

THE POINT LACE BARBE.

BY MRS. HARRIET PRESCOTT SPOFFORD.

I know very well that Laurence is only a bookkeeper with a moderate salary; but then he knew very well before he married me that I had an inordinate love of diamonds, and dresses, and feathers, and finery; and a person's tastes are not so elastic that they can always be accommodated to that person's means, and the fact that we are poor does not hinder me from going into ecstasies over a piece of lace that looks like a tangible hoar-frost, as if it were spun by the winds, and that might just as well be spun from the starbeams themselves for all of any purse of mine.

It is true I had, of course, rather please Laurence in my appearance than anybody else on earth, and it is also true that Laurence would never know whether I wore an Antwerp silk or a Lowell print, provided my hair was still glossy as black satin and my cheek did not lose its color like the heart of a tearose. For, you see, I am really quite a fine-looking brunette, rather large-molded and rich-tinted, and absolutely designed by Fate to display the sweep of splendid tissues as I walk; any one would say who did not first observe that Fate had planted me inside a brown merino and bade me stay there irretrievably.

If I had any finger-knack I might make myself useful—turn an honest penny by means of trifles of dainty workmanship that need feminine touch—decalcomanic, tatting—and eke out Laurence's salary with sufficient to give me two new silks a year. But I haven't; I'm an ignoramus, and don't know enough to teach, can't spell well enough to write, don't play or paint to speak of, and though I could possibly do worsted-work and make it worth my while to use a tricot-needle, it never would do in our set, any way, and I had better go without in the beginning. When I spoke of it once to Laurence, he negatived the idea in a single breath.

"No, my dear," said he, "I shall give my consent to nothing of the kind. I hope I can clothe you suitably to
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our position—better, perhaps, than a clerk's wife really ought to dress. Anything beyond that must throw suspicion both upon me and on yourself. Put such idle wishes, and all they lead to, out of your head, Charlotte; and be content, my darling, with the lot of a poor man's wife, which you chose long ago."

For all that, I wish Laurence was a rich man! Because, you see, in reality, though Laurence is poor, we visit among the rich.

I was an orphan, and entirely penniless myself; but I have a flock of cousins, all of them rich as need be, and all of them stingy, as, I'm sorry to say, rich people are apt to be—or

perhaps they think, with Laurence, that satins and velvets would not become my position; I'm sure they do, now I think of it, and at any rate I'm glad that it is so, for I don't want any of their giving.

I suppose it's spiteful; but, sometimes, when I see Lavinia's long, white hand reach forward for anything, and the light suddenly dip into it, so that you lose sight of the hand itself altogether for the flash of the jewel there; or when I, plodding along in brogans, Catharine lifts her skirt and I see that French *brodequin*, making her foot look as if an artist had sculptured it; or when Amelia comes into the room at some one of their countless parties, and the wilderness of her white net flows round her like a cloud, and as she sits down to talk with me, I sink as if completely sub-



THE POINT LACE BARBE.—"IT IS A PLEASURE TO ME TO SHOW MADAME MY WARES."

merged in the foam of it—well, I am free to confess that there are times when I could fairly steal.

"You ought to keep away from such places, then," says Laurence.

But how can I? They're my cousins; it would be odd and envious and churlish enough if I did so; and they never let on but what I am dressed like a princess, and are always introducing me to everybody and making much of me altogether, and wishing they had my hair, or my teeth, or my eyes, as if I could do without everything.

But there! they're dear good girls, and I love them every one, and I take back what I said about stinginess—they are

thoughtless, I suppose, and feel a sort of delicacy about giving me things that would imply Laurence's inability to give them, knowing how high-strung he is.

And then, the fact is, I do contrive to make a very respectable appearance on mighty little; and, since my dear little Laura has come and filled the time so, I don't go into their old gayeties nearly as much; but, for all that, when I do go, I like to go fittingly, and my manias, as Laurence calls them, are as strong as ever.

"You'd give anything for my eyes?" I said, in reply to Amelia, the other day. "And I'd give my eyes for your point lace."

"Then we're quits," said Amelia.

