

FICTION

Edward Bellamy

A Love Story Reversed



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A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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A LOVE STORY REVERSED

By Edward Bellamy

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I

The golden hands of the parlor clock point glimmeringly to an hour after midnight, and the house is still. The gas is turned almost out, but the flickering of the dying sea-coal fire in the grate fitfully illumines the forms and faces of two young women, who are seated before it, talking earnestly in low tones. It is apparent from their costumes that they have been spending the evening out.

The fair girl in the low chair, gazing pensively into the fire, is Maud Elliott, the daughter of the house. Not generally called handsome, her features are good and well balanced, and her face is altogether a sweet and wholesome one. She is rather tall, and the most critical admit that she has a fine figure. Her eyes are blue, and their clear, candid expression indicates an unusually sincere and simple character. But, unfortunately, it is only her friends who are fully conversant with the expression of her eyes, for she is very shy. Shyness in little people is frequently piquant, but its effect in girls of the Juno style is too often that of awkwardness. Her friends call Maud Elliott stately; those who do not like her call her stiff; while indifferent persons speak of her as rather too reserved and dignified in manner to be pleasing. In fact, her excess of dignity is merely the cloak of her shyness, and nobody knows better than she that there is too much of it. Those who know her at all well know that she is not dull, but with mere acquaintances she often passes for that. Only her intimate friends are aware what wit and intelligence, what warmth and strength of feeling, her coldness when in company conceals.

No one better understands this, because no one knows her better or has known her longer, than her present companion before the fire, Lucy Mer-ritt. They were roommates and bosom friends at boarding-school; and Lucy, who recently has been married, is now on her first visit to her friend since that event. She is seated on a hassock, with her hands clasped over her knees, looking up at Maud,—an attitude well suited to her *petite* figure. She is going home on the morrow, or rather on the day already begun; and this fact, together with the absorbing nature of the present conversation, accounts for the lateness of the session.

"And so, Maud," she is saying, while she regards her friend with an expression at once sympathetic and amused,— "and so that is what has been making your letters so dismal lately. I fancied that nothing less could suggest such melancholy views of life. The truth is, I came on this visit as much as anything to find out about him. He is a good-looking fellow, certainly; and, from what little chance I had to form an opinion to-night, seems sensible enough to make it quite incredible that he should not be in love with such a girl in a thousand as you. Are you quite sure he is n't?"

"You had a chance to judge to-night," replied Maud, with a hard little laugh. "You overheard our conversation. 'Good-evening, Miss Elliott; jolly party, is n't it?' That was all he had to say to me, and quite as much as usual. Of course we are old acquaintances, and he 's always pleasant and civil: he couldn't be anything else; but he wastes mighty little time on me. I don't blame him for preferring other girls' society. He would show very little taste if he did not enjoy Ella Perry's company better than that of a tongue-tied thing like me. She is a thousand times prettier and wittier and more graceful than I am."

"Nonsense," exclaimed Lucy. "She is a flirt and a conceited little minx. She is not to be mentioned the same day with you; and he would think so, if he could only get to know you. But how in the world is he ever going to? Why, you seem to be shyer than ever, poor dear. You were actually distant, almost chilling, in your manner towards him to-night, although I know you didn't mean to be."

"I know it. Don't I know it!" groaned Maud. "I always am shyer and stiffer with him than with any one else. O Lucy! you can't guess what a dreadful thing it is to be shy. It is as if you were surrounded by a fog, which benumbs you, and chills all who approach you. I dare say he thinks that I actually dislike him. I could not blame him if he did. And I can't help it. I could never make him understand anything else, unless I told him in so many words."

The tears filled her eyes as she spoke, and hung heavy on the lashes. Lucy took one of her hands in both of hers, and pressed and stroked it caressingly.

"I know you could n't, poor dear, I know you could n't," she said; "and you cannot tell him in so many words because, forsooth, you are a woman. I often think, Maud, what a heap of trouble would be saved if women, when they cannot make themselves understood in other ways, were allowed to speak out as men do, without fear or reproach. Some day they will, when the world gets wiser,—at least I think so. Why should a woman have to hide her love, as if it were a disgraceful secret? Why is it any more a disgrace to her than to a man?"

"I can't quite see what good it would do me," said Maud, "even if women could 'speak out,' as you say. If a man did n't care for one already, I can't see how it would make him know that one cared for him. I should think she would prefer to keep her secret."

"That is n't what men do," replied Lucy. "If they have such a secret, they tell it right away, and that is why they succeed. The way half the women are induced to fall in love is by being told the men are in love with them; you know that."

"But men are different," suggested Maud.

"Not a bit of it: they 're more so, if anything," was the oracular response of the young wife. "Possibly there are men," she continued,— "the story-tellers say so, anyhow,—who are attracted by repulsion and warmed by coldness, who like resistance for the pleasure of overcoming it. There must be a spice of the tyrant in such men. I wouldn't want to marry one of them. Fortunately, they're not common. I've noticed that love, like lightning, generally takes the path of least resistance with men as well as women. Just suppose now, in your case, that Mr. Burton had followed us home, and had overheard this conversation from behind that door."

