that enough reason?”  “They are your husband’s,” returned Mademoiselle, with a shrug and a  malicious elevation of the eyebrows.  “Oh! I see there is no deceiving you. Then let me tell you: It is a caprice. I have a little money of my own from my mother’s estate, which my father sends me by driblets. I won a large sum this winter on the races, and I am beginning to sell my sketches. Laidpore is more and more pleased with my work; he says it grows in force and individuality. I cannot judge of that myself, but I feel that I have gained in ease and confidence. However, as I said, I have sold a good many through Laidpore. I can live in the tiny house for little or nothing, with one servant. Old Celestine, who works occasionally for me, says she will come stay with me and do my work. I know I shall like it, like the feeling of freedom and independence.”  “What does your husband say?”  “I have not told him yet. I only thought of it this morning. He will  think I am demented, no doubt. Perhaps you think so.”  Mademoiselle shook her head slowly. “Your reason is not yet clear to  me,” she said.  Neither was it quite clear to Edna herself; but it unfolded itself as she  sat for a while in silence. Instinct had prompted her to put away her  husband’s bounty in casting off her allegiance. She did not know how it would be when he returned. There would have to be an understanding, an explanation. Conditions would some way adjust themselves, she felt; but whatever came, she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself.  “I shall give a grand dinner before I leave the old house!” Edna exclaimed.  “You will have to come to it, Mademoiselle. I will give you everything that you like to eat and to drink. We shall sing and laugh and be merry for once.” And she uttered a sigh that came from the very depths of her being.  If Mademoiselle happened to have received a letter from Robert during  the interval of Edna’s visits, she would give her the letter unsolicited. And she would seat herself at the piano and play as her humor prompted her while the young woman read the letter.  The little stove was roaring; it was red-hot, and the chocolate in the tin  sizzled and sputtered. Edna went forward and opened the stove door, and Mademoiselle rising, took a letter from under the bust of Beethoven and handed it to Edna.  “Another! so soon!” she exclaimed, her eyes filled with delight. “Tell  me, Mademoiselle, does he know that I see his letters?”  “Never in the world! He would be angry and would never write to me  again if he thought so. Does he write to you? Never a line. Does he send you a message? Never a word. It is because he loves you, poor fool, and is trying to forget you, since you are not free to listen to him or to belong to him.”  “Why do you show me his letters, then?”  “Haven’t you begged for them? Can I refuse you anything? Oh! you  cannot deceive me,” and Mademoiselle approached her beloved instrument and began to play. Edna did not at once read the letter. She sat holding it in her hand, while the music penetrated her whole being like an effulgence, warming and brightening the dark places of her soul. It prepared her for joy and exultation.  “Oh!” she exclaimed, letting the letter fall to the floor. “Why did you  not tell me?” She went and grasped Mademoiselle’s hands up from the  keys. “Oh! unkind! malicious! Why did you not tell me?”  “That he was coming back? No great news, *ma foi*. I wonder he did not  come long ago.”  “But when, when?” cried Edna, impatiently. “He does not say when.”  “He says `very soon.’ You know as much about it as I do; it is all in the  letter.”  “But why? Why is he coming? Oh, if I thought—” and she snatched  the letter from the floor and turned the pages this way and that way,  looking for the reason, which was left untold.  “If I were young and in love with a man,” said Mademoiselle, turning  on the stool and pressing her wiry hands between her knees as she looked down at Edna, who sat on the floor holding the letter, “it seems to me he would have to be some grand *esprit*; a man with lofty aims and ability to reach them; one who stood high enough to attract the notice of his fellowmen. It seems to me if I were young and in love I should never deem a man of ordinary caliber worthy of my devotion.”  “Now it is you who are telling lies and seeking to deceive me, Mademoiselle; or else you have never been in love and know nothing about it. Why,” went on Edna, clasping her knees and looking up into Mademoiselle’s twisted face, “do you suppose a woman knows why she loves? Does she select? Does she say to herself: ‘Go to! Here is a distinguished statesman with presidential possibilities; I shall proceed to fall in love with him.’ Or, ‘I shall set my heart upon this musician, whose fame is on every tongue?’ Or, ‘This financier, who controls the world’s money markets?’  “You are purposely misunderstanding me, ma reine. Are you in love with Robert?”  “Yes,” said Edna. It was the first time she had admitted it, and a glow overspread her face, blotching it with red spots.  “Why?” asked her companion. “Why do you love him when you ought not to?”  Edna, with a motion or two, dragged herself on her knees before Mademoiselle Reisz, who took the glowing face between her two hands.  “Why? Because his hair is brown and grows away from his temples;  because he opens and shuts his eyes, and his nose is a little out of drawing; because he has two lips and a square chin, and a little finger which he can’t straighten from having played baseball too energetically in his youth. Because—”  “Because you do, in short,” laughed Mademoiselle. “What will you do  when he comes back?” she asked.  “Do? Nothing, except feel glad and happy to be alive.”  She was already glad and happy to be alive at the mere thought of his  return. The murky, lowering sky, which had depressed her a few hours  before, seemed bracing and invigorating as she splashed through the streets on her way home.  She stopped at a confectioner’s and ordered a huge box of bonbons for  the children in Iberville. She slipped a card in the box, on which she  scribbled a tender message and sent an abundance of kisses.  Before dinner in the evening Edna wrote a charming letter to her husband, telling him of her intention to move for a while into the little house around the block, and to give a farewell dinner before leaving, regretting that he was not there to share it, to help out with the menu and assist her in entertaining the guests. Her letter was brilliant and brimming with cheerfulness. |  |