Now, if I'd been in Amelia's place, I should have said, "Take the point lace, dear." But she didn't. And just that little thing is the root of a dilemma that was exactly as grievous to me as ever the dilemma of the diamond aigrette was to Anne of Austria—if that was the right lady. I'm not very well up in those little fictions, you see.

Laurence had made me a present of a new black silk, thick and heavy, and looking as if it had a treasure of lustre inside its web if the shadows would only let it out.

Of course the making up of the dress was no trifle. I do believe that mantuamakers think money grows spontaneously in the pockets of people's husband's, like fire in the end of a match. It should have been trimmed with lace, but that being utterly out of the question, the last cent of money in my private purse was gone when it came home set off with a fringe; but the fringe was rich and long, so I didn't care.

I tried on the gown. I was perfectly delighted. What a sweep it had! I had never worn such a superb fabric; how it became me! how round and handsome it made my figure! Ah, what would Amelia say now when she saw it! If only I had the proper decorations for my throat and wrists! My old Honiton set was darned too much to look like anything but rag-fair, or a satire on the dress itself. My one little collar of point did look so skimpy; however, it would do—if only I could get a barbe to match it. A bow of point lace and long hanging ends of the webbish beauty—that would just make the whole toilet ravishing! But I couldn't. I hadn't a cent in the world. I must just do without it. There was only the month's housekeeping money in the drawer—and if I were willing to starve, Laurence wasn't—and there wasn't a dime too much of that. And then it grew upon me, like an ague, that the dress wouldn't be fit to be seen without that barbe, would be perfectly ridiculous, tell the whole story of how everything had been spent upon the silk and nothing left for accompaniments. One might just as well wear a printed placard of poverty upon one's back. I tore off the dress and hid myself in my wrapper, and I was so vexed with myself and my circumstances that I could have sat down and cried with a good relish.

When Laurence came home to dinner that day, he told me, gently as possible, that he was obliged to go on a journey for his employer, and should be absent more than a week. I usually made a great fuss when he went away. I couldn't bear to have him gone; I missed him; and was afraid to be alone, and afraid something would happen to him; and he always went under protest from me, and in the midst of tears and embraces that were a perfect nuisance. He must have been surprised at the patient way in which, on that one day, I received his announcement. Visions of house-keeping economy, of abstaining from dinners, of dollars enough saved from the bills of grocer, butcher, and poulterer to buy me my point lace barbe flashed over me now and obscured his departure; and I bade him adieu with equanimity and an absent mind, to say nothing of the absence of my heart, which had absolutely been stifled in the visionary folds of that point lace barbe.

For, you see, possession of a point lace barbe had become a sort of insanity with me; and the thing was to get it before the dress to wear it with was worn out, and while Laurence was gone. I could not at any rate betray myself by talking about it in my sleep, as I was sure I did.

So all that week, to begin with, I had no fire in the drawing-room. But I had not dreamed of the embarrassments a saving of coal might occasion—quite equal to the annoyance of being seen without a point lace barbe. For, of course, the natural consequence of having no fire in the drawing-room was, that every soul on my visiting-list took that week to call upon me. Of course I had to resort to all manner of subterfuges that kept the blood flowing rapidly enough in my veins, so that I, at least, was not cold; finally, though, I sent word to the door that I was not at home. The housemaid refused, on moral grounds, to take any such message, and insisted upon saying that I was extremely engaged; by which means I offended the very people I would not have offended on any account whatever, and who were of the sort never willing to admit that you can be too much engaged to see themselves.

Meanwhile I dispensed with chops or steaks or omelets at breakfast, reduced that meal to little else but bread and tea, and abolished dinner altogether. After three days of no joints or roasts, the rebellious housemaid left me in high dudgeon, and since then no doubt has scattered broadcast her views of my parsimony—and having all my neighbors imagine me a miser is certainly as unpleasant as going without a point lace barbe.

When you are in any trouble, somehow or other everything helps to heap it up. I don't see why it was that I couldn't have the barbe and keep the housemaid too. It was all the harder to have her go just then, for little Laura had caught cold in the drawing-room and was down with the croup. I forgot everything else with that, and hung over her in a fever myself.