"No, no," she added laughing, as Maud looked around apprehensively; "he is n't there. But if he had been there and had overheard you own that you were pining for him, what a lucky chance it would have been! If he, or any other man, once knew that a magnificent girl like you had done him the honor to fall in love with him, half the battle would be won, or I 'm no judge of men. But such lucky eavesdropping only happens in stories and plays; and for lack of it this youth is in a fair way to marry a chit of a girl who does not think half so much of him as you do, and of whom he will never think a quarter what he would of you. He is not, probably, entirely stupid either. All he wants, very likely, is just a hint as to where his true happiness lies: but, being a woman, you can't give it in words; and, being Maud Elliott, you can't give it in any other way, if you died for it. Really, Maud, the canon which makes it a woman's duty to be purely passive in love is exasperating, especially as it does not represent what anybody really believes, but only what they pretend to believe. Everybody knows that unrequited love comes as often to women as to men. Why, then, should n't they have an equal chance to seek requital? Why have not they the same right to look out for the happiness of their lives by all honorable means that men have? Surely it is far more to them to marry the men they love than to a man to marry any particular woman. It seems to me that making suitable matches is not such an easy matter that society can afford to leave the chief part of it to the stupider sex, giving women merely the right of veto. To be sure, even now women who are artful enough manage to evade the prohibition laid on their lips and make their preference known. I am proud to say that I have a royal husband, who would never have looked my way if I had not set out to make him do so; and if I do say it, who should n't, I flatter myself he has a better wife than he could have picked out without my help. There are plenty of women who can say the same thing; but, unluckily, it is the best sort of women, girls like you,—simple, sincere, noble, without arts of any sort,—who can't do this. On them the etiquette that forbids women to reveal their hearts except by subterfuge operates as a total disability. They can only sit with folded hands, looking on, pretending not to mind, while their husbands are run away with by others."

Maud took up the poker and carefully arranged the coals under the grate in a heap. Then she said: "Suppose a girl did what you 've been speaking of. I mean, suppose she really said such a thing to a man,—said that she cared for him,

or anything like that,—what do you suppose he would think of her? Don't you fancy she would be in danger of making him think very cheaply of her?"

"If she thought he were that kind of a man," replied Lucy, "I can't understand her ever falling in love with him. Of course, I'm not saying that he would necessarily respond by falling in love with her. She would have to take her chance of that; but I'm sure, if he were a gentleman, she need have no fear of his thinking unworthily of her. If I had spoken to Dick in that way, even if he had never wanted to marry me, I know he would have had a soft spot for me in his heart all the rest of his life, out of which even his wife would not have quite crowded me. Why, how do we think of men whom we have refused? Do we despise them? Do we ridicule them? Some girls may, but they are not ladies. A low fellow might laugh at a woman who revealed a fondness for him which he did not return; but a gentleman, never. Her secret would be safe with him."

"Girls!" It was the voice of Mrs. Elliott speaking from the upper hall. "Do you know how late it is? It is after one o'clock."

"I suppose we might as well go to bed," said Lucy. "There's no use sitting up to wait for women to get their rights. They won't get them to-night, I dare say; though, mark my word, some day they will."

"This affair of yours may come out all right yet," she said hopefully, as they went upstairs together. "If it does not, you can console yourself with thinking that people in general, and especially girls, never know what is good for them till afterward. Do you remember that summer I was at the beach, what a ninny I made of myself over that little Mr. Parker? How providential it was for me that he did not reciprocate. It gives me the cold shivers when I think what might have become of me if he had proposed."

At the door of her room Lucy said again: "Remember, you are to come to me in New York for a long visit soon. Perhaps you will find there are other people in the world then."

Maud smiled absently, and kissed her good-night. She seemed preoccupied, and did not appear to have closely followed what her lively friend was saying.

The following afternoon, as she was walking home after seeing Lucy on the cars, she met a gentleman who lifted his hat to her. It was Arthur Burton. His office was on the one main street of the small New England city which is the scene of these events, and when out walking or shopping Maud often met him. There was therefore nothing at all extraordinary in the fact of their meeting. What was extraordinary was its discomposing effect upon her on this particular afternoon. She had been absorbed a moment before in a particularly brown study, taking no more notice of surrounding objects and persons than was necessary to avoid accidents. On seeing him she started perceptibly, and forthwith became a striking study in red. She continued to blush so intensely after he had passed that, catching sight of her crimson cheeks in a shop window, she turned down a side street and took a quieter way home.

There was nothing particularly remarkable about Arthur Burton. Fortunately there does not need to be anything remarkable about young men to induce very charming girls to fall in love with them. He was just a good-looking fellow, with agreeable manners and average opinions. He was regarded as a very promising young man, and was quite a favorite among the young ladies. If he noticed Maud's confusion on meeting him, he certainly did not think of associating it in any way with himself. For although they had been acquaintances these many years, and belonged to the same social set, he had never entertained the first sentimental fancy concerning her. So far as she had impressed him at all, it was as a thoroughly nice girl, of a good family, not bad-looking, but rather dull in society, and with very little facility in conversation; at least he had always found it hard to talk with her.

Ten days or a fortnight after Lucy Merritt's departure there was a little party at Ella Perry's, and both Arthur Burton and Maud were present. It was the custom of the place for the young men to escort the girls home after evening entertainments, and when the couples were rightly assorted, the walk home was often the most agreeable part of the evening. Although they were not engaged, Arthur imagined that he was in love with Ella Perry, and she had grown into the habit of looking upon him as her particular knight. Towards the end of the evening he jestingly asked her whom he should go home with, since he could not that evening be her escort.

"Maud Elliott," promptly suggested Ella, selecting the girl of those present in her opinion least likely to prove a diverting companion. So it chanced that Arthur offered his company to Maud.

It struck him, as she came downstairs with her wraps on, that she was looking remarkably pale. She had worn a becoming color during the evening, but she seemed to have lost it in the dressing-room. As they walked away from the house Arthur began, to the best of his ability, to make himself agreeable, but with very poor success. Not only was Maud, as usual, a feeble contributor of original matter, but her random answers showed that she paid little attention to what he was saying. He was mentally registering a vow never again to permit himself to be committed to a tete-a-tete with her, when she abruptly broke the silence which had succeeded his conversational efforts. Her voice was curiously unsteady, and she seemed at first to have some difficulty in articulating, and had to go back and repeat her first words. What she said was:--

"It was very good in you to come home with me to-night. It is a great pleasure to me."

"You're ironical this evening, Miss Elliott," he replied, laughing, and the least bit nettled.

It was bore enough doing the polite to a girl who had nothing on her mind without being giped by her to boot.

"I'm not ironical," she answered. "I should make poor work at irony. I meant just what I said."

"The goodness was on your part in letting me come," he said, mollified by the unmistakable sincerity of her tone, but somewhat embarrassed withal at the decidedly flat line of remark she had chosen.