Nobody knows how a day tells in a child's life; perhaps in reducing our diet I had robbed her of the very strength she needed to resist the attack; if it had not been for my going without fires she would not have had the attack at all. I had great fires roaring up every chimney in the house, now that they were of no use, and the doctor hardly quitted her bedside.

I never dreamed of what Laurence would say, when he found how it had all come about; I didn't care what he would say to me, while she was in danger; he might kill me, and welcome, if he wished. If she had died I don't know but I should have killed myself.

And just as she rallied, the very day that Laurence was expected, the very train in which I expected him was thrown from the track, and whether he was dead or alive I could not know for four mortal hours. And I had so indifferently let him leave me. When he walked in at last, all safe and sound, I just betook myself to bed, and never left it for three weeks, and the doctor's bill was something terrible.

So, my economy proving almost ruinous, I did have, for a little while, the strength to put all thoughts of a point lace barbe out of my mind. Perhaps half of what gave me that strength was the fact the thoughts were of no manner of use. What I couldn't have, I couldn't. But I didn't cease envying the women who went stepping by with their beautiful laces floating out like the gossamer dew that, of a June morning, you have seen rising up into a sunny sky, and that, in France, the peasants call the "Virgin's thread." If the pin of any one of them all had only loosened, and the lace had gently fluttered to the ground, I don't really know, as I should have picked it up till after she was out of sight, and when I couldn't have returned it to her.

Dear me! they talk about money's being the root of all

evil. For my part, I think it is the want of it that is the root of all evil. At all events, it has completely demoralized me.

I was just going across the hall one day, when I heard the door-bell tinkling for the second time, and as nobody seemed to be attending to it, I went to the door myself.

It was a peddler, with a basket on his arm, who was standing there. Now I know that all the peddlers and agents have a little speech all ready prepared, which, if they can force their way into a house while uttering, it is all up with you, and buy you must. So I never let them so much as begin their little speech. But this one was a cunning dog. He looked at me, and then he lifted the lid of his basket, held it open, and looked at me again; while, taken unawares, I surveyed the contents. Laces—Valenciennes, Mechlin, Limerick, point—folded away there over their colored silks like so many clouds curdled over a bed of flowers.

In spite of myself, and though I should have remembered the absurdity of letting him waste his time with me, before I knew what I did I had thrown the door open, and he was in the back parlor, spreading his wares upon the table, and expatiating over their beauties volubly enough to drive one mad.

There was a bridal veil; of course I had, fortunately, no need for that; but then it could be worn as a mantle. The price of it was a thousand dollars. I touched it with a kind of awe, all the more that I was sure the price ought to have been three thousand. Then it came over me that it had been smuggled. I recalled Laurence's description of the old packman who had sold him my silk. This was the identical individual. And I knew that the part of honesty would have been to turn him out of doors without another word, and, instead of even waiting to buy his baubles, to save my pennies with a different view, and some day send to the Treasury, in conscience-money, such a sum as would have been the government duty at the custom-house upon that piece of silk.

But I am weak-minded. I just let that piece of airy loveliness hang over my hands, and wondered if I ought not to send the man to my uncle's house, where Amelia would have bought the veil out of hand. And while I wavered, he went on unfolding, one by one, flounces and shawls, and peplums and berthas, and at last—a barbe. A barbe, and what a beauty! It was more than a yard long, of exquisite shape, curving in and out like a strip of sea-foam blown by the wind, and with its dainty and perfect pattern might have been a bannerol for the armies of Oberon and Titania.

If my mouth didn't water for it my eyes did. The price of it? Seventy-five dollars. Real point, he assured me, and worth twice the money, as I must already know. I threw it down in despair. Seventy-five dollars! I had ten in my purse, which Laurence had handed me the day before, to go and come upon, as he phrased it.

"It is of no use," I said, dismally. "I must not make you waste any more time, and ought not to have let you come in, for I cannot afford to purchase any such things."

"Do not mention it," said the merchant, graciously. "That is of no consequence. It is a pleasure to me to show madame my wares."

"Yes," I answered, instead of allowing him to depart with no more words, "I can certainly admire, although I have no money to buy."