"Oh, no," she replied; "the goodness was not on my side. I was only too glad of your company, and might as well own it. Indeed, I will confess to telling a fib to one young man who offered to see me home, merely because I hoped the idea of doing so would occur to you."

This plump admission of partiality for his society fairly staggered Arthur. Again he thought, "She must be quizzing me;" and, to make sure, stole a sidelong glance at her. Her eyes were fixed straight ahead, and the pallor and the tense expression of her face indicated that she was laboring under strong excitement. She certainly did not look like one in a quizzing mood.

"I am very much flattered," he managed to say.

"I don't know whether you feel so or not," she replied. "I'm afraid you don't feel flattered at all, but I--I wanted to--tell you."

The pathetic tremor of her voice lent even greater significance to her words than in themselves they would have conveyed.

She was making a dead set at him. There was not a shadow of doubt any longer about that. As the full realization of his condition flashed upon him, entirely alone with her and a long walk before them, the strength suddenly oozed out of his legs, he felt distinctly cold about the spine, and the perspiration started out on his forehead. His tongue clung to the roof of his mouth, and he could only abjectly wonder what was coming next. It appeared that nothing more was coming. A dead silence lasted for several blocks. Every block seemed to Arthur a mile long, as if he were walking in a hasheesh dream. He felt that she was expecting him to say something, to make some sort of response to her advances; but what response, in Heaven's name, could he make! He really could not make love. He had none to make; and had never dreamed of making any to Maud Elliott, of all girls. Yet the idea of letting her suppose him such an oaf as not to understand her, or not to appreciate the honor a lady's preference did him, was intolerable. He could not leave it so.

Finally, with a vague idea of a compromise between the impossible alternative of making love to her, which he could not, and seeming an insensible boor, which he wouldn't, he laid his disengaged hand upon hers as it rested on his arm. It was his intention to apply to it a gentle pressure, which, while committing him to nothing, might tend to calm her feelings and by its vaguely reassuring influence help to stave off a crisis for the remainder of their walk. He did not, however, succeed in carrying out the scheme; for at the moment of contact her hand eluded his, as quicksilver glides from the grasp. There was no hint of coquettish hesitation in its withdrawal. She snatched it away as if his touch had burned her; and although she did not at the same time wholly relinquish his arm, that was doubtless to avoid making the situation, on the street as they were, too awkward.

A moment before only concerned to evade her apparent advances, Arthur found himself in the position of one under rebuke for offering an unwarranted familiarity to a lady. There was no question that he had utterly misconstrued her previous conduct. It was very strange that he could have been such a fool; but he was quite too dazed to disentangle the evidence just then, and there was no doubt about the fact.

"Pardon me," he stammered, too much overcome with confusion and chagrin to be able to judge whether it would have been better to be silent.

The quickness with which the reply came showed that she had been on the point of speaking herself.

"You need not ask my pardon," she said. Her tones quivered with excitement and her utterance was low and swift. "I don't blame you in the least, after the way I have talked to you to-night. But I did not mean that you should think lightly of me. I have said nothing right, nothing that I meant to. What I wanted to have you understand was that I care for you very much." Her voice broke here, but she caught her breath and went right on. "I wanted you to know it somehow, and since I could not make you know it by ways clever girls might, I thought I would tell you plainly. It really amounts to the same thing; don't you think so? and I know you'll keep my secret. You need not say anything. I know you've nothing to say and may never have. That makes no difference. You owe me nothing merely because I care for you. Don't pity me. I'm not so much ashamed as you'd suppose. It all seems so natural when it's once said. You need not be afraid of me. I shall never say this again or trouble you at all. Only be a little good to me; that's all."

She delivered this little speech almost in one breath, with headlong, explosive utterance, as if it were something she had to go through with, cost what it might, and only wanted somehow to get out the words, regardless, for the time, of their manner or effect. She ended with an hysterical sob, and Arthur felt her hand tremble on his arm as she struggled with an emotion that threatened to overcome her. But it was over almost instantly; and without giving him a chance to speak, she exclaimed, with an entire alteration of tone and manner:--

"Did you see that article in the 'Gazette' this morning about the craze for collecting pottery which has broken out in

the big cities? Do you suppose it will reach here? What do you think of it?"

Now it was perfectly true, as she had told him, that Arthur had nothing whatever to say in response to the declaration she had made; but all the same it is possible, if she had not just so abruptly diverted the conversation, that he would then and there have placed himself and all his worldly goods at her disposal. He would have done this, although five minutes before he had had no more notion of marrying her than the Emperor of China's daughter, merely because every manly instinct cried out against permitting a nice girl to protest her partiality for him without meeting her half-way. Afterward, when he realized how near he had come to going over the verge of matrimony, it was with such reminiscent terror as chills the blood of the awakened sleep-walker looking up at the dizzy ridge-pole he has trodden with but a hair's breadth between him and eternity.

During the remainder of the way to Maud's door the conversation upon pottery, the weather, and miscellaneous topics was incessant,—almost breathless, in fact. Arthur did not know what he was talking about, and Maud probably no better what she was saying, but there was not a moment's silence. A stranger meeting them would have thought, "What a remarkably jolly couple!"

"I'm much obliged for your escort," said Maud, as she stood upon her doorstep.

"Not at all. Great pleasure, I'm sure."

"Good-evening."

"Good-evening." And she disappeared within the door.

Arthur walked away with a slow, mechanical step. His fallen jaw, open mouth, and generally idiotic expression of countenance would have justified his detention by any policeman who might have met him, on suspicion of being a feeble-minded person escaped from custody. Turning the first corner, he kept on with the same dragging step till he came to a vacant lot. Then, as if he were too feeble to get any farther, he stopped and leaned his back against the fence. Bracing his legs before him so as to serve as props, he thrust his hands deep in his pockets, and raising his eyes appealingly to the stars, ejaculated, "Proposed to, by Jove!" A period of profound introspection followed, and then he broke forth: "Well, I'll be hanged!" emphasizing each word with a slow nod. Then he began to laugh,—not noisily; scarcely audibly, indeed; but with the deep, unctuous chuckle of one who gloats over some exquisitely absurd situation, some jest of many facets, each contributing its ray of humor.

Yet, if this young man had tremblingly confessed his love to a lady, he would have expected her to take it seriously.

Nevertheless, let us not be too severe with him for laughing. It was what the average young man probably would have done under similar circumstances, and it was particularly stated at the outset that there was nothing at all extraordinary about Arthur Burton. For the rest, it was not a wholly bad symptom. Had he been a conceited fellow, he very likely would not have laughed. He would have stroked his mustache and thought it quite natural that a woman should fall in love with him, and even would have felt a pity for the poor thing. It was, in fact, because he was not vain that he found the idea so greatly amusing.

On parting with Arthur, Maud rushed upstairs and locked herself in her room. She threw herself into the first chair she stumbled over in the dimly lighted apartment, and sat there motionless, her eyes fixed on the empty air with an expression of desperation, her hands clinched so tightly that the nails bit the palms. She breathed only at considerable intervals, with short, quick inhalations.

Yet the act which caused this extraordinary revulsion of feeling had not been the result of any sudden impulse. It was the execution of a deliberate resolve which had originated in her mind on the night of Lucy Merritt's departure, as she sat with her before the fire, listening to her fanciful talk about the advantages which might be expected to attend franker relations in love affairs between men and women. Deeply in love, and at the same time feeling that in the ordinary course of events she had nothing but disappointment to look forward to, she was in a state of mind just desperate enough to catch at the idea that if Arthur Burton knew of her love, there would be some chance of his returning it. It seemed to her that if he did not, she could be no worse off than she was already. She had brooded over the subject day and night ever since, considering from every point of view of abstract right or true feminine propriety the question whether a woman might, without real prejudice to her maidenly modesty, tell a man that she cared for him, without waiting for him to ask her to marry him. Her conclusion had been that there was no reason, apart from her own feelings, why any woman, who dared do it, should not; and if she thought her life's happiness dependent on her doing it, that she would be a weak creature who did not dare.

Her resolve once taken, she had only waited an opportunity to carry it out; and that evening, when Arthur offered to walk home with her, she felt that the opportunity had come. Little wonder that she came downstairs from the dressing-room looking remarkably pale, and that after they had started, and she was trying to screw up her courage to the speaking point, her responses to his conversational efforts should have been at random. It was terribly hard work, this screwing up her courage. All the fine arguments which had convinced her that her intended course was justifiable and right had utterly collapsed. She could not recall one of them. What she had undertaken to do seemed shocking, hateful, immodest, scandalous, impossible. But there was a bed-rock of determination to her character; and a fixed, dogged

resolve to do the thing she had once made up her mind to, come what might, had not permitted her to draw back. Hardly knowing what she was about, or the words she was saying, she had plunged blindly ahead. Somehow she had got through with it, and now she seemed to herself to be sitting amidst the ruins of her womanhood.

It was particularly remarked that Arthur Burton's laughter, as he leaned against the fence a square away in convulsions of merriment, was noiseless, but it was perfectly audible to Maud, as she sat in the darkness of her chamber. Nay, more: although his thoughts were not uttered at all, she overheard them, and among them some which the young man, to do him justice, had the grace not to think.

The final touch to her humiliation was imparted by the reflection that she had done the thing so stupidly,—so blunderingly. If she must needs tell a man she loved him, could she not have told him in language which at least would have been forcible and dignified? Instead of that, she had begun with mawkish compliments, unable in her excitement to think of anything else, and ended with an incoherent jumble that barely escaped being hysterical. He would think that she was as lacking in sense as in womanly self-respect. At last she turned up the gas, for very shame avoiding a glimpse of herself in the mirror as she did so, and bathed her burning cheeks.

II

Meanwhile Arthur had reached home and was likewise sitting in his room, thinking the matter over from his point of view, with the assistance of a long-stemmed pipe. But instead of turning the gas down, as Maud had done, he had turned it up, and, having lighted all the jets in the room, had planted his chair directly in front of the big looking-glass, so that he might enjoy the reflection of his own amusement and be doubly entertained.

By this time, however, amazement and amusement had passed their acute stages. He was considering somewhat more seriously, but still with frequent attacks of mirth, the practical aspects of the predicament in which Maud's declaration had placed him; and the more he considered it, the more awkward as well as absurd that predicament appeared. They had the same acquaintances, went to the same parties, and were very likely to meet whenever they went out of an evening. What if she should continue to pursue him? If she did, he either would have to cut society, which had promised to be unusually lively that winter, or provide himself with a chaperon for protection. For the first time in his life he was in a position to appreciate the courage of American girls, who, without a tremor, venture themselves, year in and year out, in the company of gentlemen from whom they are exposed at any time to proposals of a tender nature. It was a pity if he could not be as brave as girls who are afraid of a mouse. Doubtless it was all in getting used to it.

On reflection, he should not need a chaperon. Had she not assured him that he need not be afraid of her, that she would never repeat what she had said, nor trouble him again? How her arm trembled on his as she was saying that, and how near she came to breaking down! And this was Maud Elliott, the girl with whom he had never ventured to flirt with as with some of the others, because she was so reserved and distant. The very last girl anybody would expect such a thing from! If it had been embarrassing for him to hear it, what must it have cost such a girl as Maud Elliott to say it! How did she ever muster the courage?

He took the pipe from his mouth, and the expression of his eyes became fixed, while his cheeks reddened slowly and deeply. In putting himself in Maud's place, he was realizing for the first time how strong must have been the feeling which had nerved her to such a step. His heart began to beat rather thickly. There was something decidedly intoxicating in knowing that one was regarded in such a way by a nice girl, even if it were impossible, as it certainly was in this case, to reciprocate the feeling. He continued to put himself mentally in Maud's place. No doubt she was also at that moment sitting alone in her chamber, thinking the matter over as he was. She was not laughing, however, that was pretty certain; and it required no clairvoyant's gift for him to be sensible that her chief concern must be as to what he might be at that moment thinking about her. And how had he been thinking about her?