"That is of small odds," said the merchant again, graciously. "What is money? A mere measure of the value of other things. What is there in this little silver piece," flipping between thumb and finger a coin which he took from his pocket, "to give it value? Nothing whatever. It is merely a written order from the world at large to give me such and so much at sight. I had as lief receive other commodities in exchange for my goods as gold and silver, which in the

end only procure me the same commodities.' If madame feels inclined to trade, I have no doubt she has half-worn dresses, linen, napery, books, silver spoons a little battered, for all of which I shall be glad to barter with her. How is that? To be arranged?"

He had seen my hungry gaze devouring the barbe; he cunningly took it up again and displayed its broidery against the light, gathered it into the various shapes into which it might be worn gracefully, as only lace can be, and displaying perfectly the transparent linnea-bells of its design everywhere caught upon the awns of the blanched and bearded grass that seemed to thread it.

"It is a lovely trifle, indeed," he said. "And what pure art in the execution of the fancy! One need not tell me there is less art in the design of a rare bit of lace than in a great painter's fresco, for I deny it! Nor is it as if the purchase of it were an extravagance, a whim of the passing fashion, costly to-day, to-morrow a worthless rag. This little strip of lace will be as valuable a hundred years from now, if you can take care of it"—already assuming that it would be mine to take care of—"as it is to-day. You wear it at your throat at the next dinner-party, at the opera. By-and-by there are calls to be made, and only a commonplace bonnet to wear, or one even that madame's fingers have shaped themselves; let, then, this piece of lace be twisted here and there, as may be, in the folds or over them, and the bonnet has come from Paris, and is worth a couple of hundred dollars for all that the wisest can tell. Or when there is nothing but mull muslin for the great ball where satins and velvets and diamonds reign, this lappet of point, basted down the centre of the front breadth, leaves the dress rich enough in its simplicity for a princess. Ah, there is no end to the uses to which a bit of valuable lace can be turned! And then it is a heritage for one's children, besides."

I stood stupefied by his eloquence, which pierced me to the heart; not noticing that this was indeed his little speech which he had been too skillful to utter at the door, nor heeding that a man talking this way, but doing such questionable things, was more than likely to be a villain fallen from high estate. I forgot all my prudence in the truth of what he said, and sat and stared at the lovely streamer of lace as if my salvation depended on its acquisition.

"Let me see," recommenced the oily tongue, "if madame has not a silk dress a little past its best; a poplin; a shawl too much soiled for a lady to wrap about her; an atom of old china; or, indeed, any underclothing, such as ladies have a habit of making up and putting away against some fancied need of it. It will not take an armful to reach the pitiful amount of seventy-five dollars," said this son of Jewry.

Suddenly my face must have brightened; he took the cue, and grew more fervid in his plausibility; but I did not hear a word he said, for I was reckoning over my possible treasures. There was my bright ruby silk—to be sure it was hardly wrinkled; but Laurence detested it, and I had not worn it for a year and a half. Perhaps that would balance the barbe. I ran and brought it down, leaving little Laura in the room with him.

I must have known, be it ever so faintly, that I was doing something wrong; for a fright took hold of me, lest in my absence he should run away with my child, and I flew down the staircase like lightning. But he had a more profitable game than that on hand. I eagerly unfolded the dress.

"It is but a poor color," said he. It was the richest of rubies. "One of those pronounced things," he added, "that are seldom available. And the fashion is old—ah, yes, very old. Has madame no silk of neutral tint, no pearl-color, no black?"

Balance the barbe, indeed! He was not going to take the dress at any price, apparently. I saw that my plausible gentleman must be bargained with.

"First let me know," I said, "what price you would set on this."

"Madame must set her own price."

"Well, it cost me—material, making, and trimming—a hundred," I ventured.

"Alas!" said the worthy. "Madame is proceeding on an entirely false assumption. And to put her right at once, I will tell her that I will give her ten dollars for this dress, and no more. Six is the usual allowance; but the guipure on this shall make the difference."

What a simpleton I had been! Why hadn't I remembered this old guipure when trimming my new gown? The thought only flashed upon me and was gone; for I was in a stupefied condition at the idea of the beggarly sum he offered for my splendid ruby silk.

"No," said I, valiant with indignation. "You may keep your laces. I had rather give the dress away."

"Madame must not be vexed at such a matter. It is an affair of bargain and sale. Let her consider the case. I receive a dress cut to a certain form; I shall not perhaps find so good a form again in all my transactions, and therefore

none whom it will suit, and who will take it off my hands. It is a fashion of three years ago, and in purchasing it I take the responsibility of meeting, by the barest chance, with three conditions—a person who does not care for the fashion of it, who is a brunette and able to wear it, who is of as fine figure as madame is herself. It is to be allowed that with so many risks ten dollars is all the amount with which I should

be right in burdening myself. Let madame reflect if she has nothing else of value; ladies will keep worthless things in their wardrobes for years, that in truth are mere lumber and food for moths."

And he folded the dress up leisurely and placed it on one side, and set down in a little note-book, which he had held open, the sum of ten dollars. I was evidently destined by

him to consummate the whole arrangement. I knew he had defrauded my country, and now he was stealing my dress. Why didn't I order him out of the house? On the contrary, I went meekly and brought down my foulard; once it had been the pride of my silly heart, but I had spilled a cup of cream on it, and now I was just as dishonest as he was, for I wasn't going to say a word about that unless he himself discovered it. Unless he discovered it! His lynx-eyes lighted upon it as if by instinct.

"That is done," he said, disdainfully. "Shall I exchange point lace for grease spots? Say two dollars."

And he laid it in a little parcel on the other, and wrote down in his note-book two dollars.

I humbly went upstairs again, and this

time brought down my French cashmere. Aunt Jane had paid fifty dollars for it once, but I had always disliked it, and had hardly ever worn it.

"Ah, that is entirely out of date," said my cozenor. "Those palm-leaves, that border, are of the style of half a generation since. It is worth very little to me, absolutely almost nothing. Hem! a bit of fringe gone, too; a bad

crease ; it has not been carefully folded. A shawl should always be put away in the same folds as it wore when bought ; no, it has been very badly treated."

I am thankful to say that the Adam in me turned under that treading, though it was only for a moment.

"You can take your basket and go," I said. "I do not care for any further dealings with you to-day, sir."

He became servile in a moment.

"A thousand, ten thousand pardons! Madame must not look at my poor remarks in a personal light. I intend no reflections upon herself. She must understand that I but give her the reasons for my price. For the shawl we will say five dollars," relapsing from the gentleman to the Jew again, in his astonishing way, and without budging an inch he folded it carefully and laid it on the pile at his left, made another entry in his note-book, and I crept away like a spaniel, doing his bidding.

Two gowns and a shawl gone. I paused to consider what I could add to the holocaust. There was an organdy that I could spare—that went over my arm—but then I recollected that it was the dress I wore on the day when Laurence first kissed my hand, and I hung it up again. In its place I gathered together a parcel of odds and ends, that I knew he would flout, as he did—a sacque, an apron, a cape, a hood, a waterproof.

"Poor duds," said he.

And he held them up to the light, that I might be satisfied, without words, as to how threadbare they were, felt of the edges to assure me they were ragged, found the stains by natural intuition, and then shoved them to me with an eloquent and reproachful glance, intimating that he did not care for them, did not know as he would take them away even if I gave them to him for nothing, but finally rolled

them all together and said he would allow a dollar for the lot! That was eighteen dollars. What else had I to make up the fifty-seven still wanting? he would beg to ask.

"Nothing!" I said. "Nothing at all. It is impossible!"

"Not so," cried my companion. "Nothing is impossible. And it would indeed be a poor business to retreat from the purchase, when with so little trouble a quarter of it is already procured. Has madame no small sum of money she can add to the amount?"

I thought of my ten dollars. To be sure, if I gave it up I should have to go afoot, and neither car nor carriage for me the rest of the season. I should have to turn every beggar from the door, which I had never been obliged to do yet. I should be positively unable to buy so much as a spool of cotton all Winter; for as to telling Laurence what I had done with the money, it was not to be thought of. But what mere trifles all these things in the future seemed! I liked best to walk; I didn't approve of street beggars and promiscuous charity; perhaps I should need no cotton or nicknacks till Laurence handed me another bill. The lace merchant put away the pieces of paper in his pocket, and changed the figures on his note-book.