As this question came up to his mind, he saw himself for a moment through Maud's eyes, sitting there smoking, chuckling, mowing like an idiot before the glass because, forsooth, a girl had put herself at his mercy on the mistaken supposition that he was a gentleman. As he saw his conduct in this new light, he had such an access of self-contempt that, had it been physically convenient, it would have been a relief to kick himself. What touching faith she had shown in his ability to take a generous, high-minded view of what she had done, and here he had been guffawing over it like a corner loafer. He would not, for anything in the world, have her know how he had behaved. And she should not. She should never know that he was less a gentleman than she believed him.

She had told him, to be sure, that he owed her nothing because she loved him; but it had just struck him that he owed her at least, on that account, a more solicitous respect and consideration than any one else had the right to expect from him.

There were no precedents to guide him, no rules of etiquette prescribing the proper thing for a young man to do under such circumstances as these. It was a new problem he had to work out, directed only by such generous and manly instincts as he might have. Plainly the first thing, and in fact the only thing that he could do for her, seeing that he really could not return her affection, was to show her that she had not forfeited his esteem.

At first he thought of writing her a note and assuring her, in a few gracefully turned sentences, of his high respect in spite of what she had done. But somehow the gracefully turned sentences did not occur to his mind when he took up his pen, and it did occur to him that to write persons that you still respect them is equivalent to intimating that their conduct justly might have forfeited your respect. Nor would it be at all easier to give such an assurance by word of mouth. In fact, quite the reverse. The meaning to be conveyed was too delicate for words. Only the unspoken language of his manner and bearing could express it without offense. It might, however, be some time before chance brought them together in society, even if she did not, for a while at least, purposely avoid him. Meantime, uncertain how her extraordinary action had impressed him, how was she likely to enjoy her thoughts?

In the generous spirit bred of his new contrition, it seemed to him a brutal thing to leave her weeks or even days in such a condition of mind as must be hers. Inaction on his part was all that was required to make her position intolerable. Inaction was not therefore permissible to him. It was a matter in which he must take the initiative, and there seemed to be just one thing he could do which would at all answer the purpose. A brief formal call, with the conversation strictly limited to the weather and similarly safe subjects, would make it possible for them to meet thereafter in society without too acute embarrassment. Had he the pluck for this, the nerve to carry it through? That was the only question. There was no doubt as to what he ought to do. It would be an awkward call, to put it mildly. It would be skating on terribly thin ice -- a little thinner, perhaps, than a man ever skated on before.

If he could but hit on some pretext, it scarcely mattered how thin, -- for of course it would not be intended to deceive her, -- the interview possibly could be managed. As he reflected, his eyes fell on a large volume, purchased in a fit of extravagance, which lay on his table. It was a profusely illustrated work on pottery, intended for the victims of the fashionable craze on that subject, which at the date of these events had but recently reached the United States. His face lighted up with a sudden inspiration, and taking a pen he wrote the following note to Maud, dating it the next day: -

Miss Elliott:

Our conversation last evening on the subject of old china has suggested to me that you might be interested in looking over the illustrations in the volume which I take the liberty of sending with this. If you will be at home this evening, I shall be pleased to call and learn your impression.

Arthur Burton.

The next morning he sent this note and the book to Maud, and that evening called upon her. To say that he did not twist his mustache rather nervously as he stood upon the doorstep, waiting for the servant to answer the bell, would be to give him credit for altogether more nerve than he deserved. He was supported by the consciousness that he was doing something rather heroic, but he very much wished it were done. As he was shown into the parlor, Maud came forward to meet him. She wore a costume which set off her fine figure to striking advantage, and he was surprised to perceive that he had never before appreciated what a handsome girl she was. It was strange that he should never have particularly observed before what beautiful hands she had, and what a dazzling fairness of complexion was the complement of her red-brown hair. Could it be this stately maiden who had uttered those wild words the night before? Could those breathless tones, that piteous shame-facedness, have been hers? Surely he must be the victim of some strange self-delusion. Only the deep blush that mantled her face as she spoke his name, the quickness with which, after one swift glance, her eyes avoided his, and the tremor of her hand as he touched it, fully assured him that he had not dreamed the whole thing.

A shaded lamp was on the centre-table, where also Arthur's book on pottery lay open. After thanking him for sending it and expressing the pleasure she had taken in looking it over, Maud plunged at once into a discussion of Sevres, and Cloisonne, and Palissy, and tiles, and all that sort of thing, and Arthur bravely kept his end up. Any one who had looked casually into the parlor would have thought that old crockery was the most absorbing subject on earth to these young people, with such eagerness did they compare opinions and debate doubtful points. At length, however, even pottery gave out as a resource, especially as Arthur ceased, after a while, to do his part, and silences began to ensue, during which Maud rapidly turned the pages of the book or pretended to be deeply impressed with the illustrations, while her cheeks grew hotter and hotter under Arthur's gaze. He knew that he was a detestable coward thus to revel in her confusion, when he ought to be trying to cover it, but it was such a novel sensation to occupy this masterful attitude towards a young lady that he yielded basely to the temptation. After all, it was but fair. Had she not caused him a very embarrassing quarter of an hour the night before?

"I suppose I shall see you at Miss Oswald's next Thursday," he said, as he rose to take his leave.

She replied that she hoped to be there. She accompanied him to the door of the parlor. There was less light there than immediately about the table where they had been sitting. "Good-evening," he said. "Good-evening," she replied; and then, in a lowered voice, hardly above a whisper, she added, "I appreciate all that was noble and generous in your coming to-night." He made no reply, but took her hand and, bending low, pressed his lips to it as reverently as if she had been a queen.

Now Arthur's motive in making this call upon Maud, which has been described, had been entirely unselfish. Furthest from his mind, of all ideas, had been any notion of pursuing the conquest of her heart which he had inadvertently made. Nevertheless, the effect of his call, and that, too, even before it was made,—if this bull may be pardoned,—had been to complete that conquest as no other device, however studied, could have done.