"Twenty-eight," said he. "Courage! We are more than a third on our way already." He threw his hawk's eyes round about him. "Ah," he cried, "I see here a bit of old china," for little Laura had succeeded in opening the closet-door where I kept my best dinner-service and one or two old family keepsakes, and the contents were all displayed. "Ah," said he again, bending forward, "there is something, not so very old, but still it may be better than delf. Shall I see it? The little bowl with a cover. I pay my best prices for old china."

"Do you mean this?" I asked, taking down a little

sugar-bowl that had been my great-grandfather's. "Oh, no, I could not sell that at any price."

"But shall I take it in my hands one moment?" he asked, humbly and admiringly.

It was a small oblong bowl, in the shape of a half melon, the cover completing the other half; over all the ribs ran a tiny vine of sweet-briar, tinted as exquisitely as if a painter had spent his lifetime upon the work; it rung to the touch with a tone like silver, and it was as translucent as though it had only been thickened out of ice. The peddler bent above it in a sort of rapture. I believe he thought that I was so silly it was no object for him to conceal his feelings. "And one heavenly little crack," I heard him mutter to himself.

"You shall have ten dollars for it," then he said, glancing up at me.

"No, indeed," I answered. "It is an heirloom; I couldn't think of parting with it."

"I will say fifteen," he urged. "Nay, not to haggle, twenty."

I took it from him and set it on the shelf again.

"I should feel as though I were selling my great-grandmother's bones," I said. "But here is a tablecloth and napkins I could do without," as they caught my eye.

I queried, afterward, if taking such articles as that, and disposing of them in such a manner, was not as much theft, on my part, as if I had been a light-fingered housemaid doing the same.

But I did not think of that then, feeling so virtuous, as I did, at not selling my grandmother's sugar-bowl; and my companion had no more conscience than at the moment had I, and he added the napery to his pile, and some small figure to his note-book.

After that I scraped my memory and my closets for an old grenadine, a little scarf, and a coat of Laurence's, a cloak that I had hung out to give to Betty, the poor washer-woman; a dozen small articles were added to his selection; these he threw aside, and would have none of them, so contemptuously that my ears burned, and I grew momentarily more abject; those he depreciated to the last thread; now he paid a half-dollar, now a few cents, while I trembling awaited his fiat. And the sum total grew so slowly that in a despair I could have torn my *chignon*—to think I had ever begun such a bad business at all.

I had, at last, nothing left that I could spare or could remember. I had sold a quantity that indeed I couldn't spare, and the sum total was yet but thirty-five dollars. I began to be woefully ashamed of my poverty, and to think that I had taken up a whole hour of this man's time for nothing. I was afraid, too, that if we really concluded no bargain, he would be impudent and ugly, perhaps snatch Laura and run off with her before my very eyes; and there never is a policeman in sight when you want one, though at any other time they are marching down the sidewalk six abreast. I sat down and tried to recall any other possible possession that I had.

"I suppose you don't care for old linen?" I asked, recalling the trunk in the attic, full of articles made up in the usual useless profusion at the time of my marriage, and not yet encroached upon.

"On the contrary, it was one of the things I mentioned to madame," said he.

And I ran up the stairs to overhaul the trunk, without loss of time. I recollected with what pleasure I had set every stitch in that pile of whiteness; the things there seemed, in a way, sacred to me now, and their sale to the packman a sort of sacrilege.

I took them up tenderly, one by one; the chemises with their dainty ruffles, the pretty little underwaists, the skirts, the night-dresses, full of puffs and insertings. Once I dropped them back again, but a second thought of the barbe, a

second fear of the man, and I gathered them all up in one heap and sprang down to the back-parlor again.

"They have never been worn," said I, abandoning them triumphantly.

"They have been made a long time," said he. "They are very yellow. Perhaps starched when put away; if so, then very rotten. And then there may be moths, and, possibly, crickets."

He displayed them to the light, peered among the gathers, pulled them in one direction and another, and grew sharper-featured than a buzzard while he hunted them over.

"When I bought that cloth," murmured I, "I paid eighty cents a yard for it."

"Dear, dear!" he answered. "They took advantage of you. And that was when gold was running up among the two-forties. Now I can buy it anywhere for a shilling."

"It is very fine, I urged.

"And all the worse for wearing, then. Home-made, I venture to believe?"

"Certainly. I made them myself," I replied, with a proud fatuity.

"And, in no disparagement to madame's finger-work, there are those whose business this work is, and who do it so much the better that their livelihood depends upon it."

How much my contrabandista knew! How well he talked! I was so overawed that I said no more, and suffered him to lay on his growing hillock all my precious garments that had been put away for the rainy day, and to set down for them, without a remonstrance, the pitiful sum of fifteen dollars.

"We want but twenty-five more," said he.

"And shall have to want," I cried. I had sold him a trunkful of new clothing, my gowns, my shawls, my hoods, a part of my table-linen—presently I should be beggared. "I haven't another atom of anything. I have stripped my house. I have been very wrong to undertake the thing. I cannot conclude it. You positively must take your laces away.

"Madame must reflect," said the robber, now severely. "that I cannot afford to waste valuable time in this way. It would be unjustifiable on her part, if, at this stage, the affair were not continued to the end. There is the trifle of old china. I offered madame twenty—I will say twenty-five dollars; and that will close the bargain, and madame will be the richer by a rare bit of point lace that a princess might wear."

"Take it!" I cried, glad now to get him out of the house on any terms.

And I ran and put it in his hands, and helped him tie up his bundle, and shut the door upon him at last, and flew upstairs to hide my barbe, and to bathe my head, which ached as though the veins were full of fire.

It was very strange that that very day Laurence, searching in the back parlor closet, should have turned to me and said:

"I suppose that ancestral sugar-bowl of yours, Charlotte, was broken while you and Laura were sick? Too bad! I would rather have given a good deal than that she shouldn't have had that delicate bit to show her own children? How did it happen?"

But by the most fortunate accident in the world, showing that sometimes accidents are fortunate, just then little Laura tripped and fell, and raised such an uproar that I had to run and carry her from the room for vinegar and brown paper, and trust, with a heart beating in my throat, that her father would have forgotten his question by the time I returned.

It was plain that I never should dare to tell Laurence of the quantities of things I had that day sacrificed on the shrine of my vanity. I felt as if I had stolen his purse; and it was days and days before I left off starting, as if I were stung, at every trifle, and fearing that Laura would articulate

plainly enough to be understood something about my transactions; for they had entertained her so highly that she had fastened them into a sort of lyrical recital.

"What is that which Laura keeps singing," asked her father one day, "about a man with clouds, and a man with spiders' webs, and a man with a big nose carrying off your clothes?"

"Nancy has been teaching her 'Mother Goose,'" said I, tremblingly, though really that part of my reply was no fib. "Is it that? The man in the moon, or the maid that was in the garden hanging out the clothes, when along came a blackbird and snipped off her nose?"

I had never deceived him about anything before in my life; and I cried so much, in consequence of all this, that if tears made anybody immaculate, I should have been washed clean of all the sin of it very soon.

It was not very long after this that aunt Martha said to me:

"What are you going to wear to our great dinner-party next week, Charlotte? I rely upon you and Laurence to take a great deal off my hands. Your aunt Jane's girls, Lavinia and Catharine, that is, are always so much taken up with themselves that they are of no service to anybody. The general and his chief of staff are to be there, and that new poet, Sluiceaway, and the very *grandissimi* of the city; and Mrs. Vandervan, too, who always dresses so tremendously that it is no matter what anybody else puts on at all, she has quite enough to go round."

"I can wear my new silk that Laurence gave me the other day. It is a beauty," I said.

"Ah! That is nice. All complete? Do you want anything more?"

Why was aunt Maria so solicitous concerning my toilet? It was a new freak on her part. Was she going to make me a present? All at once it occurred to me that perhaps if I suggested a point lace barbe she would, in the plenitude of her sudden generosity of the moment, give me a check with which—I could buy my own! or, at any rate, could make good the things I had thrown away for it.

"Yes," I said; and it was such an artful fit that I felt as if it were an innocent one. I never knew I had such a capacity for wickedness before. "Yes, I do want to wear with it a point lace barbe. It is such a handsome silk that anything else would be——"

"A point lace barbe!" cried my aunt. "What is the child thinking of? It would cost a hundred and fifty dollars."