The previous night Maud had been unable to sleep for shame. Her cheeks scorched the pillows faster than her tears could cool them; and altogether her estate was so wretched that Lucy Mer-ritt, could she have looked in upon her, possibly might have been shaken in her opinion as to the qualifications of women to play the part of men in love, even if permitted by society.

It had been hard enough to nerve herself to the point of doing what she had done in view of the embarrassments she had foreseen. An hour after she uttered those fatal words, her whole thinking was summed up in the cry, "If I only had not done it, then at least he would still respect me." In the morning she looked like one in a fever. Her eyes were red and swollen, her face was pallid but for a hard red spot in each cheek, and her whole appearance was expressive of bodily and mental prostration. She did not go down to breakfast, pleading a very genuine headache, and Arthur's note and the book on pottery were brought up to her. She guessed his motive in a moment. Her need gave her the due to his meaning.

What was on Arthur's part merely a decent sort of thing to do, her passionate gratitude instantly magnified into an act of chivalrous generosity, proving him the noblest of men and the gentlest of gentlemen. She exaggerated the abjectness of the position from which his action had rescued her, in order to feel that she owed the more to his nobility. At any time during the previous night she gladly would have given ten years of her life to recall the confession that she had made to him; now she told herself, with a burst of exultant tears, that she would not recall it if she could. She had made no mistake. Her womanly dignity was safe in his keeping. Whether he ever returned her love or not, she was not ashamed, but was glad, and always should be glad, that he knew she loved him.

As for Arthur, the reverence with which he bent over her hand on leaving her was as heartfelt as it was graceful. In her very disregard of conventional decorum she had impressed him the more strikingly with the native delicacy and refinement of her character. It had been reserved for her to show him how genuine a thing is womanly modesty, and how far from being dependent on those conventional affectations with which it is in the vulgar mind so often identified, with the effect of seeming as artificial as they.

When, a few evenings later, he went to Miss Oswald's party, the leading idea in his mind was that he should meet Maud there. His eyes sought her out the moment he entered the Oswald parlors, but it was some time before he approached her. For years he had been constantly meeting her, but he had never before taken special note of her appearance in company. He had a curiosity about her now as lively as it was wholly new. He took a great interest in observing how she walked and talked and laughed, how she sat down and rose up and demeaned herself. It gave him an odd but marked gratification to note how favorably she compared in style and appearance with the girls present. Even while he was talking with Ella Perry, with whom he believed himself in love, he was so busy making these observations that Ella dismissed him with the sarcastic advice to follow his eyes, which he presently proceeded to do.

Maud greeted him with a very fair degree of self-possession, though her cheeks were delightfully rosy. At first it was evidently difficult for her to talk, and her embarrassment betrayed uncertainty as to the stability of the conventional footing which his call of the other evening had established between them. Gradually, however, the easy, nonchalant tone which he affected seemed to give her confidence, and she talked more easily. Her color continued to be unusually though not unbecomingly high, and it took a great deal of skirmishing for him to get a glance from her eyes, but her embarrassment was no longer distressing. Arthur, indeed, was scarcely in a mood to notice that she did not bear her full part in the conversation. The fact of conversing on any terms with a young lady who had confessed to him what Maud had was so piquant in itself that it would have made talk in the deaf-and-dumb alphabet vivacious. All the while, as they laughed and talked together quite as any other two young people might do, those words of hers the other night: "I care for you very much," "Be a little good to me," were ringing in his ears. The reflection that by virtue of her confession of love she was his whenever he should wish to claim her, even though he never should claim her, was constantly in his mind, and gave him a sense of potential proprietorship which was decidedly heady.

"Arthur Burton seems to be quite fascinated. I never supposed that he fancied Maud Elliott before, did you?" said one of the young ladies, a little maliciously, to Ella Perry. Ella tossed her head and replied that really she had never troubled herself about Mr. Burton's fancies, which was not true. The fact is, she was completely puzzled as well as vexed by Arthur's attentions to Maud. There was not a girl in her set of whom she would not sooner have thought as a

rival. Arthur had never, to her knowledge, talked for five minutes together with Maud before, and here he was spending half the evening in an engrossing tete-a-tete with her, to the neglect of his other acquaintances and of herself in particular. Maud was looking very well, to be sure, but no better than often before, when he had not glanced at her a second time. What might be the clue to this mystery? She remembered, upon reflection, that he had escorted Maud home from the party at her own house the week before, but that explained nothing. Ella was aware of no weapon in the armory of her sex capable of effecting the subjugation of a previously quite indifferent young man in the course of a ten-minutes' walk. If, indeed, such weapons there had been, Maud Elliott, the most reserved and diffident girl of her acquaintance,—"stiff and pokerish," Ella called her;—was the last person likely to employ them. It must be, Ella was forced to conclude, that Arthur was trying to punish her for snubbing him by devoting himself to Maud; and, having adopted this conclusion, the misguided damsel proceeded to flirt vigorously with a young man whom she detested.

In the latter part of the evening, when Arthur was looking again for Maud, he learned that she had gone home, a servant having come to fetch her. The result was that he went home alone, Ella Perry having informed him rather crushingly that she had accorded the honor of escorting herself to another. He was rather vexed at Ella's jilting him, though he admitted that she might have fancied she had some excuse.

A few days later he called on her, expecting to patch up their little misunderstanding, as on previous occasions. She was rather offish, but really would have been glad to make up, had he shown the humility and tractableness he usually manifested after their tiffs; but he was not in a humble frame of mind, and, after a brief and unsatisfactory call, took his leave. The poor girl was completely puzzled. What had come over Arthur? She had snubbed him no more than usual that night, and generally he took it very meekly. She would have opened her eyes very wide indeed if she had guessed what there had been in his recent experience to spoil his appetite for humble-pie.

It was not late when he left Ella, and as he passed Maud's house he could not resist the temptation of going in. This time he did not pretend to himself that he sought her from any but entirely selfish motives. He wanted to remove the unpleasantly acid impression left by his call on Ella by passing an hour with some one whom he knew would be glad to see him and not be afraid to let him know it. In this aim he was quite successful. Maud's face fairly glowed with glad surprise when he entered the room. This was their second meeting since the evening Arthur had called to talk pottery, and the tacit understanding that her tender avowal was to be ignored between them had become so well established that they could converse quite at their ease. But ignoring is not forgetting. On the other hand, it implies a constant remembering; and the mutual consciousness between these young people could scarcely fail to give a peculiar piquancy to their intercourse.

That evening was the first of many which the young man passed in Maud's parlor, and the beginning of an intimacy which caused no end of wonder among their acquaintances. Had its real nature been suspected, that wonder would have been vastly increased. For whereas they supposed it to be an entirely ordinary love affair, except in the abruptness of its development, it was, in fact, a quite extraordinary variation on the usual social relations of young men and women.

Maud's society had in fact not been long in acquiring an attraction for Arthur quite independent of the peculiar circumstances under which he had first become interested in her. As soon as she began to feel at ease with him, her shyness rapidly disappeared, and he was astonished to discover that the stiff, silent girl whom he had thought rather dull possessed culture and originality such as few girls of his acquaintance could lay claim to. His assurance beyond possibility of doubt that she was as really glad to see him whenever he called as she said she was, and that though his speech might be dull or his jests poor they were sure of a friendly critic, made the air of her parlor wonderfully genial. The result was that he fell into a habit whenever he wanted a little social relaxation, but felt too tired, dispirited, or lazy for the effort of a call on any of the other girls, of going to Maud. One evening he said to her just as he was leaving, "If I come here too much, you must send me home."

"I will when you do," she replied, with a bright smile.

"But really," he persisted, "I am afraid I bore you by coming so often."

"You know better than that," was her only reply, but the vivid blush which accompanied the words was a sufficient enforcement of them; and he was, at the bottom of his heart, very glad to think he did know better.

Without making any pretense of being in love with her, he had come to depend on her being in love with him. It had grown so pleasing to count on her loyalty to him that a change in her feelings would have been a disagreeable surprise. Getting something for nothing is a mode of acquisition particularly pleasing to mankind, and he was enjoying in some respects the position of an engaged man without any of the responsibilities.

But if in some respects he was in the position of an engaged man, in others he was farther from it than the average unengaged man. For while Maud and he talked of almost everything else under heaven, the subject of love was tabooed between them. Once for all Maud had said her say on that point, and Arthur could say nothing unless he said as much as she had said. For the same reason, there was never any approach to flirting between them. Any trifling of that sort would have been meaningless in an intimacy begun, as theirs had been, at a point beyond where most flirtations end.

Not only in this respect, but also in the singular frankness which marked their interchange of thought and opinion, was there something in their relation savoring of that of brother and sister. It was as if her confession of love had swept away by one breath the whole lattice of conventional affectations through which young men and women usually talk with each other. Once for all she had dropped her guard with him, and he could not do less with her. He found himself before long talking more freely to her than to any others of his acquaintance, and about more serious matters. They talked of their deepest beliefs and convictions, and he told her things that he had never told any one before. Why should he not tell her his secrets? Had she not told him hers? It was a pleasure to reciprocate her confidence if he could not her love. He had not supposed it to be possible for a man to become so closely acquainted with a young lady not a relative. It came to the point finally that when they met in company, the few words that he might chance to exchange with her were pitched in a different key from that used with the others, such as one drops into when greeting a relative or familiar friend met in a throng of strangers.

Of course, all this had not come at once. It was in winter that the events took place with which this narrative opened. Winter had meantime glided into spring, and spring had become summer. In the early part of June a report that Arthur Burton and Maud Elliott were engaged obtained circulation, and, owing to the fact that he had so long been apparently devoted to her, was generally believed. Whenever Maud went out she met congratulations on every side, and had to reply a dozen times a day that there was no truth in the story, and smilingly declare that she could not imagine how it started. After doing which, she would go home and cry all night, for Arthur was not only not engaged to her, but she had come to know in her heart that he never would be.

At first, and indeed for a long time, she was so proud of the frank and loyal friendship between them, such as she was sure had never before existed between unlighted man and maid, that she would have been content to wait half her lifetime for him to learn to love her, if only she were sure that he would at last. But, after all, it was the hope of his love, not his friendship, that had been the motive of her desperate venture. As month after month passed, and he showed no symptoms of any feeling warmer than esteem, but always in the midst of his cordiality was so careful lest he should do or say anything to arouse unfounded expectations in her mind, she lost heart and felt that what she had hoped was not to be. She said to herself that the very fact that he was so much her friend should have warned her that he would never be her lover, for it is not often that lovers are made out of friends.

It is always embarrassing for a young lady to have to deny a report of her engagement, especially when it is a report she would willingly have true; but what made it particularly distressing for Maud that this report should have got about was her belief that it would be the means of bringing to an end the relations between them. It would undoubtedly remind Arthur, by showing how the public interpreted their friendship, that his own prospects in other quarters, and he might even think justice to her future, demanded the discontinuance of attentions which must necessarily be misconstrued by the world. The public had been quite right in assuming that it was time for them to be engaged. Such an intimacy as theirs between a young man and a young woman, unless it were to end in an engagement, had no precedent and belonged to no known social category. It was vain, in the long run, to try to live differently from other people.

The pangs of an accusing conscience completed her wretchedness at this time. The conventional proprieties are a law written on the hearts of refined, delicately nurtured girls; and though, in the desperation of unreciprocated and jealous love, she had dared to violate them, not the less did they now thoroughly revenge themselves. If her revolt against custom had resulted happily, it is not indeed likely that she would ever have reproached herself very seriously; but now that it had issued in failure, her self-confidence was gone and her conscience easily convicted her of sin. The outraged Proprieties, with awful spectacles and minatory, reproachful gestures, crowded nightly around her bed, the Titanic shade of Mrs. Grundy looming above her satellite shams and freezing her blood with a Gorgon gaze. The feeling that she had deserved all that was to come upon her deprived her of moral support.