"No, indeed," said I; "only seventy-five."

"You could not get it for twice that in any store in town," said my aunt. And very truly, for I remembered then what the packman had told me. "What would people say of you?" continued my aunt. "Every one knows Laurence couldn't afford it. I wouldn't have you wear one if you had it! It is the very reason that I never give you anything inconsistent with your position; for I would not for the world have people think"—aunt Maria does care so much for what people think!—"that you were an extravagant spendthrift of a wife, leading Laurence to his ruin, when you are such a nice, careful housekeeper for him, my dear." I twinged, I know I did. "And they would certainly have to think that you ran him in debt for it, or else came by your toggery in some way not so pleasant even as that."

"Why, aunt Maria!"

"Yes, child," shaking her head, dolorously; "there is little Mrs. Venning, whose husband is Mr. Marvaugh's clerk—the rich Marvaugh. They live in Marvaugh's house, and, as her husband is that gentleman's secretary, to be sure that is all well enough. But you have only to look that woman over to see that her husband's yearly salary would not pay for half her evening dresses. And when I

met her, the other day, in an Indian cashmere that cost five thousand dollars if it cost a cent, why, I cut her dead!"

"Why, aunt Maria, I never thought of such a thing!"

"I dare say not. You're not a woman of the world, thank goodness! and you're very innocent, for all you're such a great handsome thing. Now, my dear," concluded aunt Maria, tumbling over her bureau-drawer, "what led to all this is that I have a little Valenciennes set with rose-colored ribbons, that is too gay for me, and just the thing for you. It only cost a trifle, and I want you to wear it. Now, good-by. I must see my dressmaker. I had rather it were my dentist. Don't you fail me on Thursday."

You may be sure I walked home with my cheeks tingling; and, meeting Laurence on the steps, I paid the whole conversation forth with one gush the moment we were in the parlor.

"She was very right, dear. Your aunt Maria is a woman of sense," said he. "Every one knows that your relations do nothing for you since your marriage, except the small kindnesses which are all I would endure your accepting. And you would stand in a very questionable light in every one's eyes."

"What do you care for every one's eyes?" I asked, pettishly.

"We all care," said Laurence.

"I'm sure I don't."

"If you didn't, you wouldn't wish to wear this finery. Eh? And either disagreeable things must be thought of you, or else it would be supposed that I was embezzling my employer's funds."

"Embezzling!"

"And nothing else—if you are seen with a bit of lace at your throat worth a couple of hundred dollars."

"Why, Laurence!" I cried. "I only paid seventy-five for it."

"Only paid?" said he.

And then the mischief was out, and out came all the rest of the story.

"And that was where the china bowl went to!" I said, despairingly, as I finished.

Laurence didn't say a word; but he walked up and down the room with such a grave face, and then went out. He was so disappointed in his wife. By-and-by he came back; and as I was crying fit to break my heart, he came and took me in his arms and kissed me, and forgave me.

"We will think no more about it now," said he.

"Oh, I'll never wear it, Laurence!" I cried, through my sobs. "I'll keep it for little Laura, when she's married."

"It will be no more fit for Laura than for Laura's mother," said he. "No; we will look at it now and then, to grow wiser by. Perhaps some time we shall be rich enough to wear it. It is not the barbe, Charlotte, that was a mere indiscretion; it is the first want of confidence, the first deception between you and me."

"Oh, Laurence!" I cried, "how good you are! What ever made you marry such a selfish, unprincipled wretch as I am?"

"Perhaps because one loves a person all the better for not being quite perfect," said he, mischievously.

But his kindness, do you know, was harder to bear than if he had been angry. I made so many good resolves on the spot. I have been trying ever since so hard to keep them. And the very first thing I did was to take Nancy for an escort, that very evening, and run up to aunt Maria's, and tell her the whole story. And, do you believe, the good old soul bought the hateful little rag on the spot, and gave me just what I paid for it, only gave it in money, and wore it at her dinner-party, and has been congratulating herself ever since on the bargain she made in that point lace barbe. But the very sight of it makes me shiver.