Arthur had never showed that he thought cheaply of her, but in his heart of hearts how could he help doing so? Compared with the other girls, serene and unapproachable in their virgin pride, must she not necessarily seem bold, coarse, and common? That he took care never to let her see it only proved his kindness of heart. Her sense of this kindness was more and more touched with abjectness.

The pity of it was that she had come to love him so much more since she had known him so well. It scarcely seemed to her now that she could have truly cared for him at all in the old days, and she wondered, as she looked back, that the shallow emotion she then experienced had emboldened her to do what she had done. Ah, why had she done it? Why had she not let him go his way? She might have suffered then, but not such heart-breaking misery as was now in store for her.

Some weeks passed with no marked change in their relations, except that a new and marked constraint which had come over Arthur's manner towards her was additional evidence that the end was at hand. Would he think it better to say nothing, but merely come to see her less and less frequently and so desert her, without an explanation, which, after all, was needless? Or would he tell her how the matter stood and say good-by? She thought he would take the latter course, seeing that they had always been so frank with each other. She tried to prepare herself for what she knew was

coming, and to get ready to bear it. The only result was that she grew sick with apprehension whenever he did not call, and was only at ease when he was with her, in the moment that he was saying good-by without having uttered the dreaded words.

The end came during a call which he made on her in the last part of June. He appeared preoccupied and moody, and said scarcely anything. Several times she caught him furtively regarding her with a very strange expression. She tried to talk, but she could not alone keep up the conversation, and in time there came a silence. A hideous silence it was to Maud, an abyss yawning to swallow up all that was left of her happiness. She had no more power to speak, and when he spoke she knew it would be to utter the words she had so long expected. Evidently it was very hard for him to bring himself to utter them,—almost as hard as it would be for her to hear them. He was very tender-hearted she had learned already. Even in that moment she was very sorry for him. It was all her fault that he had to say this to her.

Suddenly, just as she must have cried out, unable to bear the tension of suspense any longer, he rose abruptly to his feet, uttering something about going and an engagement which he had almost forgotten. Hastily wishing her good-evening, with hurried steps he half crossed the room, hesitated, stopped, looked back at her, seemed to waver a moment, and then, as if moved by a sudden decision, returned to her and took her gently by the hand. Then she knew it was coming.

For a long moment he stood looking at her. She knew just the pitifulness that was in his expression, but she could not raise her eyes to his. She tried to summon her pride, her dignity, to her support. But she had no pride, no dignity, left. She had surrendered them long ago.

"I have something to say to you," he said, in a tone full of gentleness, just as she had known he would speak. "It is something I have put off saying as long as possible, and perhaps you have already guessed what it is."

Maud felt the blood leaving her face; the room spun around; she was afraid she should faint. It only remained that she should break down now to complete her humiliation before him, and apparently she was going to do just that.

"We have had a most delightful time the past year," he went on; "that is, at least I have. I don't believe the friendship of a girl was ever so much to a man as yours has been to me. I doubt if there ever was just such a friendship as ours has been, anyway. I shall always look back on it as the rarest and most charming passage in my life. But I have seen for some time that we could not go on much longer on the present footing, and tonight it has come over me that we can't go on even another day. Maud, I can't play at being friends with you one hour more. I love you. Do you care for me still? Will you be my wife?"

When it is remembered that up to his last words she had been desperately bracing herself against an announcement of a most opposite nature, it will not seem strange that for a moment Maud had difficulty in realizing just what had happened. She looked at him as if dazed, and with an instinct of bewilderment drew back a little as he would have clasped her. "I thought," she stammered—"I thought--I"--

He misconstrued her hesitation. His eyes darkened and his voice was sharpened with a sudden fear as he exclaimed, "I know it was a long time ago you told me that. Perhaps you don't feel the same way now. Don't tell me, Maud, that you don't care for me any longer, now that I have learned I can't do without you."

A look of wondering happiness, scarcely able even yet to believe in its own reality, had succeeded the bewildered incredulity in her face.

"O Arthur!" she cried. "Do you really mean it? Are you sure it is not out of pity that you say this? Do you love me after all? Would you really like me a little to be your wife?"

"If you are not my wife, I shall never have one," he replied. "You have spoiled all other women for me."

Then she let him take her in his arms, and as his lips touched hers for the first time he faintly wondered if it were possible he had ever dreamed of any other woman but Maud Elliott as his wife. After she had laughed and cried awhile, she said:

"How was it that you never let me see you cared for me? You never showed it."

"I tried not to," he replied; "and I would not have shown it to-night, if I could have helped it. I tried to get away without betraying my secret, but I could not." Then he told her that when he found he had fallen in love with her, he was almost angry with himself. He was so proud of their friendship that a mere love affair seemed cheap and common beside it. Any girl would do to fall in love with; but there was not, he was sure, another in America capable of bearing her part in such a rare and delicate companionship as theirs. He was determined to keep up their noble game of friendship as long as might be.

Afterward, during the evening, he boasted himself to her not a little of the self-control he had shown in hiding his passion so long, a feat the merit of which perhaps she did not adequately appreciate.

"Many a time in the last month or two when you have been saying good-by to me of an evening, with your hand in mine, the temptation has been almost more than I could withstand to seize you in my arms. It was all the harder, you see, because I fancied you would not be very angry if I did. In fact, you once gave me to understand as much in pretty plain language, if I remember rightly. Possibly you may recall the conversation. You took the leading part in it, I

believe."

Maud had bent her head so low that he could not see her face. It was very cruel in him, but he deliberately took her chin in his hands, and gently but firmly turned her face up to his. Then, as he kissed the shamed eyes and furiously blushing cheeks, he dropped the tone of banter and said, with moist eyes, in a voice of solemn tenderness:--

"My brave darling, with all my life I will thank you for the words you spoke that night. But for them I might have missed the wife God meant for me." for me."